

Spike Island Reading Group
Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*
facilitated by Jack Young
28.01.21

N.B. These three passages are something of a whistle-stop tour of some of the ideas explored in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Please find below a brief summary with some potential discussion points from each of the passages.

In Passage One, Kimmerer touches upon the ideals of gratitude as espoused by the Potawatomi Nation, of which she is a member, and their “covenant of reciprocity” between the human and non-human. When reading you may want to think about: what this reciprocity means; the role of gratitude in Kimmerer’s worldview.

In Passage Two, Kimmerer decries the eco-pessimism of much of contemporary discourse and discusses how we might lean on indigenous teachings to explore alternative ways of acting in this time of ecological crisis. Some things to think about: How does she diagnose this despair? Is this something you recognise in contemporary discourse? What alternatives does Kimmerer suggest?

In Passage Three, Kimmerer outlines the indigenous linguistic approach termed “a grammar of animacy”, found within various Anishinaabe languages of the First Nations. You may like to think about what this grammar entails; Kimmerer’s discussion of the colonial linguistic strategies forced upon her ancestors; the different ways the Anishinaabe languages diverge from European languages.

Passage One
A Covenant of Reciprocity:
changing relations between the human and non-human
pp.381 – 384

Passage Two
Joy over Despair:
Healing
pp.327 – 338

Passage Three
On Language:
the “Grammar of Animacy”
pp.48-55

PASSAGE ONE

In a culture of gratitude, everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again. This time you give and next time you receive. Both the honor of giving and the humility of receiving are necessary halves of the equation. The grass in the ring is trodden down in a path from gratitude to reciprocity. We dance in a circle, not in a line.

After the dance, a little boy in a grass dance outfit tosses down his

new toy truck, already tired of it. His dad makes him pick it up and then sits him down. A gift is different from something you buy, possessed of meaning outside its material boundaries. You never dishonor the gift. A gift asks something of you. To take care of it. And something more.

I don't know the origin of the giveaway, but I think that we learned it from watching the plants, especially the berries who offer up their gifts all wrapped in red and blue. We may forget the teacher, but our language remembers: our word for the giveaway, *minidewak*, means "they give from the heart." At the word's center lives the word *min*. *Min* is a root word for *gift*, but it is also the word for *berry*. In the poetry of our language, might speaking of *minidewak* remind us to be as the berries?

The berries are always present at our ceremonies. They join us in a wooden bowl. One big bowl and one big spoon, which are passed around the circle, so that each person can taste the sweetness, remember the gifts, and say thank you. They carry the lesson, passed to us by our ancestors, that the generosity of the land comes to us as one bowl, one spoon. We are all fed from the same bowl that Mother Earth has filled for us. It's not just about the berries, but also about the bowl. 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. Every bowl has a bottom. When it's empty, it's empty. And there is but one spoon, the same size for everyone.

How do we refill the empty bowl? Is gratitude alone enough? Berries teach us otherwise. When berries spread out their giveaway blanket, offering their sweetness to birds and bears and boys alike, the transaction does not end there. Something beyond gratitude is asked of us. The berries trust that we will uphold our end of the bargain and disperse their seeds to new places to grow, which is good for berries and for boys. They remind us 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.

Somewhere along the line, though, people have abandoned berry

teachings. Instead of sowing richness, we diminish the possibilities for the future at every turn. But the uncertain path to the future could be illuminated by language. In Potawatomi, we speak of the land as *emingoyak*: that which has been given to us. In English, we speak of the land as “natural resources” or “ecosystem services,” as if the lives of other beings were our property. As if the earth were not a bowl of berries, but an open pit mine, and the spoon a gouging shovel.

Imagine that while our neighbors were holding a giveaway, someone broke into their home to take whatever he wanted. We would be outraged at the moral trespass. So it should be for the earth. The earth gives away for free the power of wind and sun and water, but instead we break open the earth to take 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.

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. Water knows this, clouds know this. Soil and rocks know they are dancing in a continuous giveaway of making, unmaking, and making again the earth.

Our elders say that ceremony is the way we can remember to remember. In the dance of the giveaway, remember that the earth is a gift that we must pass on, just as it came to us. When we forget, the dances we'll need will be for mourning. For the passing of polar bears, the silence of cranes, for the death of rivers and the memory of snow.

