

Braiding Sweetgrass
Robin Wall Kimmerer

Discussion and Question Guide

Prepared by The Longwood Gardens Library and Archives

The Longwood Gardens Library and Archives staff invites you to use the following guide to discuss the various themes of our 2015 Community Read book.

An Overview:

What is sweetgrass – *Hierochloe odorata* – *wiingaashk*? Robin Wall Kimmerer, “a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation,” eloquently and beautifully uses the indigenous cultures’ sacred plant, sweetgrass, as a poetic metaphor to explain the origins of plant, animal, and human life on Mother Earth, their intertwined respectful and reciprocal relationships with each other, the loss of this reciprocity, and the hope of ecological restoration to return the gifts of Mother Earth and the balance that once was.

Robin Wall Kimmerer provides the reader with the definition and explanation of the significance of sweetgrass’s scientific name, *Hierochloe odorata* -- “the fragrant, holy grass.” In her language, “it is called *wiingaashk* – the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth. Breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn’t know you’d forgotten.” (Preface)

Dr. Kimmerer presents this book as a gift of braided stories “meant to heal our relationship with the world” by weaving together the three strands of “indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most.” That is, the necessity for humankind to be rejoined with its relationships to nature, and to understand the implications of the Earth’s gifts and our responsibility to return these gifts. Although Dr. Kimmerer recounts specific examples of our loss of respectful relationships with nature and the resultant destruction and devastation, she does provide a hopeful challenge to humankind to “...honor our responsibilities for all we have been given, for all that we have taken. ...Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world.” (p. 384)

Section 1: Planting Sweetgrass (pp. 3 – 59¹)

¹ Page numbers refer to Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer as published by Milkweed Editions (First Paperback Edition) © 2013



Throughout the six chapters in this section, the reader is presented with many indigenous teachings, scientific knowledge, the philosophical dilemmas Dr. Kimmerer faced upon entering her scientific studies, personal experiences with nature and her indigenous teachings during her formative years, and the reawakening of her original questions as a result of reconnecting with the last nine fluent Potawatomi speakers. The themes of reciprocity, the spirit of community, a gift economy versus a property (market) economy, gratitude, the four aspects of being—mind, body, emotion, and spirit, and the learning of the language of animacy are brought to the forefront quite fervently.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the story, ‘Skywoman Falling’--the indigenous Creation story (pp. 3-10), you learn that Skywoman lived as if her children’s future mattered. If you truly focus on the Earth that will be left for your grandchildren, how would you live differently?
2. Kimmerer states, in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” (p. 9) Do you agree that humans can learn from plants and animals? If so, how can we humble ourselves to ‘listen’ to the wisdom of the plants?
3. In the ‘Council of Pecans’ (pp. 11-21), we learn that trees teach the ‘Spirit of Community’ in which what is good for one is good for all. If you believed that the earth belongs to everybody as a community, would you be more invested in its health? Why?
4. Does the concept of trees having a community relationship, and the scientific explanations of their possible means of communications change how you view our relationship with forests? If so, how?
5. The ‘Gift of Strawberries’ (pp. 22-32) introduces the reader to the concept of “the essence of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity.” (p. 28) How can “the relationship of gratitude and reciprocity that has been developed increase the evolutionary fitness of both plant and animal?” (p. 30)
6. Do you see the earth as property or as a gift? How does this perspective change the way in which you view the value of what you take from the earth?
7. ‘An Offering’ (pp. 33-38) provides insight into Kimmerer’s understanding of the meaning of ceremony that is “fed from the same bond with the land, founded on respect and gratitude.” (p.



36) How can we express our gratitude and responsibility for the gifts of the land? What can we offer earth in return?

8. 'Asters and Goldenrod' (pp. 39-47) delves into Kimmerer's need to question and to know about the relationship between these flowers. "It was an architecture of relationships, of connections that I yearned to understand." (p. 46) She discovered a "lived reciprocity" between asters and goldenrod—"the pairing of purple and gold". What is the interdependency between humans and plants? And, what happens if we don't live up to our end of the relationship?
9. 'Learning the Grammar of Animacy' (pp. 48-59) introduces the concept of communing with nature by getting to know more about plants and recognizing that they are not inanimate objects. What can you do to start learning about the plants in your immediate environment? If you addressed the plants as something other than 'it', would that change your attitude? How?

Section 2: Tending Sweetgrass (pp. 64-117)

Through illustrative, indigenous stories, and personal memoirs, Kimmerer expands on the need to nurture reciprocal relationships between humans and plants. She asserts that these relationships are required if we are to assure the habitats' survival, e.g., "weeding and care for the habitat and neighboring plants strengthens its growth." (p. 60) The themes of reciprocity and gratitude are continued in stories about the gifts we receive from nature and, in turn, our responsibility to return those gifts by, at a minimum, recognition of the gifts and expressions of thanksgiving.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the story 'Maple Sugar Moon' (pp. 63-71), Nanabozho finds that people have grown lazy due to the bounty of the first Maple trees. Nanabozho removes this culture of plenty by diluting the sap and teaching the people to honor and respect the gift of the Maple tree. Can you draw any parallels from this story and our consumer-driven economy? In what ways are we wasting earth's gifts – its non-renewable, natural resources?
2. In 'Allegiance to Gratitude' (pp. 103-117), Kimmerer introduces the Thanksgiving Address used by the indigenous people to give thanks to the land. She states, "...it is the credo for a culture of gratitude." (p. 115) How does the Thanksgiving Address support the concept of "our mutual allegiance as human delegates to the democracy of the species"? (p. 116) What does that mean to you?

