Braiding Sweetgrass

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

Robin Wall Kimmerer grew up in upstate New York, surrounded by nature and learning about her family's Potawatomi heritage—her grandfather was forced to attend the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which sought to entirely strip Native children of their culture and integrate them into white society. Kimmerer majored in Botany at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) and went on to receive a master's degree and PhD at the University of Wisconsin. She is known for teaching "Traditional Ecological Knowledge," a practice combining scientific observation with cultural and spiritual knowledge. She also specializes in the study of moss ecology, and her first book was called *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. Her second book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, became a bestseller despite originally being released only by a small nonprofit publisher. Kimmerer, now an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, currently teaches at ESF and lives and writes in upstate New York.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Braiding Sweetgrass primarily focuses on the state of the contemporary world, but it also draws deeply from Indigenous American history and traditions. Notable historical events that Kimmerer focuses on include the Trail of Tears, when the U.S. Government forcefully displaced around 60,000 Native Americans to reservations, resulting in a massive loss of land and thousands of deaths. Through the story of her own grandfather, Kimmerer also discusses the influence of Native American boarding schools like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Over the course of almost four decades, more than 10,000 Native children attended Carlisle (usually through compulsion or threats), where they were separated from their families and subjected to intense psychological manipulation, being punished for any expression of their culture and even forced to change their names. Braiding Sweetgrass also focuses on the history of Onondaga Lake, which was a sacred place to the people of the Onondaga Nation and part of their territory until it was seized by the state of New York in 1788. The lake then became the site of intense industrial growth and was massively polluted by industrial waste, largely from the Allied Chemical Corporation, over the course of almost 200 years. Various environmental efforts, many of them led by Native leaders and activists, have since tried to clean up the lake, but with mixed success.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Braiding Sweetgrass blends elements of science writing, memoir, and Indigenous American philosophy in its exploration of plants and the human relationship to the natural world. Its contemplative and observational aspects resemble the work of Annie Dillard, most notably *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, while its study of botany falls in the tradition of science writing for a popular audience, joining plant-focused books like Michael Pollan's *The Botany of Desire* and Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*. Richard Powers' novel *The Overstory* also focuses on plants (especially trees) as characters in their own right, echoing many of Kimmerer's views through the medium of fiction. Other major contemporary Indigenous American writers include Sherman Alexie (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*), Louise Erdrich (*Plague of Doves*), and Joy Harjo (*Eagle Poem*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, Nature Writing
- **Setting:** Various settings around the world, but mostly Upstate New York, the Pacific Northwest, and Oklahoma
- **Climax:** The story of defeating the Windigo
- **Antagonist:** The Windigo, capitalism, human greed
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Surprise Hit. Braiding Sweetgrass was originally published by Milkweed Editions, an independent non-profit publisher, and has since gone through 18 re-printings and been translated into nine languages.

Teaching. Kimmerer is a professor at her alma mater, ESF, teaching courses like "Land and Culture" and "Ecology of Mosses."

PLOT SUMMARY

Braiding Sweetgrass is a combination of memoir, science writing, and Indigenous American philosophy and history. The book opens with a retelling of the Haudenosaunee creation story, in which Skywoman falls to earth and is aided by the animals to create a new land called Turtle Island. Robin Wall Kimmerer explains how this story informs the Indigenous attitude

towards the land itself: human beings are "the younger brothers of creation" and so should humbly learn from the plants and animals that were here first. At the same time, the world is a place of gifts and generosity, and people should give gifts back to the earth as well.

In "The Council of Pecans," Kimmerer relates some of her family history while also discussing how trees communicate with each other. Her Potawatomi grandfather was sent to Carlisle boarding school, where he and other Native children were given new names and subjected to various abuses in an attempt to rid them of their culture. Yet despite the federal government's best efforts and the many tragic injustices that Indigenous Americans have faced over the centuries, they remain resilient, as shown by the Potawatomi Gathering of Nations that Kimmerer attends with her family.

In "The Gift of Strawberries," Kimmerer elaborates further on her worldview that the land can be a place of generosity and wonder. Growing up, she loved picking wild strawberries, and she thinks of them as gifts from the earth. This leads her to consider the difference between gift economies and market economies, and how the nature of an object changes if it is considered a gift or a commodity. She hopes that more people will come to see our relationship to the world as a relationship of giving and receiving. In a similar vein, Kimmerer describes her father's ritual of pouring the morning's first coffee onto the ground as an offering to the land.

In "Asters and Goldenrod," Kimmerer details her attempts to reconcile her field of botanical science with Indigenous knowledge and her own sense of wonder. Initially she was discouraged from focusing on anything but total scientific objectivity, but after many years she returned to Native ways of knowing and now tries to combine the that with science to paint a fuller picture of the world. Next, Robin discusses language, as she starts taking classes to learn some of the Potawatomi language. Musing on how it differs from English, she notes that in many Native languages, objects and animals are spoken of as if they are persons as well. This helps shape a culture's view of its place in the world, and she wonders how English speakers might see the world differently if their language also granted personhood to non-humans.

In "Maple Sugar Moon," Kimmerer remembers making maple syrup with her daughters, Larkin and Linden, and considers again her responsibility to the land and the future. "Witch Hazel" is narrated in the voice of one of Robin's daughters, and it describes a time when they lived in Kentucky and befriended an old woman named Hazel. Hazel and Robin bonded over their love of plants and also a mutual sense of displacement, as Hazel had left behind her family home. In "A Mother's Work," Kimmerer muses on motherhood as she works to clear out a pond that is overgrown with algae. This becomes an exercise in the study of the pond's flora and fauna, but also a symbol of the constant work of motherhood and trying to provide a better future for her children. When her daughters do eventually leave for college, Robin tries to ward off her sadness by going canoeing. There she is comforted by the water lilies all around her, and she thinks about their life cycle of reciprocity between the young and the old. In "Allegiance to Gratitude," Kimmerer considers the difference between the U.S.A.'s Pledge of Allegiance and the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address. The Thanksgiving Address makes a list of various aspects of the natural world and gives thanks for them all, and Kimmerer suggests that we might be better off with such a mindset of gratitude, pledging allegiance to the land itself rather than a flag or nation.

"Epiphany in the Beans" furthers the theme of reciprocity between humans and the land, as Kimmerer considers the idea that the land itself loves us because of how it takes care of us, and that our relationship to it could be very different if we were to accept its love. She then describes the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—that are a staple of many Indigenous cultures and are designed to grow together and support each other in a harmonious relationship. She considers the plants to be her teachers, and she tries to pass on this mindset to her own college students.

Robin next takes a class on making traditional black ash baskets, taught by a man named John Pigeon; he emphasizes the patience and respect for the ash trees that go into the process of basket weaving. Kimmerer tries to apply his worldview to other aspects of her daily experience, recognizing the life within the origins of everyday objects. In "*Mishkos Kenomagwen*: The Teachings of Grass," Kimmerer and her student Laurie attempt to integrate academic science with Indigenous knowledge, as Laurie decides to use her thesis project to study **sweetgrass** and how harvesting methods affect its growth. Despite the scorn of her other advisers, Laurie ends up producing data that affirms the benefits of Native practices: harvesting sweetgrass in the traditional way actually causes plant populations to flourish, not decline.

Kimmerer next returns to the theme of citizenship and allegiance, wondering what it would mean to be a good citizen of "Maple Nation"—to actively defend the forests as if they were our country. "The Honorable Harvest" focuses on the best way to consume sustainably, with gratitude and respect. The concept of the Honorable Harvest means never taking more than one needs and honoring the generosity of the plant or animal being harvested. It also means giving back to the land that sustains us. She contrasts this mindset with the contemporary capitalist habit of constant overconsumption and suggests that the only way to prevent environmental catastrophe is by bringing back the Honorable Harvest's ideas of restraint and reciprocity.

Next Kimmerer discusses Nanabozho, the traditional Original Man in many mythologies, and how he explored his new home on earth and made it his own. Kimmerer uses this story to build

the idea of "becoming Indigenous to a place," and she considers the rootlessness of many Americans. Following the example of Nanabozho and certain plants, she suggests that non-Indigenous people try to become "naturalized" by treating the land like the home that one is responsible to, and to live as if one's "children's future matters."

In "Sitting in a Circle," Robin takes her ethnobotany students out into the woods for five weeks of field work away from civilization. Though the students are unused to living so closely to the land, after working to construct shelters entirely from plants, eventually even the most reluctant comes to appreciate all the gifts that nature provides. Later they discuss among themselves how to live more sustainably and give back to the generous land. "Burning Cascade Head" discusses the salmon of the Pacific Northwest, and the ceremonies that the Indigenous people there performed in confluence with their migrations. Kimmerer asserts the importance of ceremonies that are connected to the land itself, rather than just other people.

In "Putting Down Roots," Kimmerer returns to the story of her grandfather and the tragedy of the Carlisle Indian School and others like it. Comparing this loss of cultural heritage to the decline in sweetgrass populations, she works at planting new sweetgrass plants while also considering how to undo the work of places like Carlisle. Next Kimmerer tells the story of Franz Dolp, who traveled to the Pacific Northwest and studied old growth forests there, and then carefully attempted to recreate similar ecosystems in places that had been logged, working towards a future of new old-growth forest.

In the book's final section, Kimmerer introduces the character of the **Windigo**, a demon in many Indigenous mythologies, and uses him as a metaphor for the constant consumption and narrowminded greed of capitalist society. She then delves into the story of **Onondaga Lake**, which was originally a sacred place to the Haudenosaunee people—the site where a figure called the Peacemaker united five warring tribes and formed the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. In the centuries since, however, the Onondaga's land was stolen and Onondaga Lake was overrun by chemical factories that flooded the waters with industrial waste, such that it is now one of the most polluted places on earth. There have been many efforts to restore the lake, but with mixed success. While relating this history, Robin walks the shores of the lake herself and considers how best to begin restoring our relationship to the land. An important aspect of this, she says, is changing our perception of the land: not seeing it as real estate to own and exploit, but as a living thing that takes care of us and requires our care and generosity in return.

In "Collateral Damage," Kimmerer describes a night spent with her daughters rescuing migrating salamanders from passing cars—the same night that the U.S. began bombing Iraq in 2001—and considers all the lives that are considered "collateral damage" to the way that we live. Next she discusses the nature of fire and its importance in Potawatomi culture, and relates a prophecy about various generations of people: the final group, the people of the Seventh Fire, are destined to return to the ways of those who came before and to heal the wounds of the previous generations. Kimmerer speaks frankly about our society's current state on the brink of environmental collapse, and she says that only drastically reimagining our relationship with the land—choosing the "green path"—will save us. *Braiding Sweetgrass* concludes with a story of Robin herself defeating the Windigo with the aid of plants and stories.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Robin Wall Kimmerer – As *Braiding Sweetgrass* is part memoir, author Robin Wall Kimmerer is often a character in her own book. Growing up in upstate New York, she is very close to the land itself, feeling like she is partly raised by the plants around her, especially the wild strawberries and her "grandmother Sitka Spruce." Along with these formative experiences in nature, she also learns of her own Potawatomi heritage from her parents, informing her view of the world as a place of gifts, responsibilities, and reciprocity. Robin goes on to study botany in college, receive a master's degree and PhD, and teach classes at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. She has two daughters, Linden and Larkin, but is abandoned by her partner at some point in the girls' childhood and mostly must raise them as a single mother. Robin seeks to integrate ecological science with Indigenous wisdom and knowledge, while recognizing that this is an extremely difficult task—both because few others have attempted it, and because of the complicated and traumatic history between the colonized and the colonizers and their respective methods of knowing. Robin also struggles with how best to fulfill her roles of mother and teacher, exploring different ways to pass on her experience to her students within an academic setting that discourages anything beyond rigorous scientific objectivity. Overall, Robin presents herself as a constant work in progress, forever surprised and awed by the world around her but also doing her best to repair people's relationships to the land itself and hoping for a future beyond our current systems of exploitation and isolation.

Skywoman – Skywoman is an important figure in the Haudenosaunee creation myth, and *Braiding Sweetgrass* opens with her story. In this tale, Skywoman falls from her home the Skyworld to earth, where she is caught by a flock of geese and then helped by the other animals, who work with her to create a new land known as Turtle Island (as it is first created on the back of a turtle). There Skywoman dances the land into being, plants seeds and creates a garden, and later gives birth to a daughter. Kimmerer uses Skywoman's story to illustrate how a

culture's mythology can shape their relationship to the land itself. She compares Skywoman to Eve from Judeo-Christian mythology: Skywoman is welcomed by the animals and plants a garden to be a home for her future children, while Eve is exiled from her own garden and told to subdue the harsh world beyond Eden. In contrast to Eve's story, then, the myth of Skywoman suggests that human beings belong to this land and should celebrate its gifts while also treating it with respect, gratitude, and humility.

Nanabozho – Nanabozho is the Anishinaabe Original Man, a trickster figure who in some mythologies is part human and part spirit. He often acts as a teacher of humanity, and stories about him are used to teach valuable lessons. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer describes Nanabozho as being born of the Creator, placed upon Turtle Island, and taught by the Creator to live according to the Original Instructions. He is tasked with naming all the parts of creation that Skywoman had danced into being, but he also learns from the plants and animals about how best to live on Turtle Island. Kimmerer uses the story of Nanabozho's creation to show how one might become Indigenous to a place by treating the land with respect and walking so that "each step is a greeting to Mother Earth."

Robin's Father – Robin's father (whose name is Robert Wall) appears mostly in Robin's memories of her own childhood, particularly canoe camping in the Adirondacks during the summer. There he had a tradition of making an offering each morning, pouring some of the first coffee out onto the ground and toasting to a nearby mountain, lake, or river. Only then would he have coffee himself. This ritual plays an important role in shaping Kimmerer's view of the land as something deserving daily respect and gratitude, and the importance of having a personal relationship with the land itself.

Robin's Mother – Robin's mother (whose name is Patricia Wall) appears mostly in Robin's memories of her own childhood, particularly canoe camping in the Adirondacks during the summer. There, Robin's mother had a tradition of cleaning up their campsite when they left and gathering firewood for whoever might next arrive there. Kimmerer offers little description of her mother, but she is presented as a loving and supportive figure in Robin's life.

Robin's Grandfather (Asa Wall) – Asa Wall, Kimmerer's grandfather, was a Potawatomi boy who at nine years old was taken to Carlisle boarding school, where he was given a new name and punished for speaking his language or expressing any aspect of his home culture. Changed forever by this experience and feeling severed from his home in Indian Territory, afterward he joined the army and then settled in upstate New York, working as a mechanic and raising a family "in the immigrant world." Asa is a tragic figure in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, as he feels disconnected from both his Potawatomi roots and the American society that seeks to destroy those roots. Robin also feels great sorrow over all the knowledge lost to him during his time at Carlisle, and how his distance from their culture has affected their personal relationship and her knowledge of her own roots.

Linden – Linden is Robin's older daughter, who ends up going to college on the West Coast, and later gets married. Linden is close with her mother and shares her love of gardening and appreciation for the land. Several chapters of *Braiding Sweetgrass* focus on Kimmerer's experiences as a mother, but she offers few personal details about her daughters.

Larkin – Larkin is Robin's younger daughter, who now goes to graduate school "studying food systems and working with urban gardeners." Larkin is close with her mother and shares her love of gardening and appreciation for the land. Several chapters of *Braiding Sweetgrass* focus on Kimmerer's experiences as a mother, but she offers few personal details about her daughters.

The Adviser – Kimmerer's unnamed adviser in college is a negative figure in the book and in Robin's development. When she first arrives as a freshman and tells him that she is excited to study botany because of her love for plants and the beauty of nature, the adviser is immediately dismissive and insists that she must stick strictly to science. The adviser represents how pure science can be limiting when it is divorced from other kinds of knowledge and experience.

Hazel Barnett – Hazel Barnett is an older woman who is Robin's neighbor in Kentucky. She lives with her adult son Sam and daughter Janie, and she bonds with Robin over their love of plants, cooking, and household projects—and a mutual sense of exile and longing for home. Robin and her daughters decorate Hazel's old house for Christmas one year and throw her a party, offering the experience as a gift of homecoming.

John Pigeon – John Pigeon is a Potawatomi basket maker who teaches classes on how to make traditional ash baskets. Robin sits in on one of his classes and learns about all the work, thought, and tradition that go into making the baskets. John Pigeon's character teaches the importance of patience and respect in harvesting from the land.

Laurie – Laurie is one of Robin's graduate students whose thesis focuses on **sweetgrass** and how it is affected by different methods of harvesting. Though her faculty committee is initially condescending and discouraging of her work, her findings reveal that harvesting sweetgrass with traditional methods actually causes the population to flourish rather than decline. Laurie's thesis represents a meeting of scientific rigor and Indigenous knowledge—similar to what Kimmerer attempts in *Braiding Sweetgrass* itself—and shows how the two can complement each other.

Lionel – Lionel is a modern-day fur trapper and a member of the Métis nation who lives in Quebec. Robin meets with him to discuss how he can work as a fur trapper and still abide by the rules of the Honorable Harvest, and she is struck by the respect

and care that he exercises towards the animals that he kills. Lionel's work shows how one can treat all life with respect and gratitude even in a capitalist society.

Brad – Brad is one of Robin's students on her five-week field work trip in ethnobotany. He is initially wary of living in the wilderness without technology, but over time he joins the other students in discovering the joy of connecting with the land itself. Brad's experience illustrates how simply living closely with nature can make anyone learn to appreciate it.

Tom Porter – Tom Porter, whose Mohawk name is Sakokwenionkwas, is a Mohawk elder and Robin's friend and teacher. Decades earlier, he and several others decided to resettle their lost home in the Mohawk Valley, where they worked to reclaim their culture and build a new community, trying to undo the work of schools like Carlisle that stripped Native children of their culture. Tom is also one of the few remaining speakers of the Mohawk language.

Franz Dolp – Franz Dolp was an economics professor, philanthropist, and poet who moved to the Pacific Northwest and set about planting thousands of trees, attempting to lay the groundwork for a new old-growth forest to replace those that had been lost. Franz's writings show how patient study and work can repair one's relationship to the land, as well as help to heal the land itself.

The Peacemaker – The Peacemaker is an important religious and political figure in Haudenosaunee tradition. Considered to be the founder of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, he united the five warring Haudenosaunee tribes at **Onondaga Lake** with a message from the Creator. There they agreed to live by the Great Law of Peace and formed the Confederacy.

Tadodaho – Tadodaho was an ancient Onondaga leader who, according to legend, was so filled with hatred that his body was twisted and his hair was full of snakes. Messengers from the Peacemaker were able to transform him with their medicine and message of peace, however, and they combed the snakes from his hair. After the formation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Onondaga chieftains and some spiritual leaders traditionally take the name Tadodaho.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lena – Lena is an elder who harvests **sweetgrass** for basketmaking using traditional methods. She already knows what Robin's grad student Laurie will later discover using scientific methods—that properly harvesting sweetgrass causes the population to flourish rather than decline.

Theresa – Theresa is a Mohawk basket maker who works with Kimmerer in her research.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RECIPROCITY AND COMMUNALISM

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer portrays the natural world—which includes human beings—as a living network of reciprocity, of constant giving and receiving. She begins with the Haudenosaunee creation story of Skywoman, who fell to earth and was then helped by the animals to create a land for all to share, immediately illustrating the Indigenous worldview in which people and nature are part of the same communal system. The primary message introduced here, which Kimmerer explores throughout the rest of the book, is that human beings are part of a communal ecosystem with plants, animals, and the land itself, and that we all flourish better when working together, giving our own unique gifts and receiving the gifts of others as part of a network of reciprocity.

In "Epiphany in the Beans," Kimmerer is working in her garden when she is struck by the idea that the earth actively loves people and shows that love by providing food from plants. People, in exchange, can show their love for the earth by planting and tending to the gardens that offer this food. The "Three Sisters," which are corn, beans, and squash—part of many traditional Indigenous planting systems—also present ideas of reciprocity, as they are planted together and support each other in growth, with the corn providing stability for the bean vine, whose roots provide nitrogen for the other two sisters, and the squash keeping out pests. The three plants flourish best when planted together than apart—the opposite of the monocrop fields of modern agriculture—because of the give and take of each plant's gifts. At the end of the book, Kimmerer introduces the traditional monster of the **windigo**, a ravenous demon who wanders alone in the winter; he is essentially cut off from the community's web of reciprocity and can only take, never give. Kimmerer sees "windigo thinking" in the capitalist materialist mindset that exploits the earth for its resources without giving anything back in return. This system is unsustainable, as countless natural disasters show, and people's best hope for repairing their relationship with the land, Kimmerer suggests, is to embrace the Indigenous worldview of reciprocity.

INDIGENOUS WISDOM AND SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Robin Wall Kimmerer is both a member of the

Potawatomi nation and a distinguished professor of botany and biology. Throughout the chapters of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she tries to unite these two sides of herself: her Indigenous heritage and its traditional culture, and the expectations of scientific objectivity that she finds in academia. She realizes the potential conflict between these two when she first goes to college to study botany, only to find that her sense of wonder and love for plants is scorned as unscientific. For years she succumbs to the pressures of Western scientific culture, suppressing her ideas about reciprocity and the living spirit in nonhuman beings, until exploration of her own Potawatomi heritage convinces her that traditional wisdom has value equal to science in helping people to understand the world. While acknowledging that she is still learning and struggling to accomplish this goal in her own teaching and writing, Kimmerer ultimately asserts that scientific knowledge and Indigenous wisdom don't need to be opposed to each other, but rather can be combined into a more holistic view of the world, one that values both data and relationships.

This is best exemplified in the chapter "*Mishkos Kenomagwen*: The Teachings of Grass," which is framed as if it were a scientific article, divided into sections like "Literature Review," "Hypothesis," and "Methods." Despite this technical framework, the content of the chapter is about one of Kimmerer's graduate students, Laurie, who carries out a thesis experiment to confirm the Indigenous knowledge that harvesting **sweetgrass** in the traditional manner actually causes sweetgrass populations to flourish, even more so than in areas where the plants aren't harvested at all. The conclusion here is that is that traditional wisdom adds great value to scientific knowledge, and that science offers methods of verifying and further exploring this wisdom. Ultimately, *Braiding Sweetgrass* itself stands as Kimmerer's own thesis, an attempt to weave together Indigenous culture and wisdom with scientific insight.

GIFTS, GRATITUDE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

If the best way of interacting with the natural world is through a lens of reciprocity, as *Braiding Sweetgrass* asserts, then this is best exhibited through the way that Kimmerer thinks about gifts, gratitude for those gifts, and the responsibilities and relationships that accompany the giving and receiving of gifts. Kimmerer explains how the earth gifts people with food, shelter, and beauty, and each individual being offers its own gifts as part of this. Our gifts to give as human beings, Kimmerer suggests, include offering gratitude and the ability to take responsibility for the care of all the other beings who are so generous to us. This makes the web of reciprocity not just about an equal exchange of commodities, but about a relationship of generosity and gratitude.

In "The Gift of Strawberries," Kimmerer describes how picking wild strawberries in her childhood instilled her with the idea of the world as a generous place—she thinks of the strawberries as being like personal gifts given to people from the land itself. She then compares this gift economy to the market economy of capitalism, which requires the idea of constant scarcity and attempts to make everything into a saleable commodity. Seeing something as a gift rather than a commodity changes one's worldview, Kimmerer claims, as gifts create a relationship between the giver and receiver—the kind of relationship that she believes people should have with the land. To carry a gift is to carry a responsibility to give back and to pass on one's own gifts, which itself creates the web of reciprocity that is essential to a healthy community. These ideas are also distilled in the traditional Haudenosaunee "Thanksgiving Address," which lists all the beings and gifts of the world and gives thanks for them. The Address thus not only presents the world as a place of plenty, but also makes us take stock of all these gifts and consider our responsibilities to them.

MOTHERHOOD AND TEACHING

Braiding Sweetgrass contains many autobiographical details about Robin Wall Kimmerer's own life, particularly as they pertain to her work as a mother and teacher. She first introduces the idea of motherhood with the creation story of Skywoman, who was pregnant when she first fell to earth. She also often references her own daughters, Linden and Larkin, and her struggles to be a good mother to them. Throughout the book, Kimmerer connects the caring aspect of motherhood to the idea of teaching, particularly as she describes Indigenous traditions regarding women's roles in a community—one describes a woman as first walking the Way of the Daughter, then the Way of the Mother, and finally the Way of the Teacher—and through Robin's own experiences teaching at a university. Kimmerer affirms the value of mothers and teachers as crucial to the wellbeing of any healthy community, and as essential for maintaining any hope for a better future.

In "A Mother's Work," Robin spends years trying to make a pond clean enough for her daughters to swim in. She hopes that the act of caring that is inherent to motherhood can extend to a sense of mothering the entire world, not just one's own children. So as she cleans the pond, Robin also thinks about her responsibility to the plants and animals living in and around the pond—many of whom are mothers themselves, and all of which see the pond as an essential part of how they mother their children. Teachers also provide their own kind of care, planting the seeds of wisdom for future generations. Kimmerer describes how Franz Dolp plants trees that will long outlive him in "Old Growth Children," and how she herself teaches her students to develop a personal relationship with the land in "Sitting in a Circle." *Braiding Sweetgrass* acknowledges that the current state of the world is dire, but it also looks forward to a better future—and it suggests that this future is only possible

through the work of mothers and teachers.

ANIMACY AND VALUE

As part of its project to present humans as just one aspect of a living community of reciprocity, *Braiding Sweetgrass* also attempts to reframe readers' perspectives of what has animacy and value. Animacy, or the idea of sentience and aliveness, is given only to humans in most Western languages—for example, capitalizing the names of people but not of animals (unless the animal is named after a person). This inherently sets humans as separate and above the rest of life and land, a philosophy that is central to our current culture of exploiting the natural world as the book claims. Instead, Kimmerer challenges readers to see humans as equal partners in a community of nature, giving animacy to other things and thus seeing them as having value and deserving of respect.

Kimmerer most notably comes to this idea in her studies of the Potawatomi language, which treats other beings and objects as having the same animacy as individual people. Struck by how this shift in language creates an entirely different worldview, she muses on how we might treat other beings differently if we naturally thought of them in the same way that we think of other people—as having equal animacy. She then attempts to employ this throughout her own book, going against the traditional rules of English and often capitalizing the names of trees or animals. In "*Wisgaak Gokpenagen*: A Black Ash Basket," the master basket-maker John Pigeon teaches his students to respect and thank the tree that gave its life for the basket's material. Afterwards Kimmerer attempts to see the lives behind even the most everyday objects in her home, something that makes her reconsider her relationships to them and think about how casually we treat objects that have their source in a living being. The idea of the "Honorable Harvest" admits that there is no way to live without taking other lives in some form (whether for food or materials), but that those lives should be at least considered and respected as equal to our own. Respecting the animacy and value of other beings means being more grateful and aware of every interaction that we have, which Kimmerer suggests in turn means that we are less likely to be so callous in our consumption.

THE INDIGENOUS PAST AND FUTURE

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a member of the Potawatomi Nation. Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she references the history of Indigenous Americans while also considering what it means to be indigenous at all, and how such ideas can help us build a better future. She doesn't shy away from the tragic history of Indigenous Americans once European colonizers arrived, but she also emphasizes their resilience and strength despite exploitation and genocide. *Braiding Sweetgrass* suggests that while Indigenous people have endured incredible hardships, the very idea of being indigenous to the land—that is, seeing it as one's true home and not a place to be owned, borrowed, or visited—is crucial to saving humanity's future.

In "The Council of Pecans," Kimmerer describes her own grandfather, who was taken to Carlisle School and, like thousands of other Indigenous children, stripped of his culture through years of abuse and indoctrination. As an attempted antidote to this cultural genocide many generations later, the Mohawk people in the chapter "Putting Down Roots" attempt to undo the work of places like Carlisle by returning to their traditional homelands, reviving their culture, and physically planting **sweetgrass** in the places where it once flourished. Kimmerer then looks to the example of Nanabozho, the Anishinaabe Original Man, who worked hard to become indigenous to his new home of Turtle Island (the land that Skywoman created with the help of the animals) by exploring the land and interacting respectfully with all the beings he encountered. Kimmerer believes that this idea of "becoming indigenous to a place" is crucial to restoring modern humanity's relationship to the land, and that even the descendants of colonizers can look to the example of Nanabozho and Indigenous people like the Mohawk. While she doesn't believe that colonizers can ever be truly indigenous, she suggests they can become "naturalized," like a plant that is introduced from elsewhere but doesn't become invasive. These "naturalized" plants and people, Kimmerer insists, can instead harmoniously blend with the native flora and offer their own unique gifts to the network of reciprocity.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SWEETGRASS

Sweetgrass represents a way of looking at the world as a system of reciprocity between people and land, and the mutual love and nourishment that comes from such a generous two-way relationship. Sweetgrass's scientific name is *Hierochloe odorata*, and in Potawatomi it is called *wiingaashk*. Kimmerer introduces the plant by describing it as "the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth," one of the first plants to sprout from the body of Skywoman's daughter, so that picking and braiding sweetgrass becomes an act of intimacy with the land itself, like braiding one's mother's hair. Kimmerer then builds on this idea, emphasizing aspects of sweetgrass that represent reciprocity between people and land. In "*Mishkos Kenomagwen*: The Teachings of Grass," she helps her graduate student Laurie study how harvesting sweetgrass

affects the species' population. Despite the initial skepticism and scorn of her advisers, Laurie discovers that harvesting sweetgrass in the traditional way—by taking only half—causes the population to *increase*, while not harvesting at all caused a *decrease* in the sweetgrass. This suggests that sweetgrass has come to rely on humans as well, adapting to a relationship of give-and-take with the Indigenous harvesters.

"Putting Down Roots" then describes how sweetgrass is best grown not from seed but by replanting shoots. As Robin and her Indigenous neighbors work patiently at planting new shoots of sweetgrass on ancestral Mohawk lands, she likens this activity to recovering the cultural roots that were stolen from so many of their ancestors at places like the Carlisle Indian School. Here sweetgrass becomes a symbol of Indigenous culture itself, while also still representing the reciprocity between land and people that is such a central aspect of that culture. The people work to replenish the sweetgrass populations, and in return the plant offers itself up as a gift to its respectful harvesters.

ONONDAGA LAKE

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the history of Onondaga Lake represents two different ways of interacting with the world and the consequences of these disparate philosophies: one worldview sees the physical earth as a sacred place, while the other considers it to be merely a bundle of resources to be exploited.

Onondaga Lake is adjacent to what is now Syracuse, New York. It was a sacred place to Haudenosaunee people before the coming of Europeans. The lake was the site of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's founding, in which the legendary Peacemaker united the warring tribes and they agreed to live by the Great Law of Peace. When the area was invaded by colonists, however, the Haudenosaunee were expelled from their lands and Onondaga became a hotbed of industrial activity. In the following centuries, manufacturers used the lake as a dumping ground, filling the water with millions of tons of industrial waste. The once-thriving environment of Onondaga Lake was made unlivable for its wildlife, and soon even for people—fish from the lake are still considered unsafe to eat even today. Kimmerer relates this history to emphasize the differences between the gift economy and the market economy, or the ways of seeing the world as something alive and holy versus a mere commodity. The Haudenosaunee treated Onondaga Lake as a sacred place and the lake thrived, while Allied Chemical and other companies consumed all the resources they could get their hands on, and it nearly died. Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer emphasizes that our current culture of capitalist overconsumption is unsustainable, and the tangible evidence of that can be seen in places like Onondaga Lake. Instead, she advocates that we see the world like a gift—the way the Haudenosaunee treated Onondaga Lake—and take care of it rather than exploiting it.

THE WINDIGO

Braiding Sweetgrass presents the mythical figure of the Windigo as "that within us which cares more for its own survival than for anything else"—the greedy part of ourselves that a capitalist society encourages to consume ever more and more, without considering the consequences of our actions.

In many Native American traditions, the Windigo is a human-like demonic figure (either possessing a human or the result of a human's monstrous transformation) associated with isolation from the group, a gnawing hunger, and sometimes cannibalism. While it was originally connected to the starvation conditions of a long winter, many contemporary Indigenous people—including Robin Wall Kimmerer—also see "Windigo thinking" in today's market economy that commodifies the land and encourages constant consumption, and in the general mindset of self-destructive addiction to certain substances or experiences. Kimmerer states that the Windigo mindset is even considered admirable in the modern world: "Indulgent self-interest that our people once held to be monstrous is now celebrated as success." This has encouraged capitalism's principle of artificial scarcity—that even in the wealthiest of modern cities, there must be a hierarchy of haves and have-nots to reinforce the demand for more consumption. While this leads to a depletion of resources and a destructive relationship with the land itself, for the individual it also means the isolation of the cannibal monster: being "banished from the web of reciprocity, with no one to share with you and no one for you to care for."

Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer tries to emphasize the fact that changing our relationship to the natural world is not just a practical necessity, but a spiritual one as well. Even if we were to somehow reverse the effects of climate change and mass extinction, we must also change our individual worldviews to avoid the narrowminded greed of "Windigo thinking" and instead embrace a spirit of communal reciprocity, generosity, and work towards a better future.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Milkweed Editions edition of *Braiding Sweetgrass* published in 2014.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a cocreator of the good green world that would be the home of her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven.

And then they met—the offspring of Skywoman and the children of Eve—and the land around us bears the scars of that meeting, the echoes of our stories.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), Skywoman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Robin Wall Kimmerer begins *Braiding Sweetgrass* with the Haudenosaunee (also known as Iroquois) creation story of Skywoman, who fell from her home of the Skyworld down into the waters of Earth. There, animals helped her to create Turtle Island, the Haudenosaunee name for North America. Kimmerer then contrasts this story with the Adam and Eve story from the Bible, emphasizing that the implications of these disparate origin myths define how their respective cultures relate to the earth. The two worldviews clashed when European colonizers arrived in the Americas—the children of Eve invading the children of Skywoman—leading not only to violence and displacement, but also to a total transformation of the land from the sacred Turtle Island into a place divided into private property and harvested for commodities.

Kimmerer is able to make this connection more poignant because of the idea that Eve and Skywoman are like two mothers to humanity, and their children have grown up with the lessons that their mothers' stories taught them. She starts the book, then, by challenging the descendants of Eve (her readers, presumed to be non-Native Americans) to rethink their perspectives and to consider whether their mother got the raw end of the deal when it came to this earth. This also means examining how Eve's perspective has affected the land itself, versus how the children of Skywoman have affected it—only one group has "scarred" the earth, and those are the descendants of the "exile" Eve.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ It's funny how the nature of an object—let's say a strawberry or a pair of socks—is so changed by the way it has come into your hands, as a gift or as a commodity. The pair of wool socks that I buy at the store, red and gray striped, are warm and cozy. I might feel grateful for the sheep that made the wool and the worker who ran the knitting machine. I hope so. But I have no *inherent* obligation to those socks as a commodity, as private property. […] But what if those very same socks, red and gray striped, were knitted by my grandmother and given to me as a gift? That changes everything. A gift creates ongoing relationship.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kimmerer describes how an object can be completely transformed by its owners' perspective of it as either a commodity or a gift. Here she imagines a pair of socks as being given to her by her grandmother, versus the same exact socks being purchased at the store, and the repercussions of this simple difference. The buying of the socks is the end of the relationship between the buyer and the seller/maker—the socks are a commodity, and the buyer owns them now. When they are a gift from one's grandmother, however, they become part of a relationship—the receiver would thank their grandmother, wear the socks when they visit her, and presumably do something nice or make something for her in return.

When this idea is applied to the earth itself, it means a totally different way of interacting with all the products that we purchase and use. Kimmerer asks readers to consider what would happen if we saw everything that we harvest from the land as a gift, one that comes with its own responsibilities to be kind to the giver—the land itself —in return, to care for her and give her back gifts of our own? The products that we own then seem to have more value, and we are more likely to appreciate and respect them, less likely to casually discard them. On a mass scale, this would mean less consumption and less waste—exactly what Kimmerer insists we need to disrupt our current catastrophic path towards environmental collapse.

❝ For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation puts the market economy that dominates today's world into the larger perspective of human history. Our current capitalist worldview has not been around forever, Kimmerer reminds the reader, and so it does not *need* to be around forever—it is just a "story," like the story of Skywoman or Eve. The economy itself has no physical existence—it only exists because we uphold its structure in our actions, in the way that we relate to goods and to each other.

Kimmerer doesn't deny that capitalism has brought about many innovations, but even these have been mixed: for every lifesaving medicine there has also been a new and more destructive form of warfare, for example. And while many of capitalism's innovations have helped humanity, the industrialist consumerist mindset has had an almost entirely negative effect on the earth and nonhuman living things. Kimmerer then encourages the reader to look directly at the disasters that industrialization and capitalism have wrought upon this planet—our home—and consider that we need drastic change. On the individual level, this means changing one's perspectives about the things that we take from the earth for our own benefit and convenience. These things are gifts, and so they come with responsibilities and a relationship to the giver.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be human.

A language teacher I know explained that grammar is just the way we chart relationships in language. Maybe it also reflects our relationships with each other. Maybe a grammar of animacy could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world, other species a sovereign people, a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one—with moral responsibility to water and wolves, and with a legal system that recognizes the standing of other species.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 57-58

Explanation and Analysis

Robin has been trying to learn the Potawatomi language of her heritage, and she is frustrated by its difficulty and the seemingly excessive number of verbs that it contains—many objects are defined by their verbs, rather than named as nouns (some of her examples are words for "to be a Saturday" or "to be a bay"). As she continues her study, however she realizes that this gives the nouns a kind of animacy that English lacks. In this context, animacy is a sense of inner life, or soul—essentially, the quality of being a sovereign being with the ability to act as a subject rather than an object. In the Potawatomi language, and in many other Indigenous languages, Kimmerer says, there is no difference between humans and nonhumans in the way that the language gives animacy to its subjects. In English, by contrast, only human names are capitalized, while the names of animals (or natural objects like stones) are never capitalized unless they are named *after* a human being.

Kimmerer sees this quality of the English language as reflected in the Western culture that speaks it: considering humans as the only ones with agency and animacy, and the rest of life and land as a commodity to be owned and exploited. Animacy grants value, and Western society sees value only in humanity and in profits. This also extends to the world of Western science, which limits true consciousness and wisdom to humanity, treating everything nonhuman as an object to be experimented on and learned about. Imagining the world through the lens of the "grammar of animacy," Kimmerer sees how this could change the foundations of our society. Giving legal rights to non-humans as persons would have drastic effects on our destruction of the environment. Related to this, she uses

the phrase "democracy of species" to mean that human beings should recognize our place as one among equals. Acknowledging that we live in this democracy means that we would lose our place at the top of the hierarchy, but also that we would recognize the family all around us—that we are not the only persons on this earth.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ What I do here matters. Everybody lives downstream. My pond drains to the brook, to the creek, to a great and needful lake. The water net connects us all. I have shed tears into that flow when I thought that motherhood would end. But the pond has shown me that being a good mother doesn't end with creating a home where just my children can flourish. A good mother grows into a richly eutrophic old woman, knowing that her work doesn't end until she creates a home where all of life's beings can flourish. There are grandchildren to nurture, and frog children, nestlings, goslings, seedlings, and spores, and I still want to be a good mother.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), Linden, Larkin

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

Robin has been working on clearing a pond of algae for her daughters Linden and Larkin to swim in, a project that stretches on over the course of years and leads to an extended rumination on what it means to be a good mother. Concluding the chapter here, Kimmerer draws out some of the lessons that she has learned from her work with the water and the plants that grow in and near to it.

In traditional Potawatomi culture, women are associated with water and men with fire. Kimmerer connects the cyclical flow of water—from ponds to lakes to rivers to the ocean, and back through rain—with the care and love of a mother that spreads outward from her through her children and out into the world. Truly caring for one's own children also means caring for other living things, she believes, and again that care flows downhill like water to become love for all beings, human and not. Kimmerer describes the pond, which is full of algae, as "eutrophic," meaning that it's full of accumulated nutrients that support new growth, and Kimmerer sees the archetypal mother and grandmother figure as eutrophic in kind, accumulating love and wisdom and supporting others with their care. Closing with "I still want to be a good mother" shows that Robin herself knows that the work of mothering continues on even after her own children are grown—seeing the animacy and value in all things means that there are always more children to care for.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ As I grew to understand the gifts of the earth, I couldn't understand how "love of country" could omit recognition of the actual country itself. The only promise it requires is to a flag. What of the promises to each other and to the land?

What would it be like to be raised on gratitude, to speak to the natural world as a member of the democracy of species, to raise a pledge of *inter*dependence?

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Here Kimmerer comments on the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance and how limited it is to declare love of one's country to what is essentially just a flag and an idea, rather than the literal land itself and one's fellow people and living things. The term "democracy of species" returns here, ironically nodding at America's claims about itself as a beacon of democracy and tweaking the language of the pledge to adjust to an Indigenous worldview. In an Indigenous worldview, democracy applies to not only human citizens of a nation but to all living beings who are citizens of the same land.

Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer shows how thinking of the earth's products as gifts and nonhumans as having animacy and value of their own make the U.S. Pledge seem limited and narrowminded. Again, Kimmerer imagines how different our world would be if these Indigenous ideas were the dominant ones, rather than our current society in America. By asking rhetorical questions like these, she invites the reader to consider alongside her, hoping to inspire readers to long for a better world. Kimmerer defines a better world as one in which not only one do we no longer fear catastrophic climate change and pollution, but also one in which our lives are happier and more fulfilled, feeling like we are truly living at home on this planet among our fellow beings.

Chapter 12 Quotes

People often ask me what one thing I would recommend to restore relationship between land and people. My answer is almost always, "Plant a garden." It's good for the health of the earth and it's good for the health of people. A garden is a nursery for nurturing connection, the soil for cultivation of practical reverence. And its power goes far beyond the garden gate—once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself.

Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It's a place where if you can't say "I love you" out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate, in beans.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126-127

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation begins with practical advice for how readers can apply many of the lessons of *Braiding Sweetgrass* in their daily life: simply by planting a garden. Throughout the book, Kimmerer finds all kinds of wisdom in the lives of plants, and also makes many different metaphors using plants to emphasize her points. Here she sees the planting of seeds as an action of love on several levels: literally caring for the earth through tending a garden, but also planting seeds of respect and gratitude for the earth within oneself. Mutual flourishing, or the idea here that "it's good for the health of the earth and it's good for the health of people," means practical benefits for all—but also just means people will be happier.

In this chapter Kimmerer has tried to move beyond her plant scientist self and let herself be speculative and spiritual, thinking of the earth as an actual mother figure, which means that the love and care between people and the land would be real and personal. Kimmerer suggests that it should not be considered embarrassing or ignorant to really say "I love you" to the earth or to consider that she says "I love you" back. According to the evidence of how mothers and children interact, this might be what is really happening when the land "reciprocate[s], in beans."

