

Wiseheart Saves the Dawn

A SunWise Legend



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Introduction

The story of Wiseheart is based on traditional Native American folklore. Native Americans and other indigenous people around the world used these stories to explain how and why the natural world and its inhabitants, human and otherwise, good and evil, came to be as they are. The tales were meant to entertain the young children of the tribe, but they almost always had a deeper purpose. Told around campfires, generation after generation, by the tribe's elders, they were a way of passing down the beliefs and values of the tribe. On a more practical level, they taught children from an early age how to survive in an often dangerous world, where knowledge was often more important than physical prowess.

WiseHeart is the story of a curious and courageous boy from the Cahto Indian tribe in the land now known as northern California, who dared to confront his tribe's dark secret and in so doing made a remarkable discovery. This story has been adapted from traditional tales to teach another important lesson, sun protection.

Today, as in the days of Wiseheart, protecting one's skin is essential to avoid both the short and long-term consequences of overexposure to the sun's UV rays. Just as in the time of legends, the sun can be both helpful and harmful. We need to know how to use its power safely to keep our world warm, our plants growing, and our bodies healthy.

But now, let's travel back in time to when the world was filled with spirits, and when animals, even mice, could speak.

SunWise Team
EPA SunWise Program
www.epa.gov/sunwise

SunAWARE Team
Children's Melanoma Prevention Foundation
www.melanomaprevention.org

Wiseheart Saves the Dawn!

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, there lived a young Indian boy who was both smart and kind and who longed to make the world a better place for his people. His name was Wiseheart, and he belonged to the Cahto Indian Tribe, which lived in what is now northern California. The world in which Wiseheart lived was cold and barren, with few plants or trees. During the day, his world was gloomy and grim, lit by only a faint, dim light that seemed to come from very far away. At night, his world was cloaked in deep darkness, a darkness that was broken only by the campfire and the torches, which the elders alone were allowed to carry.

Wiseheart knew that the world had not always been such a dark and gloomy place. Sometimes, as his tribe huddled around the campfire at night, the elders told stories- ancient stories- of a time when a bright light they called the Sun had warmed the world during the day, while its distant relatives, the Moon and Stars, had filled the night. Wiseheart had also seen the ancient tribal cave paintings, which showed a world, filled with the bright light of the Sun and with towering trees and plants. Whenever Wiseheart or the other children asked the elders how the world had lost its Sun, Moon, and Stars, the elders would become quiet and warn the children not to ask such questions.



one night, while Wiseheart slept, he dreamed of the beautiful, Sun-filled world

O that he had seen in the cave paintings. There were blue skies, trees laden with delicious fruit, and smaller plants with fragrant flowers. Then, in his dream, he heard the sound of a fiercely shrieking wind, and the Sun suddenly seemed to be torn from the sky, leaving only a dim glow in its wake. Wiseheart woke from his dream troubled and unable to fall back asleep.

When the dim light of day returned, Wiseheart cautiously approached the oldest and most respected of the elders, a stooped old man named Running Water. The boy recounted his dream and asked the old man if he knew what had happened to the Sun so many years before. At first Running Water scolded the boy and warned him not to wonder about such things. Finally, however, seeing the boy's determination to know the truth, Running Water relented. He told the boy that many years before, an evil spirit had become jealous of the brilliance and warmth of the Sun and had stolen it from the sky and hidden it in a deep canyon on the far side of the world. The Evil Spirit had also stolen the Moon and Stars and hidden them away as well so that the humans would not have enough light to search for the Sun and free it from its captor. From that day on, Running Water explained, the world had been dimly lit. Bound with thick ropes to a giant boulder, the Sun could make only a few of its rays reach above the edge of the deep canyon.

All that day Wiseheart thought about Running Water's words. He watched his people as they struggled to survive by eating the few fish in the stream and the few small plants on the hillsides. By the time darkness fell, Wiseheart had made a decision. He would journey across the mountains, to the far side of the world. He would find the deep canyon where the Evil Spirit was holding the Sun, Moon, and Stars, and somehow, he would free them. That, he decided, was how he would help make the world better for his people.

