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Coyote's Birthday

By Shirley Benedick

Coyote was having a birthday. No big deal, he thought, not one of the big birthdays. No, he thought, no need for ceremony, actually nothing to celebrate at all, certainly no need for a party. This was what he was saying to himself one evening as he squatted on a flat granite rock overlooking his favorite watering place. As he stared at his reflection in the water below, he noticed the gray in his muzzle. Even to his uncritical eye, he looked a little shabby. The gray in his fur seemed not a sign of experience and maturity, but an indication of lost virility. Sighing, he remembered fondly the past, when his appetite had seemed inexhaustible. Ah, those were the good times! If he were not the same as he had been, did it mean the good old days were gone forever? And where had it gotten him? Had following his nose led him astray?

He was not feeling well. His usual insatiable hunger had been dulled. Lately excess had lost its savor. What did he have to show for his life, he wondered?

Time pressed upon him, taking the form of this pain in his belly, which was rapidly becoming very uncomfortable. It had led him here, to this place. He was hoping to converse with his first teacher, Big Sjit. Unfortunately, Big Sjit didn't seem to be available. As he squatted, he considered sniffing about for another teacher in the lineage, Old Sjit. Maybe he could divine from the signs what to do. However, the pain was growing, and so, instead, he began to howl.

Nearby, in an old cottonwood tree, Owl was awakened by woeful noises. When she saw it was Coyote, she called out. "Ah, Coyote, is there a problem? It sounds like something is wrong."

"Well..." wailed Coyote, "Well." And then he stopped.

Owl, not necessarily as wise as she liked to think she was (or as her reputation indicated), was sometimes more of a wise-ass.

"Well? That's a pretty deep subject for you, Coyote." Even though it was a very old joke, she still thought it was pretty funny, and used it whenever she could. Coyote looked puzzled.

"Well?" Owl repeated. "You said well. You know, a well, in

the ground? They're deep." Coyote stared blankly, then shook his head, and turned huffily away, but he did not trot off as he once might have.

Owl flew down next to him. "What's the problem, old friend? Out with it."

"I wish I could. That is the problem. I have a pain I can't seem to eliminate. My teachers are unavailable. And...it's my birthday."

"HOH, hooh, hooh, hOhhh," replied Owl. "Happy Birthday! Are you having a birthday party?" she asked.

There was silence. Owl waited. Coyote spoke again. "Do you think I should?"

Owl turned her large eyes on him, and asked, "Do you want one?"

Coyote noticed that Owl had the annoying habit of answering questions with questions. "No," he decided, "not this year."

Owl looked surprised. She had never known Coyote to avoid any opportunity for a party.

Coyote started to moan again, holding his belly.

"Spicebush tea," she said. "See, there's spicebush in that gully. Shall I get you some?" Coyote did not answer. He just kept moaning.

"Mandrake root! That would do it. You have to be careful with it, of course. Can be dangerous. I'm not sure where we can find any right now, but."

Coyote ignored her. He glanced again at his reflection in the water, and then quickly turned away, moaning louder, writhing a little and shaking his head.

"Coyote!" Owl called out again, more loudly this time, "Coyote, I know where there are some wild grapes along the river upstream. They were so ripe they were almost fermented."

"Yes, I know," grunted Coyote. "They were fermented. And did you see the melon patch? And somebody left some trout just

lying on the bank, covered with twigs and rocks, but I could still smell them.”

“Why am I not surprised? Well, then that’s probably it, Coyote, the reason for your pain. Everything, even pleasure, has its price, you know. You should know! It’s because of you that it is so. Remember the Council of Creation? The Rule of Ambivalent Acts?”

Coyote stopped rocking back and forth. He stared at Owl. It was a long time ago. Then Coyote remembered.

The Council meeting had been held on top of a high mountain. All the First People had come. They had decided to create beings to live in the new world that had been made, but they were having trouble agreeing on how to make People. Simple decisions about how these new beings should look resulted in long arguments. For example, each animal thought its own shape the most pleasing. Each thought the food it preferred the best food.

“All this talk is making me hungry!” Coyote complained to Fox. They were standing together on the outer edge of the circle. Time was passing and it seemed the Council was getting nowhere. Finally Coyote lost his patience.

“Why are you arguing? Why shouldn’t these beings eat anything, everything?”

Owl agreed, and added a further suggestion, “ We can make them so they are a little like each of us. Each of us can give them a gift, one of our character qualities or physical attributes. In that way they will be related to all of us and respect us as their companions and guides in this world.”

The Council nodded approval. Coyote howled appreciatively. Owl thought he was acknowledging her wisdom, and preened her feathers coyly. But Coyote was watching Duck walk by. He was fascinated by the way she moved her rump when she walked. Something about it made him twitch.

Then everyone began speaking at the same time, each excited to tell about the unique gifts they had to offer. Finally, with the help of Mountain Lion, Elk managed to impose order again. The Talking Stick was passed. Whoever held the stick had the right to speak. Of course, each enjoyed extolling the benefits of its own qualities.

Surprisingly, most were also interested in the gifts that others offered. Eagle, for example, conceded to Lizard that hands with fingers would be more generally useful to People than talons. "That way," agreed Raccoon, "they will be able to pick up all kinds of food, as well as make useful tools."

