

Of Gifts, Reciprocity, and Community

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In the account of his scientific exploration of the South American interior in the late 1730s, La Condamine asks a question that has haunted me since I first read Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*: “*What would it be, if we comprehend herewith, an examination into the virtues ascribed to [Amazonian plants] by the natives of the country? An examination, which is undoubtedly the most attractive of our attentions, of any branch of this study.*”¹ Pratt explains, “For La Condamine in the 1740s, before the classificatory project [initiated by Linnaeus] had taken over, the naturalists’ knowledge existed in parallel with even more valuable local knowledges.”² How astonishing — that at one time, learning from previously unknown cultures might have been considered “the most attractive of our attentions”!

I have pondered the vast natural, scientific, and cultural knowledge that European hubris subjugated, dismissed, or lacked the imagination to even consider. What might our relationship with the natural world be now if our scientific history had unfolded differently, if these explorer/colonizers had an attitude of respectful, curious reciprocity and an appreciation for the potential benefits of local knowledges and transcultural knowledge sharing, if they had seen new ideas and understandings as a gift? And, if humans themselves had not become subjected to Linnaean classification,³ colonization, slavery, genocide, and exploitation, what type of world might we all currently inhabit?

Recently, I have turned a form of this question toward education. What would it mean for educators steeped in Eurocentric practices and curricula — especially those with settler heritage — to learn from indigenous teachers? I realize that pre-Columbian America was not without human conflict, and do not wish to romanticize a worldview that has much to teach me. But, along with many other scholars of European descent, I have surely been plagued by the “*ego conquiro*” described by Dussel,⁴ a state he asserts precedes, and is therefore understood to abide within, the “*ego cogito.*” Hoping to loosen the *ego conquiro*’s grip

on me, I wish to follow the path La Condamine did not and learn from other knowledges. Toward this end, I am convinced there is much to be gained from examining the deep wells of gratitude at the heart of a reciprocal relationship with the land that is central to indigenous philosophy and science. A deeper understanding of gratitude and reciprocity offers a conception of decolonial educational relations rooted in ethics, a complement to the pedagogical approach of understanding and unraveling intransigent social categories of dominance and subordination.

Thankfully, there is a fine contemporary exemplar to learn from: Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer. Kimmerer straddles the worlds of academic science and indigenous knowledge, yet the wonder and gratitude she expresses toward the world of plants does not easily find a home in academia — either in her graduate studies or when she becomes a professor and must teach required undergraduate curriculum or advise a graduate student. Her book *Braiding Sweetgrass* contains an abundance of wisdom regarding our understanding of and relationship with the natural world. Kimmerer herself learns from the elders of her own and other tribes, always questioning and deepening her knowledge of what it means to live in gratitude for, and reciprocity with, plants. She asks Western scientists to see “plants as our teachers rather than their subjects” because we humans are the “younger brothers of Creation,” who must learn from our elders.⁵ The book is astonishingly generous: despite her ancestors’ grim history at the hands of settlers, she offers her understanding to all who read it, no matter our background.

Kimmerer does not gloss over problems with the current state of our natural surroundings, but squarely faces the poverty of plants in second-growth forests and poisoned Superfund waste beds. Yet she knows, too, that “despair is paralysis [that] robs us of agency.”⁶ She understands that, ultimately, the earth heals itself, but she never loses sight of the sacred nature of her task to repair our bonds with the earth and one another. The process is slow, and the places she describes — such as Onondaga Lake and its watershed — will probably never return to their pre-industrial state. Nevertheless, the book offered me a complicated wellspring of hope.

METAPHORS AND GIFTS

Barry Lopez wrote late in his life,

I've felt for a long time that the great political questions of our time — about violent prejudice, global climate change, venal greed, fear of the Other — could be addressed in illuminating ways by considering models in the natural world. Some consider it unsophisticated to explore the nonhuman world for clues to solving human dilemmas, and wisdom's oldest tool, metaphor, is often regarded with wariness, or even suspicion in my culture. But abandoning metaphor entirely only paves the way to the rigidity of fundamentalism.⁷

By contrast to the western-centric culture Lopez laments, Gregory Cajete tells us that the “metaphoric mind remains the first foundation of Native science,”⁸ although he is clear that both the rational and metaphoric minds are “typically given...balanced regard” in Native societies.⁹ Through Kimmerer, one apprehends the multi-layered meanings contained within Cajete's use of the term “metaphor,” a far richer concept than Western minds may grasp. She is a scientist who reclaims and celebrates the metaphoric foundation Cajete describes; *Braiding Sweetgrass* is introduced by the metaphorical telling of Skywoman Falling, and the process of planting, tending, picking, braiding, and burning sweetgrass provides a leitmotif to the book. According to her Potawatomi worldview, sweetgrass itself is one of the first gifts from Skywoman. It is a sacred ceremonial plant across many indigenous nations.

