

Who Brought Endless Winter to the Land?

Once, not so very long ago, there was a winter that did not end. On the frozen river, the ice did not move. Beneath the ice, the water was empty. Fish had lived there once, but all had been caught, and last year's fish had long since been eaten.

There was hunger in the tents of the people. The spring winds did not warm the land. The days did not grow longer.

Each morning as the sun rose late in the sky, the village elders looked at each other over the heads of the children, wondering when spring would finally come. Mothers dug all day in the snow, looking for the only food they could find: twigs and dry leaves. Pounded together, it tasted like sawdust or medicine, but to hungry people even that tastes good.

The children were very, very hungry. The elders, counting the days, knew it should be June. But snow still stood on the ground next to the ice-locked river. At night, wild winds tore at the leather tents, while inside children nestled deeper into their fur blankets, trying to ignore the pain in their stomachs.

When it should have been July, there was still as much ice and snow as in December.

At last a council was called. It was held in the home of the oldest woman. One by one the elders entered through the short flap of the tent, ranging themselves in a ring around the tiny fire.

"What," asked the oldest woman, "has caused winter to remain these long months in our land?"

The elders fell silent, staring into the fire and into their memories. Something, they knew, must have upset the spirits of earth. Something had caused this punishment to come upon them. But what?

The elders sat with their fur blankets wrapped around them. Their dark eyes closed as they concentrated on the problem. Here and there an already-wrinkled forehead wrinkled even more in a frown.

An hour passed in silence. Then an old voice croaked, "Bird murder."

The elders did not stir, but their eyes travelled to the old man who had spoken.

"An endless winter results from the needless killing of a bird."

Slowly, the elders began to relax. They looked at each other, nodding slightly. Yes, that was it. It happened so rarely that none remembered the last incident, but all had heard the story, dim years ago, in their youth.

Someone in the village had murdered a bird. The only way to bring spring was to find that person.

One by one, each member of each family came forward and told the elders, "I killed no bird except for food." First came the hunters: none of them had committed the crime. None of the mothers admitted to it. One by one, the children said they did not do it. Each one said the necessary words, "I killed no bird except for food." Finally, one girl blurted, "I killed no bird except for food-but Wakanee did! I saw her!"

The elders looked somberly at each other. Wakanee was a bright-eyed girl, only child of her parents. She was asked to speak. Crying, she stepped forward. "I did not mean to do it!" she tried to explain. "I was throwing rocks and one of them hit a bird and it died."

Wakanee's family stiffened with sorrow. Her father looked sadly at his wife. Wakanee's mother clenched her fists but said nothing, either to her daughter or to the elders.

Wordlessly, the parents left the tent, returning a few moments later with Wakanee's best clothing, a pair of soft moccasins embroidered with porcupine quills, a warm leather skirt and an overblouse fringed with beads. These were her holiday clothes but Wakanee, tears running down her cheeks, knew that no holiday waited for her.

Someone began a chant as mournful as the winds that tugged at the leather tents each night. Wakanee's parents pulled the girl's beautiful holiday clothes onto her. She did not resist.

Then, one at a time, the people left the tent and walked to the riverbank, across snow that crunched underfoot. Wakanee's mother walked unspeaking beside her daughter.

When they reached the riverbank where snow met ice, one of the elders approached Wakanee and put his hands on her shoulders. Everyone bowed. Tears trickled from the corners of many eyes.

Wakanee had stopped crying. She was too scared to cry. She did not know what was going to happen to her, but she was afraid. She stood there, tense and pale, under the heavy hands of the elder.

The elder raised his hands and eyes. He pointed out onto the ice. Wakanee did not understand. She stood still, staring at the old man. He pointed again, saying nothing. He pointed out to the center of the ice.

Wakanee realized that he meant her to walk on the river ice. She'd seen people walking on the frozen river all winter. It did not scare her. So she started walking.

The river was very wide at that point. It took many moments for Wakanee to reach the center. When she did, she turned and looked back at the small knot of people gathered on the river bank. She began to raise her hand to wave at them.