Section 3: Picking Sweetgrass (pp. 121-204)



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The reciprocity theme continues in this section with an emphasis upon the gifts the land provides, finding our unique gifts to give in return, how our gifts can be used to foster the sense of community, and how “plants teach in a universal language: food.” (p. 129) ‘The Three Sisters’ (pp. 128 - 140) story is especially poignant and informative. The reader learns that “... the lessons of reciprocity are written clearly in a Three Sisters garden. Together their stems inscribe what looks to me like a blueprint for the world, a map of balance and harmony.” When corn, beans, and squash are planted together, their “organic symmetry of forms belongs together... Respect one another, support one another, bring your gift to the world and receive the gifts of others, and there will be enough for all.” (p. 132)

‘The Honorable Harvest’ (pp. 175 – 201) “... asks us to give back, in reciprocity, for what we have been given.” (p. 190) The Guidelines of the Honorable Harvest are presented as rules that “... are based on accountability to both the physical and the metaphysical worlds.” (p. 183) Kimmerer discusses the culture of gratitude as a springboard for a culture of reciprocity, and the differences between reciprocity and the modern ecological movement towards sustainability.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does each of The Three Sisters – corn, beans, and squash - bring to their reciprocal relationship? How can this partnership create a stronger community? Can you think of other examples of such win-win situations?
2. In our consumer-driven society, how can we put into realistic practice the covenants of The Honorable Harvest? How can we teach people to “remember that what’s good for the land is also good for the people”? (p. 195)

Section 4: Braiding Sweetgrass (pp. 205 – 302)

The significance of braiding plaits of sweetgrass into three strands is symbolic of the philosophy and spirituality of the indigenous people. Sweetgrass is a sacred, healing plant to the Potawatomi people and is braided “... as if it were our mother’s hair, to show our loving care for her.” (p. 263) Kimmerer shares the meaning of becoming indigenous to a place, of how the land is the “real teacher” (p. 222), and the methodology she used with her Ethnobotany students to enlighten them to the fact that “The plants adapt, the people adopt.” (p. 229) In addition, she elaborates on the purpose of ceremony and how “... the community creates ceremony and the ceremony creates communities.” (p. 250) Preserving the relationship between plants and people through ecological restoration is another example of the need for listening to the plants. Kimmerer states in the ‘Umbilicaria: The Belly Button of the World’ chapter, “... lichens are born from reciprocity. ... They remind us of the enduring power that rises from mutualism, from the sharing of the gifts carried by each species.” (p. 275)



Discussion Questions:

1. In ‘Putting Down Roots’ (pp. 254 – 267), Kimmerer states, “Losing a plant can threaten a culture in much the same way as losing a language.” (p. 261) On the basis of Kimmerer’s discussion in this chapter regarding sweetgrass’s decline, how can plants repeat the history of their people? (p. 262) What are some examples presented by Kimmerer that would support her statement, “Reciprocity is a key to success.”? (p. 262)
2. The chapter, ‘Old-Growth Children’ (pp. 277 – 292), captures the essence of sustainability and how we can learn from an old-growth forest. What tools do forest ecosystems have for “dealing with massive disturbance ...”? (p. 283) What is the difference between industrial forestry and sustainable forestry? (p. 285) What can we learn from the extermination of old-growth ecosystems in the past and present? What can our role be in the regeneration of these ecosystems? (p. 284)

Section 5: Burning Sweetgrass (pp. 303 – 379)

“A Sweetgrass braid is burned to create a ceremonial smudge that washes the recipient in kindness and compassion to heal the body and the spirit.” (p. 301) Conversely, in ‘Windigo Footprints’ (pp. 303 – 309), Kimmerer draws parallels between the indigenous people’s stories of the Windigo monster and the greedy nature of mankind today that allows for the destruction of nature’s structures, habitats, and balance in the name of progress and profit. This selfish behavior is our Windigo.

The need for the healing of the land and the ecological restoration of the gifts that Mother Earth has given us is passionately presented in the ‘The Sacred and the Superfund’ (pp. 310 – 340) chapter. Onondaga Lake, located outside of Syracuse, New York, was turned into a Superfund site following years of destructive industrial misuse that began prior to 1940 and continued into the 1970’s. Kimmerer states that “scarcely thirty years ago, covering up your mess passed for responsibility—a kind of land-as-litter-box approach.” (p. 329) She points out the difference in the approach to ecological restoration when land is “just real estate, then restoration looks very different than if land is the source of a subsistence economy and a spiritual home. Restoring land for production of natural resources is not the same as renewal of land as cultural identity.” (p. 328)

Discussion Questions:



1. Kimmerer states that “we seem to be living in an era of Windigo economics of fabricated demand and compulsive overconsumption” (p. 308) In addition, “Our leaders willfully ignore the wisdom and the models of every other species on the planet—except of course those that have gone extinct. Windigo thinking.” (p. 309) Can you provide examples of unnecessary overconsumption? What would we need to change in our society to stop these practices?
2. “The Onondaga people still live by the precepts of the Great Law and still believe that, in return for the gifts of Mother Earth, human people have responsibility for caring for the nonhuman people, for stewardship of the land.” (p. 319) What do you believe are the responsibilities of our government and our society in aiding the Onondaga Nation in its efforts to restore Onondaga Lake to a healthy state?
3. Reflect upon Kimmerer’s statement “environmentalism becomes synonymous with dire predictions and powerless feelings.” (p. 327) What action can you take within your community to bring about positive environmentalism and ecological restoration/preservation?
4. Based upon the central themes as presented by Dr. Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, explain the differences between reciprocity and the current ecological movement known as sustainability.

