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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

WIM LAVEN

This issue of *Peace Chronicle* centers the theme of “Gratitude”—a subject as deceptively simple as it is profoundly complex. In a world shaped by chronic uncertainty, extractive systems, and widespread suffering, gratitude may appear naïve or even inappropriate. But as many of our contributors reveal, gratitude is not always soft, or even possible. It can be defiant. It can be courageous. It can even be revolutionary.

When the call went out to the membership last November, the forecast was bad. Huge attacks to the peace and justice community were promised (readers can assess for themselves: things are better, worse, or pretty much what they expected). The editorial team saw this issue as an opportunity to continue the meaningful reflection and solidarity that animated our “Forgiveness” edition and our 2024 conference, *We Are All Connected: Fostering Intersectionality and Solidarity*, held in Niagara. Gratitude, like forgiveness, lives in tension with grief, injustice, and structural violence. And like forgiveness, it is not about forgetting or submission—it is often about how we remember, how we endure, and how we resist.

In back and forth with a contributor, and there were multiple people who found “Gratitude” was impossible, I wrote:

“Gratitude is an oxymoron; all I know is worry. I am not happy people are alive, I only worry they will die tomorrow. I feel like this is the only thing I have known for too long. Even in quiet moments, when nothing is wrong, I scan for what could go wrong next—what illness, what accident, what silent unraveling might already be underway. Celebration feels dishonest, like dancing on thin ice while pretending not to hear the cracks. Joy doesn’t land; it ricochets off the armor I’ve built around fear. I keep bracing for news I don’t want, half-listening for the phone to ring, always rehearsing grief just in case it arrives unannounced.”

I get what you're saying, criticize 'gratitude,' say it is extinct, or question if it ever existed. Is it possible to use the word once? Even to deny it?"

I tried to put myself into the shoes of others, and meet the needs of moment, but, again, the issue comes up short despite the best efforts of the *Peace Chronicle* team.

This issue comes at a time when many of us feel frayed—by political regression, medical exhaustion, and personal loss. My own gratitude, increasingly, has been a deliberate practice, not a spontaneous feeling. This shift has made me think differently about what it means to serve, to lead, and to edit this magazine. I want the membership to live your best lives, practices in gratitude and reduce stress and anxiety. This can lower your blood pressure and cortisol levels, which, in turn, can strengthen your cognitive capacity and immune system. I personally want you all to know how important you are, and affirm that it is important for you to be at your physical and mental best (whatever that might be in this moment).

I am deeply grateful to the contributors who entrusted us with their work in this issue.

We begin with **Ali Syverson**, whose reflection, *Preserving USAID's Legacy Through the Arts*, is accompanied by her cover painting, *From the American People*. Syverson's piece wrestles with political erasure, environmental degradation, and the fragility of public memory. Her art is both tribute and protest, a reminder that what is deleted from government servers may still live on in paint, witness, and truth.

Gabriel Ertsgaard offers two strong contributions to this issue. In *Can Pacifists Be Grateful to Military Veterans? (An American Perspective)*, he reflects on the tension between nonviolence and military service. He argues with nuance, that honoring moral courage—especially in those who resist unjust wars—can deepen our shared humanity. His second piece, an interview titled *Storytelling Can Reshape People's Lives*, features a conversation with **Lori Kozlowski**. It's a compelling reminder that storytelling is a form of activism, capable of shaping empathy, policy, and cultural memory. Kozlowski's gratitude for the power of narrative and for those who shaped her path is palpable. I think we can all benefit from help in shifting from mythologies of war to narratives of social responsibility and justice.

P.K. McCary gives a powerful meditation. In *Gratitude and Defiance: A Manifesto of Life's Longing for Itself*, she offers a deeply personal reflection rooted in the brief life of her granddaughter and the long shadow of historical trauma. Through the Sankofa Initiative, McCary links the past and the future, mourning and resistance, declaring gratitude not as submission but as sacred rebellion. Her piece, which I have read and reread, resonates as a poetic and political act. We should never forget that the personal is political.

