

Introduction

Sweetgrass has just come into bloom at the edge of my pond, the first grass to flower and so mark its presence in the tangle of winter-brown thatch. The open panicle is a spire spangled with stamens and feathery pistils that quiver in the breeze. Kneeling in the damp soil for a close look, each floret is rimmed with burgundy and copper and gleams with a metallic sheen, far showier than necessity demands for a flower that attracts, not bees but only the wind. It's as if she wants you to notice, raising a flower flag before the great green sward of the meadow engulfs her, so you'll remember this spot when it's time to gather the long shiny blades in mid-summer, with only a whiff of fragrance to guide you.

This stand of Sweetgrass did not volunteer here; I planted it many years ago and I'm gratified to see how far it has spread. Despite the fancy flowers, Sweetgrass does not propagate by windblown seed, but by rhizomes, slender fingers of underground stem that wind their way through the soil unseen until they rise up and bloom. Rarely do they dominate a meadow; rather they come gently, persistently to stand beside the other bigger plants. They delight me with their subversive infiltration of the status quo; all on their own they find their way to new places, where their shine and seductive fragrance beckons, tugging at the edge of consciousness like a memory of something you once knew and want to find again. It stops you, calls you to slow down, and see the meadow with new eyes. Look what was waiting for you; all you needed to do was pay attention. Dropping to your knees, you can't help but sigh in recognition of the gift that was there all along.

Fittingly, this has also been the lifeway of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, as if

the stories in the book embody the teachings of their namesake. Slowly, the book moved underground like a network of rhizomes, largely unnoticed at first, until, like the patch at the edge of my pond, you see it blooming everywhere. I'm awash with gratitude for the spread of the message the book carries, with fragrance and shine.

Since time immemorial, we human people have accelerated the movement of *wiingaashk* across Turtle Island, by bringing Sweetgrass to live beside us, to share with a friend. That's how Sweetgrass is best propagated, by carrying the plant with us. And so too, the book has made its way in the world, not by a broadcast of seed, but by loving passage from hand to hand. This beautiful new edition celebrates all those hands.

Milkweed Editions reports that small booksellers offered it to their customers, who then came back for a stack to share. Readers were giving their copies away, saying "I think you need to read this" like a manifesto of love for the world.

I wish I could share all the stories that were shared with me: couples courting by copying out passages for their beloveds, followed by wedding vows inspired by lichens; a daughter reading chapters by phone to her blind father each night on the other side of the country; babies named Hazel; bikes named *wiingaashk*; Thanksgiving Address recitations around the holiday table; protest manifestos; Earth tribunal testimony. Folks have sent me photos of their books as companions: in a dugout down the Amazon, atop a mountain, on a train through Norway, in an ICU bed, on a hay bale in the lambing barn, a touchstone in quarantine. I am bent low by the request of an elder in hospice that the last words she would ever hear carry the scent of wild strawberries. These stories are gifts to the writer's spirit and I thank you.

Everyone has a secret yearning I suppose, a latent desire for some kind of superpower or another life that might have been theirs. I know thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's chloroplasts—and yet I must confess to full-blown chlorophyll envy. What I wrote years ago remains true: "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."

In the absence of chloroplasts, writing is as close to that alchemy as I am capable of.

A leaf, bathed in light with stomates wide open to the breath of the air, is not unlike the writer musing in the dark and mind wide open to wisps of thought as amorphous as the atmosphere. We both are sifting and winnowing from the unending flow of materials so ubiquitous as to be invisible, those particular molecules from which life can be built.

I marvel at the glittering green leaf turbines that spin air and water into the building blocks of sugar, like spinning letters into words that can be assembled and reassembled into whatever can be imagined. If only I could turn idea into ink the way they catalyze light into substance, the dross of the ordinary inorganic into the organic word molecules that energize life's unfolding; flowers to seduce, roots to connect, fruits to nourish, seeds to endure, sap to blister skin, and scents to call back memory—all from light and air turned to sugar.

One day, after I'm a daffodil, I will be able to photosynthesize. It's something to look forward to.

On occasions such as this, writers are inevitably asked, Why did you write this book? That question paralyzed me. I was supposed to have an erudite answer, when the truth is I wrote it because I couldn't help myself. There were plant stories wanting to be told and they forced their way up through the ground and down my arm with the motive force of Trillium pushing through soil. I had the honor and responsibility of holding the pen. I'm profoundly grateful for the privilege of carrying a message from the plants, so that they can do their work. I wrote from the belief that since plants are medicines, so too could their stories be healing.

The song leader Laurence Cole crafted songs from *Braiding Sweetgrass*. One is the mesmerizing chant, "A great longing is upon us, to live again in a world made of gifts." It is that longing everywhere I turned that propelled the book. I wrote *Braiding Sweetgrass* in response

to longing in Indigenous communities that our philosophy and practices be recognized as guidance to set us back on the path of life. I wrote in response to longing from colonizers, beset with the aftermath of injustice and living on stolen land, to find a path of belonging. I heard longing from the trampled Earth herself to be loved and honored again. Longing from Sandhill cranes and wood thrushes and wild irises just to live.

