



Learning Circle

A Gift of Food

In summer, I love eating a tomato sandwich. A whole ripe warm off the vine beefsteak tomato, sliced, between buttered (gluten free) toast and a bit of mayonnaise. Heavenly. But when I picked that tomato, did I stop to thank the plant for its generosity, for growing and sharing its bounty? After all, that tomato is the hope for the next generation, will the seeds that I eat go into the ground to grow the next generation of plants? (probably not!) Why should I care? After all, I put the tomato plant in the ground, watered it and nurtured it. I own it so I get to reap the harvest of my labours (water, fertilizer etc.). Why would I thank the plant?

How different would our view of the world be if we did not have that sense of ownership of the natural world? What if we saw the world as being full of all of our kin who are each pursuing the normal and natural cycle of their lives until we interrupt or even destroy them as we live our human lives. Would I take a moment to acknowledge the work that the tomato plant invested in its fruit before I harvested it? To acknowledge the sacrifice the tomato plant makes as it gives up its fruit, hoping that at least one seed survives to grow the next generation?

This is not how we view the world in Western cultures. But many Indigenous peoples do not separate themselves from their kin – all the living (and non-living) inhabitants of this world that Creator made, including us. We do not see ourselves as part of a web of life, but rather as the ones in control of the web. So while we may give *Creator* thanks before we eat the tomato sandwich, we don't give a thought to the life force of the tomato plant or have any connection to it. We don't acknowledge that there even is a gift involved.

The world would look very different to us if every time we used a resource from this planet, we stopped to acknowledge the gift that is given to us in the use of that resource.

Let me tell a story. Imagine you are a young hunter and have just made your first kill. As you bend over the deer you pause to thank and acknowledge the sacrifice the deer is making in giving its life to feed your community. When you bring the deer home, it is divided among all the families. You do not eat of this deer and no one thanks you specifically for the gift of venison but as you pass between the hearths that night you will hear people saying how good this venison is, the best they have tasted etc. The food is praised but not the hunter. What is understood by everyone is that they are acknowledging the young hunter's skill and achievement, his now adult contribution to the wellbeing of his community. But the food itself? That is the gift of the deer, and the Creator, not the hunter.

In many Indigenous cultures, food was shared because everyone has different gifts or roles in regard to making, finding, growing, hunting, preserving etc. A community would only thrive if

everyone shared their gifts for the common good. This is the reciprocal economy I described in the previous article. And specifically, food was something to be shared with everyone because everyone has the same need for nourishment. The food was not something you thanked someone for, because the plants and animals that made up the meal gave up their existence so you could eat. That was the gift you acknowledge when you share/eat food together. And there is respect for the gift because nothing given by the deer is ever wasted, all parts of the animal are used. And you do not waste the Creator's gifts by taking more than you need. This is a profoundly different way of viewing the natural world that would lead to conflict and misunderstanding that lasts to this day.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer points out that Europeans used the “lack of gratitude” shown by North Americans when they were given food, as proof that North Americans were savages, primitive, uneducated, had no manners or culture etc. Especially among missionaries or religious orders who were trying to ‘feed the poor’ who seemed poor by their European standards of clothing and shelter etc. Those people they shared food with most likely were grateful for the gift of food – grateful to the plants and animals that provided the food – but not the Europeans who handed it out. I suspect that even those early Europeans who made the effort to learn local languages would still not understand such a fundamentally different world view.

It's like one of those things that ‘everyone knows’ so no one ever explains it. Except when you are not part of the local culture – for example, when reading about medieval meals where three things were always put on the table – but only salt and pepper are specifically mentioned. Everyone ‘knew’ what the third item was so it did not need to be recorded because parchment and ink were expensive. Not everyone expresses gratitude, or sees the world, in the same culturally approved ways that the dominant culture does. It is hard for a dominant culture to change, but change is needed.

If Indigenous practices around food were a core value in our society, there would be no food banks and no hunger unless we were all equally hungry together.

As we move forward, with baby steps, on the journey of reconciliation we need to really stop and listen. And we need to find ways to set aside our preconceptions about what we ‘know’ or ‘hear’ when we do listen. Personally, I will probably never thank a tomato plant when I pick the ripe fruit because it is not a habit of mind I grew up with and internalized at a young age to become part of who I am (but I *can* and have changed so who knows....). But if I am gathering food with an Elder, I will be aware there are teachings on how and with what attitude I should be gathering the food because it is more than just ‘picking’ the fruit. I want to show respect for their practices. To be present together in that space. Something we could all do more of, in large and small ways.

Respectfully submitted,
Michele Altermann