

Tell Me a Story
Maori
Rangi and Papa (A Polynesian Creation Myth)

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Long ago, out of a shell, the world emerged. The shell began to open slowly, letting a sliver of light inside, and the top of that shell became Rangi, or sky, the bottom Papa, earth.

Now Rangi and Papa loved each other, and so they stayed close, holding each other. Before long they bore sons -- marvelous gods -- 70 in all, each one strong and powerful, each wishing to help with the new creation.

And so it was they set to work. ^{Tah-nay} Tane planted trees and bushes, shrubs and flowers. At first he planted everything upside down, and nothing blossomed, but when he saw that he had erred, he set to work turning each one upright.

Then everything began to bloom. Stiff fern fronds and bushy green leaves fanned across Papa's body. Tane was overjoyed when bright red flowers burst from the limbs of the ^{Poh-hoh-two-kaw-wah} Pohutukawa trees, and when the strong kauri began to spread, he called the others to celebrate the beauty of all he had grown.

But Tane was not alone among the creators. ^{Hoo-mee-ah} Haumia created wild foods, while his brother ^{Tan-gah-row} Tangaroa, god of the rolling sea, led the cool waters to lick the shores of this lush land. ^{Tah-fee-ree} Tawhiri ruled over the storms and winds, and ^{Toc} Tu vowed he would protect everything, for he was bold and brave, the perfect god of war.

And so the world grew and grew, and the forests and seas began to fill. The gods created beasts to roam the land and birds to fill the sky, fish to fill the seas and butterflies to float among the flowers.

But now that more and more things filled the world, the gods began to long for more space.

"Papa," they said to their mother, "let go of Rangi. You need not hold him so closely. If you'll let go, our world will grow."

Papa shook her head. "I love Rangi. I will not let go," she said to her sons. "Do not ask such a thing of your mother."

And so the gods turned to their father, but Rangi agreed with Papa. As time passed, it seemed as if Rangi was pulling closer to his wife, and their sons began to fear that they might suffocate in this tiny world.

And so the sons of the sky and earth sat down together to talk. "How can we convince them to let go -- just a little?" Haumia asked.

"We cannot," Tu roared. "We'll kill them instead." His fierce nature frightened the others.

"No," Tane cried. He cherished every living thing. "They love each other, and they love us. Surely they will let go just a little."

But more time passed, and they did not let go.

"We need more space," the gods chanted.

All the gods, that is, but one. Tawhiri, god of storms and winds, shook his head hard, and wind swept the land. "You will destroy all creation if you separate our parents," he howled, and the windy words set his brothers reeling backward.

When Tawhiri saw the effect of his words, he held his breath, hoping they would forget their plan.

But they did not forget, and they begged their parents to let go of each other for the sake of all other creatures.

But Papa and Rangi still refused to part.

In the end, the gods lost their patience. "We can push you apart then," they said, and they began to push, but no matter how hard they pushed, they could not break the strong embrace of their parents.

"You see," Tu muttered, "we must kill them."

Hearing this threat, Tane felt his strength double. He placed his shoulders against his mother's belly, and with his feet he pressed against Rangi. The others watched in wonder as slowly, ever so slowly, Rangi's grip on Papa seemed to loosen.

Light and air began to fill the world. And after a while, the space between Papa and Rangi grew wide enough so that the earth and sky no longer seemed as one.

The gods were amazed. "Now we need the human element, 'ira tangata,'" they said. But they knew that to create human beings, they needed help, for they did not know how to create woman.

Tane sought his mother's advice, hoping she would forgive him. And when he went to her for help, her heart melted. "Go to a place called ^{Kur-ah-wah-kah} Kurawaka," she said. "There you will find what you need."

Tane and his brothers traveled to Kurawaka, and it was there they found the red clay that they were to mold into a woman.

Each brother set to work, the elders shaping a body of the clay, the younger ones adding flesh and muscles and blood. When they were satisfied with their creation, Tane took the figure of the woman in his arms, pressed his nose to hers, and breathed into her nostrils. This was the living spirit she would need to help to create new life.

When all the gods had offered their gifts, the woman's eyes opened. She sneezed, and Hine-ahu-one, the first woman, was made, the beginning of the creation of humankind. Hee - nay - ah - hoo - ~~nee~~ nee

Now Tane placed the golden sun and silver moon upon his father's head, crowning and honoring him. And then he cast a basket of stars toward his father. When he looked around, he felt satisfied that his tasks were complete.

Rangi and Papa were proud of what their sons had done, but forever afterward they missed each other's touch. Every night Rangi cries, and in the morning the world is damp with the dew of his tears. And the morning mists are Papa's sighs of sadness as she thinks of her beloved Rangi, now separated from her embrace.