

Giving Thanks

Giving thanks for the blessings of life, health, food, shelter, family, friendship and so on is an ancient practice shared by cultures around the world. Whereas some cultures celebrate thanksgiving as an annual one-day event, others celebrate numerous occasions throughout the day and the month and the year to give thanks to God – who is often referred to in English as “the Creator” by many Aboriginal peoples. Traditional indigenous cultural practices typically include prayers of thanksgiving at sunrise to show *gratitude* for the gifts of the Creator that make life possible, such as the sun. Other ceremonies may honour and give thanks for the plant life, the water, the moon, and so on. Through the ceremonial practice of giving thanks, one remains *aware* and *appreciative* of the gifts and the people that make life meaningful, with the hope of never taking them for granted. Giving thanks for the various elements of the world should never be confused with “worshipping” those elements in the sense of idolatry. All prayers recognizing elements like the sun, moon, or plant life, for example, are a thanksgiving to the Creator for the gifts of these elements, and the Creator’s existence is recognized as existing within these elements.

Thanksgiving Address

In traditional Mohawk culture, the Thanksgiving Address is a prayer of *reconciliation* with the universe. It pays tribute to multiple forms of life such as plants and animals, the natural elements, the four directions, the four seasons, and everything that exists. Giving thanks is a way to acknowledge all the energy forces that work together to *sustain* life, including those that are seen and unseen and heard and unheard. Saying prayers of thanks in Aboriginal cultures is a practice to remind oneself of the interdependency of these energies, and the need to be *respectful* of these life forms.

Morning Prayer

Mohawk Elder Tom Porter describes a morning prayer, thanking the Creator for creating life and for sustaining and embracing us through the sun. He then describes how traditionally Mohawk people will continue to express gratitude throughout the day: for their family members, by greeting them each day; and after eating and drinking water; after feeling the breeze of the wind; after stepping on Mother Earth, and so on. Thanking the sun each morning pays respect to the energy force that provides warmth and makes our plants grow, which we need to survive. In respect for all these things, the traditional practice is to say, “Nya weh,” which means “thank you” in Mohawk. Showing gratitude creates positive relations with others and makes it easier to communicate. The traditional Mohawk mindset is focused on the spiritual, constantly paying respect to all these things.

Mohawk Creation Story

In the Mohawk Creation Story, a woman came from another planet, helped by birds to travel to Earth, but this planet was covered in water. A turtle appeared to this woman and she landed on its back as there was no other place for her to stand. The woman was the great, great, Grandmother of the Mohawk and she brought gifts of food with her. Walking in a *counterclockwise* direction on the turtle’s shell, she created the miracle of birth, turning the seeds of the fruits into humans and into corn. Singing songs from this other planet, the woman continued to dance in a counterclockwise motion, making a *sacred* circle, turning the turtle into earth and growing to form North America. The more she danced, the more the earth grew.

People of the Longhouse continue to dance in the counterclockwise direction as taught by this woman, their great, great, Grandmother. Sky Woman taught the Mohawk to dance this way although many other Aboriginal cultures dance in a clockwise direction. Longhouse people continue to dance in the sacred circle to keep the corn growing and to keep beans growing and to keep the culture alive as taught by Sky Woman.

Sky Woman had a daughter, and this daughter had two sons: Brother Sun (Daytime), who gives life, and Night time; but the Sky Woman's daughter died in childbirth. The Mohawk believe that in birth each of us is given three spirits, or *souls*: three sources of energy that make a person who he is, which come together as one. At death, these three parts of the spirit are unraveled with each returning to its place of origin. One returns to the sky while the other two return in the direction of the earth. So at death, Sky Woman's daughter was covered with earth, to make a *mound*, not buried below. Today you can visit sacred mounds in Mohawk territories in the USA.