

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode # 38: Meet Rachel Sayet, Mohegan Tribal Member

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Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use, but to connect the dots between nature and ourselves. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I'm delighted to welcome Rachel Sayet back with us here at the *Holistic Nature of Us*. Rachel is a Mohegan tribal member from Uncasville Connecticut. She has been working for the Mohegan Cultural Department since 2/13 and since then she has also been researching Native American foods. She is also an adjunct lecturer at the University of Hartford teaching a Native American Cultures class. She is a busy lady and I'm so delighted to have her here today to share her wisdom and her knowledge about Thanksgiving and the history of Thanksgiving and food. Welcome Rachel.

RACHEL: Hawatknee, thank you Judith.

JUDITH: Let's start with you. I know you'd like to talk to us about the true history behind Thanksgiving from your cultural perspective.

RACHEL: Yes, and also from a historical perspective. The modern day Thanksgiving holiday as we know it today is based on a myth of friendship in which the 1621 feast was kind of a happy gathering, you know a

friendship between what people called the Pilgrims and the Indians, which really we're talking about Puritans and other types of settlers as well as the Wampanoag specifically. The Wampanoag are the tribe. They have multiple groups within Wampanoag. They're the tribe that are in Plymouth as well as throughout the Cape Cod region. We have the Massape Wampanoag. We have the Herring Pond Wampanoag. We also have the Aquinnah Wampanoag of Gayhead Wampanoag out in Martha's Vineyard. So those are all subgroups of the Wampanoag tribe who were that group that people think of when they think of that first Thanksgiving. Although, unfortunately, many people don't even know the tribal name even though they are one of the most famous native tribes. And that's part of the problem with our school curriculums is that they're not teaching that history. They're not even telling people what tribe it is, let alone what really happened. And I have many friends who are Wampanoag, and I've done a lot of work with them. I actually wrote my entire master's thesis on that tribe and their traditional stories. They just have such a wealth of knowledge and there's actually a book that I would recommend to people that, I don't know how easily available it is, but it's called "Many Thanksgivings, Teaching Thanksgiving Including the Wampanoag Perspective" and it's published by the Boston Children's Museum (<http://www.worldcat.org/title/many-thanksgivings-teaching-thanksgiving-including-the-wampanoag-perspective-a-guide-for-educators/oclc/55046593>) and it's got a lot of great information from Wampanoag tribal members, quotes and things like that and I can share a quote later.

When you look back on that original time period, it was a time of some friendship and you could call it peace or you could call it peaceful relations between the settlers and the natives, because this is the early contact period. We're talking about the time when the settlers are really trying to make an impression on us saying that they're here to be friendly, and that they're trying to get the land. They're trying to get the resources. They're trying to do all these things, so you know they're basically tricking the natives into thinking that they are friendly and some of them were, right? I mean some of the people say that Winslow and Metacomet (or Metacom) who was the chief during King Philip's War that they were friends and things like that. And there were definitely relationships and alliances built throughout that time period. However, ...I'm sorry, Massasoit was the chief during the early time period. Metacom was later. But there definitely were alliances and friendly relations built and then as the time went on, it got worse and worse.

The colonists would encroach more and more upon the land, the same thing that was happening here at Mohegan, you know? Signing documents acknowledging that we'll give you this much but they're really going to take this much. It was never a fair situation throughout the history of the colonization of this country, as many people know. Because when you look at the amount of native land that's left, there's not very much. So, it just kept happening. They kept encroaching more and more. They're building their houses. They're going this. They're doing that and as the natives are seeing all this, they're wondering what's going on exactly? This doesn't feel like our homeland any more, you know? Pigs are being brought in, animals that disturb the environment, as I mentioned in the last podcast. All these things are happening and we're talking about just a period of 50 years or so where things change so drastically between those early 1600's and the late 1600's, just a couple of generations. It's crazy to even imagine what it would be like to be part of the Wampanoag tribe in that time period. And there's also a film, a PBS documentary "We Shall Remain" which is a good one. It has three parts and the first part is called after the Mayflower. I just showed that to my students. It gives you a very, very quick overview of that time period.

So, when you look at Thanksgiving specifically, what it was known to be is a 3-day meeting to negotiate land. It was really only hundreds of warriors present. There were some women that came later on and it was known that there were a couple of deer that were shot. There were a few deer shot for the meeting, so they could have some food and things like that. There are various accounts out there of the foods that would have been eaten and people say there was, obviously the deer and then there could have even been some lobster since that was so plentiful. You know things like squash and thing like that and we were talking cranberries. All that stuff was readily available and there are varying accounts of what was actually eaten. Most likely no turkey because turkey at that time period was very stringy, tough, it wasn't the type of turkey we would have today. We didn't even really eat turkey much because it wasn't something that was really, you know, it didn't have a lot of meat on it, and it would probably be similar to the ducks we would get the way the turkey was back then.