Kimmerer tells us that because sweetgrass belongs to Mother Earth and is a gift to us, it cannot be bought and still retain its ceremonial power. It must be a gift, and accepting the gift obligates the receiver to reciprocate. “Sweetgrass pickers collect properly and respectfully, for their own use and the needs of their community. They return a gift to the earth and tend to the well-being of the [sweetgrass. Braids of sweetgrass] are given as gifts, to honor, to say thank you, to heal, and to strengthen. The sweetgrass is kept in motion.”¹⁰ Indeed, when detailing the importance of sweetgrass, she recalls Lewis Hyde's injunction

that “the gift must always move.”¹¹

As Kimmerer moves through the processes of tending, harvesting, and benefitting from sweetgrass, she incorporates her life as a child, a college student, a graduate student, a student of indigenous elders, and as a professor. I never felt she intended to showcase her own teaching, but she uses examples throughout the book to explain concepts and reveal the gifts she passes along. As someone steeped in academia, her pedagogy dazzled me: what would it be like to have such a truly humble teacher? One who puts herself at the service of both her students and the natural world? She seeks bridges between academic and native science to help her students understand the myriad gifts and teachings of plants and ultimately to become agents of change who work to assist the earth in its healing process. It seems pretentious to consider that I might even approach her abilities, but I recognize her focus on nature for its pedagogical gifts, especially the ability to move us beyond troubled inter-group dynamics.

I will highlight just one of the teaching episodes from *Braiding Sweetgrass* that linger in my imagination. In these polarized political times, I was particularly struck by Kimmerer’s interactions with a class of Evangelical undergraduates in the Bible Belt. One spring, she asked her group of pre-med students to develop a hypothesis about why the slope of a nearby forest displayed different colors as it rose in elevation; they offered “God’s plan” as their response. She took it upon herself to cultivate more curiosity toward the natural world to “convert their scientific souls” and organized a weekend camping trip in the Great Smoky Mountains,¹² where they would experience firsthand the various temperature zones, soils, and species that comprised the ecosystems at different elevations.

At the close of a weekend full of information, facts, measurements, and lists of species, Kimmerer despairs that she has not managed to help her students care for the world, and to “...respond to it as a gift. I’d told them all about how it works, and nothing of what it meant. We might as well have stayed home and read about the Smokies.”¹³ And yet, the world she’d shown them became their teacher. As the students followed her down the mountain amid the late afternoon light, they were enveloped in a “shower of white petals” from silverbells and heard the song of a Hermit Thrush.¹⁴ One of the students

began to sing “Amazing Grace,” and others joined in with beautiful harmonies. She writes:

I was humbled. Their singing said everything that my well-intentioned lectures did not. . . . I heard in their raised voices the same outpouring of love and gratitude for the Creation that Skywoman first sang on the back of Turtle Island. In their caress of that old hymn I came to know that it wasn't naming the source of wonder that mattered, it was wonder itself.

As an enthusiastic young PhD, colonized by the arrogance of science, I had been fooling myself that I was the only teacher. The land is the real teacher. All we need as students is mindfulness. Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart. My job was just to lead them into the presence and ready them to hear. On that smoky afternoon, the mountains taught the students and the students taught the teacher.¹⁵

Within the indigenous/evangelical contact zone of Kimmerer's ecology course, her revelation seems a remarkable example of transculturation. Her focus on the gifts we receive from plants allows her to be extraordinarily generous to a group that might test the teaching mettle of a more anthropocentric instructor. Realizing she is intellectually colonized by her academic scientific training, Kimmerer opens herself to learning from the students whose ancestors colonized her people and marginalized their scientific knowledge. In so doing, she realizes the students have arrived at the “love and gratitude for Creation” that she hoped they would find during their experience in the field, although they revealed this love through an unexpected route.

