



## BRAIDING SWEETGRASS

Indigenous Wisdom,  
Scientific Knowledge,  
And The Teachings  
Of Plants

By Robin Wall  
Kimmerer

**Publication date:  
August 2014**

ISBN:  
9781571313560  
Paperback, \$20

Questions written  
by Longwood  
Gardens and  
Shannon Blackmer  
for Milkweed  
Editions.

Milkweed Editions  
1011 Washington  
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Minneapolis, MN  
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# Discussion Questions

1. In the story, “Skywoman Falling” [3-10], you learn that Skywoman lived as if her children’s future mattered. What questions come to mind when you imagine the Earth and environment fifty years from now? One hundred years from now?
2. The “Gift of Strawberries” [22-32] introduces the reader to the concept of “the essence of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity.” [28] How can “the relationship of gratitude and reciprocity that has been developed increase the evolutionary fitness of both plant and animal” [30] from your perspective?
3. “Learning the Grammar of Animacy” [48-59] introduces the concept of communing with nature by getting to know more about plants and recognizing that they are not inanimate objects. If you addressed the plants in your neighborhood as something other than “it,” would that change your relationship to the environment? How?
4. In the story “Maple Sugar Moon” [63-71], 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?
5. In “Allegiance to Gratitude” [103-117], Kimmerer introduces the Thanksgiving Address used by the indigenous peoples to give thanks to the land. She writes that “it is the credo for a culture of gratitude.” [115] How does the Thanksgiving Address support the concept of “our mutual allegiance as human delegates to the democracy of the species”? [116] What does that mean to you?
6. What does each of The Three Sisters [128]—corn, beans, and squash—bring to their reciprocal relationship? How can this partnership create a stronger community? Can you think of other examples of similar relationships in your community?
7. In “Putting Down Roots” [254-267], Kimmerer writes, “Losing a plant can threaten a culture in much the same way as losing a language.” [261] Discuss the sweetgrass’s decline, which Kimmerer outlines in this chapter. How can plants repeat the history of their people? [262]
8. Reflect upon Kimmerer’s statement “environmentalism becomes synonymous with dire predictions and powerless feelings.” [327] Share an action you’ve observed someone take, or one you would like to take, that transcends powerlessness and invites deeper ecological consciousness.
9. Based upon the central themes in Braiding Sweetgrass, explain the differences between reciprocity and the current ecological movement known as sustainability. Can you think of other authors, activists, or artists working to achieve Kimmerer’s idea of reciprocity?
10. Since Braiding Sweetgrass was released in paperback in 2014, artists of all disciplines have been inspired by and created work in honor of Kimmerer’s book. Visual artist Jenny Holzer projected dozens of quotes from the book on the buildings of Glasgow during the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, including “Our leaders willfully ignore the wisdom and the models of every other species on the planet—except of course those that have gone extinct” [309] and “Climate change will unequivocally defeat economies that are based on constant taking without giving in return.” [375] Videographer Phoebe Mussman created a short film entitled “I Must Return the Gift” with The Resilient Activist using excerpts as an immersive entryway into indigenous wisdom and resilience. Share an idea for an art project grounded in Kimmerer’s ideas of reciprocity, attention, and reconnection to the land that you would like to create.



**ROBIN WALL KIMMERER**

is a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She is the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*, which has earned Kimmerer wide acclaim. Her first book, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for outstanding nature writing, and her other work has appeared in *Orion*, *Whole Terrain*, and numerous scientific journals. She tours widely and has been featured on NPR's *On Being* with Krista Trippett and in 2015 addressed the general assembly of the United Nations on the topic of "Healing Our Relationship with Nature." Kimmerer lives in Syracuse, New York, where she is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, and the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment.

# Reading Reflections

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