

“A FROG JOURNEY”: A CHEROKEE TRADITION

This is a story about what it means to become a leader. My great-grandmother always asks me: “How is your frog journey going?” So I’ll explain to you what a frog journey is.

Once there was a frog in a pond, and he was the best that a frog can be. He could see further than other frogs could see. This frog could sense the world around it better than any of the others. He could find food, could find shade, and knew when to bury itself for the winter before any of the others. This frog had the deepest, greatest song you would ever hear from a frog. And this frog could jump like no other frog.

But in every animal’s life, at some point, “Coyote” comes to ask a very important question: “What is it you will do with your life?”

So when that question was posed to this great frog, he thought about it and said: “I have heard that there is a place that is the source of all beauty. I want to go to that place. I want to see it, feel it, sing and jump in the place that is the source of all beauty.”

Coyote said to the frog: “I will tell you that the place is on the top of that far mountain you see over there. But I must warn you, it is not about getting to that place but in how you make the journey to get from this place to that place that will determine if you actually find the source of all beauty.”

The frog was up for the challenge, and took off. As he was passing through a broad field, he ran into a little group of field mice. They were in trouble; they were clearly hungry and distressed.

He asked them: “What is your problem?” They replied: “We can’t find any food. We’re so focused on what is just in front of us that we can’t get out of this field, where there is no more food. We can’t see far enough to know where we should go next.”

The frog said: “I am on a special journey, but I will give you a gift. If you will help me to the trail ahead, I will give you my sight so that you can see far.” So he gave the field mice his great vision so that they could see far to find food. They helped him get across the rest of the field, and start up the path toward the mountaintop.

He kept walking now unable to see but sure that he was on the right path. Eventually he ran into a caterpillar who was very sad and woeful. The caterpillar said “I am surely going to die. I don’t know how to make the right step to change from my present state to my next state.”

The frog asked: “What has happened to you?” The caterpillar replied: “All my brothers and sisters and I have forgotten how to sense the world around us, and we don’t know when it’s time for us to change.”

And so the frog said: “I am on an important journey, but I will give this to you.” He transferred to them his ability to sense the world around him, and to know the next right move. The caterpillars lined up to help him up the mountain, so that he could touch them to know the way.

As he walked up the mountain, the frog came across a wolf. This wolf was clearly distressed. The frog asked: “Why are you so distressed?”

The wolf replied: “I am lost, and cannot find the rest of my pack. We used to sing gloriously so that we could find each other. Now we can’t sing. We cannot find each other, cannot stay together, and cannot move through the forest together without our song.”

So the frog gave his song to the wolf. The wolf could now howl gloriously, and could find his brothers and sisters. The wolf helped the frog up the mountain, back to the trail.

Finally, on the last stretch of his journey, the frog ran into a deer. The deer said: “I am stuck. We used to be able to get over every obstacle by just jumping. We can’t jump anymore, and can’t overcome these obstacles.”

The frog said: “If you will help me to the top of the mountain, I will give you my ability to jump.” So he did, and the deer could jump and overcome obstacles again.

The deer carried the frog to the top of the mountain, and left him there. The frog sat and thought: “I’m a little sad. I can’t see, I can’t feel, I can’t sing about this place, and I can’t jump. But I think it’s enough that I made it to the source of all beauty. I am at peace, happy.”

Coyote appeared at that point, and asked the frog: “So you are pleased with your journey to get to the source of beauty?” The frog said: “Yes, I am. It was important to me— even though I gave up much to be here.”

Then Coyote grabbed the frog and threw him high in the air. As he flew through the air, the frog was able to see further than he had ever been able. He could again sense and feel every motion of the earth, greater than he ever had.

His ability to sing came back, not as the low song of a frog but as a high pitched song. He could not jump, but now could fly— because the frog has become the eagle.

This is why we look to the eagles for leadership. They have made a great journey.

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