

The Lenapé Creation Story

Our lèpâ'chik, wise ones, say, "Kunakwat, lowat, nuchink...Long, long ago, in the beginning..." at first there was only endless space, and therein dwelt Kishelamàkânk, the Creator. Nothing else existed at this time, all was silence and there was a great peace. Then it was that Kishelamàkânk had a great vision. In this vision he saw the endless space around him filled with stars, and he saw the sun, the moon, and the Earth. On the Earth he saw mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers, and forests. He saw the trees, flowers, crops, and grasses, and the crawling, walking, swimming and flying beings. He saw the birth of things, their growth and death, and other things that apparently lived forever. Then he heard songs, stories, laughs and cries. The Creator touched the wind and the rain, felt love and hate, courage and fear, happiness and sorrow. Then the vision passed, and it was gone!

Kishelamàkânk, the Creator, had seen that which was unknown, and he thought deeply upon all that he had seen in his vision. He came to understand that the vision would come into being. When there was nothing around him but empty space, his mind saw nothing and so nothing was created. Now, through thought, thinking in his mind of the vision, it started to happen.

There were first created the Keepers of Creation, four powerful Spirit Beings, to help him in his task of fulfilling and creating the vision: the Spirits of the Rock, Fire, Wind, and Water. Into each he breathed life and Spirit, giving each different characteristics and powers. These four beings were:

Muxumsa Lowànewànk, our Grandfather in the North. He was placed there to control the power of rock. He gave forth solidity and physical form to the Creator's thoughts, to his vision. North Grandfather gives us the wintertime, ice, snow, and cold; also, our bodies, the rocks, the trees, and all that we see around us;

Muxumsa Wapànewànk, our Grandfather of the East. He was placed there to control the power of the wind. He gave forth breath and mind to the Creator's vision. He gives us springtime, the breath of life, birth and new beginnings, and brings forth the light, the winds, our minds, creativity, knowledge, music and songs;

Huma Shawànewànk, our Grandmother in the South. She was placed there to control the power of fire. She gave forth Spirit, life and growth to the vision of the Creator. She gives us the summer, warmth, growth and maturity, our inner fire and Spirit, and gives fire to the Sun;

Muxumsa Wunchènewànk, our Grandfather in the West. He was placed there to control the power of water. He brought a watery and softening influence to the Creator's vision. He gives us autumn, gives us death, and readies us for renewal, and gave us the waters, our life's blood, healing, intuition, emotions, dreams and visions, and rain.

These four Spirit beings, Keepers of the Creation, did help the Creator to make the stars, the sun, the moon and the Earth.

Now the Creator instructed all of these Beings to come together on the Earth, to give of their powers together to create life. Nux Kishux, our Father Sun, gave heat and light, and Nipahuma, our Grandmother Moon, came down to Earth and gave of her powers of fertility and reproduction. Kukna, the Mother Earth, upon which all life was to be born, gave growth and healing. North Grandfather gave form to all life, East Grandfather gave the breath of life and Spirit, South Grandmother gave inner fire and Spirit, and West Grandfather gave of its water to life, life's blood.

First were made the plant beings of four kinds, grasses, flowering plants, trees, and crops. To each was given, through Spirit, life, growth, healing, and beauty. Each was placed where it would be most useful, and give the greatest harmony and balance to all land and life.

Then were made the animal beings. Each was given special powers and characteristics. There were those that crawled and walked upon the Earth, those that swam in the lakes, rivers, and streams upon the good Earth, and those that flew in the skies above.

Now, Nipahuma, our Grandmother Moon, having been set in the night sky, her Spirit became lonely and so she asked the Creator for a companion. The Creator sent her a Spirit, Grandfather Thunder, Muxumsa Pethakowe, to keep her company. With him she conceived, and when she came to lend her powers of fertility to the Earth to help in the creation of life, she gave birth upon the Earth to twins - one a man, and the other a woman. Thus it was humankind was the last of beings created. Though they were different, man and woman found a wholeness in union with each other. Only together were they complete and fulfilled, only together could they fulfill their purpose. The Creator gave man and woman a special gift, the power to dream. Nipahuma, our Mother who goes by night, the first mother, the mother of all mothers, nurtured her children, and when her purpose was complete she returned to the spirit world; but before she left she told first man and woman that she would never forget them. She continues to watch over us at night as the Moon. The children promised to remember Grandmother Moon whenever she appeared in the sky, giving her light to guide our paths.

In vision the Creator had seen things of opposite natures, and so was created light and darkness, male and female, hot and cold, above and below, good and evil. Where the Creator created, giving forth goodness and light, Matantu, a Spirit of destruction, evil and darkness came into being. Where the Creator made edible plants, Matantu made poisonous plants. Where the Creator made the delicious blackberries, Matantu put thorns on them. Matantu also made tormenting insects such as flies, mosquitoes and poisonous snakes.

