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Book Club Guide

Braiding Sweetgrass

By Robin Wall Kimmerer

About the Author

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She is the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, which has earned Kimmerer wide acclaim. Her first book, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for outstanding nature writing, and her other work has appeared in *Orion, Whole Terrain*, and numerous scientific journals. She tours widely and has been featured on NPR's *On Being* with Krista Tippett and in 2015 addressed the general assembly of the United Nations on the topic of "Healing Our Relationship with Nature." Kimmerer is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, and the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, whose mission is to create programs which draw on the wisdom of both indigenous and scientific knowledge for our shared goals of sustainability.

As a writer and a scientist, her interests in restoration include not only restoration of ecological communities, but restoration of our relationships to land. She holds a BS in Botany from SUNY ESF, an MS and PhD in Botany from the University of Wisconsin and is the author of numerous scientific papers on plant ecology, bryophyte ecology, traditional knowledge and restoration ecology. As a writer and a scientist, her interests in restoration include not only restoration of ecological communities, but restoration of our relationships to land. She lives on an old farm in upstate New York, tending gardens both cultivated and wild.

Retrieved from: https://www.robinwallkimmerer.com/about

About the Book

As a botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer has been trained to ask questions of nature with the tools of science. As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, she embraces the notion that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer brings these two lenses of knowledge together to take us on “a journey that is every bit as mythic as it is scientific, as sacred as it is historical, as clever as it is wise” (Elizabeth Gilbert).

Drawing on her life as an indigenous scientist, a mother, and a woman, Kimmerer shows how other living beings—asters and goldenrod, strawberries and squash, salamanders, algae, and sweetgrass—offer us gifts and lessons, even if we’ve forgotten how to hear their voices. In a rich braid of reflections that range from the creation of Turtle Island to the forces that threaten its flourishing today, she circles toward a central argument: that the awakening of a wider ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgment and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world. For only when we can hear the languages of other beings will we be capable of understanding the generosity of the earth, and learn to give our own gifts in return.

Retrieved from: https://www.robinwallkimmerer.com/books

Discussion Questions

1. In the story, “Skywoman Falling” [3-10], you learn that Skywoman lived as if her children’s future mattered. What questions come to mind when you imagine the Earth and environment fifty years from now? One hundred years from now?

2. The “Gift of Strawberries” [22-32] introduces the reader to the concept of “the essence of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity.” [28] How can “the relationship of gratitude and reciprocity that has been developed increase the evolutionary fitness of both plant and animal” [30] from your perspective?

3. “Learning the Grammar of Animacy” [48-59] introduces the concept of communing with nature by getting to know more about plants and recognizing that they are not inanimate objects. If you addressed the plants in your neighborhood as something other than “it,” would that change your relationship to the environment? How?

4. In the story “Maple Sugar Moon” [63-71], Nanabozho finds that people have grown lazy due to the bounty of the first Maple trees. Nanabozho removes this culture of plenty by diluting the sap and teaching the people to honor and respect the gift of the Maple tree. Can you draw any parallels from this story and our consumer-driven economy?

5. In “Allegiance to Gratitude” [103-117], Kimmerer introduces the Thanksgiving Address used by the indigenous peoples to give thanks to the land. She writes that “it is the credo for a culture of gratitude.” [115] How does the Thanksgiving Address support the concept of “our mutual allegiance as human delegates to the democracy of the species”? [116] What does that mean to you?

6. What does each of The Three Sisters [128] —corn, beans, and squash—bring to their reciprocal relationship? How can this partnership create a stronger community? Can you think of other examples of similar relationships in your community?

7. In “Putting Down Roots” [254-267], Kimmerer writes, “Losing a plant can threaten a culture in much the same way as losing a language.” [261] Discuss the sweetgrass’s decline, which Kimmerer outlines in this chapter. How can plants repeat the history of their people? [262]

8. Reflect upon Kimmerer’s statement “environmentalism becomes synonymous with dire predictions and powerless feelings.” [327] Share an action you’ve observed

someone take, or one you would like to take, that transcends powerlessness and invites deeper ecological consciousness.

