

## **A Thanksgiving Address**

IT IS SAID THAT, as we walk the path that is our life, there are times when things happen to distract us. When this happens it is easy for us to lose our way and stray from the path that is the good mind, and we suddenly find ourselves stumbling through the brush. As we struggle to push our way through the underbrush, trying to regain the clear path, we pick up burrs and thorns that cling to our clothing, pricking our skin. We get dusty and scared. Our fear causes us to cry and our hearts to pound.

It is good to see that you have arrived here safely and that we may spend some time together. I know that you have come from far away and that many obstacles were in your way. And yet, despite these obstacles, you are able to be here. I take you by the hand as a brother or a sister. I offer you words of greeting and respect. I offer you food and drink.

I speak these words so that your mind may be put at ease and your load lightened. We come together in this way because your mind is distracted. We come to offer our thoughts and our support. We come to lift the weight of your burden from your shoulders and to share it among us. We know that as an individual you are very strong. But, we also know there are times when we need the strength of others. We understand that when we are in pain, the mind is distracted and we find it difficult to use the power of a good mind.

First, we take the finest eagle feather we can find, and with this eagle feather, we brush away the dust that clings to you. We remove any burrs or thorns or twigs that may be caught on your clothing. We remove these things because they surely cause you pain and discomfort. And so, we hope this makes you feel more comfortable and more at ease.

Your eyes may be filled with tears because of that with which you are struggling. These tears blur your vision and sting your eyes. There may be a sound like roaring in your ears because of the fear, pain and anger you may be feeling. And so, we take the finest and softest deer skin we can find. We gently wipe away your tears so that you may see the beauty that is all around you and your friends and relations who have gathered here to support and help you. Next, we wipe away any obstruction in your ears that may prevent you from hearing the good words that people speak to help ease your suffering. We offer you a place to sit so that you may rest your weary body.

Finally, your fear, your pain and your anger may cause an obstruction in your throat. It is important to remove that obstruction so that, when you speak, your words may come loudly and clearly so that all may understand what is troubling you. And so, we offer you a drink of pure, cool water. Water is indeed one of the most powerful medicines we have, for it has the ability to give and to sustain life. The water will help to remove that which clogs your throat. It soothes your insides and quenches your thirst.

And so, with all this we hope you are now more comfortable and we have helped to ease your burden. We hope these words have helped to restore a sound mind, body and spirit. We hope that now you may focus, with a clear and good mind, on the words of thanksgiving, the Ohentonkariwatehkwen (the words that come before all others). We celebrate the fact that life exists, for we understand that it is by pure chance that it does.

And so it is Sonkwaiatison, our Creator, that as we prepare to begin this new day, we take a few moments to centre ourselves, to reflect on who we are, on our place within the Circle of Life, and on our responsibilities to all of Creation.

We begin by turning our thoughts to you, Ietinistenhen Ohontsa, our sacred Mother, the Earth. We know that you are sick and you are dying at this time because of the way we, the two-legged, show you disrespect and abuse of your gifts. And yet despite this, your love for your children is such that you continue to provide all we need to survive on a daily basis. You continue to fulfil your responsibilities and carry out your duties in accordance with the instructions given you in the beginning of time. For this we are grateful. And so it is, we turn our minds to you, we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

We understand that we share our time here with many different forms of life. From the smallest micro-organisms and the insects that live in the body of our Mother Earth, it is your responsibility to keep the body of our Mother healthy and strong. It is your duty to fight the effects of pollution. We know your task is great at this time because of the demands we, the two-legged, place upon you. And yet, despite this, you continue to struggle with the weight of the burden we place upon you. You fight to carry out your responsibilities and fulfil your obligations in accordance with the original instructions. Because of this, the cycle continues. And so it is, we turn our minds to you, we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

We turn our minds to the different forms of life that walk on the face of Mother Earth. There are those of you who crawl and those of you who slither. We acknowledge you Okwaho (wolf), Okwari (bear) and Anowarah (turtle). You represent our clans, our families. There are those of you who provide us with shelter, tools, clothing and food. We call you Skanionsa, the moose and Oskenonton, the deer. You give of yourselves so that we may survive. We understand that there is a relationship of respect that must exist among us.

We turn our minds to the fish and other forms of life that live in the bodies of water. We know that you struggle because of the disrespect we show you. We pollute your world and treat you as resources and products.

We look now to all the different birds that are around us. When the Creator made you, he gave your feathers the colours of the rainbow. He gave each of you a beautiful and distinctive song and he asked that you greet each new day with that beautiful song. Every day, when your voices come together in a beautiful chorus, we are reminded of the importance of the diversity and harmony in Creation.