Chapter 13 Quotes

It's tempting to imagine that these three are deliberate in working together, and perhaps they are. But the beauty of the partnership is that each plant does what it does in order to increase its own growth. But as it happens, when the individuals flourish, so does the whole.

The way of the Three Sisters reminds me of one of the basic teachings of our people. The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world. Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

The Three Sisters are corn, beans, and squash, three sacred plants of Indigenous American agriculture that are usually planted together. In this system the plants work together, with the corn providing structure for the bean vines, which provide nitrogen for the other two, and the squash protects them all from pests.

In this passage, Kimmerer affirms that the Three Sisters garden is not just communalism for the sake of communalism, but for mutual benefit; the plants actually produce more when planted together than if they are planted alone. Yet while living in reciprocity with each other is essential, this garden system shows that the individual is also important. This is a sentiment that might be comforting to contemporary American readers, who are saturated with media that elevates the individual over the collective, as it is only the individual who can "be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction." The Sisters work together, but only because they each have a unique gift that they can provide.

This passage in itself is also a mixture of science and traditional wisdom, as Kimmerer acknowledges that she is somewhat anthropomorphizing the plants—that is, ascribing human qualities to nonhuman beings. But she also recognizes that it is possible that, as animate beings themselves, they really *do* work together with some kind of purpose of their own or out of a sense of companionship.

The Three Sisters offer us a new metaphor for an emerging relationship between Indigenous knowledge and Western science, both of which are rooted in the earth. I think of the corn as traditional ecological knowledge, the physical and spiritual framework that can guide the curious bean of science, which twines like a double helix. The squash creates the ethical habitat for coexistence and mutual flourishing. I envision a time when the intellectual monoculture of science will be replaced with a polyculture of complementary knowledges. And so all may be fed.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer draws many lessons from the way that plants work. She usually starts with her own personal experience with the plant, moves into a scientific description of it, and then finds wisdom in its behaviors that she tries to pass on to the reader. Here, Kimmerer uses the reciprocal structure of a Three Sisters garden (one where squash, beans, and corn grow together) as a metaphor for the relationship between Western science and Indigenous wisdom, a relationship that has only recently been considered as possible. Rather than contradicting each other, Kimmerer insists that these two ways of knowing can actually work together to further our understanding of the world. In the metaphor of the garden, she sees the straight, strong corn stalk as the traditional wisdom borne of centuries of experience, supporting and guiding the bean of science, which curls like a double helix: the structure of DNA. All of these are supported by the squash, which represents qualities that Kimmerer believes are crucial in all study: humility and respect.

In agriculture, monocultures (crops made up of only one type of plant) might provide immediate profits, but they also create new problems and are unsustainable in the longer term. Kimmerer sees our current scientific worldview—that "science holds a monopoly on truth," as she says elsewhere—as being akin to an unhealthy monoculture, which she hopes will humble itself and join in a polyculture with other kinds of knowledge. These two perspectives (Indigenous knowledge and Western science) will only work together when they are both "rooted in the earth," centered in a humble curiosity in their subject and its experience. The result, Kimmerer insists, will be mutual flourishing: "so that all may be fed."

Chapter 14 Quotes

What would it be like, I wondered, to live with that heightened sensitivity to the lives given for ours? To consider the tree in the Kleenex, the algae in the toothpaste, the oaks in the floor, the grapes in the wine; to follow back the thread of life in everything and pay it respect? Once you start, it's hard to stop, and you begin to feel yourself awash in gifts.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), John Pigeon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

Robin's basket making lesson with John Pigeon has left her with a new awareness of the nonhuman lives given to make our products, and she tries to maintain this awareness upon returning home to her daily life. This is then an example of a practical thing that readers can do to apply the lessons of *Braiding Sweetgrass* to their own lives: just pay attention to where their possessions come from. There are lives and gifts everywhere, as this passage shows, many that we might never consider if we didn't force ourselves to—because the successful commodification of living things requires that we as consumers not think of them as living things at all. To see the animacy and value in nonhumans, Kimmerer insists, is to see the living beings at the source of almost everything, as all the objects that we consume come from the earth and return to the earth. Maintaining this perspective can then make us feel "awash in gifts," which also makes us consume less, better appreciate what we have, and be less likely to discard our belongings or consider them waste. All of these qualities not only lead us to a more fulfilling experience as human beings, but also can help ease our current pattern of overconsumption that is destroying the earth.

Chapter 15 Quotes

To me, an experiment is a kind of conversation with plants: I have a question for them, but since we don't speak the same language, I can't ask them directly and they won't answer verbally. But plants can be eloquent in their physical responses and behaviors. Plants answer questions by the way they live, by their responses to change; you just need to learn how to ask. I smile when I hear my colleagues say "I discovered X." That's kind of like Columbus claiming to have discovered America. It was here all along, it's just that he didn't know it. Experiments are not about discovery but about listening and translating the knowledge of other beings.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Kimmerer begins this quotation by explaining the reconciliation of botanical science and Indigenous wisdom within her own work: she sees both ways of knowing as being based in connection to the plant itself. A science experiment, then, is just one method of having a conversation with the plant, trying to speak its language when we share no common tongue. She then offers another reminder of the animacy and personhood of nonhuman beings, which in her eyes makes it supremely arrogant for scientists to say that they "discovered" something when it was already known by the plant itself. She compares this arrogance to Indigenous American history and Columbus's supposed "discovery" of America, implying that the sense of hierarchy and supremacy of European colonists is echoed in the Western science practiced by their descendants. (This hierarchy no longer exists as much with regard to other human races, but still very much exists in the way people think of other species.) She concludes with the idea that "discovering" a new inhabited land and "discovering" something new about a nonhuman should be approached in the same way: with humility and mindfulness. Kimmerer insists that it is better to listen and learn than it is to assert one's own dominance and miss out on the wisdom of others, whether human or not.

The scientists gave Laurie a warm round of applause. She had spoken their language and made a convincing case for the stimulatory effect of harvesters, indeed for the reciprocity between harvesters and sweetgrass. One even retracted his initial criticism that this research would "add nothing new to science." The basket makers who sat at the table simply nodded their heads in agreement. Wasn't this just as the elders have said?

The question was, how do we show respect? Sweetgrass told us the answer as we experimented: sustainable harvesting can be the way we treat a plant with respect, by respectfully receiving its gift.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), Laurie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

Robin's student Laurie presents her thesis to the faculty committee who initially doubted and scorned her, as she now has airtight data to show that respectful harvesting of sweetgrass leads to a more flourishing population than no harvesting at all. It's important to note that the academics only accept her conclusion because she translates it into their language of data, which is disconnected from relationships. On the other hand, the traditional basket makers, unhindered by the limitations of the modern scientific system, have known this all along. This passage also hints at an important point, which is that much Indigenous wisdom already *is* based in science: it is the result of trial and error over decades and centuries, just without the technical language and hierarchical structure of peer review and academic tenure. Further, it's often set in moral or spiritual terms rather than scientific ones.

Kimmerer concludes with the lesson learned from Laurie's study of sweetgrass. There are many ways of showing reciprocity with the land; reciprocity can extend beyond just gratitude, to the active giving and receiving of gifts. The sweetgrass gives itself, and we give our care. It is especially poignant that our gift is the receiving of *its* gift—and so the cycle continues, and the relationship grows.

Chapter 17 Quotes

Cautionary stories of the consequences of taking too much are ubiquitous in Native cultures, but it's hard to recall a single one in English. Perhaps this helps to explain why we seem to be caught in a trap of overconsumption, which is as destructive to ourselves as to those we consume.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), Nanabozho

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

Kimmerer says this after telling a brief story about Nanabozho—the "first man" in Anishinaabe culture, a trickster figure and culture hero—and how he learned not to take too much after being taught how to fish by Heron. This is a classic story warning about the dangers of overconsumption, but in fact Nanabozho's actions seem to fit exactly into our current capitalist society, where people are encouraged to consume as much as possible and then hoard any excess for future benefit. This mindset is easy to maintain when we are encouraged to see the earth as limitless in its resources and lacking in animacy and self-sovereignty. It's easy to think this way, Kimmerer suggests, when we are disconnected from the source of our purchases and encouraged to buy more and more commodities without thinking about where they come from, where they go when we discard them, or how they will be replenished in the future. Not only is this practice harmful to the earth itself, Kimmerer asserts, but it is harmful to us personally, as it robs us of a relationship to the gifts and the giver, creating a void within people that can never be filled by more consumption.

The state guidelines on hunting and gathering are based exclusively in the biophysical realm, while the rules of the Honorable Harvest are based on accountability to both the physical and the metaphysical world. The taking of another life to support your own is far more significant when you recognize the beings who are harvested as persons, nonhuman persons vested with awareness, intelligence, spirit—and who have families waiting for them at home. Killing a *who* demands something different than killing an *it*.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

This chapter confronts the direct reality of being a "heterotroph," or a being that must consume other living things in order to survive. The question of this chapter, then, is how we can most morally take the lives of other beings.

More recent state regulations try to address this somewhat by setting limitations on the harvest of certain species. However, these regulations still consider other beings to be resources and commodities; their harvest is only limited to make future profits more sustainable. The beings are never considered to have rights in and of themselves. This is like the socks Kimmerer describes in Chapter 3, which could be seen as either a commodity or a gift: only one perspective leads to a relationship that affects how we interact with the object. Similarly, seeing an animal as another kind of person, a being "vested with awareness, intelligence, spirit," makes us treat it very differently.

This is also another example of the need to go beyond science, as the contemporary scientific viewpoint will never declare that nonhumans are persons with wisdom and value. But they are, Kimmerer argues, and we must acknowledge that they are in both our personal and legal relationships with them. As is the case with many practical ideas that Kimmerer proposes, this would lead to a large-scale shift in consumption and negative environmental impact, but also to a personal shift in how we think of and relate to our fellow citizens of this earth.

"In my grandmother's house we were taught to kiss the rice. If a single grain fell to the ground, we learned to pick it up and kiss it, to show we meant no disrespect in wasting it." The student told me that, when she came to the United States, the greatest culture shock she experienced was not language or food or technology, but waste. […] I thanked her for her story and she said, "Please, take it as a gift, and give it to someone else."

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

Robin has given a talk called "Cultures of Gratitude" to a university audience, telling traditional stories about the dangers of overconsumption and the importance of gratitude. She can tell that the students didn't relate to her words, however, especially given the students' behavior at the reception afterward where everyone casually wastes food. Eventually one young woman approaches Robin and says that she understood what Robin was trying to convey. The student then relates the story quoted here about "kissing the rice," which she learned from her grandmother in Turkey.

This story shows that the idea of appreciating the gifts of the earth was once universal (it exists in the student's grandmother's Turkish culture and in Indigenous American culture, which are separated by thousands of miles), and that it could be universal again. The U.S. and the global market economy are the exception, not the rule, in the context of cultures worldwide over the span of human history. We don't have to live in a society that wastes the land's gifts in such destructive excess—we could truly respect the planet that we live on once more.

This passage also emphasizes the idea of stories as gifts of their own, like seeds that can spread, sprout, and produce new gifts to pass on to others. The girl passes on this story explicitly as a gift to Robin, and Robin then passes it on to her readers so that the wisdom it shares might grow, spread, and flourish.

❝ We need the Honorable Harvest today. But like the leeks and the marten, it is an endangered species that arose in another landscape, another time, from a legacy of traditional knowledge. That ethic of reciprocity was cleared away along with the forests, the beauty of justice traded away for more stuff. We've created a cultural and economic landscape that is hospitable to the growth of neither leeks nor honor. If the earth is nothing more than inanimate matter, if lives are nothing more than commodities, then the way of the Honorable Harvest, too, is dead. But when you stand in the stirring spring woods, you know otherwise.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200-201

Explanation and Analysis

Kimmerer here directly addresses the reader about the need for the Honorable Harvest today. (The Honorable Harvest, she explains in the book, is a system of harvesting that honors the land and the beings being harvested, seeing things like leeks and martens as gifts that one should reciprocate.) It is easy to despair that it's too late to change our current destructive path and try to return to an older and humbler way of being. We do need to mourn what has been lost, Kimmerer knows, but as she says later, "despair is paralysis," and the world is still alive and generous and beautiful—direct experience with nature and the land proves this, as she describes here through the joyful animacy of the "stirring spring woods." This means that the Honorable Harvest is alive too, and we *can* return to it. Again, it's important to put this into context: the Honorable Harvest was once the law of the land, and it could be again.

Kimmerer describes our possible relationship with the earth in a tone of longing, hoping to inspire readers to imagine a better alternative to our current society and broken relationship with our own planet. To truly abide by the Honorable Harvest is to experience joy and community with nonhuman beings, and to be fully present and mindful in one's experience of consumption.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ Had the new people learned what Original Man was taught at a council of animals—never damage Creation, and never interfere with the sacred purpose of another being—the eagle would look down on a different world. The salmon would be crowding up the rivers, and passenger pigeons would darken the sky. […] I would be speaking Potawatomi. We would see what Nanabozho saw. It does not bear too much imagining, for in that direction lies heartbreak.

Against the backdrop of that history, an invitation to settler society to become Indigenous to place feels like a free ticket to a housebreaking party. It could be read as an open invitation to take what little is left. Can settlers be trusted to follow Nanabozho, to walk so that "each step is a greeting to Mother Earth"?

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), Nanabozho

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation starts by briefly but directly facing the gaping hole of all that has been lost due to colonization and

industrialization on Turtle Island (North America). Imagining the abundance that Nanabozho saw and comparing it to our current world can only lead to mourning, and for Robin personally she again grieves her own lost sense of heritage, stolen from her by Carlisle school and the society that supported it.

This history leads to a bitter tone as Kimmerer considers how one might "become Indigenous to place": in this case, she considers how American settler society might finally feel at home on Turtle Island and therefore treat it with respect and gratitude. She knows that a change like this is necessary because settler society is the one in power and also the one destroying the earth, but at the same time it feels unfair to invite them into a relationship with the abundance that they have destroyed. Not only does it feel unfair to her, but she is also suspicious of settler society—and this is a case where trust is necessary, as shown in the last quotation from Nanabozho's story. Those in power must be trusted to act humbly and respectfully, to treat the earth as if it were actually their loving mother whom they want to please. This is the kind of perspective change that Kimmerer believes is necessary to heal both the earth and humanity itself.

❝ Maybe the task assigned to Second Man is to unlearn the model of kudzu and follow the teachings of White Man's Footstep, to strive to become naturalized to place, to throw off the mind-set of the immigrant. Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. […] Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), Nanabozho

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214-215

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer has drawn wisdom from plants and the way that they live and interact. In this chapter she draws out lessons about both the positive and negative kinds of relationships in two different plants: kudzu and the common plantain, or "White Man's Footstep." Neither plant is native to the Americas, but kudzu has become invasive and destructive, smothering other plants and trees to the point that they suffocate from lack of light. White Man's Footstep, on the other hand, has been naturalized and is now a part of the local flora and even Indigenous medicine. This contrast then hinges on the idea of naturalization versus invasion: invasion means taking over a place that is foreign and that the invader has no care for, exploiting it as they see fit for immediate gain with no thought for their own future there or its own sovereignty and value. Naturalization, however, means considering it one's new home—not pretending to be indigenous to there or appropriating the ways of those who are, but still recognizing this land as one's home and working towards a future there. This is also connected to mothering, then (no matter one's gender), because it is about caring for future generations of all species, who will all share this land that it is our responsibility to care for.

Chapter 19 Quotes

❝ As an enthusiastic young PhD, colonized by the arrogance of science, I had been fooling myself that I was the only teacher. The land is the real teacher. All we need as students is mindfulness. Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart. My job was just to lead them into the presence and ready them to hear.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Robin is temporarily living in Kentucky and teaching at a college of predominantly Christian pre-med students, who are concerned with ecology only as an academic requirement and focus exclusively on human beings in their concept of science. She tries to share with them her own sense for the animacy and value of the land by taking them on a school-sanctioned camping trip, but throughout the outing she is nervous about justifying the trip and so focuses instead on giving them facts and figures, data to write down and report back to the dean. As the trip comes to an end here, Robin is disappointed in herself, particularly remembering her own younger self from "Asters and Goldenrod" being crushed to hear that her love of plants was not scientific. She recognizes that she has acted like her own professors at that time. Notably, she uses the word "colonized" to show how this Western scientific mindset has invaded and displaced her sense of beauty and the animacy

and value of nonhumans, as well as the traditional wisdom of her heritage.

But while Robin feels like *she* failed, the land itself has made the students listen, as she can tell by their spontaneous singing of "Amazing Grace" while walking back to camp. She is humbled and reminded of an important lesson of *Braiding Sweetgrass*: that placing ourselves as the "younger siblings of creation" means we must be willing to listen and learn from other beings. As described here, the first important step of this is just paying attention. Humble mindfulness can be one of our gifts back to the earth, part of the system of "reciprocity with the living world."

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ So, were we to act ethically, don't we have to somehow compensate the plants for what we received?

[...] The students ramble and laugh as we work and weave, but come up with a long list of suggestions. Brad proposes a permit system in which we do pay for what we take, a fee to the state that goes to support wetland protection. [...] They also suggest defensive strategies. [...] To go to a town planning board meeting and speak up for wetland preservation. To vote. Natalie promises to get a rain barrel at her apartment, to reduce water pollution. [...] I thought they would have no answer, but I was humbled by their creativity. The gifts they might return to cattails are as diverse as those the cattails gave them. This is our work, to discover what we can give.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), Brad

Related Themes:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

Robin has led another group of students on an outing in the wilderness, showing them how to traditionally harvest several plants and how to use the gifts of the wetland and forest to provide for basic needs like shelter and food. The students are awed by all that they can receive directly from the land, and through their experience they truly perceive these things as gifts to value and respect. Now, however, they debate about how they could repay these gifts or "compensate" the plants. Robin is delighted to hear this, and she's also inspired by their creativity in coming up with unique methods of compensation.

Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer considers how we can exist in reciprocity with the earth, as part of the Honorable Harvest and also to further our general relationship of love and care with the land. Gratitude is always a crucial aspect of this, but she acknowledges that sometimes it feels like it's not enough. Personally, Robin feels that language and storytelling are her own gifts, but here she sees the diverse options that others might envision. As with the reciprocity of the Three Sisters garden, strengthening our individual gifts leads to us having more to share with others. If only we are willing to take the time and really consider what we owe and what we have to offer, she shows, we can come up with practical actions like the students do here.

❝ As I listen to them, I hear another whisper from the swaying stand of cattails, from spruce boughs in the wind, a reminder that caring is not abstract. The circle of ecological compassion we feel is enlarged by direct experience of the living world, and shrunken by its lack.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

On a camping trip with students, Robin is listening to the students brainstorm how to give back to and compensate the land and the plants for their gifts. This quotation highlights two important points. The first is the necessity for real action, not just abstract feelings that change nothing for anyone but the person feeling them. Second, it highlights how the feelings that lead to such action are inspired by "direct experience of the living world," or physical interaction with nonhuman beings and the land. This direct experience, when combined with humble awareness and respect, leads to a sense that we have a responsibility to the earth for its gifts, and also that we have an actual relationship with it and so should *want* to care for it in return.

Recognizing the animacy of things and feeling a closeness to the plants around her, Robin herself draws wisdom from their nearness and feels like she can almost hear them speaking, reminding her of these lessons. As she notes here, if "ecological compassion" is increased by this direct experience, then it is also "shrunken by its lack." It is so much easier for people's current disconnection from and exploitation of the land to persist because we don't have direct experience of it. We can think of it as a distant commodity and nothing more because we don't have to face

where our products come from, the lives given up for our use, or where they go when we discard them. The industrialization of the natural world for the sake of consumerism only feeds more consumption, as consumers feel that they can take endlessly without consequence.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ The First Salmon ceremonies […] were for the Salmon themselves, and for all the glittering realms of Creation, for the renewal of the world. People understood that when lives are given on their behalf they have received something precious. Ceremonies are a way to give something precious in return.

When the season turns and the grasses dry on the headland, preparations begin; […] With waders and boats, the biologists are on the river to dip nets into the restored channels of the estuary, to take its pulse. […] And still the salmon do not come. So the waiting scientists roll out their sleeping bags and turn off the lab equipment. All but one. A single microscope light is left on.

Out beyond the surf they gather, tasting the waters of home. They see it against the dark of the headland. Someone has left a light on, blazing a tiny beacon into the night, calling the salmon back home.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This chapter focuses on the lost Native people of the Pacific Northwest and their ceremonies and relationship with the salmon, and it ends with a new kind of ceremony: the scientists trying to restore the salmon's habitat and bring them back to their native rivers.

Kimmerer suggests that ceremony is important because it is a way of focusing a society's attention. The salmon ceremony of the old people was about focusing on the value of the salmon's sacrifice, leading to respect and a relationship between people and salmon. This specific ceremony also involved the Native people doing their own kind of science: enacting a controlled burn of the headland that encouraged new growth. It built a sacred relationship with that piece of land, which was intimately tied to the salmon in the process.

Centuries later, Kimmerer sees a new kind of ceremony being born here on this same river. This one is not appropriating Indigenous ceremonies; rather, it arises naturally through new people who show their care for the salmon through scientific work. Importantly, this is not the disconnected and hierarchical science that Kimmerer criticizes, but rather science based in direct experience and love of the land and its inhabitants—the exact kind of science that Kimmerer praises and tries to practice in her own work. She then closes the chapter lyrically, imagining this tentative new relationship from the salmon's perspective. The people are out here working *for* the salmon, and the salmon can sense that, seeing the same kind of light of respect and care in the microscope as they once did on the burning headland.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ Only with severe need did the hyphae curl around the alga; only when the alga was stressed did it welcome the advances.

When times are easy and there's plenty to go around, individual species can go it alone. But when conditions are harsh and life is tenuous, it takes a team sworn to reciprocity to keep life going forward. In a world of scarcity, interconnection and mutual aid become critical for survival. So say the lichens.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

As a scientist, Robin Wall Kimmerer is an expert in mosses, so this chapter about Umbilicaria (a type of lichen) is a brief foray into her specialty. Lichens are not technically plants, or even individual species, as she describes here: they are unions in action, a combination of a fungus and an alga. This quotation suggests that this is not an exploitative relationship, however. Both partners need each other to survive, and in fact they only turn to each other in times of need. This is not about profit for one, but about mutual flourishing, as they both gain more from working together than apart.

The way that she phrases this passage also highlights the way that Kimmerer derives wisdom from the plants that she studies. She tries not to foist her own ideas onto the scientific facts, but rather to present the facts, accept the plants as wise teachers and friends, and then learn from them. She finally passes these lessons on to her readers. From this lichen, then, she derives another lesson about the importance of reciprocity, of valuing "interconnection and mutual aid" rather than competition.

Chapter 26 Quotes

Cautionary Windigo tales arose in a commons-based society where sharing was essential to survival and greed made any individual a danger to the whole. In the old times, individuals who endangered the community by taking too much for themselves were first counseled, then ostracized, and if the greed continued, they were eventually banished. The Windigo myth may have arisen from the remembrance of the banished, doomed to wander hungry and alone, wreaking vengeance on the ones who spurned them. It is a terrible punishment to be banished from the web of reciprocity, with no one to share with you and no one for you to care for.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

Braiding Sweetgrass's last section focuses on the Windigo, the traditional monster of several Indigenous cultures. Here Kimmerer contrasts what was considered monstrous in Indigenous society against what is encouraged today: that is, consuming too much and ignoring the needs of others for the sake of one's own convenience and pleasure. The origins of the Windigo myth were practical in these ancient societies, considering the scarcity of food in winter. But they also reflected Indigenous cultures' worldview of communalism, a worldview that led to the land's abundance prior to European colonialism.

This passage is especially poignant in its description of the "terrible punishment" of living outside the web of reciprocity, because in this chapter Kimmerer shows that this is exactly humans' current state of "species loneliness." We have placed ourselves atop a hierarchy and considered everything nonhuman as commodities, but in doing so we have isolated ourselves and led to a great sense of unhappiness as a society. Having to care for others is not a punishment, Kimmerer suggests, but a source of joy. It means relationship and a future of gifts and giving, of community and mutual flourishing.

Chapter 27 Quotes

Restoration is a powerful antidote to despair. Restoration offers concrete means by which humans can once again enter into positive, creative relationship with the more-than-human world, meeting responsibilities that are simultaneously material and spiritual. It's not enough to grieve. It's not enough to just stop doing bad things.

We have enjoyed the feast generously laid out for us by Mother Earth, but now the plates are empty and dining room is a mess. It's time we started doing the dishes in Mother Earth's kitchen.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most important chapters of the book, as it directly confronts the tragedy of our current world and also looks forward to solutions. *Braiding Sweetgrass* guides readers through thinking about these things by encouraging them to consider humans' relationship to the earth. For instance, grief is a part of love, and Kimmerer acknowledges that it is important to grieve for all that has been lost on this earth. But she also insists that focusing on grief can lead to despair and paralysis in the face of so much loss. Most importantly, she asserts, it is now time to get to work. This quotation then builds on the metaphor of the earth as a kitchen, with Mother Earth providing generously for her family (humanity and other living beings), but Kimmerer details how humanity is overeating and leaving the place a mess. It is then our responsibility to do the dishes, to reciprocate in the give and take of gifts in this metaphorical kitchen.

Further, Kimmerer reminds the reader that doing the dishes doesn't have to be drudgery. Rather, it can instead be an activity of community-building and joy. Similarly, ecological restoration doesn't just mean trying to undo the bad things that we have done in the past. To stop doing bad things is certainly required, but Kimmerer also suggests that we also need to be doing new *good* things, using our unique gifts to give back to the earth, which has given so much to us.

Chapter 29 Quotes

❝ Being with salamanders gives honor to otherness, offers an antidote to the poison of xenophobia. Each time we rescue slippery, spotted beings we attest to their right to be, to live in the sovereign territory of their own lives.

Carrying salamanders to safety also helps us to remember the covenant of reciprocity, the mutual responsibility that we have for each other. As the perpetrators of the war zone on this road, are we not bound to heal the wounds that we inflict?

The news makes me feel powerless. I can't stop bombs from falling and I can't stop cars from speeding down this road. It is beyond my power. But I can pick up salamanders. For one night I want to clear my name.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker), Linden, Larkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 358-359

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Kimmerer connects the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the deaths caused by the conflict there to the "collateral damage" of the spotted salamanders, which are being killed by cars as they migrate towards their mating grounds. Again, Kimmerer acknowledges that considering the tragedy of global events like a new war can lead to despair and paralysis, but instead of despairing she is always trying to see what we can do practically on an individual level. Only a very few of us can change global policy matters like invasions and wars, but we can all do our part to act on "the mutual responsibility that we have for each other" on the smallest level, whatever that might be.

This passage is then an example of applying the wisdom of the natural world to not only affect our relationship with the earth itself, but also to improve relationships with other human beings. Finding animacy and value in all beings makes it easier to see xenophobia as the small-mindedness that it is. At the same time, Kimmerer proposes that acknowledging and respecting "the sovereign territory of their lives" should apply not only to the "sovereign territory" of people's lives, but to that of all living things.

In general, this chapter is a melancholy one and comes from a place of grief and powerlessness in the face of seemingly unstoppable forces of human greed and destruction. But we cannot be paralyzed, Kimmerer maintains, and we must do our part. This is not just the right thing to do, she insists; it is our responsibility, and our debt. We do it not be seen as righteous, but simply to pay back what we owe. This offers a new perspective, one discouraged by capitalist society, on environmentalism: it is not something extraneous to daily life or morality, but fundamental to it, to being decent as a human being. We have a responsibility to our fellow citizens of this earth, and Kimmerer maintains that to neglect that responsibility is truly immoral.

Chapter 31 Quotes

❝ The market system artificially creates scarcity by blocking the flow between the source and the consumer. Grain may rot in the warehouse while hungry people starve because they cannot pay for it. The result is famine for some and diseases of excess for others. The very earth that sustains us is being destroyed to fuel injustice. An economy that grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings: this is a Windigo economy.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 376

Explanation and Analysis

In these final chapters, Kimmerer gets direct about the flaws of our current capitalist society, putting things in perspective again when it comes to what our overarching values as a civilization are. This quotation then points out how foolish and self-destructive our current system is if we really want to flourish together, as a species and alongside other species. The Windigo is an ancient monster, but applying its qualities to our current dominant idea of economics encourages the reader to rethink what is actually beneficial on the whole. Kimmerer proposes that if we really want to survive and flourish in the long term, even just as humans alone, then it is difficult to justify clinging to this system of artificial scarcity—especially when even those receiving the excesses suffer from their own "diseases" of anxiety and ennui. If nothing changes, Kimmerer insists, we are hurtling toward destruction for the sake of immediate gratification. And we are doing so at the expense of every being on this planet.

Each of us comes from people who were once Indigenous. We can reclaim our membership in the cultures of gratitude that formed our old relationships with the living earth. Gratitude is a powerful antidote to Windigo psychosis. A deep awareness of the gifts of the earth and of each other is medicine. The practice of gratitude lets us hear the badgering of marketers as the stomach grumblings of a Windigo. It celebrates cultures of regenerative reciprocity, where wealth is understood to be having enough to share and riches are counted in mutually beneficial relationships. Besides, it makes us happy.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 377

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation draws together many of the themes of *Braiding Sweetgrass* and offers a direct plea to the reader: reject the commodification of the gifts of the earth, and return to a worldview that respects and loves our home. The predominant mindset of market capitalism doesn't have to be the norm, Kimmerer suggests. Rather, it can be seen as the "Windigo psychosis," which is destroying the planet and our personal sense of closeness to each other and the land. Rejecting this worldview and instead practicing gratitude and reciprocity is the only thing that will stop catastrophic climate change, Kimmerer declares. Furthermore, it will also make us better as a society and simply happier on an individual level.

Notably, Kimmerer also pleads with the non-Indigenous reader here to remember that every society was once Indigenous, no matter its more recent history of colonization or immigration. We all have a connection to this planet somewhere, and according to Kimmerer, that connection can and must be restored.

Epilogue Quotes

The moral covenant of reciprocity calls us to honor our responsibilities for all we have been given, for all that we have taken. It's our turn now, long overdue. Let us hold a giveaway for Mother Earth, spread our blankets out for her and pile them high with gifts of our own making. Imagine the books, the paintings, the poems, the clever machines, the compassionate acts, the transcendent ideas, the perfect tools. The fierce defense of all that has been given. Gifts of mind, hands, heart, voice, and vision all offered up on behalf of the earth. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world.

In return for the privilege of breath.

Related Characters: Robin Wall Kimmerer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 384

Explanation and Analysis

In the epilogue to *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer returns to her focus on the importance of the giving and receiving of gifts, rather than viewing things as commodities. She also once more emphasizes how this wisdom is found in both plants and in Indigenous American traditions like the *minidewak* ceremony that she participates in here with her fellow Potawatomi, spreading out gifts on a blanket so that everyone can partake equally, after which they all dance together.

As Kimmerer explains throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, all the dire facts about our current world emphasize the urgency of the concept she describes here, of piling gifts high on a figurative blanket for the earth itself. Kimmerer insists that humans have moved beyond the point of offering our gifts out of generosity, but now must provide them to repay our debt. Our every breath is a gift from the earth and its plants, and in Kimmerer's view, we need to return that gift. The breath will not always be there, and as *Braiding Sweetgrass* insists, we should never have taken it for granted in the first place.

This is Kimmerer's final plea to the reader, and her plea calls back to "The Three Sisters" and the ideas about how to repay the earth that the students come up with in "Sitting in a Circle." It's essential, Kimmerer insists, to get to know and embrace our own individual gifts, and then use these to benefit the community. And this community includes not only our fellow people, but most crucially, the earth itself.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

Robin Kimmerer invites the reader to accept from her a sheaf of **sweetgrass**. She gives its scientific name, *Hierochloe odorata*, and its Ojibwe name, *wiingaashk*, and describes how weaving it into a braid can be a communal activity. Again addressing the reader directly, she asks if they can help each other braid sweetgrass together. The braid of the book that follows is made of three parts: "science, spirit, and story." She hopes that it might inspire a different kind of relationship between people and the earth.

The preface to Braiding Sweetgrass *introduces several of its main themes, all brought together through the symbol of the braided sweetgrass of the book's title. Kimmerer introduces the plant using both its Latin and Ojibwe names, bringing up the theme of mixing scientific knowledge with Indigenous wisdom, and she prefaces the theme of reciprocity and communalism by describing how braiding sweetgrass can be a practice of communion with other people. This section also prepares the reader for the hard-to-classify book to follow, which is part memoir, part history, and part science writing. Finally, Kimmerer reveals her main goal: to change the way that the reader thinks about their own relationship to the earth.*

CHAPTER 1

The narrative describes a creation story: Skywoman falls through a hole in the Skyworld and plummets downwards. Below her is only darkness and water, but there are also animals living there who see Skywoman falling. Geese fly up to catch her, and then an enormous turtle offers its shell as land for her to step onto. Several water creatures dive deep in search of mud to make land, but none can find any. Finally Muskrat tries, and he drowns in his attempt—but when his body floats to the surface, he is clutching a handful of mud. Skywoman then spreads this mud over Turtle's back and dances and sings over it as the earth grows. This, Kimmerer says, is "Turtle Island, our home."

Here Kimmerer retells a version of the Haudenosaunee (also known as Iroquois) Creation Myth. What's important to note about this story is that the animals immediately move to help save Skywoman, even offering up their own lives to do so, and that together she and the animals bring their own new home into being. Turtle Island is then another name for North America. Notably, because it is seen as a living animal—a turtle—the continent itself has a kind of personhood that must be respected.

Skywoman then opens a bundle that she was holding when she fell: it's full of plants and seeds. She spreads these over the earth, and they flourish. **Sweetgrass** is the first plant to grow on Turtle Island, and Kimmerer explains that it is still an important ceremonial plant for many Indigenous cultures. She compares the traditional braiding of sweetgrass to tenderly braiding the "flowing hair of Mother Earth" in an act of gratitude and care.

After partially creating the land itself, Skywoman's first act is to plant a garden of plenty to support all living things. Braiding sweetgrass is not only a practice of communing with other people, but also with the earth itself. Giving back to the earth in reciprocity for all its gifts is a major theme of the book, and, for Kimmerer, braiding Mother Earth's hair is one way that we can show our gratitude.

Kimmerer says that she has a painting of Skywoman hanging in her laboratory. She is a professor of botany and ecology, and one day in her General Ecology class she gives her students a survey about their perception of relations between human beings and the environment. On average, the students respond that they do not know about *any* positive interactions between people and the land. This is shocking to Kimmerer, and she wonders how we can work towards a more sustainable world when most people cannot even imagine that humans and the earth can be generous and beneficial to each other.

Kimmerer's conversation with her students here leads her to the goal that she laid out in the preface: to change her readers' sense of relationship to the land. As shown here, even the contemporary environmental movement is mostly about mitigating the negative effects of humanity on nature—that is, seeing human beings as wholly disconnected from other lives and harmful to them—rather than seeking out positive ways that humans can interact with the earth. The Haudenosaunee painting hanging in Kimmerer's laboratory also highlights the contradiction within herself and within the book. She is both a plant scientist and a person with Indigenous heritage (although she is not Haudenosaunee, and her own Potawatomi people have different creation myths), who in her work mixes Indigenous wisdom with scientific knowledge. Throughout Braiding Sweetgrass *she will try to show that these worldviews are not necessarily contradictory.*

Kimmerer compares the story of Skywoman to another creation myth: Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. While Skywoman created a garden with the help of the animals, Eve was banished from her garden for eating its fruit and sent out into a harsh world, which she was then instructed to "subdue." These stories represent two fundamentally different worldviews: one is of a generous, bountiful world that is humanity's home, and the other is of an "alien land" that humans must endure before they reach their true home in heaven. When the people of Skywoman and the people of Eve finally met, these worldviews clashed, and "the land around us bears the scars of that meeting."

This insightful passage shows how creation myths can shape the worldviews of their respective cultures. Indigenous American culture sees the world as a homeland full of other beings of equal value and full of wisdom to be learned from, while Judeo-Christian culture sees the world as a temporary stopping place to be subdued, owned, and used. Eve's culture has clearly become the dominant one in the modern world, resulting in our current commodification of the earth and increasing environmental disasters.

Kimmerer explains that the Skywoman story is part of a group of teachings called "the Original Instructions." These are not rigid rules, but more like ethical measures for caring for the world and each other. Kimmerer muses on the Skywoman story again—how it is essentially about a world that gives gifts to humanity, and how humanity might give something back in return—and wonders how it might apply to the modern world. She also notes that Skywoman was an immigrant, falling from the Skyworld down to earth. Kimmerer herself comes from "Skywoman's people," but she also has European immigrants as her ancestors.

Kimmerer again uses Skywoman's story to introduce some of the main themes of the book to follow, here the idea of the world as a place of gifts to be received and given in return, as well as what it means to be Indigenous versus an immigrant. Skywoman was originally an immigrant, but she literally made the earth her home, and so all of her offspring and descendants have since been considered Indigenous to Turtle Island.

Skywoman was also pregnant when she fell to earth, so she worked to make the world flourish for the sake of her future children: "the original immigrant became Indigenous" by giving back and tending to the land that also provided for her. This is what becoming Indigenous to a place means, Kimmerer states: "living as if your children's future mattered" and depended on the land.

Kimmerer will explore this idea in more depth later on, but here she briefly describes how one might "become Indigenous to a place"—by developing a personal relationship with the land and working to make it a home for one's descendants.

Kimmerer again returns to the story of Eve being exiled from Eden. The results of that sense of exile broke the land itself but also people's relationship to the land. While the people of Eve consider humans to be at the top of the hierarchy of earthly creation, in Indigenous cultures humans are called "the younger brothers of Creation," meaning that we should look to the other inhabitants of the land—plants and animals—for guidance about how best to live. Kimmerer concludes by imagining that the seeds that Skywoman scattered across Turtle Island were also stories, and she invites the reader to listen with her.

An important aspect of these creation myths is how their respective cultures see humanity in relationship to other living things. Even though in the Adam and Eve myth humanity is also the last being to be created by God, humans were then given dominion over all other life and so see themselves at the top of the hierarchy of species. Indigenous American culture, however, looks to animals and plants as wise teachers and subjects in their own right, rather than objects to be owned and used. Kimmerer here connects the idea of stories to the image of seeds, emphasizing that both can be spread and are able to flourish on their own.

CHAPTER 2

It is a hot September day in 1895, and two young boys go fishing for their dinner. They can't catch anything and are worried about disappointing their mother—until one boy stubs his toe on a fallen pecan. Soon they realize that they are surrounded by pecans, which they call *piganek*. They stuff their pockets full but want to carry even more nuts home, so they remove their pants and tie them off at the ankles, fill them with pecans, and run home in their underwear. One of those boys was her grandfather, Kimmerer says, back when he lived on a reservation in "Indian Territory," which would later become part of Oklahoma.

Throughout Braiding Sweetgrass, *Kimmerer mixes descriptions of Indigenous culture with her personal experiences and the history of her own family, here retelling a scene from her grandfather's childhood. While this is a cute story about boys using their pants as bags, the context also emphasizes the hunger and poverty that they must have been living in at the time. The rather sinister name "Indian Territory" also shows that her grandfather's family had already been driven from their original homes.*

Pecan comes from "*pigan*," which just means "nut," as the Indigenous people who named it were not initially familiar with the tree, having already been driven from their homelands and resettled multiple times on the "Trail of Death." Kimmerer laments how many lives and how much knowledge, language, and culture was lost on these forced marches. She imagines her ancestors being relieved at least to find new nuts (*pigans*) in Kansas. Briefly returning to the story of her grandfather, Kimmerer describes how nuts are full of fat and protein, and so the boys' haul would have provided for their family almost as well as fish.

After the coming of European colonizers, much of the history of Indigenous people in America is a story of massive grief and loss, and Kimmerer doesn't shy away from this reality in Braiding Sweetgrass. *Here she brings up the idea of familiar plants as an aspect of one's sense of home, imagining displaced people finding comfort in seeing nuts similar to ones they were used to.*

Kimmerer explains that nut trees don't produce their crops every year, but instead have "mast years" that are almost impossible to predict, when they all produce nuts at once. Nuts are food for winter, she says, designed to last a long time and to be difficult to penetrate, unlike fruits and vegetables that need to be eaten fresh. For "mast fruiting" to be evolutionarily successful, Kimmerer says, the trees must produce more nuts than the "seed predators" can eat, so that enough seeds will be buried or hidden and forgotten—and then able to sprout. But because nuts are so rich in calories, trees cannot produce them every year, so they save up for their mast years.

As she does frequently, Kimmerer here shifts from a personal narrative to a broader scientific discussion about the chapter's main botanical subject. The phenomenon of mast fruiting is an example of how many natural processes remain mysterious to modern science.

Scientists have long debated the reasons that some trees reproduce with mast fruiting instead of a predictable yearly crop. In mast fruiting, trees don't follow their own individual schedules, saving up nutrients until they can fruit—rather, they all fruit at once for hundreds of miles around, even in areas where the trees haven't saved up extra sugar. In mast fruiting, "the trees act not as individuals, but somehow as a collective." These bursts of collective generosity don't seem to fit with the theory of survival of the fittest, but Kimmerer notes that the pecan trees are benefitting themselves as well as the squirrels and humans who eat their fruit. When the animals have been sated, the remaining nuts can begin growing.

Still speaking in a scientific manner, Kimmerer slightly changes the narrative's perspective to look beyond objectivity and see the trees as a source of wisdom, teaching readers about the value of collective generosity. This generosity also benefits the trees, however, a fact that challenges the usual concept of survival of the fittest and instead posits that nature—particularly in the world of plants—can be a place of reciprocity rather than competition, with no less benefit for the individual plants themselves.

Kimmerer returns to the history of the U.S.'s Indian Removal policies. Resettlement didn't wipe out Indigenous cultures as well as they'd hoped, so the federal government began separating Native children from their families and sending them off to boarding schools. They would manage this in different ways—through threats, bribes, or extortion. At some point Kimmerer's grandfather was sent off to one of these schools.

Colonial society tried to destroy Indigenous people not only through direct violence, but also through the cultural genocide of places like the Carlisle Indian School. There is a special horror to these "American Indian Residential Schools," as they were tragically effective at manipulating children and thus cutting off cultures at the root of their future generations.

The U.S. government was threatened by Native ideas about land, Kimmerer says. Rather than seeing land as property to be owned and exploited, to Native people land was something sacred, a gift requiring responsibilities of those who received it. The federal government made the people's leaders an offer: they could keep their land communal and risk having it all taken away, or they could take part in the "American Dream" and own their own property in Indian Territory, where their legal rights would then be protected by the U.S. Constitution.

As with the contradiction between the creation stories about Skywoman and Eve, here Kimmerer juxtaposes Indigenous ideas about land with those of the colonizers. The Indigenous view threatened the very basis of colonizer culture—private property, in which land is something to be owned and used by humans and has no rights of its own—and so had to be destroyed. Indigenous people were themselves then forced to choose between their culture's worldview or the ways of the invaders.

