CHAPTER 26

The Covenant of Reciprocity

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We are showered every day with the gifts of the Earth, gifts we have neither earned nor paid for. When we woke this morning and put our feet on Mother Earth we were met with air to breathe, nurturing rain, black soil, berries, and honeybees, the tree that became this page, a bag of rice, and the exuberance of a field of goldenrod and asters in full bloom.

Many people in the society in which we live speak of these everyday miracles as "natural resources," as if they were our property, waiting to be transformed. In the ecological sciences we call them "ecosystem services" as if they were the inevitable outcomes of the function of the ecological machine. But to me, simply as a person filling my basket with berries and my belly with pie, they feel like gifts, bestowed by the beings whose lives surround us.

Though we live in a world made of gifts, we find ourselves harnessed to institutions and an economy that relentlessly asks, "What more can we take from the Earth?" This worldview of unbridled exploitation is, to my mind, the greatest threat to the life that surrounds us. Even our well-worn definitions of sustainability, such as "to ensure that the benefits of the use to present generations does not diminish the capacity to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations," revolve around trying to find a formula by which we can keep on taking, far into the future. Isn't the question we need, "What can we give in response for all we've been given, for all we have taken?"(Kimmerer, 2014).

It seems to me that for the past couple of centuries—just an eye blink in the lifetime of our species—we have been performing an unintended experiment, an experiment based in philosophy, but with very tangible manifestations. We have unwittingly asked, what would happen if we believed in human exceptionalism? What if a single species, out of the millions which inhabit the planet, was somehow more deserving of the richness of the Earth than any other? And not only that, in this experiment all the

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ecological laws which constrain growth and consumption do not apply to us, and the laws of thermodynamics had been repealed on our behalf. What happens if we continue to take without giving in return? This poorly conceived experiment tests the hypothesis of what would happen if we behaved as if the Earth were nothing more than "stuff"—a strictly materialist, utilitarian view of the Earth—and, moreover, that all this stuff belonged to us?

After several centuries of data collection, the results of that experiment are in. We face natural goods ("resources") depletion, massive loss of biodiversity, accelerating climate change, inequity, and the systematic extinction of land-based cultures whose members question the very premise of this experiment. We find ourselves teetering on the edge of a precipice of climate chaos, entering what evolutionary biologists are calling the Age of the Sixth Extinction, in which we are losing 200 species every day.

How do we repair the harm we have done to the Earth? It is imperative that we do so, but first we should remember that it is not the Earth that is broken but our relationship with the Earth. The great thinker and botanist Gary Nabhan (1991) said that what we need is not only restoration, but "re-storyation," a healing new narrative for our relationship with the Earth.

The scientific worldview that has dominated our landscape for the past 500 years has undoubtedly yielded tremendous gains in the quality of human life. Science by its very nature seeks to generate knowledge which is free of the influence of human values and there is an important role for that attempted objectivity. However, the problems that our societies face today lie at the intersection of Nature and culture, in values and priorities. Science has brought us huge advances in knowledge, but it is not more knowledge that we now need; it is wisdom. And generating wisdom is not within the purview of science alone. For that we need a new kind of science, one that engages all the human faculties, not just the intellect, but also the mind, body, emotion, and spirit; one that includes not only *p*-values, the common scientific measure of statistical significance, but also human values.

Yet, much of our environmental discourse is about changing the type of lightbulbs we use. While new technologies are an important part of our response, as a scientist, I do not think that it is necessarily new technology, more data, or more money that are needed. If we are to survive, and if our more-than-human relatives are to survive as well, we need a change of heart, a change of worldview.

We are living in an era of profound error, which by virtue of our historical shortsightedness we have come to accept as "normal" when it is, in fact, an anomaly. If we set aside the post-Columbus era, we recognize that for much of humans' time on this planet we lived in cultures of balanced reciprocity with the land that sustains us. For much of our human history we understood ourselves not as "masters of the universe," but as "the younger brothers of Creation" as many indigenous cultures think of us.

