

**Indigenous language, story-telling and cultural traditions promote sustainability through
fostering a reciprocal relationship with the Earth**

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Introduction

The impact of human activity has left a significant mark on our Earth and as a result, Earth is currently in a state of emergency, scientifically termed the Anthropocene. Unsustainable practices within Western civilization are responsible for the dramatic changes the Earth is experiencing in terms of rising global temperature, loss of ecosystem services, and a decline in biodiversity (Steffen et al. 2011). North American Indigenous culture is centralized around a reciprocal relationship with the Earth (Salmón 2000). Dissecting these key philosophical and cultural practices provides an opportunity for Western civilization to incorporate these concepts to promote sustainable living. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Citizen of the Potawatomi Nation and biology professor, wrote *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, which describes Indigenous culture and its core principles primarily focusing on traditions from the Potawatomi Nation and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Her book became popular for its celebration of Indigenous culture through relatable examples that evoke an emotional connection to nature. Kimmerer's perspective and incorporation of Indigenous culture into her personal life has sustainability rooted at its core. Kimmerer writes, "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, depend on it", inviting the reader to partake on a journey to foster a relationship with Earth (2013, p. 9). In this essay, I will argue that Robin Wall Kimmerer's description of North American Indigenous philosophy and cultural practices in *Braiding Sweetgrass* provides a set of unique and fundamental concepts that our civilization needs to incorporate to significantly move toward sustainable living.

Analysis of Indigenous Linguistics and its Underlying Core Principles

The Foundation of Indigenous Languages

Many Indigenous languages tend to be verb-based, meaning that they have a much higher verb-to-noun ratio in comparison to Western languages. Instead of categorizing nouns as a ‘person, place, or thing’, that noun is given life, in the form of the verb *to be*. Both nouns and verbs in many Indigenous languages are distinguished as animate or inanimate as opposed to the masculine or feminine divide frequently observed in Western languages. With this distinction, Indigenous languages are not confined to the clear-cut boundary of biotic and abiotic as the threshold for defining the animate and inanimate. Any natural creation or element of existence including, animals, plants, rocks, soil, the sky, and all else belonging to the natural world, is considered animate (Reo and Ogden 2018). What is left as inanimate are synthetic, man-made objects that do not belong in the natural world. Kimmerer summarizes the key difference, “When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the world. But the verb *wiikegamaa* – to *be* a bay – releases the water from bondage and lets it live. ‘To be a bay’ holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers” (2013, pp. 55). Indigenous languages instill a sense of appreciation for the natural world, and suggest that all aspects of nature are equal. Incorporation of this fundamental component of Indigenous languages does not require changing Western languages, and likewise does not depend on encouraging everyone to learn an Indigenous language. Rather, we can dissect the focal shift that Indigenous linguistic design creates in its inherent appreciation and respect for nature. This foundational principle of speaking about the natural world’s life, instead of objectifying nature, should be emphasized in Western civilization.

Words that Tell a Story

Translation of Indigenous languages into Western languages unveils deeper meaning and stories that each word dutifully carries. Indigenous language fosters a profound connection between the words that describe natural beings and the gifts they provide to Earth (McCarthy 2010). Indigenous languages incorporate process-describing words that promote an appreciation for natural phenomena and our relationship with the natural landscape (Fettes 1997). The word *puhpowee* is the Potawatomi word for

“the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 49). A community that has a word to describe this intimate occurrence between a mushroom and the Earth, is one that respects each and every detail, and undoubtedly strives to protect the Earth. Other Indigenous words evoke a feeling of gratitude toward a natural element (McCarthy 2010). In Potawatomi, the word for cattail, *bewiieskwinuk*, translates to “we wrap the baby in it” and in the Mohawk language, cattail translates to “the cattail wraps humans in her gifts” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 230, 237). These translations describe a longstanding tight-knit relationship that Indigenous communities foster with the natural world. Their gratitude, respect, and appreciation for the natural world is evoked every time they speak their language, and thus cultivates a sustainable lifestyle.

Indigenous Story-Telling to Promote a Reciprocal Relationship with the Earth

Skywoman

Story-telling is an important aspect of many cultures around the globe, and those which strike an emotional cord in humans have the power to enact change. Most stories in Indigenous cultures are centered around an inherent relationship that people have with the Earth (Brown 2013). A commonly told story in Indigenous cultures is the story of Skywoman, describing how humans came to inhabit Earth (Shenandoah et al. 1998). The story of Skywoman is integrated around an interconnectedness and reliance that humans have on the Earth and the gifts that it provides.

