

"Braiding Sweetgrass" by Robin Wall Kimmerer

**Three-part group study Tuesdays on Zoom
September 10th, 24th, and October 8, 2024 4 to 5:30pm**

Robin Wall Kimmerer's "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants" offers a profound spiritual philosophy and path to ecological resilience rooted in Indigenous traditions. The natural world is regarded as sacred, and human beings are seen as integral members of the ecological community. This philosophy is characterized by an ethic of reciprocity, respect, and reverence for all forms of life, and can inform and guide our individual and collective responses to our world's pressing climate and global challenges.

Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and a trained botanist, weaves together Indigenous wisdom and scientific knowledge to reveal a worldview in which the earth and its creatures are not merely resources to be exploited but are living beings deserving of respect and care. The earth is often described as a living, sentient being, with whom humans share a reciprocal relationship. Kimmerer writes of the land as a provider, a teacher, and a relative, emphasizing the need to honor and care for it as we would a beloved family member.

Part 1: Introduction to Indigenous Wisdom and Reciprocity

Tuesday September 10th, 2024 Reading: Preface & Pages 3 to 104

- "Planting Sweetgrass" pages 3 - 59
- "Tending Sweetgrass" pages 63 - 104

Key Themes:

- Indigenous Wisdom: The significance of Indigenous knowledge and its relationship to the natural world.
- Reciprocity: The concept of reciprocity and how it manifests in the relationship between humans and nature.
- The Gift Economy: The idea of gifts in nature and the responsibilities that come with them.

Questions to ponder:

1. What are the main differences between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, as described in *Braiding Sweetgrass*?

Indigenous ways of knowing are deeply rooted in a relationship with the natural world, viewing all living beings as interconnected and imbued with spirit. This perspective emphasizes reciprocity, respect, and stewardship, where humans are seen as part of the natural world, not separate from it. Western ways of knowing, on the other hand, often prioritize objectivity, scientific inquiry, and human dominion over nature, often leading to an exploitative relationship with the environment. "Braiding Sweetgrass" contrasts these approaches to highlight the importance of integrating Indigenous wisdom into our understanding of the world.

2. How does *Braiding Sweetgrass* define reciprocity, and why is it crucial in our relationship with the earth?

Reciprocity is defined in "Braiding Sweetgrass" as a mutual exchange between the natural world and us, where both give and receive in a balanced relationship. This concept is crucial because it fosters a sense of responsibility and gratitude, encouraging us to care for the earth as it cares for us. Reciprocity ensures that resources are used sustainably and that we maintain the health and vitality of the ecosystems that sustain us.

3. Reflect on the "gift economy" in nature. How does this concept challenge modern economic practices?

The "gift economy" in nature, as described in "Braiding Sweetgrass", is based on the idea that nature provides abundantly and freely, without expectation of payment, but with the implicit understanding that we must respect and care for these gifts. This contrasts sharply with modern economic practices, which are often transactional and focused on profit and ownership. The gift economy challenges us to rethink our relationship with resources, encouraging a shift from exploitation to stewardship and from competition to cooperation.

- Reflection Exercise: Write about a personal experience where you felt profoundly connected to nature.

- Group Discussion: How can we incorporate Indigenous wisdom and the concept of reciprocity in our daily lives?

Part 2: Interconnectedness and Ecological Knowledge

Tuesday September 24, 2024 Reading: pages 121 to 300

- "Picking Sweetgrass" pages 121 - 201

- "Braiding Sweetgrass" pages 205 - 300

Key Themes:

- **Interconnectedness:** Explore the interconnected nature of life and the idea that all beings are related.
- **Ecological Knowledge:** Discuss how traditional ecological knowledge can inform modern environmental practices.
- **Cultural Revival:** Reflect on the importance of reviving Indigenous practices and cultural heritage.

Questions to ponder:

1. How does *Braiding Sweetgrass* illustrate the interconnectedness of all living things in these chapters?

“Braiding Sweetgrass” illustrates interconnectedness through stories and examples that show how every element in nature is related to others, forming a complex web of life. This is illustrated in the relationships between plants, animals, and humans in the process of braiding sweetgrass, where each plays a role in supporting the others. This interconnectedness is not just physical but also spiritual, emphasizing the mutual dependence and respect that ideally should characterize our interactions with the natural world.

