

Allegiance to Gratitude

There was a time, not so long ago, when my morning ritual was to rise before dawn and start the oatmeal and coffee before waking the girls. Then I would get them up to feed the horses before school. That done, I would pack lunches, find lost papers, and kiss pink cheeks as the school bus chugged up the hill, all before filling bowls for the cats and dog, finding something presentable to wear, and previewing my morning lecture as I drove to school. *Reflection* was not a word frequently on my mind those days.

But on Thursdays, I didn't have a morning class and could linger a little, so I would walk the pasture to the top of the hill to start the day properly, with birdsong and shoes soaked in dew and the clouds still pink with sunrise over the barn, a down payment on a debt of gratitude. One Thursday I was distracted from the robins and new leaves by a call I received from my sixth-grade daughter's teacher the night before. Apparently, my daughter had begun refusing to stand with the class for the Pledge of Allegiance. The teacher assured me she wasn't being disruptive, really, or misbehaving, but just sat quietly in her seat and wouldn't join in.

After a couple of days other students began following suit, so the teacher was calling “just because I thought you’d like to know.”

I remember how that ritual used to begin my day, too, from kindergarten through high school. Like the tap of the conductor’s baton, it gathered our attention from the hubbub of the school bus and the jostling hallway. We would be shuffling our chairs and putting lunch boxes away in the cubbies when the loudspeaker grabbed us by the collar.

We stood beside our desks facing the flag that hung on a stick at the corner of the blackboard, as ubiquitous as the smell of floor wax and school paste.

Hand over heart, we recited the Pledge of Allegiance. The pledge was a puzzlement to me, as I’m sure it is to most students. I had no earthly idea what a republic even was, and was none too sure about God, either. And you didn’t have to be an eight-year-old Indian to know that “liberty and justice for all” was a questionable premise.

But during school assemblies, when three hundred voices all joined together, all those voices, in measured cadence, from the gray-haired school nurse’s to the kindergarteners’, made me feel part of something. It was as if for a moment our minds were one. I could imagine then that if we all spoke for that elusive justice, it might be within our reach.

From where I stand today, though, the idea of asking schoolchildren to pledge loyalty to a political system seems exceedingly curious. Especially since we know full well that the practice of recitation will largely be abandoned in adulthood, when the age of reason has presumably been attained. Apparently my daughter had reached that age and I was not about to interfere. “Mom, I’m not going to stand there and lie,” she explained. “And it’s

not exactly liberty if they force you to say it, is it?”

She knew different morning rituals, her grandfather’s pouring of coffee on the ground and the one I carried out on the hill above our house, and that was enough for me. The sunrise ceremony is our Potawatomi way of sending gratitude into the world, to recognize all that we are given and to offer our choicest thanks in return. Many Native peoples across the world, despite myriad cultural differences, have this in common—we are rooted in cultures of gratitude.

Our old farm is within the ancestral homelands of the Onondaga Nation and their reserve lies a few ridges to the west of my hilltop. There, just like on my side of the ridge, school buses discharge a herd of kids who run even after the bus monitors bark “Walk!” But at Onondaga, the flag flying outside the entrance is purple and white, depicting the Hiawatha wampum belt, the symbol of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. With bright backpacks too big for their little shoulders, the kids stream in through doors painted the traditional Haudenosaunee purple, under the words *Nya wenhah Ska: nonh*, a greeting of health and peace. Black-haired children run circles around the atrium, through sun shafts, over clan symbols etched on the slate floor.

Here the school week begins and ends not with the Pledge of Allegiance, but with the Thanksgiving Address, a river of words as old as the people themselves, known more accurately in the Onondaga language as the Words That Come Before All Else. This ancient order of protocol sets gratitude as the highest priority. The gratitude is directed straight to the ones who share their gifts with the world.

All the classes stand together in the atrium, and one grade each week has responsibility for the oratory. Together, in a language

older than English, they begin the recitation. It is said that the people were instructed to stand and offer these words whenever they gathered, no matter how many or how few, before anything else was done. In this ritual, their teachers remind them that every day, “beginning with where our feet first touch the earth, we send greetings and thanks to all members of the natural world.”

Today it is the third grade’s turn. There are only eleven of them and they do their best to start together, giggling a little, and nudging the ones who just stare at the floor. Their little faces are screwed up with concentration and they glance at their teacher for prompts when they stumble on the words. In their own language they say the words they’ve heard nearly every day of their lives.

*Today we have gathered and when we look upon the faces around us we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now let us bring our minds together as one as we give greetings and thanks to each other as People. Now our minds are one.**

*The actual wording of the Thanksgiving Address varies with the speaker. This text is the widely publicised version of John Stokes and Kanawahientun, 1993.

There is a pause and the kids murmur their assent.

