

A LEGEND: THE ORIGIN OF DEATH (From Keepers of the Earth)

Virginia Beavert

A Lesson In Environment

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When the earth was new, Old Man and Old Woman were walking around. "Let us decide how the world will be." Old Man said.

"That is good," said Old Woman. "How shall we do it?"

"Well," Old Man said, "since it was my idea I think I should have the first say in everything."

"That is good," said Old Woman, "just as long as I have the last say in everything."

So they walked around and looked at things. Then Old Man spoke. "I have been thinking about hunting," he said. "The men will be the hunters. Anytime they want to shoot an animal they will call it and it will come to them."

"I agree men should be the hunters," Old Woman said. "But if the animals come when they are called, life will be too easy for the people. The animals should run away when they see the people. Then it will be hard for the men to kill them. That way people will be smarter and stronger."

"You have had the last say," Old Man agreed. Then they walked around some more. After a while, Old Man spoke again. "I have been thinking about what people will look like," he said. They will have eyes on one side of their face and their mouth on the other. Their mouths will go straight up and down. They will have ten fingers on each hand."

"I agree that people should have their eyes and their mouths on their faces," Old Woman said. "But their eyes will be at the top of their face and their mouth at the bottom and they will be set across. I agree they should have fingers on their hands, but ten on each will make them clumsy. They will have five fingers on each hand."

"You have the last say." Old Man agreed.

Now they were walking along the river.

Let us decide about life and death," Old Man said. "I will do it this way. I will throw this buffalo chip into the river. If it floats, when people die they will come back to life after four days and then live forever."

Old Man threw the buffalo chip into the water. It bobbed up and floated.

"I agree we should decide it this way." Old Woman said. "But I do not think it should be done with a buffalo chip. I will throw this stone into the water instead. If it floats, the people will die for four days and then come back to life and live forever. If it sinks, the people will not come back to life after they die."

The Old Woman threw the stone into the water. It sank quickly.

"That is the way it should be." Old Woman said. "If people lived forever, the Earth would be too crowded. There would not be enough food. This way people will feel sorry for each other. There will be sympathy in the world." Old Man said nothing.

Some time passed. Old Woman had a child. She and Old Man loved the child very much and they were happy. One day the child became sick and died. Then Old Woman went to Old Man.

"Let us have our say again about death," she said.

But Old Man shook his head, "No, he said, "you had the last say."

**DISCUSSION:** These are good lessons for today as the population of the Earth grows faster and faster. We can see the role death plays in keeping a balance on the Earth. In the first activity, a population explosion is simulated which exceeds the Earth's carrying capacity, the population size that the Earth's resources are capable of sustaining. The nutrient cycle of birth, growth, death, decomposition and new life from the old is a microcosim of how death works in our lives in the world. The importance of this lesson is evident in those examples where people have removed the natural sources of death from the animal world. Often, when predators are killed off from a community where there is a rough balance between predator and prey, the prey suffers as well. The prey can become too numerous, only to die of starvation and disease.

In our modern world we fight to keep death from our doorstep. Life expectancies are higher than anytime in history, and we now count human population growth in billions as the Earth gets smaller and smaller. We also try to keep from dying in our old ways, which prevents us from taking new paths and following the kind of knowledge and wisdom that We, American Indians, have to teach about being part of nature and living as one with the Earth and each other.

It is easy to forget that with every death we suffer, there comes both a loss and a gain. We lose the innocence and dependency of youth and gain the maturity and independence of adulthood. We lose unbridled freedom and experience liberation and deeper meaning through commitment and self-donation. We lose life itself and gain back once more our place in eternity. The second activity in this lesson explores death and loss, life and gain, as natural parts of living.

**QUESTIONS:** 1. Why does the Old Woman say it is good for death to be final so that people will not come alive again after they die?  
2. When the Old Woman's child dies, she tries to change things so death will not be final. What does the Old Man say? Why do you think he insists that death be final?  
3. What would it be like if nobody or nothing ever died? Do you think people would like it that way? What would happen to all the plants and animals on Earth?  
4. What is overpopulation? What happens when too many animals or people live where there is not enough food, water or shelter to go around?  
5. Where in the world are there too many people today?  
6. Is death a good thing? A bad thing? How do you feel about death?

**ASSIGNMENT:** This is a take-home assignment. Study the legend and translate as many English words into Sahaptin using your dictionary and collection of words in your possession. Seek help from Elders. Read the legend to them and ask about Indian words and write it.