



Letters to Nature Kids

November, 2023 ∞ Number 15
Thanksgiving

Dear Nature Kids,

What stories about the Thanksgiving holiday have you been told? Probably about a harvest feast shared between native people and European settlers in 1621. The actual holiday that happens on the last Thursday of November was established in 1863 during the Civil War. That was a time when everyone had reason to wish and pray for war to be over, and in the middle of all that loss and pain to notice good things and be thankful for them.

Since then we have had a holiday for noticing what's good and being grateful for it. We could give thanks for good food, loving family members and friends, a forest where we feel at peace and maybe in awe of how big and wonderful it is, and lots of other things.



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Today I'm really grateful for last night's rain. The pond is now full and has room for all the living things it supports. I'm glad to see the blue sky and clouds, not just in the sky but also reflected in the water.

Is it sometimes hard to notice good things? Our brain seems to be wired to look for bad things, dangerous things that we try to avoid. "Watch out for that drop-off so you don't fall! ... They didn't call me back – it's like nobody likes me ... We have to go back to school (or work) tomorrow, oh no!" Our brain figures that if we notice every bad thing, maybe we can make it stop or at least prepare for it.

Here's your chance to teach your brain something. Your brain can notice and feel good about things that are beautiful or make you laugh or feel loved, and still be able to keep an eye out for trouble. We can do both things. We *need* to make room for the good.

This morning it was cool but not cold, quiet and peaceful with the morning sun warming me and beautiful clouds like white popcorn scattered across a blue sky. Many good things for me to notice.

Also, I have many wonderful people in my life. When I think about how things are going for me, I don't forget the joy that these people bring.



On today's walk it made me happy to be surrounded by kind people who shared this love for all the life of the prairie. We look after each other and share all the little discoveries. I'm grateful for all of them.

How should I give thanks for such things? Not just on the holiday, but throughout the year, how do I show that I am grateful? People express gratitude or thankfulness in various ways. Religious people may see good things as gifts from a creator, and so they give thanks to God or a Great Spirit.

The Haudenosaunee people of the northeastern part of North America have a Thanksgiving Address that expresses gratitude to the earth and everything within it – like animals, winds, waters, the sun, and trees. It may be spoken to greet the day or start a gathering. A speaker offers thanks, and others answer, “Now our minds are one.” Here is one part of it:

“We are all thankful to our Mother, the Earth, for she gives us all that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she continues to care for us as she has from the beginning of Time. To our Mother, we send thanksgiving, love, and respect.

Now our minds are one.”

When we feel grateful to another person, why not tell them? Not just like, “Thanks for buying my lunch,” but also to show that we’re glad for their kindness or being a good friend.

One good way to give thanks is to write in a diary or journal. We have talked about nature journaling (the August, 2022 letter), in which we write about or draw something from the time we spend in nature. We could say something about our gratitude for a place, a plant or animal, or anything else. To write about this, we would think about what is making us grateful, and pay attention to how we are feeling, and then put that into words.



Looking at that tree, I'm thinking about how it makes oxygen for us to breathe, its leaves shade us from the heat, and it provides homes for so many animals. I'm feeling cared for - thankful that places like this take care of all of us.

When we write about our gratitude (in any kind of journal), researchers have found that it helps us. It adds up over time and benefits our mood, health, friendships and other relationships. Expressing thankfulness – putting it into words – makes a real difference.

This Thanksgiving could be a reminder for all of us to notice what is good within us and around us, and say something or write something in thanks for it. Not just on the holiday, but throughout the year.

Happy Thanksgiving!

✍ Michael

(You can find a more complete version of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address in the chapter “Allegiance to Gratitude” in Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, or look for a version of it online.)



Grateful for each other

© 2023 by Michael Smith. **Letters to Nature Kids** is really a letter to anyone with a connection to nature, regardless of age. I know lots of adults who haven't lost touch with that child that they used to be—and Letters to Nature Kids is for them, too. You can download it from <https://livesinnature.com>. It is free, but your contribution in any amount is gratefully accepted (via www.PayPal.me/MSmithLPA). I welcome questions, suggestions and feedback. Please contact me at masmith.tx@gmail.com.