The story begins with Skywoman falling from the Skyworld. She was graciously greeted by all of the animals, who gave their assistance to help Skywoman build her home. Turtle offered his shell for Skywoman to rest on, while the other animals took turns diving down into the deep water to bring up mud for Skywoman to build her home. Many of the animals were unable to reach the bottom, and some drowned in their efforts to help Skywoman. Muskrat, the weakest swimmer of all the animals, dove down to help Skywoman. Muskrat resurfaced as a limp body, he had sacrificed his life for Skywoman, but he had brought back a small patch of mud in his paw. Skywoman spread the mud on Turtle’s back,

and sang and danced to thank the animals and their efforts to make her feel at home. In her thanks the land grew from Turtle's back, and the Earth was made. "Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home" (Kimmerer 2013, p. 5).

The story of Skywoman is rooted with a powerful interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. The story pays tribute to the interdependence of nature and its regenerative cycles. Through the sacrifices of one, the whole can flourish together in harmony on Turtle Island. At its core, this story is an acknowledgement of the circle of life, and its essentiality to life. Kimmerer notes, "Children hearing the Skywoman story from birth know in their bones the responsibility that flows between humans and the earth" (2013, p. 5). The story of Skywoman is deeply embedded in the foundation of Haudenosaunee beliefs and culture. The powerful relationship of reciprocity between humans and the Earth are incorporated into the Haudenosaunee language, as the words to count to three, *én:ska*, *tékeni*, *áhsen*, describe Skywoman falling alone, Skywoman and her daughter, and Skywoman's daughter and her twin sons (Kimmerer 2013, p. 258). Western civilization could stimulate an appreciation for the Earth in the younger generations by sharing stories about human interaction with the Earth, emphasizing the responsibility of this relationship. For example, the powerful biblical story of Adam and Eve can be interpreted as an allegory for the consequences of irresponsible actions on the Earth.

Stories as a Guide, The Earth as the Teacher

Oral story-telling is a common tradition in Indigenous communities, and serves as the platform for sustainable living. The stories that are shared go hand-in-hand with living intimately with the natural world, and partaking in the reciprocal relationship (Iseke 2013). As a professor of biology, Kimmerer's classes cover core biological principles, but the outdoor, hands-on delivery of her lessons stimulate a different way of *knowing*, resulting in deeper learning and understanding. Through her university classes, Kimmerer strives to immerse her students into the natural world. Children raised in Indigenous communities are exposed to this type of learning every day, and many develop a profound

connection to the Earth (Turner et al. 2000). Kimmerer fondly remembers the feeling she gets after taking students to harvest *watap*, the roots of White Spruce, commonly used to build canoes, wigwams and baskets. “Through them I get to remember what it is to open the world as a gift, to be flooded with the knowledge that the earth will take care of you, everything you need right there” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 236). Sustainable thinking becomes integrated into one’s mindset when they form a deep relationship with the Earth. By learning within nature students can better understand the beauty of the Earth, and can carry their appreciation for Earth in order to develop a reciprocal relationship. If we give back and nurture the Earth, she will provide everything we need for us. This fundamental concept can be integrated in Western civilization by deliberately spending more time in the outdoors with mindful observation and an intent to learn from nature.

Indigenous Tradition and its Applications for Sustainable Thinking

The Thanksgiving Address

The Thanksgiving Address, *Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwén* in Haudenosaunee, translates to “Words That Come Before All Else”. The Thanksgiving Address is a cultural tradition that lies at the foundation of the Haudenosaunee, and it is spoken at all important events. The words themselves differ from person to person, but it always has the same underlying message of thanking every natural element for their generosity in sustaining human life. “We are thankful to our Mother the Earth, for she gives us everything that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk upon her. It gives us joy that she still continues to care for us, just as she has from the beginning of time. To our Mother, we send thanksgiving, love, and respect” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 108). The Thanksgiving Address continues to thank the Water, the Fish, the Plants, the Berries, the Food Plants, the Medicine Herbs, the Trees, the Animals, the Birds, the Winds, the Thunder and Lightning, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Teachers, and The Creator, each with their own personalized statement.