The contemporary industrialized worldview understands the meaning of land primarily from a fourfold, materialist perspective. Land is recognized first, as property and its associated exclusionary rights, second, as capital, third, as a source of natural resources, and, more recently, fourth, as the provider of "ecosystem services" (soil fertility, oxygen, habitat and water purification). Humans' relationships with the land are many and diverse, but collapsed to these commonly used definitions land is understood

metaphorically as a "machine," with humans playing the role of mechanic and beneficiary of the machine's production. Across the globe, this worldview has been imposed through colonialism, in an effort to replace a more ancient view which understands the land as a web of relationships which are simultaneously spiritual and material. In the indigenous worldview, these meanings include: land as sustainer, as the dwelling place of non-human relatives, as a source of knowledge, as a pharmacy, as the intergenerational home of both ancestors and descendants. The land is the place where our moral responsibility to life is enacted, land is home, land is inspirited, and land is sacred. Land and life are mutually sustaining when the worldview is based on responsibility *for* land rather than on rights *to* land. Is the land merely a source of belongings or is it also the source of our sense of belonging? We can choose the lens through which we view the world.

Our current adversarial relationship with the rest of the living world is not all that we are as a species. We can learn from the global mistakes we are making. We have stories to help us remember a different past and imaginations to help us find the new path. We are a species that can adapt.

This time we live in—of great change and great choices—has been spoken of by our ancestors in the teachings of the "Prophecies of the Seventh Fire," a long and important history, of which I will share just a fragment (Benton-Banai, 1988). It is the history of the migration of our Anishinaabe people. Each fire represents an historical era beginning with our migration from the East, where we lived among our Wabanaki relatives on the Atlantic shore. It is said that a prophet arose among the people warning of great changes to come and cautioning the people to divide and move to the West to safeguard the sacred fire. The history unfolds as our people moved through the generations to "where the food grows on the water," the wild rice lands of the Great Lakes. At each fire, or historical stopping place, teachers once again emerged to guide the people through the coming changes, including the upheaval caused by the arrival of the newcomers. It was foretold that the people would become alienated from their lands and from each other, that their language would be lost, that the black robes with their black book would seek to replace the ancient spiritual traditions, that the knowledge of the elders would be all but lost. This we know has come to pass. After all the losses of land, of language, of sacred ways, of each other, it is said that the people will find themselves in a time when we can no longer fill a cup from the streams and drink, when the air is too thick to breathe, and when the plants and animals begin to turn away from us. In the time of climate chaos and the Age of the Sixth Extinction, we know that this too has come to pass. It is said that in the time of the Seventh Fire, all the world's peoples, newcomers and original peoples, will stand together at a fork in the road, and have a choice to make. In my imagination, one of the paths is soft, green, spangled with dew—you could walk barefoot there. The other path is black and burnt, made of cinders that would cut your feet. Prophecy has become history, for at this time, when the world as we know it hangs in the balance, we know we have reached that fork.

The prophecy tells us that we must make a choice between the path of materialism and greed that will destroy Earth, or the spiritual path of care and compassion, of *mno bmaadiziwin*, the good life. We know which path we want, but we are told that we cannot simply walk forward. Instead, the people of the Seventh Fire must walk back and pick up

what was left for us along the ancestors' path: fragments of land and shreds of story; to retrieve our language, ceremonies, and spiritual ways; to pick up our relatives, the other species who have been harmed and cast aside. Only when we have reclaimed what was lost and put it in our bundles can we walk down the green path of life together, all the world's people, immigrants and indigenous, for the same Earth sustains us all. This teaching is not for a return to a romanticized past, but to recover spiritual, cultural, and relational elements of that past so we can go forward.

What do we love too much to lose, such that we will carry it through the straits of climate change, safely to the other side? For there is another side. The prophecy foretells that the People of the Seventh Fire will need great courage, creativity, and wisdom to do the work of healing the world, but that in doing so they will lead us to the lighting of the Eighth Fire, of kinship and life. Our elders have said that we are living in the time of the Seventh Fire. In this moment, at the cusp of undoing, we are the ones who must bend to the task of putting things back together. We are the people of the Seventh Fire, and the wisdom that we reclaim will enable us to renew the world.

