

Raven Steals the Light
North American Haida Tribe Ancient Tale

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Excerpts from Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst, *The Raven Steals the Light*, Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984. Reproduced by permission of the authors.

Before there was anything, before the great flood had covered the earth and receded, before the animals walked the earth or the trees covered the land or the birds flew between the trees, even before the fish and the whales and seals swam in the sea, an old man lived in a house on the bank of a river with his only child, a daughter.

At that time the whole world was dark. The old man had a small box which contained all the light in the universe.

Eventually, a Raven, bumping around in the dark, reached the home of the old man. He first heard a little singsong voice muttering away. When he followed the voice, he soon came to the wall of the house, and there, placing his ear against the planking, he could just make out the words, "I have a box and inside it is all the light in the world, and it is all mine and I'll never give any of it to anyone, not even my daughter."

It only took an instant for the Raven to decide to steal the light for himself, but it took a lot longer for him to invent a way to do so.

First he had to find a door into the house. But no matter how many times he circled it or how carefully he felt the planking, it remained a smooth, unbroken barrier. Sometimes he heard either the old man or his daughter leave the house to get water or for some other reason, but they always departed from the side of the house opposite to him, and when he ran around to the other side the wall seemed as unbroken as ever.

Finally, the Raven retired a little way upstream and thought and thought about how he could enter the house. And in that idle speculation, he found the solution to his problem.

He waited until the young woman, whose footsteps he could distinguish by now from those of her father, came to the river to gather water. Then he changed himself into a single hemlock needle, dropped himself into the river and floated down just in time to be caught in the basket which the girl was dipping in the river.

The girl took a deep drink from the basket, and in so doing, swallowed the needle.

The Raven slithered down deep into her warm insides and found a soft, comfortable spot, where he transformed himself once more, this time into a very small human being, and went to sleep for a long while. And as he slept he grew.

The young girl didn't have any idea what was happening to her, and of course she didn't tell her father, who noticed nothing unusual because it was so dark -- until suddenly he became very aware indeed of a new presence in the house, as the Raven at last emerged triumphantly in the shape of a human boychild.

He was -- or would have been, if anyone could have seen him -- a strange-looking boy, with a long beaklike nose and a few feathers here and there. And he was noisy. He had a cry that contained all the noises of a spoiled child and an angry raven -- yet he could sometimes speak as softly as the wind in the hemlock boughs.

The Raven's grandfather grew to love this strange new member of his household and spent many hours playing with him, making him toys and inventing games for him. As he gained more and more of the affection and confidence of the old man, the Raven felt more intently around the house, trying to find where the light was hidden. After much exploration, he was convinced it was kept in the big box which stood in the corner of the house.

That box, said the Ravenchild to his grandfather, was the one thing he needed to make him completely happy. As most if not all grandfathers have done since the beginning, the old man finally yielded and slightly opened the lid to the box. A strange radiance, never before seen, began to infuse the darkness of the house, disclosing vague shapes and their shadows, still too dim to have definite form. The Ravenchild then begged in his most pitiful voice to be allowed to hold the light for just a moment.

His request was instantly refused, but of course in time his grandfather yielded. The old man lifted the light, in the form of a beautiful, incandescent ball, from the box and tossed it to his grandson.

He had only a glimpse of the child on whom he had lavished such love and affection, for even as the light was travelling toward him, the child changed from his human form to a huge, shining black shadow, wings spread and beak open, waiting. The Raven snapped up the light in his jaws, thrust his great wings downward and shot through the smokehole of the house into the huge darkness of the world.

The world was at once transformed. Mountains and valleys were starkly silhouetted, the river sparkled with broken reflections, and everywhere life began to stir.