There was a sudden slamming sound. At that instant, spring arrived. Ice rushed out of the river, carried on fierce currents. And Wakanee was carried, too, carried away from the people gathered on the shore.

In the village, snow melted all at once and ran down to the river in a flood. Birds arrived from the south in a rush of singing. Trees budded and broke into leaf, all in an instant. From empty soil flowers sprang up and blossomed.

The transformation from winter into July took place in an instant. The villagers stood gasping, entranced and stunned by the speed of summer's coming. The children ran into the woods, yelling, to gather wild strawberries.

Wakanee's mother walked slowly home, her husband at her side. They saw the justness of their daughter's punishment. They were glad for the others that there was again food to eat. But they grieved for their daughter. They had no other children. They would grow old alone.

Summer passed peacefully, though the village missed the bright neighbor who had disappeared in the crashing ice. The rivers were full of salmon. The people caught more than enough for the winter, hanging some to dry, storing the precious fish oil in big wooden boxes. There were many berries-fat huckleberries, blueberries the size of pebbles, juicy raspberries. There was enough food for two winters. The Chinook gathered what they needed and stored some away against harder times.

Winter came late that year, as if to make up for staying so long the last time. And when it came, it came slowly. Winds from the sea blew cold into the village for many weeks before the mountaintops turned white. And that snow-late as it was in coming-did not last many months. It scarcely seemed that a season had passed before spring arrived again.

The river tugged at its icy cover and broke into chunks. Drifting seaward, the icebergs melted. Sometimes a particularly big iceberg passed close to shore, and those in the village grinned, glad to see so much of winter disappearing at once.

One day, however, a block of river ice, travelling swiftly down the river, caught on the exposed root of a huge cedar near the village. It caused a great stir, for when the people came down to push it off with poles, they saw the body of Wakanee frozen within it.

The girl's body should have been carried out to sea the previous winter. No one could explain why it was there, going the wrong way through the waters. But they hacked away the ice and pulled the girl's body to shore, then carried it in ceremony back to the village. She was, after all, a heroine. The girl had died to save her village. Her crime, they knew, had been unintentional, but nonetheless she had suffered terribly for it.

Hardly had they brought the body back to the village, however, than a pink

flush crept into Wakanee's cheek. Her mother ran out of the tent towards her daughter. Wakanee gave a great sigh, the sound of breath going into lungs empty for more than a year. Then she opened her eyes.

She looked up and saw the villagers staring down at her. She pulled herself to one elbow, took another deep breath, and looked around. From every corner of the little village, people were running to see her. She sat up, then stood.

When she spoke, it was to the eldest woman in the village. The old man who had sent her onto the ice had died the previous winter, and the woman was now oldest of the elders. "Grandmother," she said, "I have returned."

The old woman nodded her head.

"I have learned much that will be of use," Wakanee said.
The old woman nodded again.

"I must have a tent of my own and a hunter to hunt for me," Wakanee finished.

The woman nodded yet again, then looked across the circle of villagers to a young man, a good hunter. She nodded at him, then at Wakanee. "Take care of it," she said.

Wakanee lived out her life as a sacred being, for she understood the ways of winter and read its signs. When the sky blew full of dark thin clouds, she could tell if the snow was coming or would pass over. She knew the depth of ice from its blueness, the strength of river ice beneath moccasined feet, the places snow hid winter berries. When the days lengthened, she could tell if winter was going to go quickly or hang on through early spring.

Most of all, she understood the language of birds. When the geese skeined above, heading north to their nesting lands or south for winter warmth, she listened to their discussions of the weather. She spoke to sparrows, learning where juicy berries could be found. Even the owls conversed with her, filling her mind with their great wisdom.

All the secrets of winter Wakanee knew, for winter had made her its daughter that terrible year. All the secrets of the bird people Wakanee knew, for having paid for her crime against them, they adopted her as one of their own.

And so she lived, among yet not one of her people, sharing with them her hard-won wisdom.

The goddesses of the American Pacific Northwest

Thousands of years ago, the rainy Pacific Northwest coast was settled by people who loved that land for its bounty and richness. Great cedar trees provided fuel and building materials for the handsome decorated homes of the people. Bears wandered the hills, our distant relatives, sometimes providing food. Salmon swarmed through the wide rivers every year, bringing food and oil inland. There was plenty to hunt-moose and deer, squirrel and geese.