We know that we stand today at a crossroads. We need to look for the stories, left along the ancestors' path, that will heal us and bring us back in balance. I have been told that my Potawatomi ancestors taught that the job of every human is to learn the answer to the question, "What can I give in return for the gifts of the Earth?" This is so fundamental to our worldview that it holds a place in the mythic Creation story of our people, a story shared by the peoples of the Great Lakes:

> In the beginning, there was the Skyworld, where people lived much as they do on Earth, alongside the great Tree of Life, on whose branches grew seeds and fruits and medicines, all the gifts of the plants on a single tree. One day a great wind felled the tree, and a hole opened where its roots had been. When a beautiful young woman, called in our language, Gizhkokwe (Skywoman), ventured to the edge to look down, she lost her footing. When she reached out to the tree to stop her fall, a branch broke off in her hand.
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> 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. But in that emptiness there were many, gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman, arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them.
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> The geese nodded at one another and rose as one from the water, in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath and broke her fall. Far from the only home she'd ever known, she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers. And so it began. From the beginning of time, we are told that the very first encounter between humans and other beings of the Earth was marked by care and responsibility, borne on the strong wings of geese.
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> The world at that time was covered entirely by water. The geese could not hold the woman much longer, so they called a council of all the beings to decide what to do. As Turtle floated in the watery gathering, he offered to let her rest upon his back. The others understood that she needed land. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreed to retrieve some. One by one, the animals offered their help: the otter, the loon, and the beaver. But the depth, the darkness, and the pressures were too great for even these strongest of swimmers, who came up gasping. Only the little muskrat

> was left, the weakest diver of all. He volunteered to go while the others looked on doubtfully. His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward. He was gone a very long time. They waited and waited, fearing the worst for their relative. A stream of bubbles rose and the small limp body of muskrat floated upward. But the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched, and when they pried it open, there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said, "Here, spread this mud on my back and I will hold it."
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> Skywoman did as Turtle asked and then began to sing her gratitude and then to dance. As her feet caressed the Earth, the land grew and grew from the dab of mud on Turtle's back. From the branch in her hand, she seeded the earth with green. And so, the Earth was made. Not by one alone, but from the alchemy of two essential elements of gratitude and reciprocity. Together they created what we know today as Turtle Island. Our oldest teachings remind us that gratitude and reciprocity are the threads that bind us together. The other species were her life raft at the beginning of the world, and now, so much closer to the end, we must be theirs. (Kimmerer, 2013)

The Earth was new then, when it welcomed the first human. It is old now and some suspect that we have overstayed our welcome. The stories of reciprocity have faded in our memory. How can we translate from the stories at the world's beginning to this hour which is so much closer to its end? Can we understand the Skywoman story not as a relic from the past, but as instructions for the future? In return for the gift of the world on Turtle's back, what will we give in return?

How do cultures engage in reciprocity with the more-than-human world? As the Skywoman story and millennia of lived experience attest, this was a central question for our ancestors, as it is for us today. Traditional knowledge is replete with teachings about how to reciprocate. The imperative of reciprocity is explored in what have been called our "Original Instructions" (Nelson, 2008), which are the ethical systems that govern relations with the human and the more-than-human world. Reciprocity can take many forms, just a few of which are explored here.

What Can We Give?

Gratitude

Native environmental philosophy acknowledges that our human lives are utterly dependent on the lives of other beings and thus our first responsibility is for gratitude. As the Skywoman story suggests, recognition of the world as a gift is an invitation to give thanks; indeed, many indigenous cultures have been characterized as "cultures of gratitude."

For much of humans' time on the planet, before the great delusion, we lived in cultures that understood the covenant of reciprocity—that for the Earth to stay in balance, for the gifts to continue to flow, we must give back in equal measure. The most powerful offering we possess is gratitude. Gratitude may seem weak given the desperate challenges that lie before us, but it is powerful, much more than a simple thank you. Giving thanks implies recognition not only of the gift, but of the giver.

When I eat an apple, my gratitude is directed to the forces of Creation and to that wide-armed tree whose tart fruit is now in my mouth, whose life has become my own. Gratitude is founded on the deep knowing that our very existence relies on the gifts of other beings.

