

## **JEANETTE: STORYTELLING IN THE NEZ PERCE TRADITION**

**6/29/2022**

*[AMBIENCE OF WIND CHIMES UP AND FADE UNDER]*

**INTRO FOR WEBSITE :** WELCOME TO THE VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH PODCAST SERIES FOR THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER.

I'M JANE FRITZ. *[FADE AMBIENCE OUT]*

**JANE:** BACK IN THE 1990s, I GOT TO HEAR SOME OF THE BEST STORYTELLERS IN THE NEZ PERCE TRIBE SHARE THEIR ORAL LITERATURE. BUT YEARS BEFORE I BEGAN RECORDING TRIBAL ELDERS FOR RADIO PROGRAMS, I WAS VISITING AN ELDER IN KOOSKIA, IDAHO, WHEN HER GREAT GRANDSON, WHO WAS ABOUT FIVE OR SIX AT THE TIME, CAME HOME FROM SCHOOL AND INTERRUPTED US. HE SAT DOWN AT HER FEET AND SHE PROCEEDED TO TELL HIM A STORY COMPLETELY IN HER NATIVE TONGUE. LISTENING TO AN ELDER SPEAK NIMIIPUUTIMT IS A SPECIAL GIFT EVEN IF I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND A SINGLE WORD. HE SEEMED TO UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING SHE SAID. THEY BOTH LAUGHED A LOT AND CONNECTED IN A DEEP AND MEANINGFUL WAY THAT I'LL NEVER FORGET. HE WANTED ANOTHER STORY AND ANOTHER, AND SO I LEFT HER HOME IN AWE AND WONDER.

WHERE DO TRADITIONAL STORIES COME FROM? HOW DO THEY CONNECT TO TRIBAL LANDS? AND WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO TEACH THE YOUTH OF TODAY? LET'S LISTEN TO SOMEONE WHO CAN TELL US.

**JEANETTE:** Hello, my name is Jeanette Weaskus and I'm an enrolled member of the Nez Perce Tribe of Idaho, or Nimiipuu. Today I'll be talking about Nez Perce legends and how they relate to the tribal landscape. As a folklorist, I have gotten to know the mythologies of many cultures around the world and have learned how traditional stories function within those cultures. Specific cultural knowledge is conveyed to the listener who will remember it, thus learning from the stories.

In the case of our Nimiipuu mythology, the function of the stories is to teach youth how to treat one another in the right way, as well as how to survive if they are somehow caught alone in the wilderness. The landscape covered in the legends begins at the mouth of the Columbia River and ends just south of the Seven Devils Mountain range. This region, as described in the Coyote stories, are settings for his many adventures. These stories begin with, "Coyote was going upriver," because he begins his journey at the ocean and travels inland.

In each story, Coyote has an adventure at a landscape feature that children will recognize as places the people have traveled in their seasonal food cycle. Over the years, the youth grow to become expert navigators by recalling Coyote's adventures and seeing the places for themselves.

**MARI WATTERS:** "The concept of the Coyote stories, my father told me was they started along the coast, Pacific Ocean and Coyote kept coming upriver from the mouth of the Columbia. And he kept coming up."

**JEANETTE:** The late Nez Perce elder, Mari Watters explains how the Coyote stories were interactive within the landscape:

**MARI WATTERS:** "...And as he passed numerous tributaries, things happened like he'd go up one tributary and maybe there would be some oyster sisters or bear sisters or somebody that would call him and they would talk back and forth and whatnots and he'd say, "Well I'm making the way for the salmon." And depending on what happened in each tributary, whether it was the mussel shells or it was the otter or anybody else, the skunks or something else or the bear that did something to the Coyote depended whether they were good to him or bad to him. If they were good to him, he said, "The salmon would come up the river and spawn." If they were bad to him, he said, "Salmon will not come up this river." So all the way from the coast, all the way up into Idaho, he would go along and he would say each story. And that's why all the stories from Coyote say he is going upstream. And each time he's come to a river and something would happen to him, he would either marry deer sisters or something like that and then maybe mother-in-law was bad to him because of this no salmon would go up the Potlatch. So that's the essence of why Coyote was coming upriver was giving all these landmarks and why salmon would go up certain tributaries..."

**JEANETTE:** In addition to the salmon, other foods are discussed in many of the stories so that children can recall where in the landscape Coyote had left a great patch of sunflowers or huckleberries and more importantly, where he did not. Coyote cursed some areas of the land so no foods grew there, like from Asotin to Dayton, Washington. A lost child would know not to go there. It was a sagebrush desert.

**MARI:** "...and also the same thing would happen when he'd go over land, he would say, "Because of this, you were good to me, elk and deer will be

here and there will be good forests here.” And other places he said, “Because you were bad to me there will be barren land.” Desert places and rocks and numerous things. So every place that Coyote went, something happened to him, whether it was good or whether it’s bad depended on what was going to grow and what was going to propagate itself.

And this is the way the people recognized and knew where the salmon would spawn and where they would go and where they would come from. And they’d know that just like the roots, the roots would grow up around the Lewiston Valley and up around the Camas and around the Palouse, but you will never find roots between Asotin Creek and Pomeroy in that area, clear on over to Dayton, you won’t find roots because Coyote was spurned by a beautiful woman.”

