

Gratitude¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
May 20, 2018
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

We begin our service with a call and response recitation drawn from the Haudenosaunee people. Sometimes known as the Iroquois Confederacy, they have given this recitation to the wider world as a gift. At the beginning of any meeting or gathering, the Haudenosaunee begin by giving thanks to all beings of the world. We will share its beginning now, and come back to it throughout our worship service today.

The People

Today we have gathered and see 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, we bring our minds, hearts and bodies together as one.

Response 1: We give greetings and thanks to each other as People. Now our minds are one.

The Earth Mother

We are all thankful to our Mother, the Earth, for she gives us all that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she continues to care for us as she has from the beginning of time.

Response 2: To our Earth Mother, we send greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

The Waters

We give thanks to all the Waters of the world for quenching our thirst and providing us with strength. Water is life. We know its power in many forms—waterfalls and rain, mists and streams, rivers and oceans.

Response 3: To the spirit of Water, we send greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

OPENING WORDS

The German mystic, Meister Eckart said, “If the only prayer you say in your life is Thank You, that is enough.” We come together for a time of conscious reflection on all that we love, and open our hearts to the practice of gratitude.

PRAYER FOR OUR JOYS AND SORROWS

We gather together all of the joys and sorrows we hold in our hearts.

We gather them together in thanks for the gift of life.

Let us continue the words of thanks of the Haudenosaunee.

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The Fish

We turn our minds to all 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 we can still find pure water.

Response 4: We turn now to the Fish and send greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

The Plants

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

Response 5: To the Plant life, we give greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

The Food Plants

With one mind, we turn to honor and thank all the Food Plants we harvest from the garden. Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans and berries have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them too.

Response 6: To all the Plant Foods, we send greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

The Medicine Herbs

Now we turn to all the Medicine Herbs of the world. From the beginning, they were instructed to take away sickness and elevate human consciousness. They are always waiting and ready to heal us. We are happy there are still among us those special few who remember how to use these plants for healing.

Response 7: We send greetings and thanks to the Medicines and to the keepers of the Medicines. Now our minds are one.

The Animals

We gather our minds together to send greetings and thanks to all the Animal life in the world. They have many things to teach us as people. We see them near our homes and in the deep forests. We are glad they are still here and we hope that it will always be so.

Response 8: To the Animals, greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

The Trees

We now turn our thoughts to the Trees. The Earth has many families of Trees who have their own instructions and uses. Some provide us with shelter and shade, others with fruit, beauty, and other useful things. Many peoples of the world use a Tree as a symbol of peace and strength.

Response 9: We greet and thank the Tree life. Now our minds are one.

The Birds

We put our minds together as one and thank all the Birds who move and fly about over our heads. The Creator gave them beautiful songs. Each day they remind us to enjoy and appreciate life. The Eagle was chosen to be their leader.

Response 10: To all the Birds—from the smallest to the largest—we send our joyful greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

READING Messenger by Mary Oliver²

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird —
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.

The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

ANTHEM

One Voice by Ruth Moody

SERMON

Most of the time, we think of gratitude as applying to the happy occasions in our lives. Someone gives us a gift, and we say thank you. Or we ponder the blessings of home or family, and a feeling of gratefulness wells up in our hearts. But gratitude is a much wider and deeper resource, beyond just a feeling in response to happy occasions.

Naomi Shihab Nye is a Palestinian-American poet and author. I am happy to be sharing a story she tells, since my heart has been holding Palestinian people this week. Her story is about being delayed at the airport—not for anything in particular, just a normal delay. An announcement over the intercom asked if there were any speakers of Arabic near her gate. She paused, but then went to see what was needed. She wrote,

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. “Help,” said the Flight Service Person. “Talk to her. . . We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.” I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly. . . The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day.

² This is the first poem in Mary Oliver's collection *Thirst*.

Naomi offered to call her son for her, and then called all her other sons just for fun. They called Naomi's dad, who spoke with the woman in Arabic, discovering about ten shared friends. By this time the woman was laughing and telling stories of her life and offering homemade cookies to all the women at the gate.