There was plenty to harvest-berries and mushrooms and wild grains. It was an abundant land, where people lived well and happily.

Because the land was so rich, there was room for many nations in the area: Bella Coola, Haida, Tlinget, Tshimshian, Okanagan, Nez Pierce and many others. Their religions included many powerful goddesses, like Tacoma after whom the great volcano is named, the fierce and jealous mountain goddess; Gyhldeptis, the forest mother whose hair hangs like moss from the trees; and Rhpisunt, the ancestral mother who married a bear and bore half-bear children. Cultures and customs varied widely throughout what we now call the states of Washington and Oregon and southeast Alaska, and the province of British Columbia. But there was a shared belief that it was important not to waste the natural bounty of their lands.

Like many of America's original residents, the Chinook had stern rules against being wasteful or careless of the lives of other beings. In this traditional tale, a girl is punished when starvation visits her people. There is a happy ending, but only after Wakanee has learned how to live gracefully and carefully among the other creatures of the earth. She is provided with gifts after she has learned this lesson. This story is one of the many told around the world in ancient times that were designed to remind us that we are not alone on this earth and that we must honor our neighbors, the plants and animals that some Native Americans called simply "all our relations."

Our place on the earth

It's Saturday afternoon, and you take the car down to the mall and wander around. It's warm in winter, cool in summer, so you can wear what you like. Some friends meet you there after you call them on the cell-phone to say where you are. You drink a soda and eat some corn chips, throwing away the cup and wrappers. You buy a new pair of earrings, though you have thirty pairs at home. You watch a movie with a lot of special effects, then go home in time for dinner. You check your purse before you leave. Good deal! You're only out \$25. Not bad.

But if you could count absolutely everything, what did your day at the mall really cost? What did it cost the earth to produce the corn, and what will it cost to eliminate the toxins in the pesticide the farmers used? What will it cost the air to absorb the heavy metals which the mall's power plant exhales? What will it cost the oceans to eliminate the wastes our sewage systems carry out to sea?

And what of the social costs? What does it cost the Asian woman, only a few years older than you, who has to leave her small children to work for low wages, making trinkets like the earrings you bought? What does it cost the minority man who cleans the litter from the mall, in terms of self-esteem and pride? What does it cost for the roads and water systems that support the mall?

Nothing, our wide foremothers knew, is unconnected to anything else in this

world. When you turn up the heat instead of putting on a sweater, a network of changes is sent rippling through the world. More fuel is burned at your local power plant, leading to more pollution in the sky, bits of hard ash floating around like smog. A bird's migration route is altered when a wetland is filled so that the waste from the power plant can be disposed of. Far away, in the arctic, a fox starves because the birds don't arrive at the end of a long cold winter. The death of that fox means a little of little foxes is not born that summer, and so squirrels begin to multiply, unchecked by fox predation. An ancient forest begins to die away, and nothing grows to replace it because all the seeds have been eaten by the unusually high population of squirrels. Soil begins to wash into the sea, no longer held in place by the roots of trees.

Our actions have consequences. Even our smallest actions. Even killing a bird accidentally could change the world?

But how could Wakanee's accident cause a prolonged winter? In physics, this is described as "sensitive dependence upon initial conditions." Science today has rediscovered some of the wisdom of our elders on this continent, especially the idea that we are all interconnected in a web of life. Sometimes called the Butterfly Effect, this scientific theory tells us that a storm in California could have been caused by a butterfly flapping its wings in China. The tiny waves of air set in motion by the butterfly could be amplified again and again until great gusts of wind are the result. If a tiny butterfly could have such an effect, why not the death of a bird? The absence of that one being, with all its activities and interconnections, could have similar set in motion a series of consequences which resulted in endless winter.