I think that it's important for people to realize that yes there was a time, somewhat, of friendship and these peaceful relations, but it didn't last long. What wound up happening right after Thanksgiving were very various massacres throughout New England, horrible wars and massacres. And

what the colonists would say every time that they had one of these battles which they would win, they would call it a day of thanks, Thanksgiving and so basically Thanksgiving is founded on murder and not on friendship because this holiday was not enacted until a couple of hundred years later. After that there were hundreds of battles, hundreds of Indian Wars and they were all called Thanksgivings in the early 1600s. We're talking about the Pequot War which was a massacre of all these Pequot men, women and children and after that a day of thanks, right? They feasted and then again King Philip's War which is known to be the bloodiest massacre in New England history and that was when we were going in to the 1670's. We have Massasoit who is the famous leader of the early 1600s and then his son Metacom who became the chief later on. And he was the one who King Philip's War is named after. People knew him as King Philip because he spoke English and he knew all these things. He was diplomatic, so it was just his other name.

Basically, what happened during that time period was the land had been encroached upon so much, so much had change that people were sick of it. They started fighting back and they started burning Puritan villages and things like that. For awhile they had the upper hand but very, very quickly that turned on them and during that war, I won't go into too much detail, you know there were all different tribes involved. We're talking about all of New England plus the Mohawks. It's crazy to think about it because you're just thinking about how people are getting back and forth and everything. But we were all a part of that war and Mohegans, this was one of the things that for me really stuck with me when I first started researching my history more because I really began this work in Graduate school. I grew-up with the traditions and the stories but not so much with the battles and the wars. When I was working at the Peabody Museum in 2008, this was when I started doing on research on these Wampanoags. I put together an exhibit on their Indian College in Harvard. And, that's a tragedy on its own where Wampanoags attended this Indian College and it basically was founded in order to raise money for the faltering school and four of them attended and only one survived to graduate because the of the diseases and everything and then that person died right after graduation.

JUDITH: Wow.

RACHEL: It's a tragic story. However, I learned a lot about everything that was going on in that time period and the Indian College. It is just a crazy

thing to think about because you're thinking like okay, there are colonists going to school there and there's natives and then there are all these wars breaking out. I couldn't even imagine. But they had us read a lot of the history as we were putting together the exhibit because we were starting out on this. Oh my god, Mohegans were chopping off fingers and hands of our Narragansett relatives. You know I'm part Narragansett myself and things like that were happening during King Philip's War and I just didn't know. I didn't know all that. I knew that we had befriended the colonists because people know Mohegan does, Uncas friend of the English that's our history. It's hard to grapple with it sometimes because they all made these decisions for a reason, all of these leaders. He was a great leader but look at the Pequot War. Look at King Philip's War. We're slaughtering our relatives and it still trickles down till today. Other tribes have these same issues where it's like, there's still some deep animosity in some people from these ancient wars. So, there's a lot to learn about all that stuff but in terms of Thanksgiving itself, I think just the concept that it wasn't this happy go lucky thing. It was a meeting and there were land negotiations happening, and there were all types of indigenous foods being served. We're not exactly sure 100% which ones were there but we know that some of those basic Thanksgiving foods were there. You know we didn't have regular potatoes and sweet potatoes most likely because they're not really from here. They're from farther south, you know? So that wouldn't be something we'd have. Beans, most likely there were some beans there.

JUDITH: Well you know what's interesting about the story, I just came across and met Larry Spotted Crow Mann who wrote the book, *The Mourning Road to Thanksgiving* and that's not morning m-o-r-n. It's mourning, m-o-u-r-n-i-n-g. Mourning Road to Thanksgiving which I highly recommend to our listeners to get because it's a great story, but the history is there. And I think that's what I feel sad about. There's a lot of history missing in our school system. We tend to romanticize certain aspects of our history without understanding the detail behind our history. I appreciate what you're sharing with us because in Larry's book too, he talks about the massacre of the Pequots and the people that were running the churches and the government at that time. This was in the 1600s, when the leaders said it's a day of thanksgiving for us. We are the conquerors. And I think that mentality is shifting and changing. We can no longer exist on this planet as command, control and conquer. We're really looking for ways of being grateful, appreciative and sustainable. And that's what I like about the work that you're doing and the messages that you have.

RACHEL: Definitely. Yeah and Larry's a great guy, amazing storyteller, writer. We actually, in the Mohegan book club that I was running, we actually read that book and brought him in, I think in March actually. And we had a little native feast, just rice and different things served and ham. He loved it. He had such a fun time. He was just enjoying catching up with people because I guess some of the tribal members at my tribe were some of the folks that he had gone out and done training talks with when he was a kid. But yeah, I like that book and it's also really great for kids. When you look at the morning that we're mourning, so that's the other point that I wanted to bring up.