9. Based upon the central themes in Braiding Sweetgrass, explain the differences between reciprocity and the current ecological movement known as sustainability. Can you think of other authors, activists, or artists working to achieve Kimmerer's idea of reciprocity?

10. Since Braiding Sweetgrass was released in paperback in 2014, artists of all disciplines have been inspired by and created work in honor of Kimmerer's book. Visual artist Jenny Holzer projected dozens of quotes from the book on the buildings of Glasgow during the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, including "Our leaders willfully ignore the wisdom and the models of every other species on the planet—except of course those that have gone extinct" [309] and "Climate change will unequivocally defeat economies that are based on constant taking without giving in return." [375] (https://vimeo.com/668256025/8341a34dd0) Videographer Phoebe Mussman created a short film entitled "I Must Return the Gift" (https://vimeo.com/639233670) with The Resilient Activist using excerpts as an immersive entryway into indigenous wisdom and resilience. Share an idea for an art project grounded in Kimmerer's ideas of reciprocity, attention, and reconnection to the land that you would like to create.

Retrieved from: https://milkweed.org/book/braiding-sweetgrass

Author Interview

Krista Tippett: Few books have been more eagerly passed from hand to hand with delight in these last years than Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. I interviewed her in 2015, and it quickly became a much-loved show, as her voice was just rising in common life. She is a botanist and also a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She's written, "Science polishes the gift of seeing; Indigenous traditions work with gifts of listening and language." An expert in moss, a bryologist, she describes mosses as "the coral reefs of the forest." She opens a sense of wonder and humility for the intelligence in all kinds of life that we are used to naming and imagining as inanimate.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a professor of environmental biology at the State University of New York and the founding director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. She works with tribal nations on environmental problem-solving and sustainability. Part of that work is about recovering lineages of knowledge that were made illegal in the policies of tribal assimilation, which did not fully end in the U.S. until the 1970s. Robin Wall Kimmerer's grandfather attended one of the now infamous boarding schools designed to "civilize" Indian youth, and she only learned the Anishinaabe language of her people as an adult.

So I'm just so intrigued, when I look at the way you introduce yourself. It will often include that you are from the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, from the bear clan, adopted into the eagles. And I'd love for you to just take us a little bit into that world you're describing, that you came from, and ask, also, the question I always ask, about what was the spiritual and religious background of that world you grew up in — of your childhood?

RWK: I'd like to start with the second part of that question. I was lucky enough to grow up in the fields and the woods of upstate New York. I was lucky in that regard, but disappointed, also, in that I grew up away from the Potawatomi people, away from all of our people, by virtue of history — the history of removal and the taking of children to the Indian boarding schools. And so in a sense, the questions that I had about who I was in the world, what the world was like, those are questions that I really wished I'd had a cultural elder to ask; but I didn't.

But I had the woods to ask. And there's a way in which just growing up in the woods and the fields, they really became my doorway into culture. In the absence of human elders, I had plant elders, instead.

KT: And it sounds like you did not grow up speaking the language of the Potawatomi nation, which is Anishinaabe; is that right?

RWK: That's right. The language is called Anishinaabemowin, and the Potawatomi language is very close to that.

KT: I was intrigued to see that, just a mention, somewhere in your writing, that you take part in a Potawatomi language lunchtime class that actually happens in Oklahoma, and you're there via the internet, because I grew up, actually, in Potawatomi County in Oklahoma. And having told you that, I never knew or learned anything about what that word meant, much less the people and the culture it described.

RWK: That is so interesting, to live in a place that is named that. And this is the ways in which cultures become invisible, and the language becomes invisible, and through history and the reclaiming of that, the making culture visible again, to speak the language in even the tiniest amount so that it's almost as if it feels like the air is waiting to hear this language that had been lost for so long. So it delights me that I can be learning an ancient language by completely modern technologies, sitting at my office, eating lunch, learning Potawatomi grammar.

