



## Earth Day Ksaahkomm Ksiistsikó

and Indigenous History

with **Api'Soomaahka, Running Coyote**

William Singer III

“One of the topics I’d like to talk about is water. Water comes in different forms. Today we are experiencing snow, **Kóónssko**-its water. Water is LIFE. It is how we are connected. Even to the sky. Today it is snowing. I don’t mind. I live by a lake, Moses Lake near Cardston, and the lake has since dried up, so I don’t mind the snow. It represents how things have changed over time and how much we have forgotten. We had a lot to do with that. There are many things to talk about- **Ksaahkomm Ksiistsikó**, its Earth Day.”

Going back in time, to tell you how things were created **Aohkíi lihtaipatapiiyop**- “water is life” In 2006 I started to work with the land and how to be a better land steward and focus on restoration. I am a member of the Kainai Ecosystem Protection Association (KEPA) and operate “Naapi’s Garden.” In 2013 I decided to spend the rest of my life to working with the land. This project is created as a continued adaptation of the **Niitsitapi** (Blackfoot- The real people). Today we are experiencing a decline in our native land, which means a decline in our community health and every time we lose that we lose our **Niitsitapi** way of life. Now we have environmental and social climate change that requires looking for participants to ensure action for our future. Its also how we rear our children, how we heal ourselves, pray for the future, and becoming horticulturalists and scientist by growing our native plants. We utilize **Blackfoot** Indigenous knowledge to heal ourselves through the plants Creator gave us on the earth. We use our knowledge to create reciprocity for research, education, and partnership; to assist and create food security solutions by developing community and land gardens. We learn the lessons from Naapi and take action by them. We need to learn the spirit of the land and **Naató’si** (the Sun). We are teaching inspiration to educate our future generations and continue our community survival to take action and to reclaim the land.

### *The Seven Stars- The Ihkitsikamm*

Blackfoot stories start from the beginning, which is **Naató’si**- the sun. **Naató’si’s** original name is **Ki’sómm**. Later we started calling **Naató’si- Ki’sómm**-that means the holy one. **Naató’si** was the only being that was in our universe. There came a time when he brought up **Ksááhko**, or space dust, and created a ball of dirt, that turned into the early beginnings of earth. There was nothing but grass here- **Matóyihko**. One of the earliest grasses that grew was **Saissksiimoko** -sweetgrass. When you think about sweetgrass it is an essential plant. **Naató’si** would come down and walk the land and got to the point of wanting a partner, so he created his wife. At some point as time went on the children came along. Their daughter is O’kina. In some stories O’kina is male, but in this one, O’kina is female. The mother told O’kina go out and hunt and find her brothers. She found her brothers who were hunting birds similar to Prairie chickens- **Sisstsi**. As O’kina was hunting she looked into the woods to see her mother speaking to an elk, **ponoká**, and there was a feather. Her mother was being unfaithful to her husband, **Naató’si**. Thereafter, **Naató’si** gave all of his children different powers and gave the children the choice of when to use their powers. Their father used these powers to separate their children at

birth and was teaching his children how to survive. After O'kina saw her mother with **ponoká** she got quite scared and told her brothers what she saw. The children decided to run away. After some time, the mother was looking for her children and decided to go after them. After many miles she caught up with them. O'kina thought her mother was angry at them and was going to harm them, so they all ran. As they were running, one of the children remembered they were each given a power from their father. One was given power from his father in his finger. The power of another child was an ability to create different types of canyons; canyons that formed coulees to slow their mother down. One of the other siblings was given the power of a bladder of wind. They opened a bladder of wind that caused chinook winds, **Ikoopiisopo**, that were blowing constantly and slowing their mother down, but eventually she caught up again. One of the other siblings remembered that he was given a rock, so he took the rock out and threw it on the ground. Some of the rocks looked like they had faces, all the different types of rocks looked up to the sky. There were rocks all over the place. The children got quite far ahead again but the mother again was getting closer. Another sibling decided to create forests so all the trees started to grow; the cottonwoods, the pine trees, and although it would slow their mother down, eventually she caught up. Another sibling remembered he had the power of 'thunder and rain, so he used his power to slow her down. At the end of every storm, we see a rainbow. In our past when we saw a rainbow, it told us that Naapi had lassoed the storm. Eventually the mother caught up again. Another sibling had the power of lightning, **Áipapomm**, and thunder, **Ksiistsikom**, with the rain, **Sootaa**, wind, **Ikoopiisopo**, and loud noises, their mother slowed down again. Eventually the children arrived at the ocean. The younger one, O'kina had the power to create oceans, **Mo'tóyáóhkiistsi**, and rivers, **Niitahtaistsi**; she created rivers and waves to slow their mother down. While their mother was still gaining momentum, they all stayed together. O'kina said one of the things we can do is to stand and stay this way forever. And people could look up into the night sky and see us the dipper. Each individual had their gifts from their father and each star represents one of their gifts found on earth. **This is a story called O'kina, the Seven Stars, The Ihkitsikamm**. There's actually eight stars. The smallest and eighth star is actually another galaxy, but in folklore, we call this the dog that the children took with them. The constellations we see in the Milky Way is the Wolf Trail.



