

Handout #2
On Behalf of our Children
Wisconsin Council of Churches

ORIGIN STORY - HO-CHUNK NATION

In the beginning, Earthmaker sat in space and there was nothing around him. He became conscious and realized there was nothing there. He wondered what he should do, and he began to cry. Tears flowed from his eyes and fell down below him. He looked down and saw something bright: it was his tears which had fallen and formed the oceans, lakes, and streams. Earthmaker thought some more. He realized that if he thought of something, it would simply appear. He thought of light and it became light. Then he wished for the earth, and the earth came into existence. Earthmaker looked at the earth and thought it was fine, but it was not quiet and steady: it moved like waves on the ocean. Then he made the trees, but they did not make the earth steady. Then he made grass and rocks and stones and they helped to steady and quiet the earth, but it wasn't really steady yet. So then he made the four directions and the four winds and he placed one at each corner of the earth to hold it down and steady it. But still the earth was not quite steady. He then made four large snake beings and threw them down to the earth, and they fell through the earth to the place underneath. Then the earth was steady and quiet.

The earth and the trees were all formed, but Earthmaker thought of something else. He took a piece of clay and shaped it so it looked just like him. He talked to the small form, but it did not answer because he had not given it a mind. He talked to it again, and again it did not answer, and he realized that he had not given it a tongue. He made a tongue for it but still it could not talk. He gave it a soul and breathed into its mouth and it answered him.

Earthmaker was proud of this being made in his own likeness, and he made three more of them, and made them powerful so they could watch over the earth. He made these beings the chiefs of the Thunderbirds. And then he thought he should populate the world with other beings, and he made four more beings and they were four brothers. He showed them the earth and told them that they would be living there. Before they left, he gave them a plant, saying "This is important. I cannot grow this myself, but you can, and if you offer me some I will accept it and give you what you ask." The plant he gave them was tobacco. At the same time, he also gave them fire so they could live on the earth.

The four chiefs of the Thunderbirds brought the four brothers to earth and set them down at a place called Red Banks near Green Bay. The first thing they did on earth was to start their fire.

Earthmaker realized that he had not made anything for them to eat, so he made animals and gave them bows and arrows to hunt with. They soon came back to camp with some deer they had killed, and to show their thanks to Earthmaker, they took some of the meat and fat and threw them into the fire so Earthmaker could smell their offering to him through the smoke.

Other people were also on the earth and came to visit the four brothers, who were of the Thunder Clan. The War Clan people came from the west, and were followed by the Deer Clan, then the Snake Clan, the Elk Clan, the Bear Clan, and the Fish Clan. The Water Spirit Clan and all the other clans also came and joined them. They all made a feast and offered some of the meat and some tobacco to Earthmaker. The

four brothers showed all of the other clans how to make and use fire. The last clan to join them was the dog or wolf, which came sniffing around camp and eating the cast off deer bones. They took it into their homes and made it one of their clans. From that point forward, the people of the different clans began to marry one another. To prevent them from marrying their own relatives, the people of the upper clans married the people of the lower clans.

One day, the oldest Thunder Clan brother lay down and did not breathe and grew cold. No one knew what was the matter. For four days he lay there, and no one knew what to do. They mourned his passing by fasting and blackening their faces with ashes and charcoal. They built a made a platform and laid him on it. It was snowing and the three remaining brothers travelled to the east to ask the wind spirit there what to do. He did not know what to do, and suggested they seek out the spirit of the north wind. They travelled to the north, where that spirit kept the north corner of the world tied down. The north wind did not know what to do and directed them to seek out the west wind. Again, the west wind did not know what to do, and recommended that they ask the south wind. When they reached the lodge of the south wind, they entered, and all of the winds were sitting around the fire. They asked the west wind what had happened to their brother and what they should do, and all of the wind sprits answered. They explained about death and that the souls of the deceased would live in a village in the west especially for them. The eldest brother of the Thunder Clan would be the chief of this village because he was the first to die.

The three brothers thanked the spirits and travelled home. There they dressed their brother in his best clothes and buried him facing the west to speed him on his journey. They also food and tobacco on his journey to the west to offer to any which might hinder his way. Thus the world was created and the Ho-chunk took their place in it.

(Adapted from Paul Radin, 1990, The Winnebago Tribe, Lincoln: University of Nebraska.)

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