

Thank sky, feel heart: Gifts of gratitude and goodness



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

A reader sent me an article on the way diverse cultures express gratitude. I took particular notice of the Chinese expression, "Thank sky," described as "a way to express gratitude to all things under the sky" (The Conversation, Nov. 17, 2023). This seems to connect very well to indigenous cultures around the world who honor, even revere, the natural order of the cosmos.

For many years, following my father's example, I would close my eyes and bow before a meal, giving thanks to the Lord for food on my plate. As I emerged from supernaturalism, I would often bow, in Hindu and Buddhist fashion, giving thanks to the animals and plants for their sacrifice. This was a silent gesture of deep appreciation. Now, it's enough simply to pause, take a breath, and be grateful for the living things I consume, and the many hands that provide the elements of the meal, from farmworkers to truck drivers to warehouse and store workers. I choose to be consciously aware of the many gifts of nature, including human nature, that don't merely

appear on the table but require cultivation and effort to sustain me.

According to the article in The Conversation, people in Taiwan express thanks with "kám-sim," an expression meaning "feel heart," to express gratitude. "In complimenting a good deed, the word is also meant to highlight how people who witness the act but do not directly benefit from it are touched by the benevolence. It encourages people to recognize that the impact of good deeds is not limited to its direct recipients but to other members of the community as well. To say "kám-sim" is to recognize that our actions have effects that ripple outward, potentially strengthening and solidifying the social fabric, which ultimately benefits us all." What a wonderful gift to a family or community, to be conscientious not only in doing something good for another, but with the intention that any good act of giving keeps on giving. That "ripple outward" presents us with the joy of the potential for expanding goodness. One benefit is that we never know how far the ripples will go, or how long the effects of one thoughtful act will touch others (on reflection, the Spanish word "gracias" came to mind. Thanking someone with grace. It opens the opportunity for relationship, assumes a graceful connection to another human being).

All of these expressions of gratitude nurture and energize the heart of humanist practice. While I never suggest someone "convert" to Humanism (a nonsensical idea), I would certainly encourage more humanistic practice such as a daily exercise of gratefulness, in whatever culture or tradition or mindset a person holds. Being thankful doesn't require a theological belief — it doesn't have to be religious at all. As I see it, consistently showing a consciously grateful attitude is not a religious ritual but an awareness, a way of thinking and being. It can be a rational choice to be a better person, sending out those ripples, not to please someone else (or Someone else) but just because it's "the right thing to do."

From time to time we hear stories of animals appearing to show thanks. A fox freed from a trap; a whale released from a net; an elephant pulled from a pit. There is momentary eye contact, a brief glance of gratitude that somehow feels like a "Thank you very much!" Though personally I think we can get too anthropomorphic, projecting human emotions, on these moments, there is still a sense of connection between living beings that can be profoundly compelling. I might even take a deep breath and bow to that "grateful" animal.

This causes pauses and ponderings:

is it the act, the verbal acknowledgment of thankfulness, or the feeling, the attitude, or the often silent response, that truly conveys the thanks? Observing the bowing of Buddhist friends through the years, I grew to appreciate the symbol of palms together and a slight lowering of the head in the presence of another. More than a symbol, of course, yet the image serves as a reminder that the smallest movement can have great meaning. While a person chooses to bow their head before a representation of Buddha, Jesus, Confucius or other sage or savior, the respectful honoring does not have to be worship, elevating the representative human being above the rest. It may be true that the highest honor we can show another person is to treat them as a representative of Humanity (or divinity, if a person of faith).

Gratitude can be directed to gods, or the goodness in ourselves and our world. We can "thank sky" with a grace-filled composure that "feels heart" and fills the mind with an expansive benevolence.

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