

The Sun, Moon and Stars *A Navajo Traditional Story*

In this present, or Fifth World, the First People had four lights which had been brought from the lower world. White light appeared over the eastern mountains, blue light spread across the sky from the southern mountains, yellow light came from the western peaks and darkness from the north. These lights were far away and carried no heat, so the air was always of one temperature and no seasonal changes occurred although there was darkness and daylight.

"We do not have enough daylight," the people complained
"We surely need more light."

So First Woman sent Glowworm to the east and told Fox Fire to go to the south, Lightning Beetle to the west, and Firefly to the north. Then, when anyone needed extra light, these four were ready to serve him.

For a time this plan worked very well, but it was not long before the First People were saying, "These lights are too small. They flicker on and off so they are of little use to us. We cannot work in such dim light!"

Then others asked, "How can we see to do anything? We do not have night eyes like Owl or Bat!"

It seemed that First Woman could never please them. Finally she thought of Fire Man and his glowing mountain, so she sent a messenger to ask the Fire Man if he could help her. "Yes," agreed Fire Man, "I can make the land bright all around Fire Mountain, but the light will not reach the edges of the land, and there will be smoke." After that flames leaped high above the mountain top, and there was no more darkness for some distance. But soon the people were again complaining.

"We do not like the heat and the smoke that is coming from Fire Mountain," they declared. "The heat scorches the earth and we are choked by the smoke!"

As everyone was complaining and no one was satisfied, First Woman decided that she must find a different way by which to light the earth. After consulting with a council of wise men, she told her helpers to bring her a large, flat slab of the hardest and most durable rock they could find. After visiting every mountain and rocky top, they returned with a large, flat slab of quartz; it was twice as long as it was wide, and, when the helpers had placed it on the ground in front of her, First Woman decided it was large enough to make two round wheels of equal size. She had hoped to make four in order to have one for each of the four directions, but the rock was too small for that many, so only two could be made.

After First Woman had marked two large circles on the slab, they all set to work with sharp flints and stone hammers, cutting out the two equal sized wheels. This was not an easy task, as the quartz was just as hard as the implements with which they were working, but after a time two round, flat discs lay shaped and ready for their purpose. Then First Man and First Woman started decorating the stones in a manner that would signify the powers that each was to be given. The first was given a mask of blue turquoise to produce



light and heat, then red coral was tied to the ear lobes and around the rim. A horn was attached to each side to hold male lightning and male rain. Feathers of the cardinal, flicker, lark, and the eagle were tied to its rim to carry it through the sky, and also to spread the rays of heat and light in the four directions. Four zig-zag lines of male wind and male rain stood at the top and four more hung at the bottom, and four sunspots were placed for guardians who sometimes stood on its face, but more often took their places in the four directions.

"Now it is finished," said First Man, "and I will give it a blessing of mixed pollens, and also a song which will be sung by a lark who hereafter will be known as the 'sun's voice'."

"But this cannot remain here!" stated First Woman. "It must be placed in the sky!"

No one seemed to know how this was to be done until Fire Man suggested that it should be carried to the top of the highest mountain and placed on the tallest peak at the edge of the earth where it could shine on all of the land at the same time. So it was taken to the eastern mountains and fastened to the sky with darts of lightning.

Then First Woman and her helpers went back to decorate the second, round stone disc, which was the same size as the first. but First Woman said, "We do not need another bearer of heat and light, so this one will carry coolness and moisture." Then they decorated its face with white shell, placed a band of yellow pollen on its chin, and made a rim of red coral. Magpie, nighthawk, turkey and crane feathers were fastened on four sides to bear its weight and its horns held female lightning and soft winds. Four straight lines placed at the top, and another four at the bottom, gave it control over the summer rains. When it was finished this, too, was taken to the top of an eastern peak and fastened to the sky with sheet lightning.

"Now everyone should be satisfied," remarked First Woman as she looked at the discs.

"Now we have light, heat and moisture, all coming from the sky."

But again many of the First People were complaining. "This is not right," they said. "If the sun stays in the east all the time it will always be summer on that side of the land, and it will always be winter on the other side."

"The sun must move across the sky," First Man agreed, "but how can it move when it is only a stone and has no spirit?"

Everyone looked at the two discs and knew that they were just decorated stones with no life of their own, and they wondered what could be done about it. Then two very old and very wise men stepped forth and said, "We will give our spirits to the sun and the moon so they will have life and power to move across the sky." One entered the turquoise disc and he was called Jóhonaa'ái, or Sun Bearer; the other entered the white disc and he was called Tl'éhonaa'ái, or Moon Bearer. Immediately the two stones began to quiver and show signs of moving.

