

excerpt from:

A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida
Mythtellers and Their World,
by Robert Bringhurst

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Liú Xié, a Chinese critic writing fifteen hundred years before our time, saw literature as landscape and the other way around. Sun and moon and mountains and rivers, he says, are the *wén* of *dào*.¹⁶ They are, that is, the literature and culture of the Tao, the message-bearing legacy and wisdom of what-is.

The myths exist, most mythtellers say, independently of any human culture. We learn them from the others: other animals, the trees, the creeks, the ground. But wherever they are told in the words that humans use, they are told by individual human beings. Learning how to hear the telling of a myth means learning how to hear the myth itself and how to hear the one who tells it. Myth, like music, speaks when someone with the skill is willing to perform. It also speaks, like music, *on behalf* of the performer. For that to happen, the performer must step back instead of forward, and let the myth itself say what it can about the world. Rarely, but once in a while, a mythteller speaks of this process directly.

One day in March 1928, in the village of Husum, Washington, close to where the White Salmon River empties into the Columbia, a Sahaptin-speaking shaman known as Shláwtxan¹⁷ began to tell a story. *Áw iwachá tীন*, he said: "Now there were people." *Iwachá tীন cháw ílkwash*, "There were people without fire." As Shláwtxan soon explained, the people without fire were the people of the earth. Led by their headman-in-waiting, the Beaver, they went to steal fire from the people of the sky.

Two human beings were listening intently as the tale continued to unfold. One of the two was a young anthropologist, Melville Jacobs. He had studied, like John Swanton, with Franz Boas,

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and he was busy, just as Swanton would have been, writing down what the mythteller said. When the story reached what was plainly a conclusion, Shláwtx̱an pronounced the conventional formula, *Íkunik iwá wat'ít'aash*, "So goes the myth," which certified its close. Then he kept right on talking to Jacobs, and Jacobs kept on writing. What Shláwtx̱an said that day sheds light, I think, on all the indigenous literatures of western North America, and in its way on literature worldwide:

Míniknash aníya ínk wat'ít'aash?
Cháw ínk.
Anamún itx̱ánana tiichám,
mún itx̱ánana tíin,
kúuk pá'anakwa tíinan tiichámnan. 5

Kúuk itx̱ánana k'pínk anak'pínk iwachá tíin
k'pínk itx̱ánana kákya,
itx̱ánana waykáanash,
itx̱ánana iwínat,
itx̱ánana tmaanít, 10
itx̱ánana xnít.

Tí'áaxw k'pínk kwnínkat ittáwax̱na wat'ít'aash.

Cháw íchlaksim tiichámpa,
anakútk iwshá tiichám.
Kwnák tí'áaxw tinx̱tínx̱ tíin, 15
kúushxi sínwit,
kúushxi tkwátat.

Anamít ichi iwachá tíin.
Cháw qúyx̱ tamánwit,
tíin itx̱ánana tamánwitki. 20

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*Ittáwaxna {ínk} tíin íchi íkuuk,
kúuk ikwítamsh kumánk,
anak'pínk shín kumánk ittáwaxshamta.*

*Kúuk k'pínk iyíkshana wat'ít'aashnan,
kú k'pínk ipxwísha íchi íkuuk. 25
Íkunik ittáwaxníma tiichám kú wat'ít'aash
kumánk íchi íkuuk.*

Áw cháv-wíyat t'áaxw k'pínk iwátsha wat'ít'aash.

*Áw ínk xwísaat,
kúmash watísha t'áaxwsimk'a,
wiyáanakwanisha wat'ít'ash. 30
Íxwinam páyikshata ínk shiix.
Áwmash ní cháv-wíyat t'áaxw wat'ít'ash
íchnak tiichámpa,
Xwátxwayppam tiichám.*

Kúnam áw páyksha.¹⁸

*How did I make the myths?
I didn't.
After places came to be,
after people came to be,
the people and the places were destroyed. 5*

*Those who were previously people
turned into birds and furred animals,
turned into fish,
turned into elk and deer,
turned into fruit trees and berry bushes, 10
turned into root plants.*

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Those are the ones from whom the myths come.

*Not just here in this place,
but in every place there is:
all the different kinds of people, 15
differing languages,
differing foods.*

*There were that many kinds of people here.
Rather than the white man's law,
people lived by their own law. 20*

*People came to be here then,
and they have been here since,
the ones who will continue being born here.*

*They were listening to myths back then,
and they are thinking of them still. 25
The land and the myths have grown together this way
from then until now.*

Now almost all those myths are disappearing.

*I am old now,
telling you the whole of it,
leaving the myths behind. 30
Even so, you will keep on hearing me clearly.
Now I have given you almost all the myths
of this country,
the Klikitat country.*

That is what you hear now.