The leaders debated this choice for an entire summer in a place called the Pecan Grove. They did not act like the communal mast-fruiting pecan trees when they made their decision, however, as they ultimately chose Indian Territory and private property. In theory their land could now no longer be taken from them, but within the span of a generation, most of it was lost to private buyers or through legal loopholes.

The tragedies of Native American history include many broken treaties on the part of the U.S. government and private exploitation by settlers, as was the case here. The Native American people chose the ideology of private property under duress, but they were clearly not used to this system and so could be exploited by those with more power, greed, and experience with capitalism.

According to Indigenous tradition, the trees used to be able to speak to each other long ago. Science has long assumed that plants cannot communicate—but recent discoveries suggest that the elders were right, and that trees *do* communicate with each other. They do this primarily through releasing pheromones, usually warning of threats to their neighbors, but perhaps even coordinating mast fruiting. Masting also might be arranged through underground connections of fungi called mycorrhizal networks, in which fungi connect trees to each other and redistribute nutrients according to each tree's need, in exchange drawing their own necessary carbohydrates from the trees. "They weave a web of reciprocity, of giving and taking," Kimmerer says.

This is just one of many examples that Kimmerer gives of current scientific exploration only now catching up with Indigenous wisdom, in this case regarding the idea that trees can communicate with each other. Once more braiding science and wisdom within her narrative itself, Kimmerer describes the botanical facts and then draws lessons from them, seeing the trees as teachers rather than objects. Here the mycorrhizal network teaches the value of reciprocity through the web of giving and receiving that takes place underground, invisible to the human eye.

Kimmerer turns to the present, where she is returning to Oklahoma with her own family for the Potawatomi Gathering of Nations. This gathering was organized by tribal leaders, but the participants are also bound together by "something like a mycorrhizal network" of history and experience, and the knowledge that "all flourishing is mutual." The Gathering is large this year—it's a "mast year"—and Kimmerer imagines all the participants as seeds full of both future potential and remembrance of the past.

"All flourishing is mutual" is somewhat of a thesis statement for Braiding Sweetgrass, *bringing traditional wisdom learned from a close relationship with plants to her contemporary readers. She connects the trees to the Indigenous culture that grew up around them, both systems based on collective reciprocity rather than competition. Even the history of tragedy among the Potawatomi is part of the mycorrhizal network that binds the people together at their gathering.*

CHAPTER 3

Kimmerer considers the idea that she was "raised by strawberries," as wild strawberries were such an important aspect of her experience of childhood. As soon as she got home from school, she says, she would hurry off into the fields behind her family's house, visiting the strawberry patches and trying not to eat the tiny berries until they were properly ripe. Even fifty years later she is still surprised to come across a patch of wild strawberries, and she experiences a feeling of gratitude as if for a wonderful but unexpected gift from the land.

This passage emphasizes the idea of plants as having their own kind of personhood, here acting as parental figures during Robin Kimmerer's childhood. They also taught her early on to see aspects of the land as gifts—something personally left for her, as if by a friend or family member.

Returning to the story of Skywoman, Kimmerer tells of how Skywoman's daughter died giving birth to her twins, and when they buried her, a strawberry grew from her heart. Kimmerer says that wild strawberries helped shape her own worldview growing up: that of "a world full of gifts simply scattered at your feet." As a child, she experienced the world as a "gift economy," unaware of how her parents struggled with the wage economy beyond the strawberry fields.

The connection to Skywoman makes strawberries a special plant in Haudenosaunee culture (although again, Kimmerer herself is not Haudenosaunee), and the idea of wild strawberries as being gifts from the earth was very important for Kimmerer on a personal level growing up. The gift of strawberries made her see the land as generous and loving, even as the wage economy had no room for gifts.

For Christmas the members of Kimmerer's family would always make each other gifts—because they couldn't afford to buy them, she now realizes, but also because at the time she thought that all gifts were supposed to be specially made for the recipient. For Father's Day, her mother would bake her father a strawberry shortcake with wild strawberries picked by Robin and her siblings: another gift that couldn't be bought.

Economic hardship may have forced the tradition of homemade gifts in Robin's family, but these gifts were also much more special than anything they could have purchased premade. The first gift is the gift of strawberries from the land, which is then passed on from the family to Robin's father through the strawberry shortcake, showing how gifts tend to keep giving and building more community.

Kimmerer muses on the nature of gifts: they are freely given, but they also establish a relationship and sense of responsibility between the giver and receiver. As a child, Robin would instinctively pull up weeds around the strawberry patches, and in response, new plants would bloom. In contrast to this, some farmers nearby grew strawberries to sell, and they would sometimes hire Robin and her siblings to help pick them. One woman reminded them that she owned the berries, and so they weren't allowed to eat any of them. Robin knew that there was a difference between these berries and the wild strawberries: the wild ones "belonged to themselves."

Young Robin tended to the wild strawberries because she saw them as gifts, and accepting something as a gift creates a relationship with the giver. She didn't own the strawberries, as the woman described here claimed to, so she would never try to sell them, but she still took care of them because of her connection to the strawberries' inherent generosity. Taking care of the wild strawberries was a way for Robin to give her own gift back to the land.

Kimmerer notes that our perception of an object depends on whether it is received "as a gift or as a commodity." When she purchases a pair of socks, for example, she feels no special connection with the cashier or the store—she just exchanges the socks for her money. If those same socks had been knitted for her by her grandmother and given as a gift, however, she would have a very different relation to them—the gift would further a connection of gratitude and future gifts given to her grandmother in return. Wild strawberries are gifts, Kimmerer states, and store-bought strawberries are commodities. She says that she would even be offended to see wild strawberries at a grocery store, and she would want to liberate them—as they are meant to be given, not sold.

In this important passage Kimmerer makes clear the difference between gifts and commodities, showing how the same object can be seen as one or the other. This is a challenge to the reader—who is assumed to be accustomed to our current commodity economy—to rethink their relationship to objects from the land. If the things that we harvest from the land are gifts, then they create a relationship with us, the receivers. If they are just commodities, however, then we can exploit them however we wish—as our current society does.

Kimmerer says that **sweetgrass**, too, should only be a gift, not a commodity. A friend of hers uses sweetgrass for ceremonial purposes, but he will never buy it, even from other Indigenous people—he will instead explain that it must be given freely if it is to be sacred. Some people refuse to offer him their sweetgrass for free, but others are willing to give it as a gift. Sweetgrass is a gift from the earth, Kimmerer says, and it continues on as a gift between people. The more a gift is shared, she claims, "the greater its value becomes."

This passage highlights another important aspect of gifts, which is that they are dynamic and naturally passed on to others. They create a relationship between the giver and the receiver, but they also lead to new relationships. Reinforcing the lesson of the previous passage, Kimmerer emphasizes that the same sweetgrass is only sacred if it is treated as a gift rather than a commodity.

This idea led to the concept of the "Indian giver," which in today's commodity-driven world has negative connotations—someone who gives something and then later wants it back. In reality, Kimmerer says, the idea arose from the meeting of the Native gift economy and the colonial economy of private property. To the Native people, a gift came with attachments of responsibility and reciprocity: "that whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again." A gift isn't a single "free" transaction, but rather part of an ongoing relationship between gift and giver.

Kimmerer builds on this point with an interesting and poignant historical anecdote about the term "Indian giver," which shows how alien the Indigenous economy was to the settlers. Rather than treating objects as being owned, Indigenous people regarded them as only lent out, having their own ownership of themselves. The gift keeps giving and retains its own sovereignty, rather than remaining a static object owned by any one individual.

Kimmerer once worked doing ecological research in the Andes. She particularly enjoyed the market in the local village, which was a vibrant and bustling place. Recently she dreamed of this market, she says, but when she tried to pay for things in the dream, the vendors all waved her money away and insisted that she take things for free. She chose a few things carefully and full of gratitude, and realized that she was more sparing in her consumption than if everything had simply been on sale rather than free. She also immediately began thinking about gifts that she might give to the vendors in return. Kimmerer now realizes that the dream was an illustration of a market economy transforming into a gift economy.

Robin's dream illustrates an interesting psychological phenomenon: that people often tend to consume less when what is being offered is given as a gift rather than being sold as a commodity. This is because the act of gift-giving creates a relationship, and it's assumed that the receiver of the gift will eventually give something back in return. Our current market economy of overconsumption to the detriment of the earth is an obvious example of the other worldview, in which commodities for sale are bought and discarded without a second thought as to where they came from or where they will go next.

Kimmerer reminds the reader that she is a plant scientist who tries to speak in objective language, but she is also a poet who is drawn to metaphors. She doesn't really believe that the wild strawberries are personally crafting a gift for her, but she also recognizes how little science knows about plants and their consciousnesses and the different ways that evolution works to further generations of a species. Her main point is this: that our *perspective* is what makes the world either a gift or a commodity. Treating the world as a gift means respecting it and feeling a responsibility to give back to it in return.

Kimmerer draws attention to the dichotomy within her own writing, as she continues to try to "braid" scientific knowledge with Indigenous wisdom, and on a sentence-by-sentence level to braid fact with metaphor. This line becomes even more blurred regarding the study of plants, as scientific knowledge is very limited about subjects like wisdom and non-human consciousnesses. This passage broadens the metaphor of the socks to describe the entire world as able to be perceived as either gift or commodity. That perspective shift drastically changes how we interact with the earth itself.

Centuries ago, Kimmerer says, it was easier to see the world as a gift, like the geese who caught Skywoman as she was falling or who arrived every year to offer themselves as food for people. Eating a goose that one has known and killed is very different from buying meat at the grocery store wrapped in plastic, the corpse of a bird raised in a cage. "That is not a gift of life; it is a theft." Kimmerer acknowledges that we cannot all live as hunter-gatherers in today's world, but we can at least change our perspective and act as if "the living world were a gift." One way to do this is just "don't buy it"—if it should be a gift, like wild strawberries or **sweetgrass** or water, then don't buy it.

Throughout Braiding Sweetgrass, *Kimmerer tries to give practical examples so that her readers can apply the ideas that she presents in their own lives. She isn't proposing that we return to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, but we can change our perspectives and use that gift mindset to guide our purchases in daily life. An important aspect of this is mindfulness—just being aware of what one is consuming, like taking the time to think of the living bird that the plastic-wrapped grocery meat comes from. This increased awareness then generally leads to increased respect and gratitude for what one is consuming.*

Kimmerer says that for most of human history, "common resources were the rule." Some societies invented commodity economies, however; and such economies have taken over the world in recent centuries, causing both good and harm to humans, but destruction to the earth itself. Yet treating the world as a commodity is just "a story we have told ourselves," Kimmerer says, "and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one." We have the choice to exist in a gift economy with the land itself, living in both surprised gratitude and with a sense of responsibility to give back our own gifts. Even with the same number of resources available, seeing them as commodities makes us feel poor, while seeing them as gifts makes us feel wealthy.

This passage lends some important perspective on our current world and its place amidst the history of humanity and life itself. Our current commodity economy is a relatively recent development in the course of human history, and though its effects on the environment have been drastic, it is also just a "story we have told" and "we are free to tell another." This offers some hope for the future—if only enough people are willing to change their perspectives and start seeing our interactions with the land and with each other as an exchange of gifts rather than commodities.

Returning to her childhood, Kimmerer remembers how she used to eat the white unripe strawberries when she was too impatient to wait for them to turn red. As she grew older, however, she learned to wait for them to ripen properly. The commodity economy of Turtle Island is built around eating "the white strawberries and everything else," but it has also left people longing for more. She hopes that we can once again live in a world of gifts, where we are patient enough to wait for things to ripen.

Here Kimmerer compares our greedy market economy to an impatient child always wanting immediate gratification. From her perspective, what we need is to mature and grow more patient as a society, to recognize the earth's gifts and treat them with the respect they deserve, rather than grabbing them before they are offered and then being dissatisfied with the result.

CHAPTER 4

Kimmerer remembers spending her summers as a child canoe camping in the Adirondacks with her parents and siblings. Every morning her father makes coffee, and when it's ready, he solemnly pours some of it out onto the ground, saying, "Here's to the gods of Tahawus." Only after this offering does he pour coffee for himself and his wife. As a child, Robin doesn't question this small ritual and feels like it is an important way to begin the day, as if announcing their presence and giving thanks to the land. Tahawus, she explains, is the Algonquin name for the highest peak in the Adirondacks.

Robin returns to her personal history, as in the previous chapter with the strawberries, showing how a small thing in her childhood deeply affected her worldview growing up. Part of being mindful of the earth and its gifts means announcing oneself respectfully, as Robin's father does with his coffee offering. Any relationship is a two-way street, and in Kimmerer's framework, human beings must do our part, which includes being fully present and aware.

Sometimes Kimmerer's father offers other names—of lakes, rivers, or mountains—when he pours out the ceremonial coffee. Kimmerer's mother has her own offering of respect: she makes the family leave their campsite spotless and gather firewood for whoever might arrive there next. They only perform the coffee offering when they are camping or on picnics, out in nature and never in the town or under a roof.

Like Robin's father, Robin's mother offers her own gifts to show appreciation for the land. There is an important distinction made here: that it's only when directly interacting with the land that they perform these rituals, not when there is a divider like a house separating person and land.

As she grows older, Robin becomes frustrated by the coffee ritual, feeling like it is a "secondhand ceremony" made by "exiles," while the real ceremony had been lost in the past. Years later, however, their family makes stronger connections with other Potawatomi people and learns other, similar offerings—made with different words but the same spirit of gratitude and of announcing oneself to the land. Kimmerer now can appreciate that even though her father's offering was secondhand, it was still sincere and therefore just as powerful as the ancient ceremonies.

The grief for her lost culture and the anger at those who stole it away leads to the young Robin's frustration with her father's makeshift ritual, but eventually she realizes that it's the intention that really mattered at the time, not the exact details or history of the ritual. At the same time, the loss of these cultural rituals cannot be ignored or reasoned away as a means of absolving the people who purposefully destroyed them.

Once, as an adult, Robin asks her father how his offering originated. At first he just says that "it seemed right," but after thinking about it for a few weeks he reveals that it probably originated practically: they didn't have coffee filters when they were camping, and so the first pour would have a plug of grounds in the spout. Robin is devastated to hear this—that the offering so important to her childhood was just a dumping of coffee grounds—but her father continues, saying that though it may have originated that way, it eventually became something else. Even when there weren't grounds to clear, he still offered the first pour to the land in a kind of "joy."

The personal history of Robin's father's coffee ritual offers a microcosmic glimpse into how ceremonies come into being, all through the perspective of one man's shifting habits. It starts out as something practical, but over time and when combined with intention and awareness, it eventually becomes a ritual. The ritual then is passed on to other people like the young Robin, and what was once mundane becomes an important formative experience for a new generation.

This is the power of ceremony, Kimmerer says: "the water turns to wine, the coffee to a prayer." The earth is generous with its gifts, but there is little that we can offer it in return. One thing we can do, though, is offer ceremonies that turn the mundane into something holy: "a homemade ceremony, a ceremony that makes a home."

Like viewing a sock as a gift rather than a commodity, seeing a simple act as a ritual rather than a chore changes it and makes it sacred in its own right. This purposeful sense of the sanctity of certain acts is an important aspect of building a new relationship with the earth itself, Kimmerer concludes—a way to make it feel like home again.

CHAPTER 5

Kimmerer describes her younger self going off to college to study botany, full of excitement and wonder at the natural world. When her adviser asks her why she wants to pursue botany, Robin tells him about her lifelong love of plants, and that she wants "to learn about why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together." The adviser immediately tells her that "*that* is not science," and that she must stop thinking about things like beauty when it comes to botany.

This chapter highlights the apparent divide between the realm of scientific knowledge and the world of Indigenous wisdom. Kimmerer notes how her personal love of biology began as a simple love of plants and their beauty, until this perspective was shot down by her adviser. Because of his race, gender, and position of power over Robin, the adviser's action is also an example of our society's scientific mindset often coming from a place of patriarchal and colonialist history, one that is unwilling to accept perspectives that might challenge its status quo.

Kimmerer then describes her love of asters and goldenrod, and how wonderful it seems that they grow together, making a meadow seem like a royal court of purple and gold. She wonders why the world is so often beautiful like this when "it could so easily be otherwise." This is what she wanted to learn about in school, but professors like her adviser insisted that science was something else entirely.

Kimmerer leans into the spiritual side of nature here, seeing the world as if it has intentions regarding humanity, in this case purposefully presenting itself as beautiful to our eyes. Her adviser, who is the one in the position of power and representing the scientific mindset in power in the Western world, declares that this worldview cannot be reconciled with true science.

Kimmerer now realizes that in going to the university, she "shifted between worldviews," almost like going to the old Carlisle Indian School and being told that her entire way of life was wrong and should be discarded. The botany that young Robin learns in school is entirely detached from any kind of emotion or connection between humans and plants. After a while, she starts to believe that she *had* been wrong all along. She barely passes her first plant science class, but she keeps trying and soon learns not to question the kind of science that she is taught, despite her natural tendency to see things holistically. Her adviser writes that "She's done remarkably well for an Indian girl."

This passage makes a comparison between Robin's experience in college and the Carlisle school, which is the most egregious example of Indigenous culture being stripped away and replaced by what is seen by settler society as the only proper way to exist (or in this case, to do science). The adviser's comments even sound like they could come from a place like Carlisle, as he seems to regard her heritage as a flaw or setback that she must overcome.

Robin goes on to get a master's degree, a Ph.D., and a teaching job. She starts teaching "the mechanics of botany" just the way she learned them, still assuming that this is the best approach. One night, however, she stumbles across a photograph of a large American elm called the "Louis Vieux Elm." Louis Vieux is one of Robin's Potawatomi ancestors, and seeing his name there connected to the tree makes her have an epiphany: she has "stepped off the path of Indigenous knowledge" in her pursuit of science.

Like her grandfather at Carlisle, Robin is indoctrinated for a while by academia and repeats the same lessons that she has been taught by Western science. At the sight of the elm and a reminder of her heritage, however, she takes a necessary next step and at least becomes aware of what has happened in her own life, recognizing that she has repressed a crucial part of herself.

Soon after this Robin attends a gathering of Indigenous elders who are talking about plants. Hearing their stories and seeing their personal closeness with the plants themselves, she is deeply moved and feels like she has come home to a familiar kind of knowledge. These elders, she realizes, pursue questions that science does not. Like her adviser on the first day of school, science's scope in this case is narrow and ignores other kinds of human understanding.

The Indigenous gathering offers another way of understanding life, the side that Robin has repressed and been unknowingly missing—the wider view of the world that is offered by traditional knowledge. She sees this wisdom not as something primitive or inferior to modern science, but as presenting a crucial aspect of a more holistic way of interacting with the world.

Inspired by this, Robin returns to ideas of beauty that she had ignored for years because of her science education. Kimmerer then uses this point to come back to asters and goldenrod, saying that there actually is a scientific reason that they look so beautiful together: purple and yellow are complementary colors, a "reciprocal pair" that evoke each other to the human eye—but also the eyes of bees, who pollinate the flowers. The bold contrast attracts their vision, so that asters and goldenrod growing together attract more pollinators than if they were to grow alone.

Releasing the part of herself that she has repressed, Robin is able to unite this traditional wisdom with scientific knowledge through her relationship with plants. Asters and goldenrod are the perfect example of this, as only her sense of beauty led her to study them in this way, and science allowed her to explain why exactly they appear beautiful to the human eye when appearing in combination. Learning this allows her to then move beyond science and find wisdom in what she has learned—the importance of reciprocity, of working together to ensure mutual flourishing.

The question of asters and goldenrod is a matter of both science and beauty, then, and to see them fully requires both. Kimmerer muses that science and traditional knowledge might be like complementary colors themselves, a reciprocal pair that, when combined, create a fuller picture of the world. Kimmerer now resolves to understand her work no longer as purely scientific, but also something spiritual and emotional. Asters and goldenrod are "lived reciprocity," and science and Indigenous knowledge could be, too.

Kimmerer applies this idea of the reciprocal pair to science and Indigenous wisdom, two ways of knowing that can better flourish when combined than when separated and competing with each other. This is another example of the braid that Kimmerer tries to weave throughout her narrative, using both science and traditional wisdom to learn more about plants, and then learning from the plants themselves about how we can better live as humans.

CHAPTER 6

Robin sits leaning against a pine tree, listening to the sounds of the forest. Hearing the wind in the trees and the movements of animals, she feels that she is not alone and that everything around her is speaking in its own language that is familiar to her, though she can't understand it. Kimmerer muses that a desire to understand this language of the forest is what led her to study botany. In school she learned the scientific names of things, but by their very nature, these names turn their subjects into objects, robbing them of life in the name of precision.

Kimmerer often uses a personal experience framed in the narrative present—like here as she sits listening to the woods—to lead to a larger meditation on the ideas that this experience brings up. This passage returns to the science vs. wisdom dichotomy, as science taught her information about the living things around her, but didn't give her knowledge of their natures, as represented by their "true names." This is another way that her initial scientific education disappointed her, since her desire to learn the language of the forest on its own terms was part of what made her want to be a botanist.

Kimmerer first comes across the language that is missing from science through the Potawatomi word "*Puhpowee*," which translates to "the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight." She is immediately intrigued, and decides that she wants to learn the language that would have a word like this, something to describe the "unseen energies that animate everything."

*A word like "*puhpowee*" would have no place in science writing because it is imprecise and subjective, but it also describes an essential aspect of living things that is clear to anyone familiar with them. This seems like the language that Kimmerer has been missing, the counterpart to scientific Latin names.*

Kimmerer only knows how to speak English, but she considers an alternate history in which she would have grown up speaking Potawatomi, which is also called Bodewadmimwin. Unfortunately, children like Kimmerer's grandfather were stripped of their language and culture as children, and that damage has been irreparable.

This passage again returns to the history of Carlisle and its place within the broader history of loss and grief for the native people of Turtle Island, not just for those in the past but for the culture that Robin herself never got to experience when she was growing up.

At a yearly tribal gathering one year, Robin decides to attend a class on the Potawatomi language. Every single fluent speaker in the world is there: only nine elders, many with walkers or wheelchairs. One of them explains that he only still knows the language because he hid when "Indian agents" came to take the other children off to boarding school. Another claims that if the language is lost, so too will be the Potawatomi culture and "way of seeing the world." The youngest, a 75-year-old man, tells a joke in Potawatomi that makes the other speakers giggle, but then he sobers and asks the audience to reflect on what happens to a joke when no one understands it anymore.

The Potawatomi language is a fragile thing, maintained only by a few fluent elders at this point in its history. Like its myths, a culture's language both shapes and is shaped by its worldview. A language is not just a historical artifact to be lost or preserved in a museum, but a living thing full of its own meanings, jokes, and perspectives on life.

After the class, Robin covers her house with yellow sticky notes containing Potawatomi words and phrases. She practices her vocabulary with her sister on the phone and attends an online class twice a week. As she learns more, however, she starts to get discouraged. She's mostly just learning nouns, not the true language that is at the heart of the culture—this would mean learning verbs, and Potawatomi language is 70 percent verbs (compared to English's 30 percent). Looking through a dictionary of Ojibwe (a language close to Potawatomi), Robin sees examples of verbs like "to be a Saturday" or "to be a bay." Their specificity makes her feel even more despondent about learning such a complex language.

This section further shows how a language and the society that speaks it shape each other. English is more about having specific words for objects, and then generic verbs that objects can do, while in the Potawatomi language the object has its own verb that makes it become *itself. Rather than just defining this part of the land as a bay, in Potawatomi it is seen as water that is acting out the thing that English conceptualizes as "bay." In Potawatomi the water has its own subjectivity, its own inner life.*

As she considers giving up her project, Robin imagines the ghosts of the boarding school missionaries gleefully observing her failure. Suddenly she has a revelation: these specific verbs convey the idea of animacy and life within all things. A "bay" as a noun is something lifeless, but "to be a bay" is something that water and land *do* "in a world where everything is alive." Kimmerer describes this as "the grammar of animacy." Just as it would make one feel cold and inhuman to describe one's grandmother as an "it," so in Potawatomi or Ojibwe it is wrong to describe a tree or a mountain as if it were an inanimate object.

Robin now understands that the Potawatomi language gifts non-human and even non-living things with their own life and subjectivity, their inner puhpowee. *This is connected to the idea of humans as the younger siblings of creation; in this view, the other citizens of earth are our brethren, not our subjects, and so the language we use to describe them should reflect this. Kimmerer makes this difference clear to the English-speaking reader with the example of one's grandmother (similar to the sock metaphor of Chapter 3) to show how, from an Indigenous perspective, English is dehumanizing to things that are considered animate in languages like Potawatomi.*

Kimmerer compares this idea to English, where only humans are given the respect of true animacy, and even then, they must be gendered as either "he" or "she." She describes a field biologist who refers to the animals she works with as "someone" rather than "something," and one of Kimmerer's own students who had a revelation that the very nature of the English language, with its limited ideas of animacy, gives its speakers "permission to disrespect nature." "Wouldn't things be different if nothing was an *it*?" he asks.

This is the other side of the linguistic coin, as Kimmerer suggests that the English language's denial of animacy to anything non-human reflects Western culture's worldview of treating the earth and its citizens as commodities to be owned and used.

Kimmerer invites the reader to consider this question as well, and to imagine how we might treat the world if our language—the lens through which a culture sees the world—considered things like flowers and rocks as animate subjects rather than lifeless objects. In such a world "there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us," and we might also feel less lonely as a species. In her own life now, Robin tries to keep this idea in mind, greeting the animals and plants each day as if they were persons in their own right. To close, she quotes a Cheyenne elder who once told her that even though the members of the natural world like to hear the old Indigenous languages, they will also understand her if she speaks only with her heart.

Kimmerer challenges her readers to try to see the world through this language of animacy. This doesn't mean trying to learn the Potawatomi language, but simply trying to see other beings as having their own subjectivity, dignity, and wisdom. While this would mean losing our place at the top of the hierarchy, it also means that we as humans are suddenly surrounded by siblings, no longer isolated as a species assuming itself superior to everything else. This also explains why in the narrative of Braiding Sweetgrass *itself, Kimmerer will often capitalize words like "maple" or "sweetgrass" that are not capitalized according to the rules of English grammar. She is still writing in English, but adjusting the language to better reflect the "grammar of animacy" that she seeks to cultivate in herself and in her readers.*

CHAPTER 7

The chapter begins with a story of Nanabozho, the Anishinaabe "Original Man." Nanabozho observed that in some villages, people had grown lazy and took the gifts of the earth for granted because all they had to do was drink rich syrup from the maple trees all day. In response to this laziness, Nanabozho diluted the trees' syrup with water, so that now the people must work to concentrate the syrup, reminding them of "both possibility and of responsibility."

Nanabozho is briefly introduced here as a folk-hero trickster figure in Anishinaabe mythology, half-man and half-spirit. The lesson of this story is that receiving gifts—like the sweetness of maple sap—comes with its own responsibility. One cannot just take the gifts and give nothing in return.

When her daughters Linden and Larkin are still young, Robin moves with them to Fabius, New York, to an old farmhouse in a yard full of old Maple trees (Kimmerer capitalizes "Maple"). One day the girls discover a pile of old syrup-making equipment in the stable. Robin researches how to use it and buys more supplies at a nearby store, planning on "sugaring" in the old fashioned way of collecting sap in a bucket via a tube and spout drilled into the Maple tree.

This is an example of Kimmerer trying to bend the rules of English to better accommodate the animacy of non-humans after the lessons that she learned in the previous chapter. Plants are an important aspect of place and home to Robin, and so she defines this new house by the maples that surround it.

Robin, Linden, and Larkin eagerly await the coming of spring, when the sap begins to flow. Kimmerer explains that Maples have a sophisticated way of telling when spring has truly begun, measuring the amount of light they receive each day via photosensors in their buds. Lacking such a system, Robin herself must simply guess when the time is right. Noting years-old scars from past taps on the Maples in her yard, Robin drills a hole and inserts the "spile"—and sap immediately begins to drip into the bucket. She and the girls place three taps in each of their seven Maples. The girls catch some of the drops on their tongues, an act that moves Robin to tears, as she feels like she's watching her daughters be nursed directly by Mother Earth.

Robin's daughters often play a role in the memoir sections of the book as she jumps around through the years. In this chapter, they are still young children excited to harvest their own maple sap for the first time. Watching them drink the sap directly from the maples, Kimmerer is deeply moved. She often personifies Mother Earth as a being who sustains humans generously, and this image of Linden and Larkin then seems to Robin like Mother Earth directly feeding her daughters, who eagerly accept the gift.

That night Robin collects the sap from the buckets—a huge amount—and sets it to boil over a campfire overnight. With four gallons of sap, she hopes for just a cup of syrup by morning, but eventually she gives up and goes to bed. The next morning she sees that ice has formed on the remaining unboiled sap, and she remembers that her ancestors would also use this method to refine the syrup: pouring it into troughs, letting it freeze, and removing the layers of frozen water to leave the sugary syrup underneath. Kimmerer notes what an elegant solution this is, as it saves firewood and "maple sap runs at the one time of year when this method is possible."

It's notable how much labor is required to produce so little syrup, but this makes it all the sweeter—one works for the gift, with the help of traditional methods that build on the qualities of the season itself, rather than just carelessly buying syrup at the store. Again Kimmerer notes the wisdom in traditional knowledge, here in using the freezing nights to refine the syrup more efficiently.

Kimmerer explains how Indigenous people would set up "sugar camp" when the time was right, with entire families moving to be near the Maples where they collected the sap. One tradition says that people learned to make syrup by observing the squirrels, who will scrape the bark off of a Maple tree so that the sap flows, and the next morning lick the sugar crystals that form overnight.

This passage returns to the idea that human beings should learn from our fellow living things instead of assuming our own superiority. Kimmerer highlights the Indigenous cultures that had the humility to do so from the start, learning from the squirrels in ancient times.

This time of the year is called "Maple Sugar Moon," Kimmerer says, a period after the leanest depths of winter when the Maples offer their sap to "care for the people" as part of the Original Instructions. At the same time, the process helps the Maples as well. Only for a few weeks in spring—during the Maple Sugar Moon—sugar moves upwards from the roots to the buds, before the leaves are able to make their own sugar and send it back down to the roots.

Again Kimmerer combines a scientific explanation with traditional wisdom. The maple tree is feeding itself and preparing for spring by sending up sugar, but this could also be seen as providing sap to "care for the people."

Robin stays up for many nights tending the fire and boiling down the sap. The trees give so much sap that eventually she pulls out the spiles to avoid wasting it. By the end of her adventure, Robin has bronchitis from sleeping outside in the cold and has made three quarts of syrup. Years later, her daughters remember that sugaring experience as being a lot of hard work, but they also remember drinking the sap straight from the tree. Kimmerer also reminds the reader of Nanabozho's story—that the maples produce the sap, but humans must work to turn it into syrup. "It is our work, and our gratitude, that distills the sweetness."

The physical result of all Robin's and her daughters' labor is negligible and would be considered a waste to an economist, but it has provided the value of memories, a direct connection with the land, and a sweet reward for hard work and gratitude.

Returning to her memories of sitting by the fire boiling Maple sap, Robin notices that two of the Maples seem exactly the same size, growing symmetrically on either side of her house's entrance. She remembers that there was a custom in the 1800s of couples planting twin trees when they got married and started a family, and she assumes that these Maples were two such trees planted by a young couple long ago. Kimmerer imagines herself as living with a responsibility to this couple and to the trees themselves, as they have all given a long-term gift that she can never truly pay back. To reciprocate, she decides to leave another gift for the future by planting Daffodils beneath the Maples.

Kimmerer closes the chapter by attempting to see gifts in the long-term, from the perspective of trees and with consideration for how time passes more slowly for them. She has received the gift of maple syrup from this past couple and from the land, and so she decides to reciprocate by planting something new for future generations to enjoy.

CHAPTER 8

This chapter, "told through the eyes of [Kimmerer's] daughter," begins with the narrator (almost certainly Linden, the eldest) musing on the weather of late fall days in Kentucky and the yellow flowers that decorate the bare branches of a witch hazel shrub. Linden visits a house that is now empty—though still decorated for a long-ago Christmas—and remembers when a woman named Hazel Barnett lived there.

In this chapter Kimmerer employs a new narrative technique, imagining her own past experiences through what she imagines her daughter's memories to be. Linden has her own connection with plants, similar to her mother (and likely influenced by her).

Linden first meets Hazel while she and her mother Robin are looking for wild blackberries, soon after they have moved to Kentucky. Hazel is a very old woman who calls out to them as they pass by her fence. Linden only knows the name "Hazel" from the plant witch hazel, and so she decides that Hazel "must be the witch herself." Hazel and Robin soon become friends. At the time Robin is teaching at the local college and writing scientific articles, but she spends her evenings gardening. She and Hazel discuss plants, sitting together on the front porch and drinking lemonade. Hazel lives with her adult son Sam, a physically disabled veteran who receives a pension, and daughter Janie, who is mentally disabled.

Robin includes her daughters in her search for wild berries, the activity that was so influential in her own childhood, to likewise instill in them a connection to the land and a sense of nature's gifts to us as human beings. Hazel seems to have no scientific background, but she and Robin find common ground in their mutual love of plants.

Linden describes how her mother Robin finds great joy in household tasks like splitting wood, sometimes saying that she was "born too late" and should have been a farmwife in the 1800s. Linden feels that Robin and Hazel's friendship grew around this sense of work and the land: "both were women with feet planted deep in the earth who took pride in a back strong enough to carry a load for others." One day Hazel starts to cry at the sight of Robin carrying firewood, saying that she used to be able to do hard work like that, but she no longer can.

Along with their connection to the botanical world, Robin and Hazel both take pleasure in simple tasks of manual labor, homebuilding, and helping other people. Hazels' tears are the first sign to Linden that the older woman carries a great sadness within herself as well.

Hazel often laments the loss of her old home. It's just down the road, but she hasn't been back to it in years, ever since Sam had a heart attack and she came to live with him. Robin relates to Hazel's feelings of longing for home, as she herself has recently been "transplanted" to Kentucky from her native Adirondacks. One day Hazel calls and asks if Robin will take her to see her old house before the next winter. Robin drives Hazel and Linden to the house, and Hazel starts to cry as they approach.

Hazel's sense of loneliness is connected to the loss of her old house, which is nearby in terms of distance but still feels a world away. Robin can relate to this feeling of being an exile because of her own recent move. She decides to ease her personal sense of displacement by helping Hazel return to her own home.

They all get out and Hazel shows them around the yard, finally going inside on her own. Linden looks inside the house and sees a room decorated for Christmas, with a table set for a dinner for six. After a moment of contemplation, Hazel sets to work cleaning up the place while Linden explores the abandoned rooms. Later they all go outside, and Hazel points out the witch hazel plant, commenting on how she used to make medicine out of it for her neighbors.

This bittersweet homecoming connects to Robin's personal feeling of displacement, as well as the broader historical exile of Native Americans that Kimmerer discusses elsewhere. An entire culture can feel like Hazel, longing for a home that is no longer the same.

After this initial visit, Hazel often calls Robin on Sundays and asks to go visit the house. Linden and her younger sister Larkin go along as well. One day they discover a wren's nest on the old house's porch, and Hazel describes how the bird has come to depend on her for shelter. Sometimes they also visit Hazel's old neighbors, who live in harsh poverty. Hazel always sends Robin and the girls home with a gift of food.

Hazel has a strong connection with the natural world and a generous spirit, two qualities that Kimmerer clearly prizes in a person. Hazel and Robin's relationship is one of giving and receiving gifts, living out the relationship of reciprocity that Kimmerer sees in so much of the natural world.

As winter begins, Hazel expresses a wish to visit her old house for one last Christmas. Linden's family isn't traveling to be with Robin's mother and father as they normally would at Christmas, and Robin is already feeling sad about it—until she decides to have a surprise Christmas party for Hazel instead. Robin arranges to have the power reconnected to Hazel's old home for a few days, and she, the girls, and some of Robin's college students clean out the filthy kitchen. They invite Hazel's old neighbors and decorate the house with a tree and lights.

Again Robin redirects her own sense of loneliness and displacement into a project to help Hazel return to her old home and sense of belonging. This is its own gift in response to Hazel's consistent generosity.

On the day of the Christmas party, Linden and Larkin welcome the guests while Robin goes to pick up Hazel. Hazel beams as she steps out of the car and sees her old home full of light, warmth, and people. She moves about like a "queen" that night, and falls asleep in the car on the way home. A few years later, Robin's family moves back north. Hazel gives her a going-away present of a rocking chair and some old Christmas ornaments. Two years after that, they learn that Hazel has died. Linden reflects that "there are some aches witch hazel can't assuage; for those, we need each other." Hazel and Robin found a surprising bond in their loneliness, and together they made a healing "balm" for their pain. Even now, Linden goes looking for witch hazel plants in winter, remembering that long-ago Christmas and the "medicine" of friendship.

Closing the chapter, Kimmerer (in Linden's voice) connects the medicine made from plants like witch hazel with the "medicine" that comes from our relationships with each other. In the traditional Indigenous sense, medicine has a broader meaning than just drugs to heal illness, and the two women's friendship is an example of this. Hazel's joy on the night of the party shows how even one night of a true homecoming can transform a person, making them feel that they truly belong to a place once more, generously receiving its gifts and passing them on to others.

CHAPTER 9

Kimmerer briefly mentions that her husband abandoned her while they were living in Kentucky, leaving her to take care of Linden and Larkin alone. The three then moved back to upstate New York, where Robin looks for a new house and, wanting to be a good mother, tries to meet all of her daughters' criteria for what they want in a home (including big trees and a pond to swim in). Robin eventually settles on an old farmhouse on seven acres of land, surrounded by enormous sugar maples and including a frozen-over "trout pond." She and the girls move in that spring, and soon Linden and Larkin's wish-list is complete—except for the swimming pond.

Kimmerer's husband is rarely mentioned in the book, but here she briefly hints at the reason that she is raising her daughters alone from this point on. Being a newly single mother makes her insecure about her ability to fully provide for her daughters, so she wants to meet all of their wishes, including the swimming pond. This chapter is then another perspective on the time period when they moved into the farmhouse surrounded by maples, as described in "Maple Sugar Moon."

As the ice melts, Robin realizes that the supposed "trout pond"—which some of the neighbors say that people used to swim in decades ago—is now a thick mass of weeds and algae. Still doing what she thinks a "good mother" would do, Robin adopts some baby ducks for the girls to raise. When they grow up, the ducks move to the pond, but their feces only provide more nutrients for the algae to grow. In the winter the ducks become a nuisance to Robin as well, leaving the shelter she built for them and crowding on the back porch instead, eating the dog's food and covering the porch in their frozen feces. Robin gets so annoyed that she considers giving them away, but instead she continues to try to be a good mother and feeds them and cleans their leavings. In the spring they return to the pond, and they are gone a month later.

Robin here gets some experience of trying to be a good mother to more than just her own daughters, but to other living things as well. Even though the ducks irritate her to no end, she still tries to care for them as best she can. At the same time, the nutrients that they provide with their feces make the "trout pond" even less swimmable, as the algae that has taken over grows even thicker in response.

In the ducks' aftermath, the pond is greener than ever. A family of Canada geese move in, and one day Robin sees one of the chicks actually walking on the surface of the water because the algae is so thick. This is the last straw for her—"you should not be able to walk on a pond," she thinks. Kimmerer then describes what has happened to this particular pond: something called eutrophication, "the natural process of nutrient enrichment that comes with age." Eventually the pond would become a marsh, and then even a field or forest. However, Robin wants to be a good mother and offer a swimming pond for her girls before they get too old, and good swimming ponds are not eutrophic but rather oligotrophic, or nutrient-scarce.

Once more navigating her braid of narratives, Kimmerer shifts from personal memoir to scientific explanation. The eutrophic process of building up nutrients is a natural one when left to its own devices over many years, but Robin the mother decides to circumvent Robin the botanist and try to reverse this process for the sake of her daughters. This means removing the nutrients and the algae that thrive off of those nutrients from the pond in order to make it swimmable for Linden and Larkin.

Robin thus decides to alter the pond's natural process and to clear it for her girls to swim in. Her first attempts at raking up the algae from a canoe are futile, and as she does more research, she realizes that she needs to remove the nutrient-rich muck at the bottom, not just the algae. A regular snow shovel and a window-screen sieve both fail to collect much muck, however. She resolves to remove the nutrients not by shoveling soil, but by hauling away the plants that store them. Robin takes a sample of algae from the pond and examines it under her microscope, feeling an obligation to know about the living things that she is trying to remove. She identifies three different kinds of algae, her "partners in restoration."

Robin is essentially fighting against the natural processes of time and nature here, and so she must be patient, diligent, and inventive to succeed. At the same time, the botanist in her can't help exploring all the plant life that she is now dealing with so intimately. Over time, the pond becomes her own private restoration project, and she likes to think of herself as working with *the plants around her. The algae naturally absorb and store the nutrients that she is trying to remove, so she will use this absorption to aid in her work.*

Going forward with her project, Robin must schedule her "pond restoration hours" in between her regular work and all the duties of a single mother with two daughters. Her time at the pond becomes special to her, however, a chance to actually "*do* ecology" instead of just teach it. She develops a new strategy of raking the algae up from the shore and tossing it into a wheelbarrow. Eventually she progresses from raking only from the safety of dry ground to actually wading into the pond to work, first wearing waders and then just her shorts. She changes her ideas about mud as well, no longer trying to avoid getting muddy but simply becoming oblivious to it.

Throughout the book, Kimmerer emphasizes the importance of hands-on work with the land itself, which provides its own wisdom and insight that can never be truly found in a laboratory or classroom. Her work on the pond then serves as a counterpart to her work at the college, getting messy and putting her theoretical lessons into action. The more she works, the closer she literally gets to nature, as when she eventually gives up on trying to stay clean and embraces the mud.

One day Robin notices a large bullfrog tadpole struggling in the mass of algae that she has just raked up. She puts it back in the water, but her next haul has many more. This new development leads Robin to a moral dilemma—she is trying to be a good mother and make a swimmable pond for her children, but she feels that she cannot sacrifice another mother's children (the tadpoles) in the process. She adapts her work, now not only raking the algae but also picking out tadpoles and returning them to the water. As she works, she thinks more about the choices she is forced to make in her work. In theory she believes that "all lives are valuable, protozoan or not," but in practice she is prioritizing some lives over others, and she reluctantly accepts that fact.

Robin recognizes that she is making sacrifices in her attempt to be a good mother to her own children. She decides that killing the tadpoles in the process of cleaning the pond is a sacrifice that she is not willing to make, but also recognizes that she must draw the line somewhere. Throughout the book Kimmerer tries to focus on practical applications of the ideas that she describes, and practical work often means wading through ethically murky waters. Though she believes that all lives are valuable, it is impossible to live without doing some kind of harm to others, so she must simply remain aware, respectful, and thankful for those lives that fall on the other side of the line.

