How the World Began

A Seneca Creation Myth

Beyond the dome we call the sky there is another world. There in the most ancient of times was a fair country where lived the great chief of the up-above-world and his people, the celestial beings. This chief had a wife who was very aged in body, having survived many seasons.

In that upper world there were many things of which men of today know nothing. This world floated like a great cloud and journeyed where the great chief wished it to go. The crust of that world was not thick, but none of these men beings knew what was under the crust.

In the center of that world there grew a great tree which bore flowers and fruits, and all the people lived from the fruits of the tree and were satisfied. Now, moreover, the tree bore a great blossom at its top, and it was luminous and lighted the world above, and wonderful perfume filled the air which the people breathed. The rarest perfume of all was that which resembled the smoke of sacred tobacco, and this was the incense greatly loved by the great chief. It grew from the leaves that sprouted from the roots of the tree.

The roots of the tree were white and ran in four directions. Far through the earth they ran, giving firm support to the tree. Around this tree the people gathered daily, for here the Great Chief had his lodge where he dwelt. Now, in a dream he was given a desire to take as his wife a certain maiden who was very fair to look upon.

Footnote by Arthur C. Parker: In another version this chief was killed and his body hidden in the trunk of the celestial tree. Another chief, a rival, desired to marry the daughter of the deceased one and indeed took her in the manner here related. In this version it was the bride who desired to have the tree uprooted in order that she might hunt for her father's body. The concealing of the body of the celestial father in the body of a tree reminds one of the legend of Osiris.

So, he took her as his wife for when he had embraced her he found her most pleasing. When he had eaten the marriage bread he took her to his lodge, and to his surprise found that she was with child. This caused him great anger and he felt himself deceived, but the woman loved the child, which had been conceived by the potent breath of her lover when he had embraced her. He was greatly distressed, for this fair Awen'ha'i was of the noblest family. It is she who is customarily called Iagen'tci.

He, the Ancient One, fell into a troubled sleep and a dream commanded him to have the celestial tree uprooted as a punishment to his wife, and as a relief of his troubled spirit. So on the morrow he announced to his wife that he had a dream and could not be satisfied until it had been divined. Thereupon she "discovered his word," and it was that the tree should be uprooted.

"Truly you have spoken," said Ancient One, "and now my mind shall be satisfied."

And the woman, his wife, saw that there was trouble ahead for the sky world, but she too found pleasure in the uprooting of the tree, wishing to know what was beneath it. Yet did she know that to uproot the tree meant disaster for her, through the anger of Ancient One against her.

It so happened that the chief called all his people together and they endeavored to uproot the tree, it being deep-rooted and firm. Then did the chief grow even more angry for Iagen'tci had cried out that calamity threatened and nobody would avert it. Then did the chief himself embrace the tree and with a mighty effort uprooted it, throwing it far away. His effort was tremendous, and in uprooting the tree he shook down fruits and leaves. Thereafter he went into his lodge and entered into the apartment where his wife Iagen'tci lay moaning that she too must be satisfied by a look into the hole. So the chief led her to the hole made by uprooting the tree.
He caused her to seat herself on the edge of the hole and peer downward. Again his anger returned against her, for she said nothing to indicate that she had been satisfied. Long she sat looking into the hole until the chief in rage drew her blanket over her head and pushed her with his foot, seeking to thrust her into the hole, and be rid of her.

As he did this she grasped the earth at her side and gathered in her fingers all manner of seeds that had fallen from the shaken tree. In her right hand she held the leaves of the plant that smelled like burning tobacco, for it grew from a root that had been broken off. Again the chief pushed the woman, whose curiosity had caused the destruction of the greatest blessing of the up-above-world. It was a mighty push, and despite her hold upon the plant and upon the ground, she fell into the hole.

Now, this hole had penetrated the crust of the upper world, and when Iagen'tci fell she went far down out of sight, and the chief could not see her in the depths of the darkness below. As she fell she beheld a beast that emitted fire from its head whom she called Gaas'iondie't'ha (Gahashondietoh).

