

Reformation Lutheran Church Faith Life Series

Braiding Sweetgrass:

Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants

By Robin Wall Kimmerer

(Based in part on the Longwood Gardens Braiding Sweetgrass Discussion Guide)

Introduction:

What is sweetgrass?

Author Robin Wall Kimmerer provides the reader with the definition and explanation of the significance of sweetgrass's scientific name, *Hierochloa odorata* -- "the fragrant, holy grass." In her indigenous 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."

Robin Wall Kimmerer, "a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and member of the Potawatomi Nation,". She beautifully uses the indigenous cultures' sacred plant, sweetgrass, as a poetic metaphor to explain the origins of life on Mother Earth,

Plants, animals and humans lives are intertwined in respectful and reciprocal relationships with each other. She writes about the loss of this reciprocal relationship, and 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 Anishinabe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most." That is, the necessity for humankind to be rejoined with its relationships to nature, and to understand the implications of the Earth's gifts and our responsibility to return these gifts.

In four weeks, we will explore the book with selected readings. The book is so beautifully written that I encourage you to read every word, but each chapter is its own essay to enjoy. Please join our discussion even if you don't have time to do the suggested readings. Your presence in our group is the most important ingredient in our time together.

Discussion 1 - Jan. 10



(Image: *Skywoman Falling* by Bruce King, Oneida)

Skywoman Falling – The indigenous Creation story (pp.3-10)

“Skywoman Falling”, the indigenous Creation story, you learn that Skywoman lived as if her children’s future mattered. If you truly focus on the Earth that will be left for your grandchildren, how would you live differently?

Kimmerer states, in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” (p. 9) Do you agree that humans can learn from plants and animals? If so, how can we humble ourselves to ‘listen’ to the wisdom of the plants?

How does the Indigenous Creation story compare to the Biblical Creation story? How does each story lead us to an understanding of our relationship with the earth?

Asters and Goldenrod (pp. 39-47)

“Asters and Goldenrod’ delves into Kimmerer’s need to question and to know about the relationship between these flowers. “It was an architecture of relationships, of connections that I yearned to understand.” (p. 46) She discovered a “lived reciprocity” between asters and goldenrod—“the pairing of purple and gold”. What is the interdependency between humans and plants? And, what happens if we don’t live up to our end of the relationship?

Learning the Grammar of Animacy (pp. 48-59)

“Learning the Grammar of Animacy” introduces the concept of communing with nature by getting to know more about plants and recognizing that they are not inanimate objects. What can you do to start learning about the plants in your immediate environment? If you addressed the plants as something other than ‘it’, would that change your attitude? How?

Discussion 2 - Jan. 17

Maple Sugar Moon (pp.63-71)

In the story “Maple Sugar Moon”, Nanabozho finds that people have grown lazy due to the bounty of the first Maple trees. Nanabozho removes this culture of plenty by diluting the sap and teaching the people to honor and respect the gift of the Maple tree. Can you draw any parallels from this story and our consumer-driven economy? In what ways are we wasting earth’s gifts – its non-renewable, natural resources?

Allegiance to Gratitude (pp. 103-117)

Kimmerer introduces the Thanksgiving Address used by the indigenous people to give thanks to the land. She states, “...it is the credo for a culture of gratitude.” (p. 115) How does the Thanksgiving Address support the concept of “our mutual allegiance as human delegates to the democracy of the species”? (p. 116) What does that mean to you?

Discussion 3 - Jan. 24

The Three Sisters (pp. 128-140)

What does each of The Three Sisters – corn, beans, and squash - bring to their reciprocal relationship? How can this partnership create a stronger community? Can you think of other examples of such win-win situations?

Putting Down Roots (pp.254-267)

Kimmerer states, “Losing a plant can threaten a culture in much the same way as losing a language.” (p. 261) On the basis of Kimmerer’s discussion in this chapter regarding sweetgrass’s decline, how can plants repeat the history of their people? (p. 262) What are some examples presented by Kimmerer that would support her statement, “Reciprocity is a key to success.”? (p. 262)

Burning Sweetgrass

Based upon the central themes as presented by Dr. Kimmerer in Braiding Sweetgrass, explain the differences between reciprocity and the current ecological movement known as sustainability.

Discussion 4 - Feb 7

Epilogue (pp. 380-384)

Sharing Lessons from Braiding Sweetgrass – What “beauty” can you return to the world with the knowledge discovered in this book? Please share an extension of your reading! It can be:

- Art
- Recipes – e.g. Three Sisters Soup
- Music
- Garden Plan
- Other ideas?