

Rainbow Crow
(Lenni Lenape Tribe)
retold by
S. E. Schlosser

It was so cold. Snow fell constantly, and ice formed over all the waters. The animals had never seen snow before. At first, it was a novelty, something to play in. But the cold increased tenfold, and they began to worry. The little animals were being buried in the snow drifts and the larger animals could hardly walk because the snow was so deep. Soon, all would perish if something were not done.

We must send a messenger to Kijiamuh Ka'ong, the Creator Who Creates By Thinking What Will Be," said Wise Owl. "We must ask him to think the world warm again so that Spirit Snow will leave us in peace."

The animals were pleased with this plan. They began to debate among themselves, trying to decide who to send up to the Creator. Wise Owl could not see well during the daylight, so he could not go. Coyote was easily distracted and like playing tricks, so he could not be trusted. Turtle was steady and stable, but he crawled too slowly. Finally, Rainbow Crow, the most beautiful of all the birds with shimmering feathers of rainbow hues and an enchanting singing voice, was chosen to go to Kijiamuh Ka'ong.

It was an arduous journey, three days up and up into the heavens, passed the trees and clouds, beyond the sun and the moon, and even above all the stars. He was buffeted by winds and had no place to rest, but he carried bravely on until he reached Heaven. When Rainbow Crow reached the Holy Place, he called out to the Creator, but received no answer. The Creator was busy thinking up what would be to notice even the most beautiful of birds. So Rainbow Crow began to sing his most beautiful song.

The Creator was drawn from his thoughts by the lovely sound, and came to see which bird was making it. He greeted Rainbow Crow kindly and asked what gift he could give the noble bird in exchange for his song. Rainbow Crow asked the Creator to un-think the snow, so that the animals of Earth would not be buried and freeze to death. But the Creator told Rainbow Crow that the snow and the ice had spirits of their own and could not be destroyed.

"What shall we do then?" asked the Rainbow Crow. "We will all freeze or smother under the snow."

"You will not freeze," the Creator reassured him, "For I will think of Fire, something that will warm all creatures during the cold times."

The Creator stuck a stick into the blazing hot sun. The end blazed with a bright, glowing fire which burned brightly and gave off heat. "This is Fire," he told Rainbow Crow, handing him the cool end of the stick. "You must hurry to Earth as fast as you can fly before the stick burns up."

Rainbow Crow nodded his thanks to the Creator and flew as fast as he could go. It was a three-day trip to Heaven, and he was worried that the Fire would burn out before he reached the Earth. The stick was large and heavy, but the fire kept Rainbow Crow warm as he descended from Heaven down to the bright path of the stars. Then the Fire grew

as it came closer to Rainbow Crow's feathers. As he flew past the Sun, his tail caught on fire, turning the shimmering beautiful feathers black. By the time he flew past the Moon, his whole body was black with soot from the hot Fire. When he plunged into the Sky and flew through the clouds, the smoke got into his throat, strangling his beautiful singing voice.

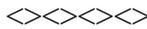
By the time Rainbow Crow landed among the freezing-cold animals of Earth, he was black as tar and could only Caw instead of sing. He delivered the fire to the animals, and they melted the snow and warmed themselves, rescuing the littlest animals from the snow drifts where they lay buried.

It was a time of rejoicing, for Tindeh - Fire - had come to Earth. But Rainbow Crow sat apart, saddened by his dull, ugly feathers and his rasping voice. Then he felt the touch of wind on his face. He looked up and saw the Creator Who Creates By Thinking What Will Be walking toward him.

"Do not be sad, Rainbow Crow," the Creator said. "All animals will honor you for the sacrifice you made for them. And when the people come, they will not hunt you, for I have made your flesh taste of smoke so that it is no good to eat and your black feathers and hoarse voice will prevent man from putting you into a cage to sing for him. You will be free."

Then the Creator pointed to Rainbow Crow's black feathers. Before his eyes, Rainbow Crow saw the dull feathers become shiny and inside each one, he could see all the colors of the rainbow. "This will remind everyone who sees you of the service you have been to your people, and the sacrifice you made that saved them all."

And so shall it ever be.



Alternate Version of "Rainbow Crow" – by Chief William "Whippoorwill" Thompson

White-Feathered Crow – Also known in some of Chief Bill Thompson's writings as "Sky Colored Crow Story" and of course "Rainbow Crow"

This story is dedicated to Chief Bill Thompson of the Eastern Lenape Nation who has been an inspiration to me and to many, many others over the years. White Feathered Crow

Many, many moons ago, before the two-legged ones were on the Earth, Rainbow Crow, who was a magnificent creature, with beautiful coloring and a magnificent voice, saved the four-leggeds from the Great Snow, but in doing this his beautiful feathers became sooty black, his beak also became black and his voice became hoarse and ugly. But this is another story. Today, Crow is all black and has as his song, the hoarse "CAW".

Today, one Crow was flying over the Earth Mother and looked down into a stream and saw his reflection. All of a sudden he noticed that on one wing he had four white feathers. "What is this," he said. "What does this mean?" He looked at himself in bewilderment. He remembered what the Great Spirit had told him when he became all covered with black soot. Crow flew away and then returned to the stream and look again upon his reflection and the four white feathers were still there. "I will ask the Great Spirit what this means." And, he flew up towards where the Great Spirit is to ask Him about his new four white feathers.

When Crow came into the presence of the Great Spirit, he called to Him and said, "Great Spirit, look at my wing with the four white feathers. What does this mean?" The Great Spirit looked upon Crow and said to him "It is for you to find out for yourself. But I will tell you what to look for to help you find the answer. You, of all of your family of Crow, are very special in that you will again be able to save your People, not only the four-leggeds and the winged ones, but the two-leggeds also."

The Great Spirit then told this special Crow to return to the Earth Mother and listen for Her heartbeat and then he will find the answer he is searching for. He did this because it is more important for an individual to search for his own answer to a question then for someone to tell him the answer directly.

Four White-feathered Crow returned to the Earth Mother in a dilemma. "Where can I find the heart beat of the Mother. How will I know it is Her's?" Crow was flying around in a circle listening hard to hear the Mother's heart beat, when all of a sudden he heard in the far distance an even beat of the Drum. As Crow flew in the direction of this Drum beat, it became louder and louder and Crow was filled with a great peace. He came closer to the earth and he saw the two- legged ones, the People, dancing in a circle and in the center of this circle was the Drum which is the heartbeat of the Mother. He came down closer and Crow saw the beauty of the People who were dancing and he followed them around the Circle, going from East to South to West to North. Crow flew around again in the same direction the People were dancing - from East to South to West to North and the peace which was within him became greater and greater as he followed the Circle. He felt a wholeness, a oneness with all: with the four-leggeds, with the ones who fly, with the crawly ones, with the two-leggeds. He felt renewed hope.

Crow saw the People in the Circle become one with the Earth Mother. Crow saw the continuity of the Circle as meaning the continuity of the People - that the People would always be one with the Earth Mother as long as they danced to Her glory and were caretakers of Her Earth. He felt renewed hope for all things living.

Then, it came to Crow -- the meaning of the four white feathers on his wing. They celebrated the four directions: East, South, North and West. They were a reminder to him and to everyone that the Circle of Life depends upon ALL the People to care for the Earth Mother and to respect Her and to celebrate Her, for without the Earth Mother we have no life and there is no future for our children. And Crow also realized that the Great Spirit had given him this sign so that he could save his People again as he did once before, so very, very long ago.

