

Bad Fog

September 4, 2014

Years ago, Martin Louie took my father as a son. As a result, we usually called him Grandpa Martin, but sometimes we affectionately called him “The Old Man across the River.” Martin was an elder and spiritual leader who lived at Inchelium, near the western shore of the Columbia River. He was a colorful character, often remembered for his wisdom and humor.

From time to time, Grandpa Martin shared the most profound sayings. Recently, I found a partial transcript of his stories. The following paragraph contains an excerpt. He said:

inxaxcin, isxáxpax?, inqáqna?, istəmtíma, inkíkwax?, kʷu_cq́míxəl, kʷu_ncq́mnítʷsəl
i?_kəl_sax?ítʷ, mət kʷu_cúsəl, 'lut akskəf?ítxm i_təmxʷúla?xʷ. kəf?ítxməntxʷ
i?_tmxʷúla?xʷ, mət yaxʷást way' suxʷxʷ i?_skəkʷáka? i?_kəl_wist. yaxʷást way'
nəxʷtílx, mi kʷ_xʷtí...lx, mət i?_skəkʷáka? wíkənts ti kʷ_xʷ?u...l ixí? t_astkʷsícax?.'

In English:

My ancestors, my paternal grandfather and grandmother, my maternal grandfather and grandmother, they threw me out of bed, they threw me into the river, and they said to me, ‘Don’t sleep while the world goes by. If you sleep while the world goes by, all the birds will leave and go to the mountains. They will be gone into the bushes before you wake up, and the birds will see you as a bad fog surrounding your body.’

This was a story I had never heard before. In particular, the words ‘bad fog’ caught my eye as an enigmatic or mysterious phrase. I wondered about the meaning, so I decided to ask sʷamtičax? – one of our fluent speakers of the Okanagan language.

She said, “xʷul is like steam that might come up from a boiling pot, but it’s also like what people say nowadays when they talk about an aura – it’s your energy.” In that exact moment, kʷulcniŋkʷ – an energetic, happy, two-year old boy – bounded into the room and pounded a drum with a stick. sʰamtićaʔ pointed to him and said, “ǰast i_sxʷuls. His power is good.”

She also said that tksíćaʔ can refer to bad clothing (something bad on the outside), but it can also refer to your body.