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May gratitude be our daily response.

We Are the Grateful Ones

My dad used to tell us stories about the artist Charlie Russell, our grandfather's first cousin. Born in 1864, he'd famously left home at sixteen, rejecting the life of his well-educated, proper St. Louis family. We heard how he headed west to Montana to live with the Indians and became a famous painter and sculptor of the Wild West.

We visited his statue in the Rotunda in Washington - Montana's favorite son. The family lore was fun and proud. When Charlie would come to visit, late in life, the family would sit around the hearth and talk as he'd make little sketches and then crumple them into balls and throw them into the fire.

I've since done some studying and learned more details. I now appreciate a wistfulness, a sadness, in Charlie Russell's story. It turns out that he did escape to the West, but he lived only briefly with native people. In his twenties, he lived for one winter with the Blood Indians of Alberta. Those few months changed him forever.

Russell deeply admired this tribe's way of life – their independence and love of the land. The art that made him famous and successful reflected his nostalgia and his grieving for a way of life that, in his lifetime, had become a thing of the past, lost forever. As a magazine biography in the 1970s put it, "He wanted it known that he had taken part in the Old West, and was a better man for it."¹

Though my distant connection with this story is two generations away, it feels alive in its melancholy and, thankfully, in the canvases that remain. A town-dweller, I don't live close to the land (not nearly as close as some of you do) but I do feel drawn, in a primal way, to many earth-centered traditions associated with native people. Like thanking the earth or a plant or tree before taking some of it for one's own use. Or never taking all of something and always leaving half. Or making gratitude to the earth central to everything one does.

How much is that gratitude part of your everyday living – gratitude for the beautiful, amazing, necessary, sacred gifts of the land? How fortunate this young artist was to live close to the land at the end of an era and be immersed in a culture of gratitude. It transformed him.

Skipping forward a generation, a family in the Adirondacks begins the day with ceremony. Wherever they wake up and make their morning coffee, they give the first few drops to the earth. A woman remembers camping as a child, her father...

¹ Brian W. Dippie. "Charlie Russell's Lost West," *American Heritage Magazine*, Volume 24, Issue 3, 1973. Internet <https://www.americanheritage.com/content/charlie-russell%E2%80%99s-lost-west>

...in his red-checked wool shirt, standing atop the rocks above the lake. When he lifts the coffeepot from the [Coleman] stove, the morning bustle stops; we know without being told that it's time to pay attention....He pours coffee out on the ground in a thick brown stream.

The sunlight catches the flow, striping it amber and brown and black as it falls to the earth and steams in the cool morning air. With his face to the morning sun, he pours and speaks into the stillness, "Here's to the gods of Tahawus."²

Tahawus, the highest peak in the area. The narrator here, Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of the book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, remembers this daily time of thanks as a shared experience between her family and the land that drew "a circle around our family." She would imagine the land responding to their words and whispering, "Ohh, *here* are the ones who know how to say thank you."

A botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer writes with a solemn respectfulness. Her stories make the words "living close to the land" come alive. "Our people," she says, "were a circle, until we were dispersed. Our people shared a language with which to thank the day, until they made us forget. But we didn't forget. Not quite." She wants to make sure of that and writes with purpose.

She tells stories about the farming life, e.g. how native people planted particular crops together, like the "three sisters" of corn, beans and squash. Her anecdotes reveal how we can reach across cultures and connect on the soul level. Some of us may have grown up with limited views of native people as exotic and even foreign. Many of us live with discomfort and shame about our ancestors' treatment of them. Robin Wall Kimmerer helps us forge needed connections.

A botanist and teacher, in one story she leads a group of youth into a marsh to gather cat-o'-nine tails. Some of them madly searching for a phone signal, others squeamish, they resist the exercise. The lesson is about using every part of the plant. The fuzzy fronds of grasses and dry cattail fluff fill pillows. The strong silky strands inside the stems are woven into baskets. Tall woody stems are set into the ground in a circle, the tops curved inward and lashed together to make a roof – a cozy wigwam for lessons by day and sleep by night.

By day's end, the kids have gotten into it. They've splashed around and gotten dirty in the marsh mud. They've grown silent, intently working and weaving and dissecting the plants. They even roast and eat cattail roots. And at night, exhilarated by the air, the earth and accomplishment, they shed their worldly sophistication...and a sweetness arises. They sing their teacher to sleep with a made-up lullaby, thankful out loud.

Kimmerer takes another group of teens out into the country, this time in a religiously conservative area. She teaches all day, almost frantically trying to convey everything she can about the plants and animals of these fields and woods. And she frets. Is she communicating it all? Is she getting through? Because she wants to do more than transmit facts – there's depth and

² Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Canada: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

meaning she wants to express. She's not just showing them the quaint old ways of the Indians. She wants relevance for these kids. And then it comes. As they trudge back to civilization, she feeling she's somehow failed, she hears it. The kids have begun to sing. It's a hymn, "Amazing Grace." Sometimes we all do speak the same language.

We too are a people of gratitude. Some say that gratitude is what sets Unitarian Universalists apart from other faith traditions. Rev. Galen Guengerich, the minister of All Souls Church in New York City, wrote in a *UU World* article:

In the same way that Judaism is defined by obedience, Christianity by love, and Islam by submission, I believe that Unitarian Universalism should be defined by gratitude....It reminds us how utterly dependent we are on the people and world around us for everything that matters. From this flows an ethic of gratitude that...demands that we nurture the world that nurtures us in return.³

This is our 7th principle: "UU congregations affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Some think it should be our 1st principle. We are an integral part of all that is, no more or less important than the waters and mountains, the natural world, not to mention one another. We are not masters or fixers or deciders of the land. Rather, we pass through it, like everything else.

In turn, the land awakens in us awe and inspiration. We bask. We praise. We fall to our knees. We gather and sing. Rev. Guengerich reminds us that the word "religion" means "to bind together":

Religion unites the *purpose* of our lives as human beings with the *purpose* that animates the universe. Religion unites the *meaning* of our lives as human beings with the *meaning* that pervades the universe. Religion unites the *spirit* of humanity with the *spirit* that keeps the stars shining, the planets spinning, and the flowers blooming in springtime. I believe that gratitude is the appropriate religious response to the nature of the universe.⁴

This weekend reminds us of people who lived in this place, in loving relationship to the earth, before the Europeans arrived. May their living example help us live our lives fully, gratefully and responsibly. We owe our lives to earth's bounty. May gratitude be our daily response. We will be better people for it.

So may it be.

³ Galen Guengerich, "The Heart of Our Faith," *UU World*. Spring 2007. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/a-theology-gratitude>

⁴ Ibid. (my italics)