Because the loads of wet algae are so heavy to haul away, Robin begins leaving them for a few days to dry and bleach in the sun before moving them. The remaining plant matter is incredibly rich in nutrients, and she adds it to the compost pile to eventually be reborn as vegetables in her garden. Along with the algae, Robin now starts to cut back the willow trees along the pond's edge, as they are another storehouse of nutrients. The more plants she removes, the more grow back, as they gradually draw more and more nutrients from the muck in the pond. One day she is cutting willows with careless enthusiasm and notices that she has almost chopped down a stem holding the tiny, exquisite nest of a nearby yellow warbler.

This section emphasizes the cyclical, elegant nature of many ecological processes, as the nutrient-rich algae becomes compost for Robin's garden. Having removed much of the algae, the willow trees act as her next restoration partner in absorbing the pond's nutrients. Noticing the warbler's nest, she realizes that once again a lack of awareness has nearly made her carelessly sacrifice another life.

This incident makes Robin muse again on the casualties produced by any kind of habitat manipulation, no matter how well intended. She has once more risked sacrificing another mother's children (the warbler's eggs) in the process of making a home for her own daughters. She wonders how the warbler envisioned her as she approached with her shears, and compares herself to a force of destruction like industrialism or climate change "advancing inexorably toward her children and mine" in the wider world. Again she wonders "what does a good mother do?" in the face of such threats.

Robin is again forced to recognize that there will always be casualties in any kind of major ecological work, but that awareness and respect can help to minimize them. She also sees herself in the mother warbler trying to protect her eggs. To Robin, climate change is like herself as the woman with the thresher, impossible to stop. There is no easy answer to how a mother should respond to such powerful threats.

Robin lets the pond settle for a week, and at first it looks better, but soon algae reappears. She compares the pond to cleaning a kitchen that will always get dirty again soon. She considers the fact that when her girls eventually move away from home and her kitchen is finally clean, she will probably long for the messy, "eutrophic" kitchen that accompanied their presence.

Robin once more connects her work at the pond to the work of mothering her daughters. She recognizes that she is trying to undo the pond's eutrophication process even as she tries to savor her own eutrophic household with Linden and Larkin.

One day Robin finds a new kind of algae in the pond, a fine mesh of green lace called *Hydrodictyon*. *Hydrodictyon* grows outward via "daughter cells" replicating the mother cells' hexagonal net formation. Robin thinks to herself, "what does a good mother do when mothering time is done?" and starts to cry as she stands there in the water. *Hydrodictyon* is Latin for "water net," she explains, and she muses on how a water net "catches nothing, save what cannot be held." She compares the act of mothering to this net: caring for and enclosing that which cannot be held and which will eventually pass beyond. Potawatomi women are the "Keepers of the Water," connecting the water of the womb to motherhood. "Being a good mother includes the caretaking of water," she writes.

In this poignant passage, Kimmerer again uses her scientific knowledge about botany to find a lesson of wisdom and then applies this to her own personal life. In the water net algae she sees the contradiction at the heart of motherhood—caring for and holding that which, when truly cared for, can no longer be held. She then takes this idea further by connecting it to traditional Potawatomi culture, which associates women with water. Being a true caretaker of the water means being a good mother to not just one's own children, but to all living things as well.

Years pass as Robin continues to work at restoring the pond whenever she has a free weekend day. Linden and Larkin grow older, and the family dog who accompanies Robin at her work eventually dies. One day there is a nearby rally for the cleanup of **Onondaga Lake**, a place sacred to the Onondaga Nation but now one of the most polluted lakes in America. Working on her own pond that Saturday, Robin considers the decisions she has made to take on certain responsibilities over others, choosing to spend so much time cleaning up her daughters' pond but neglecting the cleanup of Onondaga Lake.

Onondaga Lake is a sacred place to Haudenosaunee people, and Robin recognizes that she is choosing her personal project over something with larger importance to other Indigenous people. Once again, she must choose who exactly she is being a good mother to, and sometimes this means neglecting children other than her own.

Robin muses on the apple tree beside the pond, who acts as a "good mother" sending out her fruit to be shared with the world. Linden and Larkin have also grown up here, but are now ready to leave like the apples or the seeds of the willows. Linden leaves for college before the pond is clean, and Larkin continues to help Robin in her work. The water is much cleaner now and Robin herself enjoys swimming there, but the girls only briefly get in to please their mother, and Robin recognizes that she hasn't succeeded in "turning back time."

A large part of Robin's experience as a mother in this chapter is preparing for and dealing with her daughters' inevitable departure from her home. The project of the pond has not exactly been successful—the eutrophic process cannot be stopped by one woman's work—but it has been a labor of love that has brought Robin closer to the land and taught her many lessons about motherhood.

On the last day of summer vacation, the last summer with Larkin at home, Robin watches the apples floating on the surface of the pond. Musing on motherhood, she references Paula Gunn Allen's book *Grandmothers of the Light*, which describes women as walking different paths over the course of their lives. As the years spiral outward and a woman grows, first she walks the Way of the Daughter, then the Way of the Mother, and finally the Way of the Teacher. The spiral continues outward until she can even mother the earth itself.

Kimmerer introduces another traditional idea about women here, one that intimately links motherhood with teaching. She often associates motherhood and teaching in Braiding Sweetgrass, *as both involve a kind of care and generosity, and are of course essential parts of every culture on earth.*

Robin imagines her grandchildren swimming in the pond, but also the "water net" connecting every living thing, and the "circle of care" growing larger until her work tending to the pond spreads to a mothering of all the world's waters. A good mother knows that her work doesn't end, she says, "until she creates a home where all of life's beings can flourish."

This passage returns to the idea of women as caretakers of the water, and water flows downhill to reach all things. This means that the mothering and teaching of women also flows downhill, from one's own children to all the children of the earth. Robin feels responsible not just for building a home for her daughters, but for making the earth itself a better home for all life.

CHAPTER 10

Robin's eldest daughter Linden goes off to college in California, "long before the pond was ready for swimming." Robin visits her during her first semester, and they walk along the beach one day, gathering agate pebbles, as Robin considers the "fundamental unfairness of parenthood"—that being a good mother means inevitably saying goodbye to one's children. Returning home, Robin misses her daughter deeply and ruminates on all the things in her life that require constant care and feeding, including her girls. There is a kind of freedom in being released from those responsibilities, but she also believes that there is a reciprocity between parent and child, with each feeding the other in different ways.

This chapter deals directly with the grief that Robin feels when her daughters leave home for college—she is experiencing "empty nest syndrome." As she recognized with the "water net" algae, the "fundamental unfairness of parenthood" is that it involves caring for and holding that which by its very nature cannot be held. At the same time, Robin tries to comfort herself with ideas of reciprocity, that she and her daughters will continue to nourish each other forever even when they are far apart.

When Larkin gets ready to leave for college, she and Robin go camping by the pond one last time. Looking around, Larkin thanks her mother "for all of this." The next day Robin drops Larkin off at school, noting the different ways that some of the young people dismiss or say goodbye to their parents. Larkin hugs Robin in front of everyone and warns her to pull off the road if she starts crying.

Larkin clearly associates her mother with her own connection to nature and is grateful for that. Their closeness and emotional intimacy with each other even in public is a clear sign of their strong bond—and shows that Robin has been a "good mother" after all.

Robin tells the reader that she isn't returning directly home, however, as she can't handle facing the empty house just yet. Instead, she has made a "midlife crisis" purchase of a new kayak, and she plans on taking it out to assuage her most immediate sense of loss. She drives to the nearby Labrador Pond and slips her kayak into the water, completely alone among the blackbirds and water lilies.

Unsurprisingly, Robin takes solace in nature, where her sense of the animacy and wisdom of all living things ensures that she never feels alone. She has wisely prepared for the grief that she knows she will experience upon Larkin's departure, and she is able to immediately begin her self-care activity.

Kimmerer comments on the water lilies around her, describing the spongy cells that keep them afloat. The plants get light and air from the surface, but they are attached to a large rhizome (an underground stem) at the bottom of the lake. The yellow flowers surround Robin as she paddles, giving off a slight alcoholic scent. Robin paddles beyond the lilies and out into the deeper water, trying to wear herself out physically so that she has less energy left to feel sad. She rests on the water and closes her eyes, letting herself drift and feeling held and comforted by the water and wind around her.

Robin finds comfort in physical labor (here, rowing) as well as in the company of nature. The botanist in her continues to observe and teach about the scientific processes taking place in the plants around her.

When Robin finally opens her eyes, she finds herself once again surrounded by water lilies. Kimmerer then explains how oxygen passes between the new and old leaves to the rhizome via changes in pressure, as if the plant were inhaling and exhaling between the old "mother" leaves and the new "daughter" leaves. Robin finds herself comforted by this idea, that mothers and daughters are "linked in one long breath." She paddles back to shore and loads her kayak onto the top of her car. Still thinking about motherhood, she also considers the earth as a mother, one who perhaps also is "fed by the giving." Robin thanks Mother Earth "for all of this."

Like the maples with their sap, the water lilies send nutrients up and down through a long vertical system, creating a network of give and take that Kimmerer here compares to the inhalation and exhalation of breath. This is its own kind of reciprocity, and it comforts Robin to think of her relationship with her daughters as being like the breathing in and out between the "mother" and "daughter" leaves of the water lily. Once again, she expands the idea of motherhood to include the earth itself—meaning that Robin is also a child receiving gifts from a generous parent—and she gives thanks to Mother Earth in response.

Returning home in the late evening, Robin sees a pile of presents on her front porch. At first she assumes that there was a going-away party for Larkin and her daughter has missed it, but then Robin realizes that the presents are all for her, meant to comfort her and remind her that she isn't alone and that her daughters will come back. Such gifts are like the oxygen flowing back and forth in the water lilies, she thinks, meant to be given away and to trust that what we give will one day return.

Robin's friends and family recognize what she is going through, many of them clearly parents themselves who know what it is to have their children grow up and leave. This scene then returns to the theme of gifts, offering the idea that a mother's children are a kind of gift that she sends out into the world, trusting in the system of reciprocity that the gift will someday come back.

CHAPTER 11

One day when Robin's daughters are still young and living at home, one of their teachers calls to say that Robin's daughter (it's not stated whether Linden or Larkin) has started quietly refusing to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance in class. Robin remembers her own school days and being forced to say those words, recognizing even then that "liberty and justice for all" was far from her country's truth. She questions her daughter about this when she gets home, and the girl says that she won't "stand there and lie" anymore. She is used to different rituals, like Robin's father pouring out the coffee grounds, or Robin's sunrise ceremony of gratitude.

Considering the tragic past and present of Indigenous Americans in relation to the state, it makes sense that anyone with Native heritage might be reluctant to pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States. Robin has clearly instilled in her daughters the importance of ritual, but they also know that rituals have meaning, and if they don't support the meaning then they won't perform the ritual. They can get behind gratitude to the earth, but not allegiance to an invasive state.

At the school on the nearby Onondaga Nation reserve, the school week begins with the "Thanksgiving Address," also known as the "Words That Come Before All Else"—not the American Pledge of Allegiance. All the students gather together in the atrium and the different grades take turns delivering the recitation. Today the third graders lead the ritual, which Kimmerer quotes. The first two sections involve giving thanks to each other as people and to Mother Earth, both ending with "Now our minds are one." Kimmerer notes that the Onondaga Nation is outside of the jurisdiction of the U.S., and that the Thanksgiving Address is not a pledge or a prayer, but something more complex.

As an alternative to the American Pledge of Allegiance, Kimmerer invites readers to consider a "pledge" that was here before the first colonizers arrived in America: the Thanksgiving Address. Just like languages and creation myths, rituals like reciting a common creed or pledge together are important aspects of a culture, both shaping it and being shaped by it. The differences between the Pledge of Allegiance and the Thanksgiving Address thus show another contrast between Indigenous culture and colonizer culture in America.

The children continue the Address, thanking the waters of the world, the fish, the plants, and the berries, each time ending with "Now our minds are one." Kimmerer comments that the Address is primarily a statement of gratitude, but it is also a kind of "scientific inventory of the natural world." Next the children thank the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash) and other food plants, the "Medicine Herbs of the world," and the trees. Kimmerer interjects again to say that the Address takes a long time to recite, and whenever it's delivered at gatherings with non-Native people, she always notices them fidgeting and looking impatient. She reminds the reader that the Address's length only means that we have so very much to be thankful for.

The Thanksgiving Address is an important aspect of the Indigenous culture of gratitude for the natural world, and it connects to many themes that Kimmerer has already explored in the book, such as seeing the world as a place of gifts and cultivating a sense of responsibility to respect those gifts. Most non-Native people are not used to this kind of "pledge," she notes, perhaps because this inventory of gratitude comes with its own sense of responsibility to the natural world—something a capitalist economy doesn't encourage.

Listening to the Thanksgiving Address makes one feel wealthy, Kimmerer says, and expressing gratitude for the earth's plenty is actually a radical idea in a consumer-driven society. Capitalism thrives on the idea of scarcity, that people always need to be buying and consuming more to achieve satisfaction, so being grateful for what one has and not asking for more goes against such an idea. "Gratitude cultivates an ethic of fullness, but the economy needs emptiness," she writes.

This important passage emphasizes the idea that perceiving something as a gift rather than a commodity makes one appreciate it more and feel *wealthier to have a connection to it. The market economy requires scarcity and even creates artificial scarcity to function, but the gift economy thrives on the idea of fullness and gratitude. This is another example of a small personal action that one can take to change the world for the better: simply express one's gratitude for what the earth has given.*

The Address continues, thanking the animals, the birds, and the Four Winds. A clan mother and teacher at the Onondaga Nation School has told Kimmerer that the Thanksgiving Address is also a reminder that human beings are not at the center of the universe, but are instead just another part of a larger whole. Kimmerer again remembers her own childhood reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, which asks for loyalty to a flag rather than to the land itself. She wonders what it would be like to declare a pledge of "interdependence" to the "democracy of species." She feels that the Thanksgiving Address is an important aspect of such a culture of gratitude.

Kimmerer again emphasizes the importance of the idea that human beings are not separate from or above the rest of creation, but part of a system of interdependence. We are just one voice in a "democracy of species"—a concept Kimmerer returns to throughout Braiding Sweetgrass. *This passage also notes that the Pledge of Allegiance asks loyalty only to a flag—an idea of a country—rather than the physical country itself and all of its inhabitants. This makes sense for an American settler culture that Kimmerer sees as disconnected from the land—and this disconnection allows the market economies that exploit the earth to flourish.*

Kimmerer explains how the Address has also helped the Haudenosaunee people in diplomacy. By listing all of the things that we can all give thanks to and ending each section with "now our minds are one," the Address breaks down the divisions between people and helps them to see the bigger picture. Among the Haudenosaunee, decisions are not made by a majority vote, but only "when our minds are one." Kimmerer wonders what would happen if more contemporary leaders tried giving thanks and finding common ground before negotiating or arguing.

This is another example of how the ritual reflects the culture, as the Haudenosaunee's culture of gratitude leads to a humbler and more democratic process than the U.S. government's current system of contentious partisanship (at least in Kimmerer's description).

Interspersed with more sections of the Address giving thanks for the sun, moon, stars, and the Creator, or Great Spirit, Kimmerer points out another consequence of the Address—the "roll call of gifts" makes us question the state of the world as it is now, and if the different parts of the world are functioning as they should.

Once again, reflecting on the natural world as a place of gifts means that we also have responsibilities in accepting those gifts. The gift creates a relationship, and the relationship requires that we take care of the world that is so generous to us.

Altogether, the Address acts like a "Bill of Responsibilities" (as opposed to a Bill of Rights) and a creed for a culture of gratitude. "Cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity," Kimmerer says, as no one member exists alone or above the rest, but each has a duty to the others. All the beings mentioned in the Address have a duty, and she wonders what gift humanity has to offer. The answer might be gratitude itself, which sets in motion cycles of reciprocity, of gifts and thanksgiving.

Kimmerer once more contrasts the ideas of the Thanksgiving Address with the United States government. The "Bill of Responsibilities" upholds a culture of gratitude and responsibility to the world around us, rather than a sense that we as human beings should have rights and no one else. Throughout Braiding Sweetgrass, *Kimmerer considers tangible ways that we can give back to the earth and practice reciprocity, and one that she keeps coming back to is consistently offering our gratitude.*

Kimmerer says that she was initially cautious about publishing the words of the Thanksgiving Address in her book, but an elder assured her that the Haudenosaunee want everyone to know about the Address—"If they'd understood the Thanksgiving [five hundred years ago], we wouldn't be in this mess," he says. The Address has indeed been published worldwide and translated into many languages, but it is not well-known in the United States itself. Kimmerer says that she means no disrespect for U.S. veterans, but she also hopes for liberty and justice for *all*, not just one country or even one species. She ends the chapter with the conclusion of the address and her own wish that one day the land will be thankful for humans in return.

Kimmerer has a sense of the Thanksgiving Address as something sacred, not to be appropriated by colonist culture, but she also wants to use it as a teaching tool to encourage her readers to practice gratitude, reemphasizing that a culture of gratitude would have avoided the current environmental "mess" that we're in. While she is very critical (for good reason) of the U.S. government, Kimmerer is respectful to individuals who do feel patriotic towards America, but at the same time she encourages them to cultivate a sense of allegiance to the land itself and to the wellbeing of their fellow living things.

CHAPTER 12

One day Robin is out in her garden, picking beans. She sees the remnants of her daughters' harvesting work (they are still young and living at home at this point), and she notes that she loves watching them garden, as it makes her feel like a good mother. Kimmerer then returns to the story of Skywoman, explaining that when Skywoman buried her own daughter in the ground, certain plants grew up from her body: tobacco from her head, **sweetgrass** from her hair, strawberries from her heart, corn from her breasts, squash from her stomach, and beans from her hands.

The book enters a new section here but continues the theme of motherhood and trying to be a good mother, often through Robin encouraging her daughters' relationship to the land. This chapter also returns to the Skywoman story as the origin of many of the sacred plants that Kimmerer highlights throughout Braiding Sweetgrass.

Robin thinks about how she shows her love for her daughters: by giving them gifts and providing for their needs. Today in the sunlit garden, she connects this idea to the earth itself, feeling suddenly sure that "the land loves us back." Why else would it provide us with such abundance? she asks: it's "what good mothers do." Kimmerer says that she spends a lot of time working through scientific equations about the relationships between land and people, but in that moment, all that she can feel is "the ultimate reciprocity, loving and being loved in return."

This is the epiphany in the beans of the chapter's title: the thought that the earth actively loves us as human beings, and that this is why it is so generous in its gifts to us. Robin has thought much about how she can be a good mother, but now she thinks of the earth as a good mother also.

Kimmerer addresses the cynical plant scientist aspect of herself, who would cringe at the idea of the land literally loving people, and she tries to explain to this plant scientist that the concept makes sense. She provides a quantitative list of how a mother shows love for her children, and then transposes that list onto a person's love for a garden, and finally onto the *garden*'s love for the person. Throughout history plants and people have shaped each other evolutionarily, she notes, and this kind of interdependence seems like another kind of loving relationship.

This passage is an example of Robin Kimmerer actively trying to reconcile her cynical plant scientist side with her more spiritual self. Again she goes through the process of relaying facts and then drawing conclusions from those facts, finding wisdom that might go beyond the realm of science but does not necessarily contradict it.

Kimmerer describes a class that she taught about relationships to land, and how all the students professed to love the earth, but were left speechless when she asked them, "Do you think that the earth loves you back?" Kimmerer then asked them what might happen if people actually believed such a thing, and the responses were positive and overwhelming. "You wouldn't harm what gives you love," one student says. Kimmerer then describes how her daughter Linden calls her to talk while she works in the garden. One day Robin asks her if she feels like her garden loves *her* just as she loves it, and Linden says yes, "My garden takes care of me like my own mama." This answer brings Robin great joy.

Just like thinking of natural resources as gifts rather than commodities changes one's perspective, so thinking of the earth as actively loving us as human beings changes our relationship to the land: as Robin's student puts it, you wouldn't harm what gives you love. Linden's answer shows again that Robin has been a good mother to her daughters, and that they associate her mothering with care and generosity—and with the generosity and care of the earth as well.

Kimmerer describes an unnamed man she once loved who had mostly lived in the city, and who claimed that the place where he felt safest and most familiar was his car—he never had a real relationship with any part of the land itself. A few years later, he tried to kill himself in that same car. Kimmerer wonders if much of our society's problems stem from a similar disconnection to the land. Her daughter Larkin, now in grad school, works with at-risk youth in urban gardens. The kids are accustomed to seeing all food as a commodity, and are surprised by the gifts the garden offers for free.

Kimmerer has stated that one of her main goals is to change her readers' sense of relationship with the land, and she has described positive outcomes related to a renewed closeness between people and the earth—but now she turns to our society's ills and connects them to a disconnection *from the earth. If everything is a lifeless commodity to be used and sold, then we are alone as a species, surrounded by our tools and technologies that offer no community.*

Kimmerer says that in a garden, "food arises from partnership." It takes the gardener's work to make sure that everything thrives. When people ask her how to restore a relationship between people and land, she always tells them to plant a garden. Even such a small connection sets something greater in motion and can become a microcosm of the potential love between individuals and the earth.

The beauty of a garden is that it is reciprocity in action. The earth gives its gifts of food, but only because the gardener gives their gifts of labor, care, and time. This is another small, workable action that readers can take to improve their relationship with the natural world.

CHAPTER 13

Kimmerer describes the sounds of the plants in a growing garden, particularly corn, beans, and pumpkins. She muses on how these plants teach without using words, but rather through their every movement and the gifts that they provide. She remembers a Cherokee writer once gifting her with three seeds: the "Three Sisters," corn, beans, and squash. These three plants can teach us valuable lessons about how to live, Kimmerer declares.

Kimmerer continues her pattern of using a moment of personally experiencing nature to open up a broader discussion. Most of the book's chapters also revolve around a certain type of plant, in this case the Three Sisters, ancient staple crops domesticated by Indigenous Americans thousands of years ago and considered sacred.

For thousands of years, Indigenous Americans have planted the Three Sisters together. The European colonists scorned this method upon seeing it, assuming that a productive garden meant uniform rows of crops. At the same time, they couldn't deny how much food the Indigenous gardens produced.

The original colonizers thought that Three Sisters gardens were primitive and inefficient, just as current industrial agriculture privileges monocrops that offer immediate profits over more complex agricultural systems that are sustainable in the long-term. Kimmerer again tries to present an alternate worldview, one that is tried and tested over millennia—essentially, through the science of trial and error that is passed down as traditional wisdom.

Kimmerer describes the scientific processes of how these three plants first germinate and sprout: the corn shoots up quickly while the bean plant secures its roots first, and the squash takes its time to germinate. As the corn grows straight and tall, the bean makes a few leaves and then becomes a vine, seeking a support to climb. It latches onto the corn, which is already strong enough to support it, and they grow together. Meanwhile the squash spreads over the ground around them, keeping away pests with its bristly leaves and stems. These are the Three Sisters, and there are many stories of their origins as actual mythical women coming to feed the hungry people in winter.

Again Kimmerer braids her narrative with both scientific information and traditional wisdom, trying to paint a fuller picture of the world just as the Three Sisters braid themselves together to support each other. It is possible to see these plants as simply acting out their evolutionary roles and trying to maximize their own benefits, and at the same time to see them as beings with intelligence and purpose of their own who might choose to work together and to provide for the people who care for them.

A Three Sisters garden emphasizes the "lessons of reciprocity," Kimmerer claims, as the three plants flourish together better than they might apart, each finding its own niche to best receive sunlight and nutrients and protect itself and its neighbors. The Sisters give their gifts to each other and support each other, and the result is a plentiful harvest. Per acre, Kimmerer says, "a Three Sisters garden yields more food than if you grew each of the sisters alone."

This passage distills the lesson of the chapter and one of the book's main themes: reciprocity, rather than competition, leads to mutual flourishing.

Examining the plants again, Kimmerer describes them as if they were the kinds of human sisters that are familiar to her. Corn is the firstborn who is straightforward and direct, while the bean sister learns to be more flexible. The baby squash sister has no expectations placed upon her and so chooses her own path for the good of the other two. It also might seem like the bean plant takes more than it gives, but this isn't the case, Kimmerer claims: the bean's roots not only share water with the roots of the other plants, but also nitrogen. A bean plant can convert nitrogen from the atmosphere into fertilizer that all three of the Sisters can use, via a symbiotic bacteria called *Rhizobium*, which hides itself in the bean's roots.

Anthropomorphizing plants is considered taboo in scientific literature, but Kimmerer is interested in moving beyond mere data and instead deriving real wisdom from fellow citizens of the land. Again note the importance of reciprocity and symbiosis to benefit the organisms involved. Even as there is the obvious reciprocity happening above ground, scientific study has allowed us to see that there is even more happening through the roots of these plants—thus further supporting the traditional idea of the Three Sisters and their ability to mutually flourish through communal generosity.

Kimmerer finds it tempting to say that the Three Sisters work together deliberately, and she won't rule out this possibility. What she is sure of, though, is that they are a reminder of the value of both reciprocity and individuality. Each Sister has her own unique gift, but it's only when she shares it with the other two that all three best flourish.

Kimmerer acknowledges that she is anthropomorphizing these plants to some degree, but even apart from that, she still sees them as teachers about the value of reciprocity.

Kimmerer teaches a General Biology class, and she says that for years she could not pass on her own enthusiasm for plants to her students. One day she asks if any of them have ever grown anything of their own, and only a few raise their hands. She then realizes that they needed a new teacher: not her, but the plants themselves.

Kimmerer learns and relearns this lesson several times throughout the book, as she finds herself trying too hard to teach her students something that they can only learn through their own direct experience with plants and the land.

Now Robin begins the same class in a garden, studying the Three Sisters in person. One of her students, an artist, points out the harmonious composition of the three in terms of "unity, balance, color." To another student, one who is avoiding any dirt, Robin explains how the squash fruits come from flowers, and how they are technically ovaries. The student is disgusted at first, but others are drawn in by the "earthy sexuality" of the garden.

Robin now tries to work with *the plants as if they were her fellow teachers. The artistic student commenting on the Sisters' composition and the student repulsed by their sexuality highlight the lesson that plants (like other living things) cannot be fully known through science alone, but also through other ways of seeing like art.*

Kimmerer now describes the parts of a corncob, and how each kernel must be fertilized in order to properly ripen, making the corncob "the mother of hundreds." Beans also grow like "babies in the womb," each bean nurtured by the mother plant. These plants are also like mothers in the way that they feed and nurture *us*, Kimmerer says.

Kimmerer once again connects the theme of teaching to motherhood. The plants are mothers within themselves, and also act as mothers to human beings in the way that they provide for us.

In August, Robin holds a Three Sisters potluck for her friends and family. Everyone brings traditional dishes made from the Sisters, and as part of the event they all visit the garden together to gather more of the vegetables at their freshest, emphasizing the plenitude that the Sisters provide. The Sisters also taste good together and each provides valuable nutrition that the others lack, Kimmerer says. A person could not survive on any one of them alone, but together they provide a balanced diet.

This section continues the theme of flourishing as a community effort rather than a competition between individuals, on the nutritional level as well as in the growth of the plants themselves. In ancient times and during any period of great scarcity, receiving complete proteins and adequate nutrition is crucial for survival, so the Three Sisters truly kept alive the people who needed them most.

Eating dessert at the potluck, Robin observes some nearby fields of corn, all planted in straight rows for maximum efficiency and convenience. The Indigenous practice is to plant gardens to fit the land, while modern agriculture modifies the land to best support its "frighteningly similar clones" of plants. The corn plants in these monocrop fields don't feel like "sisters," but more like lonely and anonymous faces lost in a crowd. Furthermore, the lack of diversity in these fields encourages pest outbreaks, which then encourages the use of more pesticides.

Robin has tried to find the animacy in all living things and has thought of the corn of the Three Sisters as a literal sister, but this industrial corn seems lifeless. It has always been a commodity, never a gift, and so it lacks the animacy of a gift that leads to a relationship and future generosity. Further, although this practice of monocrop agriculture leads to more immediate gains, it also causes many long-term issues like the need for pesticides.

The Three Sisters can also act as a metaphor for "an emerging relationship between Indigenous knowledge and Western science, both of which are rooted in the earth," Kimmerer claims. She sees corn as Indigenous wisdom guiding the curious bean of science, while the squash nourishes an open habitat for both to flourish. In such a relationship, "all may be fed."

Kimmerer carries on the metaphor of the Three Sisters' system of reciprocity, itself rooted in scientific fact, to show how science and Indigenous wisdom can work together to improve our world.

There is ultimately a fourth Sister as well, Kimmerer says: the planter who sows the seeds, waters them, protects them, and harvests them. "We are part of the reciprocity" between the Three Sisters, as we offer our own gifts to them and in exchange receive gifts in return. Kimmerer has had many teachers in her life, she says, but she values her plant teachers as much as any human ones, especially the Three Sisters and their lesson of mutual flourishing.

This chapter concludes as a neat metaphor for the themes of reciprocity, gifts, and gratitude. The Three Sisters live in reciprocity with each other but also with us, and we all benefit from this communal arrangement. The conclusion highlights once more the idea that all true flourishing is mutual: the gift is not to be exclusively possessed, but if shared it will grow.

CHAPTER 14

Kimmerer describes a man masterfully peeling long, thin strips of wood from a log using an axe. She is attending a class taught by John Pigeon, a Potawatomi basket maker who is showing them how to make traditional black ash baskets. Many members of the Pigeon family are expert basket makers, and their creations can be found in museums as well as here, at the annual Potawatomi Gathering of Nations. John doesn't just teach how to weave the baskets, but how to make them from scratch, starting with the living black ash tree.

This chapter focuses on Robin's experience taking a class with John Pigeon, learning a traditional practice of basket making as part of her goal of reconnecting with her Potawatomi heritage. As the rest of John's lesson will show, this is not just about how to make a craft but about building a personal relationship with a tree.

Black ash trees like swampy ground, Kimmerer explains, and the traditional basket makers patiently seek the perfect tree, which should be straight and healthy. Each growth ring of the tree is affected by the year in which it forms—and here Kimmerer describes why the rings form at all—and the layers of individual rings form the strips of material for the basket.

Kimmerer continues the interwoven braid of the narrative, here giving scientific knowledge about the ash tree used for the baskets.

Recognizing the trees as individuals and "nonhuman forest [people]," John takes his time examining the trees and finally decides on one that he wants to cut down. He doesn't immediately begin sawing, however—first he has a conversation with the tree, asking its permission to be harvested. If he notices something off about his interaction with the tree, he will assume the answer is no, and he will find a different tree. If the answer is yes, he says a prayer, offers some tobacco, and then cuts down the tree.

John recognizes the animacy in non-human beings and treats them as such, worthy of being addressed and respected as much as any fellow person. He also tries to have a kind of communication with the trees, recognizing when they are reluctant to be harvested. When he does find one to harvest, he gives an offering of gratitude with the tobacco in appreciation of the tree's gift.

To create the strips, or "splints," for the basket, John pounds along the log with the back of his ax, then splits it at a ring and peels off the strip of wood, which usually contains at least one growth ring. As he peels off more and more, he reminds his students that the pile of wood splints contains the tree's entire life, year by year. John then splits the wider strips with his pocketknife and a homemade device called a splitter. Robin tries to emulate him, but she finds that it is much harder than he makes it look. John observes his students as they work, explaining that the ash tree is a good teacher, and that humans can find balance within themselves by working to split the wood. John then shows them how to smooth the wood's surface with a very sharp knife.

The tree's rings are physical manifestations of a year's passage, so using individual rings to weave the basket is like weaving with the years of the tree's life. Just as Robin has learned in her teaching, John knows that the best teacher for this kind of lesson is the plant itself. Another important aspect of the work here is mindfulness, offering one's patient attention as a kind of gratitude for the gift of the ash tree's life.

Basket-making has been the Pigeon family livelihood for a long time, and John comments on how his mother used to chastise him whenever he would slip up and ruin a splint. He says that some customers balk at the ash baskets' high prices, but that with all the work that goes into finding the tree and making the splints even before weaving, they are priced barely above minimum wage.

This is one roadblock to shifting away from a capitalist economy—the prices we are used to paying for goods are based on exploitation. Real mindful and sustainable work like this necessarily means that goods will cost more, making it more difficult to "vote with one's wallet."

Having finished shaping the splints, the students are now ready to start weaving, but first John stops them and reminds them that even the discarded wood shavings around them represent a tree's long and full life. The tree has honored them by giving them its life, he says, so they must show it their respect and not waste any part of it. He then shows them how to sort the debris to be used as material for other baskets or for tinder. Kimmerer comments on how disconnected most modern people are from the fact that "just about everything we use is the result of another's life." Like the splints of ash, a regular piece of paper also represents a tree's life, yet we easily throw away paper all the time.

At every stage of the process, John reminds his students to be mindful and respectful of the tree's gift of its life. This also means making practical use of all the parts of the tree, so that none of it is wasted—which in itself would imply that it was waste, or worthless. Kimmerer uses this to remind the reader how they can take this lesson into their own lives, first by being aware of the living things that have given their lives for us to use. This sense of awareness then leads to less mindless consumption: when you respect the gift, you can't treat it as waste and so are more likely to be careful with it.

Kimmerer then describes a study she did with one of her graduate students, counting and measuring black ash tree populations in different areas. Most forests had only seedlings or old, mature trees, and nothing in between. In forests that were harvested by traditional basket makers, however, the trees were diverse in age and size. Having the trees occasionally cut down opened up gaps in the foliage for new growth to flourish. The ash trees and the basket makers had formed a symbiotic relationship.

The basket makers' relationship with the forest is a contrast to Robin's earlier students who had never imagined people having a positive relationship with the land. Humans don't always have to be negative forces destroying the environment; we can also live symbiotically with it like these basket makers, such that both humans and the land flourish.

While traditional Indigenous basket making is having a revival across the country, the black ash trees themselves are now under attack from a new threat: emerald ash borer beetles. John Pigeon hands out pamphlets to the students showing a picture of the insect, which was first introduced from China and is fatal to the black ashes. He reminds the students that they have a responsibility to take care of the trees because the trees take care of them by giving their wood to make the baskets. Kimmerer then describes several Indigenous-led efforts to protect black ash populations and to plant new seedlings. "It is an honor to be the guardian of another species," she says, and the black ash baskets are reminders of both the gifts that the land gives us and the responsibility that comes with them.

Along with the gift of gratitude, actively caring for the ash trees is another way that the basket makers can practice reciprocity with the trees that give their lives to their art. The invasive beetle is also a result of human activity, so it is even more our responsibility to try and undo the damage that we have caused and protect future generations of trees. Kimmerer reminds the reader once more that the gifts come with responsibilities.

Returning to the basket-making class, John shows his students how to assemble the basket's bottom, explaining how the crossed strips represent the balance of the four cardinal directions, forming a strong foundation to build on. Once the framework is formed, John tells his students to let their creativity flow in the weaving process. They have the responsibility to create something beautiful to honor the tree that gave its life for them, he says. Kimmerer pauses to comment that this idea could relate to writing on paper as well—she already feels a responsibility to write as a way of sharing her own gifts with the world, but now she thinks about her responsibility to the tree that formed the physical paper she's writing on as well.

Another part of reciprocity with the tree is using it to make something beautiful, so that the tree's sacrifice is worthwhile. Kimmerer's personal aside then shows how she has tried to apply this practice into her own art, and how readers might as well. This is another example of mindfulness changing how we interact with an object: being aware of the living being that the paper comes from makes us weigh what we write upon it more carefully.

Kimmerer describes the act of weaving the basket, which requires keeping everything balanced in order to maintain its form. She sees reciprocity in the "give and take" of tension in this process. There are three rows involved in making the basket, and she compares these rows to acts of caring for and protecting the land itself. The first row is the plenty of nature, the second row is made up of humanity's material needs, and the third row is respect and reciprocity between people and land.

This art is presented as similar to the practice of braiding sweetgrass: making something from the earth and mindfully working with it to appreciate the gift. Even within the work itself Kimmerer finds the plant teaching her life lessons: we do have material needs and the earth is generous, but for those two realities to interact in a healthy way requires respect and reciprocity on our part.

Some children stop by to watch the students weaving, and John Pigeon deftly constructs some small horses for them out of the leftover ash shavings. When everyone is done with their basket, John tells them that they should sign their work and take pride in what they have created. Each basket is different, but they all come from the same tree, and they are all beautiful. At the powwow later that night, Robin notices how the dancers move together as if weaving a basket with their bodies.

John continues to use all the parts of the tree, wasting none of the gift. Kimmerer continues to see the weaving motion of the basket making in our relationship to the earth, and then repeated in the traditional dance, all of it reinforcing the lesson for her.

Now back at her house, which contains many Pigeon baskets, Kimmerer considers what John taught her and tries to see the life in all the everyday objects around her: the tree in her tissue, the algae in her toothpaste, the metal in her lamp. She finds that she cannot find the thread of life in anything plastic, however, as it just seems too far "removed from the natural world" for her to relate to without some mental gymnastics. She recognizes that we can't always maintain this kind of constant awareness, but says that it is important to remember our connections to all the lives around us, and the responsibility and respect that we owe them for their gift.

In this important passage Kimmerer again gives the reader a practical way to apply the lessons that she is passing on: simply try to be aware of the living things that so many of our possessions are sourced in. Being mindful of these gifts tends to lead us to treat them with more respect and care, and also to consume less of them, because people tend to be less callously greedy when it comes to fellow beings.

CHAPTER 15

This chapter is divided into sections as if it were a scientific article. The "Introduction" briefly describes the aroma of **sweetgrass** in the wild. "Literature Review" then follows Lena, a Potawatomi elder who is an expert gatherer of sweetgrass. As she wanders the meadow with Kimmerer, she looks for certain glossy plants that seem to shine as if they want to be found and picked. Whenever she picks the sweetgrass, she first leaves an offering of some tobacco and says a few words. "It would be rude not to ask first," she tells Kimmerer.

This chapter returns to the relationship between science and traditional wisdom, with the narrative's very form reflecting that relationship. Kimmerer has arranged the chapter into sections like a scientific article, even while the content within this rigid structure consists of a more fluid narrative. Lena emphasizes how important it is to treat the living thing that one is harvesting with respect, asking its permission and leaving an offering of gratitude for its gift.

Lena explains that she was always taught to never pick more than half of the plants, and sometimes she doesn't harvest at all, but only checks on the **sweetgrass**. She repeats her grandmother's teaching that "If we use a plant respectfully it will stay with us and flourish." As they leave the meadow, Lena leaves a mark to show other sweetgrass pickers that she has already been there, so they don't pick any more plants. She complains about some pickers who pull up the roots along with the grass, and Kimmerer notes that she has been with people who did that too—but they also only took half and left gifts of tobacco.

Though it precedes the section of the same name, this is essentially the hypothesis of the study to follow: "if we use a plant respectfully it will stay with us and flourish." The background here is that there are two main traditional methods of harvesting sweetgrass—pinching off the grass above the roots vs. pulling up the roots along with the grass. Both methods are centered around gratitude and respect for the plant, but they differ in the practice of harvesting.

In the next section, "Hypothesis," Kimmerer explains that **sweetgrass** has been disappearing from its usual habitat, so the basket makers wanted to know if these different ways of harvesting might be the cause. Kimmerer was initially reluctant to investigate, as she sees sweetgrass as a gift, not the subject of a scientific experiment. She doesn't want to force the "teachings of grass" to fit the rigid requirements of scientific thinking and writing—and here she references the sections into which she has divided the chapter itself. At the same time, she feels a responsibility to sweetgrass. She decides to go forward with an experiment, but she knows that it must speak the language of scientists if it is to be accepted by them. She proposes her idea as a thesis project to her grad student Laurie, who accepts.

The impetus for this experiment is the decline in sweetgrass populations, as well as Kimmerer's desire to reconcile science with Indigenous wisdom in her own teaching and writing. She doesn't want to make sweetgrass less sacred or less of a gift by studying it as an experimental subject, but she also wants to protect it—and at this point, this study seems to be the best way to do that. The language of science referenced here relates to the way that Kimmerer has structured the chapter itself. Laurie is the one who will actually perform the experiment, assisted and advised by Robin.

The next section, "Methods," begins with Robin introducing Laurie to **Sweetgrass** in the wild and familiarizing her with its smell and appearance. They then design experiments to compare the two harvesting methods that the basket makers use: pinching the grass off above the roots, or pulling the whole plant up. Kimmerer notes that she sees experiments in botany as "conversation[s] with plants." She would never claim to really "discover" anything as the result of these experiments—which she compares to Christopher Columbus "discovering" America—because "experiments are not about discovery but about listening and translating the knowledge of other beings."

Robin and Laurie are performing a science experiment, but also trying to form a relationship with the plant: the experiment is an extended conversation with sweetgrass. To do this Laurie first familiarizes herself with sweetgrass, as one would do at the start of any relationship. Kimmerer associates modern science with Western colonialism through her Columbus analogy, connecting the Eurocentric worldview of the colonizers to the hierarchical scientific idea that only humans have animacy and therefore value. In contrast to this, Kimmerer advocates for a humbler kind of science, one that acknowledges both the value and the wisdom of nonhuman beings.

Kimmerer says that her academic colleagues might not think of people like Lena as scientists, but her process of harvesting half the **sweetgrass** and observing the long-term results seems very scientific to her. In producing her own experiment, Laurie has to present her thesis idea to a committee of faculty members. She makes her case, which essentially hinges on a theory based in Indigenous wisdom: that "if we use a plant respectfully, it will flourish."

Another bridge between traditional wisdom and science is that much traditional wisdom already is *science—the result of centuries of trial and error to come to the best way of acting, even if this is explained through other-than-scientific methods or as having spiritual or non-scientific reasons. Lena's statement here is the real "hypothesis" for Laurie's study, though it's one that has already been tested for centuries.*

Laurie remains calm and defends herself, but later she bursts into tears. Robin remembers doing the same thing herself, thinking back to all the condescension she has endured over the years as a woman scientist, and even more so as one interested in traditional wisdom. She recognizes that scientists like the dean have been conditioned to be skeptical of anything that doesn't come with extensive quantitative data, and that this combines with the general assumption that "science has cornered the market on truth." Nevertheless, she and Laurie decide to press on with their **sweetgrass** experiment.

The academic authorities have a limited idea of what constitutes science, and they are unwilling to consider other modes of knowledge. This is exacerbated by the fact that Western science is linked to the ruling culture of patriarchal European colonization, further marginalizing women and Indigenous ways of thinking that go against the status quo. Kimmerer has experienced this many times in her own life, starting with her adviser in "Asters and Goldenrod," and she hates to see Laurie having to go through it as well—even as a white woman in a supposedly more progressive era.

