

Restoring *the* Kinship Worldview

Indigenous Voices Introduce 28 Precepts
for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth



Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows)
AND Darcia Narvaez, PhD

Centrality of Gratitude

Audrey Shenandoah (Onondaga; 1926–2012)

I would first give thanks for another day of life here on this earth. It is another day extended that we may enjoy the compassionate goodness of our Creator. Among my people we could not come together in this way—a conference—without first offering words of acknowledgment, respect, and thanksgiving for our fellow human beings. Now our words we direct to our Mother Earth, who supports all life. We look to the shortest grasses, close to the bosom of our Mother Earth, as we put our minds together as one mind. We include all the plant life, the woodlands, all the waters of Earth, the fishes, the animal life, the bird life, and the four Winds. As one mind, our acknowledgement, respect, and thanksgiving move upward to the Sky World: the Grandmother Moon, who has a direct relationship to the females of the species of all living things; the sun and the stars; and our Spiritual Beings of the Sky World. They will carry on the original Instructions in this great Cycle of Life. With one mind we address our acknowledgment, respect, and gratefulness to all the sacred Cycle of Life. We, as humans, must remember to be humble and acknowledge the gifts we use so freely in our lives.

Source

Audrey Shenandoah. Keynote address delivered at the Global Forum on Environment and Development for Survival, Moscow, Soviet Union, January 1990. Quoted in Steve Wall and Harvey Arden, eds. *Wisdomkeepers: Meeting with Native American Spiritual Elders*, 24. New York: Atria. 1990.

Contextualized Biosketch

Audrey Shenandoah was a member of the Eel Clan of the Onondaga Nation, and she was borrowed by the Deer Clan as a clan mother. Among the Haudenosaunee (i.e., the Iroquois Confederacy, which includes the Onondaga), clan mothers select chiefs. She was known as a peacemaker who oversaw the use of natural resources for her tribe, mediated the return of Iroquois artifacts, and confronted the United Nations about problems plaguing Haudenosaunee communities. An internationally known writer, teacher, and advisor to the United Nations, she was interviewed in the film *Hidden Medicine and Sacred Earth: Makoce Wakan*.

Indigenous Worldview Precept Dialogue

Four Arrows: As Shenandoah so beautifully expresses, Indigenous cultures are continually expressing gratitude for the many gifts of life. Note how in her words gifts come from outside ourselves. Plant life, water, winds, and much more are the givers. It is not just the internal thankfulness for some benefit one experiences. Gratitude expresses deep interconnectedness as a responsibility of authentic caring and reciprocity. In Lakota, we say *wopila tanka* to express our appreciation for the many beautiful blessings all around us. These include that which may cause suffering and challenge us to do better. People sometimes look at me strangely when I say that I interpreted my non-Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis as a reminder of the importance of rebalancing my life. Truly seeing it as a gift was why I did not do chemotherapy to attack it. That I have lasted years beyond survival statistics without ever losing vitality may be related, if not causal. Research on gratitude reveals that people who regularly feel and express gratitude authentically have better health, less depression, and fewer visits to physicians.¹

Under the Indigenous worldview, the idea of continual flowing balance is a paramount requirement for living according to the laws

of nature. The well-known Lakota phrase *mitakuye oyasin* expresses gratitude for the kinds of benefits described in our opening quotes. So does the Cherokee word *otsaliheliga*, which more directly translates as "we are grateful." Both recognize that being grateful and seeing the beauty all around is vital. You know how I often end my presentations by playing the Cherokee lullaby that Carlos Nakai told me the mothers sang to their children on the Trail of Tears.² Despite the horror of what was happening all around them, the lullaby reminded the children of the shapes of the clouds, the colors of the fish and flowers, the dancing of the prairie grasses, the music of the birds. As mentioned previously, one of the most famous of the gratitude prayers for the natural world is the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address. I love it when different members of the community all choose something in the natural world to identify, express gratitude and the reason for it, and then all members say, "Now our minds are one."³

Darcia: I love this too. Ceremonies transcend the boundaries of the individual and resonate beyond the human realm. They magnify life. Starting every gathering with a ceremony acknowledging relationship and expressing gratitude toward the other-than-human sets the mind in the right space—for humility instead of arrogance, communal imagination instead of self-oriented imagination, emotional presence instead of mindlessness. Ceremony focuses attention where it becomes intention. When you stand together and profess a thing before your community, it holds you accountable. These acts of reverence are powerfully pragmatic. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the giveaway ceremony:

The berries are always present at our ceremonies. They join us in a wooden bowl. One beige bowl and one big spoon, which are passed around the circle, so that each person can taste the sweetness, remember the gifts, and say thank you. They carry the lesson, passed to us by our ancestors, that the generosity of the land comes to us as one bowl, one spoon, we are all fed from the same bowl that Mother Earth has filled for us. It's not just about the berries, but also about

the bowl. The gifts of the earth are to be shared, but gifts are not limitless. The generosity of the earth is not an invitation to take it all. Every bowl has a bottom. When it's empty, it's empty. And there is but one spoon, the same size for everyone.⁴

Regular ceremonies like this can keep one in an orientation of gratitude most of the time. It can become a habit. Everywhere you go there is a relation right there, whether the sun, the ant, the wind, the soil. You learn to recognize, respect, and cherish every diverse life and give thanks for its presence.

I love the following list, Cooper's⁵ summary of Bopp, Lane, Brown, and Bopp's⁶ assembly of Indigenous ethics. Gratitude is central to several of the ethical principles and sets the tone for the rest.