When I close my eyes and wait for my heartbeat to match the drum, I envision people recognizing, for perhaps the first time, the dazzling gifts of the world, seeing them with new eyes, just as they teeter on the cusp of undoing. Maybe just in time. Or maybe too late. Spread on the grass, green over brown, they will honor at last the giveaway from Mother Earth. Blankets of moss, robes of feathers, baskets of corn, and vials of healing herbs. Silver salmon, agate beaches, sand dunes. Thunderheads and snowdrifts, cords of wood and herds of elk. Tulips. Potatoes. Luna moths and snow geese. And berries. More than anything, I want to hear a great song of thanks rise on the wind. I think that song might save us. And then, as the drum begins, we will

dance, wearing regalia in celebration of the living earth: a waving fringe of tallgrass prairie, a whirl of butterfly shawls, with nodding plumes of egrets, jeweled with the glitter of a phosphorescent wave. When the song pauses for the honor beats, we'll hold high our gifts and ululate their praises, a shining fish, a branch of blossoms, and a starlit night.

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.

PASSAGE TWO

We could take the path of fear and despair. We could document every scary scene of ecological destruction and never run out of material for a Haunted Hayride of environmental disasters, constructing a shocking nightmare tableaux of environmental tragedies, in rooms carved from a monoculture of invasive plants, on the shore of the most chemically contaminated lake in the United States. There could be scenes of oiled pelicans. How about chain saw murders on clear-cut slopes washing into rivers? Corpses of extinct Amazon primates. Prairies paved over for parking lots. Polar bears stranded on melting ice floes.

What could such a vision create other than woe and tears? Joanna Macy writes that until we can grieve for our planet we cannot love it—grieving is a sign of spiritual health. But it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again. Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.

We are deluged by information regarding our destruction of the world and hear almost nothing about how to nurture it. It is no surprise then that environmentalism becomes synonymous with dire predictions and powerless feelings. Our natural inclination to do right by the world is stifled, breeding despair when it should be inspiring action. The participatory role of people in the well-being of the land has been lost, our reciprocal relations reduced to a KEEP OUT sign.

When my students learn about the latest environmental threat, they are quick to spread the word. They say, “If people only knew that snow

leopards are going extinct,” “If people only knew that rivers are dying.” If people only knew . . . then they would, what? Stop? I honor their faith in people, but so far the *if-then* formula isn’t working. People *do* know the consequences of our collective damage, they *do* know the wages of an extractive economy, but they don’t stop. They get very sad, they get very quiet. So quiet that protection of the environment that enables them to eat and breathe and imagine a future for their children doesn’t even make it onto a list of their top ten concerns. The Haunted Hayride of toxic waste dumps, the melting glaciers, the litany of doomsday projections—they move anyone who is still listening only to despair.

Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blinds us to our own power and the power of the earth. Environmental despair is a poison every bit as destructive as the methylated mercury in the bottom of Onondaga Lake. But how can we submit to despair while the land is saying “Help”? 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.

How we approach restoration of land depends, of course, on what we believe that “land” means. If 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. We have to think about what land means.

In the indigenous worldview, a healthy landscape is understood to be whole and generous enough to be able to sustain its partners. It engages land not as a machine but as a community of respected non-human persons to whom we humans have a responsibility. Restoration requires renewing the capacity not only for “ecosystem services” but for “cultural services” as well. Renewal of relationships includes water that you can swim in and not be afraid to touch. Restoring relationship means that when the eagles return, it will be safe for them to eat the fish. People want that for themselves, too. Biocultural restoration raises the bar for environmental quality of the reference ecosystem, so that as we care for the land, it can once again care for us.

Restoring land without restoring relationship is an empty exercise. It is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land. Therefore, reconnecting people and the landscape is as essential as reestablishing proper hydrology or cleaning up contaminants. It is medicine for the earth.

PASSAGE THREE

LEARNING THE GRAMMAR OF ANIMACY

To be native to a place we must learn to speak its language.

Listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own. I think now that it was a longing to comprehend this language I hear in the woods that led me to science, to learn over the years to speak fluent botany. A tongue that should not, by the way, be mistaken for the language of plants. I did learn another language in science, though, one of careful observation, an intimate vocabulary that names each little part. To name and describe you must first see, and science polishes the gift of seeing. I honor the strength of the

language that has become a second tongue to me. But beneath the richness of its vocabulary and its descriptive power, something is missing, the same something that swells around you and in you when you listen to the world. Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects. The language scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, an omission, a grave loss in translation from the native languages of these shores.