First they choose several **sweetgrass** stands to observe, and Laurie takes a census of every plant. For the experiment, they harvest one group by pinching the plants off at the stem, a second by pulling the plant up by the roots, and a third patch is left untouched as a control group. Laurie recognizes that she's not really replicating the traditional harvest, as she doesn't speak to the plants or make an offering, but she is okay with this—she feels that such a relationship cannot be measured by a scientific experiment, and also that she as a non-Indigenous person isn't "qualified to speak to sweetgrass."

Robin and Laurie try to mix Indigenous wisdom with science in designing this experiment, pushing at the limits of both to gain a fuller understanding of sweetgrass. Importantly, Laurie recognizes that as a white woman she cannot replicate and is not even qualified to replicate the real Indigenous relationship with the plant.

Despite trying to remain scientifically objective in this way, Laurie admits later that she did develop a real fondness and respect for the **sweetgrass** that she worked with. The experiment goes on for two years, with Laurie charting and measuring every plant in the three groups, sometimes with the help of some student interns.

Once again, the plant acts as its own animate subject, teaching Laurie as she works with it and comes to think of it as a fellow being rather than an object to be experimented on.

The next section is titled "Results." By now Laurie is pregnant with her first child, but she continues at her work of harvesting and measuring the **sweetgrass**. As the pregnancy progresses, she feels that her time with the sweetgrass is good for the baby, and she also gains more and more respect for the traditional knowledge of the harvesters that she talks and works with. The experiment comes to a close soon after the baby is born. Laurie compiles the data and examines it closely, but the results are also clear to see with the naked eye: the harvested sweetgrass stands look healthy and glossy, while the untouched control group looks brown and sickly.

A growing relationship with the land feels like medicine for the soul, as Laurie feels like she is making a better future for her baby when she works with the sweetgrass. An important aspect of "becoming Indigenous to a place," Kimmerer later states, is taking care of one's home for the sake of one's future children, as Laurie is doing here. According to the academics' assumptions, any kind of harvesting should have had a detrimental effect on a plant's population, but Laurie's experiment seems to have shown the opposite.

Even though they were harvesting half of the plants in the two experimental groups, new shoots quickly grew back to replace them, whereas in the control group the older plants choked off the potential for new growth. "Picking **sweetgrass** seemed to actually stimulate growth," Kimmerer says. Laurie makes sure that her data is airtight and presents her results to the faculty committee: the professors who dismissed her from the start.

Just like a gardener carefully pruning their plants to stimulate new growth, the respectful harvesting of the basket makers encouraged a healthy population. A relationship with people was productive *for the plant, not detrimental.*

In the next section, "Discussion," the faculty committee talks with Laurie about her findings, asking her how she can explain that harvested **sweetgrass** flourished while untouched sweetgrass declines. She recognizes that there has been little research done on the relationship between Indigenous harvesters and sweetgrass, but there are scientific precedents for this in other grasses who respond well to fire or grazing. Many grasses undergo "compensatory growth" when they are harvested or otherwise disturbed—for example, by free-ranging buffalo—which means that they grow back faster to make up for their losses, and in turn attract the buffalo back months later.

The discussion with the faculty in this scene is analogous to other sections where Kimmerer gives scientific explanations for the plant activities that she describes. It's explained here why a plant population might respond positively to the right number of external stressors. While she acknowledges that there has not been much research on the science behind Indigenous practices like this, Kimmerer clearly hopes that this will change in the future—starting with experiments like Laurie's.

Robin and Laurie wonder if the current decline in **sweetgrass** populations is the result of *under*harvesting, not overharvesting. They examine a map of sweetgrass populations created by a former student and see that the only locations that are still thriving are those clustered around Indigenous communities known for basket making.

The sweetgrass has a symbiotic relationship with the people who harvest it properly. As Indigenous American populations have decreased, so too have thriving stands of sweetgrass.

Kimmerer recognizes that science and traditional knowledge sometimes seem to be in conflict with each other, but she believes that they may "converge when both truly listen to the plants." Still, Laurie has to present her findings in wholly disconnected, technical language. At least recognizing their own language, the scientists give Laurie a round of applause as she finishes her presentation. The basket makers who are also in attendance just smile and nod their heads—they've known this all along.

This passage repeats the idea that performing a science experiment is like having a conversation with a plant. In respecting the subject of an experiment, science and traditional wisdom can agree and work together. Still, in this academic environment only science is respected, so Laurie has to avoid using any language that hints at something beyond data. Her study's conclusion is another example of modern science confirming ancient wisdom.

Kimmerer says that through this experiment, the **sweetgrass** showed how we can best respect it: by harvesting it with restraint and gratitude. Sweetgrass was the first plant that Skywoman planted on Turtle Island, she says, and it continues to exhibit cycles of reciprocity, as the very act of accepting its gift—harvesting it properly—becomes a gift of its own by stimulating new growth. Kimmerer then acknowledges that even the most respectful harvesting is not beneficial to all plants—the key "is to know them well enough to respect the difference."

Practicing reciprocity also means appreciating the individual needs of each being. Gratitude is a gift for everyone, but with sweetgrass in particular we can offer another gift by harvesting it (that is, accepting its *gift) respectfully. Kimmerer returns to the story of Skywoman to show how the sacred plant continues to teach us lessons even from the beginning of human history.*

The brief section called "Conclusions" reiterates "the lesson of grass," which is that "through reciprocity the gift is replenished. All of our flourishing is mutual." The "Acknowledgments" section describes the words of the wind moving through the **sweetgrass** and Kimmerer's desire to say "thank you" in return. Finally, the "References Cited" names *Wiingaashk* (sweetgrass) along with "Buffalo, Lena, the Ancestors."

"All flourishing is mutual" is again the conclusion, and in this chapter, Kimmerer has tried to show the reader that science can reach this conclusion as well—when it really pays attention to the way the natural world works. She again contrasts the sterile scientific structure of the chapter itself with a worldview that considers the animacy and value of non-humans, as when she "cites" the sweetgrass and the buffalo (again, capitalized as if it were a proper name).

CHAPTER 16

In Kimmerer's small, close community in upstate New York, there is only one gas station, which acts as a gathering place and trading post. It is almost spring, "sugaring season," when maple syrup is harvested—and also tax season, so people at the gas station discuss both topics. Robin listens to a local man banter with his former teacher, complaining about taxes. The teacher, who is now a town official, has no patience for his griping and tells him to "show up to a damn meeting."

This chapter returns to the territory of "Allegiance to Gratitude," as Kimmerer considers citizenship to something other than a manmade government. The natural rhythm of the sap is somewhat humorously contrasted with the unnatural yet seemingly inevitable tax season.

The new moon at this time of year marks the start of the Anishinaabe new year: the Maple Sugar Moon, when nature starts to awaken from the slumber of winter. Robin receives her census form at this time as well, and considers how the maple trees outnumber people in this region. She has seen a map of the country that divides the land into bioregions rather than state boundaries, and the Northeast would be "Maple Nation," she thinks. Kimmerer considers what it would mean to be a citizen of Maple Nation: what kind of taxes would we be expected to pay? Even though the maples themselves aren't on the census form, they have still been contributing to their community all year long, offering their wood as building materials, their shade to keep people cool, and their sap for syrup.

Considering the animacy and value of all living things leads to different perspectives on things like nations, taxes, and citizenship. If the maples were counted on the census, then they might have a say in how their community is run, especially because they have been paying their own "taxes" year- round via their gifts of oxygen and other resources. Kimmerer is reluctant to pledge allegiance to the U.S. government, but Maple Nation is a homeland that she would be proud to be a citizen of.

Robin's parents are involved in their own local town government, so she is familiar with the work necessary to build a strong community. There are different kinds of involvement necessary to do this, including the "quiet leaders" who work behind the scenes and make sure that things get done. The Onondaga people call the maple tree the leader of the trees, Kimmerer says. She goes on to describe the maples' natural processes as if they were civic duties: "running air and water purification service 24-7," beautifying the region, creating soil, providing habitats for local wildlife, and more.

In this chapter Kimmerer briefly touches on the value of political involvement, noting her parents' example and how important it is to be active in one's community. This is another practical way that readers can make use of the lessons of Braiding Sweetgrass. *Kimmerer describes the maples like her fellow human citizens, framing their life activities as public services for their larger community.*

Economists can put a monetary value on timber or syrup, but not on these other services that the trees provide. Something as crucial as oxygen is essentially their gift to us that we take for granted, ignoring its value because it cannot be commodified. In terms of civic responsibility, the maples "do their share for us," Kimmerer says," but "how well do we do by them?"

This is an important point, and one that is becoming increasingly clear as climate change progresses. Our market economy only values immediate commodities, not gifts that in the long-term can be catastrophic in their absence, like oxygen.

Robin arrives at the "sugar house," where the workers are making fresh maple syrup, boiling the water from the fresh sap until it's at the perfect consistency. She watches them for a while and then asks the workers a question: "What does it mean to be a good citizen of Maple Nation?" One man describes how they use traditional methods to make the syrup, and how they take care of the trees by clearing out some new growth that would compete with the sap trees.

Robin acts as a journalist here, sharing her musings on citizenship with her Potawatomi neighbors to get other perspectives. The first man suggests that care of the trees and respectful harvesting is a way of practicing good citizenship. His point about clearing the trees echoes other sections from the book, like the previous chapter's study about harvesting sweetgrass respectfully.

A second man emphasizes the fact that they make their fires with wood instead of oil or gas, thus remaining carbon neutral in their work. The wood burned to boil the syrup releases its carbon, which is then absorbed by the very trees that the syrup came from. Kimmerer thinks about carbon as a kind of currency in Maple Nation, passed cyclically through the community of trees, people, animals, and atmosphere. Robin asks her citizenship question to a third man, who thinks a while and then answers that being a good citizen means making the syrup, enjoying it, and sharing the gift with others. All of them then discuss their favorite ways to eat maple syrup, including at many community events where the gift of the syrup is shared with everyone.

This passage poetically describes the flow of oxygen and carbon dioxide as a kind of long, cyclical breath between people and the trees, a form of living reciprocity in action. The third man that Robin asks suggests that another way to practice reciprocity (which is essentially what her citizenship question is about) is to simply be grateful for the gifts of the land and to enjoy *them. Community is an important aspect of this enjoyment, as the gift is passed on to and shared with others.*

Robin joins one of the workers as he goes to fetch more sap, and as they drive back he explains to her how some years are good for sap and others are bad. It's always a gamble to rely on sugaring, he says, but still "you take what you get and be grateful for it," because we have no control over the weather. Kimmerer then comments that our use of fossil fuels actually *has* affected the weather, and the seasons are noticeably different in this region than they were even 20 years before.

Even the natural rhythms of the weather, long considered far beyond our control, are out of sync because of human interference. Respectful use of the land—like the way that the people here harvest sap—would not lead to such a situation, but exploitation of the earth for fossil fuels is destroying our own environment.

Driving home, Robin thinks about the American Bill of Rights, but imagines that the maples abide by a different Constitution: a "Bill of Responsibilities." At home, she looks up the citizenship oaths of several different nations. If she had to swear an oath to a nation, she thinks, she would swear allegiance to Maple Nation, with its laws of "reciprocity, of regeneration, of mutual flourishing." As in other citizenship oaths, she would swear to protect them, as they are in great danger from climate change at this very moment. Rising temperatures will soon make New England inhospitable to maples, driving them further north like climate refugees. She tries to imagine her home without the maples and feels heartbroken.

The American Bill of Rights is important in that it seeks to guarantee that the country's citizens cannot be oppressed by their government, but the country's focus on human rights has neglected our responsibilities to non-human beings and to the country's actual landscape. Kimmerer finds a law that she can pledge allegiance to in the laws of the maples, again distilling the themes of the book: reciprocity, responsibility, and mutual flourishing.

The cost of our tax-free gasoline is the survival of the maples, Kimmerer writes, and she would happily pay a tax to protect them. We might deserve the governments that we have created, but other beings do not—and they still suffer the consequences of our policies. Kimmerer closes the chapter by asking the reader to abide by the "Maple Nation Bill of Responsibilities," to "show up at the damn meeting," and to actively work to protect the trees.

Most of our government's policies only focus on the short term, like keeping gas affordable—while destroying the environment in the process. Kimmerer affirms that some of these issues can only be changed through political involvement. What is important is to act on the intention of being a good citizen of the "democracy of species," and to remember not only our rights but also our responsibilities.

CHAPTER 17

Robin walks through a field, noting that years of herbicides and monocrops of corn have left the soil sterile and dead. This field is just her path to the local woods, however. Once she enters the forest Robin starts seeing life everywhere, and she begins looking for wild leeks. They are easy to find, as if wanting her attention, and she asks the leeks for their permission before she harvests them. At this point in her life Robin's daughters Linden and Larkin are grown and live elsewhere, but they are visiting for the upcoming weekend. Robin asks the leeks to help her and her daughters renew their bonds to each other, to act as both "food and medicine."

Again Kimmerer starts with a personal anecdote that opens up the larger theme of the chapter. The wild leeks of this forest are like the wild strawberries of Chapter 3, seen as their own sovereign beings who deserve her respect and gratitude. Robin hopes that these gifts from the land will keep on giving, particularly by offering their help to renew her relationship with her distant daughters.

The first leeks that Robin gently removes are underdeveloped, so she puts them back in the ground to keep growing. Feeling happy among the plants, Robin longs to share in their ability to photosynthesize, to naturally provide for others just by the act of breathing—to feel like a mother again, and to be needed. However, she is a "mere heterotroph," and thus must consume other living things in order to survive. This fact leads to the moral question, "how do we consume in a way that does justice to the lives that we take?" The answer to this question is an ancient concern, Kimmerer says.

This is an important example of a time when the plant does not *give its permission, and Robin respects that and so refrains from harvesting. She can't help but feel jealous of plants that get to be like good mothers at all times, providing for their children just in the act of breathing and providing oxygen. She connects this to her personal sense of motherhood, clearly still feeling empty-nest syndrome and wanting to be essential to someone else, but also to her status as a "heterotroph," or a being who derives energy and nutrients from other living things. Because we are all heterotrophs, this leads to the pivotal question of the chapter, one that is certainly not new despite our culture's overconsumption as compared to most ancient peoples.*

A few weeks later Robin visits the forest again, noting that the leeks are much larger this time. Once more she asks permission to harvest them, and this time when she removes them, they are plump and aromatic. Her intuition tells her that their answer is yes, and she begins to harvest, trying to thin the patch in the healthiest way for the remaining plants. Robin notes that she uses a trowel to carefully excavate the leeks and avoid injuring the other plants, even though a sharp shovel would be much faster. "Not everything should be convenient," Kimmerer writes.

Robin's patience and respect is rewarded, as the leeks now offer themselves up to be harvested, and the gift that she receives is far better than what she would have had if she had taken them prematurely. "Not everything should be convenient" fits with many of the lessons of the book, as Kimmerer often advocates for mindfulness and care over immediate gratification. Practices that might be less convenient or immediately efficient can have long-term benefits, while convenience often leads to thoughtlessness and overconsumption.

Kimmerer then relates a story told by an elder about Nanabozho, who was the Anishinaabe original man and a great teacher. One day Heron taught Nanabozho how to catch fish, but also warned him not to take too many fish at once. Nanabozho ignored Heron, already planning a feast and stores of food for the winter. Day after day Nanabozho ate as much fish as he possibly could and also filled his drying rack. One day, however, he went to the lake and found that it was empty—he had taken all the fish. Returning home, he saw that his hoard had been stolen by Fox. Stories like this one warning about the consequences of overconsumption are common in Indigenous cultures, Kimmerer says, but they are hard to find in English.

This early story of Nanabozho shows the danger of overconsumption: something common in many ancient cultures but antithetical to market capitalism and contemporary Western society, which requires constant consumption to thrive. Like Nanabozho, we are fast approaching the time when the lake is empty and we will be forced to realize that there are consequences to our greed.

The "Honorable Harvest" is the collective term for the traditional Indigenous rules and ideas about "the exchange of life for life," Kimmerer explains. She again wishes to herself that she could photosynthesize in order to survive, but because she cannot, she must try to participate in the Honorable Harvest as well. She doesn't claim to be an expert on this subject, but in this chapter she hopes to pass on to readers the wisdom that she has learned from others.

This passage introduces the term for this idea: the Honorable Harvest. Because we cannot photosynthesize, but must consume other lives in order to survive, there are rules about doing this in the most honorable and moral way possible. These are ancient ideas and contradict our contemporary economy that encourages us to treat everything as a commodity to be exploited, but Kimmerer believes that they are crucial for her readers to learn about.

Kimmerer begins by commenting on our current society's legal harvesting regulations for certain species. The law treats wildlife as a resource to be hunted or fished, and so these regulations aim to protect the resource for future consumption, rather than for the sake of the animals themselves. When European colonizers first arrived on Turtle Island, they were awed by the abundance of natural resources. When they saw the harvesting practices of the Indigenous people, however, they assumed that their rules limiting overconsumption were the result of laziness, rather than what allowed for such abundance in the first place.

It is a positive step that we at least have some harvesting regulations now, but as Kimmerer points out here, these laws are based around the desire to protect future commodities, rather than protecting the rights of the harvested beings themselves. This section again shows how the settler mindset clashed with the Indigenous American way of life, and how the colonizers could not appreciate the wisdom in Indigenous practices.

Kimmerer then tells a story of a European engineering student who went rice harvesting with his Ojibwe friend's family in Minnesota. The student found their harvesting methods to be inefficient, and as a thank-you gift offered to design a new system that would gather more rice. The family politely declined, saying that they knew their traditional methods weren't the most immediately efficient, but they were best for attracting ducks and seeding the rice for next year's harvest—a more long-term efficiency.

That earliest settler mindset survives today as capitalism has taken over, such that even the gift offered here is really just something that can make people more efficient at consuming and therefore more profitable. It's an important point that the inefficiency in the family's process is not accidental or a result of incompetence, but rather purposeful and with longer-term benefits in mind.

Back in her current narrative, Robin walks home with a basketful of leeks for dinner, thinking of a story an herbalist once told her. The herbalist was looking for snakeroot, and quickly found the plant—but only one, and because of this she refrained from taking it. She continued searching, only to find that she had lost the trowel that she used to harvest medicine. Retracing her steps, the herbalist found the trowel among another patch of snakeroot, where she asked the plants' permission and harvested some. The herbalist saw this experience as an example of the plants reminding her that they will help her if she treats them with respect.

The herbalist's story emphasizes the importance of respecting the plant and obeying the rules of the Honorable Harvest. Because she found only one plant, she didn't take it—not wanting to deplete a sparse population—and because of her thoughtfulness the plant rewarded her with a greater bounty. This echoes the lesson of Chapter 15: "if we use a plant respectfully it will stay with us and flourish."

Kimmerer then tries to make a list of some of the most basic tenets of the Honorable Harvest. These include "*Never take the first. Never take the last*," "*Take only that which is given*," and "*Give thanks for what you have been given.*" The final rule she lists is "*Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.*" State regulations regarding harvesting are based on scientific data, she says, while the Honorable Harvest considers ideas of responsibility and accountability as well, treating nonhumans as persons of value deserving their own rights and dignity. "Killing a *who* demands something different than killing an *it*," Kimmerer writes.

Many of these tenets will have become familiar to readers of Braiding Sweetgrass, *as Kimmerer clearly draws on them in her own narrative. The Honorable Harvest is based on the concept that nonhuman beings also have animacy and value, and therefore should have rights. Again referencing how language affects the way that we see the world, Kimmerer notes that seeing nonhumans as persons rather than things drastically changes the way that we interact with them.*

Kimmerer now imagines what our society would be like if the rules of the Honorable Harvest were enforced as the law, as they once were in Indigenous cultures. For example, what if developers had to ask permission of the plants before covering them in concrete? This would mean that everyone would be subject to the same laws, the "democracy of species," rather than privileging human beings above all other living things.

This is the kind of society that Kimmerer dreams of as possible, as the term "democracy of species" returns to describe the kind of government that would treat human beings as the "younger siblings of creation." If the Honorable Harvest were the law of the land and the Thanksgiving Address were the Pledge of Allegiance, it would mean drastically changing our society—and for the better, Kimmerer believes.

There are many gray areas within the tenets of the Honorable Harvest, and so some people believe that it is easier to instead follow the rule of taking not what you need, but "only that which is given." Kimmerer compares this to accepting cookies from one's grandmother versus breaking into her house and stealing her cookies. Both end with the same result, but one method of receiving the cookies damages the relationship between the giver and receiver. Noting the many examples of "dishonorable harvest" taking place in the world around us—rainforests, oil fields, etc.—Kimmerer says that sometimes it is easy to see then the gift has been stolen rather than given. In other cases, there is no easy way to discern what has been given and what has not.

There are different interpretations of the Honorable Harvest, and they may even be contentious ones, but Kimmerer suggests that as long as the intention is the same, then they still constitute a valid appreciation of the earth's gifts. She once again uses the metaphor of a gift from one's grandmother to make readers appreciate how we are really treating the earth by so brutally stealing its gifts. There are gray areas within the Honorable Harvest, but most of our consumption is very clearly black-and-white—and dishonorable.

On an October day, Robin sits talking with some local Indigenous hunters during hunting season. An elder describes his own method of waiting for deer to pass by until he sees one animal that clearly offers itself up. He only carries one bullet with him when he goes hunting, he says, to make sure that he uses it carefully. This is the ethos of the Honorable Harvest: we need to consume for our own survival, but we should only do so mindfully and gratefully. Harvesting methods like coal mining are clearly violations of the Harvest, as coal is in no way given as a gift by the earth—we must tear the land itself apart to harvest what we want. Wind, sun, and water are freely given, however, and can also be used for energy, if not as immediately and conveniently as fossil fuels.

The elder hunter shows how the Honorable Harvest can be put into practice in one specific situation, but from there Kimmerer applies it to more contemporary concerns, like the sources for the energy that we are so used to consuming in our daily lives. Limiting ourselves to renewable energy would certainly change modern society, but if we were also able to treat such energy as a gift to be treasured and respected then we might use less of it, unlike our current ethos of constant consumption of a commodity that we feel no connection to. Not everything should be convenient, as Kimmerer said.

Robin describes giving a lecture called "Cultures of Gratitude" at an expensive college. At one point she tells a traditional story about people disrespecting the generous Corn Spirit, growing lazy and giving up their ceremonies of gratitude. Eventually the Corn Spirit left to find somewhere else where she would be appreciated, and the people starved. Only when the people returned to their work of offering gratitude and respect did the Corn Spirit return. Watching the students carelessly waste food at the reception after the lecture, Robin can tell that they couldn't relate to the story.

Robin here tells another story about the dangers of overconsumption, but to an audience that has no concept of a society that might actually follow rules like those of the Honorable Harvest. Kimmerer hopes that her reader will be more mindful of these stories in the context of modern environmental collapse and our own disconnection from the earth.

One girl approaches Robin at the reception, however, to say that she understands and appreciated her lecture. The girl says that she grew up in a small village in Turkey, where her grandmother taught her to "kiss the rice"—if even a single grain of rice fell on the ground, they were to kiss it and show that they respected the gift. Coming to the United States, the girl says that she was sickened to see how people wasted food so callously. The girl offers this, her own story, as a gift for Robin to pass on to others.

This is an example of another culture that shares the Indigenous American ideas about gratitude and respect for the gifts of the earth. This is not an uncommon worldview, Kimmerer suggests, just because the dominant culture in recent centuries is one of capitalism and commodification. The student also echoes Kimmerer's ideas about the nature of gifts, in that they are meant to be passed on and shared with others, not hoarded by the receiver. Such a story, itself about the appreciation of gifts, is the perfect example of this.

Kimmerer now believes that gratitude alone is not enough for us to offer the earth as our part of the Honorable Harvest—we must become a culture of reciprocity with the earth as well. She quotes an Indigenous ecologist, who says that our current models of sustainability are just about finding better ways to keep on taking from the earth, not about what we can give back. Reciprocity, on the other hand, eases the moral debt of taking lives by giving back through "gratitude, through ceremony, through land stewardship, science, art, and in everyday acts of practical reverence."

Kimmerer affirms the importance of gratitude, but also questions if it is enough to be considered true reciprocity with the earth. Here she considers the modern environmental movement of sustainability, which, while a step in the right direction, is still about taking and not giving back: just taking less, or in a less harmful way. Gratitude is part of reciprocity, but at this point in our broken relationship with the land more is required of us, like the practical examples that Kimmerer tries to suggest throughout the book.

Robin describes her interview with Lionel, a fur trapper with Indigenous heritage from the woods of northern Quebec. She can't help but judge him before meeting him, wondering how he could possibly abide by the Honorable Harvest while doing such work, but she tries her best to listen respectfully. Trapping is his family business, Lionel says, and he describes growing up in the bush and learning everything there was to know about minks' behavior. When a new and cruel kind of trap became popular, the "leg-hold trap," he gave up the trade and tried logging instead, but the old-fashioned practices that he used were no longer profitable there either, having been replaced by heavy machinery that was much more harmful to the forest.

The fur business is often associated with animal cruelty and exploitation, so Robin is immediately skeptical that a fur trapper could abide by the rules of the Honorable Harvest, no matter his Indigenous heritage. Toothed leg-hold traps can brutally injure and restrain the animal, so Lionel's refusal to use them shows that he at least has a sense of respect for the animals' dignity. This then follows through to his logging career, another business associated with exploitation of the land, where he is only willing to pursue the work when he is able to use traditional methods that are less efficient but also less harmful to the forest.

Lionel then worked in an Ontario mine for a while, but he became disillusioned when he saw how the chemicals used in the mine destroyed the surrounding landscape, making it look as dead as the moon. He finally felt too guilty about participating in this work and went back to trapping, but now he tries to do it in the most ethical way possible, following the traditions of his Métis Nation heritage. He only uses traps that kill the animals instantly, and he tans hides in the traditional way, using the animal's own brain rather than harsh chemicals.

The pattern continues as Lionel quits mining upon discovering how harmful it is to the environment. The depressing thing is that it seems that the only viable work in his area is that which is only profitable when it is cruel and exploitative to animals and land. Fortunately, he has been able to make a living using traditional methods to trap animals again.

Lionel considers the animals that he traps to be his neighbors, and he feels a responsibility to take care of them even as he selectively harvests them. For example, he only traps martens when they are catching males—as soon as he catches a female, he stops trapping so the population can continue to grow. In the summer Lionel works as a local fishing guide, and he saves all the fish guts from his catch in his freezer. In the winter he constructs platforms in certain trees, thaws out the fish guts, and distributes them onto the platforms throughout the forest. This is the time before the marten mothers give birth, and his work ensures that they have a place to find a guaranteed meal even in the harshness of winter.

Here Lionel explains all the ways that he tries to follow the rules of the Honorable Harvest. Essentially, he respects the animals that he harvests and tries to look out for their best interests even as he selectively takes their lives. His yearlong work to provide for them in winter shows another level of reciprocity, as he gives back to the animals that give their lives for his business.

Robin is surprised by the tenderness in Lionel's voice as he talks about the martens. He is helping his own business by taking care of the martens and making sure that they flourish, but he is also trying to abide by the Honorable Harvest and giving back for whatever he takes: he will kill the martens eventually, but first they will live well because of him. Lately Lionel has been invited to teach about wildlife and conservation at schools, "giving back what was given to him." Still, Kimmerer can't help but think of who will buy the fur coats that he makes—probably someone with no consideration for the Honorable Harvest or the idea of taking from the earth only what has been freely given.

Although this is a matter of life and death, in a way it is also another sign that all flourishing is mutual. Ensuring that the martens live well also means that Lionel is able to harvest them successfully and provide for his own future. At the same time, Kimmerer points out that in Lionel's business the Honorable Harvest likely stops with him: most of the people buying fur coats probably became so wealthy through some kind of exploitation of the earth and other people.

Kimmerer expresses her hope that the Honorable Harvest will make a comeback in our culture, because it is sorely needed: we need to restore our relationship to the land and to not be ashamed of our existence on this planet. Kimmerer admits that although she is lucky to have her own garden and to harvest some wild food, she still mostly consumes groceries from the store like everyone else. She also acknowledges that city dwellers have little chance for meaningful interaction with the land, but they can at least choose what they support by what they spend their money on. In capitalism, we can use "dollars as the indirect currency of reciprocity." It's difficult to blame only the coal companies for ecological collapse when we are also buying what they sell.

Kimmerer admits the limits of what we can do personally in a capitalist society, but she believes that we should do what we can: and that means trying to restore our own personal relationship to the land, as well as rethinking our habits of consumption and trying to be as honorable in our harvest as possible. Ideally, having respect for the animacy of nonhuman beings and considering the earth's resources as gifts will help people to change their habits.

Recognizing how dishonorable much of her lifestyle is, Robin decides to try an experiment: to live in her current capitalist economy and still attempt to abide by the Honorable Harvest. First, she goes to the grocery store, where she tries to buy only local and organic food. She is momentarily stunned to notice wild leeks for sale, alarmed to see the land's gift wrapped in plastic and commodified.

Robin attempts to take her own advice and see if contemporary life can be, within reason, lived according to the rules of the Honorable Harvest. As with the wild strawberries, she is horrified to see what to her is clearly a gift (the wild leeks) stolen and commodified.

Robin then goes to the mall to buy writing supplies. Unlike at the grocery store, everything here seems so far removed from its original life. Robin tries to buy recycled paper at least, but gives up when it comes to the pens—she has no idea where they even come from, and so ends up just buying ones that she likes. The "pulsing animacy" of the woods is impossible to find in this place, and the Honorable Harvest doesn't work: it's not exchanging life for life anymore, because "everything for sale here is dead."

Robin's experience shows how difficult it is to live by the Honorable Harvest in a society that has no value for it at all and is totally disconnected from the land. It is easy to understand why modern people have no relationship to the earth when they never have to think about the lives that are given to make their possessions. When the gift is commodified, it dies.

Afterward, Robin gets a cup of coffee and observes people in the mall's food court. She realizes that the Honorable Harvest is not the "aberration" here, however much it might seem; the aberration is rather this market of dead things, built on the illusion that the products we consume have not been torn from the unwilling earth.

This tragic passage highlights the illusion at the center of capitalism: that our consumption has no consequences, that the earth is a commodity to be exploited and killed for our own convenience.

Back home now with her daughters Linden and Larkin, they clean and cook the wild leeks that Robin gathered, first setting aside an unwashed pile of leeks. After dinner, Robin goes out to a patch of forest by her pond to plant these extras, trying to give back to this piece of land that has lost its wild leeks. The forest here is still not healthy even a hundred years after it was developed, as it has been robbed of nutrients, "medicine," or some other factor that ecologists don't understand. This is why Robin is trying to replant the leeks here, to restore some of the original diversity of the old-growth forest.

Having harvested the wild leeks as honorably as she could, Robin tries to practice reciprocity by giving back to the forest that human overconsumption has ravaged. This is another example of the limits of science, as we do not know why this past development has left the forest still unable to recover even a hundred years later.

Kimmerer asserts once again that we need the Honorable Harvest in today's world, though its ethos of reciprocity is now endangered. We have created a culture and economy with no place for such a worldview, one that pretends that everything is a lifeless commodity to be taken and used without consequence. Kimmerer closes the chapter by urging readers to remember the Honorable Harvest and to work at "bringing back the medicine."

Even in a world of dead commodities, Kimmerer argues, the Honorable Harvest is crucial. Unless we can recognize the "pulsing animacy" in all things, we will continue on our reckless path of overconsumption and destroy the very earth that provides for us.

CHAPTER 18

Robin is now on the West Coast, a part of the country where she has never been before. Feeling lonely in this unfamiliar place, she thinks about the story of Skywoman, remembering that Skywoman was herself an immigrant to Turtle Island. Further considering the Creation story, Robin remembers that humans were the last beings to be created, after all other life; this is why they're called the youngest siblings of creation. Nanabozho, the first man to be created, was part human, part spirit, and is an important teaching figure in Anishinaabe culture.

Several chapters from this point on are set during this trip to the West Coast, where Robin encounters an unfamiliar landscape that leads her to find new plant teachers. This chapter also focuses on Nanabozho, who is a trickster spirit and shapeshifter but also a "culture hero," or a mythological hero who changes the early world through their actions (like Prometheus stealing fire for humanity in Greek mythology).

Kimmerer imagines how Nanabozho felt upon first arriving in his new home of Turtle Island. She herself felt strange here in this new environment of the West Coast, and for comfort she sought out her "Sitka Spruce grandmother." Robin makes an offering and sits down among her roots, waiting for the tree to introduce her to the "neighbors" and make her feel welcomed and at home. The story then returns to Nanabozho: like Skywoman, Nanabozho was an immigrant, recognizing that his new home wasn't the "new world," but something already old and existing in balance long before his arrival.

Robin has such a close connection to her own land that she feels like an exile or immigrant even on another part of Turtle Island (like the feeling that she shared with neighbor Hazel in "Witch Hazel"). She uses this emotion to explore the idea of how one might "become indigenous" to a new place, as Nanabozho did upon being created; he was the first man, but that also made him a newcomer. This sense of being a younger sibling of creation is again a reminder that humanity is only one aspect of creation's whole, not at the top of the hierarchy, and that we should learn from our fellow citizens of earth rather than objectivize and exploit them.

When Nanabozho was created, the Creator gave him the Original Instructions as rules to live by. One of the first of these instructions was to walk through the world in a way so "that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth." While the Original Instructions were given in ancient times, many Indigenous cultures see time as circular rather than linear, so Nanabozho's story is both ancient history and a prophecy of what's to come. Just as Nanabozho tried to become indigenous to his new home, so we, "Second Man," should still try to walk in his footsteps towards the same goal.

If Nanabozho is the first man, then we are "second man," following his ancient lessons but also preceding him into our own future according to nonlinear time. The instruction to walk so that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth condenses some of the major themes of Braiding Sweetgrass*: the animacy of the land and nonhuman beings, mindfulness of the gifts of the earth, and gratitude and respect for the mother who provides for us.*

Kimmerer briefly comments on how many Native elders are still puzzled by the European colonizers, even centuries after their arrival, and try to diagnose what is wrong with them as a culture. She wonders if Americans can learn to treat their country as a real home, a place to stay in and love, rather than a temporary conquest.

The elders that Kimmerer quotes here see settler society as still having the mindset of the immigrant and colonist, living on temporary property, rather than a long-term home that they have a close connection to. Kimmerer hopes to challenge the reader to change this mindset.

Having been instructed to walk across the earth, Nanabozho first goes East, towards the rising sun and in the traditional direction of knowledge. There he learns to use tobacco and receives the knowledge that "Mother Earth is our wisest teacher." Next the Creator instructs Nanabozho to learn the names of all other beings. Observing and listening to his neighbors on earth, Nanabozho is able to discern their true names, and he doesn't feel lonely anymore.

Tobacco is one of the sacred plants that Kimmerer and others in the book use as offerings of gratitude before harvesting from the earth. Gaining a sense of the animacy and personhood of nonhuman beings makes Nanabozho feel like he is a part of a community. He is not at the top of a hierarchy, but he is also no longer alone.

Returning to her exploration of her own new West Coast environment, Robin tries to turn off her "science mind" and turn on her "Nanabozho mind," greeting the unfamiliar species around her with a beginner's eye and trying to find their true names rather than their Latin names. Kimmerer imagines the "species loneliness" of not knowing the names or language of one's neighbors, and says that this is what has been happening to human beings on earth—we have lost our connection to and relationship with the rest of Creation.

Kimmerer feels a divide within herself between the scientist and the Indigenous poet, and as she experiences this new land, she tries to reenact Nanabozho's first steps in a new place, learning the true names of things. The scientific mindset places humanity as separate and above the rest of life, but this also leads to "species loneliness." Recognizing the animacy of nonhuman persons not only makes us respect and value them; it also gives us a community.

Kimmerer imagines Nanabozho walking across the land alongside Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist who devised our current scientific system for naming organisms. In her imagination Linnaeus and Nanabozho talk together about a common language shared by all beings, with Linnaeus lamenting that such a language has been lost for his people, so that he has to translate everything into Latin instead. The two men share their own unique gifts with each other and find companionship together.

Carl Linnaeus was an 18th-century Swedish scientist responsible for our current system of taxonomy, called binomial nomenclature: naming organisms with two Latin names, first a genus and second a species within that genus. This imaginary scene is then a direct metaphor for the relationship between science and traditional wisdom, as the two men are able to find common ground and teach each other about the natural world.

Nanabozho then goes South to the land of birth and growth. There he learns from cedar, the sacred plant of the South, as well as from his other older siblings, the animals and plants. The lessons that Nanabozho learns during this time about gathering food, paying respect to the earth, and constructing tools become the "mythic roots of Native science, medicine, architecture, agriculture, and ecological knowledge." Returning to the cyclical nature of time, Kimmerer says that in many ways our modern technology is only now circling back to catch up with Native wisdom, particular in "looking to nature for models of design."

Here Kimmerer seems to be referencing the idea of biomimicry, or using evolution's most efficient designs to make technology more efficient as well. Nature is a great teacher, Kimmerer has asserted throughout the book, and even capitalist business models must admit this as well.

Nanabozho continues wandering the earth in all four directions, observing the plants and animals and learning to be quiet and respectful, to ask permission before entering another's territory, and to be grateful for the gifts that other beings offer to him. He also learns that "to carry a gift is also to carry a responsibility."

These stories of Nanabozho show the origin of many of the ideas that Kimmerer has tried to relate throughout the book, presenting the lessons of Indigenous mythology through science and memoir.

Robin now stands on a cliff by the sea, observing the landscape and imagining how things would be different if America's colonizers had learned the same lessons that Nanabozho did—the land might still be plentiful, and she might be speaking the Potawatomi language. It's too heartbreaking for her to think about this too much, however. Against such a history of tragedy it feels unfair to invite "settler society" to become Indigenous, she thinks, as they will likely just "take what little is left." At the same time, Kimmerer remembers that the settlers have much to grieve for in today's world as well—"they can't drink the water either."

Imagining what might have been is too tragic for Robin to think about for long, considering the tragic history of America and its dire present. It is easy (and justified) to become bitter in light of this history, and to want to withhold the title of "Indigenous" from the colonist society that has already taken so much. Part of the worldview of reciprocity and communalism means recognizing the fellowship of all living things, however, and Robin knows that the settlers must also live in this same world of disconnection and environmental collapse. It will benefit everyone if they—especially because they are the ones in power—can make a change.

Nanabozho goes North to learn about medicine, and there he receives a healing braid of **sweetgrass** which he carries with him afterward. To the West he sees great fires and is frightened, but the Firekeeper teaches Nanabozho about the element's internal balance, how it both destroys and nurtures. Recognizing this duality, Nanabozho realizes that he himself has a twin who is dedicated to causing imbalance. Because of this, he has the responsibility to be humble and wise in order to offset his twin's pride.

Sweetgrass, another of the sacred plants, makes its way into Nanabozho's story as well. Along with its emphasis on the cyclical nature of time, this mythology rejects hierarchy and linearity in its embrace of the idea of balance as well. This sense of balance, of every being and element containing aspects of both good and evil, fits better with the multi-natured earth than the black-vs.-white, good-vs.-evil ideology of Judeo-Christian culture.

Sitting again under the Sitka Spruce "grandmother," Robin recognizes that she is a stranger here on the West Coast, but she also feels welcomed by the tree. She continues to think about if immigrants can ever become Indigenous, and she decides that they cannot. But, she asks herself and the reader, how will they ever enter into a relationship of reciprocity with the land if they don't feel native to it? Robin continues listening to the sounds of the trees around her, and then gets up and starts to walk.

Robin considers plants not only her fellow citizens and teachers but also like members of her family. She practices her own lesson of mindfulness and awareness as she tries to respectfully introduce herself to this new environment and find welcome. Despite her reluctance to let settler society into a relationship with the land that they have ravaged and exploited, she knows that things will never improve unless they really think of this land as their home.

As she walks along a trail, Robin notices a familiar plant: the common plantain, also known as White Man's Footstep. This plant was first brought over with the first European colonizers, so Native people didn't trust it at first. Over time, however, they recognized and accepted its gifts and even incorporated it into their medicine. The plant is still not indigenous to Turtle Island, Kimmerer says, but it has been a good neighbor for 500 years and is now a true member of the plant community here. In contrast, there are many foreign plant species that are invasive and destructive, like kudzu or cheat grass. Kimmerer repeats that Plantain is not Indigenous, but she says that it *has* become "naturalized": the same legal term used for foreign-born people who become U.S. citizens.

The common plantain (unrelated to the plantain that is a kind of banana) is a flowering plant native to Europe and Asia but introduced to the Americas by early settlers. Robin finds this familiar plant teaching her an important lesson here, offering an alternative to trying to make a colonist become indigenous—instead becoming "naturalized." Rather than invading and disrupting the native flora, plantain (note again that Kimmerer capitalizes it like a proper name) has become a "good neighbor" now fully embraced by its plant community and the Indigenous people who live alongside them.

Kimmerer believes that the task of settler society, of Second Man, is to follow the example of Plantain rather than Kudzu: to become naturalized and learn to treat this land as our home, a place of gifts and responsibilities, a place to live as if our lives depend on it. Returning to the image of time as a circle, Kimmerer imagines White Man's Footstep following in Nanabozho's footsteps, lining a path along which we could walk so "that each step is a greeting to Mother Earth."

This is the lesson of White Man's Footstep to Kimmerer: non-Indigenous Americans should not appropriate Indigenous culture or pretend to be Indigenous themselves, but they can still learn the lessons of Nanabozho and build a relationship with this land that is now their home. This means treating the land with respect and humility, living in reciprocity with the democracy of species, and being mindful of and grateful for the gifts that the land provides for us.

CHAPTER 19

In this chapter Kimmerer returns to her time living in Kentucky, where she moved because of her husband's job at the time. Here she is teaching in an environment that is unfamiliar to her: her students are primarily Christian premed students whose interest in biology only extends to human beings. They seem to have no interest in ecology; they mostly just see her class as a requirement for graduation. Robin can't understand how someone could be a biologist and be so uninterested in the rich diversity of life: "the earth is so richly endowed that the least we can do in return is pay attention." Hoping to convert her students to a broader worldview, Robin decides to take them on a camping trip.

The timeline of the memoir aspect of Braiding Sweetgrass *shifts once again, as this section takes place during the same time period as "Witch Hazel," when Kimmerer and her young daughters moved temporarily to Kentucky. This chapter focuses on the importance of being mindful of the earth and the nonhuman beings around us. This simple act of paying attention tends to lead to greater respect and a deepened relationship of appreciation and reciprocity with the land.*

Robin plans meticulously for the outing, knowing that she is under a large amount of scrutiny from the school, which is a small but prestigious college for wealthy Southerners that's known for its high success rate of students going on to medical school. The dean even wears a lab coat to work to highlight the medical mission of the college. Robin manages to convince the dean that the trip is necessary for medical students here in coal country, as they should see the environmental factors that will be affecting their future patients. She is hoping to broaden her students' perspectives by immersing them in the world of ecology—ecology makes us consider other species as valuable. Robin wants to distract them from *Homo sapiens* for at least a few days.