LaKeeta Prunty returns with a personal reflection simply titled *Gratitude*. Her contribution complements her earlier work on forgiveness by focusing on intentionality in everyday relationships—with family, friends, and students. She speaks to the vulnerability of expressing thanks, and to how faith informs a life of service and compassion.

Randall Amster shares three poems under the title Gratitude Poems. These verses—The Land Was Not Ours, Beginning Again, and Moving Forward—I read them as a call for us to practice or return to humility, repair, and renewal. They highlight gratitude as spiritual practice and environmental ethic; they remind us that our survival may depend not on power, but on remembering how to say thank you to the earth, and to each other. Survivor stories work in different ways, but I've often noted that people who have a reason to live... sometimes people live just to make sure they tell the story.

Rivera Sun contributes a moving review essay, They Look At Us With Compassion – A Review of Portraits of Peacemakers by Robert Shetterly. As she stands among the painted faces of changemakers—past and present—Sun explores how visual storytelling honors the lineage of resistance and inspires continued action. Her own portrait is now among them. This piece captures that full-circle moment with deep respect and unflinching clarity. Rivera has been a friend to me in talking about how we can write about peace, justice, and nonviolence for years. Gratitude for friendship, it should not be taken for granted

Izzeddin Hawamda, in A Reflection on Edward Said's Out of Place: An Examination of Gratitude?, meditates on exile, identity, and literary inheritance. Drawing from personal memory and the wisdom of Edward Said, Hawamda writes with lyrical urgency about what it means to feel unmoored from home and yet still rooted in struggle. Gratitude, for him, is sacred and defiant—a form of survival.

Pushpa Iyer asks us to interrogate gratitude itself. In her contribution, she challenges the ways gratitude has been weaponized within Indian cultural and religious traditions to enforce hierarchy and submission. She advocates for a decolonized practice of gratitude—one based in dignity, reciprocity, and shared humanity. Her analysis is both personal and philosophical, and it pushes us to think beyond social scripts. I have always appreciated my friend's reminders to think about how ideas, even gratitude, have been colonized. It is a valuable lens.

I've added my own reflection, titled *Gratitude and Choice and Everything Else*. It's an attempt to be honest about the complexity of gratitude in a life that has been reshaped by disability, loss, and change. I write about my father, about returning to work as a postal carrier, about memory, teaching, and the strange clarity that comes when everything requires effort. I write not from a place of ease, but from the same place many of our contributors do: gratitude as deliberate practice. My autoethnography also includes my mother, she sees what's happening during democratic backsliding in the U.S. and remembers life under the Tonton Macoute. It has been a sincere pleasure to have the chance to share my stories while also amplifying others' voices.

Finally, on the back cover, we feature **Hope**, whose visual art and statement reflect on her great-grandfather's legacy and the wisdom of giving without expectation. Her piece—centered on a reimaged Buddha beneath a yellow rose tree—blends spiritual imagery, family memory, and ethical insight. It's a quiet but profound closing to this issue.

As always, I owe thanks to the editorial team, our readers, and our contributors. This issue, like the last, offers more questions than answers. What does it mean to be grateful when systems are failing us? How do we express thanks in ways that do not excuse harm? What does it look like to be thankful for people—not just for what they give us, but for who they are?

Our world is on fire. And still, we give thanks. Not as denial. But as declaration. Not to hide the pain, but to say: we are still here. We still love. We still serve. We still believe. I appreciate you.

In gratitude,

Wim Laven

Editor-in-Chief, Peace Chronicle

BEYOND THANKS: DECOLONIZING GRATITUDE

PUSHPA IYER

Before I can speak about gratitude, I must first consider what I have internalized—what some call indoctrination. I call it the colonization of the mind. Not the colonization by Western empires but by the moral universes embedded in our own mythologies.

Let me explain. Western colonization was the takeover of lands, economies, cultures, traditions, and languages, but most importantly, it was the colonization of the mind. One where the colonized and their knowledge were inferior to that of the colonizers, the Western euro-centric masters.

If colonization of the mind was one of the primary goals, as well as the impact of the colonization process, then I argue that Indian mythology, for all its spiritual and cultural resonance, has also served as a powerful colonizing force on the mind. Through stories passed off as sacred truth, it imposed patriarchal, caste-based, and moral hierarchies that shaped our emotional and social lives.

