

## ***Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013)**

**Prepared by Rev. Rita and drawn from a variety of book discussion sources available on the internet**

- This is an episodic book, rather than a continuous narrative. It is OK to “read around,” to pick and choose which individual stories you wish to read.
- I suggest reading at least one from each of the sections, as well as the Preface and the Epilogue, to get a sense of the scope of this beautiful book. Read what draws you.
- As a way to begin discussion, perhaps choose a quotation from each of the stories you read, something evocative, something that calls to you.
- The Overview and the Section Summaries are meant to orient you to the shape of the book. In our discussion, we will focus on your reactions and responses, the fruits of your thought and what you understand as worthwhile for your life in spending time with this book.

### **Overview:**

Robin Wall Kimmerer, “a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation,” uses the indigenous cultures’ sacred plant, sweetgrass, as a poetic metaphor to explain 1) the origins of plant, animal, and human life on Mother Earth, 2) their intertwined respectful and reciprocal relationships with each other, 3) the loss of this reciprocity, and 4) the hope of ecological restoration to return the gifts of Mother Earth and the balance that once was. 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” (Preface).

And what matters most to her: that humankind be rejoined with its relationships to nature, as well as to understand Earth being and beings as gifts and our responsibility to return these gifts. Kimmerer recounts specific examples of our loss of respectful relationships with nature and the resultant destruction and devastation, but she also provides 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” (384).

What is sweetgrass – *Hierochloe odorata* – wiingaashk? 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) She organizes the stand-alone chapters into five sections: Planting Sweetgrass, Tending Sweetgrass, Picking Sweetgrass, Braiding Sweetgrass, and Burning Sweetgrass. Each is both a form of relationship between human beings and this singular plant, as well as a metaphoric way of relationship with all of the earth, the human part of how the human might be more part of the whole and wholeness of nature.

**Section Summary:**

“Planting Sweetgrass” (—In this section, we learn about 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.

“Tending Sweetgrass”—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. 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

“Picking Sweetgrass”—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” (129). 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.

“Braiding Sweetgrass”—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” ( 263). She elaborates on the purpose of ceremony and how “... the community creates ceremony and the ceremony creates communities” (250). Preserving the relationship between plants and people through ecological restoration is another example of the need for listening to the plants.

“Burning Sweetgrass”—Kimmerer extends the theme of sacred uses of sweetgrass to heal body and spirit through kindness and compassion through ceremony. She also 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. She points out the need for the healing of the land and the ecological restoration of the gifts that Mother Earth has given us. She highlights 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” (328).

**Food for Thought:**

1. Do you believe that an economy of gratitude could sustain all of the people on this earth now?

2. Speaking specifically as a person who cares about/works on climate change, what theme or concept from “Braiding Sweetgrass” resonated the most with you—e.g., the gift economy, reciprocity, gratitude, etc.?
3. As Kimmerer describes relationships with plants, she is simultaneously describing relationships with people in her life. How did this resonate for you?
4. How do you respond to Kimmerer’s metaphor, belief, and guiding principle for behavior and action that the earth is our mother and we must foster our familial relationships?
5. In the beginning of the book, Kimmerer describes sweetgrass. “Breathe in its scent,” she writes, “and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten.” What did this book reinforce for you that you already knew, but had perhaps forgotten?
6. Kimmerer criticizes an environmental movement that has become “synonymous with dire predictions and powerless feelings”. She reminds us that “Even a wounded world is feeding us ... giving us moments of wonder and joy” (327). Do you agree that the environmental movement does not focus enough on the joy of the natural world? If so, how can that be changed?

**Your Offerings:**

- What questions did the book raise for you?
- What answers did it provide?
- What emotions did the book raise up in you, and which parts or passages?

[https://longwoodgardens.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/Discussion\\_And\\_Question\\_Guide\\_Braiding\\_Sweetgrass.pdf](https://longwoodgardens.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/Discussion_And_Question_Guide_Braiding_Sweetgrass.pdf)

<https://heated.world/p/book-club-discussion-thread-braiding/comments>