

19 Braiding Sweetgrass

1. The Gift Perspective

Core idea:

See the world (especially the natural world) as full of gifts rather than commodities.

- What is a gift?
 - Comes to you through no action of your own
 - Free; not earned; not a reward or payment
 - Calls for appreciation, not calculation
- Your role in a gift world:
 - To be open-eyed and present
 - To notice, receive, and respond appropriately (gratitude, care, reciprocity)
- Existence as a gift from non-human people:
 - Your life originates from gifts:
 - * Air from plants and trees
 - * Food from plants, animals, fungi, soil microbes
 - * Water filtered by ecosystems
 - * A habitable climate from the whole Earth system
 - Your life continues only through ongoing gifts:
 - * Every breath, every bite of food, every sip of water are unpurchased “services” from non-human beings
 - Kimmerer calls many non-human beings “people” (plant people, animal people, etc.) to emphasize:
 - * They are not mere “resources”
 - * They are members of a shared community, with which we are in relationship
- The joy of a world full of gifts:
 - The world becomes a place of ongoing giving and receiving, not just extraction
 - Everyday life can be experienced as surrounded by generosity, not scarcity

2. From Gift → Gratitude → Reciprocity / Generosity

Progression:

1. Receiving a gift
 - Recognizing that what you receive is not owed to you
 - Seeing your dependence on others (human and non-human)
2. Gratitude
 - Emotional and cognitive recognition: “I have been given something good.”

- Leads to:
 - Humility (I rely on others)
 - Appreciation (this is not just “mine”)
- 3. Reciprocity / Generosity
 - Proper response to gifts is not just “thanks,” but giving back
 - Reciprocity can be:
 - Direct: you help the specific being/community that helped you
 - Indirect: you help the broader community or ecosystem
 - Important idea:
 - The value of a gift increases as it is shared and passed on.
 - Hoarding diminishes the spirit of the gift
 - Sharing extends the circle of gratitude and care
 - Human purpose (according to Kimmerer):
 - To feel and express gratitude
 - To love and care for the beings who sustain us
 - This is how humans properly inhabit a gift-filled world.

3. Gift Economy vs Market Economy

Gift Economy (as Kimmerer understands it)

- Goods are gifts, not commodities.
- Main features:
 - Giving creates relationships and mutual obligations
 - Emphasis on circulation: gifts move through the community
 - Goal: mutual flourishing and relationship-building
 - Status comes from generosity, not accumulation
 - The more a gift is shared, the more valuable and meaningful it becomes

Market Economy

- Goods are commodities with a price.
- Main features:
 - Exchange is based on equivalence and payment
 - Relationships are often impersonal (buyer–seller, not kin)
 - Goal: profit, growth, accumulation, individual gain
 - Value measured mainly in money
 - Tends to encourage a scarcity mindset: you win by having more than others

Key Differences

- Nature of value:
 - Gift economy: value = relationship, gratitude, shared well-being
 - Market economy: value = market price, profit
- Attitude toward the world:
 - Gift economy: world as generous, alive, full of “people” who give
 - Market economy: world as resource, stuff to be owned, bought, sold
- Resulting behavior:

- Gift economy: sharing, restraint, reciprocity
- Market economy: extraction, competition, overuse is tempting when profitable

4. Why Inhabit the Gift Perspective? (Three Reasons)

Kimmerer offers three main considerations in favor of adopting the gift perspective:

1. It is joyful
 - Experiencing your life as full of gifts leads to:
 - Wonder, appreciation
 - A sense of being loved and supported by the Earth
 - Everyday experiences become occasions for gratitude, not entitlement.
2. It fosters an abundance, not scarcity, mindset
 - Gift perspective:
 - Focuses on what is given, what circulates, what we share
 - Encourages the sense that there is enough when used respectfully and shared
 - Scarcity mindset (typical of market focus):
 - Focuses on competition and hoarding
 - Makes others' gain feel like your loss
3. It might help humanity survive and flourish long-term
 - Gift thinking:
 - Encourages restraint (take only what you need)
 - Encourages reciprocity (give back, repair damage)
 - Treats ecosystems and non-human people as partners to care for, not just resources
 - This reduces ecological destruction and supports sustainable forms of life.
 - A market-only perspective, focused on constant growth and extraction, risks destroying the systems that support life.