The evolutionary advantage for cultures of gratitude is compelling. This human emotion has adaptive value because it engenders practical outcomes for sustainability. The practice of gratitude can, in a very real sense, lead to the practice of self-restraint, of taking only what you need. Naming and appreciation of the gifts that surround us create satisfaction, a feeling of "enough-ness" that is an antidote to the societal messages that drill into our spirits, telling us we must have more. Practicing contentment is a radical act in a consumption-driven society.

Indigenous story traditions are full of cautionary tales about the failure of gratitude. When people forget to honor the gift, the consequences are always material as well as spiritual. The spring dries up, the corn crop fails, the animals do not return, and the legions of offended plants, animals, and rivers rise up against the ones who neglected gratitude. The Western story-telling tradition is strangely silent on this, so we find ourselves in an era when centuries of overconsumption have depleted natural goods (resources) and left human societies materially and culturally impoverished by a deep alienation from the living world.

We humans have protocols for gratitude; we apply them formally to one another. We say "thank you." We understand that receiving a gift incurs a responsibility to give a gift in return. Gratitude is our first, but not our only gift. We are storytellers, music-makers, and devisers of ingenious machines, healers, scientists, and lovers of an Earth that asks that we give our gifts on behalf of life. The next step in our cultural evolution, if we are to persist as a species on this beautiful planet, is to expand our protocols for gratitude to the living Earth.

Gratitude is most powerful as a response to the Earth because it provides an opening to reciprocity, to the act of giving back, to living in a way that the Earth will be grateful for us.

Ceremony

Among the treasures we can pick up along that path of traditional knowledge are the ceremonies. Ceremonies are a potent cultural expression of reciprocity which renews bonds between the land and people and focuses intention, attention, and action on behalf of the natural world, which is inclusive of the spiritual world. From the First Salmon ceremonies of the Northwest to the great Thanksgiving Address of the Haudenosaunee, ceremony represents a ritual gift of spiritual energy, power, and beauty that is offered in reciprocity for the gifts we have received and contributes to a balance between humans and the more-than-human world. Plants and animals, of course, often play vital roles in ceremony, as ritual foods and objects, and as vehicles for interface with the sacred. Consuming feast foods in ceremony reinforces our appreciation of the way that plants and animals offer their bodies to feed our own, in a sacred transaction of life for life (Kimmerer, 2016).

It is important to remember that spiritual ceremonies, in addition to their power in unseen dimensions, may also have important immediate, direct effects on the physical world and thus constitute a form of "practical reverence." For example, the traditional four-day ceremony to honor the ripening of wild rice includes a ban on gathering during that ritual period. Abstaining from the harvest during ceremony yields pragmatic consequences for the flourishing of the rice, which benefits from four days of seed-drop to reseed the rice beds before people come to gather. Likewise, Salmon ceremonies, which permit the salmon to run upriver without impediment during the ceremony that welcomes them back to their natal waters, ensure that an adequate number of fish return to the spawning grounds.

Attention

Every one of us is endowed with the singular gift of paying attention, that remarkable focused convergence of our senses, our intellect, and our feeling. It is so appropriate that we call it *paying* attention, for it is perhaps a near-universal form of currency—it is exchangeable, valuable, and it incurs an expense on the part of the payer. For attention, we all know well, is a limited resource. Science is a powerful tool for paying attention to the Earth, as are art and religion.

What should be our response to the generosity of the more-than-human world? In a world that gives us maple syrup, spotted salamanders, and sand hill cranes, should we not at least pay attention? Paying attention is an ongoing act of reciprocity, the gift that keeps on giving, in which attention generates wonder, which in turn generates more attention, more joy. Paying attention to the more-than-human world does not lead only to amazement; it leads also to acknowledgment of pain. Open and attentive, we see and feel equally the beauty and the wounds, the old growth and the clear-cut, the mountain and the mine. Paying attention to suffering sharpens our ability to respond, to be responsible. This too, is a gift, for when we love the living world, we cannot be bystanders of its destruction. Attention becomes intention, which coalesces itself to action.