KT: So when you said a minute ago that you spent your childhood — and actually, the searching questions of your childhood somehow found expression and the closest that you came to answers — in the woods. And it seems to me that that's such a wonderful way to fill out something else you've said before, which is that you were born a botanist, which is a way to say this, which was the language you got as you entered college at forestry school at State University of New York.

RWK: Yes. And so there was no question but that I'd study botany in college. It was my passion — still is, of course. But the botany that I encountered there was so different than the way that I understood plants. Plants were reduced to object. What was supposedly important about them was the mechanism by which they worked, not what their gifts were, not what their capacities were. They were really thought of as objects, whereas I thought of them as subjects. And that shift in worldview was a big hurdle for me, in entering the field of science.

KT: One way you've said it is that that science was asking different questions, and you had other questions, other language, and other protocol that came from Indigenous culture. There's one place in your writing where you're talking about beauty, and you're talking about a question you would have, which is why two flowers are beautiful together, and that that question, for example, would violate the division that is necessary for objectivity. But then you do this wonderful thing where you actually give a scientific analysis of the statement that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, which would be one of the critiques of a question like that, that it's not really asking a question that is rational or scientific. Do you know what I'm talking about?

RWK: I do. I do, exactly.
KT: Flesh that out, because that's such an interesting juxtaposition of how you actually started to both experience the dissonance between those kinds of questionings and also started to weave them together, I think.

RWK: Yes, it goes back to the story of when I very proudly entered the forestry school as an 18-year-old, and telling them that the reason that I wanted to study botany was

because I wanted to know why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together. These are these amazing displays of this bright, chrome yellow, and deep purple of New England aster, and they look stunning together. And the two plants so often intermingle, rather than living apart from one another, and I wanted to know why that was. I thought that surely, in the order and the harmony of the universe, there would be an explanation for why they looked so beautiful together.

And I was told that that was not science; that if I was interested in beauty, I should go to art school — which was really demoralizing, as a freshman. But I came to understand that that question wasn't going to be answered by science, that science as a way of knowing explicitly sets aside our emotions, our aesthetic reactions to things. We have to analyze them as if they were just pure material, and not matter and spirit together.

And yes, as it turns out, there's a very good biophysical explanation for why those plants grow together, so it's a matter of aesthetics, and it's a matter of ecology. Those complementary colors of purple and gold together, being opposites on the color wheel, they're so vivid they actually attract far more pollinators than if those two grew apart from one another. So each of those plants benefits by combining its beauty with the beauty of the other.

And that's a question that science can address, certainly, as well as artists. And I just think that Why is the world so beautiful? is a question that we all ought to be embracing.

KT: Now, you did work for a time at Bausch & Lomb, after college. You went into a more traditional scientific endeavor. I wonder, was there a turning point — a day or a moment where you felt compelled to bring these things together in the way you could, these different ways of knowing and seeing and studying the world?

RWK: Yes. I think the place that it became most important to me to start to bring these ways of knowing back together again is when, as a young Ph.D. botanist, I was invited to a gathering of traditional plant knowledge holders. And I was just there to listen. And it was such an amazing experience — four days of listening to people whose knowledge of the plant world was so much deeper than my own.

KT: And were these elders? Were these Indigenous teachers?

RWK: They were. Their education was on the land and with the plants and through the oral tradition. But I just sat there and soaked in this wonderful conversation, which interwove mythic knowledge and scientific knowledge into this beautiful, cultural, natural history. And for me it was absolutely a watershed moment, because it made me remember those things that starting to walk the science path had made me forget, or attempted to make me forget. And I just saw that their knowledge was so much more whole and rich and nurturing that I wanted to do everything that I could to bring those ways of knowing back into harmony.

KT: You said at one point that you had gotten to the point where — you were talking about the names of plants — "I was teaching the names and ignoring the songs." So what do you mean by that?

RWK: One of the difficulties of moving in the scientific world is that when we name something, often with a scientific name, this name becomes almost an end to inquiry. We sort of say, Well, we know it now. We're able to systematize it and put a Latin binomial on it, so it's ours. We know what we need to know.