**JEANETTE:** Traditionally, winter was a good time to teach the youth because they were not preoccupied with anything except listening to the tales told by their grandparents sitting beside the fire. I can recall many tribal elders talking about how animated the storyteller became and how the grandparents from long ago used string, or hemp twine, to create images like tipis and horses as they told the stories. I saw a string story once and it was amazing how a piece of twine could come alive as a tipi and shoot through the air as a spear. I do not believe there are any more string storytellers left among the Nez Perce, as it was an ancient art form.

The late elders Mari Watters and Al Slickpoo, Sr., that you hear telling these stories, they took it for granted because they were raised knowing

the Nez Perce Language. The stories we have left were preserved from a time when Mari Watters and Al Slickpoo were kids.

Al Slickpoo, Sr. speaks about that filter which came into use after the English Language became standard in the post-boarding school era:

**AL SLICKPOO:** To begin with, a lot of our stories were told in such a manner that if they were to be repeated in English, in the English language, they would probably be x-rated. Where on the other hand to the Native American people, particularly to the Nez Perce people, our stories and the words that were used in those stories were humorous to us. This is why perhaps we have never adopted or never had very vulgar language as it is in the English language. So when we told our stories and legends, they were told more from the humorous point or from the humorous view. Where on the other hand in the English language, it would probably not be very acceptable or more embarrassing to the English-speaking people. Our language is as such that whenever we have a conversation among ourselves a lot of times about every other two-three words we're laughing, and this is what I'm saying about our language being as humorous, acceptable to our society for our people than it would otherwise have been in the English language.

**JEANETTE:** In some of these humorous stories, I can see how a grandmother might be reluctant to tell how Coyote's penis would keep growing the more he stared at these beautiful women until it grew all the way across the river where they were swimming. Or how telling the stories of "Bed Wetting Boy" might be misconstrued. Although his name sounds terrible, he brought many good lessons for listeners since his proper

kinship title had to be spoken in order to escape a threatening grizzly bear. Children can interact with this story and learn kinship terms which are numerous and complicated, but thanks to Bed Wetting Boy, become fun to learn.

**MARI WATTERS:** All of these Coyote Stories are involved with during the time when animals could speak and they're preparing the world for the coming of the human beings, the La-teet-al-whit or the Nah-teet-al-whit. There's two dialectical ways of saying it, one with an L and one with an N, but they're both correct. Each storyteller has a different version of the same story, but there just may be a few things that are a little different. But there are a lot of fun stories and when they're told in Indian, they're just fine, but when you translate them into English, they become a little risqué. At one time, I would change things around so that they weren't risqué and then I got to thinking that, "Why should I hide something that is natural?" And so I told it like it is.

**JEANETTE:** The youth also learn how to live from the stories. Mari Watters taught that in the past Coyote was considered to be a divine being with many lessons to teach. One such lesson is that cheating in order to get what one wants always ends in failure.

**MARI WATTERS:** No matter how hard you try to gain by cheating and deceptions, everything will go wrong for you, and some of these stories are lessons of being left with nothing in the end. If a child is mean to others or disobedient to his parents, or disrespectful to elders, his friends will leave him alone in the world, unwanted and become a lonely child. If a person is greedy for more than his share, he's apt to lose everything and

he should learn to share with others. Jealousy of a friend's good fortune can lead to a bad end and we should give encouragement instead of ridicule. Even the strongest beings can be defeated by weaker but more intelligent beings. One should not judge another or marry another by his looks alone.

Too often, we are quick to judge and not realizing that it's a person's heart. The strongest should learn to protect the freedom of the weak. And people will help you if they believe you are sincere and have good intentions.

These Coyote stories also indicate numerous ways of the Nez Perce culture and how we should behave and what grandmother does, what mothers do, how elder brothers treat younger brothers and things like this. How we care for the land and what Coyote does with the land. Coyote is a trickster; he has powers and he can change things any way he wants to and there are a lot of landmark stories about Coyote.

**JEANETTE:** I have seen the work of Coyote that continues among my people. Whenever my uncle would see a coyote running across the highway or along the road, he would yell out to him, "Good day, Coyote" and always left tobacco. All those years of learning to love and care for the Coyote has left me doing the same thing. And I have passed that down to my own kids. We always greet the Coyote and leave him tobacco so that he can smoke as he takes a break from going upriver. This is our modern way of interacting with Coyote in the natural world, as we see him crossing our path on the roadways. He is now the sign of a safe road trip.

Qeciyewyew, 'Iceyeeye. Thanks, Coyote.

And thanks for listening. I'm Jeanette Weaskus.

**OUTRO:** THE VOICES OF THE WILD EARTH PODCAST SERIES IS PRODUCED BY ME, JANE FRITZ, WITH PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE AND ENGINEERING BY JUSTIN LANTRIP FOR THE IDAHO MYTHWEAVER.

SPECIAL THANKS TO SCHOLAR AND NEZ PERCE PRODUCER JEANETTE WEASKUS FOR TEACHING US ABOUT THE STORYTELLING TRADITION OF HER TRIBE. BE SURE TO LISTEN TO HER OTHER PODCAST — COYOTE BREAKS THE FISH DAM.

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