My first taste of the missing language was the word *Puhpowee* on my tongue. I stumbled upon it in a book by the Anishinaabe ethnobotanist Keewaydinoquay, in a treatise on the traditional uses of fungi by our people. *Puhpowee*, she explained, translates as “the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight.” As a biologist, I was stunned that such a word existed. In all its technical vocabulary, Western science has no such term, no words to hold this mystery. You’d think that biologists, of all people, would have words for life. But in scientific language our terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed.

In the three syllables of this new word I could see an entire process of close observation in the damp morning woods, the formulation of a theory for which English has no equivalent. The makers of this word understood a world of being, full of unseen energies that animate everything. I’ve cherished it for many years, as a talisman, and longed for the people who gave a name to the life force of mushrooms. The language that holds *Puhpowee* is one that I wanted to speak. So when I learned that the word for rising, for emergence, belonged to the language of my ancestors, it became a signpost for me.

Had history been different, I would likely speak Bodewadmimwin, or Potawatomi, an Anishinaabe language. But, like many of the three hundred and fifty indigenous languages of the Americas, Potawatomi is threatened, and I speak the language you read. The powers of assimilation did their work as my chance of hearing that language, and yours too, was washed from the mouths of Indian children in government boarding schools where speaking your native tongue was forbidden.

Children like my grandfather, who was taken from his family when he was just a little boy of nine years old. This history scattered not only our words but also our people. Today I live far from our reservation, so even if I could speak the language, I would have no one to talk to. But a few summers ago, at our yearly tribal gathering, a language class was held and I slipped into the tent to listen.

To actually *speak*, of course, requires verbs, and here is where my kindergarten proficiency at naming things leaves off. English is a noun-based language, somehow appropriate to a culture so obsessed with things. Only 30 percent of English words are verbs, but in Potawatomi that proportion is 70 percent.

European languages often assign gender to nouns, but Potawatomi does not divide the world into masculine and feminine. Nouns and verbs both are animate and inanimate. You hear a person with a word that is completely different from the one with which you hear an airplane. Pronouns, articles, plurals, demonstratives, verbs—all those syntactical bits I never could keep straight in high school English are all aligned in Potawatomi to provide different ways to speak of the living world and the lifeless one. Different verb forms, different plurals, different everything apply depending on whether what you are speaking of is alive.

My sister's gift to me one Christmas was a set of magnetic tiles for the refrigerator in Ojibwe, or Anishinabemowin, a language closely related to Potawatomi. I spread them out on my kitchen table looking for familiar words, but the more I looked, the more worried I got. Among the hundred or more tiles, there was but a single word that I recognized: *megwech*, thank you. The small feeling of accomplishment from months of study evaporated in a moment.

I remember paging through the Ojibwe dictionary she sent, trying to decipher the tiles, but the spellings didn't always match and the print was too small and there are way too many variations on a single word and I was feeling that this was just way too hard. The threads in my brain knotted and the harder I tried, the tighter they became. Pages blurred and my eyes settled on a word—a verb, of course: “to be a Saturday.” *Pffft!* I threw down the book. Since when is *Saturday* a verb? Everyone knows it's a noun. I grabbed the dictionary and flipped more pages and all kinds of things seemed to be verbs: “to be a hill,” “to be red,” “to be a long sandy stretch of beach,” and then my finger rested on *wiikwegamaa*: “to be a bay.” “Ridiculous!” I ranted in my head. “There is no reason to make it so complicated. No wonder no one speaks it. A cumbersome language, impossible to learn, and more than that, it's all wrong. A bay is most definitely a person, place, or thing—a noun and not a verb.” I was ready to give up. I'd learned a few words, done my duty to the language that was taken from my grandfather. Oh, the ghosts of the missionaries in the boarding schools must have been rubbing their hands in glee at my frustration. “She's going to surrender,” they said.

And then I swear I heard the zap of synapses firing. An electric current sizzled down my arm and through my finger, and practically scorched the page where that one word lay. In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to *be* a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay” holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. *This* is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us. And the vestiges of boarding schools, the soap-wielding missionary wraiths, hang their heads in defeat.

This is the grammar of animacy.