

A Meeting Between Creator and The Animals

On one of the slopes of the Clearwater River near Lewiston, Idaho, there are a lot of rounded stones going up one of the draws. As you look along the ridgeline there are also other rocks of all different sizes and forms, but most of them are very large. Some of these are referred to by the Nez Perce as the “large animals.” They are the remains of the large animals before there were human beings. The Nez Perce have always known that at one time there were large animals that inhabited this country because we find large bones in the ground between Clarkston and Pasco. The Creator called all of these large animals together telling them that there was going to be a great change, and he said that some of them probably wouldn’t survive. Many of the animals were late to the meeting that the Creator had called and as a result were turned to stone. So Creator called all the large animal people together and said there was going to be a great change and that he wanted all of the animals to qualify themselves for a new kind of human being that would be coming as a result of this great change. Creator wanted to know who was going to be qualified to help these new human beings when they came because those human beings were going to be naked, and they were going to have a hard time making a living. The Creator said, “I want each one of you to come forward and be qualified to help these new human beings when they come.” So all of the animals had to come up and be qualified.

The Nez Perce people could describe every animal including the birds, fishes, and insects that they knew of with this story. This is one story that they could relate for days and days to the young people and tell them how they used these species to survive.

So Deer, he comes out and says, “I want to have horns that come up and branch out, and I want to have big ears so I can hear well, and I want a little short tail with a black tip on it. These new human beings when they come can use my horn to make arrows and flint knives, and they can use my hide for clothing to keep warm, and they can use my hooves to make rattles to sing their songs with.” So Creator said, “You act the way you want to act, and that’s the way you will be,” and that deer is what we call Mule Deer today.

Well, another deer came forward and said, “I don’t want to be like that one. I want to have horns that come up a different way and then branch out. I don’t like large ears and I want a tail that’s longer,” and so he described himself how he wanted to be, and he also said that the new human beings could use his body parts and also his brains to help them tan the hides and

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make them soft and white. That deer was called Blacktail Deer. The Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified to help these new human beings when they come."

Another deer came forward and said, "I don't like those horns that come up and branch like the other ones. I want them to come up and go back and go straight up, and I don't like large ears, but I want a long tail that will wave when I run, and it will give warning to others in the woods when I run." That was Whitetail Deer, and he also said that the new human beings could use his body parts. Then Moose came forward and said, "I want to be bigger, I want to be black, and I want white feet, and I want my horns to be flat with points on them, and I want to have wide feet so I can wade around in the mud and eat those plants that grow in the water." Moose also said that the new human beings could use his body parts for clothing and food. Then Elk came forth and said, "I don't want to have flat horns like Moose. I want to have horns that come up and branch out and have points." Then he described himself, and Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified."

Then Eagle came forward and said, "I want to fly up high so that I can bring the messages to you from these new human beings, and they can use my feathers for ceremonies and symbols so that they know who the Creator is." Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified." Then Crow came out and said, "I want to be black and I'll be a warning to all the other animals in times of danger." So Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified." Then another Crow came out and said, "I don't want to be that small, I want to be bigger, and I want a different sounding voice, but I also still want to be black." And that bird was Raven. So Creator said, "Okay, you are qualified." Then another bird came out and said, "I don't want to be all black, I want a long black and white tail, and I'll also be a warning to the people." That bird was Magpie. Then Bee came forward and said, "I'll make honey that is very sweet, and they can use it for food, but I'll sting them to protect what I have." So Bee became qualified. Spider came forward, and he said, "I would like to give these new human beings wisdom. When I make my webs they'll never know how I make the webs, and yet I can catch food. This will tell them that I have something that they can acquire, but it will take a long time for them to learn how to get that wisdom." So Creator let the Spider be qualified.

Salmon and Steelhead came forward and said, "We can help the human beings with our flesh." Salmon said, "When we come up the river we will die, so the human beings will have to

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catch us before that happens. I'll come up only on certain times of the year, and that's when they'll have to catch me." Then Steelhead said, "I want to come in the wintertime, but I'll give them something special. That will be the glue from my skin. This glue can be used to make bows and spears. I'll be in the water all winter long." So Creator let Steelhead become qualified. Sockeye Salmon came forward and he said, "I don't want to be big like Chinook Salmon and Steelhead, and my flesh will be red because I will eat different foods." Then Trout came forward and he said, "I'm going to look like Steelhead, but I am not going to go down to the ocean. I'll just stay here in the waters even in the winter, and if these human beings can find me they can have me for food. But in the wintertime I will be down in the gravel and if they can find me that's where I will be." Then Eel came out and said, "I don't want to look like the Steelhead or Salmon or Trout. I want to be long, and when I rest I want to put my mouth on the rocks. But I'll come up the river every year, and they can use my flesh for food." So this is how the fish became qualified.

The last animal to be qualified was Coyote. Coyote came out, and he couldn't get qualified. He tried to be qualified to do something, but he couldn't do it. You know when you hear Coyote today, he goes, yip, yip, yip. He couldn't even talk. When Coyote talks, it sounds like two or three coyotes talking at the same time. So he couldn't get qualified, and finally Creator said that he would take pity on him. He said, "Because you can't get qualified I'll give you special powers. When these new human beings come, you will have all the faults and all of the traits that this new human being will have. That's what you will be able to do, but I'll give you some special powers beyond that. You will be able to transform and change yourself, and you will be able to get out of bad situations in order to save yourself. You will also be able to teach these new human beings many things." Creator said, "I'll make you qualified, but you'll get to be gray. You won't have any other colors." That's the way Coyote was created, and that's how Coyote became qualified to help the new human beings.

About this time Grizzly Bear spoke up and said, "What are we going to do about day and night? I want six months of night and six months of day." Chipmunk perked up and said, "We can't have that. I want one day and one night." So Chipmunk and Grizzly Bear started to argue. Grizzly Bear said that he wanted six months of day and six months of night so he could rest and sleep for half the year and work for the other half of the year. Chipmunk was adamant that there

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would be one day and one night. Finally, Creator told the two of them to go off to have their argument, and he told them that whoever won the argument would determine the way the new world would be created. So Grizzly Bear and Chipmunk went off and continued arguing.

After a long time, Grizzly Bear started to get tired, and he was trying not to go to sleep but Chipmunk was still going strong. Finally, Grizzly Bear got so tired that he went to sleep. Chipmunk yelled, "I won, I won, there will be one day and one night when those new human beings come." Creator replied, "That's the way it will be from now on, one day and one night." Soon, Grizzly Bear awoke and found out from the other animals that he had lost the argument. This made him angry and he started chasing Chipmunk. As Chipmunk was trying to get away, Grizzly Bear put out his claws and scratched Chipmunk on the back, and that is why today the Chipmunk has black and white stripes on his back.

-Allen Pinkham (Nez Perce)

