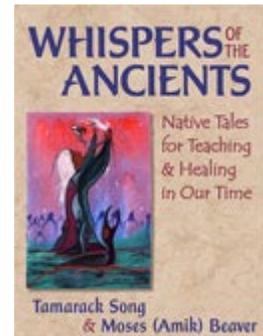


Whispers of the Ancients: Native Tales for Teaching and Healing in Our Time  
Tamarack Song and Moses (Amik) Beaver  
<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=1642728>  
The University of Michigan Press, 2010

## Q&A with Tamarack Song, co-author of *Whispers of the Ancients*



It's easy to imagine yourself transported back to a time when an Elder might have told stories like those in *Whispers of the Ancients* around a glowing hearth. Thanks to Tamarack Song's storytelling skills, monsters, heroes, and shapeshifters come alive and open a doorway to the mysteries of life. Easily accessible to all ages, this is a book that speaks to each person at his or her own level of comprehension and need. It is as beautiful to read as it is to look at.

Tamarack Song has sought out the stories of the North African and Central Asian tribal peoples from whom he is descended, and he has listened to the tales of indigenous people from the tundra to the tropics. His books include *Journey to the Ancestral Self*, and he has contributed to Lois Einhorn's *Forgiveness and Child Abuse*. He is also a counselor, wilderness skills teacher, rites-of-passage guide, and founder of the Teaching Drum Outdoor School.

### **University of Michigan Press: Why are stories important to us as human beings?**

**Tamarack Song:** What a great question to start with! Co-author Amik Beaver tells about his people, the Northern Ojibwe, losing their culture when they lost their stories. His primary reason for doing this book is to help his people restore their traditions by renewing their storytelling tradition.

We start the book with this line from one of Muriel Rukeyser's poems: *The universe is made of stories not atoms*. Imagine that: story being the substance and matter of the universe! In that context, imagine that we are story: the story of our evolution, of our ancestry, our experiences, our dreams.

You know, I sometimes wonder what it would be like to live a life without this awareness. I see people who are conflicted when the findings of modern science seem to contradict their stories. Their sacred legends are now just myths, and they lose all faith and become atheists. At the other end of the spectrum are the fundamentalists, who erase all doubt and conflict by taking their stories literally.

Those at either extreme seem to have lost touch with the fact that stories are alive, stories are us. They've forgotten that the story is their life journey, and that the story's characters are role models, archetypes, for the journey. The characters' adventures are metaphors for their own adventures; and the trappings, such as the setting, weapons, and clothing, are symbols for their thoughts and dreams and fears.

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**UMP: Do the stories contained in the book share any similarities of structure or approach?**

**TS:** I don't think they can help but share similarities, and in fact I see this as true of all stories. The stories in this collection all have a similar feel because I've geared them to the audience, which is what a storyteller generally does. However, the main reason for the similarities is that they're all part of the same story: what some refer to as the Great Story or storyline.

Based on this premise, there is no individual story until the storyteller creates it. She'll drop into the storyline and choose the segment that fits the needs of her audience. She might start a particular tale earlier or later in the storyline than she did last time. I think the way the illustrations reflect common themes gives a feel for the story continuum.

You'll also see common themes in the story groupings, such as the winter stories, which are in Chapter 9, I believe. Most of them have Nanabozho, the Ojibwe trickster, as their central character. Each of these stories covers an adventure in Nanabozho's life; and although these escapades differ radically from one another, common themes run through them all.

There's the naïve and self-serving Nanabozho, who finds it easy to satisfy his whims because he has human as well as supernatural powers; and he finds it easy to misgauge the effect of his actions, which ends up with him playing the role of the buffoon, the fool. In the end, he learns his lesson--sometimes, anyway; and sometimes not. But whatever the outcome, there's usually a greater purpose to his mischief and he ends up doing something for the good of his people.

Here's a tangent related to the Nanabozho stories that you might find interesting: There's an ongoing argument among ethnologists as to whether or not all traditional stories have a teaching or a moral. Personally, I've yet to meet a story I haven't gained from in some way; and still some traditional storytellers say they tell certain stories purely for their entertainment value.

When I hear this, I'm suspicious... Sometimes getting people to enjoy themselves helps them relax and open up, and my hunch is that this is the intent of many storytellers who claim they're only entertaining. It's a favorite trick of teachers everywhere: make it fun and you can't help but learn.

One of my priorities with the stories in *Whispers* was to make sure they were entertaining. I've heard them over and over, and I've told them over and over, and there were times when I felt so connected with the audience that it seemed as though I was listening to the stories right along with them. If something wasn't working: if they weren't sitting on the edges of their seats in anticipation of what was going to happen next, or if they weren't pulled into the story emotionally, I saw it not as the fault of the story, but as an opportunity for me to improve my storytelling. The bottom line for me is that if a story doesn't entertain, it's not going to touch people's hearts. And if it doesn't do that, it probably doesn't have anything worthwhile to give them.