It is said that as she passed by him he took out a small pot, a corn mortar, a pestle, a marrow bone, and an ear of corn and presented them to her, saying, "Because thou hast thus done, thou shalt eat by these things, for there is nothing below, and all who eat shall see me once, and it will be the last."

Now it is difficult to know how this Fire Beast can be seen, for he is of the color of the wind and is of the color of anything that surrounds it, though some say he is pure white.

Hovering over the troubled waters below were other creatures, some like and some unlike those that were created afterward. It is said by the old people that in those times lived the spirit of Ga'ha' and of S'hagodiowen'gowa, of Hi'n'on' and of Delodasondaiko (the Wind, the Defending Face, the Thunder, and the Heavy Night). There were also what seemed to be ducks upon the water and these also saw the descending figure.

The creature-beings knew that a new body was coming to them and that here below there was no abiding place for her. They took council together and sought to devise a way to provide for her.

It was agreed that the duck-creatures should receive her on their interknit wings and lower her gently to the surface below. The great turtle from the underworld was to arise and make his broad back a resting place. It was as has been agreed, and the woman came down upon the floating island.

Then did the creatures seek to make a world for the woman, and one by one they dove to the bottom of the water seeking to find earth to plant upon the turtle's back. A duck dived but went so far that it breathed the water and came up dead. A pickerel went down and came back dead. Many creatures sought to find the bottom of the water but could not.

At last the creature called Muskrat made the attempt and only succeeded in touching the bottom with his nose, but this was sufficient for he was enabled to smear it upon the shell and the earth immediately grew, and as the earth-substance increased so did the size of the turtle.

After a time the woman, who lay prone, aroused herself and released what was in her hands, dropping many seeds into the folds of her garment. Likewise she spread out the earth from the heaven world which she had grasped and thus caused the seeds to spring into germination as they dropped from her dress.

The root of the tree which she had grasped sunk into the soil where she had fallen and this too began to grow until it formed a tree with all manner of fruits and flowers and bore a luminous orb at its top by which the new world became illuminated.
Now in due season the Sky-Woman [we use this name for convenience only] lay beneath the tree and to her a
daughter was born. She was then happy, for she had a companion. Rapidly the girl child grew until very soon
she could run about.

It was then the custom of Ancient One to say: "My daughter, run about the island and return telling me what
you have seen."

Day by day the girl ran around the island, and each time it became larger, making her trips longer and longer.
She observed that the earth was carpeted with grass and that shrubs and trees were springing up everywhere.
This she reported to her mother, who sat beneath the centrally situated great tree.

In one part of the island there was a tree on which grew a long vine, and upon this vine the girl was accustomed
to swing for amusement, and her body moved to and fro giving her great delight.

Then did her mother say, "My daughter, you laugh as if being embraced by a lover. Have you seen a man?"

"I have seen no one but you, my mother," answered the girl, "but when I swing I know someone is close to me,
and I feel my body embraced as if with strong arms. I feel thrilled, and I tingle, which causes me to laugh."

Then did the Sky-Woman look sad, and she said, "My daughter, I know not now what will befall us. You are
married to Ga'ha', and he will be the father of your children. There will be two boys."

In due season the voices of two boys were heard speaking, eia'da'gon', and the words of one were kind, and he
gave no trouble, but the words of the other were harsh, and he desired to kill his mother. His skin was covered
with warts and boils, and he was inclined to cause great pain.

When the two boys were born Elder One made his mother happy, but when Warty One was born he pierced her
through the armpit and stood upon her dead body. So did the mother perish, and because of this the Sky-Woman
wept.

The boys required little care but instantly became able to care for themselves. After the mother's body had been
arranged for burial, the Sky-Woman saw the Elder One whom she called Good-Mind, approach, and he said,
"Grandmother, I wish to help you prepare the grave." So he helped his grandmother who continually wept, and
deposited the body of his mother in a grave.

