

## Colloquy Down East: Nature Writing in the Anthropocene - Week 2, Kim Ridley

*Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*  
Robin Wall Kimmerer

### Summary

“What is sweetgrass – *Hierochloe odorata* – wiingaashk? Robin Wall Kimmerer, “a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation,” eloquently and beautifully uses the indigenous cultures’ sacred plant, sweetgrass, as a poetic metaphor to explain the origins of plant, animal, and human life on Mother Earth, their intertwined respectful and reciprocal relationships with each other, the loss of this reciprocity, and the hope of ecological restoration to return the gifts of MotherEarth and the balance that once was.

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)

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.” 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. Although Dr. Kimmerer recounts specific examples of our loss of respectful relationships with nature and the resultant destruction and devastation, she does provide 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.” (p. 384)” —Longwood Gardens, Community Read

### General Questions

*Braiding Sweetgrass* is an invitation to explore and practice reciprocity with the rest of the living world—plants, animals, etc. What is one thing that particularly struck you in your reading, such as a quote, an idea, something you noticed or wondered about, etc.?

What came up for you as you were reading? What connections did you make to your own life?

How do you think the three strands Kimmerer braids together—indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and storytelling—can deepen our understanding of the natural world and our relationship with it?

Was there a particular plant Kimmerer writes about whose teaching resonates with you, and if so, how?

### **Section 1: Planting Sweetgrass**

#### **Suggested Chapters:**

Preface

Skywoman Falling

An Offering

Learning the Grammar of Animacy

#### **Discussion Questions:**

Did Kimmerer’s writing about ceremonies resonate with your life? Do you have ceremonies or imagine creating one to deepen/celebrate/honor your connection with the land or nature?

In “Learning the Grammar of Animacy,” Kimmerer observes that in the English language, about 70 percent of words are nouns and about 30 percent are verbs, but the reverse is true in the Potawatomi language—most of the words are verbs.

How do you think this influences our worldview as English speakers?

What do you imagine might or happen if the English words for trees, rocks, moss, etc. were verbs rather than nouns? What are ways this might influence your own perceptions or relationship with the world around us?

“If a maple is an it, we can take up a chainsaw,” Kimmerer writes. “If a maple is a her, we think twice.” Can you think of a way your language shapes the way you understand the world? Or an example of how a new understanding led you to choose particular language?

### **Section 2: Tending Sweetgrass**

#### **Suggested Chapters:**

Allegiance to Gratitude

#### **Discussion Questions:**

What are your thoughts on the Thanksgiving Address and now it is used in the school Kimmerer describes? What do you think would happen if public schools followed a similar practice?

### **Section 3: Picking Sweetgrass**

#### **Suggested Chapters:**

Epiphany in the Beans  
The Honorable Harvest

#### **Discussion Questions:**

When Kimmerer asked a group of students if they loved the earth, every hand went up. Then she turned it around and asked, “What do you supposed would happen *if* people believed this crazy notion that the earth loved them back?”

What is your response to this question? What is your personal experience, one way or the other?

In our consumer-driven society, how can we practice in a realistic way the covenants of The Honorable Harvest? How can we remember and help others to remember that “what’s good for the land is also good for the people?”

### **Section 4: Braiding Sweetgrass**

#### **Suggested Chapters:**

In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place  
The Sound of Silver Bells

#### **Discussion Questions:**

Kimmerer writes about plantain, a weed also called “White Man’s Footstep,” which is not a native plant, but has become naturalized. “This is the same term we use for the foreign-born when they become citizens in our country,” she writes. “Maybe the task assigned to Second Man is to...follow the teachings of White Man’s Footstep, to strive to become naturalized to a place...”

What are ways you try to become naturalized to a place, or imagine doing so?

In “The Sound of Silver Bells,” Kimmerer writes, “The land is the real teacher. All we need as students is mindfulness. Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes an open heart.” What are some ways you practice reciprocity by paying attention to the living world, or imagine trying? What have been your experiences?

## **Section 5: Burning Sweetgrass**

### **Suggested Chapters:**

The Sacred and the Superfund  
People of the Corn, People of the Light  
Defeating Windigo  
Epilogue

In “People of Corn, People of Light,” Kimmerer writes “I dream of a world guided by a lens of stories rooted in the revelations of science and framed with an indigenous world view—stories in which matter and spirit are both given voice.” Do you think this is possible or not? And what would such a world begin to look like?

Kimmerer writes that “Asking what is our responsibility is perhaps to ask, What is our gift? And how shall we use it?” What is your response to these questions?