I wrote from a sense of reciprocity with the Anishinaabe teachings that had been shared with me, by people and by plants. We're told that the reason our ancestors held so tightly to these teachings was that the worldview the settlers tried to obliterate would one day be needed by all beings. Here, at the time of the Seventh Fire, in the age of the Sixth Extinction, of climate chaos, disconnection and dishonor, I think that time is now.

Coupled to the impulse to share is the mandate to protect. Indigenous knowledge has too often been appropriated by its abductors, so the gift of knowledge must be tightly bound to responsibility for that knowledge. If Indigenous wisdom could be medicine for a broken relationship with the Earth, the moral obligation to share the healing must be accompanied by a prescription to avoid misuse. I hoped always to inspire an authentic revitalization of relationship with the land, not by borrowing it from someone else, but by finding your roots and remembering how to grow your own.

I wrote with the intention to provide an antidote for what conservation biologists have termed "plant blindness," the lack of public awareness of the significance of plants to ecosystem function, and the attendant deficiency in policy, scientific knowledge, and conservation funding that follows. Plant blindness and its relative, species loneliness, impedes the recognition of the green world as a garden of gifts. The cycle flows from attention, to gift, to gratitude, to reciprocity. It starts with seeing.

I wrote from a sense of reciprocity, that in return for the privilege of spending my personal and professional life listening to plants, that I might share their teachings with those who didn't even know that they had something to say.

Lewis Hyde, whose book *The Gift* was so important to me, writes how art as a gift behaves like a call-and-response song. One of the elements of traditional Potawatomi songs that quickens my heart is the structure in which a leader raises a song line into the quiet and is met with a surge of voices in return, taking up the line with affirmation and then falling back for the next. Around and around goes the call and response until everyone is singing, the way a storm begins with the first patter and grows into a downpour of everyone wet and dancing in the rain to the beat of thunder. It feels to me like a lone voice that discovers she is not alone. Reader after reader has used the words, "I thought I was alone in loving the earth this way." This is how I have experienced the response to *Braiding Sweetgrass*—that we have found in each other a choir.

I've come to understand the ongoing work of *Braiding Sweetgrass* is this call and response, the call arising from a shared sense of longing and the response building in a chorus of the Great Remembering. Myriad readers have offered their stories of remembering something that was buried by the noise of the world, by the commodification of nature, by the erasure of knowing oneself to be good medicine for the land. People are remembering another way of being in the world, in kinship. They long to remember their gifts and how to give them in the world. Maybe plants help us remember.

Braiding Sweetgrass invites us to hold a *minidewak*, a giveaway for Mother Earth, to spread our blanket and pile it high with gifts of our own making, in return for all we've been given, in compensation for all we've taken. The response to this invitation has been an outpouring of reciprocal gifts of art and music and science on behalf of the land. I could fill pages of praise for these acts of reciprocity; I can mention only a few to inspire you to add your own.

For example, extraordinary music has grown from *Braiding Sweetgrass*: Sarah Fraker's oboe sings in reciprocity for the tree who made it; singers lift Laurence Cole's rounds to the lichens; and in Cheryl L'Hirondelle's Cree round dance anthem, birds, water, and the people all sing together their promise to the plants, to care for them. Such a chorus we make together.

I have been humbled by the unexpected gift of art, posters, mandala, weavings, sculpture, and Tony Drehfal's woodcut that graces the cover of this book. A knitting pattern, a bread recipe, films, podcasts, a dance created for goldenrod and asters, all exemplify the power of gift that grows with every giving, not meant to be held but to be shared.

And a deep bow to the teachers who have written Sweetgrass curricula from forest preschools to university courses and everything in between. A teacher who centers high school biology around the Thanksgiving Address, the MBA course that constructs an Honorable Harvest business plan, the professor of theology who challenges his students to write new liturgies for the Earth. Should your faith in the power of story to change the world ever flag, know that the preserve managers at Cascade Head in Oregon reintroduced healing fire to that high and holy landscape. They acknowledged that their good science of restoration was compelled by the imperative of an ancient story.

This renews my faith in the possibility of lived reciprocity. Together, this is how the world changes. We have braided a Sweetgrass community, awakening for each other the knowing that we are not alone. The strength of that community has the power to activate change, and our collective rhizomes are spreading.

To me, this special edition of *Braiding Sweetgrass* envisioned by Milkweed is a gift to you, in an ongoing circle of gift giving, a giveaway, and the *minidewak*.

I began writing *Braiding Sweetgrass* in what seems, from this moment in the midst of a global pandemic and the upheavals it has generated, a more innocent time, when climate catastrophe was a hot glow on the horizon. We could smell smoke but our home was not yet engulfed in flames. There was guarded optimism for leadership on climate change and justice for land and people, human and otherwise.

