

# TURTLE TEACHINGS

## CHAPTER 2



These were some of their favourite foods and the children could already tell it was going to be a great visit!

After supper, everyone enjoyed watching the colourful sunset over the water. The children played the listening game and they tried to count the many different sounds they could hear as the birds gathered to sing a goodnight song to the sun. Wari and Sewatis realized that there were more sounds at Tota Ma's house than there were in the city.

Just as the mosquitoes started to buzz, cousin Sose rode up on his bike.

"She:kon Tota Ma, are they here yet? Oh great! Hey there, Sewatis."

"Hey Sose!" said Sewatis.

"I am so excited that you are here! Wari how are you? Did your Tota tell you about the work she is doing this summer down at the marsh? You should see her up to her ankles in mud! Tota Ma, tell us about your dream again!" Sose urged. The other children were excited to hear a story from their Tota as well!

As the sky began to darken and evening arrived, Tota Ma pulled her shawl up over her shoulders and settled into her favourite chair. Sewatis and Wari curled up at her feet.

Wari read the note over one last time as the bus turned off the highway and pulled into the stop at Tyendingaga. With a smile, she put the piece of paper into her backpack, nudged her brother Sewatis awake, and collected her belongings. Their adventure was about to begin!

Tota Ma was waiting and gathered the children in her arms with a big welcoming hug.

"Kwe kwe! Kwe kwe! My beautiful grandchildren, I am so glad that you have come. We are going to have a wonderful summer together!" she exclaimed.

When Tota Ma and her grandchildren arrived at her house, there was a fresh pan of corn bread, baked fish, and cranberry juice waiting for them.

Wari noticed that Tota Ma was wearing a nice pair of moccasins with turtles beaded on each one. She hoped to have a pair like that some day. Sose leaned on the railing, impatiently waiting for Tota Ma to share her dream.

"You know my children," Tota Ma began, "when I was young, my grandparents told me that dreams are very important. They hold special significance for us and we should listen to them carefully. I would like to share with you a dream that I had about Turtle Teachings. Do you remember the Creation Story I shared with you last summer?" asked Tota Ma.

"Yes!" exclaimed Sose. "That was my favourite story. It is about turtles, right? Can you share it again?" he asked.

"Of course, my grandson. It is one of my favourites as well. I would love to tell you the Creation story shared with me by my grandparents."

Our Creation Story begins in a place called Karonhià:ke. It is a beautiful place where people live in bark-covered longhouses, plant corn and play lacrosse. It is place of magic and mystery.

This lady from the Sky World is named Atsi'tsiakà:. And in the middle of this world, there was a special tree that grew. They called it the Life Tree because it produced the things that made everything live. It was such a powerful life-giving



source that its blossoms glowed, giving off light so the Sky Beings could see how beautiful their world was. This tree also had everything growing on it. It had apples, peaches, plums, cherries, pears, every kind fruit you could imagine. Since this tree grew everything, it had a power.

And they were told that the tree would provide such sustenance only if the people were patient and respectful, giving the fruit time to ripen so that all could enjoy its bounty. This is an important teaching from the Sky World that we should pay attention to in our world.

Now there was a woman in the Sky World who got pregnant. When a woman gets pregnant, a new life begins to form in her body. So it affects the woman as she prepares to give birth. Her body begins to transform. While this is happening it is

important that she stay in a good mood and have what they call the Good Mind – kind thoughts and words to share.

However, as her body changes, so does her moods. So sometimes she is in a good mood, a happy mood. And then the next minute or the next half hour, she can feel angry or lonely. A minute later she could feel something else.

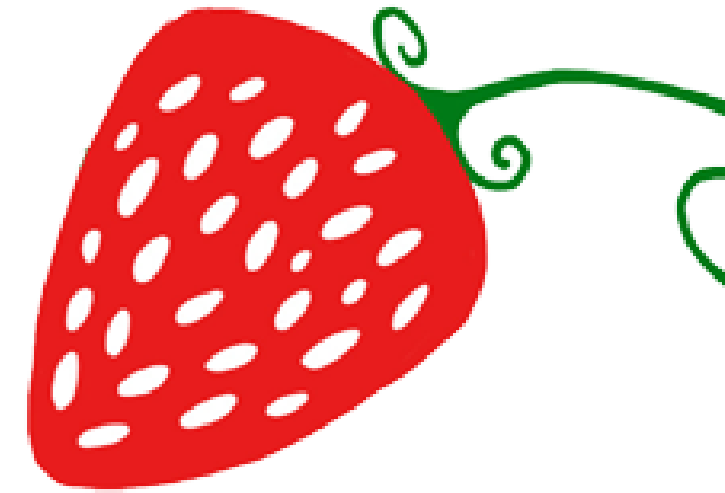
So this pregnant woman in the Sky World says to the Old Man who was guarding the Tree of Life, "I would have no greater pleasure, my husband, than if you were to go over to that tree, and get some of its small tender fresh roots, and its bark, its skin. Make a tea for me to drink. I would be so satisfied, and I would have such great peace."