We are thankful to our Mother the Earth, for she gives us everything that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she still continues to care for us, just as she has from the beginning of time. To our Mother, we send thanksgiving, love, and respect. Now our minds are one.

The kids sit remarkably still, listening. You can tell they've been raised in the longhouse.

The Pledge has no place here. Onondaga is sovereign territory, surrounded on every side by the *Republicforwhichitstands*, but outside the jurisdiction of the United States. Starting the day with the Thanksgiving Address is a statement of identity and an exercise of sovereignty, both political and cultural. And so much more.

The Address is sometimes mistakenly viewed as a prayer, but the children's heads are not bowed. The elders at Onondaga teach otherwise, that the Address is far more than a pledge, a prayer, or a poem alone.

Two little girls step forward with arms linked and take up the words again:

We give thanks to all of the waters of the world for quenching our thirst, for providing strength and nurturing life for all beings. We know its power in many forms—waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans, snow and ice. We are grateful that the waters are still here and meeting their responsibility to the rest of Creation. Can we agree that water is important to our lives and bring our minds together as one to send greetings and thanks to the Water? Now our minds are one.

I'm told that the Thanksgiving Address is at heart an invocation of gratitude, but it is also a material, scientific inventory of the natural world. Another name for the oration is Greetings and Thanks to the Natural World. As it goes forward, each element of the ecosystem is named in its turn, along with its function. It is a lesson in Native science.

We turn our thoughts to all of the Fish life in the water. They were instructed to cleanse and purify the water. They also give themselves to us as food. We are grateful that they continue to do their duties and we send to the Fish our greetings and our thanks. Now our minds are one.

Now we turn toward the vast fields of Plant life. As far as the eye can see, the Plants grow, working many wonders. They sustain many life forms. With our minds gathered together, we give thanks and look forward to seeing Plant life for many generations to come. Now our minds are one.

When we look about us, we see that the berries are still here, providing us with delicious foods. The leader of the berries is the strawberry, the first to ripen in the spring. Can we agree that we are grateful that the berries are with us in the world and send our thanksgiving, love, and respect to the berries? Now our minds are one.

I wonder if there are kids here who, like my daughter, rebel, who refuse to stand and say thank you to the earth. It seems hard to argue with gratitude for berries.

With one mind, we honor and thank all the Food Plants we harvest from the garden, especially the Three Sisters who feed the people with such abundance. Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans, and fruit have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them as well. We gather together in our minds all the plant foods and send them a greeting and thanks. Now our minds are one.

The kids take note of each addition and nod in agreement.

Especially for food. A little boy in a Red Hawks lacrosse shirt steps forward to speak:

Now we turn to the Medicine Herbs of the world. From the beginning they were instructed to take away sickness. They are always waiting and ready to heal us. We are so happy that there are still among us those special few who remember how to use the plants for healing. With one mind, we send thanksgiving, love, and respect to the Medicines and the keepers of the Medicines. Now our minds are one.

Standing around us we see all the Trees. The Earth has many families of Trees who each have their own instructions and uses. Some provide shelter and shade, others fruit and beauty and many useful gifts. The Maple is the leader of the trees, to recognize its gift of sugar when the People need it most. Many peoples of the world recognize a Tree as a symbol of peace and strength. With one mind we greet and thank the Tree life. Now our minds are one.

The Address is, by its very nature of greetings to all who sustain us, *long*. But it can be done in abbreviated form or in long and loving detail. At the school, it is tailored to the language skills of the children speaking it.

Part of its power surely rests in the length of time it takes to send greetings and thanks to so many. The listeners reciprocate the gift of the speaker's words with their attention, and by putting their minds into the place where gathered minds meet. You could be passive and just let the words and the time flow by, but each call asks for the response: "Now our minds are one." You have to concentrate; you have to give yourself to the listening. It takes

effort, especially in a time when we are accustomed to sound bites and immediate gratification.

When the long version is done at joint meetings with non-Native business or government officials, they often get a little fidgety—especially the lawyers. They want to get on with it, their eyes darting around the room, trying *so hard* not to look at their watches. My own students profess to cherish the opportunity to share this experience of the Thanksgiving Address, and yet it never fails that one or a few comment that it goes on too long. “Poor you,” I sympathize. “What a pity that we have so much to be thankful for.”

We gather our minds together to send our greetings and thanks to all the beautiful animal life of the world, who walk about with us. They have many things to teach us as people. We are grateful that they continue to share their lives with us and hope that it will always be so. Let us put our minds together as one and send our thanks to the Animals. Now our minds are one.

Imagine raising children in a culture in which gratitude is the first priority. Freida Jacques works at the Onondaga Nation School. She is a clan mother, the school-community liaison, and a generous teacher. She explains to me that the Thanksgiving Address embodies the Onondaga relationship with the world. Each part of Creation is thanked in turn for fulfilling its Creator-given duty to the others. “It reminds you every day that you have enough,” she says. “More than enough. Everything needed to sustain life is already here. When we do this, every day, it leads us to an outlook of contentment and respect for all of Creation.”

