

Gratitude as Ceremony: A Practical Guide to Decolonization

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Abstract: Throughout 2016 and 2017 more than 300 Indigenous nations from around the globe united on the plains of North Dakota, where Standing Rock affinity camps provided space for native prophecy and ceremony to play out in ways meaningful to our modern times. Standing Rock protection actions made clear to all what we've known for centuries: Indigenous peoples' relationship to the natural world provides a powerful antidote to the prevailing madness that insists nature and people are expendable as long as money is being made. Within our own Rotinonhsyón:ni (Iroquois) nations the act of gratitude is at the heart of our key ceremony that connects us to our Earth as it dissipates this violent culture.

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Ceremony at the Heart of a Modern Indigenous Movement

Throughout 2016 and 2017 more than 300 Indigenous nations from around the globe united on the plains of North Dakota, where Standing Rock affinity camps provided space for native prophecy and ceremony to play out in ways meaningful to our modern times. Standing Rock protection actions made clear to all what we've known for centuries: Indigenous peoples' relationship to the natural world provides a powerful antidote to the prevailing madness that insists nature and people are expendable as long as money is being made. Within our own Rotinonhsyón:ni (Iroquois) nations the act of gratitude is at the heart of our key ceremony that connects us to our Earth as it dissipates this violent culture.

Tewatateken Tawateno'senha. Hello Relatives. We are part of a confederacy of Six Nations – Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Cayuga, Seneca and Tuscarora and our combined name, Rotinonhsyón:ni means “People of the Longhouse”. We have been inspired to witness the power of the Standing Rock water protection movements ripple out across our world. Each nation gathered at Standing Rock honored their reciprocal Earth connections in unique ways. The people of the Great Sioux Nations gifted us their vision that when a Black Snake slithering underground threatens land and water, the people must rise together to defeat it. The Incan prophecy of the Eagle and Condor assured us that people of the world will reawaken when communities from the Earth's farthest corners unite. The Anishinaabe shared their ancient reminder that when technology dominates nature we are invited to walk an alternative path that is less violent, and more giving of life.

“That (Standing Rock camps) was our moment where we said ‘We *are* alive. We are not half living and existing any longer,” says Ojibwe economist and environmental activist Winona LaDuke. “We are not people who are semi-conscious victims of someone else’s agenda. We are people who can rise and summon up everything that is in us and become people our Ancestors are proud of. And we all understand very clearly that we are protecting all our relatives – whether they have wings or fins or roots or paws.” (W. LaDuke, personal communication, March 31, 2017)

“We’ve always kept our connection to the Earth and we live by a spiritual law, not by a man-made law,” says Grandmother Theresa Black Owl, Singungu Rosebud, a canupa (pipe) carrier who spent months at Standing Rock encampments. “And whenever we feel something – and our feelings are always connected with this Earth – that is what we go with.” (T. Black Owl, personal communication, March 29, 2017)

Rotinonhsyón:ni/Iroquois Ceremony Builds Reciprocity

Indigenous descriptions of Earth connectedness may sound like a good idea – but the actual practice of connecting could prove elusive to those not raised in a culture that holds such relationships valuable. As members of Rotinonhsyón:ni League of Nations, we’ve been gifted a powerful ceremonial address called the Ohenton Karihwatchkwen – or the words that come before all others. This ceremony, given to us by Creator, becomes a map for us to become and remain profoundly connected to all that surrounds us and we offer these words every time we gather. The recitation can take hours while we acknowledge deep gratitude for our relatives –

human and non-human – one by one. Gratitude is all we as Rotinonhsyón:ni are required by Creator to offer because it leads us naturally to actions necessary for us to survive and thrive.