Thereupon did the grandmother speak to her daughter, "Oh, my daughter," she said, "you have departed and
made the first path to the world from which I came bringing your life. When you reach that homeland make
ready to receive many beings from this place below, for I think the path will be trodden by many." Good-Mind
watched at the grave of his mother and watered the earth above it until the grass grew. He continued to watch
until he saw strange buds coming out of the ground.

Where the feet were the earth sprouted with a plant that became the stringed-potato, where her fingers lay
sprang the beans, where her abdomen lay sprang the squash, where her breasts lay sprang the corn plant, and
from the spot above her forehead sprang the tobacco plant.

Now the warty one was named Evil-Mind, and he neglected his mother's grave and spent his time tearing up the
land and seeking to do evil.

When the grandmother saw the plants springing from the grave of her daughter and cared for by Good-Mind she
was thankful and said, "By these things we shall hereafter live, and they shall be cooked in pots with fire, and
the corn shall be your milk and sustain you. You shall make the corn grow in hills like breasts, for from the corn shall flow our living."

Then the grandmother, the Sky-Woman, took Good-Mind about the island and instructed him how to produce plants and trees. So he spoke to the earth and said, "Let a willow here come forth," and it came. In a like manner he made the oak, the chestnut, the beech, the hemlock, the spruce, the pine, the maple, the button-ball, the tulip, the elm, and many other trees that should become useful.

With a jealous stomach the Evil-Mind followed behind and sought to destroy the good things but could not, so he spoke to the earth and said, "Briars come forth," and they came forth. Likewise he created poisonous plants and thorns upon bushes.

Upon a certain occasion Good-Mind made inquiries of his grandmother, asking where his father dwelt.

Then did the Sky-Woman say, "You shall now seek your father. He lives to the uttermost east, and you shall go to the far eastern end of the island and go over the water until you behold a mountain rising from the sea. You shall walk up the mountain, and there you will find your father seated upon the top."

Good-Mind made the pilgrimage and came to the mountain.

At the foot of the mountain he looked upward and called, "My father, where art thou?"

And a great voice sounded the word, "A son of mine shall cast the cliff from the mountain's edge to the summit of this peak."

Good-Mind grasped the cliff and with a mighty effort flung it to the mountaintop.

Again he cried, "My father, where art thou?"

The answer came, "A son of mine shall swim the cataract from the pool below to the top."

Good-Mind leaped into the falls and swam upward to the top where the water poured over.

He stood there and cried again, "My father, where art thou?"

The voice answered, "A son of mine shall wrestle with the wind."

So, there at the edge of a terrifying precipice Good-Mind grappled with Wind, and the two wrestled, each endeavoring to throw the other over. It was a terrible battle and Wind tore great rocks from the mountainside and lashed the water below, but Good-Mind overcame Wind, and he departed moaning in defeat.

Once more Good-Mind called, "My father, where art thou?"

In awesome tones the voice replied, "A son of mine shall endure the flame," and immediately a flame sprang out of the mountain side and enveloped Good-Mind. It blinded him and tortured him with its cruel heat, but he threw aside its entwining arms and ran to the mountain top where he beheld a being sitting in the midst of a blaze of light.

"I am thy father," said the voice. "Thou art my son."

"I have come to receive power," said the son. "I wish to rule all things on the earth."
"You have power," answered the father. "You have conquered. I give to you the bags of life, the containers of living creatures that will bless the earth."

Thus did the father and son counsel together, and the son learned many things that he should do. He learned how to avoid the attractive path that descended to the place of the cave where Hanishe'onol'n' dwells.

Now the father said, "How did you come to find me, seeing I am secluded by many elements?"

The Good-Mind answered, "When I was about to start my journey Sky-Woman, my grandmother, gave me a flute, and I blew upon it, making music. Now, when the music ceased the flute spoke to me, saying, 'This way shalt thou go,' and I continued to make music, and the voice of the flute spoke to me."