"But how shall I know where to go or which paths to follow?" asked the sun; and the moon asked the same question.

"The eagle is guided by his tail feathers," said First Man. "We will give you each twelve feathers from the eagle's tail to point the correct paths you are to follow, and the changes in the paths will mark the changes in the seasons." So twelve tall, white feathers were fastened to the top of each headdress to indicate a different path for each month of the year.

Sun was the first to start on his journey across the sky, while Moon waited all day, until Sun had reached the peaks of the western mountains but was still looking back across the land.

At this point Moon queried, "Now?"

And Sun answered, "Now!"

So Moon was about to climb into the sky, when Wind Boy, who had been standing just behind him, thought he would help by pushing with a stiff breeze. This breeze hit the Moon Bearer in the back and blew the twelve feathers forward across his face, so he could not see where he was going. All he could do was follow where the tips of the feathers pointed, and, as these were now slanted in different directions, Moon has always followed strange paths across the sky.

First Man and First Woman could do nothing about this, so everyone went back to where they had been working on the slab of quartz. On the blanket which had held the two large discs were now many small pieces of stone of every size and shape, along with the dust that the chipping and shaping had created.

"Look at all this good quartz that is left!" First Man exclaimed.

And First Woman said, "It must not be wasted! We will use it to make more lights in the night sky."

So again they took their flint knives and their chisels and stone hammers, to shape the stars that would shine only at night. There were a few very large pieces of quartz but there were myriads of small chunks, and much stardust by the time they had finished their work.

When all the stars were ready to be placed in the sky First Woman said, "I will use these to write the laws that are to govern mankind for all time. These laws cannot be written on the water as that is always changing its form, nor can they be written in the sand as the wind would soon erase them, but if they are written in the stars they can be read and remembered forever."

After that she drew a sky pattern on the ground and placed one of the large stars in the north. "This will never move!" she said, "and it will be known as the Campfire of the North. It will also be known as the traveler's guide and as the lodestar." Then she placed large stars in the other three directions and one in the very center of her sky pattern.

"These must be placed in the sky in their correct positions," she told Fire Man, who had shot two crooked fire arrows into the sky so their trails formed a ladder, and who now undertook the task of placing the stars in their proper locations on the blanket of night. Before Fire Man picked up the first one, First Woman had traced in the sand a path for each to follow across the skyways, and First Man had tied a prayer feather on its upper point, giving each star a prayer to chant as it marched along its designated path.

Fire Man began with the north star and continued climbing the ladder until all the large stars were in the sky, while First Woman placed other stars into groups to form the constellations. It was slow work, as there were many stars and the ladder was very tall. While all this work was taking place Coyote had been standing close by, watching every move Fire Man made. Now he saw one fairly large star still lying on the ground, so he asked First Woman if he might have it for his own. "You may have that star," First Woman agreed, "if you will place it in the sky directly over your mountain. Part of the time it will be quite dim, but when it shines brightly its brilliance will indicate your mating season." So Coyote carefully climbed the zig-zag ladder, clinging to the rungs

with one paw while grasping the the star with the other, and placed Canopus, which the Navajo call M 'ii Bizo', in the southern sky directly over Coyote Mountain.

The first two constellations designated by First Woman were Ursa Major, which was named Náhookos, meaning Cold Man of the North, and Cassiopeia his wife, who was called Nahookás Ba'áád. These two were placed on opposite sides of S 'tsoh, or the North Star, which was their home fire; they move around its center and never leave it. No other constellation approaches them to interfere with their set routine. This arrangement of constellations established a law that has persisted to this day. This law stipulates that only one couple may live by one hogan file.

After these, First Woman designed a slender constellation in the shape of two rabbit tracks, one following the other. This is the constellation that governs all hunting, and, during the spring and early summer when the open end points upward, no one may hunt game animals. In the late fall, when the open end tips toward the earth, the hunting season begins. In the days when the Navajo people depended mostly on game for their food, the laws governing hunting were very strict. No hunting was allowed during mating season nor when the young were still with their mothers; and no deer or antelope under the age of two years were ever killed. Even today the Navajo do not care for meat from lambs or young kids, and, now that deer and antelope have almost disappeared from Navajo territory and have been replaced by sheep and goats, they use only the older ones for their food, as they believe the meat provides greater strength.

The next pattern to be made by First Woman was one recognized as a man with wide shoulders standing in a stooped position with his hands on his knees in order to support a heavy load of harvest. This constellation, or "the harvester," commands the Dine'é to work hard during the harvest season so they may garner sufficient food for the long, cold winter.