Her husband answers, "Did you forget that we are not supposed to touch that tree?"

"Get over there and do what I asked," she said, "instead of talking about stuff like that."

He jumped up and got over to the big, beautiful tree with all of its fruit. He looked at the tree, and he was still reluctant. He did not want to do it. So he looked at that tree, and he went a little bit closer, but he did not touch it. He looked again. And right close to the base of the tree, there was a hole that appeared from nowhere, among the roots of the tree.

"Hmmm", he says, "you cannot see the bottom of it." And he was not going to get any closer. That



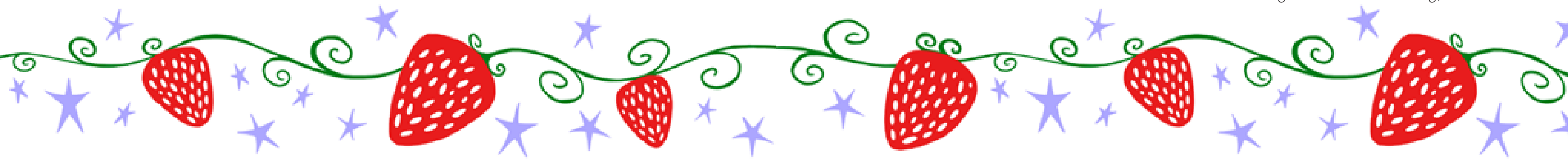
was enough for him. He backed off. So he went back home.

However, the pregnant woman asked, "You got that medicine or that root?"

"I could not do it," he says as he walks away.

"What is wrong with you?" she says, "Why won't you help me?"

The Old Man felt bad. She wouldn't give him a chance to explain anything either. She went over there and she saw that hole in the ground next to the tree. She said, "Gee, that's true, what he said. I wonder what did that?" She went closer and she looked at the hole. "I can't even see how far down it is." So she got on her hands and knees and she put her nose right to it and looked at it really hard. And that was not enough. This time she stuck her head in there. And she said, "Wow. I can't see what is down there, but I can hear animals and birds and it sounds like waves of water!" As she was busy investigating around in that hole, she did not notice that the grains of dirt were falling, as the hole



was getting bigger. The next thing you know she started to fall. She frantically tried to grab anything she could reach. And they say, because this was the Tree of Life, there were all kinds of seeds, things that fell around those roots onto the ground below, at the base of the tree. And as she tried to avoid falling, she grabbed at the edge of the hole and her hands became full of various kinds of seeds and plant roots.

Then, she began to fall down through the dark sky, through the atmosphere, tumbling, head over heels. And as she was falling down, you have to remember that on this earth where we live today did not exist. There was no land – no mountains, no valleys. The complete planet was surrounded by water. The only ones that lived here were turtles, fish, beavers, otters, muskrats, ducks, and geese. And all these creatures had webbed toes and fingers in order to survive in the water. But deer did not live here or any of those kinds of things that did not have webbed feet.

As she came falling down and caused such a commotion, all of the creatures of the water world held a council and decided to send up a flock of water birds to check it out. And they said, “What is that coming down here?” They had never seen such a creature. They did not know what it was. So they flew over close to where she was falling and they examined her. They looked at her skin, and they noticed it was not like the skin they had for water. And they looked at her toes and fingers and they noticed there was nothing between them; they were not webbed to help her swim. So they gathered that she was not from their world – the world of water. And if she was going there, she would not survive.

They felt sorry for her, and they tried to intervene. So what they said was “Let’s all fly together. We’ll hook our wings together and make a soft feathery place so she can gently fall on our bodies. We’ll catch her. Then she won’t get hurt. And we’ll try

to take her back where she came from because we don’t think she can survive in this water where we live.”

So they caught her gently on their feathery backs, and they began to go in an orchestrated way. They flew her way up high, as far as they could go. Pretty soon they became totally exhausted. They just did not have the energy to go any farther up. They came to the realization that they just could not get her back up there. It was too far, too high. They had run out of strength.