Many such laws were woven into the creation by Kishelamàkânk, the Creator, for the well-being, harmony and balance of all things and all creatures. These laws gave place and motion to the sun, moon, Earth and stars, and governed the powers of wind, water, fire and rock, and the circle of life, birth, growth and death. All things existed and worked through these laws.

The Creator's vision was now brought into being.

Now, upon the newly formed Earth, the Creator put a Spirit Being, Kichichax'kàl, the Great Toad, who was given the duty of ruling over the waters of the Earth. He was given the authority, and the power, to cause rain to fall at his will, and was also known as Bikanaki'hàt, the Water Keeper.

One day, Maxa'xâk, and evil Manito (Spirit) appeared, who came to bother and quarrel with the Great Toad. This evil Spirit had the form of a vicious and ugly horned serpent. Maxa'xâk, the horned serpent, fought with Kichichax'kàl, the Great Toad, because he wanted to be the one to rule over the waters of the Earth. One day they fought such a terrible battle that it caused a great disturbance over the whole new Earth. The Great Toad tried to swallow the evil snake, but the monster snake gored the Great Toad so severely that he died. And the four winds, newakishe'na, the mighty seas, and all the waters of the Earth, lashed out in everlasting fury at the evil serpent, but at no avail.

Now, Kishelamàkânk, the Creator of all things, saw the struggle, the turmoil, the steadily growing unrest, and he sent the Thunder Spirit to battle the horned serpent, Masa'xâk. Grandfather Thunder came swiftly, announcing his arrival by the sound of his bone rattles, and shooting his lightning arrows, forcing the evil serpent to flee. The rain fell, the waters rose and gushed forth everywhere, washing away the corruption and evil that had covered the blood-stained Earth. The rising waters caused wide-spread destruction upon the Earth, which became one great sea. Many plants and animals died, and all of humankind perished due to the destruction wrought by the evil serpent.

Now, Maxa'xâk and her children stay put in the watery depths, fearing the Thunderers who pursue them when they dare to venture forth, shooting their lightning arrows at the evil snakes.

At this time, there was another Spirit Being also on the Earth, the Wise and Gifted Being called Nanapush, the Strong Pure One, the Grandfather of Beings and Men. When he saw the rapidly rising water, he sought refuge on the highest mountain, hoping that there he would be safe. But the rain fell and fell and the waters continued to rise, until at last there was left only a small patch of ground on top of this mountain. And upon the top of this mountain, there was growing a small cedar tree. The rain continued, coming down in torrents for many days. It was now apparent that all of the seven islands, and the mountains, would soon be entirely covered with water. So the great and wise Nanapush picked up the animals and birds that had gathered on the mountain-top, and he tucked them carefully and safely inside his shirt. Then he went to the cedar tree, and spoke to it before he started to climb it. As he climbed he broke off branches and put them under his belt. Soon he reached the top of the tree, but the waters continued to rise and rise, now almost to his feet. So the great Nanapush began to sing and beat upon his bow-string which served as a drum. As he sang, the cedar tree, the sacred tree, began to grow, and it kept on growing as the waters continued to rise. After a long time, Nanapush, the Strong Pure One, the Grandfather of Beings and Men, grew tired of singing his song of peace to the raging elements, so he threw upon the waters the branches which he had plucked as he climbed. At once they took the form of a strong raft. On this raft he carefully placed all of the creatures he had saved, and the floated upon the waters on the cedar raft.

Soon he saw the mountain peaks disappear under the steadily rising water; only Nanapush and the creatures he had saved remained alive. After some time, Nanapush decided a new Earth should be made, a task he could well perform through the powers granted to him by the Creator. So he held a Council with the little creatures and they went to work to help him form a new island. Their first duty would be to get some soil from the submerged Earth. The first one to offer his help was Mitewile'un, the Loon. He dived and stayed down a very long time. When he came floating back up to the surface he was dead. So the great Nanapush breathed upon the unfortunate Loon, and its life was restored. Now Kùna'moxk, the Otter, dived down, but he failed in the attempt and also came up dead; he too was restored to life by Nanapush. Then Tamakwa, the Beaver, tried, but he in turn failed and had to be revived. Then Nanapush turned to Tamask'was, the Muskrat, and told him that he must try very hard to reach the old Earth. The little Muskrat stayed down twice as long as any of the rest, and he came to the surface completely exhausted, but still alive. An in his mouth and paws he carried some of the precious mud from the old world below the waters. The great Nanapush was pleased, and he carefully revived the little Muskrat and blessed him, promising that his kind would never die out.