Deep attention calls us inevitably into a deep relationship, as information and energy are exchanged between the observer and the observed, and neither partner in the exchange can be anonymous. They are known; they have names. There was a time, not so long ago, when to be human meant knowing the names of the beings with whom we cohabit the world. Knowing a name is the way humans build relationship. It is a sign of respect to call a being by its name, and a sign of disrespect to ignore it.

Ethnobiologists tell us that our great-grandparents spoke fluent natural history. They knew the names and personalities of dozens of birds and hundreds of plants. Today, a typical American schoolchild can recognize more than 100 corporate logos but fewer than ten plants. We have lost an entire vocabulary, of speech, of experience, and of relationship. Our fundamental currency of relationship, our highly evolved capacity for paying attention to those species that sustain us, has been subverted in an intellectual hijacking. How can we care for them, monitor their wellbeing, and fight for their existence if we do not even know their names?

The way that we name these beings both reflects and grows from our worldview. For example, in Western scientific ways of knowing, we honor Linnaeus as the father of taxonomy, the inventor of binomial nomenclature. Linnaeus was charged with giving standardized names and systematic clarity to the world's flora and fauna, at a time when discovery was rapidly accelerating the lists of biodiversity. He stamped each species with a universal Latin binomial, based on its morphological characteristics, becoming the "great namer" of plants which he may have known from only a herbarium sheet, as if they did not already have names. In contrast, let us consider another "great namer" from the indigenous tradition, Nanabozho, the cultural hero of my Anishinaabe people. It is said that when Nanabozho, the original man, was placed on the Earth, he was filled with wonder at its beauty. The Creator had instructed him to travel to the Four Directions as a humble student, learning all that he could from the others who were already living there in harmony with one another. He was given the responsibility of speaking with every kind of being and learning from them what gifts they had to share with the people who would be coming. Every plant he encountered taught him of its worth, the way its roots could be eaten, the medicines it made, how its bark was ready to become lodges, its branches baskets, its berries food to sweeten life. As Nanabozho came to know and respect each plant, he also came to know their names. His way of being was not to impose foreign names on them, but to humbly learn their own. The way that we name can create relationships of dominance and distance, or relationships of relatedness and respect. But whether the names are Linnaean, indigenous, or English, the sad truth is that we know very few. For many in industrial societies, the living world has become an inanimate collection of objects.

We have enabled a state of nameless anonymity, bringing human people to a condition of isolation and disconnection, which philosophers call "species loneliness." "Species loneliness," a deep, unnamed sadness, is the cost of estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship. Our Potawatomi stories relate that a long time ago, when Turtle Island was young, the people and all the plants and animals spoke the same language and conversed freely with one another. But no more. As our dominance has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely on the planet, and can no longer call our neighbors by their real names. If we are to manifest the values of the Skywoman story, we have to once again call each other by name.

Knowing the beings with which we share the world is also the pathway to recognition of the world as gift. The world seems less like a shopping bag of commodities and more like a gift when you know the one who gives you the aspirin for your headache. Her name is Willow; she lives up by the pond. She is a neighbor of Maple, who offers you the gift of syrup. Paying attention is a pathway to gratitude.

Respectful relationship

In her poem "When Earth becomes an It," Cherokee poet Marilou Awiakta (1993) considers the consequences of naming:

> When the people call the Earth "Mother,"
> They take with love

And with love give back
So that all may live.

When the people call Earth "it,"
They use her
Consume her strength. Then the people die.

Already the sun is hot
Out of season.
Our Mother's breast
Is going dry.
She is taking all green
Into her heart
And will not turn back
Until we call her
By her name.

In the absence of names, it all comes down to pronouns. Grammar is how we chart relationships in language and, as it happens, our relationship with the land. When you look closely at the English language, is it any wonder our worldview objectifies Nature as property? In English, a being is either a human or an "it." The language gives us no choice—it imprisons our ideas.

Imagine seeing your grandmother standing at the stove and then saying, "Look, it is making soup. It has gray hair." We might snicker at such a mistake, but recoil from it also. In English, we never refer to a member of our family, or indeed any other person, as "it." That would be a profound act of disrespect. "It" robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere "thing." And yet in the English language, we speak of our beloved grandmother Earth in exactly that way. But in Potawatomi and many other indigenous languages, it is impossible to speak of a tree or a fish or a bird as an "it." We use the same grammar to address the living world as we do our family, because they are our family.