How do we live in a world where everything is connected this way? We probably are not going to go back to living in tents and using wood for heat. But we can be thoughtful about our consumer habits. Why not refill a water bottle at home, rather than toss it and buy another? Why not refuse to buy cosmetics that have been tested on animals, causing pain and death to helpless creatures? Why not curb spending for entertainment, trying to live with more awareness of the social and ecological costs of such behavior? Why not patronize shops and companies that attempt to promote a balanced way of living on the earth?

We are like butterflies. Our smallest actions have effect. If we learn to take that seriously, we can feel our own power as well as our own responsibility for sustaining our blue planet.

Finding your power being

It is common, among people who live close to the earth, that each individual has believed to have a connection with a specific being—plant or animal or rock or place. Sometimes this is part of one's heritage, as when Australians are from a "dreaming place," where the animal or insect ancestors of their family dwelled at the time of creation. Sometimes it is an individual relationship, as when young people find their names and power

beings in a "vision quest" among North America's Plains Indians. Some cultures believe we each have one being to whom we are tied throughout our lives; others believe that different stages of our lives demand different beings, which reveal themselves to us as needed.

Sometimes such beings are called "totem animals"-though they might be fish or plants or insects rather than mammals. The word "totem" actually means the being that stands at the head of your ancestral line. In ancient times, people often bore the names of the animals from whom they were believed to descend. A name like Black Elk makes its totemic background clear, but what of McMorrow or Gruenwald? Just names, right? But the first is Irish for "son of the otter," the second is German for "greenwood," and both reveal the totem beings of the ancestral past.

In addition to ancestral totems, we often have personal totem (or power) beings. Sometimes these reveal themselves in dreams. As part of your exploration of the Goddess Path, you have been recording your dreams. Read through them to see if there are any animals which appear regularly. Not all dream animals serve your spiritual quest as totem animals. Look for ones which appear as helpful beings or guides. The horse that carries you away from trouble, the friendly dog by your side (even one that seems to be your own pet), the emblem of a bear carved on the side of a building, a piece of jewelry in the shape of a raven-then can all be indications of a power animal revealing itself to you.

Waking dreams, too, offer you an opportunity to explore your personal symbolism and locate your power beings. You can do this alone or with your friends. To use this form of meditation, also called active imagination, find yourself a comfortable place to sit. If you have some simple drumming music, put it on; or if you have a friend who is willing to drum for you, set a simple steady beat and maintain it.

Make sure there's enough light that you don't doze off. Then, beginning with your toes, tense and relax all your muscles. Go slowly up your legs, over your torso, up your arms, and finally up the neck and face to the top of the head. Tighten the muscles, each in turn, hold them for a moment, then release. Once you have completed this exercise with all your muscles, you are ready to begin the quest for your power being.

Imagine a place where you feel safe and, with your inner eye, picture yourself there. Let yourself witness everything about the place. Use all your inner senses: see, hear, taste, smell, touch everything. Once you have made this sacred inner space as real as its corollary in the outer world, find an opening leading out of the space. It could be a stairway; it could be a tree you climb; it could be a stone you turn over to find a hole beneath.

Notice whether the opening leads up or down as you follow the path that opens out from it. Imagine yourself moving along in this new space. Observe everything you can about it: its colors, its fragrances, its temperature, everything. Continue moving in this new space until you find a place to stop.

Wait there, in this inner space. Just notice what is around you. After some time-the length of time varies with each individual-you will notice some being in the space. It might be one which enters, or it might have been there all along, trying to catch your attention. In your inner body, approach this being and greet it. You might want to bow or wave, to speak or to make contact only with your inner eye. Notice how the being responds. It might move, or speak, or offer you something. When you believe the encounter to be over, thank your inner guide and retreat. Go back along the route to the safe space you originally occupied, and then slowly come back to waking consciousness.

Do not share your experience with anyone else until you have written it down or drawn it out. When you have done so, you may find no need to tell anyone about it. Your power being is your precious connection to nature; no one else needs to know about it. However, if you have spiritually minded friends or a Wild Girls circle, you may chose to discuss the experience with them. Be careful when you do that you remain always aware that a power being is a gift to you, not something to claim or brag about. A grasshopper can be a more significant power being than a wolf, if the person relates to it correctly. There is no "right" or "wrong," no "better" or "worse," with power beings. If you are given one, you are blessed.

