

# Braiding Sweetgrass Summary – Robin Wall Kimmerer

7 MINUTE READ

[Braiding Sweetgrass](#) (2013)

Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants

by [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#)

[Paperback](#) | [Ebook](#) | [Audiobook](#)

**Looking for a full, FREE Braiding Sweetgrass summary?**

You're in the right place!

Here's what you'll find on this page...

## One-Sentence Summary

Braiding Sweetgrass is an elegant collection of hopeful, moving, and wistfully funny essays about the natural world. It's also a celebration of our reciprocal relationship to the planet - by botanist, teacher, and indigenous scientist, Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer. ([391 pages](#))

## Contents

- 1. One-Sentence Summary**
- 2. Braiding Sweetgrass Review**
- 3. Braiding Sweetgrass Summary**
- 4. The Natural World Can Teach Us How to Live More Satisfying Lives**
- 5. Skywoman: Decisions for Future Generations**
- 6. Raised by Strawberries: The Gift Economy**
- 7. The Consolation of Water Lilies: Mutuality Across Generations**

- 8. Co-teaching with Cattails: Learning From Nature**
- 9. Gratitude and Reciprocity are Key to Preserving the Planet**
- 10. A Pledge of Gratitude: The Thanksgiving Address**
- 11. The Honorable Harvest: Take No More Than You Need**
- 12. Indigenous Wisdom and Scientific Knowledge are Related**
- 13. The Sweetgrass Researchers: We Are Not Separate From Our Subjects**
- 14. Windigo Nature: Self-interest Over Balance**
- 15. Braiding Sweetgrass Contents**
- 16. Braiding Sweetgrass FAQs**
- 17. What is the Purpose of Braiding Sweetgrass?**
- 18. Is Braiding Sweetgrass a Good Book?**
- 19. Best Braiding Sweetgrass Quotes**
- 20. Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?**

**Note:** This **Braiding Sweetgrass summary** is part of an ongoing project to summarise the [Best Nonfiction Books](#) of all time.

## **Braiding Sweetgrass Review**

Braiding Sweetgrass is a book about our relationship to the planet.

How can we take better care of the earth and each other for the next generation? How will we make it to the next millenium, given the challenges of climate change? What can we learn from Native American culture about these questions? If you've been wondering and worrying about sustainability, and looking for answers from both science and indigenous wisdom, you're not alone.

Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer weaves a collection of reflections on these questions. She is an indigenous scientist, a decorated college professor, and a member of the citizen Potawatomi nation. You could read the book's chapters and sections separately, but together, they present a strong braid of interwoven themes.

I return to this book when the world feels hopeless. Kimmerer has integrity and deep compassion for the planet. Her graceful prose makes reading this book feel like sharing a conversation with a wise and trusted friend – an elder.

I definitely recommend reading the original.

For now, though, here's TAOl's Braiding Sweetgrass book summary...

## **Braiding Sweetgrass Summary**

Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer is a gifted storyteller, and Braiding Sweetgrass is full of good stories. Some come from Kimmerer's own life as a scientist, a teacher, a mother, and a Potawatomi woman. But this book is not a conventional, chronological account. It's more like a tapestry, or a braid of interwoven strands.

Sweetgrass, a plant central to life in the citizen Potawatomi nation, links the five sections of the book:

1. Planting Sweetgrass
2. Tending Sweetgrass
3. Picking Sweetgrass
4. Braiding Sweetgrass; and
5. Burning Sweetgrass.

**Across these sections, several major ideas emerge, including:**

- The natural world can teach us how to live more satisfying lives;
- Gratitude and reciprocity are key to preserving the planet; and
- Indigenous wisdom and scientific knowledge are related.

Read on for more detail about each of these interconnected ideas.

## **The Natural World Can Teach Us How to Live More**

## **Satisfying Lives**

Nature has much to teach us, if only we can remember how to listen. We have grown deaf to the languages of other beings, especially the plants who are our oldest teachers.

Many stories in this book come from Kimmerer's experiences as a member of the citizen Potawatomi nation, a Native American community. Others come from her family life on a homestead farm in upstate New York. She recounts picking wild strawberries as a gift for her father. She describes kayaking with water lilies after sending her daughters off to university. She teaches her college students how to harvest cattails on a field trip. Across these stories, Kimmerer finds meaning in the natural world.

Perhaps if we could all do the same, we would be more content.

## **Skywoman: Decisions for Future Generations**

One of the Native American legends Kimmerer recounts is the origin story Skywoman, who fell to Earth and made it her home. The first plant she tended was wiingaashk, or sweetgrass. Skywoman's garden was not for herself alone. She was pregnant when she arrived, an immigrant planting a garden for the children of the future.

Traditionally, Native American tribes made decisions by considering their effects on the seventh generation (about 150 years later). What might change if we made decisions with such far-reaching consideration of their consequences?

## **Raised by Strawberries: The Gift Economy**

Kimmerer grew up picking wild strawberries from the field behind her house. She learned to delight in these surprise gifts from nature.