The Thanksgiving Address is purposefully long, and demonstrates the amount of gratitude that Indigenous cultures have for the Earth. Frieda Jacques, a teacher at the Onondaga Nation School says, “The Thanksgiving Address is a reminder that we cannot hear too often, that we human beings are not in charge of the world, but are subject to the same forces as the rest” (Kimmerer 2013, p. 112). The Thanksgiving Address has a ubiquitous message to every inhabitant on Earth, as we all benefit from its generosity. Incorporation of the Thanksgiving Address into aspects of Western civilization has the potential to send a powerful message. The Haudenosaunee have used the Thanksgiving Address at environmental meetings, including the United Nations Earth Summit, as a means of promoting core ecological principles and equity for all of nature (Ransom and Ettenger 2001). Implementing the Thanksgiving Address at conferences debating the protection of the Earth would be powerful in reminding all attendees what we would be losing if protection was not granted. Kimmerer states, “Imagine if our government meetings began with the Thanksgiving Address. What if our leaders first found common ground before fighting over their differences?” (2013, p. 113).

The message of unwavering gratitude radiating from the Thanksgiving Address should be incorporated into Western civilization, providing the path for people to live with an attuned sense of appreciation for the natural world. Interestingly, most of the states in America require public schools to recite the Pledge of Allegiance daily to fulfill a required ‘patriotic exercise’: “I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all” (Greene 1995). Compared to the Thanksgiving Address, there are few universal messages within the Pledge of Allegiance, even for the country’s citizens. One of Kimmerer’s daughters began to protest reciting the Pledge of Allegiance as she felt as though its unrelatable content was being forced upon her. Kimmerer rightfully notes that “you didn’t have to be an eight-year-old Indian to know that ‘liberty and justice for all’ was a questionable premise” (2013, p. 106). The Thanksgiving Address, however, is universal to all humans. Instead of students reciting various pledges and national anthems, the Thanksgiving Address could be incorporated into school

programming to instill a sense of gratitude toward nature. Across the globe we could be united as a population in pledging our gratefulness for the Earth. In acknowledging the gifts we receive every day through the Earth's generosity, sustainable living is inevitable.

Asking for Permission, and Waiting to Hear the Answer

Basket weaving is a significant component of Indigenous culture and livelihood. These baskets are often weaved from a Black Ash tree, as its bark has the structural properties to make a durable basket. Indigenous cultures do not harvest trees at their will when wanting to make a basket. As part of the Honorable Harvest, they must ask the tree for permission first. While a subtle action, it is by no means trivial. "Traditional harvesters recognize the individuality of each tree as a person, a nonhuman forest person. These trees are not taken, but requested. Respectfully, the cutter explains his purpose and the tree is asked permission for harvest" (Kimmerer 2013, p. 144). Indigenous cultures recognize and respect the life of the tree, and if Western civilization was able to think twice about how their actions might harm another nonhuman life, the world would be in a very different state. Western civilization would inherently be living a more sustainable lifestyle by enacting mindful choices. When asking a Black Ash for its consent, "Sometimes the answer is no. It might be a cue in the surroundings – a vireo in the nest branches, or the bark's adamant resistance to the questioning knife – that suggests a tree is not willing" (Kimmerer 2013, p. 144). Asking for permission before ending the tree's life (although to be repurposed to have another life, in a sense) slows down the process. It asks one to be mindful of the surroundings, and to think about what role this tree might play in the forest. It makes one consider what the forest would be losing without this life. This mindfulness and consideration toward the natural world is necessary to incorporate into Western living to promote a sustainable lifestyle.

Conclusions

Indigenous cultures promote sustainable living, as it is rooted within their language, stories and traditions. Through technological advances, and an increase in global population and consumption,

Western civilization has lost its connection to the Earth. An Indigenous cultural performer explained, “I dance to heal Mother Earth, because she’s been sick. It doesn’t matter if you’re Indigenous or not, we all bleed the same” (Kuddu 2020). The fundamental principles of Indigenous culture are not exclusive to those communities, and these key principles need to be integrated with Western civilization in order to redevelop a bond to the Earth. Ultimately, to significantly move toward sustainable living, it is essential that Western civilization regain the deep connection and appreciation for Earth as described by Indigenous philosophy and cultural practices.

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