Reciting the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen is different from a Biblical prayer or blessing in which human stewardship or management is often assumed over nature. After saying to the Earth, people, water, fish, grasses, medicines, roots, bugs, fruits, foods, trees, birds, Brother Sun, Grandmother Moon, winds, stars, thunders, sacred beings and Creator we utter the words “And now our minds are one.” When we reach out to our relatives in this way we create accountability by acknowledging that we honor each of them for their essential value. We establish reciprocity with other beings and in that sense we acknowledge and accept our own vulnerability. We depend on each other for our physical and spiritual survival.

“It’s the most important vibration we have,” says 23-year-old Tehahswathetha, a Mohawk immersion school graduate from Six Nations territory who studied the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen every day while he learned his original Mohawk language. “It reminds us of what we have and who we are. It’s pretty beautiful to have this practice where we don’t have to talk or think about money. When we talk about the bugs we thank them for doing their job; some give us honey, some dig holes in the earth and allow it to breathe better.” (Tehahswathetha, May 23, 2017) An excerpt from this ceremony demonstrates the enchantment and interconnectedness Tehaswathetha describes:

Excerpt from Ohenton Karihwaterhkwe Expressing Gratitude for the Insects - Mohawk

Ne káti né:’e ó:ni tayethinonhweratónhseke nè:ne otsi’nonwa’shón:’a.
Ne káti né:’e enskáhne teyonaterihwayenawa’kónhake ne kèn:tho tsi yonhwentsyà:te ne

nenwá:ton akwé:kon skén:nen enwahtén:ti. Nya'té:kon nahò:ten
wahshakoterihontónnyon ne Shonkwaya'tíson. Ne káti né:'e konwatatenón:tons nè:ne
niya'tekaryò:take táhnon ne enskáhne teyotirihwayenawá:kon. Ne káti akwé:kon
tenyethinón:weron ne otsi'nonwa'shón:'a tsi wató:ken nen'né:'e tsi yonatkahwenhátýe
nè:ne skén:nen enwahtén:ti tsi yonhwentsyá:te. Ne káti akwé:kon tenyethinón:weron ne
otsi'nonwa'shón:'a. E'tho káti nenyotónhake ne onkwa'nikòn:ra.

Excerpt from Ohenton Karihwatehkwe Expressing Gratitude for the Insects - English

So then, we also should give greetings, love and respect to all the creatures, the insect kind. So then, they become as one working together so that all is working in harmony. Our Creator gave them a variety of responsibilities. They are ones who become part of the food chain and so is a part of the great web of life. So to all the creatures, we give thanks, because they are faithful in continuing to give, so that all other life will continue on earth.

So to all the creatures we give them thanks. And now our minds are one.

Tehahswathetha says when we recite the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen, we are becoming human beings who are careful with and responsible to their world, while also engaging an important research methodology. If we are in daily practice of offering gratitude for bugs and bees and realize we have not heard them buzzing around us lately, that could be an early warning that they are in peril. When we have offered consistent appreciation for the waters and then hear that a corporation wants to force an oil pipe under the drinking source for 18 million of our human relatives, we don't need to overthink whether we will respond to a call to stand with them in protection.

“As soon as you give thanks to something it gives thanks back. That energy returns to you,” says Tehahswathetha. “It is a cultural way given to us at the very beginning of time. The Ohenton Karihwatehkwen is the most sacred speech we have.”

Grandmother Theresa Black Owl adds that deep connection to the Earth is not a uniquely Indigenous calling but she believes non-native people have long lost their understanding of how to be in relationship with the natural world. And, she says, they suffer for it. “I think you just have to be putting away all the education, all the stuff that we have been taught to think,” Black Owl says. “And if you can get rid of all of that and just become one with your mind and your heart – then you can reconnect with the Earth.”

Trauma educator and journalist Myron Dewey (Paiute/Shoshone) agrees, and in his Facebook live feeds from Standing Rock he encouraged compassion for the Dakota Access Pipeline construction workers, the policing forces and others that operated at the behest of the pipeline company.