These myths dictated submission. They taught us who was worthy of reverence and who was not. They created binaries of good and evil, loyalty and betrayal, high and low caste/ tribes, divine and earthly—all reinforced through the moral currency of gratitude. Gratitude, in this context, was not just an emotional response; it was a social contract, a tool of psychological and cultural control.

Gratitude became a way of keeping people in their place. It demanded deference. It rewarded silence. It prescribed virtue not as resistance but as obedience.

This is why I speak of the colonization of the mind and what the decolonization process entails.

Because decolonization is not only about challenging Western imperialism—it's about undoing the colonization of our inner worlds. It is about confronting the emotional hierarchies we inherited without consent. It is about unsettling the stories that taught us to equate gratitude with subservience and to see questioning as ingratitude. It is about reclaiming a version of gratitude rooted in mutuality, dignity, and complexity—not fear, obligation, or erasure.

Learning Gratitude from Myths

At some point in our lives, most of us have engaged in acts of kindness or assistance toward others. Depending on the context, many of us have received expressions of gratitude, whether through a simple “thank you” or more elaborate and emotional acknowledgments. But how do we experience gratitude—both as givers and receivers? And what lies beneath that experience?

I find myself reflecting on this frequently. I confess that I often carry an implicit expectation when I do something for others—that they will acknowledge it. I'm surprised at how easily I feel slighted when this acknowledgment is absent. But when gratitude is expressed, I feel seen, valued, and emotionally moved. Yet, even then, a quiet voice inside me is evaluating whether the words match their actions. If they don't, something hardens, and in those instances where their actions reflect their gratitude, I have forged lasting relationships and developed trust with those individuals. Yet, I am mindful of an unspoken expectation that these individuals will not act in opposition to me—a sentiment that may stem from the inherent power dynamics tied to gratitude itself.

My reflections have been articulated by scholars who have framed our expectations of doing good as the embeddedness of moral emotions (such as gratitude) in historical and cultural structures of power (Ahmed, 2012; Mignolo, 2011). These emotions are not neutral. They are shaped by the social context in which we experience them, the cultural stories we inherit, and the hierarchies that structure our relationships.

I come from a generation in India where saying “thanks” in casual, transactional ways wasn't part of our daily lexicon. I remember writing to my parents during my first trip abroad in my late teens, slightly ridiculing people who said 'thank you' for the smallest things, such as a daughter thanking her mother for passing the salt at the dinner table.

It seemed almost comedic to us as a family. However, that didn't mean my parents didn't teach me to feel and express gratitude.

My parents used stories—myths—of Indian gods and goddesses to teach us the importance of showing gratitude toward those who did something deeply meaningful for us. These myths often carried powerful yet rigid lessons of gratitude, both giving and receiving, and were thus woven into the moral fabric of our consciousness.

One of the most powerful stories was that of Karna, the son of the Sun God (Surya), and Kunti, a young princess who was granted a divine boon to bear children when she wished for one. Unmarried at the time, she decided to test out the boon, and Karna was born. Afraid of social sanction, she abandoned the child at birth. Karna was raised by a lower-caste charioteer family, unaware of his royal lineage. However, nature kicked in and being from the warrior caste, he yearned for the battlefield even as a young boy. He struggled hard to learn the skills of warfare, eventually finding a teacher in Parashurama, a revered sage known for his mastery of weapons. But Karna hid his true identity, and claimed to be a Brahmin, knowing that his lower caste status would disqualify him from training. When Parashurama discovered this deception, he cursed Karna.

The curse did come true years later but, in the meantime, Karna's desire to prove himself as a warrior despite these setbacks remained undiminished. What changed the course of his life was his encounter with Duryodhana, the eldest Kaurava prince in the Mahabharata and the central antagonist of the epic. At a public tournament, Karna was humiliated for his caste and denied the right to challenge the princes. Duryodhana, saw his talent, stepped in and immediately crowned him king of Anga—a symbolic act that gave Karna legitimacy, dignity, and a place in the royal court. This gesture bound Karna to Duryodhana thoroughly. It was a turning point that reshaped Karna's entire identity.

