

## ***Braiding Sweetgrass* and Opening the Book of Nature**

“Hold out your hands and let me lay upon them a sheaf of freshly picked sweetgrass, loose and flowing, like newly washed hair.” Robin Wall Kimmerer’s enticing invitation in the opening pages of *Braiding Sweetgrass* beckons us to engage the earth and each other as she weaves together reflections from her spiritual tradition, scientific training, and relationships with family and friends. “Will you hold the end of the bundle while I braid? Hands joined by grass, can we bend our heads together and make a braid to honor the earth? And then I’ll hold it for you, while you braid, too.”

A SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Kimmerer’s bestseller resonates with a culture that seems to have lost its spiritual roots. Although traditional church affiliation has declined in recent decades, we still crave a relationship with the divine, a sense of hope, and a power greater than our own ingenuity. We are beginning to understand that we need a spiritual connection in order to heal both the earth and our own souls.

“Our relationship with the land cannot heal until we hear its stories,” writes Kimmerer, and so she weaves “a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world.” In them we hear the narrative of creative and creating love, generous gifts, deep roots, and relationships that both bind us within and transcend our traditions.

As I read *Braiding Sweetgrass*, however, I couldn’t help but hear echoes of my spiritual tradition in the Native American tales she shares, echoes from the Bible and the mystics who encouraged their students to open the Book of Nature. I soon found myself taking up the bundle she offered and adding these strands to the braid--creation stories that remind us of our need for boundaries, tales affirming the importance of names, an appreciation for the earth’s gifts, and calls to practice humility and gratitude. I began to appreciate the nuances of each tradition and listened as the stories shared their wisdom with each other.

In an age driven by technology and scientific endeavor, Kimmerer reminds us that eternal truth is discovered in the confluence of science, spirit and story. Of course, this notion is not new nor is it absent from Western spiritual traditions, yet we seem to have forgotten that the church mystics and scholars were also quite often poets and scientists as well. Over the past century, our infatuation with scientific discoveries has led many of us to abandon, or at least to devalue, our spiritual traditions. However, interest in books like *Braiding Sweetgrass* suggests that we are beginning to recognize our limits. Although science and technology may give us the tools to address our environmental woes, unless these measures are infused with spiritual authenticity, they will function as nothing more than short-term solutions. Kimmerer, who is a scientist, poet, and spiritual guide, calls us to return to the traditions that open our hearts and minds to the divine presence dwelling with us.

Like St. Francis of Assisi, who befriended a wolf and preached to birds, Kimmerer speaks to the plants and animals she not only lives among but also relies on for sustenance. She understands

that they are created with integrity, dignity, and value in their own right. One story that resonated particularly deeply with me was Kimmerer's account of gathering wild leeks for a special homecoming dinner with her grown daughters. Although the forest was burgeoning with fat, fragrant bulbs, Kimmerer resisted the temptation to pluck as many as she could carry. Instead, she slowly entered the woods and quietly asked permission to harvest. Using a small trowel rather than a sharp shovel, she worked slowly, purposefully, and with gratitude. As she reminds us, "If I could get all the leeks I needed in five minutes, I'd lose that time on my knees watching the ginger poke up and listening to the oriole that had just returned home....The difficulty of digging is an important constraint. Not everything should be convenient."

Our current environmental crisis speaks of our impatience and desire for convenience. We rely on machines that not only ravage the land in the process of taking all, but also distance us from the work that requires us to bend our knees in awe and gratitude. Whether she is harvesting leeks, tapping maples, or cutting an ash tree for a basket, Kimmerer relies on the lessons learned from her ancestors to restrain her desires, to honor the life she is taking, and to use it responsibly with gratitude.

Kimmerer writes, "Traditional harvesters recognize the individuality of each tree as a person, a nonhuman person. Trees are not taken, but requested. Respectfully, the cutter explains his purpose and the tree is asked permission for the harvest. Sometimes the answer is no."

The sacredness and integrity of all creation is central to Jewish and Christian practice as well. Hebrew Law establishes boundaries on human behavior and consistently reminds us that the land is God's good work, both a gift and a responsibility which when treasured and fulfilled ensures fruitfulness. Similar to the Potawatomi Honorable Harvest in which no plant or creature is taken for human use without its consent, the Law limits harvesting and provides Sabbath rest for land and animals as well as people.

When we learn to read the Book of Nature--whether from church, synagogue, mosque, or Native guides--we begin to see the Spirit dwelling among us in new and powerful ways. We discover that the leeks and maples not only sustain our bodies but shape our hearts and minds. We learn to appreciate the earth not as a resource but as a neighbor whom we are commanded to love.

As Kimmerer reflects, "Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond."