

A Four Sisters Garden: Respect, Reciprocity and Climate Resilience

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Just a little over a month ago, I sat in a room with UU colleagues, some of whom are here today, listening to the wisdom of a Lakota elder. In broaching the subject of decolonization, he asked us, “You’ve talked about this before? Interesting… How can a group of white people talk about decolonization without an indigenous person being present? You’re the colonizers.” I have been reflecting on this for the past month, mindful of what I was asked to present to you all today. How could I, a white woman, present on indigenous wisdom? What is respectful learning of shared expertise and what is co-opting knowledge? So I offer this paper to you as my reflections on the material assigned, some indigenous and some not, along with my experiences of integrating this knowledge into my own life. I have structured this paper based on the elements of a garden, with acknowledgment to Robin Wall Kimmerer, who suggests that a garden is the first step any of us can take towards repairing our relationship with the earth.

Part I: The Soil We’re Planted In

“She fell like a maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze. A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before. It took her a long time to fall. In fear, or maybe hope, she clutched a bundle tightly in her hand.”¹

Coming out of darkness, she eventually sees oceans. The animals from this world congregate, trying to understand what they see in the sky. A flock of water birds is sent to help her. The birds

¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

catch her and gently guide her down onto the back of Great Turtle. The water animals, like otter, and beaver, bring mud from the bottom of the ocean and place it on Turtle's back until solid earth begins to form and increase in size.

Turtle's back becomes Sky Woman's home, Turtle Island. There she plants the seeds she clutched tightly in her hand, seeds of plants of all kinds. As the island turns from brown to green, Sky Woman tends the earth they created together. As plants for food and shelter grow, many of the animals come to live with her on the land. It is said that the first plant to flourish on the island is wiingaashk, sweetgrass.²

So begins Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. The story of Sky Woman and the creation of Turtle Island is an indigenous creation story. For Kimmerer, as a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Sky Woman's falling is also the original foundation of her own understanding of the reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world. In Kimmerer's lyrical telling, Sky Woman dances and sings her thanksgiving to the animals that saved her, her feet caressing and multiplying the earth with each step. Her gratitude and the animal's gifts combine to create the whole earth there upon Turtle's back. It is a glorious act of co-creation between humans and nature.

Kimmerer says, "It was through her actions of reciprocity, the give and take with the land, that the original immigrant [Sky Woman] became indigenous. For all of us, becoming indigenous to a

² From The Canadian Museum of History: <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/aborig/fp/fpz2f22e.html>

place means living as if your children's future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it.”³

Reading Kimmerer's description of Sky Woman and the creation of the earth, I cannot help but compare it to the Christian story of creation: a story about a world created by a distant God, where every form of life is given breath by the act of God and brought into being through God's will. In this creation story, humans are also created. Rather than participating together in the act of creation, humans are subjects. From Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”⁴

In one story we have an act of co-creation. In another we have instructions to subdue the earth. Kimmerer says, “Same species, same earth, different stories. Like Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness.”⁵

Origin stories tell us about ourselves, and about the patterns that inform our behaviors now. Intrinsic to Western Christianity is the idea that the earth and the life upon it is property. In this

³ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

⁴ Genesis goes on to explain what is meant by dominion: “**27** So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. **28** And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” **29** And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. **30** And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. **31** And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” Genesis 1:26-31.

⁵ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

way of being, the earth is a thing to be controlled and used rather than a piece of creation to partner with. It is a spiritual perspective that says humans and nature are separate, not unlike Cartesian Dualism, where the mind and body are separate, only in this analogy, rather than the mind controlling the body, humans are controlling the earth.

Such dualism is evident in traditional Western Christianity's perspective that the spiritual and material world are also separate. Humans are understood as spiritual beings having a bodily experience, thus humans are more concerned with life after death. In such a perspective, how humanity leaves the earth is a lesser concern than whether or not you are following God's will in such a way as to guarantee your entry into heaven. In contrast, Indigenous theologies are interconnected, espousing a state of being with, and belonging to, the earth, where the spiritual and the material world are one and the same. This interdependent state of being would depend on the health and well-being of people and planet together. Kimmerer says, "In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on 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 the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. 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."⁶

Unfortunately, white supremacy and Western Christianity combined in the Doctrine of Discovery to not only endorse the plunder of the land, but to obligate the domination of people and planet.