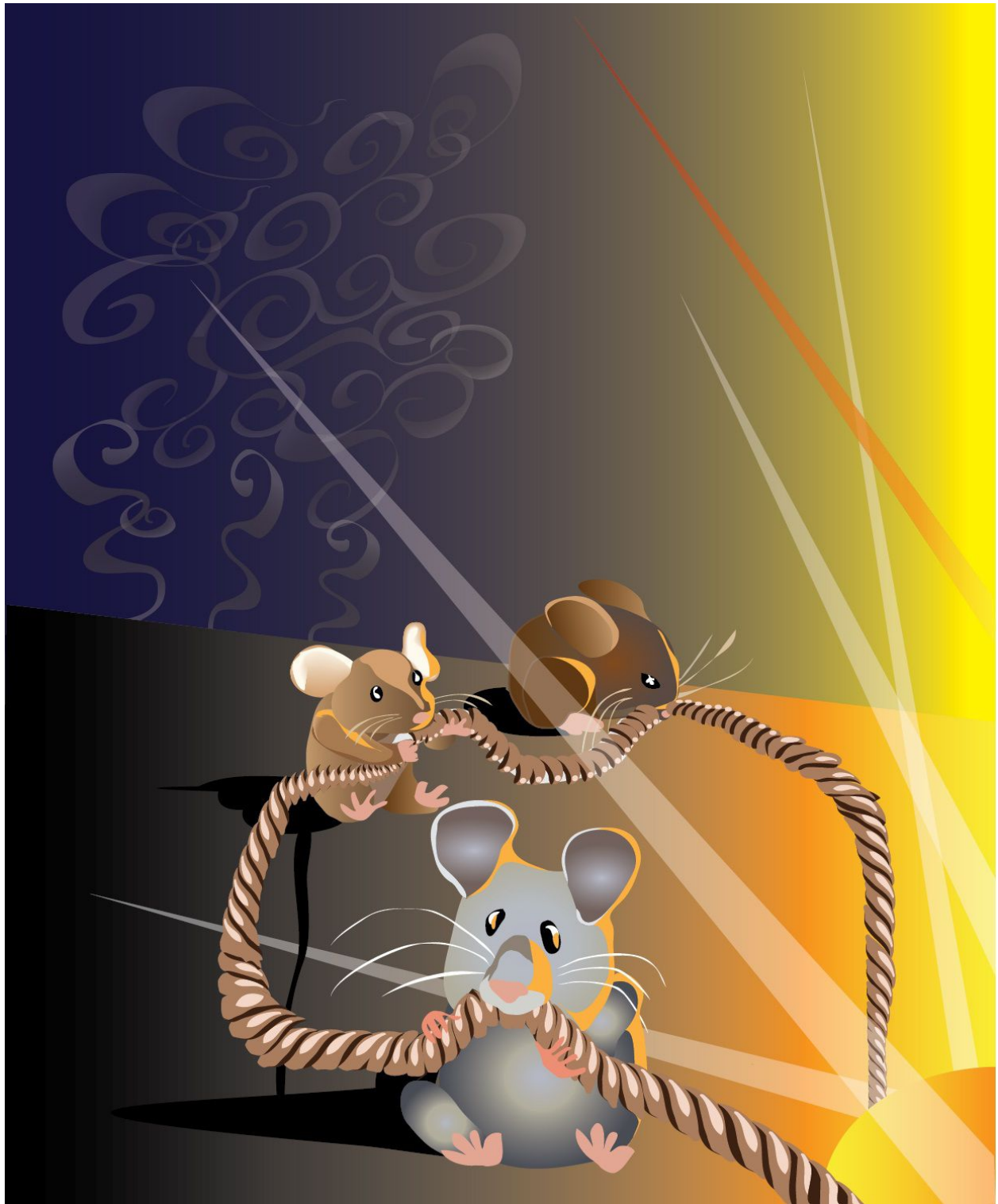


arly the next evening, Wiseheart secretly set out for the distant mountains,

E carrying only a skin of water, some dried fish, and a sharp knife. As he traveled, he asked the kind spirits of his people to help him, and they did. Guided by a fierce and powerful eagle and thousands of fireflies, Wiseheart found his way through the steep, dark mountain range. A sure-footed mountain goat led him to the edge of the deep canyon in which the Evil Spirit was guarding the Sun, Moon, and Stars. A traveling family of field mice offered to chew through the ropes, which bound the Sun, Moon, and Stars while Wiseheart distracted the Evil Spirit. Accepting their offer of help, Wiseheart climbed cautiously over the rim of the canyon and slowly began to climb down the steep cliff toward the canyon floor below.