“So let’s say a blessing for these guys that got no spirit,” said Dewey. “No connection to the Earth and they are allowing this to happen. We have heard their discussions when there was ceremony over up on that hill and they were making gestures and comments towards the women as they were getting off the boat. So these guys have no teachings. You know, their only one teaching is to do what they are told and get paid for it.” (M. Dewey, personal communication, November 19, 2016)

Forces of Disconnection

Over recent centuries dominant cultures have done an excellent job of disconnecting individuals from each other and from Mother Earth. René Descartes, regarded as the father of modern philosophy, laid the groundwork for that separation in the 1600s by developing systems of

thought that cut individuals off from their own bodies. Linguistics and philosophy professors George Lakoff and Mark Johnson summarize Descartes' philosophy in this way: "First, being able to think constitutes our essence; second, that the mind is disembodied; and third, therefore, the essence of human beings, that which makes us human, has nothing to do with our bodies" (Lakoff, Johnson 1999, 400). Descartes is best known for his infamous quote "I think, hence I am," more often quoted as "I think, therefore I am," which disregarded the human body entirely and for centuries (Descartes, 1637, Part IV, paragraph 1).

This mindset dominates tyrannically in our modern context – as individuals obsessively shape and sculpt, heat and cool, medicate and paint, starve and stuff their bodies while placing them day and night in front of blinking screens. This way of "being" is the antithesis of Indigenous philosophy and practice. Indigenous people believe our bodies emerged from the natural world and combined with the Creator's energy. So when we deny our bodies, we have lost our way to be in relationship with or vulnerable to others. If we are taught to hate our bodies, how are we to understand that a threat to the Earth and water is a threat our very lives?

In David Abram's 1996 book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, the author explores the devastating ripple effect of Western philosophy's disdain for the body on the animate world. "To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyle to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence," Abrams notes. "We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human."

Sadly, continues Abrams, the result is a world out of balance,

“...with thousands of acres of nonregenerating forest disappearing every hour, and hundreds of our fellow species becoming extinct each month as a result of our civilization’s excesses, we can hardly be surprised by the amount of epidemic illness in our culture, from increasingly severe immune dysfunctions and cancers, to widespread psychological distress, depression, ever more frequent suicides, to the accelerating number of household killings and mass murders committed for no apparent reason by otherwise coherent individuals.” (Abram 1996, 22)

Dominant cultures attempt relentlessly to control or deny our connections to each other and the

Earth and for centuries native people have posed a dire threat to corporate imperialists.

Colonizing forces called our very identity illegal and dragged the living bodies of our Indigenous children from their homes, forcing them into residential schools. This walled our children off from the gratitude and wisdom found in places, language, ceremony and ritual. Despite these genocidal actions we are still alive because our worldview prevails through simple acts of opening ourselves to the natural world.

Indigenous teachings tell us that our vast webs of relationships bring us power – and we that must attend to those relationships. We don’t need massive cash flows to feel abundant. We don’t need complicated and violent strategies to become secure. Ceremony interrupts the cult of the disconnected individual as it reminds us that capitalism and the violence that results is not natural law – it is an imposed and extractive human system. When the Aztecs dance together they remind themselves of when, how and why to plant their corn. Think for a moment how differently corporate practices would play out if Energy Transfer Partners executives opened their meetings by reminding themselves of when, how, and why to plant the food that gives them another sort of energy.

Rotinonhsyón:ni Reckoning

Our ancient practice of thanksgiving saved us time and again from the devastation of a world out of balance time and again. Centuries ago, before we were the Rotinonhsyón:ni confederacy, we as separate nations were destructive perpetrators – waging constant war upon each other. We were fearful and greedy, hoarding resources and extracting life and energy. We were violent marauders who relished torture and even cannibalism. We had lost our knowledge of how to sustain ourselves in a good way. In the midst of the very darkest days, it is said that our Peacemaker arrived in a stone canoe to remind us of our original instructions: to practice gratitude found in the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen. Over time we were able to achieve what seemed impossible; we re-engaged simple acts of thanks, which led to healed relationships. Eventually we united as the people known as Rotinonhsyón:ni/Iroquois – a confederacy that remains the oldest participatory democracy on Earth.

