

Timeless Traditions: Connecting the Past to the Present Through Stories

What are the different ways that we learn about what happened in the past? Maybe you have read a history book, maybe you have watched a documentary, or maybe you have learned about the past from your parents or teacher. All of these can be useful ways to learn, but maybe you learn best by listening to someone describe past events. Maybe you have even had a teacher that has made the past come alive through the way that they describe it.

For thousands of years, in Native communities, storytellers have been the teachers not only of history, but also of culture and values. Through the voices of these storytellers, beliefs about proper behavior, such as living in harmony with all living things, as well as explanations of how things came to be, were passed down by word of mouth and memorized from one generation to the next. In fact, many Native Americans continue to use these methods to teach about their past, even as there are new ways of recording information.

Winter was traditionally the time for stories amongst tribes in the Northeastern United States. Most Native American communities share the tradition of storytelling, but there can be many different variations of a specific story depending on the region. In a way, it is sort of similar to a game of Telephone

that has been going on for thousands of years. Quite often, the original message gets changed a bit as it is passed from one person to the next. While the minor details of the stories may change, though, the lesson stays the same.

In addition to spoken word, music, art, and dance could also be used as a way of honoring ancestors, sharing important knowledge, and providing insight into the lives and values of Native Peoples. Stories can also be told in the designs of beadwork, basketry, and wood carvings.

“In order to ensure the survival of our children and protect their inheritance for generations to come, there are certain instructions and teachings which must always continue to be passed down.”

Trudie Lamb Richmond – Schaghticoke Tribal Elder

In the example below, you will find one version of the explanation of how The Chipmunk got his stripes. Deep within this story you will discover many valuable lessons that the Storytellers are teaching even to this day. As you read this story, see if you can figure out what those lessons are being taught in this story. Are any of them useful lessons for children today?

How the Chipmunk got His Stripes

As told by Darlene Kascak (Schaghticoke Tribal Nation), Education Coordinator and Traditional Native American Storyteller at The Institute for American Indian Studies



A long time ago, animals didn't look the way that they do today. Let's talk about the chipmunk: he was solid brown, a bit boring in color. But he was an extremely curious little fellow always running up to others, chattering about and chattering about. Quite often he was told "Go away! Leave me alone", so he decided to do just that by wandering off to a forest far, far away, one that he had never been to before. He wandered around discovering new hills, new valleys, new lakes and new streams when suddenly he spotted a new friend. It was a bear.

He ran up to that bear, climbed up his leg, over his hip, up his side, and onto his shoulder and yelled in his ear, "Hey bear, hey bear, let's go fishing. Hey bear, hey bear, let's climb the mountain. Hey bear, hey bear, let's pick some berries!"

"GRRRRRR," said the bear. "Leave me alone, I do not like that chatter." But chipmunk wasn't a very good listener. He snuck around the other side of the bear. He climbed up his other leg, over his hip, up his side and onto his shoulder and yelled in his ear, "Hey bear, hey bear, let's go fishing. Hey bear, hey bear, let's climb the mountain. Hey bear, hey bear, let's pick some berries!"

"GRRRRRR," said the bear. "Leave me alone, I do not like that chatter. I am not going to warn you again!" And still the chipmunk did not listen. He snuck around to the back of that bear, climbed up the back of his leg, over his rump, up his back, onto his neck and tiptoed ever so gently in between the bears ears, he popped down and looked him in the eyes and yelled, "Hey bear, hey bear, let's go fishing. Hey bear, hey bear, let's climb the mountain. Hey bear, hey bear, let's pick some berries!"

"GRRRRRR," said the bear. "I told you to leave me alone, I do not like that chatter." And with that he snatched up that little chipmunk and held him tightly in his paw, his claws acting like a cage.

"Uh-oh, I might be the perfect size for a bear snack. I must try to get away," thought the chipmunk. So he did what chipmunks do best: he wiggled and he wiggled. He wiggled so much that he was in fact able to get himself free from the claws of that bear, but not without those claws leaving three stripes down the back of that chipmunk. This explains why chipmunks look the way that they do and why when they see you today they don't run towards you, they run away.

What lessons did you learn from this story? For example, did you spot any bad behavior in this story? Was Chipmunk a good listener? Did the Chipmunk respect the wishes of the bear? What was the consequence for this bad behavior?

The Chipmunk was told not to be such a pest and to leave the bear alone, but he did not respect the bear's wishes. After being annoyed repeatedly, the bear grew angry and snatched up the Chipmunk and caged him. Did the Chipmunk know that bear? NO! The bear was a stranger to the chipmunk and we all know that you should not talk to strangers.

“... maintaining and passing on our centuries-old attitudes and world view – a legacy that deserves protecting and inheriting.”

Trudie Lamb Richmond – Schaghticoke Tribal Elder

Common Core Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, science and technology: Grades 5

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2:** Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3:** Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).



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