⁶ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

In the Doctrine of Discovery, *terra nullius*, meaning empty or void, referred to land that was not inhabited by Christians. Thus when white Europeans landed in North America, and other parts of the world, they claimed the land as “empty” and able to be claimed, despite the many indigenous people already living there.⁷ This colonization was enabled by the Papal Bull of 1452, *Drum Diversas*, which authorized King Alfonso of Portugal to conquer Muslim Saracens and non-Christian pagans and “reduce their persons to perpetual servitude” while also taking their land and goods “to convert them to you, and your use, and your successors the Kings of Portugal.”⁸

This then, as Unitarian Universalists, is the soil in which our tradition was first planted and then grew into being. White supremacy is a parasite destroying the planet. We, as UUs, and as participants in western society, must cultivate different ways of knowing, and different ways of being if we are going to survive.

Part II: Harmful Parasites & Companion Plants

If we are to survive and thrive as humans, then we are dependent upon the survival of the earth. This means we have to shift from a model of plunder and subjugation to a model of interdependence and reciprocity. The first movement in that shift is decolonization. At the Central Midwest District UUMA chapter retreat in fall 2022, Lakota organizer and climate change activist Johnnie Aseron shared a model for decolonizing law that I find pertinent to this conversation. In this model you first observe colonial law as rooted in western ideas of

⁷ Wolfchild, Sheldon, director. 2014. *Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code*. 38 Plus 2 Productions.

⁸ Charles, Mark, and Soong-Chan Rah. *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery*. IVP, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019.

domination and consumption before moving into recognizing indigenous practices of mutual support and collaboration and then moving into a position that recognizes there are many ways of knowing and being. If we look at this model from an environmental perspective, we see western colonization as one where, “ruined land was accepted as the collateral damage of progress.”⁹ Decolonization requires honoring the indigenous values of relationship and interconnection, as well as recognizing science and academia aren’t the only ways to know the world. What is being described is not a change in “what” we know, but a change in “how” we know. Kimmerer says,

“Native scholar Greg Cajete has written that 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. I came to understand quite sharply when I began my training as a scientist that science privileges only one, possibly two, of those ways of knowing: mind and body. As a young person wanting to know everything about plants, I did not question this. But it is a whole human being who finds the beautiful path.”¹⁰

It is not just a shift from “what” we know to “how” we know, but in making that shift, we are also changing from “what” we are to “how” we are. We must change from seeing ourselves as independent, to understanding ourselves as in relationship with the entirety of life, to know that only when we treat the natural world with respect and reciprocity are we whole, to know that we belong to the land.

Kimmerer believes it is possible to become naturalized to place, “to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children’s

⁹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

¹⁰ Ibid.

future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do.”¹¹

Kimmerer is describing a life that is close to the land, where we exist in partnership with the land such that our care for the land is rewarded in the gifts of its abundance - its love even, for Kimmerer believes it is possible to love the land and for the land to love you back. Such a relationship isn’t static, it’s constantly in motion through acts of reciprocity. This kind of reciprocity mirrors the relationship between the elements of the trinity that exists in Eastern Orthodoxy. In her text, *A New Climate for Christology*, theologian Sallie McFague argues that the Western Augustinian Trinity is individualistic, “supporting a view of God as a supernatural individual. The Eastern Orthodox view of the Trinity, on the other hand, stresses the three “persons” in constant reciprocal, loving activity, thus promoting the picture of the Trinity not as a superhuman being but as a universal, loving, activity constantly expressing itself in creation as empowering, inclusive self-emptying love for others.”¹²

McFague uses this view of the Trinity to suggest that we should be more Christ-like and adopt an attitude of kenosis, of self-emptying, self-sacrificing love for the planet. While I find it can be helpful to have conversations on how a consumerist culture can change its behaviors to prevent climate change, the problem with such a conversation is it remains a conversation centered on humanity, on “what” we do, not “how” we do things or “who” we are in relationship with. It’s offering a technical fix rather than an adaptive solution. The indigenous perspective is that you do not own the land, you take care of the land in a symbiotic partnership. Which means it’s a

¹¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

¹² McFague, Sallie. *A New Climate for Christology: Kenosis, Climate Change, and Befriending Nature*. Fortress Press, 2021.

choice and a commitment – not a sacrifice¹³. Kimmerer describes it this way: “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.”¹⁴

In such a relationship, the earth and humanity, indeed all life, are intertwined. Our identity is not separate from the earth - rather they are linked.¹⁵ In recognition of our interconnectedness, we need to remember the history and tell the stories of our relationship with the land and nature. We must tell our Eco-biographies, the narrative of our lives as influenced by or in connection with nature.¹⁶ *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a lovely example of an eco-autobiography, or eco-memoir. So here is mine. For the sake of brevity, I’ll share just one portion:

Starting in 2007 and for the next four years, I lived on a farm. I dug my hands deep into the soil, learning that my life depended on its bounty: the crops we tended fed our bodies. Downed trees provided wood for the cast iron stove that heated our house. We ate the wild greens and native berries from along the creek. I learned the cycles of the seasons, and the tasks of each time of year. We planted apple trees and asparagus cognizant that you do not harvest the first, second or even third year after planting.

Living on the farm meant learning a different way of being, more in tune with the weather and the greater trends in seasons and cycles. Deep winter snow deposited nitrogen in the soil, producing good grass for hay, but a warm winter meant bugs and other pests survived to attack

¹³ Aseron, Johnnie. “INITC - InterNational Indigenous Initiative for Transformative Collaboration Process.” (Lecture) Central Midwest District UU Ministers’ Association Chapter Retreat, Oregon, IL, October 11-13, 2022.

¹⁴ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

¹⁵ Betancourt, Sophia. “Fahs Lecture: Ancestral Wisdom and Climate Justice.” (Lecture) UUA General Assembly, Portland, OR, June 23, 2022.

¹⁶ Short, Kayann. “About.” ecobiography, September 21, 2020. <http://ecobiography.com/about/>.

seedings in the spring. Good summer rain grew tall corn, but too much rain meant muddy fields and a shortened season with low yield, while too little rain meant stunted stalks and... a low yield. Sunny days ripened glorious red tomatoes, yet too much sun and too much heat meant the plants would blossom but not “set,” and fail to fruit.

I cannot say I miss the cold mornings trudging through snow to feed the chickens, or wrangling a surprise Christmas calf into the barn so it wouldn’t freeze to death. But wading along the stream bank, collecting trash caught in the reeds, felt like being in a relationship. Tilling compost into the dirt felt like reciprocity. Witnessing the fireflies light up the edges of the marsh high into the trees on a summer evening felt like divinity. “Action on behalf of life transforms,” says Kimmerer. “Because the relationship between self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us.”¹⁷

I don’t know that I would call farming an effort to heal the earth, (maybe Wendell Berry has a different perspective) however my experiences highlighted the ways I was disconnected from the natural world. Since my life on the farm, I have kept a garden in each place I’ve lived. Keeping a garden is Kimmerer’s first suggestion for restoring the relationship between land and people. She says, “It’s good for the health of the earth and it’s good for the health of people. A garden is a nursery for nurturing connection, the soil for cultivation of practical reverence. And its power goes far beyond the garden gate—once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself. Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It’s a place where if

¹⁷ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

you can't say "I love you" out loud, you can say it in seeds. And the land will reciprocate, in beans."¹⁸

Part III: The Fertilizer We Need

"What we contemplate here is more than ecological restoration; it is the restoration of relationship between plants and people," says Kimmerer. One term she uses for this is "naturalized," where a fully reciprocal relationship exists between humans and the earth. "We are dreaming of a time when the land might give thanks for the people," she says.¹⁹

Unfortunately, the very ideal of becoming naturalized is one that has been co-opted and abused by white supremacy. In his paper, "Eco-Memoir, Belonging, and the Settler-Colonial Poetics of Place Identity," retired University of Nebraska English professor Tom Lynch points out that,

The genre we might refer to as "eco-memoir" involves the writing of self into place and place into self. In many ways it is an ideal genre for the cultivation of an ecological awareness and bioregional identity, as key texts such as Thoreau's *Walden* or Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, early versions of eco-memoirs suggest... The genre clearly has much to offer in the development of a bioregionally informed place-based identity and eco-poetics of dwelling.

On the other hand, however, to the degree that the genre works to generate a "becoming native to this place" sense of belonging among members of settler-colonial societies, it risks complicity with the settler-colonial project of, in Patrick White's useful phrase, "the logics of elimination" of the native people. It is a genre that can be seen to as least unintentionally supplant, replace, or efface Indigenous claims prior and, more importantly, to continuing belonging...