Naomi goes on to say,

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament...— we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. ...And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. ...This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.³

The practice of gratitude does not mean that we must feel happy about every delay, every frustration, or everything that goes wrong. But gratitude means being open to the possibilities for luminosity within each moment. Naomi could merely have stayed irritated at facing a four hour delay of her flight. I know I have had those moments. She could have just minded her own business, and read a book. That's what I usually do at the airport. But she left a small opening in her heart, and a stranger became a friend, and a weary wait became a sacred encounter.

We cannot predict whether something that at first seems troublesome will turn out well or badly. Gratitude opens a doorway into life's remarkable possibilities. Merely by being alive, we are surrounded with beauty and abundance. And yet, how easy it is to take it for granted, to notice instead what is missing, or what we wish we could have, or what others have. Gratitude helps us to shape where we focus our attention.

I have been thinking about gratitude as my days at Allen Avenue are drawing to a close. The work of ministry can be challenging, and I have known the full gamut of feelings in my 13 years in this congregation. There have been ups and downs, certainly, but what remains are the moments of luminosity that I have witnessed and experienced in this community. I am grateful for the loving kindness that people in this congregation have shown to me, and to each other, and to visitors who enter our doorways. I am grateful for the famous hugs of Jack Berman, may his name be remembered among us. I am grateful for each person who took the time to speak to a visitor, helped to turn a stranger into a friend, or reached out to someone during a rough time, making real our hope to transform lives through the power of love.

I am grateful for the boldness of everyone who stood up for justice—I remember how many of you went door-to-door to campaign on behalf of human rights for GLBT folks in 2005, and for same-sex marriage in 2009 and 2012. Until it was done! I am grateful for everyone who participated in the creation and grand opening of the Portland Freedom Trail in 2006. Our Coming of Age group is going to visit that trail today, with one of the people who helped it come into being.

I am grateful for every time our social action banner showed up with our people to rallies, vigils, and marches on the streets of Portland and Augusta, which happened several times each year. I am grateful for the quiet dedication of those who taught English to asylum seekers, or served each month in the soup kitchen, or at Preble Street. I am grateful for those who welcomed prisoners, gave them a place to live, or a caring friend.

³ Naomi Shihab Nye short story from Honeybee (Greenwillow Books, 2008), published at http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/nye_gate.htm,

I am grateful for the generosity that people showed by giving donations to the Minister's Discretionary Fund, so that I could help out those who were in financial trouble—rent, auto payments, electricity, heat—I was privileged to be a conduit of that generosity. I am grateful for people who shared their wisdom during challenging church situations, whom we could never thank out loud because of the confidentiality of those situations. I am grateful for the search committee members who first brought me to A2U2 and who showed me around Portland, and chose me to be your candidate.

I am grateful for the disarming questions of children and their amazing insights expressed during our Time for All Ages. I am grateful for holding your new babies, and witnessing the bright young adults who come back to visit on Christmas Eve or any other Sunday. I am grateful for people who opened their hearts and souls with me to share their spiritual journey during courses I led over the years. I am grateful for the folks who were silly, who made us all laugh, who told jokes, or painted faces, or took photos, or lifted our smiles. I am grateful for 13 years of beautiful and inspiring music. I am grateful for the people who didn't really feel a connection to me, but stayed around because they loved this congregation.

I am grateful for the stalwart volunteers who time and again held up the finances, or took care of the building, or taught the children, or made hard decisions with such good natures, and with respect for our democratic processes. I am especially grateful for the leaders who served as church presidents during my time here—I want to name these remarkable folks—Trudy McNulty, Cush Anthony, Barbara Freeman, Connie Cross, Clay Atkinson, and Angie Dierks. It was a joy to work with each one of them, to share the responsibility for the well-being of our congregation. I am also grateful to Diane Oberbeck, who is willing to serve during this coming year of transitions. Leadership can include some lonely moments, and sharing it with these presidents created a feeling of community and connection.

I don't really have an adequate way to thank countless individuals, all of you who trusted me with your stories, your pain, your worry, your hopes. It was a blessing to walk with you in that intimacy. Gratitude opens our hearts to the possibilities of luminosity in each moment. I experienced so many moments of luminosity with you during these years, and you taught me so much about gratitude.

