

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address *Greetings to the Natural World*

The People

Today we have gathered and 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, we bring our minds together as one as 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. To our 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. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to the spirit of Water. Now our minds are one.

The Fish

We turn our minds to the 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. So, we turn now to the Fish and send our 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 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.

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. We gather all the Plant Foods together as one and send them a greeting of 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. 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. With one mind, 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 are honored by them when they give up their lives so we may use their bodies as food for our 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. 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 people of the world use 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 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. To all the Birds—from the smallest to the largest—we send our joyful greetings and thanks. Now our minds are one.

The Four Winds

We are all thankful to 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 us 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.

The Thunderers

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 are thankful that they keep those evil things made by Okwiseres underground. We bring our minds together as one to 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. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to our Brother, the Sun. Now our minds are one.

Grandmother Moon

We put our minds together to give thanks to our oldest Grandmother, the Moon, who lights the night-time sky. She is the leader of woman 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. With one mind, 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. With our minds gathered together as one, we send greetings and thanks to 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. With one mind, we send greetings and thanks to these caring teachers. Now our minds are one.

The Creator

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. Now our minds are one.

Closing Words

We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. 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. Now our minds are one.

[This translation of the Mohawk version of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address was developed, published in 1993, and provided, courtesy of: Six Nations Indian Museum and the Tracking Project All rights reserved. Thanksgiving Address: Greetings to the Natural World English version: John Stokes and Kanawahenton (David Benedict, Turtle Clan/Mohawk) Mohawk version: Rokwaho (Dan Thompson, Wolf Clan/Mohawk) Original inspiration: Tekaronianekon (Jake Swamp, Wolf Clan/Mohawk)]

Document Analysis

The Thanksgiving Address reproduced here is in English translation. All of the languages spoken by members of the Six Nations are part of the same language family, called the Iroquoian language group. The six languages are similar in some respects but quite different in others. For example, an Oneida speaker can understand the Mohawk language with some effort, and an Onondaga speaker can, with concentration, understand the Seneca language. The Cayuga language has much in common with both the Onondaga and Seneca languages, but it has other elements in common with the Tuscarora language. This version of the Thanksgiving Address is a short one in which some culturally specific details have been omitted in order to make it more accessible to non-Haudenosaunee readers.

The Thanksgiving Address can be properly recited in any of the six Haudenosaunee languages: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, or Tuscarora. Although it is traditionally recited orally at the opening and closing occasions of any gathering of Haudenosaunee people, it has been made available in abbreviated printed form for non-Haudenosaunee readers. While some recitations of the Thanksgiving Address can be quite brief, others can be rather lengthy. A recitation can take several minutes or several hours; the address is not read but memorized and spoken aloud. It is addressed to the people gathered together as well as to the sacred powers that are also profoundly present to the Haudenosaunee people. The Thanksgiving Address is deeply resonant for the people of the Six Nations because it expresses their reverence for the world in which they live. Recitation of the address contributes toward meeting their obligation to express their gratitude to all of the sacred powers that have sustained them as a people from ancient times up through the present day. It is understood that in the future the people must continue their struggle to remain in a proper and harmonious relationship with the sacred. The Thanksgiving Address reminds them of how they may do so.

The address is usually spoken aloud by a religious expert, called a Faithkeeper, who is knowledgeable about the particular order of this ritual statement. A Faithkeeper may incorporate some of his or her own words and expressions, but the form of the Thanksgiving Address must adhere to an invariable traditional structure. It is necessary, for example, to begin with thanking the sacred powers that exist on the earth. Next one must thank the sacred powers that exist in the sky. Last, one must thank

sacred powers that exist beyond the sky. The Thanksgiving Address may also be recited by individuals, and some Haudenosaunee people recite it aloud every morning as they greet the day. When a Faithkeeper is addressing the people, at the end of each portion of the address he says, "Now our minds are one." The people respond, "Henh," which is an expression of support and assent meaning "It is true."

The structure of the Thanksgiving Address moves from the terrestrial to the celestial, from below to above. When "The Enlightened Teachers" are thanked for periodically coming to earth and reminding human beings how to live harmonious and balanced lives, this expression of gratitude occurs after the sun, moon, and stars are thanked. This is because when many Haudenosaunee think of Enlightened Teachers, they think of Handsome Lake (Ganeodiyo), the great Haudenosaunee visionary and religious leader, as a primary example. Handsome Lake died in 1815, and he is now considered to be residing in heaven. Although "heaven" is not an ancient Haudenosaunee concept, it was introduced into Haudenosaunee religious life by Handsome Lake's religious reforms at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Notably, at the end of the Thanksgiving Address, apologies are made for any potential omissions of gratitude, and each person is then asked to convey the appropriate thanks in his or her own way. This part of the address acknowledges the importance of individual responsibility in the Haudenosaunee community. Every person must act to ensure that the community continues to be in proper relation to all beings.