Meaning in Modern Times

Today, the good mind that results from practicing the Ohenton Karihwaterhkwen manifests in many ways. We (the authors) are Kanyen'keha:ka or Mohawk people and our ancestors are known for fiercely guarding the eastern door of our confederacy at what is now known as central New York State. Our protectiveness extends into the present as Mohawk communities resist against land grabs, resource wars and environmental violence through actions similar to Standing Rock. When we defend land and water, we honor our obligation to protect our relatives who reside there.

In the 1990 Oka Crisis, Mohawk people in our territories of Kanehsatake and Kahnawake near Montreal clashed with more than six thousand provincial police and Canadian army troops backed by tanks and air support. The 78-day armed standoff began over developers building on land stolen from the Mohawk people in the 17th century. It ended when the Canadian government reimbursed developers for \$5.3 million dollars – though that land still has not been returned to the Mohawk people. (sharanmalhi, 2013)

In February 2006, in our (the authors') home territory of Six Nations of the Grand River, ten women including clan mothers and their grandchildren sparked a community-wide move to occupy Rotinonhsyón:ni land called Kanahstaton that was illegally sold to U.S.-based real estate developers. Violent clashes between Rotinonhsyón:ni land defenders, non-native neighbors and Ontario Provincial Police went on for months. The aftermath of the Kanahstaton occupation echoed that of Oka; the government reimbursed the developer and our land remains in legal limbo.

Similar protective actions continue to unfold as of this writing in 2017. Kanesatake Mohawk Grand Chief Serge Simon recently warned of Rotinonhsyón:ni unrest through a campaign of coordinated civil disobedience if tar sands pipelines continue to move forward across Canada. “We are willing to do whatever it takes, and that means to get arrested in acts of disobedience,” said Simon in a 2016 interview in the Montreal Gazette. “For now, we’re going to do everything we can through the official channels. But the government shouldn’t test our resolve.” (C. Curtis, 1996)

And Now Our Minds Are One

The Ohenton Karihwatehkwen has made us fierce defenders of our lands as well as a group of people who deeply appreciate our lives. This framework of being held accountable to the quality of all of our relationships at their most intimate and manageable levels leads us to reclaim our language, our food and ways of being organized within our world. One powerful project we undertook when we returned from the spontaneous community at Standing Rock was to create a composting toilet system at our homestead. This may sound banal to the point of being comical – but realize that we are interrupting a system designed to detach us from the responsibility of our bodies' most basic waste. And that waste poses a massive threat to all of our fragile water systems. In two years the forest will be grateful for the humus fertilizer when we return it to the Earth.

The knowledge of how to survive and thrive was given to all of us as a memory to hold and use forever. We believe that this was originally authored by this one vast intelligent energy. So we are all tied together in this way that gives us universal strength. Defending our water and reintroducing ways of sustaining our world is no cost or sacrifice to us because all that is required to do that is to give honor, respect and greetings each and every day for what is provided.

Lakota/Dakota pediatrician and water protector Dr. Sara Juanita Jumping Eagle reflected recently on the importance of Indigenous worldview revealed and re-ignited at the Standing Rock protection actions:

Jumping Eagle: “When they’ve figured out that they’ve contaminated everything – we will still be here. We will still be trying to heal the land. We will still be raising our families.”

Interviewer: “And they’ll be coming to you for answers --”

Jumping Eagle: (laughs) “--Yeah.” (S. Jumping Eagle, personal communication, September 19, 2017)

This is how we are bundled and wrapped together in Creation. We invite and challenge all – native and non-native – to step into these powerful ways of being. What we have been describing here is not elusive Native spirituality. This is the most practical guide to how we will move together with great meaning and power into our shared future.

E’tho káti nenyohónhake ne onkwa’nikòn:ra.

And now our minds are one.

