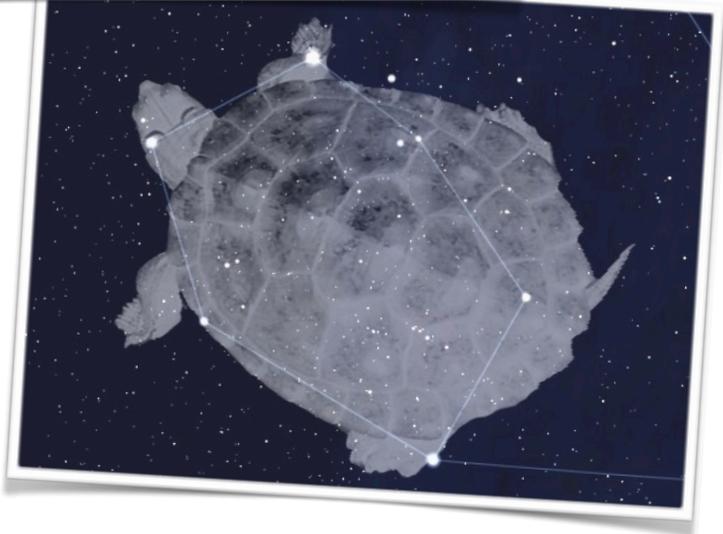
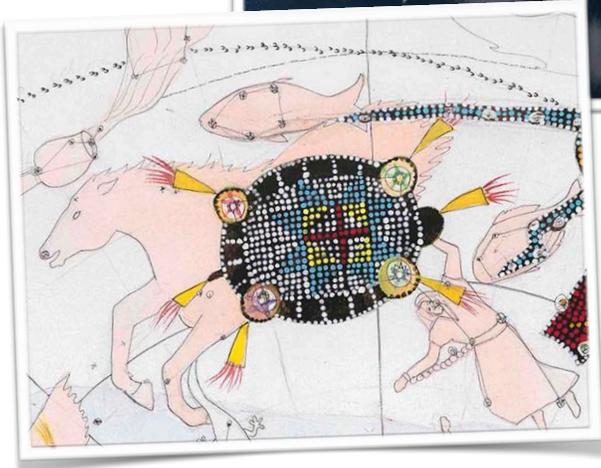
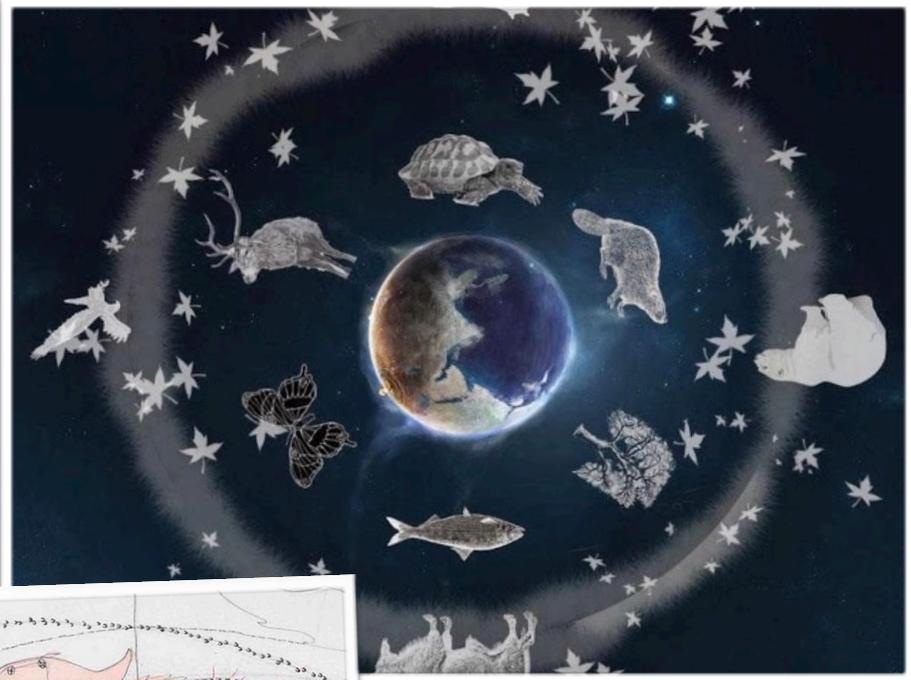