In the version of the address reproduced here, the concepts are simple and clear. Reference is made to the "cycles of life," emphasizing the Native American connectedness with the natural world. To survive in the natural world, it is necessary to maintain "balance and harmony." To achieve this balance and harmony, it is necessary to "bring our minds together as one." The address then goes on to acknowledge the power of natural phenomena. The earth is seen as the people's "Mother." The waters not only display great power but also quench thirst. Fish are thanked not only as a source of food but also for their role in keeping the waters clean. Food plants, too, are a source of strength, and medicinal herbs take away sickness. Trees provide shelter, shade, and fruit, and the tree is a symbol of peace and power. Birds and birdsong serve primarily an aesthetic purpose, reminding people of the beauty of the earth. The Four Winds refresh and purify the air, and the "Thunderers," conceived as grandfathers,

announce the arrival of purifying and refreshing rain. The sun, regarded as a brother, brings the fires of life, and “Grandmother Moon” serves as the leader of women and governs the tides, marks the passage of time, and watches over the birth of children. The stars not only light the sky but also serve as guides for night travelers. Enlightened Teachers “remind us of the way we were instructed to live as people.” Finally, thanks are given to the Creator, the “Great Spirit,” who provides the gifts of creation.

Essential Themes

Despite the Great Law, the formation of the confederacy, and the pervasiveness of the Thanksgiving Address, peace did not always reign among the Haudenosaunee. In the late 1770s part of Revolutionary War military strategy was to divide the Haudenosaunee into “pro-English” and “pro-Yankee” nations and to destroy most Haudenosaunee villages. The so-called Sullivan-Clinton campaign of 1779, under the leadership of Major Generals John Sullivan and James Clinton, was a full-scale assault on the Haudenosaunee, and the people of the confederacy faced starvation and death in great numbers. On November 11, 1794, the Six Nations and the United States signed the Canandaigua Treaty, which was meant to create lasting peace and friendship between the two peoples. Nevertheless, from about 1780 until the 1840s, the U.S. government dispossessed the Haudenosaunee of most of their land through a combination of both legal and illegal treaties and purchases. Some Haudenosaunee people moved to the Six Nations Reserve in Canada, though most remain on their traditional—although dramatically reduced—lands in upstate New York.

Not all Haudenosaunee people still speak their traditional languages. Since the Thanksgiving Address is a tradition in every Haudenosaunee language, the address is especially highly valued as a pedagogical tool by those who are dedicated to linguistic revitalization, and it is often one of the first things to be taught in Haudenosaunee language revitalization classes. It is broadcast on

some Native American radio stations daily; for instance, CKRZ-FM, a Six Nations community radio station in Ohsweken, Ontario, broadcasts a Cayuga language version of the Thanksgiving Address at six o'clock every morning. In some Haudenosaunee schools, it is recited over the public address system at the beginning of the school day. The Thanksgiving Address serves as the foundation of the entire curriculum at the Akwesasne Freedom School, a Mohawk Nation grammar school in Roosevelttown, New York.

Recently, there was a controversy regarding the broadcast of the Thanksgiving Address at the Salmon River Central School in Fort Covington, New York. Two-thirds of the students at the Salmon River Central School are Mohawk, and from 2002 to 2005 the address was recited twice a week over the school's public address system as well as at pep rallies and at lacrosse games. A non-Mohawk parent complained to the school district's superintendent on the ground that the Thanksgiving Address resembled a prayer and therefore might violate the First Amendment, which provides for the separation of church and state. The public address daily recitations were stopped in 2005, but the school auditorium was made available on Monday mornings and Friday afternoons for any students to gather voluntarily to recite the Thanksgiving Address. In response, a group of Mohawk parents filed a suit claiming that their rights under the Fourteenth Amendment, which provide for equal protection under the law, were violated. In 2007 a federal judge ruled that the Mohawk families' rights were not violated by the suspension of the daily recitation, because the school provided accommodations for voluntary recitation of the Thanksgiving Address. The judge pointedly refused to rule on whether the daily public recitation violated the First Amendment, noting that the courts are not qualified to determine what does or does not constitute prayer.

—Lisa J.M. Poirier, PhD

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