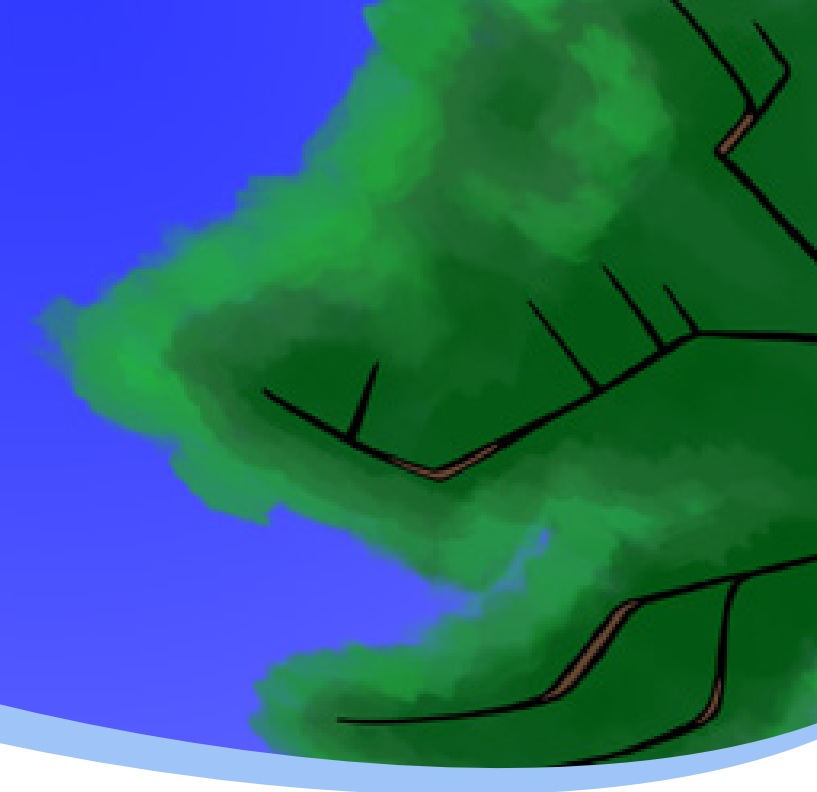
“We’ll have to take her to where we live. We don’t know what we’re going to do when we get there, though. She’s in trouble. We can’t fix that. Only choice we’ve got, so we better find something to help us.” And one of them said, “You go down first. Dive down there and tell all the different life in the water that there is a great emergency. Tell them what is happening. Maybe together they can find a way to think of a plan to help this being.”

So the water animals held a second council and it was decided that they needed to provide a safe place for her to land. At first, they were completely

befuddled about it. First a giant muskie offered his back but they said it was not big enough. Others offered but they too were too small. Just as they were ready to quit, since they did not have any options, the big turtle spoke up. And that turtle said, “I don’t really have an answer, either. But I might have a temporary answer. How about if when they get down here, you tell them to put that creature right in the middle of my back. I’ll stay afloat up on top of the water, and I’ll hold her up. And then we can try to keep thinking about what we might do to help her.”

So when they got down, they put her on that turtle. And she stood there. And all the animals came from every direction, of all sizes and shapes and forms. They were all curious to see what this creature was. And they looked at her. And they came to the same conclusion as the birds did – that she had to have land so she would not drown in the water.

And then she opened up her hands. She showed them that she had a strawberry plant. She had all those seeds in her hand, which were to be her food source. But there was no dirt to plant them. So the beaver said, “Dirt. I think I remember my grandfather



and great grandfathers talking one time when I was just a young kid. I heard that below this big water somewhere, way down, there is dirt down there. But we've never seen it. We've never been down there."

Then the otter said, "I seem to have heard that too, from our grandpa, and elders. They said that there was dirt." And they all came to the same conclusion. They had heard it. But none of them had ever been

there. So finally the beaver said, "Well, I have a big tail, you know. And it can push me, and I can go fast, and I'm a good swimmer. And I can hold my breath a long time. I could go and try to retrieve that dirt. And if I do, then I'll bring it for her, and she can plant those seeds, and she will have food."

So he took a run and a jump and he dove. He splashed into the water, and down he went. And he was gone a long time. And all of a sudden, his body popped out of the water. And everybody saw him. He was lifeless. He was not moving at all. It appeared that he had drowned; he had died. And so they pulled his body up there. And sure enough, he had drowned. He had never made it to the bottom of the big water.

So then the otter tried it. And then different ones tried it. They all took turns, but they all died. Finally, a little tiny one, the smallest one – the muskrat – he came forward. He does not have anything to help him to be great. He is just a little tiny thing, not like the beaver, not like the otter

with their streamlined bodies that make them swift as an arrow. He is just a skinny little old muskrat. But all the other creatures had tried it, and they could not do it, so now he was their last chance. So they were all looking at him. And if there was a place to hide, I suppose he would have hid. But there was no place. So he felt he had to be brave; he had to do his share. He said, "Well, I'm not a good swimmer. I don't have a big tail like the beaver to propel me down in the water. All I am is just a little old muskrat. And if they didn't make it, probably I'm not going to make it either. But at least I'm going to try."