If you do not encounter a power being on your first expedition to your inner wilderness, do not be dismayed. You may not be ready to meet your power being, or you may have met it without realizing it. Many people discover, over the course of their lives, several power beings who make themselves available when the need arises. Journey regularly to your inner spaces, and you will encounter all the powers you need there.

Omens and divination

A skill related to finding power beings is that of reading omens. In ancient times, omens were a part of every day. Some of these were direct observations of the natural world around us. Even today, some navigators among Pacific Islanders are able to detect storms days in advance, by their extremely careful attention to changes in the wind and the ocean's color. This can seem like magic to someone who does not observe these subtle natural phenomena. Other omens are events in the outer world which somehow correspond to our inner world. Several kinds of such omens are listed below.

Things out of place: A book lying on a park bench; a playing card carried by the wind to your feet; a misdelivered package; anything not in the place where you would expect it to be.

Things at the wrong time: A grandfather clock chiming twelve times at 6 am; a rose blooming in snow; a birthday card that arrives months late; anything that occurs at an unanticipated time.

Words out of nowhere: A meaningful phrase that appears on a billboard; a name that you overhear several times; a significantly misspelled word; any word that repeats itself or appears out of place.

Repeating images: A place that appears several times in conversation, on

television, in pictures; an image from a dream that you see in waking life; a bird that flies by just as you are reading about birds; any unusual repetitions or echoes.

Interpreting omens is not easy. You might find books which offer you lists of meanings for various omens-but these are limited, because your own meaning might differ from what is published. Never use just one source for omen interpretation, no matter how good it may appear. To interpret an omen, investigate all the potential meanings of the image or word. Use dictionaries, mythic encyclopedias, glossaries of symbolism, your own dreams and associations-compile all of them without trying to select only the positive meanings. It is often easier to interpret others' omens than our own; who is really honest with herself when it comes, for instance, to love? Ask help from your Wild Girl friends. In all cases, do not let any omen interpretation guide you to actions about which you feel uneasy.

Activities for earth-loving Wild Girls

1. Examine your last name, and the names that appear in your family tree. Look up their meanings in a foreign-language dictionary from the country of your origin, if the names are not already in English. Can you find one or more of your totem ancestors?
2. Examine your first and middle names for their meanings. Look in dictionaries and other references books until you are sure you have found all possible meanings. Examine what other relatives have your names. Are there images or totems hidden in your names?
3. Make a power shield. Cut a round piece of cardboard (or beg a few spares from a pizza kitchen) and divide it into four quadrants. Label the quadrants north, south, east, and west-the "four quarters" of the visible universe. In the east, color or paint in images of earth power, however you experience it. In the west, put water; in the south, fire; in the north, air. Color each quadrant in colors you associate with those elements; draw, stamp, or paste images which fill you with those elemental powers.
4. Go on an amulet hike. Fill your pocket with silver coins, bits of broken jewelry, or other things you will not mind offering. Select a natural area like a park or forest or beach; go alone or with others, but if you travel with others, do so silently so that the objects around you may speak to you. Allow at least an hour for this hike. Walk through the natural area, looking carefully at each and every rock, plant, and other resident. Some-not many-will volunteer to go home with you. If you find something that truly calls to you, offer the earth something in return for it. Take as little as you possibly can: a petal rather than an entire flower, a leaf rather than a branch. Make sure you leave things undisturbed as you pass, and pick up any litter you encounter. When you return from the hike, put the object or objects on your altar and ask for guidance in accepting its power.
5. Have a giveaway. Go through all your possessions and make a pile of all those you don't ever use. Clothing you've outgrown, books you read long ago, jewelry you never did wear-be ruthless. If you haven't worn something in two years, you probably aren't going to wear it again. Then locate places to donate the still useful objects. Throw nothing away that still could be used by someone. Shelters for battered families or homeless people are always in need of useful materials; your church may have a campaign for the

less-fortunate; there are many nonprofit organizations which can use what you do not. As you give away your excess, thank from your heart the person who accepts it from you.