

The Origin of Death

Siksika
[Blackfeet]
+
Montana and
Alberta



When the world was new, Old Man and Old Woman were walking around.

"Let us decide how things 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."

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 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 mouth 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 hand will make them clumsy. They will have five fingers on each hand."

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

Now they were walking by 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."

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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."

Old Woman threw the stone into the water. It sank immediately.

"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, though, 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."