The Flood and the Pipestone

The Lakota · the pipestone quarry, south-western Minnesota

Where It Comes From

At Pipestone, in south-western Minnesota, there is a quarry of soft red stone. For centuries many nations have come there to cut it for sacred pipes, and it is a holy place to them today. The National Park Service cares for it as Pipestone National Monument.

This telling was given by the Lakota holy man John Fire Lame Deer to the writer Richard Erdoes in 1969, in Winner, South Dakota. Lame Deer said he had learned it from a Santee grandmother. It is one of several stories about where the pipestone came from, and others have no flood at all. Because it concerns something sacred, we tell it briefly, with respect.

What Happens

Long ago, a great horned water monster called Unktehi fights against the people and brings a great flood.

The water rises and rises, until only one hill, near the place of the quarry, stays above it. The people climb the hill, but the water reaches them, and they die there. Their blood soaks into the earth and hardens into the red pipestone.

Unktehi is turned to stone too.

One young woman is saved. The great spotted eagle, Wanblee Galeshka, carries her up to safety. She bears him twins, and from them the Lakota people, the Lakota Oyate, are descended.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The war of a water monster against human beings.

Who was saved, and how. One young woman, carried away by an eagle.

The boat or the refuge. A hill, and then the eagle.

What came after. The stone of the quarry is the people's own blood, which is part of why the pipe made from it is holy. A new people comes from the woman and the eagle.

Other peoples who use the quarry tell different stories of its origin. The Park Service also cautions that some older accounts written down by outsiders, such as the painter George Catlin, come to us in the writer's own voice. One person telling a story cannot speak for a whole nation.

THINK IT THROUGH

This story makes a stone people still use into a reminder of those who died. What reminders of the past do the people you love keep close?

Sources

National Park Service, “Unktehi and the Flood, as told by Lame Deer”.

National Park Service, “Blood and Stone: The Many Stories of the Pipestone Quarries”.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.