

## **"Nature and Wisdom"**

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First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

Sunday, March 19, 2017

<http://firstunitarian.org/podcasts/wisdom-and-nature/>

My home is something of a houseplant museum. It's not that I have many plants. It's that the ones that I do have tend to stay with me for a long time.

When I bought my first (and only) new car in 1993, the dealer congratulated me by sending me a potted plant. That same plant finally petered out just this past winter; I had it 14 years longer than I had the car. I have a spiky, Dr. Seuss palm tree I inherited when a friend moved away in 1996. Still have the friend, still have the plant. The plant with vines sprawling in front of my living room window belonged to my sister when she was in college. And two of my philodendrons are direct relatives of plants that are still living at my childhood home. When I visit my family, I see their family, too.

I don't have any special knowledge about plants or magical skills. The reason for my green thumb is simple: I pay attention. Plants usually tell us what we need to know to help them thrive.

Just to be clear, I do not believe that my jade plant from Costco has a voice or a conscious spirit. But when its fat leaves start to get a hint of a wrinkle, I know it's time for water. The plant that sits next to it is getting some yellow spots that remind me it needs a bigger pot. The plant with the vines was sure let me know it was not happy when I placed it too far from the window. And the Dr. Seuss palm and the peace lily are total drama queens. Their leaves slump over the second they're thirsty. I try not to let that happen, but when it does, I pay attention.

This is science with a small "s." There are no peer-reviewed journals. There's just the day-to-day trial-and-error that keeps any mutually beneficial relationship going. I give my plants water, light, and a bit of food. They provide oxygen and give me greenery to look at during the long gap between the colors of autumn and the colors of spring. I'm grateful for their presence and their gifts. I do talk to my plants on occasion, usually to apologize for a late watering, but I stop well short of thinking of them as people or friends. After all, keeping it impersonal is the Western, rational, mature, scientific thing to do.

But is it the *right* thing to do? Is it the humble thing to do? Is it really the best way?

For the past month, I've been reading chapters from a book called "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants." The author is Robin Wall Kimmerer. Dr. Kimmerer is a professor of botany, and she's an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She's an expert in both science and native cultures, and a great analyzer of languages. And she brings all her gifts and experiences together in a book so rich that you may hear me refer to again on a future Sunday. (I figure most ministers preach from a single book for their whole careers, so maybe I can get away with using a book twice.)

Part of the reason I've been reading Kimmerer's book so slowly is because there's so much to take in, so many quietly radical ideas about how to view the world that we humans inhabit. And right now in these times we're living in, we really need some different ways to look at the world. The dominant views are not serving the cause of human or planetary flourishing, especially here in our country. Anyone who is loving and justice-seeking is getting beaten down right now. And as we continue to face destructive authoritarianism, one of the gravest dangers is that we lose our imaginations. We are at risk of losing the ability to dream of a better world and believe it possible. We risk losing our faith that spring truly will return.

Dr. Kimmerer lifts up the importance of imagination, and she provides much fodder. She explores the resilience of nature, and she reframes humanity's place in the scheme of things. And as someone who was born into and who remains deeply connected to Native American communities, she knows well what resistance looks like. The people she is descended from survived the very worst acts that human beings are capable of. Such communities have much to teach about endurance and harmony.

Dr. Kimmerer once asked a couple hundred of her ecology students about negative interactions between humans and the environment. Nearly every one of her students responded confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix; I would have been right there with them. "Later in the survey," Kimmerer writes, "they were asked to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was 'none.' I was stunned. When we talked about this after class, I realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like."

She asks a crucial question: "How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?"

The sweetgrass that gives Kimmerer's book its title is just as it sounds – it has a long-lasting aroma, one that endures even when it's dried and made into baskets or burned as part of a ceremony. North American tribes have long collected sweetgrass, either by pulling it up by the roots or pinching it off above the ground.

Kimmerer and one of her grad students wondered: how do these harvesting methods affect the grasses' continued growth? So they created three areas of sweetgrass to find out. In one area they harvested it by pulling it out of the ground. In another area they snipped it off and left the roots. They never removed all the sweetgrass from either plot. One of the native values that Kimmerer tells about is the idea of always taking only half, a sensible approach that allows natural regeneration. This approach, she notes, was criticized by Europeans as wasteful and lazy; why take half when you can obliterate? A third area of sweetgrass in the experiment served as a control group, and it was left untouched.

As the study progressed, they noticed that it didn't make much difference how the sweetgrass was harvested, whether it was pinched or pulled; both areas thrived with new shoots and had similar yields. What surprised them was the control groups: they fared the worst. These undisturbed plots looked sickly and became choked with dead stems. It turns out that these meadows of sweetgrass actually needed humans to thrive. They had evolved in harmony with their human neighbors. It is not inevitable that humans and nature are a bad mix. When humans exist humbly and cooperatively as a part of nature, rather than as a conqueror of it, all forms of life and land can do better.

This separateness, this sense of human superiority, this lack of humility is a deeply rooted human problem, pervasive across Western thought. Dr. Kimmerer sees it going all the way back to a pair of origin stories, one told by her native ancestors and one told by European invaders. In the native story, the first human being is a woman who falls from the sky. She's brought gently down to the earth by some geese, and she begins forming the lands of the world by dancing joyfully atop the back of a turtle. She then graces the lands with all the plants of the world.