So they said okay. And so he ran along on top of that turtle's back. And he jumped and he dove in and down he went. He was gone longer than every one of those animals. All of a sudden, his little old scroungy body came popping up on top. His eyes were closed. And there was no movement in his body whatsoever. And he, it appeared, had gone as well. He did not make it.

So the other animals, they went over there and grabbed him. They dragged him up on top of the turtle's back to examine him, to see if he was dead. They touched him all over, and he was cold as ice. But finally when they touched around his chest, they felt a little warmth and a little movement. A movement so faint...but he was living. So they pushed on his stomach, and water came up. And they pushed on his stomach, and more water came up. As they revived him, his eyes opened up, and he started to blink. And when they opened his little tiny black hand, there were some little granules of the dirt there, from the big water.

And so when he came to, he went over there to that woman and he gave it to her, that dirt. Everybody was happy. All the animals were so elated, so joyous, because they were able to do it



in their combined efforts, through great sacrifice. Life could begin. And so the woman took the dirt. And she put it right there in the middle of the turtle's back. And then she started a kind of slow, sideways shuffle dance in a circle where that dirt was in the middle. And as she started to move she started chanting the language of Karonhià:ke, for that's where she was from.

And as she went around there, the miracle of birth began. And the granules of dirt began to multiply and grow. Instead of a little speckle, it had become a pile. As the dirt began to grow she used the movement of her feet to spread it out, forming a small island on the back of the Turtle. And as she continued to sing or to chant that song, it began to multiply even more. And not only that, but the turtle began to grow in accordance with the growth of that dirt. And as she continued to go around in an even bigger circle, the turtle grew and grew until it became bigger. And

there was wall-to-wall dirt covering it now. That was the miracle of birth of this land.

So this island got bigger and bigger until it became what they call the Great Turtle Island. That is why the Lakota, the Blackfoot, the Mohawks, most all of the original people, when they refer to the earth, call it Turtle Island. That is what we call this earth where we live. And it came from this story.

(used with permission from Tom Porter's book, "And Grandma says")

When Tota Ma finished telling the story, the grandchildren began to shuffle in their seats.

"Gosh, I love that story" said Wari. "I remember a turtle in the story but I did not know that turtles could teach us so much! Are there other things we can learn from turtles, Tota?" Wari asked.

"I am so happy you asked that. As a matter of fact, just the other night I had a dream about an old turtle. This turtle's name was A'nó:wara. She spoke to me about her turtle troubles," Tota Ma explained.

The first stars were beginning to sparkle in the night sky as Tota Ma began to tell her grandchildren about the dream. "The A'nó:wara family and cousins have lived in the waterways and wetlands of Turtle Island since Creation. Some turtles live for over one hundred years! As keepers of stories and knowledge about the water, they have responsibilities to communities and to the Creator. A'nó:wara asked me who will take over those responsibilities when the turtles are gone. There are fewer of them to fulfil the responsibilities that were given by Shonkwaya'tihson," Tota Ma said quietly.

She paused for a few moments with her eyes closed, remembering the words and the sad voice of A'nó:wara, "A'nó:wara reminded me of a



traditional Turtle Teaching. Her shell is our calendar. In my dream, she used her claws to draw a turtle shell in the soft sand at the edge of the marsh. She then cut the shell into thirteen parts, which represent the thirteen full moons of every year. With each changing moon, there are different seasonal activities. For example, during *Ohyariha*, we gather strawberries," Tota Ma explained.

Wari asked, "Tota Ma, is that in June? I remember going to the *ken'niyohontehsa* farm with my class to pick *ken'niyohontehsa* in June."

"Yes, that is right Wari," said Tota Ma. "A'nó:wara also told me about thirteen challenges with activities for each moon. These challenges provide ways for us to help the turtles of Ontario! The *first challenge* is something we do daily; she asks that we *give thanks for all that exists in Creation*. Her *second challenge* asks us to *understand Turtle Teachings*, such as the calendar she carries on her back, and the Creation Story. As you can see, my grandchildren, there are many things to learn from A'nó:wara. Walking in her

footsteps may be challenging, but it is important so we can learn that there are different ways of knowing."

"Wow, Tota Ma, there is a whole lot to learn," Sose said as he yawned. "I am so tired! This has been such a great day and I am looking forward to learning more about A'nó:wara and what those challenges can teach us, but for right now, I need some sleep!" he said.

"I can see you are all getting tired. Time to get ready for bed," Tota Ma said.

Sose hopped on his bike. Wari and Sewatis said their goodbyes and scurried off to brush their teeth and change into pajamas.

"Goodnight my grandchildren," said Tota Ma. "Tomorrow will be a busy day."

Each child said goodnight and crawled into bed, looking forward to the exciting day ahead.