You can't listen to the Thanksgiving Address without feeling

wealthy. And, while expressing gratitude seems innocent enough, it is a revolutionary idea. In a consumer society, contentment is a radical proposition. Recognizing abundance rather than scarcity undermines an economy that thrives by creating unmet desires. Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, but the economy needs emptiness. The Thanksgiving Address reminds you that you already have everything you need. Gratitude doesn't send you out shopping to find satisfaction; it comes as a gift rather than a commodity, subverting the foundation of the whole economy. That's good medicine for land and people alike.

We put our minds together as one and thank all the birds who move and fly about over our heads. The Creator gave them the gift of beautiful songs. Each morning they greet the day and with their songs remind us to enjoy and appreciate life. The Eagle was chosen to be their leader and to watch over the world. To all the Birds, from the smallest to the largest, we send our joyful greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

The oratory is more than an economic model; it's a civics lesson, too. Freida emphasizes that hearing the Thanksgiving Address every day lifts up models of leadership for the young people: the strawberry as leader of the berries, the eagle as leader of the birds. "It reminds them that much is expected of them eventually. It says this is what it means to be a good leader, to have vision, and to be generous, to sacrifice on behalf of the people. Like the maple, leaders are the first to offer their gifts." It reminds the whole community that leadership is rooted not in power and authority, but in service and wisdom.

We are all thank ful for the powers we know as the Four

Winds. We hear their voices in the moving air as they refresh us and purify the air we breathe. They help to bring the change of seasons. From the four directions they come, bringing us messages and giving us strength. With one mind we send our greetings and thanks to the Four Winds. Now our minds are one.

As Freida says, “The Thanksgiving Address is a reminder we cannot hear too often, that we human beings are not in charge of the world, but are subject to the same forces as all of the rest of life.”

For me, the cumulative impact of the Pledge of Allegiance, from my time as a schoolgirl to my adulthood, was the cultivation of cynicism and a sense of the nation’s hypocrisy—not the pride it was meant to instill. As I grew to understand the gifts of the earth, I couldn’t understand how “love of country” could omit recognition of the actual country itself. The only promise it requires is to a flag. What of the promises to each other and to the land?

What would it be like to be raised on gratitude, to speak to the natural world as a member of the democracy of species, to raise a pledge of *interdependence*? No declarations of political loyalty are required, just a response to a repeated question: “Can we agree to be grateful for all that is given?” In the Thanksgiving Address, I hear respect toward all our nonhuman relatives, not one political entity, but to all of life. What happens to nationalism, to political boundaries, when allegiance lies with winds and waters that know no boundaries, that cannot be bought or sold?

Now we turn to the west where our grandfathers the Thunder Beings live. With lightning and thundering voices they bring with

them the water that renews life. We bring our minds together as one to send greetings and thanks to our Grandfathers, the Thunderers.

We now send greetings and thanks to our eldest brother the Sun. Each day without fail he travels the sky from east to west, bringing the light of a new day. He is the source of all the fires of life. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to our Brother, the Sun. Now our minds are one.

The Haudenosaunee have been recognized for centuries as masters of negotiation, for the political prowess by which they've survived against all odds. The Thanksgiving Address serves the people in myriad ways, including diplomacy. Most everyone knows the tension that squeezes your jaw before a difficult conversation or a meeting that is bound to be contentious. You straighten your pile of papers more than once while the arguments you have prepared stand at attention like soldiers in your throat, ready to be deployed. But then the Words That Come Before All Else begin to flow, and you start to answer. Yes, of course we can agree that we are grateful for Mother Earth. Yes, the same sun shines on each and every one of us. Yes, we are united in our respect for the trees. By the time we greet Grandmother Moon, the harsh faces have softened a bit in the gentle light of remembrance. Piece by piece, the cadence begins to eddy around the boulder of disagreement and erode the edges of the barriers between us. Yes, we can all agree that the waters are still here. Yes, we can unite our minds in gratitude for the winds. Not surprisingly, Haudenosaunee decision-making proceeds from consensus, not by a vote of the majority. A decision is made only "when our minds are one." Those words are a brilliant political preamble to negotiation, strong medicine for

soothing partisan fervor. Imagine if our government meetings began with the Thanksgiving Address. What if our leaders first found common ground before fighting over their differences?

We put our minds together and give thanks to our oldest Grandmother, the Moon, who lights the nighttime sky. She is the leader of women all over the world and she governs the movement of the ocean tides. By her changing face we measure time and it is the Moon who watches over the arrival of children here on Earth. Let us gather our thanks for Grandmother Moon together in a pile, layer upon layer of gratitude, and then joyfully fling that pile of thanks high into the night sky that she will know. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to our Grandmother, the Moon.

