



Thoughts from Linda:

Braiding Sweetgrass
*Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge,
and the Teachings of Plants*

by Robin Wall Kimmerer
2013

Hierochloe odorata, or sweet grass, is an aromatic, cool-season perennial growing 10-24 inches in height - and spreading about 2 feet per year by underground rhizomes. It holds the scent of honeyed vanilla and, in the Potawatomi language, is called *wiingaashk*, "the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth." As Robin Wall Kimmerer says, "breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten."

The traditional *wiingashk*, or sweetgrass, braid tells how mind, body, and spirit are connected and mutually dependent. To follow the way of the sweetgrass would mean that we give thanks to nature's abundance and use our gifts to nurture the world, thus nurturing ourselves.

In her 2013 award-winning book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, takes us on a journey of remembering and discovery. She blends the worlds of ecology, science, and indigenous wisdom to help awaken a wider consciousness of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world.

She beautifully says in her introduction, "...I am offering a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world. This braid is woven from three strands: Indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most."

She received the Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award for this book, and by 2021, it sold over 500,000 copies. One of the chapters, 'Council of Pecans,' won a Burroughs award and appeared in the *Orion* magazine in 2013. In 2022, she was awarded the MacArthur Genius Award. Several outstanding YouTube videos captured her speeches, including one from 2019 on "The Honorable Harvest."

She was encouraged to pursue her passion for biology by her parents. She attended State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry and received a Bachelor's degree in botany. She later obtained a Masters' Degree and earned a Ph.D. in plant ecology. She focused on forest ecology, specifically with mosses, about which she has written prolifically. After teaching in Kentucky, she returned to New York and ESF, her alma mater, where she teaches courses on Land and Culture, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Ethnobotany, Disturbance Ecology, and General Botany. She is also the Director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment there. She is a proponent of the TEK approach, which refers to Traditional Ecological Knowledge, which she describes as a 'way of knowing.'

Kimmerer's efforts are motivated in part by her family history. Her grandfather was a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and was schooled at the colonialist school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Like the Canadian model, the school set out to "civilize" Native children, forbidding residents from speaking their language and effectively erasing their Native culture. Knowing how important it is to maintain the traditional language of the Potawatomi, Kimmerer attends a class to learn how to speak the traditional language because "when a language dies, so much more than words are lost."

She has also been motivated by the incredible lack of knowledge she experiences from students and average Americans, as revealed in surveys. For example, she noted that the average American can name over 100 company logos but has difficulty naming ten plants. In one of her classes, General Ecology, she administered a survey to over 200 students, all in their third year and all of whom had selected a career in environmental protection. She was astonished to learn that nearly 100% of them said, with some confidence, that humans and nature are a 'bad mix.' In a question rating their experience with 'positive interactions of people with the land,' they noted the disturbing median answer as 'none.' In a conversation after class, she heard from them that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like.

This eloquently written book is a collection of stories, beautifully woven together, that are both real and illustrate metaphorically the principle she is conveying. There are 31 'short stories' organized into five main chapters: *Planting Sweetgrass*, *Tending Sweetgrass*, *Picking Sweetgrass*, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, and *Burning Sweetgrass*. My favorite stories are *Skywoman Falling*, *The Council of Pecans*, *The Gift of Strawberries*, *Allegiance to Gratitude*, *the Three Sisters*, *The Honorable Harvest*, and *People of Corn: People of Light*.

She begins the book appropriately by starting with the 'origin story,' shared by the indigenous people of the Great Lakes, which is entitled *Skywoman Falling*. In it, she

tells the beautiful creation story held sacred as one of her people's "original instruction" tenets.

The story is long but illustrates her style and is the significant beginning.

Here is an excerpt: *"in the beginning, there was Skyworld. A woman fell like a maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze...A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before...Hurling downward, she saw only dark water below. But in that emptiness there were many eyes gazing up at the sudden shaft of light...(what they saw)was a woman, arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them. The geese nodded at one another and rose together from the water...and flew beneath her to break her fall...and gently carry her downward. And so it began. The geese could not hold her for much longer, so they called a council to decide what to do...loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds...when a great turtle emerged and offered his back for her...while she rested on his shell, the others understood that she needed land to survive and discussed how they might meet her need...(after many failed attempts) a little muskrat was left to attempt a dive even though he was the weakest diver of all. He volunteered to go and was gone a very long time under the water, searching for soil under the stream's flow. Finally, his dead body emerged, and in his fist, was a small handful of mud. That is when the turtle said, 'here, put in on my back and I will hold it'... Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by their extraordinary kindness she sang in thanksgiving and danced on the shell, with her feet caressing the earth. The land grew as she danced and the whole earth eventually was made...from the alchemy of all the animal's gifts, coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home."*

She contrasts this story to others, including the Biblical version, to illustrate the differences. She notes, *"like creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. No matter how distant they may be from our consciousness, we are inevitably shaped by them. One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a co-creator 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."*

She noted, "the air we breathe is given to us by plants." According to the interpretations of her people, the story teaches that from the beginning of the world, the other species were a lifeboat for people. Now, we must be theirs. As the others (animals and plants) have been here much longer, we must look to them for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. In Native ways of knowing, humans

are often referred to as 'the younger brothers of creation,' meaning that humans have the least experience with how to live and, thus, have the most to learn.

You'll learn about the brilliance of pecan trees, the history of the federal government's Indian Removal policies, and factual nuances of language, such as the fact that 30% of English words are verbs, while 70% of the Potawatomi are. You'll learn about the brilliance of the 'three sisters' of corn, beans, and squash and their intimate collaboration. You'll learn one of her compelling questions as a student, "why do asters and goldenrods look so beautiful together?" and be amazed by the science embedded in the answer. And you will learn so much more in this spiritual, fascinating, and informative literary accomplishment.

Robin Wall Kimmerer has accomplished her goal in this beautifully written book—that of telling stories that illustrate the intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with the earth, a pharmacopeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other.

We have never needed this good medicine more than today. I highly recommend you read this book.