There also is an event called, the National Day of Mourning, that takes place every year in Plymouth, MA. Many native people choose to go there instead of celebrating with their families, which others still choose to celebrate the harvest with their families. They may not think of it in the way that the general public thinks of it in that happy go lucky way my family celebrates Thanksgiving each year just as a harvest kind of thing. The National Day of Mourning, I believe that it was started in the 70s around the time that we were having the American Indian Movement and things like that popping up. And now a days there are performances that go along with it. There are marches and I think you can find all of the information on line. So, if people wanted to attend it, it's open to the public. I've always wanted to go but I haven't gone yet. But it seems like an amazing thing. It's more of just recognizing what happened here at Plymouth and you know there will still be food. There will still be some kind of some celebration component but it's more praying for those ancestors, recognizing what actually happened.

JUDITH: Right, right. And you know Joseph Bruchac, *Keepers of Life* with Michael Caduto, he talks about celebration and appreciation. What I see the healing for Thanksgiving is to get beyond the grieving is for us to connect in a different way. To connect from a true place of appreciation for the natural world, for our connection to each other, that we really are all one. And I know we're getting there. We're not there yet but being stewards of the earth, keeping strong for future generations and keeping in mind that any celebration joins us together. We all want the same things? I think we all want to have prosperity and good family relationships and good jobs and all that good stuff. So, for me, I see the healing of Thanksgiving being into more of a deeper understanding of appreciation, especially from the native

tradition because every day is a day of thanksgiving, not just one day out of the year.

RACHEL: Right, and that's another thing and I spoke about this a little bit in the last podcast. But traditionally, we as indigenous people, we would have multiple Thanksgivings. We'd have a Thanksgiving, we wouldn't call it Thanksgiving, but every moon cycle we would celebrate the season. And so now we're in the hunting moon, and this is according to our Mohegan traditions. You know we have these moons that are kind of in place. What is sad about the hunting moon actually is that Mohegan hunters watch the autumn sky for the eternal hunt of the sky bear. In the fall the cosmic hunter Orion slays the great celestial bear Ursa Major. When the bear is roasted, his blood and fat fall to the earth, coloring the leaves on the trees from green to crimson and gold. So that's kind of one of our stories that goes along with this time.

JUDITH: Oh, I like that because again there's a teaching in there, you know. I would think that if they're paying attention to the sky bear, they would know that it is the time to hunt and it has to be in a certain place in the sky to signal that time. And we have to remember that the indigenous folks didn't have encyclopedias and text books to keep track of things, so they were very aware with their oral tradition of paying attention. You know paying attention to the elements, to the sky, to the stars.

RACHEL: Right, exactly and I know we've talked about that we have to kind of force ourselves to do this on a daily basis now and it's important. And another thing that goes along with that, another kind of saying which they say in regard to the hunt and a lot of this is from my great aunt Gladys Tantaquidgeon who recorded many of these kind of miscellaneous nature folklore type of things. They wrote, "We never hunt on new moons which we can hang our powder horns. Such moons are wet and full of water. When the points of the moon turn downward, and the water runs out, the hunter knows he may set out on his journey destined to meet with fair weather."

JUDITH: There you go again, another teaching but done very poetically too. I like that. I like that very much. Do you have anything to add about some of the traditional foods for the holiday?

RACHEL: Yeah, I have some foods and then I have a prayer that I can share too, the Haudenosaunee address, I can share some of that, which we've done. The Iroquois Haudenosaunee address sometimes in my family as well which they speak at meetings, they use that address and I think that will be good to share with folks.

JUDITH: Oh, I'd love that.

RACHEL: And then in terms of foods, I mean my family is kind of funny because my grandmother is the Mohegan side and my grandfather is actually a Mayflower descendant.

JUDITH: That's interesting, wow!

RACHEL: Like many of us in New England. They're cute and they've always had the little Pilgrim and Indian salt shakers at their house, which is questionable, but you know it's a different generation. And they say something like when my grandfather came here, my grandmother was here to meet him like when the ships came in. And they have these cute little things that they say. And you know it's nice in some ways, right? It's like okay that's the positive. Bringing it together and acknowledging that we're all connected and we're all here, today right? But at the same time, that's not really what happened.