We give thanks to the Stars who are spread across the sky like jewelry. We see them at night, helping the Moon to light the darkness and bringing dew to the gardens and growing things. When we travel at night, they guide us home. With our minds gathered as one, we send greetings and thanks to all the Stars. Now our minds are one.

Thanksgiving also reminds us of how the world was meant to be in its original condition. We can compare the roll call of gifts bestowed on us with their current status. Are all the pieces of the ecosystem still here and doing their duty? Is the water still supporting life? Are all those birds still healthy? When we can no longer see the stars because of light pollution, the words of Thanksgiving should awaken us to our loss and spur us to restorative action. Like the stars themselves, the words can guide us back home.

We gather our minds to greet and thank the enlightened Teachers who have come to help throughout the ages. When we forget how to live in harmony, they remind us of the way we were instructed to live as people. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to these caring Teachers. Now our minds are one.

While there is a clear structure and progression to the oratory, it is usually not recited verbatim or exactly the same by different speakers. Some renditions are low murmurs, barely discernible. Some are nearly songs. I love to hear elder Tom Porter hold a circle of listeners in the bowl of his hand. He lights up every face and no matter how long the delivery, you wish it was longer. Tommy says, "Let us pile up our thanks like a heap of flowers on a blanket. We will each take a corner and toss it high into the sky. And so our thanks should be as rich as the gifts of the world that shower down upon us," and we stand there together, grateful in the rain of blessings.

We now turn our thoughts to the Creator, or Great Spirit, and send greetings and thanks for all the gifts of Creation. Everything we need to live a good life is here on Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greetings and thanks to the Creator. Now our minds are one.

The words are simple, but in the art of their joining, they become a statement of sovereignty, a political structure, a Bill of Responsibilities, an educational model, a family tree, and a scientific inventory of ecosystem services. It is a powerful political

document, a social contract, a way of being—all in one piece. But first and foremost, it is the credo for a culture of gratitude.

Cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity. Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them. If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human's education is to know those duties and how to perform them.

The Thanksgiving Address reminds us that duties and gifts are two sides of the same coin. Eagles were given the gift of far sight, so it is their duty to watch over us. Rain fulfills its duty as it falls, because it was given the gift of sustaining life. What is the duty of humans? If gifts and responsibilities are one, then asking "What is our responsibility?" is the same as asking "What is our gift?" It is said that only humans have the capacity for gratitude. This is among our gifts.

It's such a simple thing, but we all know the power of gratitude to incite a cycle of reciprocity. If my girls run out the door with lunch in hand without a "Thanks, Mama!" I confess I get to feeling a tad miserly with my time and energy. But when I get a hug of appreciation, I want to stay up late to bake cookies for tomorrow's lunch bag. We know that appreciation begets abundance. Why should it not be so for Mother Earth, who packs us a lunch every single day?

Living as a neighbor to the Haudenosaunee, I have heard the Thanksgiving Address in many forms, spoken by many different voices, and I raise my heart to it like raising my face to the rain. But I am not a Haudenosaunee citizen or scholar—just a respectful neighbor and a listener. Because I feared overstepping my

boundaries in sharing what I have been told, I asked permission to write about it and how it has influenced my own thinking. Over and over, I was told that these words are a gift of the Haudenosaunee to the world. When I asked Onondaga Faithkeeper Oren Lyons about it, he gave his signature slightly bemused smile and said, “Of course you should write about it. It’s supposed to be shared, otherwise how can it work? We’ve been waiting five hundred years for people to listen. If they’d understood the Thanksgiving then, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

The Haudenosaunee have published the Address widely and it has now been translated into over forty languages and is heard all around the world. Why not here in this land? I’m trying to imagine how it would be if schools transformed their mornings to include something like the Thanksgiving Address. I mean no disrespect for the whitehaired veterans in my town, who stand with hand on heart as the flag goes by, whose eyes fill with tears as they recite the Pledge in raspy voices. I love my country too, and its hopes for freedom and justice. But the boundaries of what I honor are bigger than the republic. Let us pledge reciprocity with the living world. The Thanksgiving Address describes our mutual allegiance as human delegates to the democracy of species. If what we want for our people is patriotism, then let us inspire true love of country by invoking the land herself. If we want to raise good leaders, let us remind our children of the eagle and the maple. If we want to grow good citizens, then let us teach reciprocity. If what we aspire to is justice for all, then let it be justice for all of Creation.

We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. Of all the things we have named, it is not our intention to leave anything out. If something was forgotten, we leave it to each

*individual to send such greetings and thanks in their own way.
And now our minds are one.*

Every day, with these words, the people give thanks to the land. In the silence that falls at the end of those words I listen, longing for the day when we can hear the land give thanks for the people in return.