Turtle in the Sky

By Andy Kreyche



Introduction

Years ago I was giving a tour of the sky at my first planetarium job. It must have been in winter because I was pointing out winter constellations including Auriga, the group of stars that is supposed to represent a charioteer. Suddenly, a girl in the audience called out in a loud voice that she thought it looked like a turtle. And I had to agree with her. It *did* look like a turtle. And ever since that night, whenever I see Auriga in the sky, be it the planetarium sky or the real one, I see a turtle. When giving winter sky tours I still tell people that particular group of stars represents a charioteer, but I also tell them about the girl who saw (and makes me now see) a turtle. But I wanted to tell more about the turtle I now saw in the sky. I had a pet turtles for a while when I was very young, but I don't remember enough about my turtles to make a very interesting story, and there are enough ethical issues around pet turtles that it may be better left unmentioned.

I don't have a natural affinity for Greek and Roman stories and since their stories hold an artificially high place in terms of star stories, I tend to gravitate toward other cultures. So I began looking for a story in books of retold myths in my local library. Turtles have great significance in many cultures across the world but the story that I was most drawn to was a Dakota (Sioux) legend. I'd finally found the turtle I'd been seeing up in the sky. I later found a shorter version of the same story attributed to the Oneida people. It turns out that the Dakota actually have a turtle constellation called "Keya," but in Pegasus, not Auriga. The Cree have a turtle constellation that *is* made out of the pentagon of stars that define Auriga. So, like many legends, this story is an amalgam of others. Things are borrowed and mixed up a bit, but that is the nature of stories.

The Story

"Turtle in the Sky"

A Mashup of Native and Personal Myths

by Andy Kreyche

Adapted from "How Turtle Flew South for the Winter" by Joseph Bruchac

One day, Turtle was walking to the lake to look for food. As he plodded along the water's edge, he noticed leaves starting to gather and blow along with him. Along one side of him was a tall row of trees. He realized that the leaves on the ground were coming from those tall trees. And he remembered that this happened every year so he knew that this was the start of the fall season, when it started to get colder. Turtle liked looking up at the trees and watching the leaves flutter down from the sky down to the ground. So he craned his neck to look up, but he still couldn't see the top of the trees. So he slowly made his way to a small hill near the base of the trees. As he climbed up the small hill, his body tilted up and now he could see better the lovely sight of the leaves floating down to earth from the sky. Turtle started to wonder what it would be like to be up in a tree, but before his imagination took him off the ground, he noticed something else was happening in the trees.

From all directions, birds were flying into the trees and landing in the branches. Every time they landed they would shake even more leaves off, sending them into the sky for their journey to the ground. The birds were chattering to each other. And as more and more of them landed in the trees, more leaves fell and the chattering got louder, and louder, and

louder. "Why are you making such a racket?," the turtle yelled up at the trees.

Two of the birds heard him and flew down to a lower branch to answer. "Hey there, Turtle," one bird replied, "we're getting ready to fly south for winter."

"Why would you do that?," asked Turtle. "Don't you like it here?"

"Well," said the bird, "when the leaves start to fall from the trees, it tells us that soon it will become much colder here and snow will fall on the ground. That will make it much harder for us to find food."

The other bird added, "In the south it is warmer and it never snows. We can find food all over the place down there."

Turtle was hungry, so when he heard the bird mention food, he became excited. "Things sound great there in the south. Can I come with you?"

The two birds looked at each other for a moment and then cackled with laughter. "It's a long way, said one of the birds. You have to fly to get there."

"Don't you know how to fly?," asked the other bird. Knowing the answer, the two birds looked at each other again and broke out into new cackles of laughter.