Fascinated by how they grew, she also learned to tend them, giving back to the field. The farm down the road, where she and her siblings picked quarts of berries for pay, was a very different experience. Nothing was free, or freely given.

The “gift economy” is not about cost, but relationship.

## **The Consolation of Water Lilies: Mutuality Across Generations**

After her youngest daughter left for college, Kimmerer took a kayak to a lily pond. She was reluctant to go home to an empty nest. On the pond, she found consolation in the entwinement of old and new flowers. The blooms mutually nourished their common roots. “New leaf to old, old to new, mother to daughter—mutuality endures.”

What we give away comes back to us.

## **Co-teaching with Cattails: Learning From Nature**

As a professor, Kimmerer argued that her students should have field experience. She describes taking them on a trip during which the marsh became the classroom. Corn, beans, goldenrod, and asters were all co-teachers. Among the teachings of plants was the lesson of the humble cattail: every part is a gift, providing sunscreen, sleeping mats, twine, and food. “It’s almost as if the plants made these things for us,” said one student.

By the end, they wondered, what can we give in return?

## **Gratitude and Reciprocity are Key to Preserving the Planet**

Native American people like Kimmerer’s Potawatomi ancestors have

learned many lessons from nature. Among the teachings of plants are key lessons about gratitude and reciprocity. Like other tribes, the Potawatomi pass on the words of [the Thanksgiving Address](#), a pledge of gratitude to all that sustains us. Another lesson, the honorable harvest, outlines a reciprocal relationship with the land. That relationship is both ethical and practical.

## **A Pledge of Gratitude: The Thanksgiving Address**

Along with the pledge of allegiance, Native American children learn [the Thanksgiving Address](#). Composed and passed on by Native American tribes, it is a pledge of gratitude. These “words that come before all others” give thanks to the waters, the trees, the fish, the herbs, and the sun. They give thanks to all the gifts that form the overwhelming generosity of the earth.

Each section of the Thanksgiving Address ends with “now our minds are one.” The pledge remind us we all agree that the Earth is worth protecting.

To begin from that on which we all agree was important for the native peoples who created this address. They were the Haudenosonee, known to settlers as the Iroquois Nation. They are the original American democracy. Masters of diplomacy, their words form the basis of our country’s founding documents.

All of which makes me wonder: what might liberty and justice look like if we began from a culture of gratitude?

## **The Honorable Harvest: Take No More Than You Need**

Implicit guidelines shape the Native American approach to harvesting plants and animals from the land. Kimmerer calls these implicit guidelines, “the honorable harvest.” Central to the “honorable harvest” guidelines are

the principles "Take only what is given; take no more than you need; and give a gift in reciprocity."

In this section, Kimmerer recounts stories of people who practice the honorable harvest. Native craftsmen and trappers, they understand reciprocity. Like the berries, the lilies, and the cattails, plants offers their own gifts, relying on us, the harvesters, to leave them alive and spread their seeds.

This is ethical because we do not exploit the land. It is also practical, since we want plants to regrow and animal populations to continue. In supporting them, we save our souls and ourselves. We remain in reciprocal relationship with other beings, braided together like sweetgrass.

## **Indigenous Wisdom and Scientific Knowledge are Related**

Scientists, like indigenous peoples, are curious about other species and the more-than-human world. Kimmerer and some of her graduate students also draw on an indigenous worldview in conducting their scientific experiments. That worldview combines curiosity with humility. But even indigenous people can act from Windigo nature, a perspective that values self-interest over balance.

## **The Sweetgrass Researchers: We Are Not Separate From Our Subjects**

Kimmerer and her students studied the relationship between sweetgrass and Native American harvesting. The college dean and other scientists scoffed, "Anyone knows that harvesting a plant will damage the population; you're wasting your time."

But Kimmerer's student, Laurie, found what Native American tribes had

known from years of “research”: if we use a plant respectfully, it will flourish. If we ignore it, it will go away.” Sweetgrass thrives when planted, not from seed but from cuttings, depending on its harvesters to spread. Laurie’s research proved in scientific terms that reciprocity is necessary to survival.

Scientific knowledge and indigenous wisdom can be similar. They both involve theorizing, testing, and presenting in compelling ways. But scientific knowledge and indigenous wisdom envision quite different relationships to their subjects. The difference is in their worldviews.

What if we are not separate from that which we study?

## **Windigo Nature: Self-interest Over Balance**

The Windigo is a boogeyman of indigenous stories. Associated with excess, this cannibal monster also infects those it touches with insatiable appetite. Like other fearful fairy tale figures, the Windigo reflects cultural values. Traditionally, indigenous cultures fear uncontrolled consumption, and value balance.

The danger of Windigo thinking is evident in the story of Onandaga Lake. Onandaga Lake is a sacred site of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. In the past, the tribes buried their weapons at Onandaga Lake beneath the legendary Tree of Peace. Today, the lake is dominated by nine superfund sites. These industrial giants have destroyed and polluted the land beyond recognition. The original coastline, where the Tree of Peace once stood, has disappeared.

