

The Sky Tree



Huron—Eastern Woodland
Retold by Joseph Bruchac

In the beginning, Earth was covered with water. In Sky Land, there were people living as they do now on Earth. In the middle of that land was the great Sky Tree. All of the food which the people in that Sky Land ate came from the great tree. The old chief of that land lived with his wife, whose name was Aataentsic,¹ meaning “Ancient Woman,” in their longhouse² near the great tree. It came to be that the old chief became sick and nothing could cure him. He grew weaker and weaker until it seemed he would die. Then a dream came to him and he called Aataentsic to him.

“I have dreamed,” he said, “and in my dream I saw how I can be healed. I must be given the fruit which grows at the very top of Sky Tree. You must cut it down and bring that fruit to me.”

Aataentsic took her husband’s stone ax and went to the great tree. As soon as she struck it, it split in half and toppled over. As it fell a hole opened in Sky Land and the tree fell

through the hole. Aataentsic returned to the place where the old chief waited.

“My husband,” she said, “when I cut the tree it split in half and then fell through a great hole. Without the tree, there can be no life. I must follow it.”

Then, leaving her husband she went back to the hole in Sky Land and threw herself after the great tree.

As Aataentsic fell, Turtle looked up and saw her. Immediately Turtle called together all the water animals and told them what she had seen.

“What should be done?” Turtle said.

Beaver answered her. “You are the one who saw this happen. Tell us what to do.”

“All of you must dive down,” Turtle said. “Bring up soil from the bottom, and place it on my back.”

Immediately all of the water animals began to dive down and bring up soil. Beaver, Mink, Muskrat, and Otter each brought up pawfuls of wet soil and placed the soil on the Turtle’s back until they had made an island of great size. When they were through, Aataentsic settled down gently on the new Earth and the pieces of the great tree fell beside her and took root.

1. *Aataentsic* was the Earth-mother in Huron mythology. The Huron believed themselves to be the children of Aataentsic.
2. A *longhouse* was a bark-covered Native American communal dwelling that could have space for multiple families as well as rooms for tribal ceremonies.

Question Why is the old chief’s dream important to the story?

The Sacred Earth and the Power of Storytelling
How does this part of the story reflect a Native American attitude toward the natural world?