

BOOK REVIEW

Robin Wall Kimmerer. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, Minnesota. xii + 390 pp. hardcover \$35.00. ISBN 978-1-57131-335-5. Paperback \$20.00. ISBN 978-1-57131-356-0. eBook \$9.00 ISBN 978-1-57131-871-8.

The national bestseller *Braiding Sweetgrass* is an inspiring exploration of the relationship between humans and nature as seen by indigenous people of the Great Lakes area. The deep acknowledgment in indigenous traditions of our absolute dependence on plants, animals, and the earth itself is vividly portrayed in the stories, rituals, and indigenous wisdom that are recounted in this book.

The book begins with a moving illustration of this complete dependence: an account of the creation of humanity that is widespread among native peoples in the Great Lakes area. In the beginning, water covered the Earth, and there were no humans. But one day the animals of the Earth saw a woman, Skywoman, falling from the sky, heading for the dark water. The geese, ducks, fish, beavers, otters, muskrats, and other animals noted her approach and conferred among themselves on how to save her from drowning when she landed. Through the cooperation of the animals, she was able to stand on a turtle. A courageous muskrat brought up mud from the bottom of the ocean that allowed Skywoman to produce land on the turtle's back. This formed what is widely called "Turtle Island" among indigenous peoples in the Midwest. Skywoman also brought seeds of all the plants with her, scattering them on the new Earth. One version of this account says that sweetgrass, *Hierochloe odorata*, was the first plant to grow. Skywoman, who was pregnant, began the peopling of the Earth, and gave instructions to these new inhabitants for correct ways of living.

Why the emphasis on sweetgrass? Sweetgrass is considered the hair of Mother Earth. It is tended and carefully harvested. Braids of dried sweetgrass are made to signify care for the earth's well-being, are given as gifts signaling gratitude and kindness, and are burned for ceremonial healing. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer braids indigenous plant knowledge, scientific knowledge, and an account of her life as a plant scientist strongly identified with her native Anishinabekwe heritage into a cord of scientific plant lore and reflections on indigenous ways of knowing. This cord affirms our potential to heal the earth by learning from indigenous wisdom. She demonstrates the power of themes derived from the first instructions given to humans to transform the frequently destructive European narrative of Man as the conqueror of Earth and, all too often, its destroyer. As habitat elimination and climate change become more threatening to us and to the plants and animals we rely on, Kimmerer's 2013 book becomes ever more relevant to our outlook on the world.

Kimmerer, who has a PhD in plant ecology from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is enrolled in the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She is a MacArthur Fel-

low. She is currently on the faculty of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry. She teaches botany, ecology, ethnobotany, and other courses in a model incorporating scientific data, hands-on experience, and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). TEK is a synthesis of the ways of knowing and living in interdependence with the earth that have been practiced by indigenous peoples throughout the world. Kimmerer has also worked to promote access to scientific learning and careers for indigenous students.

Most of the 31 chapters in *Braiding Sweetgrass* are organized around a one or a few plant species: strawberries, wild rice, maples, black ash, silverbells, and witch hazel, among others that will be familiar to Great Lakes botanists. Each chapter includes traditional knowledge and philosophy about a plant or a natural process, generally from the Anishinaabe culture, as well as fascinating scientific information.

In a chapter on the indigenous concept of plants and animals as persons, for example, Kimmerer discusses how she collects wild leeks as medicinal food in the spring. When she goes to harvest leek bulbs, she ceremonially asks their permission for the harvest. Asking permission acknowledges that we depend totally on plants and animals, as equal inhabitants of the earth, to generously sacrifice their bodies for our nutrition. Asking permission also entails assessing the health of the individual leeks and of their populations at an intuitive level as well as a rational level.

The collector needs to sense when the leeks are ready to harvest, and how intense the harvest can be without compromising the future of the leek population. Caring for the long-term health of the leek population may sometimes call the harvester to restrict their harvest and at other times to mindfully thin overcrowded sections of the leek patch. Comprehensive care for the leeks both sustains the harvestable food source and also acknowledges the obligation we have to these beings because of their sacrifices on our behalf. This blend of leek biology with indigenous ethics is typical of Kimmerer's work in *Braiding Sweetgrass* and makes for engrossing and educational reading.

Some chapters deal more directly with the philosophy of traditional ecological knowledge. One chapter focuses on the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Thanksgiving Address. The Thanksgiving Address is a central prayer of this tradition that is said in schools and at social, cultural and other events. It systematically thanks all elements of the natural world for their contributions to maintaining humanity and the functioning of the earth. Water, fish, food plants, medicinal herbs, trees, mammals, birds, the wind and the other elements of the world are acknowledged and thanked. The specific contributions of each are included in the Address in brief form, so that all who recite it are reminded of the source of what sustains us. Incorporating real gratitude and a strong sense of reciprocity toward the natural world and the other beings in it is central to indigenous philosophy. Asking leeks for permission to harvest them is just one application of this sense of gratitude.

Botanists are sometimes told to avoid anthropomorphizing plants—informally talking about them as if they have some level of cognition or intent. Asking a leek patch for permission to harvest it would seem, in one sense, to grossly

anthropomorphize it. Leeks certainly do not hear or realize this request. But perhaps the profound sense of gratitude and reciprocity toward the natural world expressed in *Braiding Sweetgrass* is not so much about thinking that leek plants are listening to us, as it is about augmenting our ability to listen to, or pay detailed attention to, the needs of leeks and other plants and animals.

We need to better listen to nature, that is, to heed the increasingly desperate signals being sent out by so many aspects of the natural world, so that we can better serve and care for it as it has always cared for us. Steeping yourself in indigenous ecological knowledge and philosophy through reading Kimmerer's book is a potent way to allow this worldview to expand your own thinking. The volume is enthusiastically recommended to all Great Lakes botanists.

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