Speaking of and understanding other beings as objects, as mere "its," opens the door to exploitation. Linguistics codes our relationships with the world, delineating the boundaries for our circle of respect and compassion. When Maple is an "it," we can take up the chainsaw. When Maple is a "her," we think twice.

If we are to survive here—and if our neighbors are to survive, too—we need to learn to speak the grammar of animacy. Language has always been adaptive, we lose words we no longer need and coin new ones. We do not need a worldview of Earth beings as objects; that has led us down the blackened path. We need a new language for our journey on the green path (Kimmerer, 2015b). And so, as people of the Seventh Fire, can we undo linguistic imperialism with linguistic biomimicry from the Anishinaabe language?

In our Anishinaabe language, the word for "land" is a small word with a big meaning. It is more than terrain, than soil, than area—it is the living land, the inspirited, animate land. That small word is *aki*, the Earth that sustains us.

Just a small thing: let us replace the word "it," the pronoun we use for non-human beings, with a new pronoun: not "he" or "she," but "ki," from *aki*, to signify animate, being of the Earth. So that when we speak of the sugar maple, we say "Oh, that beautiful tree, ki is giving us sap again this spring."

And we'll need a plural pronoun, too. Let us make it "kin," those Earth beings. And so we can now refer to "them" not as things, but as our earthly relatives. On a crisp October morning we can look up and say, "Look at the geese, kin are flying south for the winter. Come back soon."

Words have power. Let us speak of the beings of the Earth as "kin" and leave "it" for tables, bulldozers, and paperclips. Every time we say *ki* let our language reaffirm our respect and our kinship with the more-than-human world. Let us speak of the beings of Earth as the "kin" they are.

Recognition of Personhood

The Skywoman story is grounded in the fundamental ethical tenet that the other beings with whom we share the planet—the ones who sustain us—are persons too: non-human persons with their own ways of being, their own intentions, their own contributions to the world, their own rights to life. Science and spirituality both demonstrate the fundamental nature of our relatedness with all living beings: we are more similar than we are different. We are governed by the same ecological and evolutionary rules.

Reciprocity is rooted in the understanding that we are not alone, that Earth is populated by non-human persons. How different our world would be if we extended the same respect, compassion, and agency to other species that we do to human people. We tolerate governance that grants legal personhood and free speech to non-living corporations, but denies that respect to voiceless salamanders and sugar maples.

Reserving personhood for a single species, in language and in ways of living, perpetuates the fallacy of human exceptionalism, that we are fundamentally different and somehow better, more deserving of the wealth and services of the Earth than other species. Recognition of the personhood of other beings asks that we relinquish our perceived role as dominators and celebrate our essential role as an equal member in the democracy of all species.

Paying attention to other beings, recognizing their incredible gifts of photosynthesis, nitrogen fixation, migration, metamorphosis, and communication across miles is humbling and leads inescapably to an understanding that we are surrounded by intelligences other than our own, by beings who evolved here long before we did, and who have adapted innovative, remarkable ways of being that we might emulate, through intellectual biomimicry, for sustainability. We are surrounded by teachers and mentors who come dressed in foliage, fur, and feathers. There is comfort in their presence and guidance in their lessons.

Not only are other beings understood as sovereign persons, but many are regarded as our teachers. A fundamental tenet of traditional plant knowledge is that the plants are understood, not as mere objects or lower life-forms as the Western "pyramid of being" might suggest, but as persons, non-human persons, with their own knowledge, intentions, and spirits, to whom we owe our respect. Not only are plants acknowledged as persons, but they are also recognized as our oldest teachers. It is said that the plants have been here far longer than we have, they know how to make food and medicine out of light and air, and then give it away. They unite Earth and sky and exemplify the

virtues of generosity; they heal the land and feed all the others in Creation. No wonder they are revered as teachers by humans who are learning how to live on the Earth.