What became of the mother? The dipper was out of her reach so she concentrated on her husband. She chased after **Ki'sómm -Naató'si** threatening to harm him, She got really close so he cut off her leg to slow her down. In the past, **Naató'si** was helping people on the land. We don't see **Kokomi'kisomm** the moon for four nights which coincides with the women's cycles. In the sky, you can see **Kokomi'ki'sómm and Naató'si** chasing each other, which will keep going on forever, so **Naató'si** quit coming down to earth. He had to create someone else, so he created Naapi to work on the land and gave him a lot of power. Naapi is known for always showing off. Naapi created a flood that completely destroyed everything. Once the flood was over he had to re-create the land and created something that is different now. Anytime Naapi would lay down he would mark himself with rocks that reflect the constellations. **Katoyiss** is a Blackfoot hero. He is represented by the constellation of Orion and was a person who was a lot smarter and almost equal powers than Naapi. Another star, called the dog star or **Sisoom**, his companion and both went through the territory making it safe for everyone.



Naapi's Garden came about as stories of creating climate change, floods, geological activity, he created change that we are experiencing. He was working to change the environment to be what is history, but he never fully completed it. Once his time came his body went to the sweetgrass hills.

From: [www.buffalotreaty.com](http://www.buffalotreaty.com)

The Sweet Pine hills also known as the sweetgrass hills is the form of Katoyiss body where he laid to rest. In the wintertime, you can see Katoyiss as the constellation Orion. These stories are connected to the land. Our lodge represents the cosmos of the Blackfoot and on the top of the lodge are the Pleiades, the stars. The lodge represents everything about the world. The land, the mountains, the spirit world, and the cosmos. That is what sweetgrass is. Individuals will have different interpretations of sweetgrass, but for me, one strand is for the land, one is for the spirit world with the animals, and the top is for the cosmos. Sweetgrass is very important for ceremonies and when we smudge, the smoke carries our prayers to the heavens or cosmos.



This is part of our connection to the land. Many of our Blackfoot stories are from children. We grew up with these stories. That is the power the children have; the Pleiades. The stories have been created by children until Naapi arrived. When I talk about **Ksaahkomm**, or how we are connected, we talk about how there is water in the sky; water is in the clouds. It's condensation, but we often don't see it. The state of our environment can be extreme with forest fires and ominous clouds bring in rain and various forms of storms. Our Blackfoot people teach regardless of the weather.

William teaches through Naapi's Garden as well as through different partners. He teaches at Opoka'asin every week. "I teach the children these valuable ways of life, the land, the plants, and how valuable the plants are, as well as the knowledge children learn for our future. We teach these lessons to the children at a young age, like pre-school age. What they are learning is how to become horticulturalists joining other tribes. The Lakota, the Cherokee, the Eastern tribes, they all have plants that they grew and now we are joining them. There used to be a lot of opposition to the work I am doing. The Blackfoot considers everything done by the Creator and considers everything natural, but it has come to the point of having to take care of the earth and the land. We have to take the initiative and responsibility. Plants have a connection, like with the insects. Everything has a connection, and we have to teach our children. Our education system we can view as backwards. People learn their schooling of reading and writing to later learn about horticulture. At Opoka'asin we are teaching the children about plants and their properties early along with their schooling. It's a part of our culture now and we need to teach the children how to grow plants from seeds to live. We need our plants to provide food and we need to be connected to the land. When the children grow up they can utilize the seedbank for their future. Children need to understand that the seeds grow into plants that are also medicine, and they need to understand the importance of that. Some of our people, myself included, are eating like our ancestors did with dried plants



and meat and preservation of our food. I was fortunate to grow up with knowledge of the plants and can now commit myself to working with the land and trying to restore our native plants and ways of living. If we are going to heal ourselves as a people, we need to go back to our traditional ways that are out on the land. That is where the plants are and the medicines are, so we can heal ourselves.”

“You cannot know the Creator without knowing the plants and you cannot know the plants without knowing. It is one and the same. The same is true with anything you do. You cannot know anything by just touching the surface, you need to get right into your knowledge to learn. We have partnered with many organizations, such as the Oldman Watershed Council and with Parks Canada to regenerate our native plants.”

## **Aohkii lihtaipatapiiyop-Water is Life**



*From: The Oldman Watershed Council*