This is very different from the Judeo-Christian creation story. In that story, a male god creates everything and anoints humans to dominate all the creatures of land, sea, and sky. In that story, the first woman, despite being the mother of all humans, is blamed for humanity's downfall for eating fruit from the tree of knowledge and getting all people kicked out of paradise.

Comparing these two stories, Kimmerer says this: "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." These stories are powerful metaphors, and the dominant Western metaphor speaks volumes about where humanity is today - in its relationship to the earth, in its views of women, even in its fears of knowledge. As a humanist who is focused on justice, who is focused on our earthly habitat, who is focused on this life in the here and now, I know which metaphor I prefer.

My view is in the minority. "In the Western tradition," Kimmerer says, "there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with of course human beings at the top - the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation - and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as 'the younger brothers of creation.' We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn - we must look to our teachers among other species for guidance. ... They teach us by example. They've been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out."

When Kimmerer speaks of the Western tradition, she is not just talking about religion, but also science and the broader culture; early 20<sup>th</sup>-century humanists also took the pinnacle view of humanity. Nowadays, we humanists can see how well the native perspective fits with an evolutionary view - current homo sapiens truly are one of the last species to have arrived, and it's clear we still have a lot to learn.

Kimmerer's thoughts remind me of the writing of another native thinker, George Tinker, a theologian and a member of the Osage nation whose work I first encountered in seminary. Tinker talks about the native concept of "for all my relations." These include one's familial relatives, but also all living and non-living beings of creation.

Seeing the world as consisting of "all my relations" flattens the hierarchy of the components of existence. Or, to look at it another way, it elevates all the components to equal regard. Mountains are viewed as living things because they grow, shrink, and change. Four-legged creatures are peers of us two-legged ones. In describing "all that has been given" by creation, Tinker uses the phrase "inherent worth" - a phrase we hear in the Unitarian Universalist first principle, which affirms "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." The idea that every human being has worth and dignity is currently a very radical thought in our country. And the indigenous perspective takes it an exponential leap further by granting personhood to everything nature gives us. What would the world be like?

Kimmerer makes the intriguing point that we actually all start off our lives with this point of view, that everything is a person. She writes: "Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion - until we teach them not to."

She's absolutely right. I'm pretty sure everyone in this room was raised on children's books full of trees with faces and talking songbirds and yellow suns smiling down from the sky. But anthro-pomorphizing isn't something that grown-ups are supposed to do, and Kimmerer was even warned that it was dangerous for her career. *Don't ascribe human characteristics to anything but humans; the quality of your science is at risk.* But truly, the real and greatest risk is to capitalism. The reason that modern-day grown-ups wipe the faces off the trees and take the words away from songbirds is that it's much harder to clear-cut the forest when it's made up of all your relations.

Even our language reinforces this ethic of conquest and superiority. When Kimmerer tries to learn the Potawatomi language of her ancestors, she finds that it has an entirely different approach to the world. "English is a noun-based language," she writes, "somehow appropriate to a culture so obsessed with things. Only 30 percent of English words are verbs, but in Potawatomi, the proportion is 70 percent." What this means is that most things in the Potawatomi world are seen as actors, agents, subjects, rather than objects that humans act upon. Kimmerer says there's even a verb for "to be a bay." To be a body of water is its own verb.

This can be mind-blowing for speakers of English, a language in which humans are the subject of most sentences. Kimmerer says that English has human arrogance built in. Othering is built-in, making it easier to look down upon anything that is not ourselves. Philosophies of superiority rather than of respect and interdependence make it easy to reduce animals, plants, and even other people to objects, objects to be used or disregarded. We in America have been doing that since the founding of the country, right through the headlines of just the past week.

But it doesn't have to be this way or stay this way. Kimmerer reminds us of this:

"For the greater part of human history, and in places in the world today, common resources were the rule. But some invented a different story, a social construct in which everything is a commodity to be bought and sold. The market-economy story has spread like wildfire, with uneven results for human well-being and devastation for the natural world. But it is just a story we have told ourselves, and we are free to tell another, to reclaim the old one."

Humans have great capacity for generosity, and great capacity for selfishness. The market end of the spectrum has appealed to selfishness and greed, and we are seeing the extremes at the top levels of our nation right now. Kimmerer and other thinkers remind us that this is not the only story or the final story, merely the current story. We are still free to tell a different story, free to help be keepers of a flame that lights our way toward a better future, a future that enhances relationships among all beings, human and non. In the words of Arundhati Roy, the writer from India: "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

Quiet days are very rare right now, with all the loud distractions, the cries of the suffering, and the necessary noise of resistance. But amid the chaos and clamor, there are hopeful reminders of that different world. And I want to close with just one of those reminders, one you perhaps caught a whisper of in the din of this past week.

On the north island of New Zealand, there's a river that travels nearly 200 miles from mountain to ocean, through gorges and gorgeous green landscapes, past farm and forest. To the Maori, New Zealand's indigenous people, the river is a sacred being, and for 170 years, they have been making the case for protecting it against the forces of colonization and industrialization. And just a few days ago, the Whanganui River was granted by parliament all the rights and protections of personhood. Money has been designated for the river's continued well-being, and advocates have been named to speak for the river's interest. The Maori have long believed that the river is a living, indivisible being, and their vision is now law. To be a body of water is a verb. Imagination made real.

Another world is on her way. Let us listen, and make it so.