

Nature's Neighbors – Part 2

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Welcome to Once Upon a Meadow. Our stories are written for the ear, so for those able, we recommend listening while reading along. Transcripts may contain minor errors; please check the audio before quoting.

“I’m confused,” said Grey Squirrel. “Are humans good, or are they bad?”

There was a long silence, as the animals wondered how to reply. The question seemed so simple. Surely the answer must also be simple. But none of them could figure it out. Finally, Rabbit spoke up.

“We should ask Elder Oak,” said Rabbit, looking up into the canopy of branches. “They have lived beside the meadow for centuries. They’ll know whether humans are good or bad.”

The animals all looked at the oak tree and waited.

And waited.

Finally, Elder Oak spoke. “Let me answer your question with a question,” said the tree. “Is the night black or white?”

“The sky is black,” said Rabbit.

“But the moon and stars are white,” said Deer.

“So it is that few things are either this-or-that, black-or-white, good-or-bad,” whispered Elder Oak. “As for the people and their park, it is right to be worried — as well as hopeful.”

The animals sensed that Elder Oak was ready to tell them a story. So they made themselves comfortable. The squirrels scampered up the tree’s trunk and snuggled on a low branch. They munched acorns — like how you might snack on popcorn during a movie. Rabbit and Deer nestled into the soft grass and nibbled some tender leaves.

“There was a time, long ago,” Elder Oak said, “when people lived as members of the forest and the meadow. They took care of the land. They thinned the plants to make room for new growth. They caught and ate the smaller fish in the stream to ensure that the big, healthy ones reproduced. And they sometimes set fires.”

“But aren’t fires *bad*?” asked Rabbit.

“It depends,” said the noble tree. “When the native people set small fires at the right time of year, they burned away dead leaves and fallen branches without the flames spreading into the trees. Without dry leaves and branches, there was nothing to start the massive wildfires like we see today. And so, the land flourished.”

“So, humans *can* fit into a place,” said Gray Squirrel.

“People can even do *good* for the land,” said Brown Squirrel. He was feeling less angry about humans as his tail was feeling less painful.

“That’s right, little one,” said Elder Oak, their leaves rustling softly in the breeze. The wise old tree continued the story. “But then one day, new people arrived. They took the land from the first people, without respecting their rights — or their wisdom. And it takes a very long time to

truly become part of a place. Now there are humans whose job it is to take care of the park. That means there is a chance — a chance for people to join us as members of a community.

“Is there a way that we could *help* them to learn, so that everyone can flourish?” asked Rabbit.

Now *that* was a question that excited them all.

(Animals talk over one another excitedly).

And so the meadow creatures became teachers, showing humans how to leave the park just as they had found it, if not even better.

Humans were usually careful with fire. But when someone left a campfire smoldering, Elder Oak dropped an acorn on their head. And that made the person stop and think about the hot ashes and the stiff breeze that could reignite the coals. And then they poured water on the fire pit.

People also tried to avoid damaging the land. But when a group of hikers took a shortcut through the meadow and headed into the forest where Deer had hidden her fawns, she snorted and stomped her foot. The people quickly realized that they should stay on the trail.

Most visitors remembered to take what they brought. But when a picnicker left behind a dirty napkin, Gray Squirrel scolded until that person turned to see what was making so much noise. Seeing the trash they’d left behind, the visitor took it with them.

Not many visitors removed what belonged in the meadow. But when a girl collected a basket of wild strawberries, Brown Squirrel chattered. The child knew she’d upset the little animal and left the fruit behind.

Only a few visitors didn’t show respect. There was a boy who watched a movie on his parent’s iPad with the volume turned all the way up. Rabbit trembled because the sound hurt their ears,

and made it hard to hear if a predator was sneaking up. When the child saw how frightened Rabbit was, he put away the iPad and asked his mom if they could go for a hike.

Elder Oak watched over the meadow and remembered how the Native Americans — the first people — had become part of the community. That was before the colonizers stole their land. It would be a long time before these newcomers discovered how to be true members of the meadow. But they were learning, and Elder Oak was a patient being. The tree dreamed of a time in which people once again contributed to the flourishing of the meadow community. And the Oak was happy.