Coyote was tapping his foot restlessly. Although he was almost always hungry, today he was hungrier than usual. He was finding it increasingly difficult to think about anything except the emptiness in his stomach, and the dryness in his throat. He had hoped they could wrap up the meeting early, but now he could see that was unlikely. His mind kept wandering, imagining what might be in the picnic baskets that had been put in the cool shade of the shallow cave nearby. Pots of honey? Clay jars full of dandelion wine? And how he looked forward to sampling the sweet corn cakes and fresh figs! He began to salivate. He wanted to suggest they take a lunch break. The problem was he couldn't speak until it was his turn. He could hear Beaver going on and on about the usefulness of his wonderful tail. It looked like lunch might not be for a very long time.

It was hot. Coyote decided to go lie in the shade of the large rock near the entrance to the cave. He could hear someone arguing about whether to give People fur or feathers. Obviously they had gotten sidetracked again. Fur or feathers? No question which one was best. He stroked his thick pelt proudly. After awhile he moved further into the cave. Later he learned that they never had decided, which is why People ended up with neither.

The sun had passed high overhead and begun to slip when Coyote awoke. Buffalo was bellowing. Coyote jerked awake. The remains of a sweet, made of crushed nuts and honey, slid off of his belly and onto the ground, next to an overturned food basket. Even though there was still some spiced berry juice left in the jar beside him, Coyote was curious, wondering what all the noise was about. He crept to the front of the cave and sat listening. Rabbit was speaking.

"Buffalo is right," she said, "These new beings should have others of its own kind. If there is only one it will be lonely." There was much talk, and then Bear proposed, "Let there be two. When they come together they will create another of their kind. It will be the last act of creation, but it will be eternal." Many nodded. This seemed good.

Meadowlark did not agree. She was concerned about the creative powers given to human beings by Bear's proposal. She said,

“They will multiply, overrun the Earth and destroy the rest of Creation.”

Skunk also protested, “If humans die their bodies will decay and cause a big stink!”

Finally Eagle spoke. “My gift to these new beings was the vision of the big picture, including past and probable future. They will become depressed when they realize their time on earth is limited. It seems a cruel joke to create a being and then give it knowledge that it will die.”

It was then that Coyote farted, a loud long explosion that stopped the discussion. All eyes turned toward the rock. Coyote emerged from the cave, brushing crumbs from his chin. In a loud voice he addressed the crowd. “I have not yet given my gift to the new beings. It will resolve this dilemma.”

He approached the circle. “I give these new beings my duality. They will be compassionate and self-indulgent, crafty and foolish, simple, and unpredictably profound. They will be free spirits, questioning the rules, experimenting.” He smiled because he knew that this gift would mean humans would not be bored.

The Council was concerned with Coyote’s gift. It anticipated chaos and problems. All the First People had experience with Coyote and his tricks. This gift seemed, to some of the Council, just another example of his irresponsibility. Turtle spoke up, expressing what many were thinking. “This gift will get them into trouble.”

Owl, however, thought this gift was a good one. Her nature being a balance of light and dark, she saw its potential for wisdom. However, she also realized its consequences. Looking at Coyote directly, she said, “If all things embody their opposite, then even in pleasure will be the potential for pain. ”

“Yes” he sighed, and hung his head, “I must accept that will be so. “

Then Rattlesnake spoke up. “With freedom comes choice, and with choice is change. With change, there is sometimes gain, sometimes loss, but never certainty.”

“Yes.” Coyote nodded. He was tempted to say, “Yesssss, Yessss, “ a few more times, mimicking Snake’s hissing sibilance, but

he knew Rattlesnake had no sense of humor.

Raven concluded, "If you give this gift to human beings, then they will be bound by the consequences of this duality. We are giving them Life, but because you are giving them duality, they must also experience its opposite, Death."

Coyote had lifted his head and looked around the meeting. "It will cause great pain, but it will make them sorry for each other. That will unite them."

"But..." murmured Mouse, "Death is so, so final."

Coyote thought a moment and then continued, "This new people will sing and dance and make beautiful things. Their spirit, pieced from parts of all of us, will live on in their stories, and in all they make. They will laugh and cry together, and it will save them from despair."

The Council considered, and then agreed. Later some called it the Rule of Ambivalent Acts.

So, Coyote remembered. But still his stomach hurt. It hadn't really helped to remember that loss and pain were now part of the natural order of things, or that it was somehow his fault. In fact, he wished he could take it all back. It was getting dark, and soon the moon would be rising over a distant hill. He began to howl again.

Owl sat in silence beside him, glancing over at him occasionally, but otherwise deep in thought. Suddenly she began to hoot. Hooting along with him, harmonizing in a bluesy rhythm that reverberated among the rocks, they roused the moon and stopped the Night Hunter in his trek across the sky. Their duet was about old times, pleasures shared and pleasures gone. They sang of dreams and nightmares. They sang of change, its horror and its beauty. And as they sang, they began to move together, dancing, dancing together in the moonlight, the old dances of what had been and of what was becoming, and finally for just the pure joy of being. And Coyote, living affirmation of all that is possible, of all that changes and so survives, knew himself again.

At moonset they celebrated life itself, joining their bodies and their spirits, two becoming one. They celebrated for old times sake, and for new times to come, but mostly for what is. Owl smiled. She

didn't notice the gray in Coyote's fur, or any lack of youthful enthusiasm. And then Coyote laughed. He was celebrating his birthday after all, and he was happy with what was right in front of his nose. Deep inside, Big Sjit smiled, and began to move.