

JEANETTE WEASKUS: COYOTE CREATES CELILO FALLS

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INTRO: WELCOME TO VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH — A NEW PODCAST SERIES FROM THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER. I'M JANE FRITZ.

BACK IN 1990, I PRODUCED A SERIES FOR PUBLIC RADIO CALLED KEEPERS OF THE EARTH. IT INCLUDED THE STORIES OF NEZ PERCE ELDERS, THOSE THAT ARE SHARED FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION. TIMELESS STORIES ABOUT HOW TO CARE FOR THE PLANET AND ONE ANOTHER. SUCH STORIES ARE MEANT TO BE HEARD AGAIN AND AGAIN, SO LET'S LISTEN NOW....

JEANETTE: Hello, my name is Jeanette Weaskus and I am an enrolled member of the Nez Perce Tribe, or Nimi'ipuu. I used to work for the tribal radio station, KIYE and my show was called "Titwaatit Time" which means "Story Time." This podcast for The Idaho Mythweaver's Voices of the Wild Earth focuses on the natural world with topics about trees, wolves, and salmon, and its archive of Indigenous oral histories. My contribution to the series is to share a story that fascinates many of the tribal elders that I have known over the decades and continues to be their favorite. This story is called, Coyote Breaks the Fish Dam and is also known as, How Coyote Freed the Salmon.

First, I will talk a little about what Coyote means to the Nez Perce people. He is one of the Creator's eldest children and was put on the earth to help human beings who are the Creator's youngest children. This relationship mirrors the tribal kinship way of how the elder siblings teach and help their younger siblings. Coyote continues to be a good big brother to us through the pantheon of Nez Perce Tales where he taught everything good and bad that a person would encounter in everyday village life. Coyote has also made the world safe

for human beings by ridding the land of dangerous monsters, and kept people alive by creating all kinds of foods to eat. As the eldest of Creator's children, Coyote was taught by the Great Maker of us All and passes this knowledge down so that humans can live their best life. And now we will take a look at what teachings from Coyote are held dear by the most knowledgeable of tribal elders.

Coyote Breaks the Fish Dam is a story about caring for your neighbors. It takes place at Celilo Falls where Coyote finds that 5 sisters have lived there since ancient times and dammed the falls to trap all the fish. Not only are the fish unable to go upriver to spawn, but all the people and animals who live along the rivers cannot have any fish to eat. The sisters killed anyone who came near the dam and had never let a single fish out. Coyote watched the sisters for a few days before making a plan to trick them into taking him into their lodge. He turned himself into a baby that was so cute they could not resist it except for the youngest sister who clearly saw it was Coyote. She warned the older sisters but they dismissed her, saying she was wrong about the baby. When Coyote got close enough to the dam, he broke it down and set the salmon free. Now we will hear the late Nez Perce elder, Mari Watters, tell the story of How Coyote Broke the Fish Dam:

MARI WATTERS: "Once Coyote was walking along on a hot day. He was going upriver and he saw the river and said, 'Oh let me cool myself in the water.' And he swam down the swift river. After a while he came ashore and mosquitos just swarmed all over him. So he named the place by saying, 'This will be Mosquito Place.' He swam down the river a little further and then he got out again. 'Ah, this is a nice sunny slope, they will call this place Hiila'qat Paat Kiine Ka, 'The Sunny Slope.' He kept a little farther until he came to a waterfall near where the Wasco people lived. Five maidens had dwelt there from ancient times. This was the place where the great dam kept the fish from passing up the stream.

Then suddenly he saw a maiden. Quickly, he went back upstream away and said, 'Let me look like a little baby floating down the river on a raft in a Flathead type baby board, all laced up.' And so it became. As Coyote was drifting down he cried, 'Wah-Awaa-Awaa.' And the maidens hearing this quickly swam over thinking that a baby might be drowning. The eldest maiden caught it first and she said, 'Oh what a cute baby!' But the youngest maiden said, 'This is no baby, that is Coyote.' And the others answered, 'Stop saying that, you will hurt the baby's feelings.' The Coyote put up his bottom lip as if he were about to cry and then the maidens took the baby home and cared for it and fed it and he grew very fast. And when he was crawling around one day, he spilled some water on purpose. 'Oh mother,' he said, 'Will you get me some more water?' And the youngest sister said, 'Why don't you make him go and get it himself? The river is nearby' So the maidens told Coyote to get the water himself.