In terms of the food, we mostly eat kind of the traditional Thanksgiving foods with my family and we've done other things on occasion. Like one year we had lobster which was fantastic but let's do this more traditional. Or one year we had venison and things like that. We'll change it up but for the most part it's pretty much the traditional turkey, stuffing, you know that kind of stuff. There are definitely some native recipes that I can share. One thing that I did this week which was really fun was, I run this native food discussion group for Mohegan and we did a little farm tour on Wednesday of Hunts Brook Farm in Waterford Connecticut and the farm owner Digga was nice enough to prepare a meal for us. He knew that the Mohegan elders were coming. I recently gave a talk at Abenaki back at the end of September when I went up to Maine. It was amazing, amazing experience where they had a whole traditional clam bake prepared for me. You know local oysters, everything was local out of their waters. It was just beautiful. And they gifted me with some ancient squash, a 1,200-year-old seed variety.

JUDITH: Oh, my goodness, that is such a treasure!

RACHEL: It was amazing, and they gave me some corn varieties too. It's actually pumpkin. It's called Algonquin squash but it's actually, you know....it tastes more like a squash I would say but it's called a pumpkin. So anyway, I gave it to Digga and I said, you know, why don't we just do this for the food group, myself, the elders we can all share in this. He stuffed it with venison and it was really good. It was definitely not as sweet as what I thought the squash would have been, but I've seen that recipe kind of in different places, you know the stuffed pumpkin. I've had it before. Sherry Pocknit who I mentioned before, the master Wampanoag cook, she will do it stuffed with wild rice and cranberries and things like that. Again, I don't know how traditional these recipes are, but we would have had those ingredients. A lot of our recipes were so basically simple back then, you know? A lot of times there were definitely stews and things cooking throughout the day. A lot of it would have been, right, we cooked the clams. Or we just cooked venison over the fire. A lot of it was just very simple. Now a days people are just kind of fusing things together more with the native food. You can find it in varying recipes on that stuffed pumpkin one. Sherry did a feast at Foxwoods two years in a row where she did a traditional native feast and again traditional being that she was using ingredients that were traditional. She had the pumpkin thing because she also had rabbit and some pheasant, and she had geese and all different. It was a huge feast, but it incorporated a lo more of those game ingredients that we probably would've seen at that first Thanksgiving.

JUDITH: Right, right. Sounds great. Well from here let's go into the prayer that you wanted to share.

RACHEL: Great. So, some of you may have heard this. The Haudenosaunee, again the Iroquois their traditional name is the Haudenosaunee and the Iroquois are the six nations. A lot of them are in Up-State New York, going out into Canada. My tribe, the Mohegan, we actually lived amongst the Haudenosaunee for quite awhile. We have many similar traditions and things like that but it's really just, you know, it brings to light just that grateful thankfulness, that gratitude that you're speaking of that we all need to kind of engage in, in daily life for the plant life, for the animals, things like that, for everything, for the earth. So, I'll just read a couple of them because this prayer is pretty long, so I'll just read a couple of lines.

The People – Today we have gathered, and we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now we bring our minds together as one, as we give greeting and thanks to each other as people. Now our minds are one.

The Earth Mother - 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 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 greetings and thanks.

The Waters – We give thanks to all the waters of the world for quenching our thirst and providing us with strength. Water is life. We know its power in many forms; waterfalls and rains, mists and streams, rivers and oceans. With one mind we send greetings and thanks to the spirit of the water.

The Plants – Now we turn toward the vast fields of plant life. As far as the eye can see the plants grow working many wonders. They sustain many life forms. With our minds gathered together we give thanks and look forward to seeing the plant life for many generations to come. Now our minds are one.

Can I do one more?

JUDITH: Yes, please do. It's beautiful.

RACHEL: The Food Plant – With one mind we turn to honor and thank all the food plants we harvest from the garden. Since the beginning of time the grains, vegetables, beans and berries have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them too. We gather all the plant foods together as one and send them a greeting of thanks. Now our minds are one.

JUDITH: Beautiful! Thank you for that, that's lovely. And we'll have a transcript of the recording anyway and we'll have these sources listed in there for our listeners as well. That's beautiful!

Do you want to leave us with your contact information? I know you're a busy lady. You teach all over the place but how can folks reach you?

RACHEL: Yeah sounds good. So my website is www.rachelsayet.com and my e-mail is rbsayet@gmail.com and you can check my website for future lectures and events. I'll be doing a talk at Yale this coming Tuesday and that would be...I don't know what day this airs?

JUDITH: That's okay. This coming Tuesday so it will be put on before Thanksgiving.

RACHEL: Okay, so you can check my website for upcoming events. I'm actually going to be in Philadelphia coming up and in a couple of different places but feel free to reach out to me if you have questions or if you need recommendations on proper books to choose to educate the youth on Thanksgiving and things like that. I have a whole source list for that.

JUDITH: Wonderful! All right, well I want to thank you again Rachel. It's a pleasure to have you back here and thank you for sharing your stories and the history. I appreciate it.

RACHEL: Thank you!

JUDITH: This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website www.judithdreyer.com as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more.

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