Granting personhood to all beings can be an economic and political construct, as well as an ethical stance. Recognition of personhood for all beings opens the way to ecological justice. Our laws are about governing our rights to the land. We need to include the rights of the land, the rights to be whole and healthy, the right to exist. We can follow the lead of indigenous nations: the Maori, who granted personhood to a river; the Ecuadorians, whose constitution enshrines the rights of Nature herself in the law of the land; and the Bolivians, who brought to the United Nations the *Declaration on the Rights of Mother Nature*.

Land Care

Reciprocity can also manifest through the exercise of traditional resource management or "land care" practices embedded in traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). This large body of knowledge is beyond the scope of this chapter, but represents a significant manifestation of reciprocity, in which humans invest their knowledge and tools on behalf of mutual flourishing, manifesting the understanding that "what is good for the land is good for the people." There is a substantial and growing academic literature which demonstrates the diversity and sophistication of the methods used by indigenous peoples to enhance the productivity and biodiversity of their landscapes (Anderson, 2005; Becker & Ghimire, 2003; Berkes, 2004, 2008; Drew & Henne, 2006; Kimmerer, 2000, 2003, 2013b; Kimmerer & Lake, 2001).

Acknowledgment of the dependence of human life on gifts—the lives of other beings—sets up a tension between the necessity of taking other lives and simultaneously honoring those lives. This contradiction, implicit in our heterotrophic biology, is resolved in indigenous philosophy by the practice of reciprocity, by giving back in return for the gift of the lives that sustain us. It is understood that we humans must take other lives in order to sustain our own, so the manner in which they are taken becomes very important: to take in such a way that the life received is honored.

In the context of the Western worldview, which regards plants primarily as objects, they are seen as either "wild," and therefore free for the taking, or "property," which can be bought and sold. From this perspective of plants as "natural resources," harvesting protocols are typically oriented toward efficiency and lie strictly in the secular realm. However, when plants and animals are viewed as respected persons, relatives, and teachers, harvesting moves from the secular to the sacred. Additional protocols arise as part of traditional harvesting practices. The Honorable Harvest is a set of unwritten guidelines, both ethical and practical, which govern human consumption. They represent acts of reciprocity in return for the gift of life. The Honorable Harvest guidelines are embedded in the indigenous worldview which recognizes the personhood of all beings, in which plants are treated with the same respect and responsibility as human persons. These ancient practices have resonance today in prescribing an alternative to the dominant consumptive materialist worldview, in which humans are understood solely as consumers, and not as active participants in the wellbeing of other organisms.

Collectively, the Honorable Harvest guidelines are "rules" of sorts that govern our taking, so that the world is as rich for the seventh generation as it is for us. These rules are simultaneously biophysical and spiritual; in the indigenous worldview the realms are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive.

The guidelines for the Honorable Harvest (Kimmerer, 2013a, 2015a) were taught to me by generous teachers, in picking medicines and how to gather berries, but they apply to every exchange between people and the Earth. Although the protocol for the Honorable Harvest is not written down, if it were it, it would look something like this:

- Never take the first plant you see. Never taking the first, means you'll never take the last. This is a prescription which has inherent conservation value, through the practice of self-restraint
- Ask permission. I've been taught to address that plant, to introduce myself, to explain why I need those berries or roots. If you are going to take a life, you have to be personally accountable
- Listen to the answer. You can listen in different ways: look around and see whether the plants are numerous and healthy, whether they have enough to share. And if the answer is no, go home. Remember that they do not belong to us, taking without permission is also known as stealing
- If you are granted permission, take only what you need and no more
- Take in such a way that does the least harm and in a way that benefits the growth of the plant. Don't use a shovel if a digging stick suffices
- Use everything you take. It is disrespectful of the life that is given to waste it
- Be grateful. Give thanks for what you have received
- Share the gift with others, human and non-human alike. Earth has shared generously with you, so emulate that behavior in return. A culture of sharing is a culture of resilience
- Reciprocate the gift. We know that in order for balance to be achieved, we cannot take without giving back. Plant gatherers often leave a spiritual gift, but also a material gift, through the act of weeding, scattering seeds, helping the plants to move and flourish

Can we extend the concept of the Honorable Harvest to address the environmental dilemmas that we face today? We need acts of restoration, and not only for polluted waters and degraded lands; we need a restoration of honor for the way we live. The reward is not just a feel-good sense of responsibility; it may save our lives. Our economies and institutions enmesh us all in a profoundly dishonorable harvest. Collectively, by assent or by inaction, we have chosen the policies we live by. But we can choose again—we can choose reciprocity to sustain the ones who sustain us.

