

What my Hualapai Language Means to Me

Damon Clarke

I grew up in an environment that many of you may have shared. My grandparents raised me. They taught me our language, our culture, and all our relatives. They taught me a lot. I remember when my uncle (a year older than me, he's like a brother to me) and I would listen to the conversations they had with one another and with visitors. We would listen to them and if we got caught, they'd verbally reprimanded us: "Gak nyu wi:j'm de' "; "Mi yam ja' "; "Ya' mi wi'ja"; "Ya mi wika"; "O'p kyu Gak nyum wijam de."

To us, this was the natural way, we'd take this reprimand serious, this was a way of life. It was taken as, there it is, we got caught. It didn't matter to us because it wasn't the first time and it sure wasn't going to be the last. We listened well; they taught us a lot as did others in the family. But we continued on; we learned the language, experimenting with words, especially the bad words. (I need to remind you now; we were curious, crazy little kids running around, snotty nosed, no shoes, and hair uncombed.)

We didn't know any better, we didn't care. We were just small, we were "Alive" and "Happy." We didn't know or understand we were "poor." Later on we found this out. Someone came up to us and told us, "Hey, you're poor!" I believe it was a government person that told us. This was saddening, because to me, I wasn't poor. I had my grandparents, they teach me, and you're telling me I'm poor? Man, my head went down, I was like a little puppy that was scolded.

But, I remember those times: my upbringing, my language taught by my grandparents. It has been uplifting to me. I was pulled away from a lot of the ties after a short period of time when both my grandparents died. I then lived with my Great Uncle "VK" and "Auntie" in Peach Springs. It was my choice to live with them or my aunt in Kingman. My aunt was sort of mean, but the gentleness and care from an older person was more pleasing. There, I learned more about my relatives, my language, and the land. I met more older people, learned from them much of the older terminology of the Hualapai language.

But, as with my grandparents, ties were severed, many of the older people have gone on. This is one of the biggest concerns we need to address. We need to help our grandparents. We need to listen to their teachings, their knowledge. Today, I'm afraid because if all the older persons are gone, my generation could be considered the elderly. In a few years I'll be a grandparent, and that's scary! We speak of the older people, and now the younger people look at me. I think and say, "Golly, I'm still young" and realize the impact.

Languages are an issue and an everyday reality with everyone. For example, if I came up to you we would shake hands, we meet, and we converse. **All in English.** It used to be, we would come to the Flagstaff Pow Wow. I remember seeing some of the older people going into tents. They would be meeting, conversing, and speaking all languages: Hopi, Tewa, Hualapai, Navajo, Maricopa,

and so forth. They were speaking all the languages among themselves, and it was good.

Now, we're talking about having our own languages saved, where it used to be mutually shared. Our values, dress, and religions have changed dramatically. In viewing our communities, I see a lot of new churches. I'm not saying they're bad, but they have changed our thoughts and ways of life.

When I'm in a classroom, unknowingly I'm wondering what the professor is saying in my language. Where's the focus here? Where's the connection? How can I connect the concept into our language so students of mine will be able to understand? Yes, there are differences in Hualapai. The dialect varies from band to band, home to home, from home to school, from young to old. I'll give you an example: One evening, my father-in-law came over to visit. We were having dinner, and so during the meal, he asked one of daughters, "Ko:' nya ha' mi ne:ka" (Grandchild, bring me some water). Our daughter understood Ko' as piñon only, and rarely heard the term Ko:'. After our visit, our daughter came up to my wife and I and asked, "Mom, Dad, why did grandpa call me Piñon?" We laughed and explained. Later on, we found out similar stories with others and how words could mean different things if said incorrectly or in a different dialect. That has made us wonder what is going on with our languages? How can we relate ourselves to that end of it?

Even with the differences in dialect, Hualapai could go down to Phoenix, Maricopa land, and we could converse in language, in customs, in dance. My people could go to Mohave lands and converse, trade, visit, and sing. But, we cannot come up to Dine' and converse now, that has changed. We don't have the Old Ways that were once honored. This exchange of Life has vanished. It would be good to have the Pow Wow return to Flagstaff at Thorpe Park. This is where everyone can mingle, have a good time, meet old friends, and meet new. It would be a way to share in language, culture, and trade again.

We haven't lost our ways in the last 500 years since the arrival of Columbus. We're still here. For many of us, our language is the key. The key in thinking, our educational system, and our ways. It may have changed, but it is still intact, although the United States is still pushing to get us into the mainstream and civilize us. They are pushing for National Standards to make all people fit the norms. But, the realization is that it will never occur. They need to come to our level, where we have our own standards.

Technology is another issue. We have huge areas that we used to congregate and discuss issues without the use of microphones. You would be able to hear without the mike and visit at the same time. This was a natural amphitheater.

Tribal governments need to become more involved in preserving our languages and ways. In Hualapai, we have pushed and adopted a "Hualapai Only" Resolution in our Nation. It is still enforced.

Community control is another area of concern. We need more control of our economic development, our livelihood, our destiny. We need to choose what is right for our people and our yet unborn.

Yes, casinos are here in our Nations. We need to utilize this technology to our advantage. The signs posted need to be in our language. The proceeds could go to language, education, cultural exchange, and maintenance.

Our schools need curriculum in place that is relevant to the child, not forcing the child to meet the standards of the curriculum. That is a backward thought. We need to take part in tribally controlled schools. Many state and Bureau of Indian Affairs Schools have their vision as, “Save the Indian.” For those of us that attended boarding schools, our thoughts may differ, but attending Stewart Indian School, I believe I had good experiences. I learned other languages, dances, and met other people. We attended other Pow Wows, and the languages we exchanged with one another were a benefit. Of course, like in my childhood, we learned the “bad” words first. This was our way of humor. To get the other person to say the wrong thing and joke about it later. But in a serious way we wanted to share our thoughts and interact with one another.

As date of this symposium came near and while traveling to a workshop one day, I happened to revisit a poem that I wrote about five years ago. The conference seemed to give me the incentive to have it heard, to allow my thoughts to be expressed about our elders (my strength). I believe they are a strength to a lot of you as well.

This poem is untitled and it is unfinished and it will continue to be untitled and unfinished until I die. And It is a good Day to Die! If you take that expression literally, please don’t. I do not mean it literally. You must listen to the intent, the language. Mi e:vja Mi spo: ja Mi U: ja (Listen, Learn, and Watch).

The day came, They were taken,
No one could do much of anything.
Crying, songs of mourning, sadness.
It was a time for many,
They turned, but couldn't move,
They nodded, but didn't understand,
They smiled, but were really scared.

Many sat in silence, afraid, worried
tense.
They listened, but couldn't hear,
They watched, but couldn't see,
They froze, and screamed, "Jida, Dala, Mi Wi'wo: ja"
(“Mom, Dad, Help me!”)

Many of them tried, many died.
Some died of the mind,
some of the soul.
Many died from loneliness,
others died of tradition, language.
Many, many more . . . ,
we don't even know, they're gone forever . . .

Don't speak you language, it's no good.
Don't wear your traditional clothes, it's no good.
Cut your hair, it's no good.

The system hasn't beaten us.
We care.
We want you to understand your world.
Your life, it's a chance.

Remember what is good:
Your language.
Your tradition.
Your family, All the relations of the World.

We are not by ourselves,
We are in Unison, Watch . . . ,