That is, from a purely ecocritical perspective, the eco-memoir is an ideal genre, but from a settler-colonial studies perspective, it is suspect...²⁰

¹⁸ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lynch, Tom. "Eco-Memoir, Belonging, and the Settler-Colonial Poetics of Place Identity." (Paper) International Conference on Ecopoetics: "Dwellings of Enchantment: Writing and Re-enchanting the Earth," Université de Perpignan Via Domitia, June 22-25, 2016.

How do we handle this paradox? We must do more than just develop a sense of belonging to a place, we must expand our ways of knowing. Kimmerer explains, “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 the other species for guidance.”²¹ And not just other species, but also the land. “The land is the real teacher,” says Kimmerer. “All we need as students is mindfulness.”²²

I moved around so much as a child, and as an adult, that only twice in my life have I felt that I “belonged” somewhere. In fact, the peripatetic lifestyle of modern society is one of Lynch’s critiques of settler-colonial culture. However, the value of living on the farm for the four years that I did was the sense of connection and the real reciprocity. I could see my impact on the land over time, and the land gave me gifts. Living on the farm fed my emotion and spirit. It was a lived experience of the other ways of knowing.

In addition to expanding our ways of knowing, we must also expand our notions of being - of *who* is a being. Not only does Western culture privilege only one or two ways of knowing, it also only privileges one or two ways of being: human or object. It does not allow for the living world to exist as a “being,” a person that is alive. Kimmerer says, “...in Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family... *Yawe*—the animate *to be*. I am, you are, s/he is. To speak of those possessed with life and spirit we must say *yawe*. By what linguistic confluence do Yahweh of the Old Testament and *yawe* of the New World both fall from the mouths of the

²¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

²² Ibid.

reverent? Isn't this just what it means, to be, to have the breath of life within, to be the offspring of Creation? The language reminds us, in every sentence, of our kinship with all of the animate world.”²³

Such a kinship suggests the idea of a biocracy, in which all life-forms have a vote, as opposed to a democracy, in which only humans have a vote. Sallie McFague suggests that a biocracy is one in which “trees, mountains, birds, and even slugs” have a right to live and flourish.²⁴ Kimmerer describes such a biocracy too, saying “If citizenship is a matter of shared beliefs, then I believe in the democracy of species. If citizenship means an oath of loyalty to a leader, then I choose the leader of the trees. If good citizens agree to uphold the laws of the nation, then I choose natural law, the law of reciprocity, of regeneration, of mutual flourishing.”²⁵ What other types of laws might such a biocracy develop?

The InterNational Indigenous Initiative for Transformative Collaboration Process has engaged with this very question and developed the Three Considerations for Humanity:

1. A true human being may not injure Grandmother Earth, nor through inaction, allow the Earth or any of its inhabitants to come to harm...
2. A true human being may follow various other human laws except where such laws would conflict with the First Consideration...
3. A true human being may protect its own existence as long as such protections do not conflict with the First or Second Considerations.²⁶

²³Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

²⁴ McFague, Sallie. *A New Climate for Christology: Kenosis, Climate Change, and Befriending Nature*. Fortress Press, 2021.

²⁵ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

²⁶ Aseron, Johnnie. “INITC - InterNational Indigenous Initiative for Transformative Collaboration Process.” (Lecture) Central Midwest District UU Ministers’ Association Chapter Retreat, Oregon, IL, October 11-13, 2022.

If we can recognize the world as, in the words of eco-theologian Thomas Berry, “a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects,” then we might be able to understand our relationship to the earth as one of inherent interconnection, where we are bound by our faith and by our commitments to do no harm. Transforming our understanding of who is included in the circle of being enriches the existence of all life.

IV. The Honorable Harvest

The air was crisp and a blanket of leaves littered the ground and I was outside by myself doing whatever it is that a 12 year old does outside on a fall afternoon. The sun was at that “perfect light” phase when shadows are soft but dusk hasn’t started. I turned in circles looking at the trees above me and the light filtering through the remaining leaves. I noticed a small speck floating through the air and without thinking I reached out my open palm. The tiniest green spider landed on my hand. So small it seemed translucent, it was a bright, light chartreuse.