A lot has happened since in climate urgency, with the political pain of vile Windigos come to office and all the wounds they have inflicted. I don't need to say more. This evidence might suggest that the medicine

of plant stories has not worked very well to heal our relationships with land and each other. The powerful purveyors of destruction are still in power, the skies darkening. But as always, I take my guidance from the forests, who teach us something about change. The forces of creation and destruction are so tightly linked that sometimes we can't tell where one begins and the other leaves off. A long-lived overstory can dominate the forest for generations, setting the ecological conditions for its own thriving while suppressing others by exploiting all the resources with a self-serving dominance. But, all the while it sets the stage for what happens next and something always happens that is more powerful than that overstory: a fire, a windstorm, a disease. Eventually, the old forest is disrupted and replaced by the understory, by the buried seedbank that has been readying itself for this moment of transformation and renewal. A whole new ecosystem rises to replace that which no longer works in a changed world. *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I hope, is part of that understory, seeded by many thinkers and doers, filling the seedbank with diverse species, so that when the canopy falls, as it surely will, a new world is already rising. "New" and ancient, with its origins in the Indigenous worldview of right relation between land and people. What the "overstory" of colonialism tried to suppress is surging. It is the prophesied time of the Seventh Fire, a sacred time when the collective remembering transforms the world. A dark time and a time filled with light. We remember the oft-used words of resistance, "They tried to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds."

It's as if we can see the world we want to live in just over time's horizon; the question is how do we get there? It's a question familiar to Sweetgrass, unable to leave one place and travel to a better one by seed. *Ki** relies on humans to carry rhizomes, the ones who can easily cross distance and boundaries, who know that whatever we wish to see on the other side of the narrows of this ecological and cultural crisis, we must pass lovingly from hand to hand.

The mythic story of Skywoman Falling is the heartbeat of *Braiding*

* *Ki* is a pronoun to signify a living being of the Earth.

Sweetgrass, both an opening and a closing, enfolding the stories between. The version shared in the first edition is the most widely told account of the epic, but it is not the only one. There is always the deep diving Muskrat and the earth on Turtle's back. The rescue by the Geese and the gifts of the animals are a constant, as are the seeds Skywoman brings, initiating the covenant of reciprocity between newcomer humans and our ancient relatives. The detail that varies from one telling to another is just how Skywoman finds herself falling from one world to the next. The common version is that she slips, the earth giving way at the edge of the hole in the sky where the great Tree of Life had fallen. It is an accident, with mythic consequences—and so it begins.

But in other tellings, this was no accident. In one version, she was pushed. In another she was thrown—not from malice but because she was needed for the sacred task and needed “help” in leaving her beloved home for the next. In every version I've ever heard, Skywoman was an accidental and possibly an unwilling traveler to the next world, like a seed on the wind.

As I look around at the strong women I know, Indigenous and newcomer, survivors and thrivers, teachers, artists, farmers, singers, healers, mothers, nokos, aunties, daughters, sisters holding together families and communities and leading the way to a new world, I have a hard time seeing our Skywoman as an unknowing and passive emissary. No. I see her standing at the edge of the hole in the sky, her belly planted with new life, looking down into the darkness. Guided by the shaft of dazzling light shining through, she catches a glimpse of the world that waits for the seeds she carries, plucked from the Tree of Life. With all humility and respect for the teachings of this sacred story, I cannot help my imagining forward to this moment on the circle of time. What if, with full agency, she spreads her arms, looks over her shoulder, feels her child stir within and then—what if she jumps?

She is a woman with a duty to safeguard life. Just as women have done throughout our painful history, carrying life through times of starvation and disease, on the long walks of removal, hiding children from the boarding schools and embracing the ones who came back, fighting

pipelines, protecting water, saving the seeds, learning the language, holding the ceremonies, honoring the earth... Skywoman's descendants are not women who would step away from the edge, if it meant the protection of life.

As a society we stand at the brink, we know we do. Through the hole that opens at our feet, we can look down and see a glittering blue and green planet, as if from the vantage point of space, vibrating with birdsong and toads and tigers. We could close our eyes, keep breathing poison air, witness the extinction of our relatives and continue to measure our worth by how much we take. We could cover our ears to our own knowing, back away from the edge and retreat to the gray decline.

In this time of transformation, when creation and destruction wrestle like Skywoman's mythic grandsons, gambling with the future of the earth, what would it take for us to follow Skywoman? To jump to the new world, to co-create it? Do we jump because we look over our shoulders at the implacable suffering marching toward us and jump from fear and portent? Or perhaps we look down, drawn toward the glittering green, hear the birdsong, smell the Sweetgrass and yearn to be part of a different story. The story we long for, the story that we are beginning to remember, the story that remembers us.

What does it take to abandon what does not work and take the risks of uncertainty? We'll need courage; we'll need each other's hands to hold and faith in the geese to catch us. It would help to sing. The landing might not be soft, but land holds many medicines. Propelled by love, ready to work, we can jump toward the world we want to co-create, with pockets full of seeds. And rhizomes.