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*From the Desk of the AMI/USA Human Rights & Social Justice Advisor*

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*On behalf of AMI/USA, I welcome Sinuda Kapalczynski as our guest writer during Indigenous Heritage Month. Please enjoy her eloquent and rich story about what we know as Thanksgiving. Sharing our stories helps us arrive at understanding and to create a shared human narrative. We are grateful for you, Sinuda!*

– Sheri L. Bishop, Human Rights and Social Justice Advisor

### **About Sinuda Kapalczynski**

Since graduating in 2008 from St. Catherine's University with her Primary certification and Master's in Montessori Early Childhood, Sinuda has worked in almost every type of Montessori environment. Her experience as a guide, writer, mother, environmental scientist, and Director of Fulton Montessori School, all coalesce to fuel her passion and commitment to Dr. Montessori's wonderful method. Sinuda and her family love living in Richmond, Virginia. She enjoys working in service, sparking interest in those she meets, and motivating people in Virginia as they strive to shift towards greater inclusion, equity-based programming, and cohesion between the Montessori Method and state learning standards. Sinuda joined the Virginia Montessori Association Board of Directors in August 2021 and is excited to serve the statewide Montessori community in a variety of ways. She is a member of the Akwesasne Nation in territory now called New York and Canada and also has Cherokee, Armenian and African American heritage.

### **Thanksgiving – An Indigenous Perspective**

Thanksgiving for many American Indigenous peoples is a point of contention. For some, it's just another day, while for others, a reason to eat good food together with family, or for the few, a reason to protest at the Day of Mourning in Plymouth, Massachusetts for recognition of truth that has been historically undervalued.

I come from a social justice and activist family. My grandparents housed American Indian Movement (AIM) leaders in Manhattan. My father joined the "party" in Washington, DC when AIM took over the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in 1971. My mother chose to get paid minimally as a criminal lawyer at the Legal Aid Society to stand with Standing Rock and to advocate against the occupation of Wall Street. The activism of my family continues as we stand up for what is right. I am proud of my family and give thanks every day for who we are, both individually and as a collective.

My family's Thanksgiving is not simple. With parents who grew up off-nation, these "City Indians" came from two very different upbringings, both with deep values for being "Indian." They lived through the process of assimilation, with my dad spending time in a Boarding School/Orphanage and my mom growing up a Cherokee/Armenian girl in NYC. My mom recalls students asking her in elementary school if she lived in a teepee (because, you know, teepees were common in Manhattan.). My dad spent some time in his youth on the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation and at one point, knew how to speak the language before moving to the City of Syracuse, NY.

When my parents met, their need to know what it meant to live the "rez" culture became crucial to their partnership and a year after my younger sister was born, we moved to the woodlands of Onondaga Nation

in New York. Here my two younger sisters were home-birthed, and we became immersed in living traditionally. We attended Longhouse and followed the Gaiwiio, the lessons for living a good life given to the Haudenosaunee long ago by the Peacemaker. This early childhood experience provided my three siblings and I, and my parents, with our life-long love for the woods and natural world, traditional songs, ceremonies, and for giving thanks daily for all that Creator has shared with us.

As our family grew, my mom and dad grew apart and my sisters and I eventually moved off-Nation with our mom while my dad stayed at Onondaga, where he felt the most at home. My mom remarried and had two more daughters with my stepdad, an English-Italian son of a preacher. Now, the tradition of Thanksgiving became more formal after my stepdad joined our collective. Before, Thanksgiving was a reason to visit our mom's family in NYC and eat good food. Now, we sat together at the table and said a prayer and used fine china that my stepdad's parents gave us. New traditions were forming, and we combined the American traditions with our Haudenosaunee ones. My mom grew up Episcopalian but at that time, identified more with her adopted culture of Haudenosaunee. It was essential to blend what was important to all parts of our collective family, so we began using Thanksgiving to "give thanks" in a formal way, with each person around the table sharing things that they were grateful for. For quite some time (after some years of gradual reconciliation towards friendship) my dad and his partner would join us to eat on most big holiday meals and our family get-togethers became a real-life "modern family."