From among the birds the Creator chose you, Akweks, our brother, the Eagle. You are the strongest and are able to fly the highest. Your keen eyesight allows you to see the Creation. Upon your shoulders, the Creator placed the added burden of being the Creator's messenger. Our Elders teach us that, should you appear in a dream and speak to us, we should pay particular attention to your words. For it is said that you are bringing a message directly from the Creator. All the creatures continue to carry out your duties and to fulfil your responsibilities in accordance with the original instructions. Because of this, the cycle of life continues and for this we are grateful. And so, we turn our minds to you, we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

We turn our minds to the rooted nations of Creation. We acknowledge the trees. And you, Wahta (the maple), you provide us with wood for heat, tools and shelter. You also provide us your life's blood so that we may have Wahta osis (maple syrup) for medicine. It is indeed a happy time when you give us this gift, for we know the Creation is awakening and the cycle of life continues. We look forward to the time when you, Niionhontehsha, the strawberry, will show yourself once again. You are a powerful medicine and we know that, if you appear, the harvest will be good and our people will not go hungry. We acknowledge the grasses, the medicine plants. We greet you, the Three Sisters — Onenste (corn), Osaheta (beans) and Onononsera (squash). You are the staple of my people. We know that, when we plant you together, you protect one another from disease and insects. And in so doing, you teach us a valuable lesson about the need for diversity. And so it is, we turn our minds to you, we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

We turn our minds to you, the various bodies of water. The rivers, the lakes, the oceans and the springs. You fulfil a vital function in the continuation of the cycle of life. You provide us with the most powerful medicine there is, for water has the ability to give and to sustain life. For this we are grateful, so we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

As we look around us this morning, we see, Karakwa, our brother the Sun, that you have chosen to grace us with your presence once more. You bring the warmth of a new day. You bring us light so that we may see the beauty that surrounds us. Working with all the other elements of Creation, you help perpetuate the cycle of life. We know that your time with us will be short this day and that you will soon disappear where the sky and earth come together in the west.

We know that, as darkness surrounds us, Ahsontenka Karakwa (Grandmother Moon), you will watch over us. You work with all the female life in the universe. You decide when children will be born. You work with the waters and help to keep the cycle going. We are reminded every day, as you share the sky with Karakwa, of the balance that must be maintained between the roles of the female and of the male. We are reminded of the equal importance of both, and we understand that without the one, there is no other.

As we look to the night sky, we see you Tsiotsistokwaronion (the stars). Some of our Elders teach us that you represent the spirits of those who have gone on before us. You

represent the past, our history, and yet you are still here in the present. We understand that your teachings are as old as time itself, and yet they remain unchanged by the passage of time. You also show us the way into the future and we have but to look to you for guidance. And so, we take a moment to reflect on this and, because the cycle continues, we turn our minds to you, we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

Once again this morning, we have felt the presence of unseen forces that are around us at all times. We feel the air. You represent the breath of the Creator and you bind all life together in an unbreakable circle. We understand that we must respect your gift for, should we ever destroy you, we will destroy all life and the cycle will end. We feel the presence of the winds. Coming from the Four Directions, you bring the changing seasons. You help to keep the air we breathe clean and pure. We understand the importance of your gift and we are grateful. And so, we turn our minds to you, we acknowledge you and we give thanks. So be it in our minds.

And now we come to you, Sonkwaiatison. You have created all this and you have given us certain instructions. We see that all the different nations of your Creation struggle to carry out the instructions you gave them in the beginning of time. They continue to strive in fulfilling their responsibilities and carrying out their duties as you have asked them to. It seems that only we, the two-legged, have difficulty in remembering your instructions. We seem to be blind to the lessons you have placed all around us. We are deaf to your teachings.

We invite you to spend some time with us. Move among us, feel our hearts and our minds. We have done our best to remember our place within the Circle of Life. But, we are frail and afraid. We build many things to help us survive, to help us control your Creation. The Ohentonkariwatehkwen (the words that come before all others) help to remind us of our responsibilities and duties. One day, we hope that we will begin to see the wonders of your Creation. Perhaps we will learn to live in harmony with it, rather than trying to control it. Perhaps we will see that all things, and all people, have their rightful place in the Circle. We hope that you are pleased with us and that we have shown you the respect you merit. We have done our best to honour you and the rest of Creation.

Finally, we acknowledge one another, female and male. We give greetings and thanks that we have this opportunity to spend some time together. We turn our minds to our ancestors and our Elders. You are the carriers of knowledge, of our history. We acknowledge the adults among us. You represent the bridge between the past and the future. We also acknowledge our youth and children. It is to you that we will pass on the responsibilities we now carry. Soon, you will take our place in facing the challenges of life. Soon, you will carry the burden of your people. Do not forget the ways of the past as you move toward the future. Remember that we are to walk softly on our sacred Mother, the Earth, for we walk on the faces of the unborn, those who have yet to rise and take up the challenges of existence. We must consider the effects our actions will have on their ability to live a good life.

We offer a special thought for our families, our friends and our loved ones, wherever they may be. We ask that you watch over them and keep them well until we can rejoin them. If it should be your desire to call one of them back to your side, that will be a sad time and we will grieve. We understand, however, that this is the greatest honour we can achieve and we will try to not let our grief hold them back from the journey they must make.

Finally, Sonkwaiatison, we ask that you give us all the courage, the strength and the wisdom to use the power of the good mind in all we do. Help us to speak clearly and honestly so that we may understand one another, how we feel and why. Help us to listen carefully to what others say and not to react in anger when negative things are said. Help us to understand that even painful words contain teachings and that we must sometimes look hard and listen carefully to find them. And so it is, Sonkwaiatison, that we have reflected on our place within the Circle of Life and on our responsibilities to all of Creation. Life continues, and we are grateful for what we have. So be it in our minds.

Kanatiio (Allen Gabriel)  
Kanesatakeronnon  
(Kanesatake Mohawk, Bear Clan)