Karna's loyalty to Duryodhana was absolute. He saw in Duryodhana not just a benefactor but someone who had recognized his worth when the world rejected him. And in return, Karna gave him unwavering allegiance—even when Duryodhana's choices led him down a dark path. Even when Duryodhana fought Karna's own brothers, the Pandavas – the children of his mother Kunti – in the epic battle Mahabharata. Karna knew that Duryodhana's cause was unjust, especially toward the end. He knew he was fighting against his own brothers. He knew the dharma of the moment was complicated.

Yet, he chose to stand by Duryodhana because of a profound sense of gratitude and debt.

That is the weight of gratitude when it is entangled with power, recognition, and love. Karna didn't just feel thankful—he felt bound. Moreover, Karna's gratitude was so complete, so unquestioning, that it erased his own sense of moral judgment. Gratitude here was not liberating—it was binding.

Growing up with these myths, I internalized a view of gratitude that was often binary—an all-or-nothing proposition. Either one expressed unwavering loyalty, as Karna did, or was seen as ungrateful, disloyal, and even dishonorable. These stories, powerful as they were, left little room for complexity or negotiation. Gratitude was not just an emotion; it was a moral and social contract, one that demanded absolute allegiance. Spivak (1999) might refer to this as an example of “epistemic violence”—where inherited cultural knowledge erases nuance and imposes rigid categories.

I was also told the story of Sudama and Krishna—a tale that, on the surface, appears to offer a more tender and divine framing of gratitude. Sudama was a childhood friend of Krishna. As adults, their lives diverged: Krishna, the incarnation of God Vishnu on earth, became a king, while Sudama remained in deep poverty. When Sudama finally visited Krishna on his wife's urging to seek financial help, he brought a humble gift of flattened rice, which Krishna favored when they were children. He came without expectation, asking for nothing. The story goes that Krishna received him with great joy, embraced him with love, and was touched by the fact that Sudama sought him out after all these years. Sudama decided not to ask Krishna for any help. Krishna later transformed Sudama's modest life into one of abundance, and Sudama and his wife became followers and worshippers of Krishna, the God.

Teachers and parents always told this story as the ideal true friendship: a man who didn't ask and a god who gave without being asked. But even here, I find myself pausing. The story elevates Sudama's humility and Krishna's generosity but also reinforces a clear hierarchy. One friend is divine, powerful, and benevolent; the other is worthy because of his silent suffering, humility, and modesty. The gratitude in this relationship takes on another form, presenting itself as devotion. The friendship is not one of equals—it is full of asymmetry, sanctified by grace rather than mutuality.

Today, we still expect those in marginal positions to be grateful for what should be their right. A beggar should thank us for a dollar, but if they dare ask for shoes instead, we might call them ungrateful. Refugees, scholarship recipients, domestic workers—many are reminded to “be grateful” for support and tolerance. Gratitude becomes a performance of humility and silence. Those who receive help must not critique it. They must not ask for more. They must not outgrow the hand that feeds. On the other hand, those who extend help are often afforded emotional leverage—able to judge or withhold future assistance depending on whether proper gratitude is displayed. Gratitude becomes a system of control.

Among all the stories I grew up with, Eklavya’s haunted me the most—not because of what he received, but because of what he gave away in the name of gratitude. Dronacharya—guru to royal princes, protector of upper-caste supremacy—refused to teach Eklavya because of his tribal identity. Eklavya made a statue of Drona out of clay and worshipped it. He practiced and self-taught himself with Drona’s statue in the background. When Drona discovered Eklavya’s skill, he demanded his thumb as “guru dakshina” (a traditional offering to one’s teacher), ensuring he could never surpass Drona’s favored student, Arjuna, one of the Pandava princes. Eklavya gave it willingly, out of a deep, internalized sense of gratitude and duty. But should he have been grateful? Eklavya was never Drona’s student, yet he was still bound by the rituals of gratitude. He was asked to offer guru dakshina not for knowledge received but for *daring* to learn without permission. This was not gratitude—it was control masquerading as reverence.

