

19 Braiding Sweetgrass

1. The Gift Perspective

What is a “gift” for Kimmerer?

- A gift is something that:
 - Comes to you through no action of your own
 - Is not earned, not a reward, and not a payment
 - Is freely given
- Your proper role:
 - To be open-eyed and present
 - To notice the gift, enjoy it, and then respond appropriately

World as a web of gifts

- The natural world is full of “non-human people” (plants, animals, waters, soils) who:
 - Provide what we need without bargaining: air, water, food, materials, beauty, knowledge
 - Thus, we live in a world full of gifts, not just neutral “resources”
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2. From Gift → Gratitude → Reciprocity / Generosity

Kimmerer sees a natural progression:

1. Receiving a gift
 - Example: clean air, sunlight, fruits, a river, a forest
 - We did nothing to earn these; they are simply there, sustaining us
2. Gratitude
 - Recognition that what we receive is a gift, not an entitlement
 - Emotional response: thankfulness, joy, wonder
 - Cognitive shift: “I am being given to” rather than “I am owed this”
3. Reciprocity / Generosity
 - Genuine gratitude naturally asks: “What can I give in return?”
 - Leads to:
 - Caring for land and ecosystems
 - Sharing with others (human and non-human)
 - Acting to support the flourishing of the sources of our gifts
 - Important idea: The value of a gift increases as it is shared and passed on.

This chain is central: enjoyment → gratitude → reciprocity is how we should respond to the world's gifts.

3. Your Existence as a Gift from Non-Human People

Origin as a gift

- Your very existence depends on countless non-human beings:
 - Plants: convert sunlight into food; supply oxygen
 - Animals and microbes: form ecosystems; create soil; pollinate plants
 - Waters, air, earth: create habitable conditions for life
- You did nothing to deserve being born into a world that already:
 - Has breathable air, drinkable water, fertile soil, rich biodiversity
 - Is already prepared to sustain you

Continuation as a gift

- Your continuing life is also sustained by non-human people:
 - Daily gifts of: food, water, air, materials, medicines, beauty, meaning
 - Ecosystem processes (photosynthesis, water cycles, etc.) keep you alive
 - Conclusion:
 - Both the origin and ongoing continuation of your existence are gifts from non-human people.
 - This grounds a deep debt of gratitude and a duty of reciprocity toward them.
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4. Gift Economy vs Market Economy

Gift Economy (Kimmerer's model)

- Core idea: Relationships are built on giving, gratitude, and reciprocity
- Key features:
 - Things are understood as gifts, not mere commodities
 - Gifts create obligations of gratitude and care
 - Value increases when shared and passed on
 - Emphasizes mutual support, abundance, and relationship
 - Rooted in long-term connection and responsibility

Market Economy (contrast)

- Core idea: Relationships organized by buying and selling
- Key features:
 - Things are commodities with a price tag
 - Interactions are transactions, not relationships
 - Value is often tied to scarcity, profit, and individual gain

- No built-in obligation of gratitude or reciprocity beyond the contract
- Tends to encourage a scarcity mindset (“never enough,” competition)

Why this contrast matters

- In a gift economy, we ask:
“What can I give? How can I reciprocate?”
 - In a market economy, we tend to ask:
“What can I get? What can I buy or sell?”
 - Kimmerer argues we should inhabit the gift perspective toward the Earth, even if we live within a market system.
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5. Three Reasons to Adopt the Gift Perspective

Kimmerer gives (at least) three reasons to see the world as a gift:

1. It is joyful
 - Noticing gifts (beauty, air, food, relationships) increases wonder and happiness
 - Gratitude brings an immediate emotional uplift
 2. It fosters an abundance, not scarcity, mindset
 - Market thinking often makes us feel there is never enough
 - Gift thinking highlights how much we constantly receive
 - Focus shifts from hoarding to sharing and trust in mutual support
 3. It might help humanity survive and flourish long-term
 - A gift perspective encourages:
 - Respect for the sources of our gifts (ecosystems)
 - Reciprocity: protecting and restoring the natural world
 - This is crucial if humans are to avoid destroying the systems we depend on
 - Supports the possibility of mutual flourishing between humans and non-human people
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6. Thesis of Mutual Flourishing

What is mutual flourishing?

- Core thesis:
Human flourishing and the flourishing of non-human people can and should go together.
- Opposes the idea that:
 - Human well-being must come at the expense of nature
 - Nature must be sacrificed for human progress

Key elements

- We are interdependent:
 - Our well-being depends on healthy ecosystems
 - Ecosystems can also benefit from respectful human actions (restoration, tending, seed dispersal, etc.)

- The goal is:
 - Not domination, but relationship
 - To create ways of living where:
 - * Humans live well
 - * And the land, waters, plants, and animals also thrive
 - Kimmerer sees humans as the “little brother” or “new kid on the block”:
 - Other species are our older siblings with long experience of living sustainably
 - We should learn from them, including the crucial lesson:
 - * Do not destroy the systems on which you depend.
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7. The Honorable Harvest

The Honorable Harvest is Kimmerer’s name for a set of ethical guidelines for taking from the Earth in a way that supports mutual flourishing.

Here are important features (know at least 3 clearly):

1. Ask permission before taking
 - Treat plants, animals, and ecosystems as persons, not objects
 - “Ask” by:
 - Observing health and abundance
 - Consulting cultural practices, knowledge, and your own conscience
 - If the answer (from signs of scarcity or harm) is “no,” do not take.
2. Take only what you need
 - Avoid greed and waste
 - Resist the tendency to accumulate just because you can
 - Emphasize sufficiency, not excess
3. Take only from abundance; never take the first or the last
 - Do not harvest in ways that risk wiping out a species or population
 - Leave enough so that the gift can regenerate and others can share it
4. Use everything you take
 - No disrespectful waste
 - Honors the life that has been given
 - Encourages careful, thoughtful taking
5. Minimize harm
 - Choose methods and times of taking that least damage the ecosystem
 - Consider long-term impacts of your actions
6. Express gratitude
 - Offer thanks in word, ceremony, or attentive care
 - Keeps the gift perspective alive in consciousness
7. Share what you take
 - Gifts are meant to circulate
 - Strengthens community and reflects the idea that value increases when shared
8. Reciprocate; give back to the source
 - Examples:
 - Restoring habitats

- Planting, tending, cleaning, protecting
- Supporting environmental stewardship
- Embodies the move from gratitude → reciprocity

Any 3 of these, clearly explained, illustrate what the Honorable Harvest requires.

8. Two Guiding Questions for Relating to People (Human & Non-Human)

Kimmerer thinks we should relate to all people—human and non-human—through the gift perspective and the logic of reciprocity. Two key guiding questions:

1. What gifts am I receiving from this person (human or non-human)?
 - Focuses attention on:
 - Our dependence on others
 - The value of what we are given, often unnoticed
 - Encourages gratitude rather than entitlement
2. Given these gifts, what can I give in return to support their flourishing?
 - Moves from gratitude to reciprocity and generosity
 - Leads to asking:
 - How can I be a good relative to this being?
 - What actions of care, protection, or sharing are required of me?

These questions apply to:

- Human people: friends, family, communities, future generations
- Non-human people: plants, animals, waters, lands, ecosystems

They operationalize Kimmerer's view that the purpose of a human being is:

- To feel and express gratitude
- To love and care—for human and non-human people alike.