Robin's students are not her usual group who has chosen to study botany and ecology. Rather, these are people raised on the worldview of Eve's children: that humans are the only ones with animacy, that science should not go beyond data, and that land is private property to be used as its human owners see fit. In this way they act as a stand-in for potential readers of Braiding Sweetgrass, *as Kimmerer attempts to convince them to broaden their worldview and question their culture's prevailing assumptions about land and nonhuman beings.*

Having received permission from the dean, Robin takes her students out into the beautiful Smoky Mountains, noting the contrast between the land's living beauty and the charts and graphs of a classroom. Walking up a mountain after their first night camping, they experience different climates and environments as the elevation changes. Robin teaches while they walk, and the students write down the scientific names of things that she mentions, but they don't seem enthralled by nature in the way that she had hoped. Knowing that the school already disapproved of this trip, Robin finds herself trying to justify it by making sure that the students' notebooks are filled with facts and figures.

Robin finds herself in a similar mindset here as in "Asters and Goldenrod," trying to prove to external powers (here the dean of the school known for its pre-med programs) that she is a real scientist by repressing the side of her that finds beauty, animacy, and wisdom in plants and instead focusing on data and checklists of facts. Even in the "pulsing animacy" of the woods, she tries to stick to her schedule and justify her trip to a school concerned only with hard science.

After a few days of this, Robin and the class come to a cold strip of spruce and fir tree habitat, which feels to Robin like the Northeast home that she has been missing. Overcome with longing, she lies down on the forest floor and delivers her lecture from there, finally loosening her self-imposed restrictions of scientific rigor. She discusses the endangered spruce-fir moss spider that lives in this environment, challenging her students to consider the spiders' perspectives and to question our right to take their home from them. One student then awkwardly asks her if this is "like her religion or something." Robin answers vaguely and then changes the subject, having learned to "tread lightly on these matters" among these devout Christians.

Out in the nature that she loves, Robin has tried to repress her non-scientific self, but she slips up here when surrounded by the flora that she misses so much. This is the first time that she is really challenging the students' human-centric worldview, encouraging them to consider the perspectives of the spruce-fir moss spiders instead and to recognize their value and rights to live on the land that is their home. The students are clearly uncomfortable with this idea, as one student's question shows: they are still seeing things through the lens of religious truth or falsehood, rather than a sense of communalism with nonhuman beings and the land.

On the last day of the trip, Robin and the students hike back to the parking lot through a beautiful grove of silverbells. She feels that she has failed in her goals for the venture, that she wasn't able to teach "a science deeper than data" and instead focused only on "how it works and nothing of what it meant." She remembers her own younger self wanting to study ecology to discover the secrets of Asters and Goldenrod, and she feels that she has let that younger woman down. She has obscured deeper truths with surface-level information, as if she had worn a lab coat into the forest like the dean at the university.

Here Robin recognizes that in a way she has acted like her adviser in "Asters and Goldenrod," sticking to the surface level of science and ignoring the beauty, mystery, and animacy all around them in the woods. This is something that she has tried to avoid in her life since her revelation of the Louis Vieux elm (in that same chapter), but the pressure from those in power here, like the disapproving dean, led her to revert to her old insecurities.

As they walk through late-afternoon light on their last day, one student starts singing "Amazing Grace," and soon they all join in and sing together. Robin feels humbled, like her students are offering a gift of love and gratitude in their own way, expressing wonder in a manner that goes beyond checklists of scientific names. They hadn't really been tuned out the entire time, she realizes, and her job wasn't to teach them everything or even to be the teacher at all. Her job was just to lead them to the true teacher—the land itself—and to make sure that they paid attention to it. "Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart," she writes. We just need to be quiet to accept these gifts.

The students might not have had the exact experience that Robin wanted them to on their outing, but despite her lists of facts and figures they did learn a lesson from the land itself. This is the value of just paying attention and being mindful of the life around us. The gift of awareness—of "receiving the [earth's] gifts with open eyes and open hearts"—leads to greater respect and gratitude, and the exchange of those gifts is an example of reciprocity in action. The students still see life through a Christian lens, but their song shows that this worldview too can embrace a sense of wonder and gratitude for the land.

CHAPTER 20

Robin is now leading another student expedition into the wilderness, this time back in New York state and as part of an ethnobotany class that she is teaching. This outing, which is a graduation requirement for her students, is also longer and more intense: it involves spending five weeks away from civilization. Robin has been leading these trips for years and has noticed a change in the students as time has passed—they used to remember camping trips from their childhood, but more recent students are mostly familiar with nature on the TV and are surprised to experience the reality of real wilderness. One student, Brad, is especially apprehensive and seems attached to his phone and his sense of the readily available conveniences of civilization.

This chapter begins with a similar subject as the previous one—Robin leading a student expedition into the wilderness—but this one is more extensive and (arguably) more successful. She is no longer taking pre-med students but rather her own ethnobotany class, and the outing is much longer and more involved. The way the students react to this trip over the years shows how even in the last decade, newer generations have less and less real experience of the land that is not filtered through technology.

They arrive at their destination—Cranberry Lake Biological Station—and a few days pass. Most of the students seem to enjoy working as biologists in the field, forming a community together and practicing their memorization of the Latin names for things. At the same time, Robin notices that their preoccupation with Latin names makes them pay less attention to the named beings themselves. She also feels that they have no personal connection to the plants they are studying, or sense that they are actually cared for by the land.

Cranberry Lake Biological Station is located in upstate New York. Being on the land and away from the distractions of technology immediately creates a sense of community among the students, but Robin notices that the categorization inherent to science (ironically, the Latin naming system largely established by Carl Linnaeus) tends to create a disconnect between the students and the living beings, as if these categories are a way to distract them from paying attention to the living things themselves.

To teach this lesson, Robin first encourages the students to brainstorm a list of their basic needs. On the rest of the trip, they will be learning how the land provides for these needs. First, they set about building their shelter/classroom, as Robin shows them how to construct the frame for a wigwam out of saplings. Kimmerer notes that Indigenous architecture often imitates nests or wombs from nature, and it feels comfortable and homey in an instinctual way. Next, they need walls and a roof.

The students have likely never considered that a stretch of wilderness could directly provide for their basic needs, or thought of the land as like a mother tending to her children. This metaphor is furthered by the image of the nest or womb as the most natural house design for architecture like this, which is so closely tied to the land itself.

The following day Robin and her students go "shopping" in the cattail marsh. The students love wetlands in theory, but in practice they are still wary of wading around in the muck. They eventually do jump in, however, and soon are having fun working in the mud, harvesting cattails by pulling them up at the base and trying to get the rhizome (a thick, stemlike root). The rhizomes are nutritious, and the cattail leaves, which are essentially giant grass blades bundled together to create the strength of a stalk, can be made into string and twine to weave walls for the wigwam.

Again Robin sees a divide between theoretical, scientific knowledge (these are students of ecology, so they can appreciate the value and beauty of wetlands) and intimate experience of the land itself (actually wading into the mud that makes the wetland). Robin teaches both her students and the reader about the science of the cattails and also their significance as a source of gifts for humans to respectfully use.

The students fill their canoes with leaves and then bring them to shore, where they sort and clean them. The cattail leaves are slimy, which the students find gross at first, but then they learn that the gel is soothing and antimicrobial, like aloe. The leaves also repel water, protecting their nutrients from being dissolved away by the swampy environment. This water shield helps humans too by repelling rain from the wigwam. One student remarks that "it's almost as if the plants made these things for us." Peeling all the leaves away, they can reach the cattail's central pith, which is also edible, and they all sample it.

Kimmerer continues to offer detailed scientific descriptions of plants while also finding wisdom in their compositions and habits. In this case she sees harmony and balance in the parts of the cattail, as their leaves contain a gel that soothes the hands made irritated by working with the plants. As the student points out, the plants' natural qualities seem made for human beings, from its edible parts to its water-repelling leaves, emphasizing the idea of the earth offering its gifts for our respectful use.

Looking out over the wetland and able to see where they've harvested, the students start comparing the marsh to an actual store, and they grow excited talking about everything that they can "buy" there. They gather pollen from the cattail flowers, which adds protein and a yellow dye to pancakes. The flower's stalks are also edible, and the students harvest them as well.

Although it is moving to watch the students' excitement over the gifts that the wetland has to offer, it's also notable that their first point of comparison is to a department store: a place of lifeless commodities to be exchanged for capital.

Next, they harvest the cattail stalks covered in their trademark fluff of seeds, which can be used as a lantern when dipped in fat. The stalks themselves are so straight that they can be used to make arrows. Continuing to describe the abundance that they can harvest here, Kimmerer explains that wetlands are extremely rich ecosystems, almost as productive as tropical rainforests. The colonizers thought they were worthless, however, and filled them in to form farmland or even just parking lots.

Wetlands are places of new life being born from decay, of complex webs of relationships between organisms on land that is inhospitable to human activity—so colonizers assumed them to be worthless. From the perspective of immediate profits this might be the case, but in terms of long-term abundance and the value of nonhuman life, it couldn't be more wrong.

After a few days of weaving cattail mats for the wigwam's floor and walls, Robin takes the students to harvest the roots of white spruce, which can be used to make a strong rope. Arriving at the forest after a long hike from camp, Robin once again decides to let the plants themselves be the real teacher for her students.

"Sitting in a Circle" focuses on two main plant species: the cattail and the white spruce. Robin has learned her lesson from the trip in the previous chapter and now humbly points her students to the plants themselves, letting the plants share their wisdom directly as they work together.

By now the students are used to Robin's Honorable Harvest ritual of greeting the plant, asking its permission to be harvested, and leaving an offering of tobacco, and some of them even join her. Robin then peels back a layer of the forest floor, observing the rich layers hidden beneath the surface, crawling with insects and crisscrossed by thousands of roots. She contrasts this rich, living forest soil, which is "so sweet and clean you could eat it by the spoonful," with the homogenized, manmade dirt that most of her students are familiar with.

Robin continues to attempt to follow the Honorable Harvest whenever she gathers a living thing, and she passes on this lesson to her students. Here she also contrasts the vibrant animacy of real forest soil—created by and composed of countless living things existing in community—with the relatively lifeless soil that fills most lots and gardens. That soil is a commodity: the forest soil is its own sovereign entity.

Amid the tangle of life in the forest soil Robin finds a spruce root and gently pulls on it, following where it leads. The root is then intersected by another, where she digs again and follows its path further. Eventually she cuts one end and then tries to untangle the single long root from all the other roots of the other plants, trying to keep from tearing them. After watching Robin and learning what to do, the students spread out and start looking for their own roots. She reminds them to refill the parts of the forest floor that they've dug up, and to pour some water there as well.

The maze of roots leading to countless interconnections acts as a living symbol of the interdependence of life in a thriving ecosystem. Even as they harvest the roots, Robin continues to remind her students to respect the life that they are disrupting and to try to minimize the harm that they are doing to both the tree and the other organisms affected by the root's disappearance.

Robin listens to her students work, knowing that they, like her, are pursuing the complex thread of roots through the soil, as if following the routes on a map. She compares this process to the many choices that her students are making at this point in their lives as they navigate the space between childhood and adulthood.

Seeing things through the eyes of a mother and teacher and always searching for new layers of meaning in the world of plants, Robin sees the intricate web of roots as also symbolizing the branching pathways of her students' futures.

A silence falls for a long time as they work, and then someone starts singing. This happens every time, Kimmerer says. Some research shows that the smell of humus (the decaying organic matter in real forest soil) causes human beings to release oxytocin, the hormone that also "promotes bonding between mother and child." Essentially, being close to Mother Earth makes us happier. Robin remembers the first time that she dug for roots like this and how transformative it was for her, to feel like the entire forest was "held in a wild native basket" of roots like a loving embrace.

This echoes the scene from the previous chapter and further explains what happened there. Being so intimately connected to the land causes a similar sensation that a child feels in the arms of its mother, and one way that the students respond to this sense of joy and safety is through spontaneous song. Robin conjures the lovely image of the web of underground roots as being like a basket tenderly holding the forest and its inhabitants, including her students.

Afterwards, the students compare their harvest and swap stories about interesting things that they found while following the roots' paths. Robin next shows them how to clean the Spruce roots by soaking them in the stream and then peeling away the outer layer, leaving a clean, pale twine behind that is flexible but will later dry to be as hard as wood. The students weave some baskets by the stream, and then use the root rope to tie together the birch bark that they've gathered for their wigwam's roof.

Robin continues to teach both her students and readers the myriad ways that plants can provide for us. Notably, this root harvesting is entirely sustainable, producing an extremely useful product while doing little harm to the plant and surrounding forest. Further, the process of harvesting it creates an increased closeness between people and the land whose gifts they rely upon.

Robin tells her students about the time that a Mohawk elder once joined them as they made cattail baskets and commented on how happy it made him to see them working with the cattail, the plant who "gives us all that we need to live." The Potawatomi word for cattail means "we wrap the baby in it," Kimmerer explains, while the Mohawk word slightly alters this such that it is the cattail wrapping humans in *her* gift.

The Potawatomi and Mohawk words for cattail both emphasize the plant's many gifts, but they differ slightly. The Potawatomi word describes humans using the cattail to care for their children, while the Mohawk word gives the cattail itself agency, as if it purposefully wraps its respectful harvesters in its gifts.

As they continue to work at weaving the cattails, one of the students questions whether or not it's right to have taken so much from the land without paying anything back besides gratitude and a tobacco offering. Robin explains that different people have different answers about the right way to give back as part of the Honorable Harvest: some think that gratitude alone is enough, while others believe that it's too arrogant to think that we have the capacity to give back to Mother Earth at all. She acknowledges that reciprocity is difficult in practice.

While they first thought of the abundant wetland as like a department store, the students now start to parse through the implications of what it means if the wetland's bounty is not made up of lifeless commodities, but gifts. Their conversation returns to the debate that Kimmerer has mentioned several times, with the question of just how we can ever practice true reciprocity with the earth, and what role gratitude plays in the gifts that humanity can give back.

The students debate this among themselves as they weave. One says that they don't owe anything to the plants. Another says that if the plants are offering a gift, then payment other than gratitude isn't expected. Another says that a gift comes with a responsibility to give something back—it's a moral debt, not a legal one. Robin is overjoyed to hear them talking about this, contrasting them with the average contemporary shopper who never considers "their debt to the land that has produced their purchases."

This experience of being close to the land and disconnected from modern technology and the conveniences of capitalism has led the students to consider difficult questions like these. Kimmerer hopes that her readers will start to think like the students here, rather than the average modern shopper who is totally disconnected from the land that produces the commodities they buy.

The students then start brainstorming about practical ways to give back to the land, like donating to wetland protection programs, attending political meetings, and making cattail coasters to give as gifts to loved ones. As she listens, Robin is reminded that "caring is not abstract"—it requires real, tangible action. She also knows that the students would not be having this conversation if they hadn't just been so fully immersed in the land itself and interacted so intimately with its gifts.

Kimmerer lets the students' debate speak for itself: there are in fact many ways that we can give back to the land that provides for us, and really paying attention to the gifts that we receive naturally leads to creative ways to offer our own gifts. Indeed, our creativity itself is a very human gift, like gratitude, that we can put to good use in the practice of reciprocity with the earth.

On their last night they all sleep in the wigwam that they've built together, and one student says that she's sad to be leaving this place where she felt so connected to the land. Kimmerer says that even if we don't feel it, the earth is always providing its gifts for us, in the middle of a city just as much as camping in a wetland. Around the fire that night, the students perform a song that they've made up for Robin about their adventure, ending with "no matter where I roam, when I'm with plants I'll be at home." As they drift off to sleep that night, Robin feels like a good mother. The next morning, she watches one student wake up at dawn, step outside the wigwam, and "speak her thanks to the new day."

Robin's words to her students here are also directed at her readers: one doesn't need to be camping in the wild to feel a connection with the land. Mindfulness of the land's gifts and gratitude for those gifts can maintain the relationship even in the most unnatural of environments. Motherhood again shapes Robin's perception of her teaching practice, and because she feels that she has taught her students well (as emphasized by their song of gratitude to her)—and even more importantly, led them to learn directly from the wisdom of plants—she feels again like the "good mother" that she is always trying to be. Robin's (presumably non-Indigenous) students are not trying to appropriate Indigenous practices or traditions, but experiencing such closeness to the land leads them to naturally develop their own offerings and rituals, like the student's greeting of the dawn that closes the chapter.

CHAPTER 21

This chapter follows the perspective of the salmon off the Pacific Northwest coast, gathering outside the river mouth and readying themselves to enter their ancestral home. The people who live by the cove and river gather to prepare for the salmon's arrival, dressing in special clothes and preparing a feast. Still the salmon don't come, however, so the people light a fire in a meadow on the headland (a jutting outcrop of land that is visible from the sea). The fire blazes up across the whole meadow, stopping only at the edge of the wet forest. The fire is meant as a sign for the salmon, telling them that they are welcome to return and that they will be thanked and honored by the people. The salmon all move as one and head towards the river mouth.

This chapter is more speculative and fictional than most, as Kimmerer imagines a past relationship between salmon and people in which the salmon recognize the signal of fire as a sign to enter the river. This is an idealized image of a past in which human and non-human persons lived in harmony and reciprocity with each other, as the salmon offer themselves up once they know that their sacrifice will be properly honored. Notably, the sign of this honor is the fire on the headland, signaling the salmon but also furthering its own ecosystem of human interaction with the land.

The next morning the headland is a field of ash, and the people are celebrating a river full of salmon. They wait four days before harvesting the first fish, who is caught by the "most honored fisher and prepared with ritual care." Then they dance, feast on the salmon and other sacred foods, and give thanks. They return the salmon's bones to the river, placing them to face upstream so that the salmon's spirit can travel alongside their brethren. After all this ceremony the real harvest of salmon begins, though the elders still remind the fishermen to take only what they need and no more.

The harvest of the salmon is marked at every step by respect, gratitude, and mindfulness. Even as the people rely on the salmon's bodies for food, they treat them as fellow persons and try to repay their gifts with their own. These people also follow the general rules of the Honorable Harvest.

Now using more scientific terms, Kimmerer names the different species of salmon that the tribe would have harvested, and she describes how they provided food for people and other animals—even their decaying bodies provided nutrients for the forests along the river. In the spring, the burned meadow bursts with new life, fertilized by the ash and drawing in new wildlife. The meadow is a sacred place to the people, where healers gather medicinal plants and spiritual seekers come to fast and meditate. Kimmerer ends the story with the tragic truth: these people have now entirely died out, and only pieces of their stories remain. Their history is still written in the soil of the headland, however.

The burned headland is not just collateral damage from the people's signal to the salmon, but its own ritual of reciprocity with the land. Like the respectful harvesting of sweetgrass or the paring back of young sugar maples, carefully burning the headland actually causes new life to flourish. This intimate act of destruction and rebirth that joins people and land also makes the headland sacred, adding to the special care and respect that they hold for this place. Kimmerer then ends this beautiful story with the horrifying reality: these people are now entirely extinct, their way of life only lingering in the soil itself and its history of fire.

In Oregon in the 1830s, smallpox and measles decimated Indigenous populations, often long before any settlers arrived in person. These settlers enjoyed all the plenitude left behind by the dead, but they soon grew greedy for more and decided to turn the salt marsh into flat grazing land for cattle. Kimmerer describes why estuaries are so important, acting as very biodiverse wetlands where the salmon grow up. The colonizers built dikes to keep the water out and dried up the estuary, flushing the young salmon out to sea where they made easy prey and suffered from the fast transition from fresh to salt water.

This is another example of European settlers assuming that Indigenous agricultural practices were the result of laziness or ignorance, not respect for the land—and they certainly never considered that these practices might be the very reason for the abundance of life that the colonists found upon their arrival. Again, anything that didn't seem immediately useful to European ideas of agriculture was converted into homogenized farmland, causing untold damage to natural ecosystems.

The salmon fishing industry also exploded at this time, but without the proper environment anymore, with pollution in the rivers, and with overfishing (as opposed to the Honorable Harvest of the Indigenous people) the population almost went extinct. Returning to the perspective of the salmon, Kimmerer imagines them waiting and watching for another fire on the headland, one that never comes. She wonders: "where did the relationship of loving respect and mutual caregiving between people and fish go?"

The abundance of salmon made the settlers assume that their populations were endless and could be overharvested without consequence (like Nanabozho in the story of fishing with Heron), but they soon learned that this was not the case. Again, the Honorable Harvest not only leads to a stronger relationship between people and nonhuman beings, but also to more abundance—and even from a capitalist perspective, this means longer-term flourishing.

Robin herself now walks up the path to that same headland, observing the lush forest and massive trees. Reaching the meadow, she steps out from the trees to find herself perfectly alone except for two bald eagles overhead. She knows the history of the headland, but she imagines other hikers (or even herself before she learned about it) visiting the place casually as just another scenic lookoff. Because she does know the history, however, she can only stand there and weep, full of both joy and grief: "joy for the being of the shimmering world and grief for what we have lost." Other hikers go past, and she watches some of them put down their phones for a while and look longingly out at sea, as if "trying to remember what it would be like to love the world."

Kimmerer again faces the tragic history of all that has been lost and continues to be destroyed. To really be aware of and to love the world as she does (and as she hopes that readers will as well) also means being aware of so much more loss and pain. Elsewhere in the book she paraphrases the famous naturalist Aldo Leopold: essentially, that to be an ecologist is to live alone in a world of wounds invisible to others. Sometimes it seems easier to just be blissfully ignorant, but that leads to its own sadness, as Robin sees in her fellow hikers who are moved by the headland as if longing for that lost relationship with the world.

Kimmerer comments on how easily we accept the idea of loving a person, but we consider loving the land as having no real practical effects. Cascade Head (the sacred headland) is a physical sign of the love between people and land. The ceremonies the people held there also had practical effects of clearing the land for new growth and ensuring the salmon thrived. She contrasts this to how we think of land—just a pretty place to write about on a postcard—or of salmon—just another grocery to buy.

In "Epiphany in the Beans," Kimmerer considered the fact that the earth actively loves us by taking care of us, and here she explores how an entire society can actively love the earth in return. She then contrasts this love affair with the disconnected commodities of our capitalist society, which reduces land and even fellow living things to exploitable objects.

Ceremonies hold people accountable to their community by focusing everyone's attention on the same subject, Kimmerer says. Many Indigenous ceremonies have been lost, and the most common ceremonies in modern life, like weddings, birthdays, and graduations, focus only on people and moments of personal transition. These are important, she acknowledges, and we are familiar with how to carry out these ceremonies, but she also challenges the reader to imagine throwing a party for the arrival of salmon into a river. Celebrations don't just have to be about our own species.

Kimmerer has explored the importance of personal ceremony before—her father's offering of coffee, her own ritual before harvesting a plant, and her student's makeshift ritual to thank the dawn—but here she is concerned with ritual on the cultural level. Paying attention to the land and nonhuman beings leads to greater respect and a closer relationship with them, and ceremonies are a way of focusing that attention and making it a habitual part of daily life.

Indigenous ceremonies still focus on the land, while colonist ceremonies focus on people—they had to be transportable to survive in a culture of immigrants, and so couldn't be bound to particular places. Kimmerer cautions against cultural appropriation of Indigenous practices, but she does believe that colonists need to develop new ceremonies to connect themselves to this land that is now their home.

Part of becoming naturalized—the goal for settler society that Kimmerer outlined in Chapter 18—means making new ceremonies that connect people to the land. Colonist culture has many ceremonies focused on people, and they shouldn't just steal Indigenous ceremonies, but she believes that it is important to expand their current ceremonies to attach themselves to this land and to focus on other species.

Back at Cascade Head, Kimmerer describes a new kind of Salmon Ceremony that is now taking place: field biologists measuring the return of the salmon. For the last several decades a project has been underway to restore the estuary, removing the manmade dikes and dams in the hopes that "the land remember[s] how to be an estuary." This is the result of scientific planning, not spiritual knowledge, but it is having a similar effect in restoring the land's abundance.

The description of the land remembering how to be an estuary calls back to the "grammar of animacy" chapter, ascribing active verbs to give agency to nonhuman and even nonliving things. The people who performed the original salmon ceremony are now extinct, but Robin can see a new ceremony developing with these scientists.

The people studying Cascade Head cannot speak directly to the plants and animals, but they can use science to learn what they need. "Doing science with awe and humility is a powerful act of reciprocity with the more-than-human world," Kimmerer declares. She says that all of the field biologists and ecologists that she knows came into their field because of their love for nature, and that science can be a way of getting closer to nature. The experiments these people run are like their own beacon to bring the salmon home. The land has now returned to an estuary and its natural shape.

The people working to restore this land now clearly share a similar love of the land and the animals as the people who once lived here, and their work is restoring a relationship between people and the earth. Kimmerer again affirms the importance of scientific work, but also emphasizes that it must be done in a spirit of humility and communalism, treating its subjects as fellow beings with value.

Kimmerer describes the scientists gathering at the river mouth, camping out and preparing their equipment—but still the salmon don't come. She imagines that one night a microscope light is left on in a tent, and the salmon see this tiny beacon and answer its call to return home.

Kimmerer closes the story with a poignant image: the salmon, who have been waiting for centuries for a people who respects and loves them to return, finally see a new beacon to call them home. This new salmon ceremony can never replace the one that was lost, but it does point towards a more hopeful future, where scientific and science-adjacent work can lead to a new closeness between people and the earth.

CHAPTER 22

Kimmerer describes a woman speaking Mohawk and gathering **sweetgrass**, and then herself, 400 years later, planting sweetgrass in the same valley along the Mohawk River. In between, however, that language has rarely been heard here. Immigrants pushed the Mohawk people out, and the government forced them into assimilation at places like Carlisle, with its mission to "Kill the Indian to Save the Man." The Native children there were forbidden to speak their language and had their braids cut off. They were forced to dress like colonizers, taught to use money, and made to learn skills that the authorities deemed "useful." This brutal strategy almost worked, but the Mohawk people—also called the "People of the Flint"—were resilient, and their culture survived.

In this chapter Kimmerer returns to sweetgrass and also the subject of Indian schools like Carlisle, with their tragically successful project of robbing native children of their culture. At the same time, she seeks to build on the previous chapter, emphasizing the work currently taking place to restore that wounded culture and create hope for a more abundant future. The Mohawk River is a tributary of the Hudson in north-central New York state, and an important highway for the Mohawk people before they were driven out by colonizers.

Back in her own present, Robin is planting **sweetgrass** with one of her graduate students as well as a Mohawk basket maker named Theresa, who is helping them. They are planting sweetgrass here in its native range, welcoming it home to the Mohawk River valley. Kimmerer then returns to the history of the Mohawks: some of the culture and people survived Carlisle and 400 years of exile, sustained by the Thanksgiving Address with its philosophy of reciprocity with the land, even when everything else was taken from them. They left the Mohawk Valley and resettled in Akwesasne, which borders with Canada.

When the Mohawks were driven out, so too was the sweetgrass, again showing the close relationship between certain plants and human beings who respect them. Despite the many kinds of colonialist violence that they faced, Kimmerer emphasizes the resilience of the Mohawk people, and also how their adherence to the Thanksgiving Address gave them strength and a sense of community through their trials.

Black ash and sweetgrass are neighbors in this valley, Kimmerer says, and they are reunited in the baskets that the Mohawk people weave from them, mixing the two plants together. The people still give thanks to the land at Akwesasne, but the land itself has "little to be grateful for," Kimmerer says, as industrial pollution has poisoned the river.

Black ash, the focus of Chapter 14, returns here as another important plant to the Mohawks. Despite the Mohawks' culture of reciprocity with the land, the land where they now live (Akwesasne, far to the north of the Mohawk River) is itself a victim of colonial industrial practices.

Robin's friend Sakokwenionkwas, a Mohawk elder whose English name is Tom Porter, began a return to Mohawk Valley twenty years earlier, inspired by a prophecy he heard from his grandmother about the Mohawks going back to their ancestral home. Tom and a few others settled in a town called Kanatsiohareke, where they set about renovating decaying structures and building new ones. Their goal is to celebrate and restore Haudenosaunee culture, to create "Carlisle in the reverse": "Heal the Indian, Save the Language" instead of "Kill the Indian to Save the Man." At Carlisle, children were punished and abused for speaking their native languages, and so only a few fluent speakers remain, most of them elders.

Undoing the work of Carlisle is difficult and slow, but Tom Porter and his peers have committed to returning to their ancestral home and trying to restore some of what has been lost. As with Robin trying to learn Potawatomi, recovering these almost-extinct languages is another aspect of restoring the culture and the worldview that accompanies it.

Kimmerer here reaffirms the importance of language, saying that it acts as "a prism through which to see the world," thus shaping the culture that speaks it. Along with restoring the language, Kimmerer had the idea of also restoring **sweetgrass** to the Mohawk valley as a way of recreating a flourishing home that sustains its people. Robin stops by Tom Porter's home one morning to discuss this idea as he prepares her a hearty breakfast of pancakes and maple syrup. He explains his hopes and dreams for Kanatsiohareke, how he hopes that they can again grow the traditional foods that will sustain them, practice traditional ceremonies, and follow the teachings of the Thanksgiving Address.

To a society based on reciprocity with the land, plants are an important aspect of culture and a sense of home. This means that to truly restore the Mohawk people and culture in their ancestral home, they should also restore the plants that they have close relationships with, like sweetgrass. Because sweetgrass is also a sacred plant, its presence in many traditions and ceremonies is important and will contribute to the restoration of lost cultural practices.

Still speaking of the Thanksgiving Address, Robin asks Tom how he imagines that the land says thank you to humans. In response, Tom just refills her plate with pancakes and maple syrup. Later they play a traditional game in which peach seeds—one side painted black, and the other white—are rolled onto deerskin, and the players must guess how many in each throw will be which color.

This echoes the scene in which Robin asked the maple sugaring workers how to be a good citizen of "maple nation": not only in the focus on the gift of maple syrup, but also in the idea that one way that we can give back to the land is simply by enjoying and sharing its gifts in a spirit of gratitude and pleasure.

As he steadily wins more and more rounds of the game, Tom tells a story of Skywoman's twin grandsons, who struggled with each other over the fate of the world. Finally they played this game to decide the victor: if all the peach pits were black, the world would be destroyed, and if they were white, then life would remain. The twin "who made sweetness in the world" sent out his thoughts to all living things and asked for their aid, so that when the peach pits were cast, every living thing shouted together on behalf of life and turned the peach pits to white.

This is another story of duality and balance in Native American mythology, just like Nanabozho and his twin. While affirming the rich history of this simple game, the story also shows the importance of all of creation working together in affirmation of life itself: essentially, acting as a community for the sake of mutual flourishing.

Tom's daughter joins their game and shows Robin some beautiful quartz crystals called Herkimer diamonds that she has gathered over the years on the riverbank. They then put on their jackets and walk through the nearby fields, as Kimmerer laments the loss of **sweetgrass** here just like the loss of the Mohawk language. The history of plants is bound to the history of the people who have a relationship with them, and when Indigenous people and cultures were eradicated or assimilated, so too were many of the native plants. Those native plants were replaced by new crops and accompanying invasive species. To bring back sweetgrass here, Robin knows that she'll also have to break the hold of the colonizing flora.

Herkimer diamonds are not actually diamonds, but double-terminated quartz crystals (that is, coming to a natural point on both ends rather than just one) that are frequently found in areas around the Mohawk River Valley. In this passage Kimmerer again affirms the importance of plants to Indigenous societies, emphasizing how certain plants can act as teachers and friends while others are invasive counterparts to the colonizing humans that brought them.

Tom supports Robin's idea of bringing back **sweetgrass** that can eventually form a meadow for basket makers to harvest. He asks her where to get seeds, but Robin explains that sweetgrass is rarely able to be grown from seed; usually it multiplies through its underground rhizome, which sends up new buds to sprout elsewhere and thus move along a riverbank. This worked for the plant "when the land was whole," but the rhizomes cannot cross paved areas, and development has been the main cause of sweetgrass decline.

Sweetgrass is difficult to grow from seed and is usually propagated by rhizome (a similar kind of rootlike stalk that she described regarding the lilies and cattails). This emphasizes the plant's connection to history (as new shoots come forth from older rhizomes) and communalism (as a single sprout spreads outward to create an entirely new interconnected community).

At her university, however, Robin has already begun growing **sweetgrass** in nursery beds. To find these plants she had to first order them from a place in California—not a natural habitat for sweetgrass—but then she learned that they originally came from Akwesasne, and she took it as a sign that she should buy them all. Now the beds are thriving and the plants are ready to be replanted into their native soil. This project is about more than just restoring a natural environment, Kimmerer says; "it is the restoration of relationship between plants and people."

Akwesasne is the home of the displaced Mohawk people on the border of Canada, so it's fitting that the displaced sweetgrass intended to restore the sweetgrass population in the Mohawk Valley should come from there as well. This seems like another sign that restoring the sweetgrass is symbolic of—but also a crucial part of—restoring the culture and community that was lost in the Valley.

Kimmerer now mourns all the years growing up when she knew so little about her own heritage, which was stolen from her grandfather at Carlisle—for example, she was never taught about the importance of **sweetgrass**. Back at Tom Porter's house, he shows Robin a book containing the names of all those who attended Carlisle from 1879 to 1918. He points out his own uncle, and then Robin finds her grandfather, Asa Wall.

Once again, the tragedy of what might have been can only be met with grief and a sense of irreparable loss. One of the special horrors of places like Carlisle was that they not only robbed their immediate victims of their culture, but also their victims' future descendants.

Asa and his brother Oliver were both sent to Carlisle, but Oliver ran away and returned home, while Asa did not. He became one of the "lost generation," not able to return to his home culture after Carlisle but also not accepted by the colonist society that had done this to him. He joined the army and then settled in the "immigrant world," working as a car mechanic and hiding anything related to his heritage in boxes in the attic. Asa did achieve what Carlisle taught him to want—a version of the American Dream—but Robin also grieves for her own childhood and what could have been if her grandfather hadn't been so broken and changed by the school.

The respective fates of Asa and his brother Oliver, the boys who picked pecans in Chapter 2, show how brutally effective Carlisle was. Oliver managed to escape and so he maintained his sense of Potawatomi heritage and closeness to his family and culture. Asa, however, was set adrift for the rest of his life, no longer feeling Potawatomi—and seemingly even ashamed of this part of himself—but also a constant outsider in the culture that had colonized and brutalized his own.

The town of Carlisle in Pennsylvania still lives on, and for its tricentennial it attempted to reckon with its history, inviting descendants of the stolen Indigenous children to return for "ceremonies of remembrance and reconciliation." Robin attends along with other members of her family and hundreds of others, most of whom have never seen the infamous place. The town seems picturesque and all-American; looking at it, Robin finds it hard to forgive.

When faced again with the terrible history of her people's exploitation at the hands of colonizers, Robin understandably finds it difficult to forgive and move on. No decades-late apology or ceremonies of reconciliation can undo the damage.

The descendants then gather around the school's cemetery, where so many lost children are buried. There they burn sage and **sweetgrass**, drum, and pray. Robin thinks about the different ways to react to such grief and loss—with destruction or creation, like the two sides of the peach pits. Grief can be comforted by new growth, "by rebuilding the homeland that was taken." This is why she is so devoted to planting the sweetgrass there in the Mohawk Valley.

Sometimes there is no hope for restoring all that has been lost, but mindful love can lead to a healing kind of mourning and also to new creation. The new homeland in the Mohawk Valley will never be exactly like the society that was destroyed, but with work it will be a new home for a culture that has endured so much.

Once more describing her work methodically planting the **sweetgrass** alongside Theresa, Kimmerer explains that it is like her own "ceremony of reconciliation." She again imagines the women 400 years earlier working in a similar way to harvest the plants for baskets, and she feels a sense of kinship with them. Putting down roots like this is another way of shouting in affirmation of life, like the people and animals in the story of the peach pits and Skywoman's grandsons. Suddenly Robin's trowel strikes something hard in the soil. She cleans it off and sees that it is a large and beautiful Herkimer diamond. She shows it to Tom when she gets home, and he reminds her of the rule of reciprocity: "we gave sweetgrass and the land gave a diamond."

While Kimmerer found little forgiveness at Carlisle, she has found her own ceremony of reconciliation by doing what she can to undo Carlisle's work, one sweetgrass plant at a time. In this work she also sees the affirmation of all life, like Skywoman planting seeds for her children's future gardens. The Herkimer diamond is then another small, tangible symbol of the reciprocity between people and land, as if the land is thanking Robin for bringing back the sweetgrass that it has been missing for so long.

CHAPTER 23

Again in the Adirondacks, Robin explores a lakeside forest and examines a massive granite boulder that is entirely covered in lichens. These are *Umbilicaria americana*, also known as rock tripe or oakleaf lichen. The thallus, or body, of *Umbilicaria* is circular and brown, curled up at the edges to reveal a black underside like a "charred potato chip." Lichens are not technically plants, Kimmerer explains, and in fact they also blur the line between individual and union, as they are a lifeform composed of a symbiosis between a fungus and an alga.

As a botanist, Kimmerer specializes in the study of mosses, so in a way this brief chapter is the one most aligned with her area of expertise. As usual, she begins the chapter with a personal experience and then expands from there into a scientific explanation of a specific plant.

Kimmerer compares this partnership to a marriage, like her own parents who are about to celebrate their sixtieth anniversary. Their partnership not only benefits the two of them, but also those around them. This is the case with many lichens as well. In a Native American wedding, Kimmerer explains, the bride and groom bring gifts for each other to cement their union, and similarly the alga and the fungus bring gifts for each other in their lichen partnership.

The scientific discussion broadens as Kimmerer finds a lesson of wisdom in the behavior of the plant (or technically lichen in this case). The brief mention of Native American wedding traditions is another reminder of the importance of gift-giving and gratitude in a culture based on reciprocity and communalism.

The alga is able to make its own sugar through photosynthesis, but it lacks minerals and cannot keep itself from drying out. The fungus dissolves material into minerals that the alga can use, but it must feed off the sugar that the alga creates because it cannot make its own. In *Umbilicaria*, the fungi always choose the alga *Trebouxia* as their partner, while *Trebouxia* itself partners with other kinds of fungi as well—sort of like a marriage with one more promiscuous partner.

Like the Three Sisters sharing nutrients and structural support, the lichen is a living example of reciprocity in action. Notably, the partnership between the fungus and alga is not exactly equal, but Kimmerer's metaphor of a marriage is a reminder that non-traditional relationships can still be successful.

Kimmerer describes the layers of *Umbilicaria*'s thallus, which work to preserve moisture and distribute sugar and minerals. She notes that some researchers don't see the fungus as a marriage, but as "reciprocal parasitism," or "fungi who discovered agriculture" by ensnaring the algae and feeding off of their photosynthesis. There are some of these partnerships where the individual cannot survive without the other at all, however, and scientists are still studying why some species join together and others do not. Sometimes two species that would normally form a lichen in the wild will not do so in a lab—that is, until they are placed under conditions of scarcity. Then they turn to reciprocity to best survive.

Kimmerer partly acknowledges that she is biased in her metaphorical interpretation of the lichen relationship, and that other scientists see it differently: notably, they differ in that a parasitical or agricultural relationship implies competition and exploitation, while the "marriage" that Kimmerer describes is a partnership of equals. The reality that the fungi and algae only turn to partnership in times of scarcity does seem to lend credence to her view, however, as the reciprocity here is not about profit but about survival.

Umbilicaria usually looks dry and dead, Kimmerer says, but really it is just waiting to be transformed by the rain, when it swells and turns green, forming dimples like a belly button. Robin examines the lichen on the boulder and thinks about how these ancient life forms are connected to the earth by an "umbilicus," like their name and the belly buttons that they form. Just as the lichen is nourished by the stone it is attached to, so people can also derive nourishment from the lichen. It can be soaked, rinsed, and boiled to form a nutritious broth, with the thallus itself chopped into a pasta-like strips.

Kimmerer sees the umbilicus of the lichen as resembling the umbilical cord of a baby connected to its mother, binding the lichen directly to Mother Earth. The nourishment it receives from the earth is like a gift that can then be passed on to people through the edible thallus.

Sometimes when *Umbilicaria* grows too thick it starts to create soil around itself on which moss and ferns can grow, thus laying the foundation for new life when its own life flourishes. Robin observes a rock face covered in *Umbilicaria* which is also surrounded by various algae and mosses, some of them crowding out the lichen itself.

The lichen's success leads to a new foundation for other species, which can even crowd out and kill the lichen itself, as its production acts as a sacrifice.

Lichens are some of the oldest life forms on earth, and in their very nature they embody the principle of reciprocity, Kimmerer says, giving and receiving within a single organism. In this they too are teachers about the power of mutualism. Yet while they can teach and nourish human beings, manmade pollution and climate change threaten these sensitive beings. Kimmerer feels sure that lichens will endure, but she is not so sure about humans. To close the chapter, she explains that in Asia *Umbilicaria* is known as the "ear of stone," and she imagines it quietly listening to our growth and now our anguish. Perhaps someday it will hear our joy as well, if we too are able to "marry ourselves to the earth."

Kimmerer concludes the chapter with another summation of the wisdom that she has found within this living being: a living representation of communalism and reciprocity within a single organism. Her hope for the future of earth is that humans will also find our "umbilical" connection to the earth, as only this will stop the negative effects of climate change and save the lichens themselves.

CHAPTER 24

Robin hikes into an old-growth forest of the Pacific Northwest, where she stops and is awed by the lushness around her and the massive trees. She knows that this rainforest once spread along the whole coast, with the biggest trees on earth and an incredible biodiversity of life in every square inch of land. Indigenous people here lived richly off both the land and the sea, holding "Mother Cedar" in special honor. In this wet climate, cedar, which resists rot, is especially valuable.

Robin continues her West Coast trip, here focusing on a different plant: the western redcedar. Even in the midst of the abundance of the northwestern rainforest, she can't help but lament all that has been lost, as this forest is now just a fraction of its glory before colonization and industrialization.

The Indigenous people had many uses for cedar. Its wood is straight and buoyant and easily made into canoes, arrows, and harpoons. Its bark could be stripped off in long ribbons that would regrow in time without damaging the tree (if it were carefully harvested) and then shredded to create a fluffy wool for newborns. Its roots could be woven as twine, its wood burned in winter, and even coffins were made of cedar. "The first and last embrace of a human being was in the arms of Mother Cedar," Kimmerer writes.

Some ancient redcedars still show the signs of this sustainable harvesting, which when performed properly did no lasting harm to the tree. Kimmerer once more personifies a plant to describe it as a mother figure, showing its love for the people through its various gifts.