The thumb may be metaphorical today, but the price of entry into dominant spaces still involves loss—of voice, dissent, and autonomy. Take, for example, education -- students from marginalized backgrounds—Dalit, Indigenous, first-generation learners—often find themselves excluded from full participation in elite institutions. When they succeed despite these barriers, their achievements are framed as exceptional rather than a call to question the gatekeeping itself. And when these students express frustration with the curriculum, for example, or demand equity, they are often branded as ungrateful to the very system that “allowed” them to succeed.

Eklavya didn’t just lose his thumb—he lost the right to fight his suppression. And he thanked the very system that made him less.

His story, to me, is a metaphor for how structural power demands symbolic repayment from those it has historically excluded. The narrative doesn't ask why he was denied in the first place—it celebrates his sacrifice. His silence became his virtue. His obedience, his glory. His sacrifice turned into a lesson for all of us, especially for those marginalized, on how gratitude and respect is shown to your teachers. Thankfully, I have never been a student of someone like Dronacharya, who expected such a costly form of gratitude.

These stories shaped how I learned to think about gratitude: not just as a virtue, but often as an expectation, even a demand—especially from those with less power. Gratitude became binary: either total loyalty or betrayal. And this framing persists in more subtle ways in the modern world.

In both myth and life, the giver of help is centered, while the receiver is expected to respond with submission, admiration, or even sacrifice. Rarely do we ask how gratitude is experienced when power is uneven.

And so, I come to my central question: How can we decolonize gratitude itself?

Decolonizing Gratitude

First, let me turn to scholars like Devdutt Pattanaik (2006), who urge us to approach myths with an eye for nuance and multiplicity. Myths, he says, are not static moral lessons but living narratives—filled with contradictions, complexities, and evolving interpretations. While I have critiqued the ways these stories reinforce hierarchies and expectations around gratitude, Pattanaik's work reminds us that these myths also express deep human dilemmas about duty, identity, love, justice, and sacrifice. These are stories that resist simple categorization. Holding that tension may be the first step in decolonizing our minds—one, I must admit, I do not manage well in this article.

Next, decolonization is about reimagining relationships. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) reminds us that decolonization is also about reclaiming knowledge systems and values rooted in justice, mutuality, and dignity. Gratitude, as it is practiced and taught, often reflects colonial and hierarchical values. When we interrogate those values, we open up space for new, liberating forms of relationality.

To decolonize gratitude, we need to rethink what it means to feel and express thankfulness. Many of us who offer or receive thanks unconsciously inhabit roles scripted by systems of virtue, superiority, and deference. This is not a personal failing—it is what we have inherited from our past. This dynamic is especially acute in helping professions or social justice work, where “serving” others can unconsciously carry the expectation of emotional reward or reverence.

So, what might it mean to reimagine gratitude as something that does not bind, diminish, or silence?

Here are some reflective practices I am trying to work with:

- Noticing the script: I try to become aware of when I expect to be thanked or when I thank others in a way that implies debt or obligation. Where does that expectation come from? Is it about acknowledgment or control?
- Practicing mutuality: I remind myself that gratitude should not elevate one person over another. It should be a shared expression of care and recognition, not a ranking of worth.
- Holding space for critique: Decolonized gratitude allows people to be both thankful and critical. If someone says, “Thank you—but this wasn’t enough,” or “Thank you—but I felt unseen,” I want to learn to hear that without defensiveness. Genuine relationship begins there.
- Practicing emotional self-awareness and boundaries: Research in social psychology highlights how gratitude can sometimes create feelings of indebtedness or pressure (Tsang, 2006). Developing awareness of these emotions and maintaining healthy boundaries helps people express and receive gratitude without guilt, obligation, or emotional imbalance.

These steps are not revolutionary in themselves. Many of us already know them. However, the work lies in remembering and practicing them, especially when our old instincts take over. Decolonizing gratitude is not about rejecting appreciation—it’s about refusing to let thanks become a tool of power.

I'm learning to sit with my own reactions—when I feel lifted by gratitude or unsettled by its absence. These moments show me where old patterns still live, that my mind is still colonized. I don't have it all figured out, but I'm trying to unlearn the need for affirmation and to experience gratitude as a mutual connection, not a moral expectation. It's slow work, but it matters.

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