Clearly, it is problematic that the indigenous scientist is the first to allow herself to be challenged by her students, rather than the other way around. Yet, Kimmerer's deep attention to her students is something for educators to emulate. She is rewarded by the lesson she learns and returns full circle to remind us that the land is our first and best teacher. Perhaps it is presumptuous

of me to interpret this anecdote, but, in my view, Kimmerer's relationship with her students reflects her gratitude for the gifts she receives from the natural world. Just as she gratefully receives the teachings of plants, she also receives the teachings of her students. She keeps the gift in motion.

Passing the gift along, however, is no simple matter. We do not merely move it through a chain of hands, but rather allow our gratitude for the gift to reverberate, multiply, and transform us. This process is, Hyde tells us, a labor. "[I] think of gratitude as a labor the soul undertakes to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. We work, sometimes for years, until the gift has truly ripened inside of us and can be passed along."¹⁶ Hyde distinguishes labor from work, which is done by the hour. One may be paid for labor as well as for work, but labor "sets its own pace" and is "harder to quantify." I think of the proverbial "labor of love," which may indeed correspond to one's work, but not necessarily so. Hyde continues: "When I speak of a labor, then, I intend to refer to something dictated by the course of life rather than by society, something that is often urgent but which nevertheless has its own interior rhythm, something more bound up with feeling, more interior, than work."¹⁷

The nature of labor that Hyde illuminates is a deep form of reciprocity, wherein we are moved to honor a gift by laboring toward our own inner transformation so that we may pass the gift on. Kimmerer's written work is a manifestation of this process: she is intensely grateful to Skywoman and to the world of plants for their gifts; in turn, she labors to transform her understanding into the gifts she passes on to her readers and her students. A quietly profound pedagogy of reciprocation and gift-giving is among the riches to be found in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Over time, her gratitude underwent the labor process described by Hyde, emerging in a new, reciprocal relationship with her students. Simply put, she learns from them and appreciates them in new ways: she lets them challenge and change her, deepens her understanding of who they are, and grows as a teacher.

I was moved by this vignette, and grateful to Kimmerer for conveying her lesson to me. After receiving the gift of Kimmerer's teaching through this story and others, my labor is to do as Hyde directs:

Between the time a gift comes to us and the time we pass it along, we suffer gratitude. Moreover, . . . it is only when the gift has worked in us, only when we have come up to its level, as it were, that we can give it away again. Passing the gift along is the act of gratitude which finishes the labor.¹⁸

I have also received numerous gifts from students. They entrusted me with their dreams, their research training, their confidence in our opportunity program, and sometimes with anger, sadness, or confusion that challenged me. So many stories and personalities, so many research questions — so many unexpected gifts which continue to fall into my lap years after students graduate. They invited me into their communities and families, sometimes literally, most often metaphorically through their lines of inquiry or the essays they wrote for fellowships and scholarships. Very few of these students will ever know what their gifts have meant to me, or indeed, that I consider them to be gifts. Yet their gifts have allowed me to catch glimpses of a community that might connect us in new ways, a community that would open possibilities for transformation of self, other, and education.

COMMUNITY

“Community” is a concept that may obscure historical identity and power dynamics, even so, I seek pathways for educators to enter into community with their students in the hopes that we will be better able to face the challenges ahead. Alphonso Lingis writes, “Community is usually conceived as constituted by a number of individuals having something in common — a common language, a common conceptual framework — and building something in common: a nation, a polis, an institution.”¹⁹ Certainly, this is how my college understands its goal of “building community,” and what my students mean when they say they are pursuing an advanced degree or a certain research project “for my community.” My college and my students intend to nurture their respective rational communities, which Lingis tells us are those formed by common discourses and practices. There are many different rational communities, but this form of “community” can be used opportunistically by those in power, even as it gives meaning to marginalized students who pursue higher education to

improve the lives of others.

Yet Lingis offers a sharply contrasting vision in his concept of “the other community,” which “demands that the one who has [her] own communal identity, who produces [her] own nature, expose [herself] to the one with whom [she] has nothing in common, the stranger.”²⁰ Kimmerer is steeped in both her academic discipline and her indigenous ways of knowing—two different rational communities that *Braiding Sweetgrass* weaves together. But in the encounter with her evangelistic Christian students, who are members of yet another rational community, she becomes vulnerable. Even if she might not describe herself as in community with her students, the boundaries between them feel porous: she seems to accept the Levinasian imperative to respond to the face of the Other and comes to recognize what she learns from her settler students as a gift. When Kimmerer hears her students sing, she responds to them and opens herself to “the demands and contestation of the other.”²¹ In so doing, the other community arises. Put another way, she gives them the opportunity to “come into presence:”²² by presenting themselves to her, the stranger, they come into being as subjects. Kimmerer tells us “[t]hat Sunday afternoon changed forever my way of teaching.”²³ We are left to wonder and hope that the students will, in turn, open themselves to her—to labor over the gifts she gave them in their weekend camping, and be moved to pass them on.