2. In what ways can traditional ecological knowledge contribute to contemporary environmental issues?

Traditional ecological knowledge offers insights into sustainable practices that have been honed over generations. Traditional ecological knowledge emphasizes balance, long-term thinking, and a deep understanding of local ecosystems, which can be invaluable in addressing contemporary environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and habitat destruction. By incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into modern conservation efforts, we can develop more holistic and effective strategies that respect both the land and the cultures that have lived in harmony with it for centuries.

3. What role does cultural revival play in environmental stewardship, according to *Braiding Sweetgrass*?

Cultural revival is central to environmental stewardship because it reconnects people with their traditional practices, values, and knowledge systems, which are rooted in a deep respect for nature. “Braiding Sweetgrass” argues that revitalizing Indigenous languages, ceremonies, and land-based practices can strengthen the bonds between people and the land, fostering a sense of responsibility and care. This cultural revival can inspire a renewed commitment to protecting and restoring the natural world.

Activities:

- Nature Walk: Take a slow nature walk to observe and note examples of interconnectedness in your natural surroundings.
- Sharing Circle: Share a story or memory related to a plant or animal that holds special meaning for you.

Part 3: Healing and Responsibility

Tuesday October 8, 2024 Reading: pages 303 to 384

- "Burning Sweetgrass" pages 303 - 379
- "Epilogue: Returning the Gift" pages 380 - 384

In addition to the last chapter and epilogue, in this session we will look at how the teachings in “Braiding Sweetgrass” resonate deeply with the spiritual perspectives of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Clare, Thomas Berry, Pope Francis and *Laudato Sí* and *Laudate Deum*, and other environmental stewards— with all emphasizing a deep connection with nature, a reverence for all living beings, and the responsibility to care for the earth.

Key Themes:

- Healing: The healing power of nature and how it can help address environmental and social wounds.
- Responsibility: Our responsibilities as stewards of the earth and how we can honor the gifts we receive from nature.
- Gratitude and Hope: The themes of gratitude and hope, and how they can guide us in our relationship with the natural world.

Questions to ponder:

1. How does *Braiding Sweetgrass* connect the act of healing with both ecological and cultural restoration?

Healing is connected with ecological and cultural restoration in “Braiding Sweetgrass” by showing how the recovery of ecosystems is intertwined with the revival of cultural practices and knowledge. Healing the land also involves healing the relationships between people and the earth. For example, restoring traditional plant gathering practices can help both the environment and the cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples. Healing is seen as a holistic process that involves both the physical restoration of ecosystems and the spiritual and cultural renewal of the communities that depend on them. Thus healing and

restoration is not just physical but also spiritual, involving a reconnection with the wisdom of the earth and the teachings of plants and animals.

2. What responsibilities do we have as individuals and communities in the face of environmental degradation?

“Braiding Sweetgrass” emphasizes that we all have a responsibility to protect and restore the earth, as we are part of the natural world and depend on it for our survival. This responsibility includes practicing sustainable living, advocating for environmental justice, and supporting conservation efforts. As communities, we must work together to create systems that respect the earth’s limits and ensure that future generations can enjoy the same natural abundance that we have. This also involves acknowledging and respecting Indigenous land rights and traditional ecological knowledge.

3. How can gratitude and hope serve as powerful tools in fostering a deeper connection with nature?

Gratitude and hope are powerful because they shift our focus from what we lack to what we have, fostering a sense of abundance and connection with the natural world. “Braiding Sweetgrass” suggests that by practicing gratitude, we can develop a deeper appreciation for the gifts of nature and a greater willingness to care for the earth. Hope, on the other hand, inspires us to believe in the possibility of positive change and motivates us to take action. Together, gratitude and hope can help us cultivate a more reciprocal and caring relationship with the environment.

Activities:

- Gratitude Practice: Write a letter of gratitude to a plant, animal, or element of nature that has had a deep impact on you.
- Action Plan: Develop a small project or initiative to give back to the earth, inspired by the lessons from the book.