Just as he reached the bottom, the silence was suddenly pierced by the same sound of shrieking wind that he had heard in his dream. The Evil Spirit, red-faced and shaking with rage, stepped between Wiseheart and the Sun, Moon, and Stars and demanded to know why the boy had intruded in his canyon. Before Wiseheart could answer, the Evil Spirit noticed the boy's water skin and demanded that he be given some water to quench his thirst and to cool his sun-scorched body. In reply, Wiseheart said, "Powerful spirit, I am happy to give you all my water, but first let me add some special herbs which will quench your thirst and cool your sun-scorched body far better than plain water." The Evil Spirit agreed, and after Wiseheart had added the herbs, which were really sleeping herbs, he drank the water greedily. Soon after, the Evil Spirit fell asleep.



Immediately, as if on cue, the family of mice began gnawing through the thick ropes, which held the Sun, Moon, and Stars captive. When they had almost completed their task, the Evil Spirit, feeling the heat of the Sun's rays, as it

slowly began to ascend into the sky, awoke from his slumber. With a piercing shriek, the Evil Spirit rushed to recapture the Sun. Just before he could do so, Wiseheart cut through the remaining fragments of rope with his knife. With the ends of the rope held tightly in his hands, Wiseheart and the mice sailed into the sky. A short time later, as the Sun passed over Wiseheart's village, they all jumped safely into the soft boughs of the tallest fir trees. From there, Wiseheart looked up to see the first and most beautiful sunrise that he would ever see.

Wiseheart returned to his tribe as a hero. The people hailed him as the Sun Guard and thanked him for returning light and warmth to the day and light to the night. Almost immediately, the trees and plants began to grow larger, and the people danced and celebrated in the warmth and brightness of the Sun. After several hours, however, the people began to complain. They said, "It's too hot! I'm thirsty!" Others complained of feeling tired and of their skin feeling red and sore. Wiseheart was amazed that his gift, which had at first caused so much joy, was now causing so much pain and discomfort. He thought for a moment and then quickly led his tribe to the river's edge.



There he told his people to drink deeply and to coat their skin with mud from the riverbank. He told them, “the mud will soothe your skin and protect it from the powerful rays of the Sun,” and they found that he was right. Now Wiseheart was truly a hero. His tribe could now enjoy the Sun and all the beauty it gave to the world, without being hurt by its powerful rays.

Even today, Wiseheart is a hero, for though he did not know it, he had

discovered the first sunscreen with an SPF of 50 plus!

To Learn More about SunWise and SunAWARE

Every year over half of American children experience a sunburn. Sun protection education is needed to teach children about the hazards of overexposure to ultraviolet radiation. This book is available through a partnership between Children's Melanoma Prevention Foundation and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's SunWise Program. It was developed to educate and motivate adolescents about the importance of sun protection.

The **Children's Melanoma Prevention Foundation** is a non-profit organization that aims to educate children and their caretakers about sun protection and skin cancer prevention. Their SunAWARE School Curriculum for Kindergarten through Grade 12 has been delivered to thousands of children in classrooms and recreational settings around New England. The curriculum and supporting educational materials, including children's books, are available via free download at: www.melanomaprevention.org

The **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's SunWise Program** is a partnership program that radiates good ideas. SunWise is a free environmental and health education program that teaches children and their caregivers how to protect themselves from overexposure to the sun. Through the use of classroom, school, and community components, SunWise seeks to develop sustained sun-safe behaviors. This book is one example of how SunWise partners with organizations in the community. To learn more about SunWise visit: www.epa.gov/sunwise.