For Lingis, the other community is “the community of those who have nothing in common, of those who have nothingness, death, their mortality, in common.”²⁴ We only enter it when we lay ourselves open to the Other, mindful of our shared humanity. Although surely not Lingis’ intent, I perceive a resonance between the other community and Dr. King’s “beloved community,” a term he borrowed from Josiah Royce to “describe a society of justice, peace and harmony which can be achieved through nonviolence.”²⁵ To enter the beloved community would require us to respond to the alterity and the utter humanity of the Other, and to recognize that, as King famously wrote, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”²⁶ This could not be more true in our precarious time of climate upheaval and political turmoil. The

beloved community affirms that the fates of our many rational communities are bound together.

In *Horizon*, Lopez reminds us we must learn to “speak meaningfully with one another about our cultural fate and about our shared biological fate... [and that] the necessity to listen attentively to foundational stories other than our own becomes imperative.”²⁷ Perhaps if educators received their students’ stories and worldviews as gifts to be labored over, we would find a way into the beloved, other community together.

KEEPING THE GIFT IN MOTION

The humility with which Kimmerer describes her interactions with students so different from herself set me to thinking about professors I admire. The content they teach may be far afield from Kimmerer’s, and perhaps their curricula are less suited than ecology to wonder and gratitude as the basis of their work, yet it seems to me that a similar reciprocal connection with their students drives these educators. Do they, too, regard their students with the profound attention Kimmerer demonstrates? Are they somehow able to enter the other community, to find another thread in that “single garment of destiny?”

“Owen” is a business professor, which seems an unlikely field for an educator who creates openings into the other, beloved community. And yet Owen forges bonds with students very different from himself, perhaps because he takes a thoughtful philosophical approach to his teaching. In an interview, he explained:²⁸

...[W]e do a better job stuffing our students’ heads in the subject matter than we do helping them figure out who they are. Why are they here in the world, what are their gifts and how can they find meaning and purpose in their lives? So, I’ve resolved to get more deliberate about that. I believe [in] the best connections I’ve had with students ... I resolved to be conscious about doing little things.

I’ve taken as my mission, a statement given to me by the late philosopher Robert Hartman who said there are only

four steps to a successful life. He said: know yourself; choose yourself; grow yourself; and give yourself to something greater than you. I believe as a professor if I can help my students to know themselves, choose themselves, grow themselves, and then give themselves to something greater, I've done my job well.

Owen offered several teaching ideas based on Hartman's axiology. Hartman, he explained, escaped Nazi Germany in 1933 and spent the rest of his life asking how a society could "turn so evil so fast."

[In Hartman's] language...Nazi Germany ... [considered] their ideas about other people as more valuable than people themselves. And in the theory of axiology, you accept each person as a unique individual as the highest value—more valuable than things or ideas. And that's a deliberate and difficult switch.

I find there's a strong pressure in higher ed to ... put on a mask and be the sage on the stage, to be a professor, not a person; to see them as students, not people. And the degree that I can be aware enough to be a person dealing with other people, recognizing there's still some boundaries that have to exist because of our relationship, that students appreciate genuineness, they appreciate seeing your warts and all.

Owen also expects to learn from his students. As he explained:

I do a little exercise the first day of class, I call it "gain and give." As they introduce themselves [they answer]—what do you want to gain from this course, what are you prepared to give others from your background experience, introspections, and so forth—to show them that learning is a two-way street. And I have them write it up and I put it in my notebook. I keep a notebook for each course, and I try to reread it every week or two, to see what are students telling me they want out of this course so I can adapt it.

I've got a fascinating first year student who's from [East Africa].... [She] met with me just last week.... She said, 'I want to start a mining company.' It's unusual for college freshmen to want to start mining companies! She said in [her country] mining is a major industry. Most of the mining is owned by international companies who export the profits for their benefit. They're really harsh on the environment and there are unsafe conditions. She said, I would like someday to have a mine that's owned by [our own citizens], so that the richness of it stays in the country, and I would like to have better safety measures and less environmental impact. She's majoring in geology... and I thought how powerful is *that* for an eighteen year-old.