Now Nanapush made a great ceremony, a thanksgiving ceremony, the first thanksgiving ceremony ever to take place. Then, Nanapush called for a helper who would receive and carry the new Earth. Taxkwâx, the Turtle, responded and was at once chosen to perform this important duty. Nanapush placed the mud brought back by Tamask'was, the Muskrat, upon the back of the Turtle, and blew his life-giving breath into it. Immediately it began to grow; it grew and grew until it became the great island where all of us are living today. Because Turtle carried the new Earth on his back, this is why this land upon which we live is called Taxkwâx Mènâ'te, Turtle Island, and Amankitaxkwâwikan'ànk, the Place of the Great Turtle's Back.

For his help, Taxkwâx, the Turtle, became the messenger of thoughts and feelings between different beings. A symbol of thought given and received, representing communication between all things.

After some time had passed, Nanapush sent Tàme, the Wolf, to see how large the new Earth had grown. The first time Wolf went on his journey, he was gone for one day. The second time he went he was gone for five days; the next, ten days; then, one moon; next, one year; then, five years, then again, for twelve years. The next time he went, he never returned, but became lost on the great wide Earth and died of old age. That is why today, at every full moon, the wolves sit in the forest howling, in remembrance of the great misfortune suffered by their ancestor long ago.

When Tàme, the Wolf, failed to return, Nanapush, the Strong Pure One, the Grandfather of Beings and Men, decided that the new Earth was now large enough, so he commanded it to stop growing.

As the waters subsided, that animal beings brought grasses, flowers, trees and food-bearing plants to Nanapush. Into each he breathed life and restored them on their island home.

Then the Earth was dry, and good to look upon. Indeed, it was very beautiful, and there grew a pale and lovely tree from the Mother Earth, and the root of this new tree sent forth a sprout beside it. After a time there grew upon it a man, the first on the new Earth. This man was there alone, and may have remained there alone forever, but the shimmering tree bent over its top to kiss the Mother Earth. Where the tree had touched the Earth, there appeared another sprout, and there grew the first woman of the new Earth. The wise ones tell us that from those two beings, that man and woman, came our Lenape'wàk, Lenapé people, owing our origin and faithfulness to the shimmering tree and the good Mother Earth.

Now on the new Earth, first man and first woman were nourished by food and drink brought by the animals, our elder brothers. The birds brought song and dance, the butterflies and bees amusement. All the animal beings served in some way except Màka'na, the Dog. Being less gifted than other animals, he had nothing to offer, but felt he must give something. So, the Dog pledged his love, and lay down beside where first man and first woman were sleeping. From that day the dog has remained by the side of humankind.

The first winter was a difficult one for those first Lenapé. The weather was very bad and the animals found food hard to find for them. So, Maxkwe, the Bear, fearing their death, offered of himself that they might live. With Bear's flesh they survived, and thereafter the other animals gave of themselves, their lives, to feed human beings. In gratitude and honor of the sacrifice of Bear, our ancestors held special ceremonies of thanksgiving for the gift of life from Bear and the other animals. We survive and have life because of the deaths of our elder brothers.

Nanapush taught our Lenape'wàk how to make everything we would need to live, the making of clothing, homes, canoes; he taught us the principles of leadership, that we should not strive for power and control over others; he taught us how to make weapons and how to defend ourselves; taught us our way of life and wisdom, how we should live our lives, in a way that is good, and taught us the greatest of all virtues, generosity and kindness; he taught us how to hunt and fish, how to grow crops and harvest them, how to cook and keep food through the winter. Nanapush gave our Lenape'wàk sacred medicine bundles which were to give us spiritual power to help us in times of need, he gave us the ceremonies we were to observe, taught us healing and our spiritual ways, and the importance of dream and vision.

Then, when Nanapush was sure of their survival, he called our Lenape'wàk to him and told them he was leaving. He told them always to remember the things and ways of life he had taught them, for then they would always live in peace and harmony with all land and life. The Old Ones say that his Spirit is with us still, and that if there comes a time when this world should end, he will come again to help guide us into a new Earth.

Nanapush was directed by a dream to retire into the wide expanses of the barren lands to the North, where he was to make for himself a home. So, he changed himself into a rabbit, and left, never being seen again by our people. Since that time, our Lenape'wàk have never used rabbit for food, as it is a symbol of the regeneration and continuing of life.

When Nanapush arrived in the far northern lands he found the peaceful silence and quiet contentment which he so much desired. There he built for himself a very large Wikwàm, a house, made of ice and snow. Now, every winter, he sleeps, like Maxkwe, the Bear, but before going to his bed of bearskins, he always smokes his pipe. So, the next time you see the pretty colored leaves on the trees in autumn and thick fog in the morning, you will know that Nanapush the Great Being, Grandfather of Beings and Men, is smoking his pipe and preparing to take his long winter nap.