Climate change has fostered an awakening to the dangers of Windigo thinking. The Windigo is “that within us that cares more for its own survival than for anything else.” But climate change shows us that we cannot put self-interest above everything. Despite our efforts, survival can never be ensured, and hunger never satisfied. We need a different goal.



Our goal for the future should not be endless growth, but sustainable balance.

## **Braiding Sweetgrass Contents**

***Braiding Sweetgrass* has 30 main chapters in 5 parts...**

### **Preface**

### **Part 1: Planting Sweetgrass**

1. Skywoman Falling
2. The Council of Pecans
3. The Gift of Strawberries
4. An Offering Asters and Goldenrod
5. Learning the Grammar of Animacy

### **Part 2: Tending Sweetgrass**

6. Maple Sugar Moon
7. Witch Hazel
8. A Mother's Work
9. The Consolation of Water Lilies
10. Allegiance to Gratitude

### **Part 3: Picking Sweetgrass**

11. Epiphany in the Beans
12. The Three Sisters
13. Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket
14. Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass
15. Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide
16. The Honorable Harvest

### **Part 4: Braiding Sweetgrass**

17. In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place
18. The Sound of Silverbells
19. Sitting in a Circle
20. Burning Cascade Head
21. Putting Down Roots
22. Umbilicaria: The Belly Button of the World
23. Old-Growth Children
24. Witness to the Rain

## **Part 5: Burning Sweetgrass**

25. Windigo Footprints
26. The Sacred and the Superfund
27. People of Corn, People of Light
28. Collateral Damage
29. Shkitagen: People of the Seventh Fire
30. Defeating Windigo

## **Epilogue: Returning the Gift**

# **Braiding Sweetgrass FAQs**

## **What is the Purpose of Braiding Sweetgrass?**

Braiding Sweetgrass is a book about questions of nature. It includes Native American legends. It addresses the reciprocal relationships among all beings. It explores how the tools of science relate to indigenous wisdom. The book's central argument is that instead of ignoring or dominating the rest of the living world, we can live in harmony with it. Native American tribes have long known this to be true. Scientific knowledge is intersecting with (or awakening to) indigenous wisdom. This return to ecological consciousness cannot come too soon.

## **Is Braiding Sweetgrass a Good Book?**

Braiding Sweetgrass was a New York Times bestseller. It didn't reach that status immediately. Rather, people read it and then bought copies for their friends. Like sweetgrass, it spread through the tending of relationships. Numerous book clubs have chosen Braiding Sweetgrass. Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of *Eat, Pray, Love*, called this book "a hymn of love to the world." Scientist and environmental advocate, Jane Goodall, also recommended this book. She wrote that it will "stay with you long after you read the last page."

## Best Braiding Sweetgrass Quotes

These Braiding Sweetgrass quotes come from **The Art of Living's** ever-growing central library of thoughts, anecdotes, notes, and [inspirational quotes](#).

*"For all of us, becoming indigenous to a 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."*

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

*"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."*

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

*"Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away."*

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

*"Something is broken when the food comes on a Styrofoam tray wrapped in slippery plastic, a carcass of a being whose only chance*

*at life was a cramped cage. That is not a gift of life; it is a theft."*

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

*"Ceremony is a vehicle for belonging—to a family, to a people, and to the land."*

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

*"Our toddlers speak of plants and animals as if they were people, extending to them self and intention and compassion—until we teach them not to. We quickly retrain them and make them forget. When we tell them that the tree is not a who, but an it, we make that maple an object; we put a barrier between us, absolving ourselves of moral responsibility and opening the door to exploitation. Saying it makes a living land into "natural resources." If a maple is an it, we can take up the chain saw. If a maple is a her, we think twice."*

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

*"In some Native languages the term for plants translates to "those who take care of us.""*

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

*"Action on behalf of life transforms. 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."*

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

*"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."](#)

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

["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."](#)

- [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), Braiding Sweetgrass

## **Wish There Was a Faster/Easier Way?**

Whenever you're ready, here are four ways I can help you be more productive, find more balance and live life more on purpose...

1. **Curious? Discover how productive you really are...** Take this free, 2-minute assessment to unlock your PQ and discover the top 25 habits you need to get big things done. [Take the 2-minute quiz →](#)
2. **Overwhelmed? Get a free chapter of my book...** Let me show you how to beat procrastination, permanently, with this free sneak peek inside **TAoL**'s ultimate productivity primer. [Download your free chapter →](#)
3. **Stuck? Grab a 90-Day TRACKTION Planner...** Get the tool thousands trust to help them take control of their time, master their habits and hit goals in every part of their lives. [Order your 90-day planner →](#)
4. **Burned out? Join the TRACKTION Community...** Take the 6-week

masterclass, get weekly group coaching, find accountability partners and connect with like-minded self-starters. [Get started FREE →](#)

### [Dr. Michael B. Sherry](#)

Dr. Michael B. Sherry is associate professor of English Education at University of South Florida. He studies responsive teaching, and how stories we tell - about ourselves and the world - shape what we can do and who we can become.