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**UMP: What is your favorite story from the book, and why?**

**TS:** This would depend on who is asking me and when they're asking. If I were a story collector, I might have a favorite; however, I'm a storyteller, which is an interactive craft. When a story is clicking for my audience, that story is my favorite. Stories are for telling, and it's in the telling that they come alive. For me it's all about being in the now, and in order to bring a story to life and into the lives of the audience, I have to be completely present, totally in love with the now, i.e. the story.

Let's say you phrased your question a little bit differently and asked me to share a favorite story with you. Now I'd have an audience and you'd be part of the storytelling. Because I don't know you personally, I'd want to choose a story that draws nearly everybody in. It would probably be the first story in the book: *How We Came to Wear the Skins and Furs of Animals*, which lyrically portrays our evolutionary uniqueness as a species. And it's one I take great joy in telling. It goes beyond science and touches many listeners deep, deep in their psyches, giving them an intrinsic feel for what it is to be human. And then again, if you were struggling with a trust issue, I might choose *Owl Eyes Saves Her People*. Or if it was self-esteem, *Two Hungry Bears* would be my favorite of the moment. It also happens to be a favorite of Amik's, the book's co-author. He also has a soft spot for *How Bear-Heart-Woman Brought Truth Back to the People*, because he was involved in its stage production.

Each one of the stories is a part of the storyline and a part of me, just as is my heart and liver and lungs. In the same way that I couldn't favor one of them over the other because of the unique and vital role each plays, I couldn't choose an overall favorite story from the book.

**UMP: How did you go about collecting these tales?**

**TS:** I didn't, actually; at least not as a conscious endeavor. Nor did I intend to become a storyteller, for that matter. This collection came about simply by living my life. When I was a college student, I'd take hiatuses and go hitchhiking around the country on quests to find traditional American Indian elders. I had a driving hunger to connect with the marrow of life, and I knew from my earliest memories with my mother and grandmother that those who lived close to the Earth could help me. This was back in the 1960s when there were still a few alive who grew up in hunter-gatherer cultures. Some of the elders would tell me stories, and they became a part of me.

Several of the stories, like *Night of the Windigo* and *The Scream That Stilled the Forest*, took their final forms when Amik and I shared our versions with each other. A number of the other legends, in particular the winter stories such as *How Birch Got His Thunderbirds* and *How the Four Directions Came to Be*, came to me through my long-time relationship with Amik's people, the Ojibwe.

Here in the Northcountry, the long winter nights when the snow lays deep are made to order for gathering around the fire and listening to the elders recount the timeless tales. In fact, some of the

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settings touched me so deeply that they've become part of the story; and now when I retell it, I find myself sharing the story of the event right along with it.

The stories that have touched me the deepest have come from those close to me. *The Woman and the Talking Feathers*, came from my mate Lety, who carries it as part of her Mayan ancestry. *Bezhig and the White Bear*, the story that serves as the introduction to this book, came from the Yupik of coastal Alaska. It was given to a friend of mine to help his son who was struggling with an addiction.

However the stories came, they're all living entities to me: each one is a meaningful part of my life. And each one is a doorway to the shared human experience. No matter what a story's source, I'll inevitably come across it again, and then again, in remote corners of the world where it doesn't seem there could possibly be a cultural connection.

***UMP: In an ideal world, how would you want people to enjoy the book? Where would they be, what would they be doing, what would they be thinking?***

**TS:** Speaking for Amik, who co-authored this book with me, he's taking *Whispers of the Ancients* to the reserves of his North Ontario homeland, where he's been telling these stories for a long time through his artwork. He sees it as a contemporary version of the old petroglyphs. At the same time, he knew something was missing: the oral tradition, the storytellers injecting character and personality into the forms and figures. Now he has two together, as in the old days, he now feels he can be a more effective cultural emissary.

I'd like people to see this book as a guide, as something to turn to when troubled or in need of comfort. Stories convey culture, and they lend continuity to our lives by connecting us with our past. They're the cumulative wisdom of the human experience; the voice of long-gone elders reaching us. As the title of this book says, stories are the whispers of the ancients.

The book is even being used in the classroom, with teachers finding the stories an excellent way to interest students in the study of archetype, symbol and metaphor. Art and drama classes will choose favorite stories to present as plays.

And let's not forget that stories are entertainment. They're socializers: they bring people together. And they're for all ages, with many of the selections making ideal bed-time stories.

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To read more about *Whispers of the Ancients* by Tamarack Song, and Moses (Amik) Beaver, visit the University of Michigan Press at <http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=1642728>.

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