Thunderbird, who carries all the clouds in his tail and all the rains under his wings, was the next constellation, along with Hydra, "the horned rattler," who was given charge of the underground water channels. the task of placing all of these stars in their proper places was going slower and slower, for Fire Man could take only a few stars at a time as he climbed the ladder.

Coyote became impatient as he watched this slow process of placing the constellations. He said to First Woman, "This is taking too long! Why do you not permit me to help? Then we would have this work finished twice as fast!"

First Woman answered, "You always make mistakes and then there is trouble."

But Coyote insisted, saying "I will do exactly as you say and follow the pattern just as you have placed it on the ground."

First Woman was putting two identical stars into her pattern and had named them "the twins." The two lines which marked their paths ran side by side across the sky. She pointed to them and said to Coyote, "Take these two stars and place them somewhat to the west where they will walk hand in hand across the center of the sky."

Then Coyote picked up the two identical stars (Gemini), one in each hand, and walked to the ladder. He had seen Fire Man climb the ladder with his hands full of stars and thought he could do the same, but when he was half way up he chanced to look down, and the distance was so great that he became dizzy and almost fell. To make matters worse, Wind boy came whistling by to see what Coyote was doing, and shook the ladder from east to west. Quickly shifting the star in his right hand into his left which then carried both stars,

he continued to climb, using his right hand to cling to the ladder. When he reached the sky he soon found the two places where the stars belonged, but when he looked at the stars in his hand he could not tell them apart and did not know which one went to the right or which to the left. So he closed his eyes and put one star in place with his left hand and the other with his right. Immediately a harsh, grating noise was heard, and he knew they were in the wrong spots and were trying to change places. He could do nothing about it now, as they were well beyond his reach, so he hurried down the ladder while the two stars crossed, one in front of the other to gain their proper paths. First Woman met him at the foot of the ladder and berated him with angry words and fierce gestures. "Now look what you have done!" she cried. "Those two were supposed to establish peace and friendship among all peoples of the earth. Now they will cause enmity, strife, and dissension that will plague mankind forever. You shall carry no more stars to the sky!" Coyote grumbled as he walked away, "It was not my fault! Wind Boy shook the ladder and I almost fell off!"

First Woman told him to go away as she was too busy to be bothered, and went on laying out patterns for constellations which Fire Man carried to the sky. There was K'aalógii, or Butterfly; Tsídiitltsóii, the lark who sang his song to the sun every morning; there was Na'ash ii, the lizard; M 'iitsoh, the wolf; Atsá, the eagle; Dahsání, the porcupine, who was given charge of the growth of all trees on the mountains; and the caterpillar. First Woman made many, many more until nearly every animal, bird, and insect had star counterparts in the sky.

As Fire Man bore these up the ladder he carried his fire torch which held burning coals strapped to his left arm, and as each star was put into the sky he gave it a spark of fire to light its path so it could find its way even through the darkest night. All was going very well, but, as Fire Man was carrying a medium sized star to the east, the straps that held his torch came loose and the torch fell to the ground so he had no spark to give this star. He placed it in the sky, ran down the ladder to recover his torch, and then hurried back to give it a light, but he could not find it, as it had started to move and had lost its path in the darkness. This is called the "black star;" it wanders here and there and brings bad luck wherever it goes. It sends out little black arrows to cause pain and sickness and, if a person who is travelling at night feels a sharp prick in his shoulder or his back, he will know that the black star is not far away.

When Fire Man returned to earth, First Woman did not know whether to give him another constellation to carry to the sky, or not. Not many stones left on the blanket were large enough to make stars, but many chips and piles of dust remained. She filled Fire Man's hands with stone fragments, and he started climbing; he was halfway up the ladder when he glanced at the stones in his hands and decided that they were too small and too many to place individually, so he gave each one a spark of fire and then, handful by handful, he threw them against the night sky. Here they may still be seen as close groups of small stars which represent the small, fire carrying creatures of the earth such as the lightning beetle or firefly, and the glowworm.

As Fire Man was descending the ladder, Coyote stepped up to the blanket and, grasping it by two corners, swung it into the air so the stone fragments and the star dust swept across the sky in a great arc that reached from horizon to horizon. This formed the Milky Way which the Navajo call Yikáisdáhí. They believe it provides a pathway for the spirits traveling between heaven and earth, each little star being one footprint.

The Coyote dropped the blanket and everyone looked at the sky which was now filled with stars. First Woman said, "Now all the laws our people will need are printed in the sky where everyone can see them. One man of each generation must learn these laws so he may interpret them to the others and, when he is growing old, he must pass this knowledge to a younger man who will then be the teacher. The commands written in the stars must be obeyed forever!"

Nowadays, it is only the Navajo medicine men who know the constellations and can explain the laws they represent.