What Can We Give in Return for the Gifts of the Earth?

I think that the teaching that we most need to reclaim, to carry in our Seventh Fire bundles to the future, is the teaching of reciprocity. To heal our relationship with the land we must reclaim our roles as givers to the Earth.

It may be hard to know what our responsibilities are, especially in uncertain times, so I find it helpful to remember that gifts and responsibilities are two sides of the same coin. Asking "What is my responsibility?" is also asking "What is my gift?" Birds were given the gift of song, so it is their responsibility to greet the day. Stars were given the gift of sparkling, and therefore the duty to guide our way at night. What are our gifts as human people? We cannot fly, we cannot breathe underwater, and we cannot photosynthesize. What we have is the gift of choice, of story, of gratitude, of love. We can put our hands into the soil, restoring the damage that we have done, healing the land the way the plants have shown us to do it. It is not the land which is broken, but our relationship to it. We can heal that.

Ceremony is a powerful expression of reciprocity. An old ceremony of Anishinaabe people is known as the giveaway, *minidewak*, meaning they give from the heart. In the outside world, a person celebrating life-events may be the recipient of gifts in their honor. But, in the Anishinaabe way this is reversed. The honored one is the giver, enacting reciprocity by sharing gifts in return for their good fortune. I do not know the origin of the ceremony, but I think we learned it from the berry plants, who generously offer up their gifts wrapped in red and blue. In fact, at the heart of the word *minidewak* is the word *min*, which is the root word for both berry and gift. Might the ceremony be a reminder to us to be like the berries?

In closing, let us imagine a different kind of *minidewak*. We are bound by a covenant of reciprocity: plant breath for animal breath, winter and summer, predator and prey, grass and fire, night and day, living and dying. Water knows this, clouds know this. Soil and rocks know they are dancing in a continuous giveaway of making, unmaking, and making the Earth again.

We live in a moral landscape. The land is reading us law over and over, but we forget to listen. Our elders say that ceremony is the way we can "remember to remember." In the dance of the giveaway, remember that the Earth is a gift that we must pass on, just as it came to us. We forget this at our peril. When we forget, the dances we will need will be for mourning, for the passing of polar bears, the silence of cranes, the memory of snow.

When I close my eyes and wait for my heartbeat to match the drum, I envision people recognizing, for perhaps the first time, the dazzling gifts of the world, seeing them with new eyes, just as they teeter on the cusp of undoing. Maybe just in time; maybe too late. Spread on the grass, they will see at last the giveaway that Mother Earth has prepared. Blankets of moss, robes of feathers, baskets of corn, vials of healing herbs, silver salmon, sand dunes, thunderheads and snowdrifts, cords of wood and herds of elk, tulips, potatoes, luna moths and snow geese, and berries. More than anything, I want to hear a great song of thanks rise on the wind. I think that song might save us.

Then, as the drumbeat begins, we will dance, wearing regalia in celebration of the living Earth: a waving fringe of tall grass prairies, a whirl of butterfly shawls with nodding egret plumes, bejeweled with the glitter of a phosphorescent wave. When the song pauses for the honor beats, we will hold high our gift and ululate our praise for a glittering fish, a branch of blossom, and a starlit night. The moral covenant of reciprocity calls us to honor our responsibilities for all we have been given, for all we have taken. It is our turn now, and it is long overdue. Let us hold a giveaway for Mother Earth, spread our blankets out for her and pile them high with gifts of our own making. Imagine the

books, paintings, poems, ingenious machines, compassionate acts, transcendent ideas, perfect tools. A fierce defense of all that has been given: gifts of mind, hands, heart, voice, and vision all offered up on behalf of the Earth. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and to dance for the renewal of the world in return for berries, in return for birds, in return for the privilege of breath (Kimmerer, 2010).

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