

We Give Thanks

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 23, 2025

In my early childhood years, my family lived in Pennsylvania. My sister and I had full access to our neighbor's expansive yards and were adjacent to a field that housed several horses. Amidst the untended bushes that lined the property, the array of animals, both domestic and wild, we felt rich! Many of our afternoons were spent exploring the land all around us. We soon realized we lived alongside wild raspberries and honeysuckle and treated each as if it was a true gift. Our fingers and tongues turned bright red as we plucked the fresh and juicy raspberries and tossed them into our mouths. We were filled with so much joy and pride at having found such a treat.

Now, I still eat raspberries for breakfast each day in the cold, winter months. But it is decidedly different. They are not a gift offered abundantly and graciously from the land, plucked one at a time with joy and adventure. They are items, held in my fridge, sold for monetary gain. They remain in my fridge, not necessarily as a gift, but more of a commodity. I sense the difference. How can I realign my relationship with nature by changing my idea of consumption?

Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Potawatomi botanist and author, writes about the gift culture amidst indigenous peoples. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she speaks of relationships with strawberries just as I experienced two different relationships with raspberries. Kimmerer emphasized the indigenous practices of gratitude and reciprocity. She shared a story of making strawberry shortcake for her dad for his birthday. The field gave her strawberries, which she made into dessert for her father, and after a delightful meal they gave back to the earth. In exchange for delicious strawberries of which they had been gifted, they gave of their time and their attention to care for the strawberries still in the earth. They offered their heart-felt appreciation for the juice on their sticky, red fingers. There are two stories here. One celebrates the richness, gratitude, amazement, and generosity of nature, honoring our connection and kinship to the natural world. The other highlights a commodity wrapped in plastic hidden in someone's fridge. It's a "degree of separation," as the raspberries become an "it." instead of indifferent consumers, we need be thankful, we need to foster relationship, and we need give back in abundance.¹

Culture is often shaped by history and by faith. We heard the story of the Skywoman earlier. In gratitude for the animals who broke her fall and saved her from her dramatic descent, she

¹ *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer pgs. 22-32

created land from the mud she was provided. The land grew and grew and grew until she created all the world. All abundance that surrounds us was made from the intersection of gratitude and reciprocity. The tale ends: “In the beginning of the world, the other species were our life raft. Now, in the spirit of reciprocity, we must be theirs.”²

The predominant culture in this country varies greatly from these indigenous ideas and places emphasis, instead, on the idea of dominion. These are the dangers of detachment and superiority. We are deemed in charge of the natural world and all that resides within it. We treat nature with profound disrespect and sever ties with the idea of reciprocity. Plants and animals become unfeeling objects whose entire purpose on this earth is to give us what we need. We destroy and desecrate.

This leads, in part, to what Kimmerer termed “the fallacy of human exceptionalism.” It is an idea engrained in our culture that humans are fundamentally different from any other living, breathing creature. That we are more deserving of the resources of the earth. We are better than the horses. Than the eagle. Than the deer I often see grazing in my back yard. We fundamentally deserve the bounties of the earth: grains or corn or fresh water. She calls us to relinquish this role we have created as masters of the world and celebrate, instead, that we are, quote, “an equal member in the democracy of all species.”³ Yes, the towering redwoods and the mushrooms creating a home on a felled tree. The squirrel stashing its acorns, the spider weaving its web on your window frame. Us – each beloved person held in these sacred and hallowed walls. All equal gifts of creation, those of God or Skywoman or Spirit of Life, not a piece of a perceived hierarchy, but a sacred and blessed equal.

I want to share some words from Cherokee poet Marilou Awiakta’s “When the Earth Becomes an ‘It,’”

When the people call the Earth “Mother,”

They take with love
And with love give back
So that all may live.

When the people call Earth “it,”

They use her
Consume her strength. Then the people die.⁴

² Grateful Living “Returning the Gift” by Robin Wall Kimmerer

³ Ibid

⁴ “When the Earth Becomes an ‘It,’” by Marilou Awiakta

Language plays such an important role in how we understand and relate to the world around us. “Mother” leads to beloved gratitude and abundant reciprocity offered with sincere appreciation and earth-sustaining, reciprocal actions. “It” leads to exploitation that only serves to our detriment. Exploitation that runs counter to the values and tenets of our faith. Exploitation that has led to the climate crisis we are all steeped in which is steadily getting worse. Crops fail and food becomes scarce; storms increase in intensity as lands and lives are torn apart. The marginalized among us are the most affected. When the world is an “it,” “then the people die.” If the ocean is seen as a place to dump our trash, or the air to dilute our emissions, or creatures are displaced, or entire ecosystems are demolished to make room for human exploits – we all suffer. “We consume her strength.”⁵ I offer one example that is seemingly mundane.