Then did the father say, "Make music by the flute and listen, then shalt thou continue to know the right direction."

In course of time Good-Mind went down the mountain and he waded the sea, taking with him the bags with which he had been presented. As he drew near the shore he became curious to know what was within, and he pinched one bag hoping to feel its contents. He felt a movement inside, which increased until it became violent. The bag began to roll about on his back until he could scarcely hold it, and a portion of the mouth of the bag slipped from his hand.

Immediately the things inside began to jump out and fall into the water with a great splash, and they were water animals of different kinds. The other bag began to roll around on his back, but he held on very tight, but it slipped and fell into the water, and many kinds of swimming creatures rushed forth, fishes, crabs and eels.

The fourth bag then began to roll about, but he held on until he reached the land when he threw it down, and out rushed all the good land animals, of kinds he did not know. From the bird bag had come good insects, and from the fish bag had also come little turtles and clams.

When Good-Mind came to his grandmother beneath the tree she asked what he had brought, for she heard music in the trees and saw creatures scampering about. Thereupon Good-Mind related what had happened, and Sky-Woman said, "We must now call all the animals and discover their names, and moreover we must so treat them that they will have fat."

So then she spoke, "Cavity be in the ground and be filled with oil." The pool of oil came, for Sky-Woman had the power of creating what she desired.

Good-Mind then caught the animals one by one and brought them to his grandmother. She took a large furry animal and cast it into the pool and it swam very slowly across, licking up much oil. "This animal shall hereafter be known as bear, and you shall be very fat."

Next came another animal with much fur, and it swam across and licked up the oil, and it was named buffalo. So in turn were named the elk, the moose, the badger, the woodchuck, and the raccoon, and all received much fat. Then came the bealking about. He walked over to the place where the being was pacing to and fro. He saw that it was S'hagodiwen'gowa, who was a giant with a grotesque face.

"I am master of the earth," roared this being (called also Great Defender), for he was the whirlwind.

"If you are master," said Good-Mind, "prove your power."

Defender said, "What shall be our test?"
"Let this be the test," said Good-Mind, "that the mountain yonder shall approach us at your bidding."

So Defender spoke saying, "Mountain, come hither." And they turned their backs that they might not see it coming until it stood at their backs. Soon they turned about again, and the mountain had not moved.

"So now I shall command," said Good-Mind, and he spoke saying, "Mountain, come hither," and they turned their backs. There was a rushing of air, and Defender turned to see what was behind him and fell against the onrushing mountain, and it bent his nose and twisted his mouth, and from this he never recovered.

Then did Defender say, "I do now acknowledge you to be master. Command me and I will obey."

"Since you love to wander," said Good-Mind, "it shall be your duty to move about over the earth and stir up things. You shall abandon your evil intentions and seek to overcome your otgont nature, changing it to be of benefit to man-beings, whom I am about to create."

"Then," said Defender, "shall man-beings offer ince lived.

When he saw them he said unto them, "All this world I give unto you. It is from me that you shall say you are descended and you are the children of the firstborn of earth, and you shall say that you are the flesh of Iagen'tci, she the Ancient-Bodied-One.

When he had acquainted them with the other first beings, and shown them how to hunt and fish and to eat of the fruits of the land, he told them that they should seek to live together as friends and brothers and that they should treat each other well.

He told them how to give incense of tobacco, for Awen'ha'i', Ancient-Bodied-One, had stripped the heaven world of tobacco when she fell, and thus its incense should be a pleasing one into which men-beings might speak their words when addressing him hereafter. These and many other things did he tell them.

Soon he vanished from the sight of created men beings, and he took all the first beings with him upon the sky road.

Soon men-beings began to increase, and they covered the earth, and from them we are descended. Many things have happened since those days, so much that all can never be told.

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- Edited by D. L. Ashliman. I have taken liberties with the spelling of Indian words, omitting diacritical marks.