These old-growth forests were rich and complex, and the old-growth cultures that they sustained were similarly rich in a culture of gratitude and reciprocity. Giving its scientific name, Kimmerer says that Mother Cedar is today known as western red cedar, not the tallest of the trees but able to grow trunks as wide as redwoods. The old people honored the cedar for its many gifts, but now it is seen as just another piece of lumber. "What can we who recognize the debt possibly give back?" Kimmerer asks.

Again Kimmerer associates a culture of reciprocity with the plants that are important to it, as the relationship between people and plants is a way of reinforcing a closeness to the land.

The narrative now shifts to the late 1980s and describes a man in his fifties named Franz Dolp, who is clearing a trail through thick brush and writing in his journal about his work. His path is stopped by a massive fallen cedar, the victim of past logging when only Douglas Fir was used and cedar was left behind. Now that cedar wood is considered valuable, however, these fallen giants are harvested as well. They've gone from being honored by Indigenous people to being logged and rejected by settlers—to now being sought after for their market value.

This is a rare chapter in that it shifts to the perspective of someone outside of Kimmerer's immediate family, and contains many of his writings as well. As is so common, the cedar so beloved by Indigenous people was initially thought useless by colonizers, and only more recently has capitalist society realized its value.

It takes several days of work for Franz to clear a path to the top of the ridge, where he is able look out over the landscape. From there he can see patches of dead logged land next to uniform Douglas Fir plantations, and within a small, preserved area a swathe of old-growth forest—the kind of forest that used to cover this entire landscape. In his journal, Franz writes that he is working out of a sense of loss for "what should be here."

Franz Dolp is another example of Aldo Leopold's quote, as he can see the wounds of what should *be there in the old-growth forest but which doesn't exist. This doesn't drive him to despair, however, but rather to work.*

The Coast Range was first logged in the 1880s, and by a hundred years later almost all the old growth was gone. At this time Franz is living with his wife and two children in Oregon, planting apple trees and working as an economics professor. His marriage deteriorates, however, and they sell their farm. He visits the farm after it's sold and weeps to see that all the trees have been cut down. Separated from his wife now, Franz moves to a forty-acre patch of land on Shotpouch Creek, a plot of clear-cut former old-growth forest where his family had once lived and logged, and which is now being taken over by blackberries and salmonberries.

Dolp is not of Indigenous American heritage, but he clearly does feel the kind of connection to the land that Kimmerer tries to encourage in Braiding Sweetgrass. *This is especially evidenced by his tears over the logged trees on his farm.*

Kimmerer describes how clear-cutting drastically changes a forest; the trees don't just grow back as they were, because the sudden abundance of sunlight and dried-out soil encourages "opportunistic, or pioneer, species" instead. These are plants like blackberries, that cover the ground quickly and keep slower-growing plants like trees from getting light. The pioneer plants favor fast growth and resource consumption, acting as competitors to other species instead of community members. They reflect the worldview that allowed for their growth explosion, in fact, as they do not thrive in stable old-growth forests with biodiverse populations. Pioneer human communities have created these pioneer plant communities by destroying old-growth forests worldwide.

In the wisdom of plants Kimmerer also sees some species that act like colonizers and capitalists rather than thriving on systems of reciprocity and communalism. Fittingly, these species are the ones that usually follow in the wake of the colonizers and capitalists who destroy the old-growth, reciprocal forests. Not all plants offer wisdom worth emulating, it seems.

Kimmerer now marvels at how well old-growth forests function, even in times of great scarcity. They are self-sustaining communities, like the old-growth human communities that grew up alongside them. At Shotpouch, Franz decides that his goal for his own wounded patch of land is "to plant an old-growth forest" in an attempt to heal the land. This doesn't just mean planting trees, but also developing a personal relationship with the land itself.

While the pioneer plants are successful in the short-term, Kimmerer sees more valuable wisdom in the centuries-long flourishing of old-growth systems—just like the contrast between reciprocity- and competition-based societies. Kimmerer presents Dolp as an example of how someone can set about restoring a relationship with the land and also practice reciprocity by undoing the destructive work of past humans.

First Franz builds a cabin for himself—made of cedar, as he originally intended, but he has to purchase the wood from elsewhere because the native trees have been so thoroughly clear-cut from his own land. Kimmerer describes how the Indigenous rainforest people also built structures out of cedar, and even developed a way of using some of its wood without killing the tree at all—entirely sustainable forestry that is the antithesis of the modern lumber industry.

Dolp tries to be close to the land in his home itself—and whether purposefully or not, to recreate the home materials of past people—but the land has been so thoroughly destroyed that he must go elsewhere for the redcedar that should be native to Shotpouch.

To even own the land at Shotpouch, Franz has to register an "approved management plan" for the property, which is not classified as forest but rather as "timberland." The state offers him assistance via herbicides and genetically modified Douglas Firs, but this is the opposite of what Franz wants. "To love a place is not enough," he writes. "We must find a way to heal it." Refusing to use the herbicides, he knows that he must clear the brush by hand.

This passage shows how the government thinks of land only in terms of the resources and short-term profits that it can provide. Fortunately, Dolp rejects their "management plan" and commits to the much slower and more difficult work of restoring the land without harmful chemicals.

There is a pattern for planting an industrial forest for logging, but no one had previously attempted to plant a natural, old-growth forest before. Franz has only the forest itself to teach him, so he closely observes how old-growth forests are actually arranged, mapping which species of trees grow in which environments. Eventually he hires a crew to help him clear the brush. Meanwhile he reads through dozens of ecology texts alongside studying the forest in person.

Like Robin, Franz Dolp sees the plants themselves as teachers, their wisdom evident in the very way that they live and interact with each other and their environments. To plant a new old-growth forest requires learning from scientific studies, but most importantly paying respectful attention to the forest itself.

Franz sometimes doubts if his plan will work, as it seems especially difficult to restore the environment that will allow cedar trees to flourish once more. Red cedar grows very slowly and patiently, so it is easily outcompeted by more opportunistic species. Ecologists estimate that "the window of opportunity for cedars to get started occurs perhaps only twice in a century." Franz doesn't have time to let regrowth happen naturally, so he has to plant the cedars himself.

As a human being living on a different timeline from trees, Dolp must sometimes rush the process in order to get anything done within his lifetime, but mostly he tries to abide by the most natural way of doing his work.

Despite all its delicate requirements for growth, red cedar is a common tree in many areas, especially in swampy soil that other species don't like. Franz thus plants most of his new cedars alongside creeks. The antimicrobial properties of cedar wood—which make it good medicine for people—also protect the tree itself from fungi and rot, which is always a danger in the Northwestern rainforest.

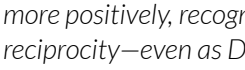
The natural antifungal properties of mature redcedar are another example of a plant's gifts causing mutual flourishing: helping the plant itself and also helping the people who respectfully harvest it.

Franz starts dating someone named Dawn, who works alongside him clearing brush and planting trees. They work together for years, planting more than 13,000 trees and creating "a network of trails with names that reflect intimacy with their forty acres." Kimmerer describes a hand-drawn map of the property, full of names that suggest personal experience with the land. One is called "Cedar Family," which leads her to discuss how cedar trees often grow together in groves, partly because the tree's trunk and branches can take root and send up new growth if they are resting on the wet ground, making them easy to propagate.

Growing a relationship with the land can also lead to growing relationships between people, Kimmerer asserts, as the gift keeps giving and the community keeps growing. The way that redcedar propagates is another example of communal networks expanding by shared resources.

Kimmerer then comments on another name on Franz's map: "Old Growth Children." The name implies faith and hope for a future even after Franz himself is gone. His work is hard, delicate, and often frustrating as he learns more and more about the factors that make certain things grow and others fail. He writes that he wishes he had consulted with all the forest wildlife before he began his experiment, since they so often frustrate his efforts. When he is finally done planting, he writes, he has hope that he may truly heal the land—but he also knows that the land has helped *him* much more. "An element of reciprocity is the rule here. […] In restoring the land, I restore myself."

In his work, Dolp learns the hard way many of the lessons that Kimmerer tries to relay in Braiding Sweetgrass. *Here that means respecting the animacy and personhood of nonhuman animals and, more positively, recognizing that restoring the land is an act of reciprocity—even as Dolp works hard, the land is working to heal him at the same time.*



Franz's journal continues, as he describes how he has come to think of forestry as an art form more than a science. He wouldn't claim the title "forester" for himself, but he would let himself be called an author who "writes in trees." He imagines his land 150 years in the future as a thriving forest, but also knows that in its present state it is still very vulnerable and needs help from an "old-growth culture" to maintain it. His project continues to be the restoration of a personal relationship with the land, and to fulfill this goal, Franz co-creates the Spring Creek Project. His cabin in the woods is now a communal building for writers-in-residence and a place for artists to collaborate and share ideas about our relationships to land.

From the land Dolp has come to this important conclusion, fitting with the themes of Braiding Sweetgrass*: environmental science and restoration are not enough. What is needed is a change in mindset and cultural values to maintain that restoration, and to rebuild people's connection to the land so that environmental disasters do not take place again. Dolp's thoughts on forestry again look beyond pure science into the realm of art, beauty, and wisdom, just as Kimmerer has tried to do.*

Franz writes that he believes his work has taken root and he has hope that it will continue to flourish—and it has indeed. He was killed in 2004 in a collision with a paper mill truck, Kimmerer writes, but he has inspired thousands of people with his work, and the forest that he planted continues to grow. To close, she imagines the young cedars surrounding Franz's cabin as a circle of dancers who, together with all the other citizens of the forest and the people who live and create there, work to "[dance] the old-growth children into being." Kimmerer invites the reader to join them.

Dolp's death is tragically ironic, in that he is killed by a vehicle of the exploitation of nature, specifically trees. Kimmerer often turns to the idea of dancing as an act of ceremonial healing and restoration, and here she personifies the trees that Dolp planted as dancing a slow dance for the restoration of their old-growth environment and a culture that might grow in reciprocity along with it.

CHAPTER 25

Kimmerer describes the rain in the Oregon rainforest, and how different plants seem to receive the droplets in different ways. In these misty forests the line between water, air, and land seems blurred. Robin is exploring Lookout Creek in the Andrews Experimental Forest. As she walks along the creek, she describes the "hyporheic flow" of water that moves underground beneath the creek's visible flow. Robin leans against a cedar tree and watches the droplets of rain fall.

Robin continues her Pacific Coast exploration in this chapter, as the Andrews Experimental Forest is located in Oregon. The hyporheic zone is the region below a streambed where water still moves through porous sediment, an example of a blurred line between where water ends and land begins.

Robin notes that the water droplets falling from moss seem to linger and swell much longer than the droplets that fall from tree branches or from her own body. She offers no explanation for this, and wonders if it is just an illusion. Robin has been out in the rain for hours, wanting to be an active participant in the downpour—like a cedar tree—rather than dry and comfortable and disconnected from it. She does eventually get cold, though, and she tries to find the places where wildlife might go to stay dry. Eventually she comes across a fallen log that provides a roof for her, and she sits down to rest.

This brief chapter is more meditative and immediate in its description of a single day in Robin's experience of a rainy Northwestern forest. Recognizing the animacy of all things allows her to observe how different beings react to each other in subtle ways, and also makes her empathetic to how other living things might endure these same conditions. She then seeks to emulate them, wanting to be an active participant in the democracy of species.

Kimmerer says that "time as an objective reality has never made much sense to me. It's what happens that matters." She tries to imagine how a cedar perceives time as compared to a gnat or a stone. Seeking to savor the present moment, when everything "happens," Robin continues to observe and listen to the falling rain. Watching a patch of moss, she notices a raindrop dangling from the end of one of its green filaments, which waves about like a caterpillar before connecting with another filament and transferring the droplet like a bridge of green light. She feels that what she has just seen is pure "grace."

The way that different beings and objects might perceive time is all relative, and recognizing this is another way of placing humanity and our experience of time in a context of one part of a whole, not any more valuable or valid than others. Robin leans into the description of the present moment in this chapter, illustrating her observations poetically rather than giving scientific or historical context that would take the narrative out of the moment.

Robin walks down by the river and decides to make an experiment to test her hypothesis that droplets form differently on different surfaces in the forest. She dries two identical strands of lichen and dips one into a pool of clear rainwater and the other in a pool stained red with the tannins from alder leaves. When she removes them, they do indeed form different droplets, with the alder water forming much larger and slower droplets than the regular rainwater. She feels pleased by this affirmation that not even the smallest phenomena are random, but that everything is "colored by relationships" between things.

Robin enjoys doing science at every level, but in the way that she has described before: as having a conversation with plants. In this passage, then, she doesn't seek out control groups or sterilized environments (or assert the factual veracity of her findings) but just performs a small experiment with *the plants as much as* on *them, and from it draws a lesson of the intricate connections between all things. In nature there is no sterile lab or control group, and so experiments like this one take into account a factor that pure science cannot: the animacy of all things and their relationships to each other.*

Robin stands by a still pool of water at the river's edge, and she notes how the droplets falling from different trees into the pool are of different sizes and speeds and make different kinds of "music" when they strike the water. "Listening to rain, time disappears," she thinks. If each moment is like a droplet from a tree into a pool, then time moves differently for different beings just as the droplets from separate trees differ. Finally, Kimmerer thinks about the very act of close observation: "Paying attention acknowledges that we have something to learn from intelligences other than our own."

Kimmerer closes the chapter by reaffirming the importance of paying attention. True mindfulness means humbling one's own perspective and experience and acknowledging those of others. This often results in a greater sense of respect and gratitude, and here it is also a reminder to Kimmerer of the animacy and personhood of nonhuman beings, and how we as the younger siblings of creation should be trying to learn from our brethren.

CHAPTER 26

It is winter, and Kimmerer walks through the snow. In times like these all of nature is hungry, and the "**Windigo** is afoot." She then explains the history of the Windigo, who is a traditional Anishinaabe monster. The Windigo is usually portrayed as a giant being with a heart of ice, skinny with hunger and stinking of carrion: the spirit of starvation in winter. Windigos were once human beings, that now they have become cannibal monsters and can bite other humans and transform them into Windigos too.

In this final section Kimmerer starts to reckon more directly with the evils that humans have perpetrated against each other and against the land, and to look for ways to undo them and restore our relationships. A personification of many of these evils is found in the traditional monster of the Windigo, described here as the personification of starvation, ravenous greed, and isolation.

In the past, especially during the era of the Little Ice Age, Indigenous Americans faced real starvation in winter. The **Windigo** myth likely grew out of this, partly as a means of reinforcing the taboo against cannibalism. The Windigo also reflects their culture's general worldview, however: in a culture based around communal good and reciprocity, the ultimate monster is "that within us which cares more for its own survival than anything else."

Like its language and creation stories, a culture's mythical monsters can reveal important aspects of its worldview. The Windigo is defined by isolation and selfish greed, taking more than his share at the expense of the community (even to the extent of cannibalizing his fellows). By contrast, this shows the importance of the common good and mutual assistance in the cultures that created the Windigo.

Kimmerer defines the **Windigo** as a case of a "positive feedback loop," in which a change in a certain direction triggers further change in that same direction, and so on—like the Windigo's hunger leading to more consumption, which only leads to more hunger. Negative feedback loops are characteristic of stable systems, and Kimmerer sees a culture of reciprocity as a negative feedback loop, in which changes lead to balance. The old stories about Windigo, then, sought to reinforce the importance of negative feedback loops in their listeners.

Negative feedback loops are essentially systems that are in balance and therefore sustainable in the long term. The endless overconsumption and greed of the Windigo (like the modern capitalist economy) is not sustainable, however, as there are not infinite resources to feed that infinite hunger.

The **Windigo** may have originated in the hungry Northern winters, Kimmerer says, but by now it has spread worldwide as corporations devour resources "not for need but for greed." Kimmerer describes a trip she took to the Amazon, seeing from the plane how the lush forest suddenly changed to dead fields of oil pipelines: she describes this as Windigo footprints. "So many have been bitten" by the Windigo these days, she says, and his traces are all around the world wherever excessive consumption and greed run rampant. It's not just the giant corporations who are at fault, but also we as consumers who keep the commodity market flowing with constant demand.

The Windigo is an ancient myth, but as Kimmerer has stated before, many Indigenous cultures see time as cyclical rather than linear, so Windigo stories can also be interpreted as being about the present or even the future. Kimmerer sees this everywhere in corporate greed and the environmental destruction that accompanies it, but also in the mindset of the average American who has been trained to keep consuming no matter their current abundance, and has no relationship to the land from which their purchases come. Indeed, the Windigo wouldn't be a monster at all in a capitalist economy, but rather the ideal customer: one who never stops consuming.

The **Windigo** arose as a monster for a communal society: an individual whose greed is dangerous for the community. It may have partially been based on banished individuals, Kimmerer says, those who were punished by being forced to live outside the tribe. "It is a terrible punishment to be banished from the web of reciprocity, with no one to share with you and no one for you to care for," she says.

The danger of the Windigo is not only the practical danger of overconsumption in a world of finite resources, but also the sense of isolation and pain that comes with being cut off from the "web of reciprocity." Kimmerer has described the "species loneliness" that contemporary humans feel as we are disconnected from our fellow citizens of the world, and this disconnection too is part of the Windigo syndrome.

Even most environmentalist policies are still based in the market economy, aiming only for a "sustainability" that allows constant growth to continue. "We continue to embrace economic systems that prescribe infinite growth on a finite plant," Kimmerer says, contradicting the most fundamental laws of physics. This is "**Windigo** thinking," and those in power seem to have no desire to stop.

Environmental movements seek to undo some of the damage, but as long as they are still based in consumerist thinking, they only seek to slow the Windigo's consumption, not defeat him altogether. This chapter ends on a bleak note, as Kimmerer points out the Windigo thinking and its dire consequences everywhere around us.

CHAPTER 27

Kimmerer describes her home of upstate New York, which was once Onondaga land and part of the Haudenosaunee (or Iroquois) Confederacy. Robin drinks from a cool, clear spring whose water has been filtered by natural limestone. She thinks of how faithful water is, always flowing and providing as it is meant to, and the Thanksgiving Address, which reminds us to be grateful for the water's diligent work.

Recognizing the animacy in nonhuman things means seeing all the elements of life taking part in communal existence, acting out their own gifts and responsibilities as recognized in the roll call of the Thanksgiving Address.

Kimmerer tells the story of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's founding. Long ago, she says, the people forgot to live with gratitude, and fought constant wars between themselves. Then a Huron man called the Peacemaker began spreading a message of peace to all the tribes, traveling among them as they fought. An Onondaga chief named Tadodaho initially refused his message. At first Tadodaho was so poisoned by hatred that his hair was full of snakes, but eventually he accepted the Peacemaker's message and was healed.

When exactly the Peacemaker founded the Haudenosaunee Confederacy is unknown, estimated between 1450 and 1660 but possibly as early as 1142. The story of Tadodaho and the people before the Peacemaker is another cautionary tale warning of the danger of living in violence and competition instead of gratitude and reciprocity.

The Peacemaker gathered the leaders of the five Haudenosaunee nations at the "Great Tree of Peace," a white pine on the shore of **Onondaga Lake**. This was the birth of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, "the oldest living democracy on the planet," in which all five tribes agreed to abide by the Great Law of Peace. Tadodaho was honored for the special role that the Onondaga played in this act, and the name Tadodaho has since then been passed down to the Confederacy's spiritual leaders. The Confederacy thrived for many years, Kimmerer says, but today "the ground where the Peacemaker walked is a Superfund site."

Other democracies (like Ancient Greece) were older, but the Haudenosaunee Confederacy continues to this day, which is what Kimmerer means by "oldest living democracy." The united Haudenosaunee nations are still represented by the white pine tree. A superfund site is an area designated by the EPA for the cleanup of hazardous substances. The contrast between the history of the Peacemaker and this single closing sentence warns the reader that the rest of the story is not a pleasant one.

Kimmerer now relates how **Onondaga Lake** went from a sacred and cherished site to one of the most polluted lakes in the country. Starting in the late 1700s, early industrialists built factories there and used the lake as a chemical dumping ground. The Tree of Peace is now buried by waste beds, which formed new shorelines entirely. This lifeless white waste is known as Solvay waste because it is the byproduct of the Solvay Process, which turns limestone into soda ash, itself a crucial ingredient in many industrial processes. In the late 1800s, the Solvay Process Company made the region explode in wealth. Trains full of products left Onondaga Lake, while the pipes kept pouring out more waste into the lake itself.

The soda ash (sodium carbonate) produced by the Solvay Process is used in many soaps and cleaning materials, as well as in the production of glass and paper, among other mass-produced products. As is the case with too many of the stories told in Braiding Sweetgrass, *at Onondaga Lake settlers exploited and destroyed the long-term abundance that was already present for the sake of their own immediate profits, with no thought for the consequences of their actions.*

The limestone for the Solvay Process was quarried from nearby open pit mines, turned into soda ash, and the waste dumped into the lake. Kimmerer imagines how the wildlife felt as they encountered the very first ejection of that waste. The pipes filled in not only a new shoreline, but the surrounding wetlands as well. Further, even once it has become the new land the waste continues to leach chemicals into the water whenever it rains. "The water has been tricked," Kimmerer writes: the rain and the creek that flow into **Onondaga Lake** are fulfilling their purpose responsibly, but now they have been made to carry poison into the lake instead of new life.

Kimmerer returns to the idea of water as constantly fulfilling its responsibilities according to the rule of reciprocity, but here it has been "tricked" by humans who have disrupted the system for the sake of greed and profits. Once again rich ecosystems that don't fit capitalist ideas of productivity are sacrificed and destroyed in the name of progress and profit.

Kimmerer describes how **Onondaga Lake** looks today, its shoreline steep with white cliffs of Solvay waste. The waste continues to leak salts into the water, which keeps aquatic plants from growing. Underwater plants create oxygen that other lake creatures rely on to survive, so the lake without underwater plants remains oxygen-poor and lacking in life. Fishing was banned in the lake in 1970 because of high amounts of mercury in the water, and even today it isn't considered safe to eat fish from Onondaga Lake. Mercury was a byproduct of another chemical process used by Allied Chemical (the successor company to the Solvay Process Company), and the toxic element still circulates through the lake's food chain.

Onondaga Lake is like the opposite of the pond by Robin's home (ironically close by)—devoid of plant life rather than choking with an abundance of it. All of this waste was created in the name of immediate profits and abundance, but there are long-term repercussions to these short-term gains.

In the 1880s, at the height of its industrial wealth, **Onondaga Lake** was a tourist attraction famed for its swimming and whitefish. Swimming was banned in 1940, however, when the waters became too toxic. The water is also muddy now because of flow from Onondaga Creek, which contains the Tully mudboils: eruptions of mud from the creek floor.

Even from a purely capitalist perspective, this shows how the pollution robbed the lake of long-term profits by destroying the tourism and fishing industry. The mudboils are separate from the Solvay waste, but cause their own problems for Onondaga Lake.

Some consider the mudboils to be natural geologic features, but Kimmerer says that Onondaga elders remember when the creek was perfectly clear, and that the mudboils didn't appear until salt mining began. Allied Chemical began salt mining from the headwaters of Onondaga Creek when the closer salt wells ran dry, which meant pumping salt for miles through Onondaga Nation territory, ruining their water whenever a pipe broke. The waste also likely created the mudboils that now make the creek run brown. Allied Chemical still refuses to claim any responsibility for the mudboils, saying that they are an "act of God." "What kind of God would that be?" Kimmerer asks.

It is a sad reality that many pipelines like this go through Indigenous territory in North America, leading to health and environmental crises when the pipes leak or break. Another sad reality is that corporations like this rarely face any real penalties for their crimes or are forced to make restitution. Because there is no legal proof that the mudboils were caused or exacerbated by the mines, Allied Chemical can claim that its hands are clean.

Kimmerer compares the wounds of **Onondaga Lake** and its waterways to the snakes that needed to be combed out of Tadodaho's hair. All these waters are supposed to be part of the Onondaga Nation, but "water is more faithful to its responsibilities than the United States would ever be." She describes how George Washington ordered the destruction of the Onondaga people during the Revolutionary War, leading to tens of thousands of deaths, and the many broken treaties that followed—along with the boarding schools like Carlisle that further destroyed so much of the people's cultural heritage.

The Onondaga, like the rest of the Haudenosaunee, allied themselves with the British in the Revolutionary War, and in response George Washington named the entire Haudenosaunee Confederacy an enemy of the U.S. He then ordered what is now known as the "Sullivan Campaign," in which an army led by Gen. John Sullivan destroyed more than 40 Haudenosaunee villages, along with all of their crops, and killed and imprisoned countless warriors and civilians. The note of bitterness in Kimmerer's voice here seems entirely justified in light of this history.

Despite all this, Kimmerer says, the Onondaga people continue to feel a responsibility to and love for their land, and they try to live according to the Peacemaker's Great Law of Peace. "The people went on giving thanks to the land, although so much of the land had little reason to be thankful for the people." Onondaga also remains an Indigenous nation still separate from U.S. sovereignty, despite having their territory drastically reduced. Recently the Onondaga people have tried to use U.S. law to reclaim their land, filing a suit in 2005 saying that it was illegally taken from them. The Supreme Court even upheld their claims.

Kimmerer expresses a similar sentiment here as when she described the Mohawks exiled in Akwesasne, who continued to follow the Thanksgiving Address even as the land itself was polluted by industry. Kimmerer clearly respects the Onondagas' decision to retain their own sovereignty in the face of U.S. government disloyalty.

Unlike many Native nations who receive various government settlements for their claims, the Onondaga called their suit a "land rights action." Kimmerer then quotes from the suit, which states that the land is not property to be possessed, and also that they will not try to evict anyone living on the land, instead aiming to bring about peace among everyone who lives there. The suit's overall goal was "to gain the legal standing necessary to move restoration of the land forward"—to begin the proper cleanup of **Onondaga Lake** and its surrounding area. The defendants were the state of New York and several corporations, including Honeywell Incorporated (the new name for the former Allied Chemical).

The Onondaga again hold true to their values rather than letting themselves be bought out, affirming their rights to the land but also the rights of the land itself. This is the kind of accountability necessary for real restoration, Kimmerer suggests. Corporations need to be held accountable for pollution, the government needs to be held accountable for land theft, and all parties involved need to move forward in a spirit of peace and restoration rather than revenge.

Because of other outside pressures, Honeywell had already begun cleaning up **Onondaga Lake**, but only in superficial ways—merely covering the contaminants in sand—that wouldn't help restore the living balance of the lake. The Onondaga Nation suit sought to hold the corporation accountable for a full cleanup of the lake, with no half-measures. Kimmerer emphasizes that this suit was not just about who owns the land, but about the rights of the land itself. She quotes an Onondaga Clan Mother, who says that the suit is about "justice for the whole of Creation." In 2010, however, a federal court dismissed the suit altogether.

Corporations exist for the sake of their own profits and can necessarily have no concern for the value of nonhuman beings. Thus, their reparations to the lake are the bare minimum in terms of cost and effectiveness. This lawsuit seemed like a sea change in the way that the land might begin to have its own legal rights and restoration might be written into law, but sadly the story ends abruptly in this passage. Those in power will never willingly give up that power by means of their own systems.

Robin now describes her own experience with **Onondaga Lake**: she knew nothing of its history until college, when her attention was briefly brought to it by seeing a huge HELP sign along the shore from the highway. Fifteen years later, when she lived in Syracuse again, she had a free day and decided to visit the lake. Robin drives to an abandoned fairground on the lake's shore, parking her car and finding her way along a path through thick, tall reeds. There are more than a thousand acres of "wasteland" along Onondaga's shore, and as she walks alone through the reeds Robin suddenly feels afraid, like she's in a horror movie.

This part of the narrative shifts to Robin's personal, present-day experience as she explores the wasteland of Onondaga's shores. The gigantic "HELP" sign is introduced rather mysteriously at first, but Kimmerer gives context for it later on in this same chapter.

Robin turns a corner and faces what initially seems to be the scene of a gruesome murder—but then she realizes that all the bloody figures make up a life-sized diorama, part of an abandoned "Haunted Hayrides" attraction from the previous Halloween, sponsored by the Solvay Lions Club. After her initial terror Robin can't help but laugh, but then she thinks about the irony of it all. What has actually happened on this land is just as gruesome as any bloody execution—and the executioner is named Solvay Process, now Honeywell. She thinks further about the horror of the fact that these were not faceless corporations, but real people who filled the lake with poison, all "just doing their jobs."

The "Haunted Hayrides" diorama that Robin finds hits all the usual horror-movie tropes, and even her narrative initially seems like she has stumbled onto a murder scene. At the same time, she points out the irony that the real horror is the lake and shoreline that she is standing on: the brutal removal of the native people who lived there and the destruction of millions of nonhuman lives as well. While Kimmerer recognizes the power of corporations and governments, she always advocates for personal change and individual responsibility: corporations and governments are made up of individuals, so their choices matter. It was real people who chose to continue the destruction of Onondaga Lake.

Kimmerer comments on how contemporary people have been psychologically conditioned to avoid confronting environmental disasters directly. She then muses on the word "wasteland," which implies that the land itself has become useless or been squandered—and in the case of **Onondaga Lake** no one seemed concerned, as "ruined land was accepted as the collateral damage of progress."

Kimmerer attempts to make readers look directly at the damage, the wasteland that is the result of our current society of convenience and consumption. She can be hopeful and gentle in her writing, but also piercingly direct about the horrors of our reality.

In the 1970s, a professor at the local College of Environmental Science and Forestry seeded and fertilized one of the Solvay waste beds facing the highway such that when the grass eventually sprouted, it spelled out the word HELP—the same sign that Robin herself had seen as a student. This one-word message was apt, she thinks, as **Onondaga Lake** was like a kidnapping victim unable to speak for itself.

This explains the HELP sign that the young Robin saw from the highway, briefly alerting her to the tragedy taking place in slow motion. Individual acts of protest like that of the professor can have an effect, the passage suggests—and we also have a responsibility to speak for the things that cannot speak for themselves.

Kimmerer now asks the reader how we respond to these wastelands. We can despair, letting ourselves be overwhelmed by the environmental disasters everywhere in our world. It is important to grieve for the land, she believes, but grief is also a part of love, and to love the land is also to give back to it some of the gifts and joy that it still gives to us. Environmentalism has mostly become about doomsday predictions and pessimism, she notes, rather than about actively giving back to the land and having a healthy relationship with it.

In the face of these tragedies it is easy to despair, Kimmerer admits, but we also have the responsibility to do more than just the easy thing. If we are really to love this world, then we must be willing to do the work of restoring it and also give our own gifts and joys. This is a relationship, after all, a system of reciprocity, and is meant to be constantly growing and adapting.

The idea that if people only knew what was happening then they would change their ways is misguided, Kimmerer believes. People do know about what our economies have done to the planet, and those that care are merely moved to despair, not positive action. "Despair is paralysis," she writes, and we cannot let ourselves be paralyzed when the land itself is crying out for "HELP." "It's not enough to grieve," she says. "It's not enough to just stop doing bad things."

This is a crucial passage, as Kimmerer makes a direct plea to readers: awareness alone is clearly not the answer, and sustainable consumption is just slowing the problem. We must do more than do fewer bad things: we must actively start doing good things, offering our own gifts back to the generous earth that we have so terribly wounded.

After eating the feast that Mother Earth has provided for us, Kimmerer says, it's time for us to do our dishes. This doesn't have to be a burden, but can be a communal effort that forms relationships between people and the land. The act of restoring the land, "doing the dishes," also means reconsidering how we think about land in the first place. Kimmerer suggests a new tableau as a counterpart to the Haunted Hayride at **Onondaga Lake**. This would be a ride about reimagining land in the process of restoring it.

Kimmerer has used the "doing the dishes" metaphor before to represent the act of restoration that is our responsibility, and again she emphasizes that doing the dishes together can actually build community and be something joyful and loving, a passing on and sharing of new gifts. The rest of the chapter is framed as different stops in a reimagined version of the haunted hayride ride: this one about the stages of restoration and the different ways of thinking about land.

The first stop in this "hayride" might be called "Land as Capital," Kimmerer imagines. This is the general modern mindset that the land is nothing but a commodity to be exploited for profit, as represented by the original Solvay waste beds themselves. The second stop, "Land as Property," is reflected in the city's sloppy attempts to undo the damage by planting invasive reeds to cover the waste beds. This strategy is employed widely, as companies and governments that destroy entire ecosystems then just cover the carnage with some new vegetation to feel like they have done right by their property.

These first two stops really are like a haunted hayride, as they represent the current state of much of the world, where land is treated as capital and property to be exploited without any concern for its own sovereignty or value. Viewing the land solely as property means treating it however the person who owns it wishes—even supposed restoration is only done for the sake of optics and reduced losses.

Some people have stood against this kind of behavior, however, like Bill Jordan, who cofounded the Society for Ecological Restoration. Ecological restoration is not about returning the appearance of nature, but the actual functioning ecological system that was previously lost. At the ride's third stop, "Land as Machine," Kimmerer describes how native plants can be used as engineering solutions for restoration, like the push to plant willow trees to absorb water pollution. Kimmerer understands the good intentions behind these ideas, but they also assume a worldview in which only humans can be active subjects, while plants and other creatures are passive objects.

As the ride progresses, the tableaus shift through the different ways that we think about land, starting with the mindsets that Kimmerer believes are the most harmful, and progressively improving. In these middle sections are ways of treating the land that are well-intentioned but still flawed, as she explains here. She appreciates the work of restoration through science, but also reminds the reader of the limitations of science when it comes to real relationships and recognizing the animacy and value of nonhuman beings.

Instead, Kimmerer suggests that we take the Indigenous worldview, viewing the ecosystem as "not a machine, but a community of sovereign beings." This leads to the ride's next display, which Kimmerer doesn't yet name. The restoration ecologists at work at this stop are not scientists, however, but the plants themselves, Mother Earth's greatest teachers and healers.

Throughout the book Kimmerer has emphasized the importance of humility and awareness, which in turn can lead us to learn from the teachings of plants. "The community of sovereign beings" echoes the idea of the "democracy of species," again placing humanity as part of a community of equals rather than a hierarchy of subject and objects.

Kimmerer then describes the plants that have gradually taken root along the wounded shores of **Onondaga Lake**. Robin digs into the soil where these plants have survived and sees that it is slowly returning from white waste to dark rich earth. She watches ants carrying both waste and grass seeds, slowly removing the poison and spreading new life. Birch trees grow with the help of algae, and birds perch in the branches, defecating seeds that become fruiting shrubs. Robin sees new beginnings and reciprocity everywhere here, in "the small incremental processes by which an ecological community is built."

As Robin personally explores the shore of Onondaga lake, she sees some signs of hope. This is the result of awareness and humility: recognizing that true restoration will mostly be the work of the land itself, as the ecosystem rebuilds itself entirely outside of human intervention. In the cycles of giving and receiving that she sees here a new system of reciprocity is being constructed, healing the poisoned land through community.

Kimmerer finally names this tableau: "Land as Teacher, Land as Healer." We can learn from the natural processes that plants use to build new ecosystems and restore lost ones. Indeed, the lake has "offered signs of hope" in recent years, as life returns with the help of human engineering and restoration efforts. The water itself continues to remember its duty as well, Kimmerer says.

The water is ever-dutiful, Kimmerer reminds the reader, and when it is allowed to be a vehicle for life instead of death it will help in the work of restoration. Again she affirms the importance of humbly learning from nonhuman beings and the land itself.

Whatever new ecosystem might emerge at **Onondaga Lake**, it is likely to be "naturalized" rather than native, and unrecognizable to the people who lived there with the Peacemaker. Some new plant communities are thriving here, however, and Robin goes to visit them with a fellow professor and his students, who have been testing which plants can survive and hopefully recreate the original salt marsh. As she observes the plants, she smells something haunting and familiar, but soon it disappears. Next she admires a stand of goldenrod and asters. She imagines this tableau of restored plant-life as another stop on the hayride, this one titled "Land as Responsibility."

Kimmerer recognizes that there is no restoring all that has been lost, returning to the idea that a colonist can never become truly indigenous. Becoming naturalized to a new home, however, remains the best option and is what she hopes for the future of Onondaga Lake's ecosystem. As she moves through this imaginary tableau and the real-life lakeshore, Robin returns to some of the important plants of earlier in the book, like the asters and goldenrod.

As she observes the students working among their plants, however, Robin feels that something is missing in this tableau as well. Everyone speaks of data and solutions, but no one dares to use words like "beautiful" or "love." Suddenly she smells the familiar aroma again. Examining a nearby patch of green, Robin sees that it is **sweetgrass**—thriving even here at **Onondaga Lake**. Referring to sweetgrass like a teacher and friend, Kimmerer says that "she reminded me that it is not the land that has been broken, but our relationship to it."

Continuing through the important plants of the book, Robin comes to its most central one: sweetgrass. She sees sweetgrass as a teacher and friend, and here it reminds her that for true restoration we must move beyond hard science and develop a real relationship with the land and its nonhuman inhabitants. Much of restoration can be done with science, but science cannot build relationships of love.

Restoration is necessary to heal the earth, Kimmerer says, but "reciprocity is imperative for long-lasting, successful restoration." Science is a crucial part of restoration practices, but restoration should not be the domain of *only* science. We must be reminded that we aren't the ones in control of the earth, only our relationship to it. Along with restoring the land itself, we must restore "a relationship of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. And love." Kimmerer then quotes a statement from the Indigenous Environmental Network, saying that science is the "head and hands" of restoration, but Native spirituality is the "heart" that guides them. "Ecological restoration is inseparable from cultural and spiritual restoration."

This important passage distills some of the themes of Braiding Sweetgrass*: one being that scientific work is important, but it should not and cannot be the end of our relationship to the earth. That requires active reciprocity, the giving of our own gifts, and the humble awareness that we are just one part of the democracy of species, the younger siblings of creation. The quotation from the Indigenous Environmental Network is then a reminder that these are not Kimmerer's own ideas: she is passing on established wisdom, and there are many others who share her worldview.*

Robin recalls going on a date when she was a college student in Syracuse; she asked her date to show her **Onondaga Lake**, but he seemed embarrassed by it because of its odor and wouldn't even get out of the car when they got there. Another friend who grew up there recalls imagining the toxic sludge of Allied Chemical as a vision of hell. It's easy to write off Onondaga Lake, Kimmerer says, but there are seeds of hope here as well. Just as resilient plants have returned to the waste beds, so the Onondaga people themselves have endured and continue to try to fulfill their duty to the land.

Because of Robin's close relationship to the land and its inhabitants, the idea that someone could be ashamed of their home because of how other people have mistreated it seems especially poignant to Robin. It is brutally ironic that the sacred place where the Great Law of Peace was established recently looked like hell itself.

Kimmerer now describes a new declaration put forward by the Onondaga: the "Onondaga Nation Vision for a Clean **Onondaga Lake**." The declaration follows the pattern of the Thanksgiving Address, greeting each element of creation while also offering a plan for restoring the lake. The declaration is an example of a new approach called "biocultural or reciprocal restoration," which echoes the Indigenous worldview that restoration should be part of a people's relationship to the land. "It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land," Kimmerer writes. "It is medicine for the earth."

This vision for Onondaga Lake and these new approaches to restoration are exactly what Kimmerer hopes for in our future on this planet: looking beyond science and capitalism and trying to undo the damage we have done, but also restoring a full relationship with the land in the process. Science is crucial to this work, but so is traditional knowledge and ceremony.

There was a recent cultural event held for the restoration of **Onondaga Lake**, Kimmerer says. Participants brought vessels of clean water (including one all the way from Mount Fuji in Japan) and poured them into the lake as a symbol of healing. Onondaga people danced traditional dances, people gave speeches, and the group joined together to plant a new tree in the tradition of the Tree of Peace. This sixth stop on the hayride would be called "Land as Sacred, Land as Community."

This is an example of the kind of ceremony that Kimmerer has hinted at in chapters like "An Offering" and "Burning Cascade Head." This ceremony is celebrating a specific place and involves Indigenous practices but also new non-Indigenous aspects that focus the participants' attention on what is important: the restoration of the lake and the restoration of the relationships between people. This is also another example of the work of restoration not being drudgery but rather an opportunity for joy and community, the giving and receiving of gifts.

There are hopeful stories of environments being restored, Kimmerer asserts, and these stories can serve as inspiration, feeding the desire within us all to be closer to our mother earth, acting as "antidotes to the poison of despair." Restoration and relationship to the land must continue to push our society towards a "life-sustaining civilization" instead of the current "Industrial Growth Society." We need to heal the earth, but in the process the earth will also heal us—and we need it to. To close the chapter, Kimmerer imagines one last, future stop on the hayride tour. In this scene, titled "Land as Home," families gather happily by **Onondaga Lake**, fishing and swimming under trees full of birds, with both the American flag and the Haudenosaunee flag flying proudly together.

This long chapter is one of the most important of the book, as Kimmerer speaks directly about some of the darkest parts of history and the present—genocide, oppression, the destruction of the environment—but also warns against despair as a reaction to these realities. It is appropriate to mourn for them, she believes, but also to hope, and hope leads to new action. She began with the story of the Peacemaker and the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and ends with an imagined future in which Onondaga Lake is a sacred place of abundance and community once more.

CHAPTER 28

Kimmerer begins by affirming the importance of stories: "stories are among our most potent tools for restoring the land as well as our relationship to land." Because we are both storytellers and "storymakers," paying attention to old stories and myths can help us write the narrative of a better future. She then relates the Mayan creation story.

In this chapter Kimmerer again looks toward a better future, but a large part of that is learning from the past, in this case mythology from the Mayan people of Central America. As stated before, an important aspect of culture is its creation myths.

In the story, the first divine beings, or gods, create plants and animals to fill the emptiness. Afterward they want to create a creature who can speak, and so they try to make humans. They make the first humans out of mud, but they are ugly and shapeless and soon melt away in the rain. Next they make humans out of wood. These people are beautiful, strong, and clever, and they soon populate the earth with their children. These people have no gratitude or love within them, however, and they disrespect the rest of creation. The gods send disasters to strike them, and they also give the rest of creation their own voices to speak out against their mistreatment. They all join together to destroy the wood people. Next the gods make people out of pure sunlight, who are beautiful and powerful, but they too lack gratitude and think themselves equal to the gods, so the gods destroy them as well.

This story comes from the Popol Vuh, a sacred Mayan text of mythology and history that was first written down in the 1500s but based in much older oral traditions. This creation myth echoes many myths throughout ancient cultures, as the gods try and fail to make the kind of people that they want. Also, as is the case in many creation myths, the people are formed out of already existing elements—and can be destroyed when the gods are displeased with them (similar to the Biblical story of Noah and the great flood).

Finally, the gods make people out of ground corn meal. These people are compassionate and loving, and they can dance in gratitude for the rest of creation. They are "wise enough to be grateful." Out of all the gods' experiments, only the corn people respect the world that sustains them—"and so they were the people who were sustained upon the earth."

Note what the gods valued most in the people of corn: their ability to be grateful and to live in community with each other and the earth itself. These qualities also benefited them, as they were the only people to survive and endure.