I’m curious about our experiences in a grocery store or even a farmer’s market. We load our carts with grapes, apples, chicken, flour, milk. What do we see in these items? Is it an “it,” or a blessing and a gift of which we need to remain truly grateful? Do we think of the grape vines, the apple orchards, the living, breathing chickens, the field of wheat, the cows that offer that which sustains the calf? Do we think of those who farmed the land, who harvested the food, who delivered it to us? Or do we simply put the cellophane in our carts and progress to the next item on our list? Do we cook and eat gifts, or commodities? Are we grateful?

I want to highlight the values of our faith. We heard in our readings a recitation of our value of interdependence. This particular value, as articulated by our Unitarian Universalist faith, highlights the tenets of living as a part of this natural, beautiful, and abundant world. Quote, “We honor the interdependent web of all existence.”⁶ Everything that exists is dependent upon all else. As a people living the principles of our deeply held faith tradition, we protect the earth and condemn exploitation. Exploitation demolishes our web. We offer appreciation and celebrate the bounty of this gracious world by taking action to protect her and her abundant gifts. Yes, we need food for sustenance and wood for shelter and water to drink. But in reciprocity, we interact with the world from a place of faith, values, tenets, and gratitude.

We are grateful. Kimmerer elaborates, “If our first response is gratitude, then our second is reciprocity: to give a gift in return.”⁷ If we are intimately connected to the abundance that is offered to us, we could give our heartfelt appreciation and give a gift in return as we weed a garden, water plants, sing a song of thanks, or send our appreciation to the wind. Likewise, we

⁵ “When the Earth Becomes an ‘It,’” by Marilou Awiakta

⁶ Unitarian Universalist Association

⁷ *Emergence Magazine* podcast “Robin Wall Kimmerer on the Gifts of Mother Earth”

can offer more indirect means of reciprocity, such as donating to a land trust to save habitats, or making art that invites others to share the values of reciprocity. Our gifts to offer the natural world that we give in return are abundant.

Every day we are offered gifts in abundance. Gifts that we have not paid for, gifts we have not earned. Gifts that sustain us from the natural world; that make our existence possible.⁸ May we give thanks! The very air we breathe, taken for granted. The distant clouds that hold the water that serves to nurture us. The tulips and daylilies that offer their bountiful beauty. The cow that shares its milk. The worms that nourish the plants we eat. The trees that became these pews of which you are sitting on. When we think of these as gifts, not things – paper, tables, breakfast – our entire relationship with the natural world changes. Living within this gratitude creates a sense of abundance; we already know that we have everything that we need to survive. Thank you, mother.

I am called to be as grateful for a piece of paper as for a towering spruce tree, for are they not the same? To be as grateful for my morning bowl of cereal as flowing fields of grains. For the water in my drinking glass as I am for a cascading waterfall. For my ice cubes I crunch on as for a glacier. They are one in the same.

If it is a gift, then we spread it! We give thanks, and we spread more joy and beauty.⁹ I pick blueberries in an orchard and give the fresh berries to my father, who then makes them into blueberry crisp, who then feeds it to my sister, who is then so fulfilled that she does one of her favorite activities – tending to her wildflower garden. We accept these gifts – starting from simple yet beautiful blueberries – and spread them. It is its own form of a gratitude and reciprocity economy, as reciprocity follows gratitude again and again. Rippling out to create abundant beauty in this wonderful, awe-filled, and finite world.

So may we remain connected to Mother Earth. May we relish in natural beauty. May we offer prayers and blessings to the trees and the lush undergrowth. May we savor each bite we take and not take our nourishment for granted. May we water plants and may tend to gardens. May we not let food rot in our fridge as a wasted life. May we celebrate each blessed cloud and rainstorm. May we center in beauty and wonder and awe.

And so we leave these walls and return to the blessed mother earth who gifts us all we need to thrive and flourish in this beautiful and finite realm. May we live each day in acknowledgement

⁸ Grateful Living “Returning the Gift” by Robin Wall Kimmerer

⁹ *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer pgs. 22-32

of the intersection of our own faith in these ancient teachings; of the interdependence of all things, and our role in this sacred and hallowed web. How each of us acts towards another human, how each of us acts towards each animal and plant, this has an impact on our great mother earth. Each action ripples out to affect all else. So may these ripples be those of love and gratitude and reciprocity as we offer our thanks to that which serves to sustain our fragile and beautiful home. May we go into the world ready to give deep and abiding thanks and celebrate all that has been offered us. May we return to the earth, nurturing her and protecting her. May we find raspberries and honeysuckle and strawberries and blueberries and receive them as a blessed gift to be shared with the world, just as my sister and I did! May we live each of our adult days as those of a child when those wild berries served as an abundant source of wonder and delight. So, in this season of gratitude, may we pause to offer thanks. Thanks to those we love. Thanks to joy and laughter. To an abundance of food. To the crisp fall air. In all of our days, we give thanks.

May it be so, and Amen