"I'd really like to go with you," Turtle said. "The south sounds like such a wonderful place. Can't you think of a way I could come with you? Please!"

One bird liked to think he was pretty smart, so he he spoke first. "See that long stick next to you?"

"Sure," said Turtle. "What about it?"

"Can you bite down on the middle of that stick and not let go?"

"Of course I can," said Turtle. "I have strong jaws and no one can make me open them once I bite down."

"OK," said the bird. "If you bite down on that stick, we'll carry either side of the stick in our claws, fly away, and take you with us to the south. But this will only work if you keep your mouth closed!"

"No problem!" Said Turtle. "Let's go get some food!"

So the two birds swooped down and got a good hold of either end of the stick. Turtle bit down hard and the birds flapped their wings until all of them, the two birds, Turtle, and the stick flew high up in the sky and turned south.

Turtle had never been in the sky before and he liked it a lot. As he looked down everything looked smaller. As they flew past other lakes, hills, and trees he wondered what the south would look like. He wished he'd eaten a little something before they left. He wondered if the birds would stop for a break along the way. He wondered if he would have been better off maybe walking to the south.

As more time passed, he grew impatient and just wanted to know when they would get there. He wanted to ask the birds, but of course he couldn't say anything with his mouth closed.

So Turtle rolled his eyes. But since the two birds were looking where they were going, they didn't notice and just kept flying. Then Turtle tried

shaking his legs, but they didn't notice that either. Now Turtle was getting angry. If they were going to take him south, at least they could tell him when they would get there!

"Mmm mmmm mm mm mmm mmmmm," Turtle said, trying to get their attention. It didn't work, so he did it again, louder. "MMM MMMM MM MM MMM MMMMM!" he cried out. Finally Turtle lost his temper.

"How soon do we . . . ?" but that was all the two birds heard, for as soon as he opened his mouth, he started to fall. Down and down and down he fell. As he tumbled from the sky, he saw the ground fast approaching. There was a pond he hoped to fall into but because he was spinning so fast he just pulled his head, and then his legs, into his shell to protect himself. He missed the pond and struck the ground upside down on his back with a huge thud. He hit the ground so hard that his shell cracked, but it was strong enough that it did not break. When he gathered himself enough to stick his head out, he saw that he landed a few feet away from the pond and just a few inches away from a big rock. If he had hit the rock, his shell surely would have shattered into a million pieces.

Even though he was in great pain, he was glad to be on the ground once again. He rolled himself against the nearby rock so he could flip himself over. He hurt so much though, that he crawled into the pond, swam down to the bottom and dug himself into the mud. He wanted to get as far away from the sky as he possibly could. He fell asleep and he slept all through the winter and didn't wake up until the spring.

So it is today birds fly south while turtles, who all have cracked shells now, sleep through the winter. But on fall and winter nights, you can look up and see a turtle in the sky, where it doesn't belong.

Notes

Among the charms of this story are its whimsical nature and its irony. The idea of having a couple of birds carry a turtle up into the sky while biting on a stick is charming for being simultaneously simple and preposterous. It offers a great escape from the real world and its rules. The subtle irony is another delight. Turtles in stories are often portrayed as both wise and patient, but this one is neither. An implicit suggestion of this story is that he gained these characteristics from this particular experience.

I have not yet tried this story out on a group, but when I do, I'm sure it will evolve. One thing I tried to do was make the description of how the turtle hibernates accurate. I am in the process of starting a new portable planetarium business in the Monterey Bay Area of California and one of my goals is to give my presentations a local flavor. One way I may make this story more local is to have the birds fly to "Santa Cruz" instead of "south." I may add local references and have the birds be specific ones that winter in our area from the area of the Cree or Dakota people.

Although as written the turtle is male and the birds are neutral, I plan to tell it fluidly, based on my whim or the gender of any participants should I get help in acting it out (see below).

