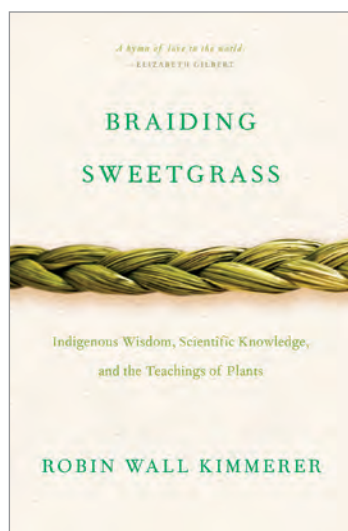


Science and an Indigenous Worldview



Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants
Robin Wall Kimmerer, PhD
Milkweed Editions, 2013

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a mother, scientist, teacher, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, which, along with the Ojibwe and Odawa, are part of the three fires council known as Anishinaabe. In the chapters of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, all of these aspects of her life come

to the fore. In particular, her identity as Potawatomi requires her to treat the earth as a living being. Her training as a biologist teaches her to ask questions that can be answered with the tools of science. For some, the scientist may seem incompatible with the indigenous perspective, but the consciousness that she finds by weaving together the two perspectives is one that will prove essential for the continuation of humans as part of Earth.

Her writing is beautiful and personal. The book begins with the story of Skywoman falling—how humans came to inhabit the earth and how Earth came to be home. It is a story of giving and gratitude, and shapes the Potawatomi worldview. Among Skywoman's gifts were plants, including sweetgrass. The book continues with stories of the more recent past—when her family moved to Oklahoma, settling in a pecan grove. The pecan grove provides a lesson linking indigenous wisdom—"In the beginning, the trees talked to each other—and the new scientific knowledge that trees do communicate and share the wealth provided by mycorrhizal fungi. That message—that giving and gratitude are woven into the fabric of the world—is a constant thread in the book.

But all is not well. The children of Eve did not come from a tradition of giving and gratitude, but one of a broken

relationship between humans and Earth. Children of Eve were cast out, to wrest a living from the land.

Early chapters of the book are filled with personal relationships with the land, as seen through the lens of science and an indigenous worldview, and played out in the practice of mothering, gardening, making maple syrup, and teaching. Then we meet Windigo.

Windigo is the legendary monster of the Anishinaabe—a human who has become a cannibal, turning others into cannibals with its bite. More than a monster created to scare children, Windigo is "a human whose selfishness overpowered their self-control to the point that satisfaction is no longer possible." Our economy has created a breed of Windigo that consumes "not for need but for greed."

In contrast with the beauty of the early chapters, the later part of the book shows Windigo's footprints—toxic waste sites, clear cuts, oil spills, industrial agriculture, diamond mines—the signs of insatiable consumption driven by greed. Those chapters are difficult to read. I had to put the book down and go for a walk.

When we finally get to the chapter "Defeating Windigo," it is clear that a solution to our environmental problems must start with a change of worldview. As Daniel Quinn wrote, "There's nothing fundamentally wrong with people. Given a story to enact that puts them in accord with the world, they will live in accord with the world. But given a story to enact that puts them at odds with the world, as [this culture's] does, they will live at odds with the world. Given a story to enact in which they are the lords of the world, they will act as the lords of the world. And, given a story to enact in which the world is a foe to be conquered, they will conquer it like a foe, and one day, inevitably, their foe will lie bleeding to death at their feet, as the world is now."

The culture of greed—Windigo—must be replaced by a culture of giving and gratitude for Earth's gifts. "Gratitude for all the earth has given us lends us courage to turn and face the Windigo that stalks us, to refuse to participate in an economy that destroys the beloved earth to line the pockets of the greedy, to demand an economy that is aligned with life, not stacked against it."

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