

A Sense of Place:

Learning from Relations under, over and around Us

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones & Theo Claire, preachers

Inspired by *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Sunday, October 24, 2021, Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #203 (vv. 1-4) All Creatures of the Earth and Sky; #163 For the Earth Forever Turning; #298 Wake Now My Senses. Reading/Prayer: #551 (gray hymnal) [Earth Teach Me](#).

Chalice Lighting (words by Paul Sprecher, adapt. R. Jones)

Today we light this chalice...
For the web of life which sustains us,
For the sacred circle of life
in which we have our being,
For the Earth and the Sky and the Seas,
For all Creatures above us, below us, and around us,
For our Mother Earth, and
For the Mystery which holds us together in Love.

Sermon Part 1 by Theo Claire, *Reflecting on the Grammar of Animacy* [[click here to read](#)]

Sermon Part 2 by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, *Learning from Relations under, over and around Us*

Robin Wall Kimmerer, the botanist and spiritual essayist, expresses envy of trees, grasses, and other green plants for their ability to use carbon dioxide and water to make food and give off oxygen—photosynthesis! She writes:

Sometimes I wish I could photosynthesize/ so that just by being, just by shimmering at the meadow's edge or floating lazily on a pond, I could be doing the work of the world/ while standing silent/ in the sun. The shadowy hemlocks and the waving grasses are spinning out sugar molecules and passing them on to hungry mouths and mandibles/ all the while listening to the warblers and watching the light dance on the water. It would be so satisfying to provide for the well-being of others.... [Providing] shade, medicine, berries, roots; there would be no end to it. As a plant I could make the campfire, hold the nest, heal the *wound*, fill the brimming pot.¹

But since the author cannot be so generous as to be a plant, she seeks to be joyful and mindful in using and consuming everything that plants make possible for us all. She's grateful for them and for all other members of creation.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer writes as a person of Indigenous heritage and a professor of ecological science. She's also a single mother who brought up two girls in Upstate New York. By gardening together as a family and sharing food with others, by joining their neighbors in tapping maple trees for sap and waiting for it to boil down to syrup, she showed her children how to love people and the land around them the way she had learned to love them. She gave them a sense of place—a local place and a place in the web of creation.

Indigenous beliefs, rituals and other spiritual practices vary among the peoples who have lived across this continent for thousands of years. Kimmerer doesn't speak for all Indigenous groups. However, she does try to identify certain values held in common across traditions. For example, it's important for humans to understand that we are only a part of the web of creation; we didn't make it and we don't control it.

Because the Creator gave life to us and to all other beings, we are related to them. Underneath us in the earth or sea, over us in the sky and the trees, and all around us are... all our relations. When we are estranged from these relations, it's bad for our soul; it's bad for them; it's bad for the earth.

We can appreciate the formative role of nature on us, as teachers, as friends, as family.

She invites us to think of the land, landscapes, plants, and other creatures as our caretakers at least as much as we are theirs. For example, she writes, "In a way, I was raised by... strawberries, fields of them." (22) "Not to exclude the maples, hemlocks, white pines, goldenrod, asters, violets and mosses of upstate New York," she says, "but it was the wild strawberries... who gave me my sense of the world." (22) She senses this world as full of gifts, and she speaks of the moral and spiritual practice of reciprocity.

Reciprocity includes using the gifts of the world with gratitude, respect, and care. Figuring out how to do this is a moral challenge. Kimmerer says: "[The]... tension between honoring life around us and taking [life] in order to live is part of being human." (172) We must not avoid this tension, she says, but live with it, reflect on it, choose how to act in response to it.

For example, she says, when harvesting sweetgrass, take care not to deplete the grasses and keep them from regenerating. When taking the life of an animal for food (or when consuming products of animals that others have killed), consider how you can make your actions worthy of that sacrifice. Another example: When she was learning from an Indigenous family of crafters to weave wooden baskets out of ribbons of wood from the trunk of an ash tree, the father of the family said: take a moment to remember what the tree gave up for you to be able to do this. Be sure you "make something beautiful out of it."

Reciprocity includes giving thanks for what we take, taking only what we can use, and giving back in some tangible way. She writes: "When we rely deeply on other lives, there is an urgency to protect them." For this reason, civic engagement on behalf of other creatures, the land around us, the skies, or the oceans is an important way of giving back. Volunteering, voting, political action, financial generosity—these can be a response of reciprocity, concern, and care.

Kimmerer says that reciprocity means to recognize that other beings are caretakers of our well-being as much as we are of theirs. I was thinking about this on Friday morning. Lying in bed, I awoke to the tapping and whooshing of raindrops hitting the shingles above me and the trees outside—the rain we have needed and wanted for so long. Then I sat in my kitchen, looking out at the rain-washed plants on the deck. First, I appreciated the subtle differences among the succulent plants—one with gray-green leaves, another of bright waxy emerald, and one more of deep forest green, each with leaves of a different shape and thickness. During the pandemic lockdown I had been given trees and smaller plants, and I bought a bunch too, and I planted them. I planted flowers and waited for them to bloom. When the dirt was dry, I watered. Of course, caring for these plants had occupied me during the lockdown. But it was

not until this rainy morning that I realized that the plants had been keeping me company. In all those lonely months when there was no place to rush off to, they had been my companions. So, on this morning, I decided to look at each plant and address it as YOU, as an individual. I said *thank you*. In return for my planting them and watering them, they gave me color, texture, and the promise of ongoing life. In a time of anxiety and upheaval in the world, they invited me to slow down, to be patient, to pay attention. Reciprocity means a balance of give and take and give back again.

One day while harvesting in her garden, Kimmerer had an insight, an epiphany, as she called it. We can love the land, of course. But we can say as well that the land loves us back. It's like a loving mother. To make her case, the author provides a list of loving behaviors. For example, to love is to nurture health and well-being, to protect from harm, to nourish, to create beauty.

Speaking of her family's garden, Kimmerer says: "She loves us with beans and tomatoes, with roasting ears and blackberries and birdsong. By a shower of gifts and a heavy rain of lessons. She provides for us and teaches us to provide for ourselves. That's what good mothers do." (118) To love means a generous sharing of resources and working together for a common goal. (119) There is give and take between humans and the earth. If we care for it and help it to thrive, it will care for us and help us to thrive. She says: "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." (120)

When we have a sense of place, the land holds us like members of the family. How is that families can flourish? How is it that friends can grow to become *like* family? With human beings, families flourish by spending time together. We demonstrate our affection, kindness, and respect. We recognize the gifts that everyone brings. We keep our mutual responsibilities.

So, coming to understand other creatures and the land around us as family starts by spending time together. We demonstrate our affection, kindness, and respect. We recognize the gifts that everyone brings. We keep our mutual responsibilities.

Today and in the days to come, may you be blessed with a sense of place. May we live so that that everybody, everywhere might be blessed with a sense of place—a local place, and a place in the web of creation. May we reciprocate for all our blessings by receiving those gifts with joy, gratitude, and care.

May everyone, everywhere have opportunities to receive and enjoy everything made possible for us by the earth and all its creatures. Underneath us in the land or sea, over us in the sky and the trees, and all around us are all our relations.

May we strive to be worthy members of the family of creation. Amen.

¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, (Minneapolis, 2020: Milkweed Editions; first published 2013), p. 171. All citations in Roger's part of the sermon are from [this edition](#), which is a physically beautiful book.