Humans and Nature and Creation: Crash Course World Mythology #6

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and today we're wrapping up creation myths.

Over the past four episodes we've seen the universe created from nothing, via the actions of earth mothers, sky fathers, and of course, vomiting supreme beings. We've seen creation used to explore the relationships between parents and children and between men and women. And snakes.

And on that note, today, we're going to examine the earthly interconnection between humans and animals. High five, Thoth! What? yeah, yeah I know humans are animals. You know what I'm saying.

[Opening music]

Before we get into the creation myths, let's start with a little scientific mythology about man's best friend. Of course, I mean dogs. Sorry Thoth. Dogs were, if not the first, then among the first, domesticated animals, and they play an important role in mythology. Romulus? Remus? I'm looking in your direction.

One of the stories that we tell about the domestication of dogs is that it started when early hunter gatherers chose to tame and then breed some of the less aggressive wolves in order to increase the hunters' capacity to capture game. Eventually, these cross and interbred wolves became dogs. Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy? It's any canine that doesn't bite off your hand, that's who a good boy is!

It's a nice story and it seems to make sense, but there are some problems with it. In an article in *National Geographic*, Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods argue that some scientists are flipping this narrative on its head and saying that it was wolves that sought out humans, rather than the other way around. It doesn't make much sense for humans to try to capture wolves and get them to work for us. Early hunter gatherers were pretty good at hunting, which is why they might have been to blame for the destruction of megafauna in the prehistoric world. Also, why would humans want to share the spoils of the hunt with a wolf? They're hungry. Like the wolf.

Hare and Woods explain that scientists think it is more likely that wolves approached humans, probably by scavenging around their garbage pits. These would have been the friendliest wolves; aggressive ones would have been killed by anxious humans. So, it was the friendly wolves that, over many generations, were bred into the lovable, vacuum-hating rapscallions that we know and love. Don't ask me about cats, though. I got nothing there. Are cats even really domesticated? I feel like they're hiding something. There's some plot. They're up to something.

Let's return, as we so often do, to the Judeo-Christian Biblical story of creation from Genesis. In Chapter One, after creating the heavens and the earth and the stars and all the animals: "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God said, 'Behold I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with every seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so.'

Sounds like more gardening to me, surprise surprise. In the second chapter of Genesis, God grants humans control over the other earthly creatures in a slightly different way. In this version, God creates man before the animals. Then the Lord God said, "'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name." Isn't that nice? Giraffes and sharks and biting flies made just to help us.

Both creation stories set up a clear hierarchy in the animal world with human beings at the top, given the power to do whatever they want with all animals below them. Basically, they're our interns. The second version of the story affirms human control over animals in two ways. First, by having man created prior to the animal kingdom, humans are granted literal primacy. Then, their power is increased over animals by the first man receiving the privilege of naming them. And, I mean, he did a pretty good job. Especially with hippopotamus.

But not all myths about humans and animals employ this strict hierarchy. In a number of creation stories from Native American tribes animals are partners in creation, often acting as guides or even as the key participants in creating the earth. The tribes of what is now the Southwestern United States have creation stories that follow a model we haven't seen yet, the emergence myth. In these stories, humans or creatures that become humans are led from an original underground world into a series of interim worlds until they emerge into the surface world that is recognizably Earth.

In a Hopi version of this story, various animals including the Spider Grandmother, and a chipmunk help to find the entry hole, or *sipapuni*, to the land beyond the sky. Apparently, there is one of these entry ways in the Grand Canyon. In a Navajo version of the emergence story, the people, who are also sort of insects, fly through the sipapuni into the higher world, assisted by swallows. I really like these myths. Humans working with nature! Literally rising towards creation! It's a really nice breath of fresh air, almost literally, after all the vomiting and death that we've had so far.

Another type of creation story featuring animal helpers is called the earth diver myth. A good example comes from the Iroquois Indians of the Northeastern Woodlands of the United States.

Let's dive into the Thought Bubble.

A long time ago, humans lived up in the sky in what we now consider heaven. The daughter of their great chief became very sick, and they were unable to cure her. In the village was a great tree on which grew the corn that had fed all the people. One of the chief's friends had a dream in which he was told to tell the chief to lay his daughter beside the tree and dig it up. The chief did as the dream said. While this was going on an angry young man came along. The angry young man didn't have the best bedside manner. He pointed out the tree provided the fruit which fed the people, and gave the sick daughter a push with his foot.

She fell through the hole that had been left when the tree had been dug up. The young woman fell into this world, which at the time was all water. On this water floated ducks, and geese and all the other water birds. As there was no earth on this water at the time, there was no place for the falling woman to land, so the birds joined their bodies together into a sort of duck island, where the falling woman landed.

After some time, the birds grew tired and asked who would care for the woman. The Great Turtle took the woman, and when he grew tired he asked who would take care of her. They decided to prepare land on which she would liv - the earth. The Toad, after some

convincing, dove to the bottom of the primal sea, and collected soil which was placed on the broad carapace of the Great Turtle. It increased in size until it provided the land to accommodate all the living creatures.

Thanks Thought Bubble. And nice work, water birds. Also, Toad. Thoth, meet Toad. Toad, Thoth. Thoth, Toad.

So there's a lot more to the myth than this, but it captures the key elements of the Earth Diver story. Although it has some things in common with other creation myths we've seen, especially the idea that the world began as water, the relationship between human beings and animals is quite different. For one thing, far from being dumb creatures waiting to be named and tamed by a man, these animals can talk, think, deliberate, and plan. Animal empowerment! They also have emotions similar to the ones we feel, especially getting tired and bored of a tedious task. Think about this the next time you watch a horse pull a cart, or you're trying to entertain your cat by waving that feathery thing in front him. I'm telling you: they're gettin' fed up.

Just as important as being given real agency in this creation story though, it's the animals who both save humans progenitors, and create our home. Without the helpful turtle and the brave toad, there would be no land to live on, and also no earth to grow food. The creation of the world requires animals and thus it is crucially important to be grateful to them. These Native American myths are very intricate and when you read them – and you should – it's important to remember that they are very different from many of the other creation stories because they are living stories, communicated by way of a constantly evolving oral tradition, unlike more or less stable written texts.

Still, one of the interpretive take-aways from these Emergence and Earth Diver stories is that Native Americans perceive a different relationship between animals and nature and humans than people from other traditions. According to the biblical tradition, human beings have a special relationship with God who prefers them to all other creatures. According to mythology professors Eva Thury and Margaret Devinney, "This privilege has been interpreted by some as giving believers the right to dispose of nature as they please."

On the other hand, according to these scholars, "Native Americans view this world...as the place where their destinies will be fulfilled, not by domination but by maintaining a balance achieved by living in harmony with themselves and other humans as well as with animals and the exterior world."

Now some of you might be saying, wait, this sounds like a stereotypical view of Native Americans. Like they have some mystical connection with nature and that we should look to them for a way to understand how better to live in harmony with it. And you would be right, that is a cultural stereotype, one that has often been uncritically linked with an idea of Native American peoples as being primitive. But, I will say, maybe in comparison to the other stories we've heard so far, with all the vomiting, and wars, and eating of children, it's kind of nice think of the universe as a place of collaboration, and not one of acrimony. Except, of course, for the jerk who kicked the daughter down the hole.

Thanks for watching. We'l see you next week.

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Thanks for watching and, just for the record, I have a cat and that's precisely why I think they're up to something.