He began to crawl toward the river, but when he got out of sight, he jumped up and began to run. The oldest sister turned around and said, 'He is out of sight already, he certainly can move fast!'

'That is because he is Coyote!' the youngest said.

When Coyote reached the river, he swam to the fish dam and tore it down; pulling out the stones so that all the water rushed free. Then he crawled up on the rocks and shouted gleefully, 'Mothers, your fish dam is just broken down!'

The sisters ran down and saw that it was true. The youngest maiden just said, 'I told you he was Coyote.'

Coyote said, 'You have kept all the people from having salmon for such a long time by keeping them from going upstream. Now the people will be happy because they will get salmon. Now salmon will go straight upriver and spawn.'

This is how Celilo, Oregon came to be. Where the Wasco people are today because Coyote tore down the fish dam.

JEANETTE: Like many Nez Perce Tales, Mari's story describes the origin of a local rock formation, with characters interacting with the environment to imbibe knowledge to the listener. This particular story is how Coyote teaches the listener to take action. He took steps to free the salmon from captivity and in doing so, helped the salmon so they could go spawn. Coyote let everyone have salmon instead of just the sisters who were keeping it all for themselves. The late Nez Perce elder, Al Slickpoo, Sr., leaves those listening to him tell the same story with the motives with which Coyote was operating:

AL SLICKPOO, SR.: "The moral of the story is that the salmon was intended to be shared by all people, and not just any one tribe or one group. It should be shared by everyone and this was the reason why that the Coyote had broken the dam. He felt that the people should share in what Mother Nature had to provide for us.

JEANETTE: Now you know how Coyote went to a great deal of trouble to break down the fish dam long ago and create Celilo Falls so that all the people and animals could have salmon. In 1957, the Army Corps of Engineers together with Bonneville Power Administration rebuilt what Coyote tore down with the construction of The Dalles Dam. On that day in March, thousands of people from all the tribes who fished there gathered to watch as Celilo Falls went underwater. What does Coyote think of these new 5 sisters who put up a dam so they could sell electricity to all the people? He may say something like, "If you are starving, you can't eat electricity, but you can eat the salmon I gave to everyone."

The late Nez Perce elder, Rick Ellenwood, summed up the feelings of that generation who fished the falls and then saw it flooded by the dam:

RICK ELLENWOOD, SR.: It was very disappointing when the dam inundated Celilo Falls. Just like losing something really valuable and great. Like losing a close friend. You kinda felt really downtrodden, and just lost. Now what are we going to do? It wasn't just a place to catch fish, it was a gathering of many people and we had a lot of friends and we'd visit. We had dances down there and we had feasts, dances, get-togethers — all these tribes and it was fun. And that was gone. And the fish was gone. Sure they give us all kinds of money—you're going to get several million dollars, and it was doled out. And I still don't think that we ever got paid enough to even take away the heartbreak and the fish and the things that we are now fighting over. It's never has compensated that void in my life. It's still empty. And that's the way I still feel about it. Money has never done me justice. It's gone. Salmon would still be here as far as that goes. But now we're destroying that, too. So I just feel that Celilo was something that we all lost. All the Native Americans in the Northwest. We lost something all together. A close friend.

JEANETTE: Not only did Coyote provide salmon to all the tribes who fished there, but a close friend as well. Take care of yourselves and be sure to watch for the upcoming, Voices of the Earth podcast: People of the Salmon.

Qe'ci'yew'yew, thanks for listening. I'm Jeanette Weaskus.

VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH PODCASTS ARE PRODUCED BY ME, JANE FRITZ, AND PRODUCTION ASSISTANT JUSTIN LANTRIP FOR THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER. SPECIAL THANKS TO STORYTELLER AND NEZ PERCE PRODUCER JEANETTE WEASKUS.

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