Presentation Ideas

It's great to have a story to tell, but it has more impact when we have ways for it to make an impression. The story can work magic on its own, but we as presenters can support it in our approach and what we do afterward. There are times when some background helps, and other

times it may be best to dispense with being didactic and just dive right in to the telling. From my theater background in college to training in the Astronomical Society of the Pacific's Project ASTRO program in the 1990's, and now as a participant in the last four LIPS (Live Interactive Planetarium Symposium) meetings, I remain a firm believer in engaging the audience in many ways and on many levels.

Which Came First?

A common misconception among planetarium audiences is that the constellations pictures were chosen because a group of stars looked like a particular something. This puzzles people because so often the connections between a star pattern and it's namesake are tenuous. For this reason I like to make the point that it's likely that the stories came first: the characters from these stories were important so people used the sky to illustrate the stories and aid in their telling. The constellations (and associated stories) of a particular people give us insight into their environment, values, and culture. This "which came first?" idea can lead to a discussion. In picture books, the illustrator is very often different than the writer. This leads to a query one could pose to audiences about their favorite picture book. Have them think about whether the author wrote the story first inspiring the artist to illustrate it, it was the other way around, or perhaps a collaboration that happened concurrently.

Animal, Person, or Thing?

At times a good introduction to constellations involves simply asking the audiences about constellations they already know and then have them share their knowledge. A slightly different way would be to ask each audience member to think of a constellation and not say the name out loud. Then you could ask a few to share what category the constellation they have in mind falls into: animal, person, or thing. There are a few that fall into interesting grey areas of mythical beasts (Capricorn, Draco, Monoceros, etc.) and half human creatures (Centaurus and Sagittarius),

but most fall pretty easily into those three categories. If an informal poll of the audience reflects the night sky, most of the answers would be animals, which would make a nice lead in to the story of a turtle in the sky.

Acting Out

With children, it's great to be able to have them participate. Again, I have not yet used this story in the planetarium, but when I do, I will be sure to find a way for kids to take part. I may modify the story to make this easier. Whether kids just stand up in character with simple costumes or props while I tell the story, or they actually recite lines, the story will be more memorable to everyone for having taken part. And to try to mitigate the disappointment of not being chosen for a part, it's good practice to give some sort of participatory activity for the audience as a whole. In this story it would be easy to have the audience "play" the birds in the trees by making bird noises when that part of the story takes place.

What to Leave Out

What a presenter doesn't say to an audience can be just as important as what they do say. Tantalizing clues and open-ended questions can lead audiences along and keep them interested about what might come next. When we leave some bread crumbs but let them connect the dots (to blatantly mix metaphors!) audience members can have their own flashes of insight and recognition. It should be pretty obvious that the turtle story is best used in the planetarium when a (Northern Hemisphere) winter sky will be shown. Although you could prepare your audience by telling them that you're going to show them the turtle constellation in the planetarium sky later, this is probably better left unsaid. Instead, when you get around to showing the sky with Auriga in it, leave it to them to try to find a pattern that looks like a turtle. Even when some of them pick another pattern, it can lead naturally to pointing out those constellations too and give the idea that the sky serves as a rich canvas for whatever picture we want to see, whatever story we'd like to tell.

Credits

"How Turtle Flew South for the Winter" by Joseph Bruchac, from Native American Stories Told by Joseph Bruchac, Fulcrum Publishing - Copyright 1991 (From Keepers of the Earth - Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac)

"How the Turtle Flew South for the Winter," an Oneida legend retold by Priscilla Dessart, <http://www.uwosh.edu/coehs/cmagproject/ethnomath/legend/legend13.htm>

Lakota Sky Lore, <http://www.kstrom.net/isk/stars/starwint.html>

Cree Turtle Legend and Cover Illustration of Turtle Overlay on Auriga, <https://explorecuriosity.org/Explore/ArticleId/3545/sky-frogs-space-turtles-3545.aspx>

Dakota Turtle Constellation Cover Illustration, detail of D(L)akota Star Map by Annette Lee, <http://web.stcloudstate.edu/aslee/DAKOTAMAP/home.html>

Native American Zodiac Cover Illustration, <http://frontiers-of-anthropology.blogspot.com/2013/12/native-american-zodiac.html>