I was a 12 year old girl who was *afraid* of spiders, yet there I stood with a *spider* on my hand. In that moment, what I felt wasn’t fear, but wonder and awe. This tiny living creature was in the palm of my hand... In that moment my awareness expanded. I could not distinguish between myself and the spider, myself and the trees, myself and the light. My heartbeat was the drum of the earth, my breath the thrum of the insects around me. Together, we breathed as one, in and out.

An eternity passed from one moment to the next - lives began and ended, stars exploded and galaxies expanded... and the spider and I regarded each other. I knew in that instant that I was holding the Holy in the palm of my hand.

Maybe the wind moved a branch. Maybe the sun shifted in its daily traverse across the sky. Whatever happened, I found myself raising my hand and with the gentlest puff of breath releasing the tiny green spider to float off on its silken web.

I wish I could say that I never killed a spider again after that. Heck, I wish I could say I wasn't afraid of spiders after that. However, neither would be true. My parents, on more than one occasion, forced me to kill bugs that made their way into the house in some misguided attempt to teach me that I was more powerful than an insect. Moving out and realizing that I could handle bugs as I chose - that I didn't have to kill them but could trap them and release them back outside - went a long way towards changing my relationship to bugs. It turns out I wasn't afraid of the bugs themselves, I was afraid of having to kill them. This all culminated one day when having parked under a tree on a beautiful fall day, I left my car windows open only to discover when it was time to leave that a Bold Jumping Spider had taken up residence in my car. I will note that bold is both its correct name as well as an apt description, which I realized when it jumped from the dash of the car onto the steering wheel halfway through my drive home. I did not know, and maybe you don't either, that it is entirely possible to drive with only your fingertips holding the steering wheel...

This story is another part of my eco-biography, a brief moment when I knew in the core of my being the reality of our interdependence, in which I knew that the circle of being encompassed the entire earth. Sadly, our Western culture founded on white supremacism and capitalist extraction told me again and again that I was wrong. The work of crafting this paper is encouraging me to re-examine my history, to consider my eco-biography. By considering my own eco-biography, I am looking for the ways that my life experience is in alignment with indigenous wisdom, and where it isn't. One of the purposes of writing an eco-biography is to develop a sense of belonging to the earth, even to a specific piece of, or place on, the earth.²⁷ I think too, we can use eco-biography to interrogate what we've been previously taught. In the words of Sophia Betancourt, we need to understand our own earth history.²⁸ If we are to create new ways of being, then understanding where we have behaved in ways that are exploitative and destructive are just as important as understanding where we have operated with models of reciprocity and gratitude. We have to write, and then re-write, our narratives.

In her 2022 Fahs Lecture, Betancourt suggests a process she calls eco-creolization, where we build a new shared understanding of self. This self is built on the knowledge that identity and earth are linked. Eco-creolization includes a model of community accountability, where we work in partnership to restore both the land and our relationship to the land. Part of that community accountability is giving up despair and nihilism. Despair and nihilism are self-fulfilling prophecies.

²⁷ “Ecological Autobiography.” Activities, July 11, 2017. <https://serc.carleton.edu/bioregion/examples/65715.html>.

²⁸ Betancourt, Sophia. “Fahs Lecture: Ancestral Wisdom and Climate Justice.” (Lecture) UUA General Assembly, Portland, OR, June 23, 2022.

The teachings of indigenous leaders, the wisdom of indigenous cultures are an antidote to despair, and to practices of exploitation and plunder. When we pause to consider the realities of climate change, the news is full of doom and gloom. It is easy to question if we will ever find our way forward, if restoration is possible at this point. Kimmerer believes it is. She writes, “Restoration offers concrete means by which humans can once again enter into positive, creative relationship with the more-than-human world, meeting responsibilities that are simultaneously material and spiritual.”²⁹ If the world is to survive and thrive, then indigenous wisdom teaches that our work is to restore relationships of respect, responsibility, reciprocity and love.

We can do this work without misappropriating practices from other cultures. We can cultivate practices of gratitude and abundance, we can build relationships of respect and reciprocity, we can act responsibly and with love. Kimmerer lays out some ways to begin, many of which you can find in the guidelines for The Honorable Harvest:

- ❖ Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.
- ❖ Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life. Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.
- ❖ Never take the first. Never take the last. Take only what you need.
- ❖ Take only that which is given.
- ❖ Never take more than half. Leave some for others. Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.
- ❖ Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken. Share.
- ❖ Give thanks for what you have been given.
- ❖ Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.
- ❖ Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.³⁰

²⁹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

³⁰ Ibid.

