

Tatyana Martynova: Respect and Forgiveness



Tatyana (Tonya) Martynova was born in a village in the Sakha Republic (Yakutia). She is one of seven children, six girls and one boy. She has one son, Vladimir, and one grandson. Tonya worked closely with Tlingit elder Jim Walton in Cherski, where she taught at a college and was the organizer of several international gatherings with Jim to address the alcohol problem in the Sakha Republic. She also helped start The Tundra Women's

Center in Cherski, the first women's shelter in the Russian Far East. Tonya's interview started out to help us test the camera, but soon took on a life of its own.

“My parents were very hard working,” Tonya said. “I didn’t know my father well growing up. He was always working. Before he died he told me stories of his childhood and his life. He died two years ago, but I still have the feeling of not enough time with my father. I am still grieving and it is still hard for me to talk about him. I love him very much and I miss him.”

“When something bad happens in my life he always comes to my dreams – like he is trying to prevent me from something bad happening. People say I have a spiritual connection with him. In these dreams he is very sad. When I wake up from these dreams, I always start to cry. I just feel sorry that I didn’t spend enough time with him when he was alive.”

Tonya said that in many ways she and her father shared similar personalities. “He never showed his feelings even if he was sad. Even before dying he never showed that he was suffering. He broke a leg and he was in the bed for one month or more. My sisters refused to take care of him because they couldn’t forgive his attitude when we were growing up. I tried to explain to them, ‘This is our father. Let’s forgive. Let’s take care of him,’ but they refused to come and visit him.”

“At the last moments in his life I took him to my mom’s house and when my sisters came to mom’s house I told them, ‘He is dying. Before it is too late you should come and see him.’ But in the end he didn’t recognize them. After he died my sisters cried and said, ‘You did the right thing to bring him to mom’s house and give us a chance to see him.’ But for some of my sisters it was too late.”

“I started to think that my dad was working all his life to support this big family, and at the end of his life there was just one daughter taking care of him. It’s not fair. For what had he lived his life? He was working hard.”

Tonya said understanding her father’s childhood helped her to forgive. “He was sometimes violent, but his childhood was after the revolution. My grandma, when she gave birth to my father, she told my grandpa that my father was going to die because the Red Army was coming and they were going to come and kill everyone anyway. She told him, ‘Take this baby and just throw him to the snow. He will die anyway.’ But my grandfather took the baby and put him in with the cows. It was warm and he survived because he hid him with the cows. When he was saying all this, I had to understand his behavior because there was no love from his mother right when he came to this world. That is why it started that he was sometimes violent and angry. But I forgave him because I understood.”

Tonya said that when she faces challenges and difficulties in her life she actually gets stronger and more focused. “I concentrate and become stronger to do what I have to. I can’t go and cry. It’s not my style. I do what I have to do and just go.”

“Sakha women, we don’t cry on someone’s shoulder. It’s not our style to share with each other even if we have problems. We try to keep silent.”

But the Sakha tradition of keeping silent, Tonya said, should perhaps change. “Maybe it’s not good. I think it’s time to change. It’s too hard to keep to yourself. You should share with other women - it will be easier to live.”

“Maybe it’s an old model. Some people say it’s because of our severe climate and that we live isolated from each other - that’s why it’s like that. It forms our national character. I read a book that before the October Revolution, Sakha women committed suicide because they had no help and they had a very bad position in the family. But now it’s a different picture.”

Although Tonya has numerous personal and professional accomplishments, as she has gotten older, her own perceptions of what is important in life have changed and her focus now is on her family. “Before something I was proud of was my graduation from my first university. I graduated with a red diploma and at that time

it was very rare for women. Or I would have said the conferences I helped put on in Cherski or Yakutz were something to be proud of. But now I think that's not so important. Now I think the most important thing was that I forgave my father and I have a spiritual connection with him. Before, I just tried to avoid him because it was very hard for me. But now that I found the strength to overcome my feelings and just forgive him and take care of him - he died in my hands - for me, I think that is the most important.”

As for advice for young women, Tonya said that respect is the most important. “First of all always respect people, because if you lose that there is no future. We should keep our links between family members because if someone is hurting or suffering in a family, it will go from generation to generation. We have to try and solve our family problems first so that we can help future generations have a more happy life.”

She also said it’s important to try to see things from other people’s perspective. “I always try to understand. If something is wrong, I try to look on the other side – to look more broadly and to try to think from a different position. I think it’s easier in life if you try to be in someone else’s shoes.”

