

Dirty Secrets of the Mycelium Underground

The wisdom of indigenous elders

Steve Izma

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a review of

Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Milkweed Editions, 2020 (original: 2013)

Don't mistake the long lifespan on bestseller lists of *Braiding Sweetgrass* as something superficial. Certainly, Kimmerer's excellent prose style attracts a broad range of readers. Yet the complexity of her ideas surely challenges those for whom nature equates to the landscape videos they capture on their smartphones.

And, it likely causes problems for those seeing Indigenous knowledge as the magic bullet rescuing them from the guilt-ridden individualism of commodity society. *Braiding Sweetgrass* is not a self-help guide, but a serious challenge to the capitalist mindset of transforming nature into self-indulgence and merchandise.

Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and a botanist teaching in Syracuse, combines traditional stories and botanical research to break apart the standard Western paradigms of wilderness, especially those aspects many people approach with distaste and trepidation. The urbanite's fear of dirt takes a thorough beating with her many descriptions of what's necessary for plant and soil restoration. She digs deeply and joyfully into elements of natural life, like wetlands, amphibians, fungi, insects, algae, that most people approach with pesticides and weapons of mass eradication.

In more than thirty gems of essays, she presents dilemmas she has encountered while straddling the border between conventional science and her inherited Indigenous wisdom. Despite some complementarity, the two perspectives often clash and in some cases even baffle each other and often startle our mechanistic mindset.

Take the case of the Anishinaabe word *Puhpowee*, translated as "the force that causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight." Kimmerer recounts: "As a biologist, I was stunned that such a word existed. In all its technical vocabulary, Western science has no such term, no words to hold this mystery. You'd think that biologists, of all people, would have words for life. But in scientific language our terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed."

Even well-intended science can conflict with those who observe on a daily basis what scientists only experience in an abstract or temporary way. Because of her family's experiences of the wild, Kimmerer's botanical practice goes beyond just observing plants. Her integration of traditional wisdom with her academic research convinces her that networks of lifeforms demonstrate mutual survival, not survival of the fittest.

The friction between these two ideas should remind us of Pyotr Kropotkin's 1902 book *Mutual Aid*, in which he emphasizes the horizontal relationships among living things. Even to speak of nature as everything outside of human beings sets up a hierarchy in the world.

But Kimmerer's and Kropotkin's approaches critique the notion that only human consciousness has agency and that all other things are just passive objects buffeted around by mindless physical and chemical forces. The current trope of "being in nature," while usually referring to tourist activities, ought to be understood as our humble, reciprocal role among the countless entities with whom we share the planet.

Other recent books complement *Braiding Sweetgrass's* description of the battle lines drawn between conventional science and a more radically holistic view of life on earth. For example, *The Hidden Life of Trees* examines the co-reliance of trees and mycelium, the underground fungi networks in forests effectively interconnecting trees and a variety of soil nutrients. Similarly, Kimmerer looks at the collegiality of plants, explaining how an amazingly agile give-and-take within the network keeps needs and abilities in balance.

Unsurprisingly, given Kimmerer's wider-than-botanical scope, she and her daughters spent an evening helping migrating salamanders cross a road. The salamanders' difficulties on pavement (a much less slippery medium than a leaf-embedded forest floor) expose them to road traffic. Since this evening in 2003 coincided with the invasion of Iraq, Kimmerer's head is filled with images of collateral damage: the bombed civilians and the flattened salamanders.

While the Kimmerer rescue squad pursued their tasks, they encountered a group of students studying the mortality rate of salamanders in just this situation. But the nature of their study prevented them from interfering with the salamanders' fate. Even as they built an argument for protecting the amphibians, the need for research objectivity prevented them from engaging in that very protection. Kimmerer, already knowing that the mortality was too great, put more faith in direct action than in the slow, bureaucratic process of gaining environmental legislation that would solve the problem in, or after, the long run.

Many people raised in the Western scientific tradition but who have committed themselves to support Indigenous struggles have particular difficulty with the way in which traditional peoples imbue everything with life. Most Westerners interpret this as metaphor: grandfather rocks aren't really alive; trees are not persons. But anyone wanting to read this book to its proper depth must face a gigantic hole in the fabric of the materialist science that currently dominates the globe.

Kimmerer quotes Native scholar Greg Cajete: "In Indigenous ways of knowing, we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit." At best, contemporary science can handle only the first two of these.

She goes on to explain: "I knew plants as teachers and companions to whom I was linked with mutual responsibility... The questions scientists raised were not 'Who are you?' but 'What is it?' No one asked plants, 'What can you tell us?' The primary question was 'How does it work?' The botany I was taught was reductionist, mechanistic, and strictly objective. Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects."

Here, science hypocritically retains the Judeo-Christian notion of the chosen people of God, given dominion over all, and empty of the capacity for mutuality with the rest of nature. Kimmerer argues strongly that the community of beings is not a delusion but a coherent way of existing.

The concept of gift gives us another way of appreciating this. Elaborating on Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*, Kimmerer opposes the West's reductionist, exploitative notion of nature's bounty with the gift as part of our vibrant web of reciprocity. The countless strawberries in a field near her childhood home led her to understand that "a gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning. It is not a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present. Gifts exist in a realm of humility and mystery—as with random acts of kindness, we do not know their source."

This brings into sharp contrast two ideas of "fruitfulness": one a strategy to spread genes, and an entirely different one that sees it as an expression of generosity.

The first perspective, an aggressively hierarchical one, focuses on the act of a plant producing a large quantity of fruit in order to proliferate its genes. This sees natural selection as predominantly a numbers game with the most fruitful plant winning.

The second perspective considers that plants don't behave this way merely for the delayed gratification of gene survival. Rather, the actual experience of abundance is fulfilling in itself. The multiplicity of fruit nourishes a community of living things, from microbes within the plants, fruit, and soil, to grazing mammals. This creates not just a reciprocity of nutrients, but a relationship that cannot be measured empirically.

The first perspective opposes collectivity. It suppresses cooperation as an unprofitable exchange, an embarrassing weakness. Can you imagine babies depersonalizing their mothers as nothing more than instruments they

exploit on their way to a highly individualized adulthood? Our millennia-old trajectory toward the total domination of nature points to such nightmares.

The generosity perspective requires shedding the certainty that plants are single-tasked machines, programmed only to cast their genes into the future. It also means exploring how non-human entities (all of them, even microbes) knowingly experience relationships with others, and seek enjoyment in those relationships.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the critique of scientific reductionism and materialism provides us with the opportunity to escape the quagmire many anarchists share with Marxists—the notion of progress, especially evolutionary progress, and productivity, progress’s associated fetish.

Marxism holds as a fundamental belief that we can only achieve true communism by progressing through the capitalist development of productive forces, a strategy that can’t be promoted without worsening the exploitation of the natural world. Marx’s particular reading of Darwin’s theories reinforced this economic idea, and Marxists have continued to bind their economic theory with their ideas on science and technology.

Increasingly, many anarchists and others resist capital’s regimentation of labor for the sake of productivity. Instead, they favor building communities integrated into their environments, where quality of collective experience overrides quantity in the production of commodities.

In confronting the damages of contemporary society, this gives us a head start towards imagining solutions based on their long-understood values of community, sustainability, and harmony.

And, the shoulders on whom we ought to stand in order to extend that vision, belong to elders like those we encounter in *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

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