

Coach Thyself: How We Bless Our Food

“So, what ceremonies can we perform?” One of us sitting with a teacher of Native American shamanism asked this question. On the last, weary day of a screening intensive, we also wondered: who would be accepted as apprentices? “Well,” replied the elder to the question about ceremonies, “you can say grace before meals.” Two people laughed out loud. It was a seemingly trivial permission. I’m not sure they made the cut.

I didn’t laugh, because the whole thrust of 10 increasingly sleepless days had been a kind of spiritual planetary ecology. Physical reality is alive and conscious. It (or “she”) wants to talk to you, dance with you, and love you. And guess what: she feeds you. And if you want to emerge from the inert world of mechanical lumps and bumps into the living one that knows and loves you—best start by practicing respect and gratitude for all the little deaths that sustain your life.

“Thanks to all the beings that gave up their lives so that we could have this food to eat.” That was the grace that was said every meal during the screening. Sometimes the elder would even single out the species present in the food. “Thank you squash-tribe, and you too, turkey-person.” Sometimes it ended with: “May your brothers and sisters thrive always, and accept one day our bodies as food for you.”

There it was—this profound gratitude and respect for the fundamental reality of this plane: we burn here like flames only so long as the fuel of other, once-living beings nourishes us. Life eats life here. We are embodied in the feminine material of the Mother Earth and had best stay in harmony with how She recycles these bodies

of all her children. If we honor and give thanks for the little deaths that keep us alive, perhaps we can avoid the big deaths—the extinctions, population explosions, famines, and ultimately wars of ecological chaos.

How different this Native grace was from the Catholic one I grew up with. “Bless us O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from thy bounty...” As if this guy, like some medieval duke off in the heavens, somehow owned, stored, and distributed all the food. Jewish and Baha’i graces seem to follow the same trend. The god in the sky (not goddess in the Earth) is praised for the food, as if it falls like pre-packaged manna from the heavens.¹ On the other hand, I know some Jewish blessings do single out a source, like “fruit of a tree.”

The most common Hindu grace, a verse from the Bhagavad Gita (4-24), is a little tricky to render into English. But, as I read it, it comes a bit closer to the shamanic grace. Put very loosely: “This food is the god-energy, and we are the god-energy offering it to the god-energy fire of digestion within us—and we become the god-energy by realizing this.” Though this stays distant from the feminine, ecological realities of our planet, still, that “god-energy” is immanent and conscious. So this grace affirms, not the dead world, but a living, loving awareness of which everything is made.

Twenty-seven years after sitting in that shamanic intensive, I have seven elements that cycle in and out of my grace before meals. I’ll share them here, in case any seem worth incorporating into your own. They constitute a shaman’s grace, adapted to modern



life. But, however you do it, I urge you to think about and practice some form of respect and gratitude for the origins of your food. It’s not a trivial prayer—especially in an age of ecological breakdown. Elements one, two, five, and six below are pretty constant; the others enter when I have time. Square brackets indicate alternate wordings.

- 1.Thanks to you on the plate who have died [changed form] so that I might live.
- 2.May your brothers and sisters [or species] survive and thrive. I offer them one day my body in return.
- 3.I cleanse you of any energies disturbed by difficult lives and deaths, especially where caused by humans, and of all impurities introduced by pushy human cultivation.
- 4.And thanks in particular today to the [corn-people (pick one food)].
- 5.Namaste [I greet the god-energy in all of you].
- 6.I surrender to the healing, health, and happiness that come when I consume you in this sacred manner.
- 7.And I thank you for providing me with intuitive knowledge of what and how much to eat when.

I also have a shorter grace, slightly humorous, that I love because it emphasizes our unity with all life. It’s based on “you are what you eat.” Thinking of myself as a vast assemblage of cells, I look at my meal and say “We who were you yesterday cherish and thank you who will be us tomorrow.” ▲

¹On Wikipedia, search “grace_(prayer)”