As our interview ended, I felt Owen's respect for this young woman and his desire to help her find the people and resources she needed to accomplish her goals. She wanted to "go back and do something good" in her country, and he wanted to give to her the wherewithal to do so. By attending to the "little things," and continually reevaluating what students want from his course, Owen makes overtures to them so they can respond to him and come into presence. In turn, he uses what he receives from students to serve them better. He echoes Kimmerer's thoughtful approach to students.

Kimmerer and Owen may seem to have little in common: a tribally-oriented, indigenous scientist who sees the natural world both metaphorically and scientifically and a self-described "pretty mainstream," older-white-male business professor guided by a western European philosopher whose Enlightenment sensibility values the individual above all else. Yet they both seem able to foster connections to their students and their subject matter, and they both use the language of gifts given and received. They have — to use Owen's language — given themselves to something greater than themselves, whether that is the healing of the natural world or nurturing students' unique gifts and goals. What allows for the deep attention to the other that they both embody? Are there indications for the rest of us to learn from?

Several elements come to mind. First, they bring their full humanity to relationships with students and do not place themselves above them, even though they are responsible to be academic guides. As Owen says, he wants to be “a person dealing with other people.” Second, they gladly learn from their students and question themselves vigilantly. They are willing to be challenged and change the course of their teaching in the service of their own as well as their students’ growth and learning. They are humble. They understand their students’ worldviews and questions as gifts to be accepted, labored over, and kept in motion. Indeed, Owen’s teaching philosophy mirrors Kimmerer when she writes that we each have a gift, but it is our responsibility to learn how to use it.²⁹ Finally, in the moments when they accept the challenge of something new and unexpected from their students, Kimmerer and Owen both hesitate. Kimmerer questions her pedagogical methods; Owen rereads his notebooks weekly. Hesitation allows something new to enter the pedagogical relationship; it is precisely what La Condamine and his fellow explorers were not able to do when confronted with indigenous knowledges.

Hyde defines “‘gratitude’ as a labor undertaken by the soul to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. Once a gift has stirred within us it is up to us to develop it. There is a reciprocal labor in the maturation of a talent. The gift will continue to discharge its energy so long as we attend to it in return.”³⁰ As educators, the task before us now is to gratefully accept the gift of our students’ challenges, to undergo the process of labor so that the gift develops and transforms within us, allowing its energy to move into the future of the young people whose lives we may have touched. “The gift must always move.”

1 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2008), 35; her italics.

2 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 35.

3 Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

4 Enrique Dussel and Gary MacEoin, “1492: The Discovery of an Invasion,” *CrossCurrents* 41, no. 4

(Winter 1991-92): 437-452; 441.

5 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 346-347.

6 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 328.

7 Barry Lopez, "Love in a Time of Terror," in *Earthly Love*, ed. Orion Magazine (Northampton, MA: Orion, 2020), xx.

8 Gregory Cajete, "Philosophy of Native Science," in *American Indian Thought*, ed. Anne Waters (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 45-57.

9 Cajete, "Philosophy of Native Science," 51.

10 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 27.

11 Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 18-19. Kindle.

12 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 216-217.

13 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 221.

14 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 221.

15 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 222.

16 Lewis Hyde, "Some Food We Could Not Eat: Gift Exchange and the Imagination," *The Kenyon Review, New Series 1* (Autumn, 1979): 32-60.

17 Lewis Hyde, "Transformation & the Labor of Gratitude," *The Kenyon Review, New Series 2* (Autumn, 1980): 104-117.

18 Hyde, "Transformation," 109-110.

19 Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), ix.

20 Lingis, *Community*, 10.

21 Lingis, *Community*, 10.

22 Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

23 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 222.

24 Lingis, *Community*, 13.

25 "Glossary of Nonviolence," The King Center, accessed 10/29/2021, <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/glossary-of-nonviolence/>.

26 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," accessed 10/29/2021, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birming-

[ham.html](#).

27 Barry Lopez, *Horizon* (New York: Knopf, 2019), 45.

28 “Owen,” in conversation with the author, January 29, 2020.

29 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 347.

30 Hyde, “Transformation,” 111.