Kimmerer muses on this story, wondering why the people of corn were the ones who ultimately inherited the earth. Corn, she says, is the product of "light transformed by relationship" via photosynthesis, and also of a relationship with people, creating the people themselves and then sustaining them as their first staple crop. This story is usually read as a history, but Kimmerer reminds the reader that in many Indigenous cultures time is not linear but rather circular. This makes the story both history, ongoing process, and prophecy of the future. She relates the idea that the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred Mayan text that contains this creation story, was used as a seeing instrument, or *ilbal*, through which its culture viewed their relationship to the world.

In "Witness to the Rain," Kimmerer noted that everything exists only in relationship to something else, and here she describes corn as a living relationship between light, water, the land, and people. This passage also introduces the idea of ilbal, *or a seeing instrument that is not a physical lens or device but a mythology. Kimmerer has described language as a sort of* ilbal *in the past, particularly in the differing ways that Potawatomi versus English languages portray the nature of what has animacy and value.*

Immigrant culture should appreciate this wisdom, but not appropriate it, Kimmerer says. Instead, settler society should write its own story of relationship to the world, creating its own *ilbal* using science and art. She then comments how the scientific process of photosynthesis could also be described like a poem, with plants combining light, air, and water to make sugar and oxygen, our food and breath. Our breath then gives back carbon dioxide, which the plants use as their own breath. We are symbiotic organisms, and this living symbiosis is its own story of reciprocity and gratitude.

Every culture has its ilbal, *both through its language and through its worldview and what it finds most important. Kimmerer warns settler society about appropriating from Indigenous peoples, but she also affirms again that society does need a new kind of* ilbal *that is healthier than what currently exists. This passage introduces another poetic metaphor of reciprocity as breath, here cycling through the process of plant photosynthesis and human respiration.*

"The very facts of the world *are* a poem," Kimmerer declares. These fact/stories used to be carried by elders and now they are usually the domain of scientists. But the technical language of science excludes most people, which also keeps them cut off from any ideas of the "democracy of all species." "Science can give us knowing, but caring comes from somewhere else," Kimmerer writes.

Kimmerer criticizes those who gatekeep science from the majority of people through the use of technical language, itself a further form of exclusion through the scientific assumption that humans are disconnected from and above other living things.

Science probably is the *ilbal* of the Western world, Kimmerer admits, but the current scientific worldview seems more like that of the wood people: clarifying material facts but blurring spiritual wisdom and relationships. She contrasts scientific practice, which brings the questioner into close contact with the natural world and invites a sense of wonder and curiosity, with the scientific worldview, which uses technology to advance exploitative materialistic economies. The scientific worldview also privileges human intelligence and value over all others, lacking humility—just like the people of wood.

Kimmerer has often pointed out the importance of direct experience with the land and other living things. The actual practice of science often means doing this, but the more general scientific worldview of Western society ignores everything that happens in these experiences, aside from the data being collected. Kimmerer again affirms the importance of the entire experience, which builds a relationship and a sense of humility.

In the Indigenous worldview, however, humans are seen as the "younger brothers of Creation" who must learn from those who were here before us: the plants and animals, who have their own kinds of intelligence and knowledge. Kimmerer imagines a kind of science in which people saw plants as teachers rather than as objects to be experimented on.

This idea has been mentioned several times before, but here Kimmerer directly challenges her fellow scientists to consider it as something other than a story: to actually allow it to inform their worldviews and work, and to rethink how limited human-only science really is.

Kimmerer closes by describing the Indigenous idea that each part of creation has its own unique gift, like a bird with its song. She wonders what our gift might be, and thinks back on the people of mud, wood, and light. They all lacked gratitude, which is indeed our unique gift as human beings, but increasingly Kimmerer says that she has come to think of language as our gift and responsibility as well. She imagines writing and storytelling as "an act of reciprocity with the living land," as we attempt to become like the people of corn and create new stories about our relationship to the world.

Kimmerer often muses on how we can live in reciprocity with the land, and gratitude, as our uniquely human gift, is always an important part of this. Yet we also have another human gift, language, another of our ilbals *that helps us to see the world—but that can also be a gift we offer back to the earth. This becomes personal to Robin's own writing practice, as she not only considers the value of the tree producing the paper on which she writes, but also how the words themselves can be an offering of love to the earth.*

CHAPTER 29

The chapter opens with a brief scene: Robin is doing something by flashlight on a country road one rainy night, and a car approaches. She gets off the road in time to avoid it and thinks that the car might stop to ask if she needs help, but instead it speeds on past. If the person won't even brake for a fellow human, she thinks, there is no chance that they will interrupt their drive for any other species of traveler this night.

This chapter opens with a more dynamic scene than most, and it is soon revealed that it takes place when Linden and Larkin are still young and living at home. In her thought process Robin is always considering human beings' place in the democracy of species.

The narrative shifts to a few hours earlier, as Robin prepares some pea soup in the rainy evening. The news on the television shows bombs falling on Baghdad—it's 2003, and the start of the U.S.-Iraq War. In describing the destruction, a reporter uses the term "collateral damage," which Robin knows is a euphemism to keep us at a distance from the real human suffering that is taking place.

The tragedies of violence and oppression are not just in the past, and not just on Turtle Island—humanity's greed, fear, and hatred continue. In wars like this, even fellow human beings are robbed of their animacy and value, their lives considered commodities to be expended in the name of victory and profits.

As bombs fall on Iraq, the rain falls on the forest outside Robin's house. She imagines the spotted salamanders, who have been hibernating for six months, hearing the rain and waking up from their long sleep. At this, the first warm spring rain, they will rise up from their burrows *en masse* and make their way to the nearby Labrador Pond, which is their spring breeding ground. The salamanders move very slowly, however, making them easy victims for cars when they must cross a roadway. This is why Robin and her daughters have driven out into the rainy night: to help ferry the salamanders across the road.

Throughout this chapter, Kimmerer compares and contrasts the global events of a new war with the smaller occurrences of her own immediate environment. She uses this juxtaposition to highlight the importance of every living being and every individual's choices, even in the face of large and seemingly unstoppable forces. Unusually, the scientific focus of this chapter is not a plant but an animal, the spotted salamander.

Robin walks down the empty road with her flashlight, observing the frogs that quickly hop across to safety, while the salamanders take about two minutes to cross. Soon they start to find salamanders, and Robin and her daughters pick them up one by one and set them on the other side of the road. She observes one female spotted salamander in particular, noting how primitive and alien its shape is, but the salamander doesn't resist as Robin picks her up and carries her to safety.

The cold, slimy salamanders seem very different from humanity and might be hard for some to empathize with, but they too are citizens of our shared world, and Robin feels a responsibility to mitigate the harm done to them by other human beings.

Kimmerer describes how the salamanders take circuitous routes in their journey because they cannot climb over obstacles, and she compares their internal guidance system to the "smart bombs" currently homing in on specific targets in Iraq. Unlike those bombs, the salamanders use their sense of smell and a sense of the earth's magnetic field to guide their way.

This is an example of human technology using biomimicry—essentially learning from the wisdom of nature—but for destructive purposes. Unfortunately this is all too often the case, as the most cutting-edge technology is often that used for warfare.

The year before, Robin had taken one of her daughters to follow the salamanders on their migration and see where they ended up. They trailed the salamanders to the edge of Labrador Pond, to a small pool by its main shore, where the amphibians unceremoniously leapt straight into the dark, cold water. Looking closer at the pool, Robin saw that the muddy bottom was covered in salamanders, all whirling around each other. Suddenly the water began to churn as a huge group of them began their mating ritual, in which the swarm dances about each other as individual males break away to deposit sperm and females seek it out.

Robin enjoys doing informal science on her own, and her daughters clearly share her curiosity about the natural world. Here they are able to experience for themselves the salamanders' unique mating ritual rather than just reading about it.

A few days later, the female salamanders lay their eggs—hundreds at a time—linger until they hatch, and then return to the woods. The newborns will live in the pool and metamorphize through several stages until they too are able to live on land, their gills replaced by lungs. They then wander about for four or five years before reaching sexual maturity and returning to the pond. They may repeat the annual migration for as long as 18 years, Kimmerer says—if they can survive crossing the road. Amphibians are already extremely vulnerable, as their sensitive and porous skin has no resistance to toxins in the water.

Kimmerer describes the entire lifecycle of this intriguing creature to emphasize how tragic it is when their lives are ended so abruptly and randomly by passing cars. The motorists speeding by have no idea the unique and valuable life they are destroying for the sake of their own convenience. Around the world, amphibians are often the first to suffer from pollution because of their sensitive skin.

Kimmerer imagines the drivers speeding past, totally unaware of what's happening beneath their tires as a "glistening being following magnetic trails toward love is reduced to red pulp on the pavement." Robin and her daughters work to save as many as they can, but they can only do so much. A truck speeds by and Robin recognizes it as one of her neighbors, whose son is stationed in Iraq. Kimmerer again connects the carnage in that far-off country to the tragedy of the salamanders on the rainy road. Neither the young soldiers nor the salamanders are the real enemy: they are just "collateral damage" to larger forces, like our addiction to the oil that starts wars and then fuels the machinery of war—and also fuels the cars killing salamanders.

Here Kimmerer again makes a poignant connection with the invasion of Iraq. In a capitalist society, profit can, in effect, be more important than human lives, and certainly more than nonhuman ones. The cycle of oil fueling profits, the wars over control of those profits, and the destruction of the environment is like a poisonous version of the cycles of reciprocity that Kimmerer sees in the flow of oxygen and carbon dioxide between plants and people, or the giving and receiving of gifts.

Robin and her daughters pause in their work to eat some of the soup that they've brought in a thermos. Suddenly they hear voices and see flashlights, and Robin worries that it is some young men who are drinking and looking for trouble. As they draw closer, however, she realizes that these strangers are also looking for salamanders on the road. Robin greets them and offers them some of her soup as they all share a moment of relief and camaraderie in their united purpose.

Robin's first instinct is that fellow people out here at night means conflict, so it is a pleasant surprise that they too are here for the salamanders. They find an immediate sense of community in their shared concern for nonhuman beings.

The newcomers are a group of herpetology students from SUNY, and Robin feels embarrassed about her automatic assumption that they were troublemakers. The class is studying the "effects of roads on amphibians," and they repeat Robin's own observations about how long it takes frogs and salamanders to cross the road: the salamanders average 88 seconds, during which all the years of their lives are at eminent risk. The class is also working to convince the highway department to install salamander crossings across roads, but to do this they first need to present hard data. Tonight, then, they are recording estimates of how many amphibians are crossing the road.

As Kimmerer has declared before, science experiments should be about having a conversation with the plant or animal, and therefore any experience with nonhuman beings can be a kind of science (for example, the traditional wisdom about the efficacy of harvesting sweetgrass respectfully). This means that Robin has been doing informal science all night in her experience with the salamanders, and her observations are confirmed by these students who are doing hard science.

It's easy to count the destroyed bodies on the road, to "tally death," but harder to keep track of which animals survive. To do this, the class has installed temporary fences along the road's edge, where the salamanders will be temporarily stalled and naturally drift along the fence's edge as if it were any other obstacle that they could go around. Eventually they fall into pre-placed buckets, where they can be counted and then released to continue their journey.

This is an ingenious scientific solution that takes advantage of the salamander's traveling instinct to count them without doing any harm to the animals themselves.

The students are performing this study to ultimately benefit the salamanders in the long term, but to remain objective observers they cannot disrupt their experiment by actually saving any of the animals from death. Robin and her daughters' work has also biased the experiment, decreasing the number of salamanders that would have otherwise been killed. The short-term dead are seen as necessary collateral damage to save more salamanders in the future.

As Robin learned in "A Mother's Work," there is always some kind of collateral damage in any choice we make—at some point, we must choose which lives to privilege above others. The students here have made the difficult decision to sacrifice the lives of some salamanders tonight for the sake of hopefully saving many more in the future via the results of their study.

This study is a project run by a well-known conservation biologist named James Gibbs, Kimmerer says. Gibbs himself sometimes can't sleep on nights when he knows the salamanders are moving, and he comes out to rescue them like Robin is doing. Kimmerer then paraphrases Aldo Leopold, saying that "naturalists live in a world of wounds that only they can see."

This Aldo Leopold quote applies in many places in Braiding Sweetgrass, *as the people who don't know about the salamanders' migration (most notably the motorists killing them) also don't have to grieve over their needless deaths. The study is following the rules of hard science, but it is based in respect and even love for the animals themselves.*

By midnight the road is empty of cars and the salamanders can cross in peace, so Robin and her daughters head home. Robin listens to the news as she drives, hearing more about the invasion of Iraq and wondering what is being crushed under the wheels of the tanks, just like the salamanders under the cars' wheels tonight. She then muses on why she and the others have felt so compelled to come out on this rainy night to save salamanders. It's not altruism, she believes—rather, it's a gift to be able to witness a fellow citizen of earth performing such a spectacle as the salamanders' mass migration.

In this melancholy passage, Robin thinks about what seem like the unstoppable forces of human greed and hatred, grinding down lives before their wheels. In the face of this, the small gift of the salamanders feels especially fragile but also especially precious.

Modern people have been said to suffer from "species loneliness," Kimmerer says, an "estrangement from the rest of Creation." On nights like this, however, this loneliness is eased. This is especially emphasized by the alien nature of the salamanders: cold, slimy amphibians totally different from human beings. "Being with salamanders gives honor to otherness," Kimmerer writes, and "offers an antidote to the poison of xenophobia"—thus connecting our sense of the "otherness" of salamanders to racism among human beings.

We have cut ourselves off from the democracy of species, and the result is an existential loneliness and a broken relationship to the earth. Work like this can ease this loneliness, however. Being humbly mindful of the value of lives different from our own is an important part of restoring our community with the land, but also to restoring human communities divided by fear and hatred of the other. It is the same sentiment, Kimmerer suggests, that drives the invasion of Iraq and that makes people ignore the deaths of creatures that look different from themselves. When any life is "othered," it is easy to see its loss as just collateral damage for a greater good.

The act of saving salamanders from cars also reminds us of "the covenant of reciprocity," and how all the citizens of this world have responsibilities to each other. Human beings are the invaders in the war zone of the road, so it is also up to human beings to heal the wounds of that war. Robin feels powerless listening to the news about the Iraq War, but she feels that she does at least have the power to save salamanders—and maybe she is driven to do this out of a desire for absolution.

Much of the work of restoration is also about making amends—doing the dishes after trashing Mother Earth's kitchen, as Kimmerer has said elsewhere. It is because of humans that the salamanders are being killed, and so it is up to other humans to try and save as many as possible. This is our duty and responsibility as citizens of this earth.

When she arrives home, Robin listens to the calls of the frogs and imagines them crying out in grief, telling humans that "we, the collateral, are your wealth, your teachers, your security, your *family*. Your strange hunger for ease should not mean a death sentence for the rest of the Creation." She imagines their cries echoed by the salamanders being crushed on the road, by soldiers sent off to die, and by civilians whose lives have been suddenly violated by war. Unable to sleep, Robin walks up to the pond by her house and continues to listen to the cries of the frogs, feeling overwhelming grief for the world. But "grief can be a doorway to love," she reminds the reader, so it is proper to grieve for the world "so we can love it back to wholeness again."

While the previous chapter ended on a note of hope, this one closes with a sense of endless grief. An important part of loving the earth and restoring our relationship to it is mourning all that we have done to it. This means mourning other human beings as well, nonhuman beings like the salamanders, and even nonliving (but still animate) things like the waters of Onondaga Lake. If we are the younger siblings of Creation, then that means that the rest of creation is our literal family, and it is horrifying to treat our siblings as we have for the sake of convenience and immediate gratification. Only when we have fully faced that horror can we move forward.

CHAPTER 30

When she was young, Robin's father taught Robin and her siblings to light a fire using only one match. This meant patiently searching for the right firewood and kindling. The hard work involved also taught them about responsibility and reciprocity with the land. After they learned this lesson, they then went on to learn to light more difficult fires, like starting a one-match fire in the rain or snow. Kimmerer now muses on the simple act of creating something so important as a fire: something that is both a gift and a responsibility.

In the worldview of reciprocity with the land, even nonliving things can be granted animacy and value of their own, in this case a fire. Because of its great power of both aid and destruction, fire contains within itself the two aspects of reciprocity: the gift and the responsibility that comes with the gift. Again, patience and humble mindfulness are important aspects of any sacred act.

Potawatomi means "People of the Fire," and so it seemed especially important to Robin and her family that they master and share this skill. In the present, Robin works to light a fire in the traditional way, without using any matches at all, but instead only a bow and drill. This is not a feat of engineering alone, but also requires bringing oneself into harmony with the involved materials and working with them in a balanced way.

Fire itself contains the harmony of creation and destruction, so to bring it into existence properly it is necessary to be mindful of this harmony within oneself as well. This simple act then becomes an expression of Robin's Potawatomi heritage and close relationship with the nonhuman world.

Kimmerer describes her father, now 83 years old, teaching lessons about fire to a group of children at a Native youth science camp. He explains about the four types of fire, starting with the campfire that they have just built together, which is used to keep them warm and to cook food. A second type is a forest fire, which can be wild and uncontrolled or used to bring about new life. Robin's father explains how Indigenous people learned the science of controlled forest fires that could help clear the land for new species of plants and encourage new birch trees to grow—which themselves provided tinder for new campfires.

Robin's father's lessons here about the different types of fire exhibit the dance of balance within the element, and also highlight how it is like a person in itself, with its own unique qualities, gifts, and responsibilities. This passage is also another reminder of the traditional wisdom that is now being confirmed by the science that once scorned it, particularly about the value of controlled forest fires to encourage new growth and prevent larger disasters.

Robin's father emphasizes that it's important for people to be involved in nature, that we have a responsibility to the land itself. "The land gives us so many gifts," he says, and "fire is a way we can give back." He describes using fire on the land like a paintbrush, sweeping across and making new environments for plants and animals. Fire was the responsibility of the Potawatomi people, he says—"it was our art and our science."

This is a beautiful image of fire as a paintbrush across the land, and also another example of a uniquely human gift—the ability to control fire—that we can offer to the land in the spirit of reciprocity. Notably, the use of fire is both art and science for the Potawatomi people, combining both in their close relationship with the element and its effects on the land.

Kimmerer then continues her father's point about traditional controlled burns creating new life. The birch forests that thrived on these burnings also hosted a special fungus: the chaga mushroom, known to the Potawatomi as *shkitagen*. The mushroom is hard to find and extract, but it can then be used as a firekeeper, maintaining an ember within its intricate network of pores and threads. *Shkitagen* will nurture the spark inside its own body, keeping it alive.

The controlled burns are ancient practices that combine science with spirituality, and Kimmerer briefly explains the scientific aspect of them once again. The plant (or technically fungus) central to this chapter is the chaga mushroom, a parasitic fungus of cold-climate birch forests. Kimmerer sees wisdom in the complex network within the mushroom's body, that which keeps the spark alive.

Robin's father continues his lesson. The third type of fire, he says, is the Sacred Fire, which is used for ceremonial purposes and represents the Potawatomi spiritual traditions. There are not many ceremonies using this fire in modern times, but he tells his students that they all carry part of the Sacred Fire within themselves as well, and so they have the responsibility to honor it and keep it alive. Continuing, Robin's father says that traditionally men are responsible for fire, and women for water. These two elements are both necessary for life and serve to balance each other. Hearing this, Kimmerer briefly references a similar teaching from Nanabozho about how fire itself must be balanced between creation and destruction, and how important it is that human beings understand this balance.

In "A Mother's Work" Kimmerer referenced the traditional idea that women are the keepers of the water, and here Robin's father completes the binary image of men as the keepers of the fire, both of them in balance with each other. The great grief of Native American history must always be taken into account, as Robin's father here laments how few ceremonies of the Sacred Fire still exist. Still, even if the details have been lost, the spirit remains, just as his own offering of coffee to the land was in the spirit of older rituals whose details were unknown to him at the time.

Kimmerer then continues her father's lesson, describing the last type of fire: a symbol of different eras in the life of the Anishinaabe nation. This is part of the "Seventh Fire Prophecy," which she goes on to explain. The people of the First Fire were the Anishinaabe who lived along the Atlantic shore. The prophecy told them to move west, carrying their fire in bowls of *shkitagen*, to the place "where the food grows on the water." Eventually they made their way to Lake Huron and an area that is now the city of Detroit, beginning the era of the Second Fire. There they divided into three groups: Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi.

Like the Popol Vuh story of the people made from different elements, this Anishinaabe story describes different eras of humanity, although of course specific to its own people and more directly considered a prophecy than a creation myth. The Anishinaabe people inhabit the Great Lakes regions, but in their own history they once lived along the Eastern coast and moved west according to this prophecy.

Each of these three tribes made their way around the Great Lakes in different ways, developing homes as they traveled, but eventually they were all reunited to form the people of the Third Fire, what is still known today as the "Three Fires Confederacy." Building new homes on rice fields, they had finally found the place "where the food grows on water," and they flourished alongside their nonhuman neighbors. Eventually two new prophets told of the coming of "light-skinned people in ships from the east," but after this initial message the prophets' messages were divided. The first prophet said that these strangers would come in a spirit of brotherhood, while the second said that they would come to steal their land—no one was sure which face the strangers would show. The colonizers' actions made it clear that the second prophet was correct, however.

The first prophet's prediction about the coming of Europeans again shows the tragedy of what might have been, how history could have been different if the colonizers had indeed come in the spirit of brotherhood.


In the time of the Fifth Fire, the prophecy warned of the Christian missionaries who would try to destroy the Native people's spiritual traditions. This was the period of exile to reservations and of separating children from families to be "Americanized" at places like Carlisle. During the Sixth Fire, "the cup of life would almost become the cup of grief," the prophecy said, as the people were scattered and turned away from their own culture and history. In this time of tragedy, a new prophet arose who predicted a people of the Seventh Fire: those who would return to the old ways and "retrace the steps of the ones who brought us here," gathering up all that had been lost along the way. We are the people of the Seventh Fire, the elders say, and it is up to us to do the hard work.

These prophecies put the history of the colonization of Turtle Island into the context of Anishinaabe history. Rather than focusing on the actions of the colonizers, they emphasize how the Anishinaabe reacted to these actions. Importantly, the people of the Seventh Fire are not meant to seek out a new path, but to return to the old way that has almost been lost. This brings back the idea of history and prophecy as cyclical, as well as the importance of learning from past stories and mythologies.

Another part of the prophecy involves a crossroads for humanity in our current Seventh Fire age. This says that all the people of earth must choose between two paths: one is grassy and leads to life, while the other is scorched and black and leads to the destruction of humanity. Kimmerer connects this to our current crossroads regarding climate change and the depletion of earth's resources. We can continue along our current path of reckless consumption, which has led to our fractured relationship to the land and the loss of countless non-human beings, or we can make a radical change.

This prophecy essentially speaks for itself: we are at a tipping point in our current age, nearing the point of no return for catastrophic climate change. Gradual reforms and sustainability practices that are still rooted in market capitalism are not enough anymore.



Kimmerer imagines the two paths vividly, describing the grassy path as full of people of all races and nations walking together and carrying lanterns of *shkitagen*, full of a vision of a world of reciprocity and respect for all of creation. In the distance she can see the other road, however, a black road of melted asphalt traversed by bullying drivers speeding recklessly ahead. Kimmerer says that she has her own experience with this "cinder path," and she tells a story from decades before of one night in January.

The dark path Kimmerer imagines looks exactly like the road that we're already on in our current system. It will take a drastic change to uproot those whose power comes from exploitation of the land.

On this night, Robin and her young daughters (Larkin is still a baby at this point) are awakened by the sound of thunder. Robin is confused—there shouldn't be thunder in January—and when she looks outside, she sees that the sky is orange and the air is rocked by waves of heat. Robin rushes the girls to her car as Linden asks her if she is afraid. Robin lies and tells her that she's not afraid, assuring Linden that everything is going to be okay. Robin quickly drives the girls to a neighbor friend's house ten miles away, and there she sees on the news that a natural gas pipeline had exploded near their farm. A few days later Robin visits the site of the explosion, noting the black and melted road.

For Robin, the image of the asphalt road melted by a gas explosion is the epitome of the dark path in the Seventh Fire Prophecy. She is lucky that she is able to escape and reassure her daughters, but this will not always be the case with other climate-related disasters. Natural gas, which relies on unsustainable drilling, powers most of the electricity in America. Even worse, the gas pipelines are often built through Native American territory, and leaks and explosions like this can have dire consequences for the communities nearby.

Kimmerer says that on this night she had the experience of being a "climate refugee," but she was fortunate that it was only for one night. The reality is that she is afraid "for my children and for the good green world," and if Linden asked her now if she was afraid, she couldn't lie and say that it's all going to be okay. She worries that if we are the people of the seventh fire, that we might have already passed the crossroads and are hurdling along the scorched path. The only hope she has is if we can collectively assemble our gifts and wisdom to return to a "worldview shaped by mutual flourishing."

This passage expands the idea of mutual flourishing to the global level, as only a change like this can save us and put us on a different path. Robin has tried to be a good mother, but now she realizes that that means telling the truth: she really doesn't know if it's going to be okay for her children.

Returning to the prophecy, Kimmerer says that some spiritual leaders have predicted an eighth fire of "peace and brotherhood," one that will only be lit if we, the people of the Seventh Fire, are able to follow the green path of life. Kimmerer wonders what it will take to light this final fire, and in doing so returns to the lessons that she has learned from her people: "the spark itself is a mystery, but we know that before that fire can be lit, we have to gather the tinder, the thoughts, and the practices that will nurture the flame."

The work of preparing for the fire is necessary to bring it into being, and this is the kind of work that Kimmerer says we, the people of the Seventh Fire, must do if we are to have any hope of lighting a new spark of the Eighth Fire.

Kimmerer then describes the materials necessary to make a fire in the traditional way: a board and shaft of cedar, a bow made of striped maple, its bowstring fiber from the dogbane plant, and tinder made of cattail fluff, cedar bark, and birch bark. Everything depends on the angle and motion of both these plants and the person working with them. Robin then describes her own struggle to achieve the necessary harmony of "knowledge, body, mind, and spirit" as she seeks to make the fire. Remembering the lesson of *shkitagen* and the Seventh Fire—to "turn back along the path and gather up what has been left beside the trail"—she tries again, this time noting another element of the fire: the air itself, the breath of the Creator providing fuel.

Many of the components of the fire-making ritual come from plants central to Braiding Sweetgrass*—cedar, maple, cattail, and birch—bound together in a sort of dance between people, plants, and air. The breath, provided by the fire-maker themselves, is also a crucial element, showing another kind of reciprocity in which human beings can offer their own gifts to bring new life into being.*

In closing, Kimmerer advises that we should be looking for people who are like *shkitagen*—those who keep the fire alive and carry it forward—and should seek to be like *shkitagen* ourselves.

This lyrical closing leaves open-ended just what it means to be like shkitagen*—whatever each individual needs to do to keep the fire alive within themselves, receiving the gift and preparing to share it with others.*

CHAPTER 31

The chapter begins with an italicized section in which Kimmerer tells a story of her own encounter with the **Windigo**. One day she walks across the meadow to her usual "medicine woods," where she has been going for decades to gather plants from the forest. When she arrives, however, she is horrified to see that her neighbor—who technically owns the maple forest—has brought in loggers over the winter, and they have cut down almost all the trees.

The italicized sections of this closing chapter lean towards the fictional and fantastical, as Robin tells a first-person story about encountering the Windigo. This opening scene seems entirely based in reality, however, as her medicine woods—presumably where she harvested the wild leeks in "The Honorable Harvest"—have been callously cut down for quick lumber profits.

Robin knows that all the other plants that depended on the maples will soon die out, to be replaced by the "invasive species that follow **Windigo** footprints." "I fear that a world made of gifts cannot coexist with a world made of commodities," Kimmerer writes. "I fear that I have no power to protect what I love against the Windigo."

From Robin's point of view, this is the stark choice offered by the two paths—we cannot have it both ways. We must truly rethink our relationship to the world and to each other if we are to save ourselves.

Temporarily leaving the italicized story, Kimmerer describes how people in the past tried to defeat **Windigos**, but no matter how hard they fought, the Windigo always managed to slip away. Connecting the Windigo to materialistic greed once more, Kimmerer says that some people think that climate change will eventually become so drastic that exploitative economies will collapse and the Windigo heart will "melt," but she knows that in the process there will be immeasurable loss for the world. Instead of waiting for things to get so bad that even the Windigo dies, she suggests we "strap on our snowshoes and track him down."

The idea that Kimmerer describes here is one based in despair and fatalism, arguing that the only thing that will change society is the total collapse of the market economy. The problem with this is all that will be lost along the way, and the fact that the people suffering the most will not be the wealthy exploiters of the earth, but rather the least powerful. Instead, Kimmerer suggests that positive action is our only hope, and in this chapter she frames it not just as restoration work to save what is in danger, but as an active battle against something evil.

Though humans alone could never defeat the **Windigo** in stories, with Nanabozho's help they were able to succeed. Kimmerer points out something else unique about the story of this epic battle against the monster: it took place in the summer, the time of abundance and plenty. The Windigo is strongest in winter, in the season of scarcity and hunger, but when he is surrounded by plenitude he is weakened. The weapon that really defeats Windigo, Kimmerer states, is plenty. Unfortunately, the idea of plenty is antithetical to capitalism, which requires scarcity to drive the constant consumption on which it thrives. The wealthiest nations on earth must reinforce this sense of scarcity, creating "famine for some and diseases of excess for others." This, Kimmerer says, is the "Windigo economy."

Here Kimmerer returns to some of the earliest motifs of the book: the idea that perceiving of things as gifts rather than commodities creates a sense of fullness and abundance, making one appreciate the object more. Capitalism, however, cannot last on appreciation and fullness, as it requires scarcity to drive more consumption—just like the never-ending hunger of the Windigo. This suggests that on a personal level, we can help to fight the Windigo by resisting the market economy's push to consume more and more, and instead appreciate the abundance of gifts that are already around us.

Kimmerer doesn't have an easy alternative for modern capitalist economies, but she suggests that we turn to Indigenous wisdom once more for guidance, in this case the teaching of "One Bowl and One Spoon." This is the idea that all the earth's gifts are contained within one bowl, and that they are to be shared by all with one spoon. The teaching is similar to the "economy of the commons," where resources that benefit everyone are "commonly held rather than commodified."

Kimmerer stops short of outright endorsing a socialist stance, but she does support a communal approach to public goods. Most socialist states still see the earth as a commodity, just one to be distributed rather than bought and sold, and Kimmerer wants much more than that. To hold these things equally is to share them as gifts rather than as goods.

Changing our economy is important, Kimmerer says, but we also need a change of heart to accompany it. "Scarcity and plenty are as much qualities of the mind and spirit as they are of the economy," she says, and "gratitude plants the seed for abundance." We were all originally Indigenous to somewhere on earth, Kimmerer reminds the reader, and we can "reclaim our membership in the cultures of gratitude that formed our old relationships with the living earth." Gratitude fights **Windigo** thinking—and it also just makes people happier.

This passage contextualizes our current industrial capitalist society within the span of human history—it hasn't always been this way, and it doesn't need to stay this way. This is important on a global political level, but also on an individual level, as Kimmerer reminds readers that changing their own perspectives is crucial to changing the world, and will benefit them as well—this is the concept of mutual flourishing.

Kimmerer returns to the italicized story of her personal experience. Surrounded by the clear-cut forest, Robin throws herself to the ground in grief. She feels powerless against the **Windigo**, having only the wisdom and knowledge of plants on her side. But looking around her at the budding strawberries, asters and goldenrod, and **sweetgrass**, she hears them affirm their own power against the Windigo: "we already have everything we need," they say. As Robin rises from the ground, Nanabozho appears, grinning mischievously. He tells Robin to give the Windigo "a taste of his own medicine" and then he walks off, laughing.

After an interlude of essentially addressing the reader directly about our need for change, this italicized story returns to a fictionalized version of Robin's own struggle with the Windigo. She is aided by all the wisdom of plants and the knowledge of her heritage that she has leaned on throughout the book, going again through the major plants of earlier chapters as she is reminded of the friends and teachers who will help her to defeat the monster.

Over the next few months, Robin gathers plants to make a medicine to defeat the **Windigo**. She starts with buckthorn, a harmful invasive species that takes over environments and poisons the soil so that other species cannot grow. Kimmerer describes buckthorn as a plant that's a "winner in the free market, a success story built on efficiency, monopoly, and the creation of scarcity." She gathers buckthorn berries and then many other plants, drying them in her home and waiting for winter to return. By her door she hangs a braid of **sweetgrass**, which reminds her of the web of reciprocity, the gifts exchanged between people and the land. In the Windigo, "the braid is unraveled," leaving him isolated from these gifts and the rest of creation.

Throughout the book Robin has gathered wisdom from many plants, but also recognized invasive plants that often follow in the footsteps of colonizers and that don't live by the rules of reciprocity and mutual flourishing, like buckthorn. As Nanabozho suggested, she is giving Windigo a taste of his own medicine with this buckthorn, which thrives in an environment of scarcity and competition, but is ultimately poisonous. Sweetgrass again is representative of the braid of reciprocity between people and Mother Earth, between gifts and responsibilities, and the Windigo is representative of this braid unraveled. It is a terrible thing to be cut off from the web of reciprocity, as Kimmerer noted previously.

The previous night Robin had friends over to share food and laughter, but tonight she is alone in the house, waiting for the **Windigo**. She starts to make her medicine: first she boils water and adds in all the dried buckthorn berries that she has collected, making a blue-black syrup. In a different pot she mixes pure spring water with a few carefully selected flower petals, root pieces, berries, and leaves. She sets this pot to simmer as well. As a snowstorm builds, she hears the Windigo at her door. Robin puts the **sweetgrass** braid into her pocket and goes to confront him.

The Windigo has no power in the time of abundance and community, of sharing food with friends. So it is only when she is alone that Robin knows that he will come, but she is also waiting for him and ready with her two medicines: one of poison, and one of healing. Sweetgrass, her old teacher and friend, gives her strength in this moment of truth.

Robin opens the door and faces the **Windigo**: a tall, icy monster with red eyes and yellow fangs. He reaches for Robin, but she distracts him by placing a cup of the buckthorn tea into his hands. The Windigo drinks it all and howls for more—he is always hungry—reaching for the pot and drinking all of it. He then tries to attack Robin, but suddenly lurches back out into the snow and vomits. Buckthorn tea is a strong laxative, and taking a large amount at once causes immediate vomiting. The Windigo throws up "coins and coal slurry," bones and sawdust, Solvay waste, an oil slick, and more. Finally he has nothing left to vomit up and lies weakened but still hungry in the snow.

The Windigo's vomit contains all the pollution and toxic waste of our industrial capitalist world, exploiting the earth and poisoning it with our greed, destroying each other and nonhuman beings alike. Endless consumption does not happen in a vacuum, and all this vomit is the real, physical consequence of our current system. The buckthorn tea, representative of the Windigo thinking of competition and exploitation, acts as a cleansing agent, draining his starving belly with the poison of even more scarcity.

Robin runs inside and fetches her other tea. The **Windigo** is repulsed by its smell, so Robin drinks some to reassure him, and he takes a sip. This tea, which is a beautiful pink-gold color, is made of many things including Strawberries, the Three Sisters, Wild Leeks, Pecans, Witch Hazel, Cedars, and Maple, each plant representing a different gift of wisdom. "You can't know reciprocity until you know the gift," Kimmerer says, and the Windigo is "helpless before their power."

This tea of healing is made up of the plants that have guided Robin throughout Braiding Sweetgrass, *from its very first chapters. The Windigo is strong in his endless hunger and greed, but these plants have their own, greater strength in the quiet but enduring power of reciprocity and generosity, the strength of the relationship that lasts.*

The cup is still full and the **Windigo** looks satisfied after just that one sip, but Robin knows that there is another necessary ingredient to her medicine. She sits down beside the Windigo—the snow is melting and the grass is already turning green—and begins to tell him the story of Skywoman, starting with the first words of the book: "She fell like a maple seed, pirouetting from the autumn sky."

Throughout the book, Kimmerer has come to believe that language and storytelling are part of our human gift and responsibility to the earth, especially for her as a writer and storyteller. This is then the final part of her medicine to defeat Windigo*: the telling of a story to pass on the wisdom of her heritage and her plant teachers, to restore the relationship between people and land. This story then is* Braiding Sweetgrass *itself, as she begins again with the story of Skywoman, hoping to love the Windigo back into wholeness.*

EPILOGUE

It is summer, called *niibin* or "the time of plenty" in Potawatomi, and Robin is picking raspberries. When she sees a blue jay and a turtle also eating the berries, she decides that she has picked enough and will leave the rest, because "the earth has plenty and offers us abundance." Highlighting the red and green colors of the raspberries, Kimmerer shifts the scene to describe similarly colored blankets at a Potawatomi ceremony called *minidewak*, which is also taking place in this time of abundance.

This epilogue returns to the theme of gifts and gratitude, describing a Potawatomi ceremony that Robin personally experiences as an example of the mentality that she hopes might lead us to a better future. After all the ups and downs of the book, particularly the last section, she returns to a small scene of the abundance and generosity of the earth.

At the *minidewak* powwow everyone who has gathered brings some kind of gift, and they spread them all out on the red and green blankets. Some of the gifts are intricate and handmade and some are humble, but everyone provides something. Then everyone takes turns choosing one gift each from the pile. Afterwards there is drumming, and they all dance together "to honor the gifts and the givers."

What is important, Kimmerer suggests, is not the monetary value of the gifts but the community of generosity and reciprocity created by this mass giving of whatever gift each individual can offer.

No matter the gift that someone brings, Kimmerer says, "the sentiment is the same." The gift-giving ceremony is an expression of the most ancient Potawatomi teachings about the importance of generosity and gratitude. These qualities are essential to a culture "where the well-being of one is linked to the well-being of all." Hoarding one's gifts leads to becoming "constipated with wealth, bloated with possessions, too heavy to join the dance." Sometimes this happens at the *minidewak* powwow, where someone will miss the point of the ceremony and take more gifts than they give, afterwards guarding their possessions instead of joining the dance.

This is another reminder of the culture that created the Windigo: the monster is the one who takes too much, who hoards the gifts and so is cut off from the community of givers and the responsibilities of receivers. The dance without holding onto one's gifts is a sign of trust in the community and trust in the act of giving, just like in "A Mother's Work" where Robin imagines her daughters as gifts being sent out into the world, ones that she must trust will someday come back.

"In a culture of gratitude," Kimmerer writes, "everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again. […] We dance in a circle, not a line." After the dance, Robin watches a little boy cast aside his chosen gift of a toy truck. The boy's father makes him pick it up and keep it, however. "You never dishonor the gift. A gift asks something of you," Kimmerer says. She doesn't know the exact origin of the *minidewak*, but she wonders if it was started by people witnessing the generosity of plants, as part of the word "*minidewak*" means both "gift" and "berry."

Kimmerer connects the idea of cycles—past, present, and future; inhalation and exhalation; giving and receiving—with the overarching mindset of reciprocity. The gift of strawberries returns here at the end as a reminder of both the generosity of the earth and the responsibility that comes with receiving the gift. This responsibility is what builds the relationship between giver and receiver—a relationship very different and much more powerful than the relationship between seller and buyer.

At many ceremonies, berries are passed around in one large bowl with one spoon, so that everyone can "taste the sweetness, remember the gifts, and say thank you." The bowl does have a bottom though, so it's important that everyone save some berries for their neighbors. In the same way, "the gifts of the earth are to be shared, but gifts are not limitless. The generosity of the earth is not an invitation to take it all."

This is the balance that is important: to celebrate the generosity and abundance of the earth, but also to recognize that it has limits and that it comes with responsibilities, both to the earth and to our fellow human beings. We must respect that everyone deserves their share, and also that the sharer deserves gifts and care in return.

Kimmerer muses on how we might refill a bowl once it is empty. Gratitude alone is not enough, she now believes. We should learn from berries that "all flourishing is mutual": "we need the berries, and the berries need us. Their gifts multiply by our care for them, and dwindle from our neglect. We are bound in a covenant of reciprocity, a pact of mutual responsibility to sustain those who sustain us. And so the empty bowl is filled."

We have almost emptied the bowl of earth's generosity in our greed and callousness. The only way to help refill this bowl is with our own gifts: a sense of gratitude and responsibility within ourselves, but also active care for the land and for each other.

Unfortunately, people have abandoned the wisdom of berries, treating the earth's gifts like our own property to be exploited, acting "as if the earth were not a bowl of berries, but an open pit mine, and the spoon a gouging shovel." If we treated a generous person in the same way we treated the earth—by flaunting their kindness and stealing all of their possessions—it would be a moral outrage. The earth gifts us with energy sources like sunlight, wind, and water, but in our greed we have broken the planet's surface to dig for fossil fuels. "Had we taken only that which is given to us, had we reciprocated the gift, we would not have to fear our own atmosphere today," Kimmerer says. "We are all bound by a covenant of reciprocity: plant breath for animal breath, winter and summer, predator and prey, grass and fire, night and day, living and dying."

This passage returns to and summarizes some the major points throughout the book, particularly imaging the generous earth like a mother figure, who we should respect and take care of rather than rob for even more than she gives to us. The consequence of our actions is not only a broken relationship to the earth, but an increasingly dangerous environment for human beings. Kimmerer brings back the image of cycles of reciprocity moving through the subjects of the book: the giving and receiving of oxygen and carbon dioxide between plants and animals; the cycle of life and death through fire and the new growth that follows it.

Kimmerer closes the book by imagining a future in which human beings recognize, just in time, Mother Earth's gifts and give her our own gifts in return. "More than anything," she says, "I want to hear a great song of thanks rise on the wind. I think that song might save us." Then, like at the *minidewak*, she imagines the drums beginning and everyone dancing, celebrating the earth's gifts together.

The minidewak *is a reminder of the principles of reciprocity, responsibility for each other, and mutual flourishing, and Kimmerer hopes that ceremonies like this can focus our attention on applying these principles to every aspect of life.*

"The moral covenant of reciprocity calls us to honor our responsibilities for all we have been given, for all that we have taken," Kimmerer says. It is now time for us to "hold a giveaway for Mother Earth," to "spread our blankets out for her and pile them high with gifts of our own making," like art, writing, machinery, and acts of kindness. "Whatever our gifts, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world," Kimmerer concludes. "In return for the privilege of breath."

Throughout the book, Kimmerer has offered examples of ways that her readers can give their own gifts as part of the covenant of reciprocity with the earth. She closes Braiding Sweetgrass, *then, with a call for everyone to change their perspective but also to act on this change by offering their gifts. It is our responsibility, and we should approach it with the urgency of every breath. After all, the gift of breath is what we are really repaying, and in the same way, Kimmerer would say, we take part in the cycles of new breath to renew the wounded world.*

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