When first engaging in Kimmerer's work it is easy to stop here: a neatly laid out rule sheet. However, she also stresses the importance of ceremony. Ceremony is how we develop a sense of belonging, particularly to the land. Kimmerer says, "Many indigenous traditions still recognize the place of ceremony and often focus their celebrations on other species and events in the cycle of the seasons." I witnessed this myself each morning as we gathered outside in a circle with Johnnie Aseron. Johnnie was surprised the first morning when we ate breakfast before giving thanks. He said, "We say thank you before we eat." I was reminded of my family's practice of saying grace before each meal: "To him gives us daily bread, in thankfulness we bow our heads, amen." I had given up saying grace when I gave up my belief in an anthropomorphic God, yet clearly I lost an important gratitude practice. I find myself sitting with the question, what would it look like to thank my garden?

"In a colonist society the ceremonies that endure are not about land," says Kimmerer. "they're about family and culture, values that are transportable from the old country. Ceremonies for the land no doubt existed there, but it seems they did not survive emigration in any substantial way. I think there is wisdom in regenerating them here, as a means to form bonds with this land."³¹ Every pagan holiday, I witnessed the farmer enacting small rituals of observance – completely matter of fact, yet profoundly spiritual, and always tied to the land and the cycles of the earth. The farmer denied giving his theology any name, but rooted his faith deep within the soil he tended.

As Unitarian Universalists and religious leaders, we are uniquely positioned to develop rituals of gratitude and celebrations of the seasons from our own tradition. We can encourage a mindset

³¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

and a spirituality that partners with the earth as creators and sustainers of life. In CPE, my supervisor was always asking us about where and how our patients' theologies were life giving. It is time for us to explore what a life-giving, life-affirming Unitarian Universalist theology looks like when it includes all beings.

Kimmerer begins *Braiding Sweetgrass* with the story of Sky Woman, a story of co-creation, and she juxtaposes Sky Woman's story with that of Eve, cast out of the garden. I cannot help but wonder what knowledge it was that God was hiding when God told Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree. What if it was the knowledge of our interconnection? What if it was the knowledge that the hierarchy of beings is a lie? The snake was portrayed as the devil trying to corrupt humans, but what if the snake was simply another creature in the garden asking to be recognized as a partner in our mutual thriving? What if...

I used to think the planet might be better off without us - nature is terribly resilient after all - but Kimmerer's research suggests otherwise. I will never forget that the final lesson of harvesting sweetgrass is that sweetgrass needs humans. And sweetgrass isn't the only plant that depends on a relationship with humans in order to survive. So the final lesson I take is Kimmerer's notion of the four sisters garden. In the three sisters garden, each plant has an important job to do and they grow in relationship with the other plants. The corn, the squash and the beans each provide something another needs. They grow and thrive through reciprocity. However, says Kimmerer, it would be more accurate to call it a four sisters garden.³² We humans are the fourth sister in the garden, providing care and tending that the garden needs, and where we are rewarded with beans. We too are an integral part of the garden. This is the task ahead of us, to embrace our place in the

³² Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

garden and to fulfill our role within a cycle of respect, reciprocity and love. As Kimmerer says, “We restore the land, the land restores us.”³³



I follow this essay a poem, that is really a prayer, “Eagle Poem,” by Joy Harjo:

To pray you open your whole self
 To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
 To one whole voice that is you.
 And know there is more
 That you can’t see, can’t hear;
 Can’t know except in moments
 Steadily growing, and in languages
 That aren’t always sound but other
 Circles of motion.
 Like eagle that Sunday morning
 Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
 In wind, swept our hearts clean
 With sacred wings.
 We see you, see ourselves and know
 That we must take the utmost care
 And kindness in all things.
 Breathe in, knowing we are made of
 All this, and breathe, knowing
 We are truly blessed because we
 Were born, and die soon within a
 True circle of motion,
 Like eagle rounding out the morning
 Inside us.
 We pray that it will be done
 In beauty.
 In beauty.³⁴

³³ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.

³⁴ Harjo, Joy. “Eagle Poem.” *In Mad Love and War*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1990.