As my siblings grew, so did all of our opinions, identities, and individual families. In a large family like mine, individuality becomes more important for some than others. Some siblings chose to live on-Nation while others moved away. Some chose partners who were Native, while others did not. Regardless of our identities, we used the holidays as a reason to join together and enjoy our family. But, as some siblings began to feel more comfortable with their identity, they decided that they no longer wanted to identify with the colonizer holidays. Life on the rez is a mixture of people who identify with the traditional culture, those who attend church, or those who do not choose any particular spiritual path. Many of our Indigenous peers never celebrated Christian or federal holidays. My two siblings were making a stand within our family and denying the holidays that had guaranteed family get-togethers.

This became a point of friction for my mom, who values her family above all else. My siblings were questioned, with different family members reasoning with them: "It's just a meal, come and eat with us." When I appealed to my dad to step in and talk to them, he simply reminded me that "it's the White man's holiday honey, it doesn't really mean anything to us. We give thanks every day." I countered him with the argument about eating food together as a family. In his patient way, he just said, "Well, this is important to them."

Eventually, we all got over their absences and respected their choices, despite missing them at the table. Because after all, family is family and a good meal is always appreciated, regardless of when it's eaten. My dad eventually stopped celebrating Christmas and laid low for Easter. He was a man who loved to eat, so he was usually eating with family somewhere on holidays but was clear about his decision to leave the actual holiday behind, saying, "it's not my holiday. It's not our way."

As a Montessorian it became clear that my role as educator expanded to "educating" my families, as many were taught about Thanksgiving from the colonizer perspective. And as detailed by Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, history is written by the conquerors. How can anyone know the real story if the stories are all told in a way that canonizes war criminals? Don't get me started on who Columbus really was and the atrocities he committed in the name of his monarchy.



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When I was working in a lovely Montessori school in the colonial town of Williamsburg, I had the pleasure of having coworkers who were very open- minded and thoughtful. So, I was surprised when I came across an Elementary student who, while doing a fantastic job of researching and presenting on Sacagawea, she offered a very outdated craft involving headbands and feathers. I was beside myself that this craft was still out there alive in the world. I figured that in 2016 I was safe from ever seeing these stereotypes anywhere. But here it was, with very progressive people at the helm. This helped me realize that the issue was not one of malice but of pure ignorance. I took some deep breaths and thought first about our young student and her hard work and decided to reach out to her Guide with an email afterwards. The conversations that ensued were very important for myself and for those involved. The Guide apologized profusely and asked for help with how she could have done things differently. We talked about how the student could have researched Sacagawea's tribe and offered culturally appropriate foods or tools. Everyone understood then that good research doesn't just stop at something cute or easy but should actually look at things from the perspective of others.

Thanksgiving had similar old stereotypes popping up here in Virginia both at the schools where I worked as a Primary Lead and in my son's public school. I kept wondering "Why do people keep using these outdated feathers and headbands?" These situations lead to my understanding that people only know what they are taught. Their reality, upbringing, culture, etc., has sheltered and conditioned them to not seek answers that don't match their current reality, because different can be scary. I took it upon myself to research the real history of Thanksgiving and to provide lists of websites, books, articles, etc., that my peers and son's teachers could use to then present the facts to their students. Some peers were excited to see things from a new lens, some didn't understand the fuss, and some, well, I think they never bothered to open the email. Either way, my role is to offer, not to force; to present, not to deny; and to observe, not to judge.

Thanksgiving is not a simple holiday and comes with a lot of baggage, garbage, and promises for redefinition. I encourage you to investigate the truth and perhaps to redefine what the holiday means to you. These times of pandemic have given us all ample opportunity to question our lives and to delve into the meaning of it all. Above all, give thanks on this holiday, and better yet, build your gratitude into each day. No one truth is correct; all perspectives are real; and no one culture is ideal.

Nia:wen,  
Sinuda Kapalczynski