But that is only in looking, of course, at the morphology of the organism, at the way that it looks. It ignores all of its relationships. It's such a mechanical, wooden representation of what a plant really is. And we reduce them tremendously, if we just think about them as physical elements of the ecosystem.

KT: So this notion of the earth's animacy, of the animacy of the natural world and everything in it, including plants, is very pivotal to your thinking and to the way you explore the natural world, even scientifically, and draw conclusions, also, about our relationship to the natural world. So I really want to delve into that some more. You say that there's a grammar of animacy. Talk about that a little bit.

RWK:: Yes. This comes back to what I think of as the innocent or childlike way of knowing — actually, that's a terrible thing to call it. We say it's an innocent way of knowing, and in fact, it's a very worldly and wise way of knowing. And that kind of deep attention that we pay as children is something that I cherish, that I think we all can cherish and reclaim, because attention is that doorway to gratitude, the doorway to wonder, the doorway to reciprocity. And it worries me greatly that today's children can recognize 100 corporate logos and fewer than 10 plants. That means they're not paying attention.

In the English language, if we want to speak of that sugar maple or that salamander, the only grammar that we have to do so is to call those beings an "it." And if I called my grandmother or the person sitting across the room from me an "it," that would be so rude, right? And we wouldn't tolerate that for members of our own species, but we not only tolerate it, but it's the only way we have in the English language to speak of other beings, is as "it." In Potawatomi, the cases that we have are animate and inanimate, and it is impossible in our language to speak of other living beings as "its."

KT: So living beings would all be animate, all living beings, anything that was alive, in the Potawatomi language.

RWK: Yes, absolutely.
KT: And inanimate would be, what, materials? Or …

RWK: You raise a very good question, because the way that, again, Western science would give the criteria for what does it mean to be alive is a little different than you might find in traditional culture, where we think of water as alive, as rocks as alive; alive in

different ways, but certainly not inanimate. Generally, the inanimate grammar is reserved for those things which humans have created.

KT: Like a table, something like that?

RWK: Yes, exactly. Right, yes.

KT: And I have to say — and I'm sure you know this, because I'm sure you get this reaction a lot, especially in scientific circles — it's unfamiliar and slightly uncomfortable in Western ears, to hear someone refer to plants as persons. It's unfamiliar. Does that happen a lot? Is that kind of a common reaction?

RWK: Sure, sure. Scientists are very eager to say that we oughtn't to personify elements in nature, for fear of anthropomorphizing. And what I mean, when I talk about the personhood of all beings, plants included, is not that I am attributing human characteristics to them — not at all. I'm attributing plant characteristics to plants. Just as it would be disrespectful to try and put plants in the same category, through the lens of anthropomorphism, I think it's also deeply disrespectful to say that they have no consciousness, no awareness, no being-ness at all. And this denial of personhood to all other beings is increasingly being refuted by science itself.

KT: That's interesting.

RWK: I can't think of a single scientific study in the last few decades that has demonstrated that plants or animals are dumber than we think. It's always the opposite, right? What we're revealing is the fact that they have extraordinary capacities, which are so unlike our own, but we dismiss them because, well, if they don't do it like animals do it, then they must not be doing anything, when in fact, they're sensing their environment, responding to their environment, in incredibly sophisticated ways. The science which is showing that plants have capacity to learn, to have memory — we're at the edge of a wonderful revolution in really understanding the sentience of other beings.

Selection retrieved from: https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-wall-kimmerer-the-intelligence-of-plants-2022/

Other Links and Resources:

https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/why-is-the-world-so-beautiful-an-indigenous-botanist-on-the-spirit-of-life-in-everything-1.5817787

https://sustainabilitystudies.nd.edu/resources/take-10-for-the-planet/video-an-interview-with-dr-robin-wall-kimmerer/

https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/

Reclaiming the Honorable Harvest: Robin Kimmerer at TEDxSitka
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lz1vgfZ3etE

Questions for a Resilient Future: Robin Wall Kimmerer
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4nUobJEEWQ

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