Today we have been listening and responding to the Haudenosaunee Words of Thanks. The Haudenosaunee call them the “words that must be spoken before all else.” Any important meeting must begin with a recitation of these words. They bring people together with a reminder about what is most important. I think of them as also so appropriate as we come to the endings of things, and the ending of my time here at A2U2. It is good to be reminded of what is most important.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist by trade, and indigenous author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, writes: You can't listen to the [Words of Thanks] 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. ... 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.⁴

⁴ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 111.

Ecologist Joanna Macy, too, recognized the radical nature of gratitude.⁵ The work she created to help us turn from our Industrial Growth Society toward a Life Sustaining Society begins with the practice of gratitude. The Industrial Growth Society is dependent on increasing consumerism, and cultivates feelings of neediness and craving. By practicing gratitude, we begin to shape our thoughts and feelings toward the abundance of what the earth gives to us, and the amazing gift it is merely to be alive.

Gratitude is a resource in facing a life that is bigger than we are. Of course, there are many possible responses to the magnitude of life: we might feel anger or fear, confusion or despair, joy or excitement, and so on. It is natural to experience all of those feelings. But gratitude is more than a feeling. Gratitude is a choice to be open to our lives, to welcome all that comes with being alive.

In a time of turmoil and danger, gratitude can steady us and ground us. I think about the long devastation that the Haudenosaunee people have experienced from the European settlement of this land. They continued their practice of giving thanks through centuries of genocide and broken treaties and theft of their land. Perhaps it was this practice that helped them to survive.

Might it also help us to change our society, so that our world can survive? Gratitude for life can be a radical counterbalance to all the blatant and subliminal messages that cultivate our sense of dissatisfaction and desire. What would it mean, each day to meditate on the words of thanks instead. Kimmerer says when you hear them, you are reminded “that you already have everything you need.”

Of course, there are certainly injustices and inequalities in our world that mean that some people do not have what they need right now. There are people who are facing war and privation. There are people who are hungry and homeless. To be full of gratitude for life is not to discount those injustices. Rather, we come to a recognition that if life is a gift, it brings us the responsibility to care for our fellow beings who share this gift with us. As the words of our opening hymn expressed it, “for all life is a gift, which we are called to use, to build the common good and make our own days glad.”

The Words of Thanks look to the shared resources that the earth offers to us, sunlight and rain, plants and animals, medicines and birds. These are what truly matters to life. When we reflect on them with gratitude, we can say with Kimmerer, “We already have everything we need.”

What would it mean if each time I saw an ad on television for the latest car or clothes or gadget, I said to myself, “You already have everything you need.” What would it mean, if each time I saw a Facebook post about someone else's marvelous vacation, instead of feeling envious, I said to myself, “You already have everything you need.” What would it mean, if each morning, as I woke up, I meditated on these words, “You already have everything you need.”

I invite you to take a few moments to reflect on these words right now.

MEDITATION

⁵ Joanna Macy and Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, p. 91-93.

The Four Winds

Now we continue the Haudenosaunee words of thanks, and we give thanks to the powers known 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.

Response 11: With one mind, we send our greetings and thanks to the Four Winds. Now our minds are one.

The Thunderers

Now we turn to the west where our Grandfathers, the Thunder Beings, live. With lightening and thundering voices, they bring with them the water that renews life. We bring our minds together as one.

Response 12: We send greetings and thanks to our Grandfathers, the Thunderers. Now our minds are one.

The Sun

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.

Response 13: We send greetings and thanks to our Brother, the Sun. Now our minds are one.

Grandmother Moon

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, binds all of the female cycles, and 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.

Response 14: We send greetings and thanks to our Grandmother, the Moon. Now our minds are one.

The Stars

We give thanks to the Stars who are spread across the sky like jewelry. We see them in the 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.

Response 15: We send greetings and thanks to all the Stars. Now our minds are one.

The Enlightened Teachers

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.

Response 16: We send greetings and thanks to these caring Teachers. Now our minds are one.

HYMN The Oneness of Everything #1052

CLOSING

The Creator

In concluding the Haudenosaunee Words of Thanks, now we 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 this 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.

Response 17: Greetings and thanks to the Creator. Now our minds are one.

Closing Words

We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. We give thanks to the Haudenosaunee people for sharing these words of thanks with the world. May we remember each day to begin again in gratitude. Of all the things we have named, it was 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.

Response 18: Greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice, let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.