1. Daily sanctification (expression of gratitude)
2. Respect for all life through honoring and esteeming others, including nonhumans
3. Respect the tribal council
4. Truthfulness at all times
5. Extraordinary hospitality to guests
6. Empathize with others and understand the spirit of the whole
7. Receive strangers with a loving heart
8. Understand that all races are family members, beautiful creations of the Creator
9. Serving others is the meaning of life
10. Moderation and balance in all affairs
11. Understand what leads to destruction or to well-being
12. Follow the guidance given to the heart by dreams, prayer, solitude, and wise others

Four Arrows, do you see gratitude woven throughout this list of ethical guidance? How have you experienced gratitude in Lakota ceremonies?

Four Arrows: What a useful exercise your question offers for people wanting to understand the role of gratitude in Indigenous cultures. To see gratitude in each of the twelve ethical guidelines listed above is to understand the importance of appreciating the flowing balance of the medicine wheel. In the wheel, each stage of life, direction, or season must be understood with gratitude. The authors of the book from which this list comes refer to the "sacred tree" as being symbolic of the medicine wheel's cycle of protection, nurturing, growth, and wholeness. One can see how all twelve relate to one of these four aspects of life. Thus, if we are grateful for each of these four concepts, we should be grateful for how each goal on the list contributes to them. Shenandoah's reference to "gratefulness to all the sacred Cycle of Life" refers directly to this conclusion.

As far as your question about gratitude in ceremony, "the act of gratitude is at the heart of our key ceremony that connects us to our Earth as it dissipates this violent culture." The authors of this quote are referring to our dominant culture, of course. In their piece, "Gratitude as Ceremony: A Practical Guide to Decolonization," they refer to the large international gathering at Standing Rock in North Dakota to protest the oil pipeline as a revelation of the power of continual gratitude in the face of such violence against Mother Earth and its life forms. They explain how ceremony "interrupts the cult of the disconnected individual" and talk about how capitalism violates natural law with its greedy, extractive practices that totally forget to express gratitude for the natural systems of energy Mother Earth provides to keep life in flowing balance. They refer to offerings of gratitude for maintaining this connection. During my own four "tours of duty" at Standing Rock, as a medic and as a trainer of people to go on the front lines, I noted how prayers of gratitude were continual during the protest, even in the worst of situations.

Our mutual friend David Abram refers to this awareness of our connection to the land in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*. He writes,

“We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human.”⁸ This gets us back to the essence of Indigenous worldview as being about our intimate relationship with Nature in its totality. Such intimacy is guided by gratitude for everything in it that keeps us flourishing. I remember how after I helped guide David through his first Sun Dance experience, he and I went to my summer home on the west coast of Vancouver Island. We spent hours paddling around an island with the agreement that we would not speak words. When we saw beautiful sights, and there were many, we gestured or grunted our appreciation. We felt like children who were truly part of the spirituality that calls for gratitude that we experienced in the Sun Dance ceremony.

I close with a reference to gratitude from my book that was published recently called *Sitting Bull's Words: For a World in Crisis*.⁹ I think it well expresses this connection between intimacy with nature and constant gratitude. I talk about how Sitting Bull would sing quietly to an animal before taking its life, expressing gratitude for its potential nourishment. I then refer to a time when his band came upon the skeletons of bison and he stopped, despite the need to escape from their enemies. He then told his people that they must honor these bones, reminding everyone that they were from those who gave their flesh to keep them alive the previous winter. “Showing gratitude to the non-human creatures for their gift of life, while acknowledging that humans can sometimes also be part of the food chain when in the wilderness, he recognized the interrelatedness of other-than-human energies and humanity. He and the other Lakota saw sentience in other creatures, including the animals and plants they used or consumed for survival. This sentience demanded respect.”¹⁰

Darcia: These are very moving stories. I think that although the dominant worldview allows for gratitude, I'm not sure it often reflects the kind of gratitude we are discussing. It's more like “thanks for giving me the toy I asked for,” or the Jewish male prayer—“thanks for not making me a woman.” In positive psychology education, keeping a

gratitude diary or writing a gratitude letter is very popular for its ability to make the doer feel happier.¹¹

I think Indigenous gratitude always assumes a reciprocal relationship. It's about not only appreciating gifts you've received, but giving back with mindful respect. A friend who took up Indigeneity as an adult visited us for a few days, and at each meal he took some of his food and set it aside as a gift to his guiding spirits. Much like Indigenous ceremony involved in taking a life, animal or plant, he was offering something in return for the lives taken for his meal. Psychologically, this reciprocal type of gratitude does much more than make you feel happy. It keeps you aware of the price of life, of the responsibility to “all our relations,” and keeps greed at bay. Because humans have more ability to make choices, we have more responsibility to make good choices and pay attention to what we are doing, keeping the welfare of all our kin in mind.

I remind myself to apply a gratitude principle in daily life, not only through gratitude over a meal or for gifts from family and work colleagues, but in minute ways for kin relations—the Indigenous way. For example, when I step on asphalt, I remember I walk on our fossil ancestors; on the sidewalk, I step on rock and sand kin. When I breathe, I benefit from the exhalations of plant kin. All around me are descendants of our common ancestors—trees, grasses, deer, flies—all are part of a web of a living earth that makes human life possible, a community of sisters, brothers, and elders. To give back, I sing to them, with gratitude and love, encouraging them to continue their being, their flourishing. My desire for finalizing my body's grateful return to the earth, rather than being buried isolated in a box of some sort, is to be buried in a mushroom suit, immediately feeding and rejoining the cosmos again.