5. Thesis of Mutual Flourishing

Thesis:

Humans and non-human people can and should flourish together; true human well-being must be linked to the well-being of the more-than-human world.

Key points:

- Humans are “the little brother” or “the new kid on the block”
 - Other beings (plants, animals, fungi) have been here much longer.
 - They are our “older siblings,” with more experience in how to live sustainably.
 - We should learn from them rather than assume superiority.
- Flourishing is mutual, not one-sided
 - We should not seek human comfort and prosperity at the expense of the land, water, and non-human people.
 - Instead: design ways of living where:
 - * Humans get what they need within limits
 - * Ecosystems remain healthy or are improved
- Lesson from our “big siblings”:
 - Do not destroy the systems on which you depend.

- Many species live within the carrying capacity of their environment; humans must learn to do the same.
- Mutual flourishing rejects:
 - The idea that nature must be sacrificed for “progress”
 - The idea that caring for the Earth means human deprivation
 Instead: caring for the Earth is part of caring for ourselves and future generations.

6. The Honorable Harvest

The Honorable Harvest is a set of ethical guidelines for taking from the Earth in a way that respects mutual flourishing and reciprocity.

At least 3 key features (with more for context):

1. Ask permission from the ones whose lives you seek
 - Treat plants/animals as people with whom you are in relationship.
 - Listen for signs (abundance, health, presence/absence) that indicate “yes” or “no.”
2. Never take the first, never take the last
 - Ensures that:
 - There is always a “seed” population to regenerate
 - Others (human and non-human) also have access
3. Take only what you need
 - Rejects unnecessary excess and greed.
 - Encourages mindfulness about real needs vs wants.
4. Take only that which is given
 - Do not force or damage to obtain more.
 - Harvest in season, from abundant populations.
5. Never take more than half; leave some for others
 - Ensures:
 - Regeneration
 - Food/habitat for other beings
 - Concrete rule to prevent overharvesting.
6. Use everything you take
 - No waste.
 - Respect the life that was given by not discarding it carelessly.
7. Give thanks
 - Explicit expression of gratitude honors the giver.
 - Reinforces the gift perspective and your role as a grateful recipient.
8. Share what you have taken
 - Extends the gift beyond yourself.
 - Spreads the benefits and the gratitude through the community.
9. Give a gift in return
 - Restore habitats, plant seeds, clean rivers, protect species, tend the land.
 - Reciprocity is active: not just “not harming,” but positively contributing.

Overall:

The Honorable Harvest operationalizes the gift perspective and mutual flourishing: you receive from the Earth with gratitude, restraint, respect, and active reciprocity.

7. Two Guiding Questions for Relating to People (Human and Non-Human)

Kimmerer suggests that our relationships with all people—human and non-human—should be guided by two central questions. A useful way to formulate them:

1. What gifts am I receiving from this being or community?
 - Recognize how others support your life and well-being.
 - For human people: time, care, labor, knowledge, emotional support.
 - For non-human people: air, food, water, materials, beauty, inspiration.
2. What can I give in return to support their flourishing?
 - Move from passive gratitude to active reciprocity.
 - For human people: kindness, fairness, help, listening, sharing resources.
 - For non-human people: protecting habitats, reducing harm, restoring ecosystems, cultivating plants respectfully, following the Honorable Harvest.

Using these two questions:

- Keeps relationships reciprocal, not one-sided or exploitative.
- Applies equally to:
 - Family, friends, strangers
 - Animals, plants, waters, soils, and ecosystems
- Enacts the gift perspective and the thesis of mutual flourishing in daily life.