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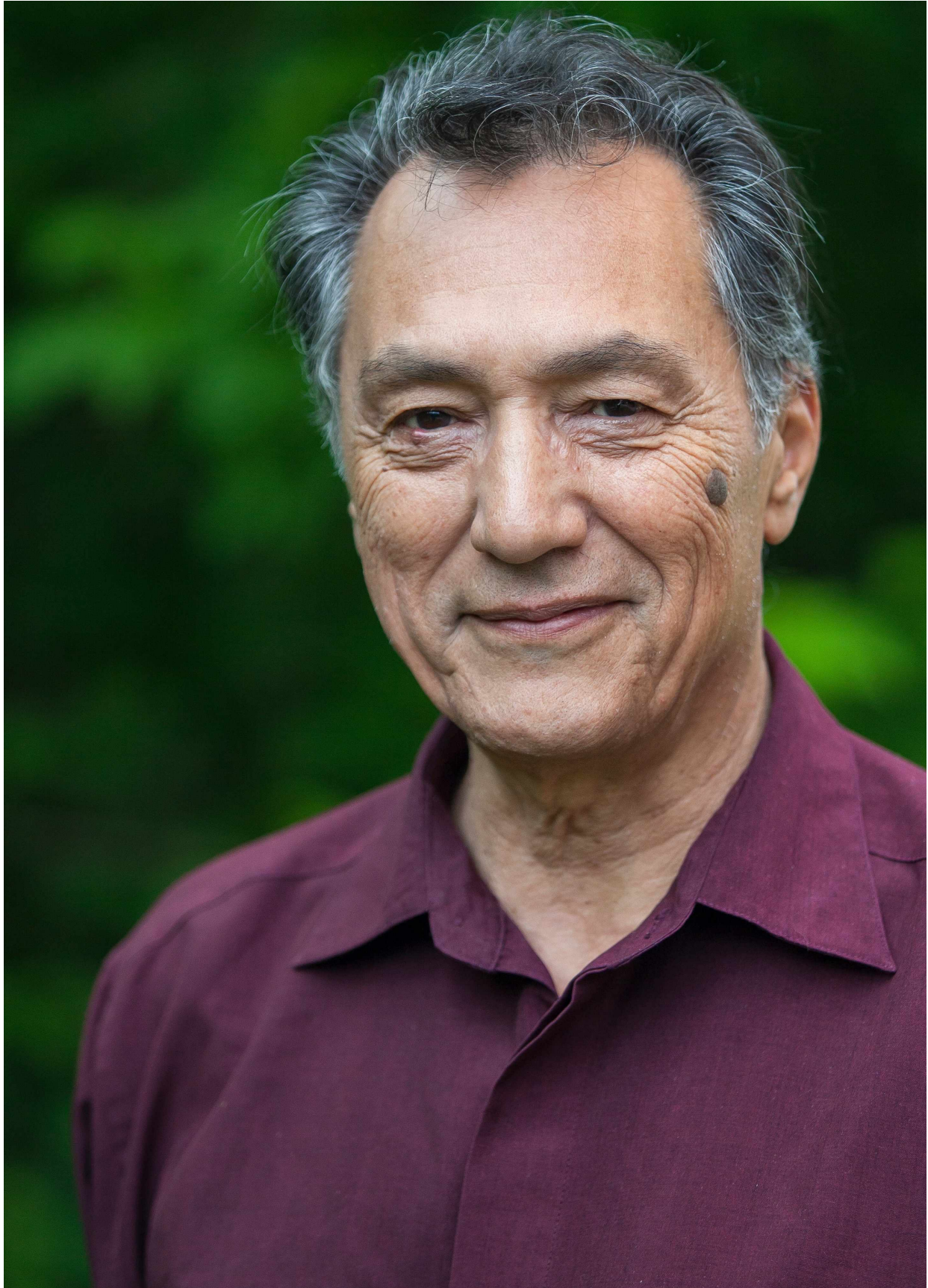
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