Returning the Gift

By ROBIN KIMMERER

We are showered every day with the gifts of the Earth, gifts we have neither earned nor paid for: 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 at full bloom.

My economics colleagues speak of these everyday miracles as "natural resources," as if they were our property, just waiting to be transformed. In the ecological sciences we call them "ecosystem services," as if they were the inevitable outcomes of the ongoing function of the ecological machine. But, to me, simply as a human person filling my basket with berries and my belly with pie, they feel like gifts, bestowed by the other beings whose lives throb around 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 definitions of sustainability revolve around trying to find the formula to ensure that we can keep on taking, far into the future. Isn't the question we need, "What does the Earth ask of us?"

The premise of Earth asking something of me makes my heart swell. I celebrate the implicit recognition of the animacy of the Earth: that the living planet has the capacity to ask something of us, and that we have the capacity to respond. Can it be that an entity as vast, as whole and generous, as the Earth has need of me? Me? Could it be that we are more than passive recipients of her gifts, but participants in her well-being? We are honored by the request. It lets us know that we belong.

I've been told that my Potawatomi ancestors taught that the job of a human person is to learn, "What can I give in return for the gifts of the Earth?" This is a question so fundamental to our being that it holds a central place in the mythic creation story of our people, a story shared by the first 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, or 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 mu-*

sic. 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...

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."

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 formed what we know today as Turtle Island. In the beginning of the world, the other species were our life raft. Now, in the spirit of reciprocity, we must be theirs.

The Earth was new then, when it welcomed the first human. It is old now, and some suspect that we have worn out our welcome. The stories of reciprocity have grown dim in the memory. How can we translate from the stories at the world's beginning to this hour so much closer to its end? Potawatomi philosopher Dr. Kyle White has written that "the intent of indigenous governance is to make the values and relationships in our creation stories manifest." Can we understand the Skywoman story not as some artifact from the past, but as instructions for the future? In return for this gift of the world on Turtle's back, what will I give in return?

THE EARTH CALLS US TO 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 for what we are given. Our first responsibility, the most potent offering we possess, is gratitude.

Now, gratitude may seem like weak tea given the desperate challenges that lie before us, but it is powerful medicine, much more than a simple thank you.

Gardner bay

Giving thanks implies recognition not only of the gift, but of the giver. When I eat an apple, my gratitude is directed to that wide-armed tree whose tart offspring are 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

way, lead to the practice of self-restraint, of taking only what you need. Naming and appreciation of the gifts that surround us creates a sense of satisfaction, a feeling of "enoughness" 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.

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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 doesn't grow, the animals do not return, and the legions of offended plants and animals and rivers rise up against the ones who neglected gratitude. The Western storytelling tradition is strangely silent on this matter, and so we find ourselves in an era when we are rightly afraid of the climate we have created.

We human people 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, devisers of ingenious machines, healers, scientists, and lovers of an Earth who 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.

THE EARTH ASKS THAT WE PAY ATTENTION

What does the Earth ask of us? In response to this question, I've heard from some that the Earth asks us nothing—that there is no possible voice in a collection of ecological processes. But I think that just means we're not listening. How does she ask? She asks by modeling generosity in times of plenty, by reminding us of limits in times of scarcity. She asks us to learn through the consequences of our failures and through the examples of our non-human teachers, helping us imagine how we might live. But we have to listen.

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's so appropriate that we call it *paying* attention, for it is perhaps a near-universal form of currency—it is exchangeable, it is valuable, and it incurs an expense on the part of the payer, for attention, we all know too well, is a limited resource.

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, shouldn't we at least pay attention? Paying attention is an ongoing act of reciprocity, the gift that keeps on giving, in which attention generates wonder, which generates more attention—and more joy. Paying attention to the more-than-human world doesn't 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 fall in love with the living world, we cannot be bystanders to its destruction. Attention becomes intention, which coalesces itself to action.

Deep attention calls us inevitably into 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 we 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 the average American schoolchild can recognize more than a hundred corporate logos. They can give a name to about ten plants, and these include such categories as "Christmas Tree" and "Grass." 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 who sustain us, has been

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subverted in a kind of intellectual hijacking. How can we care for them, monitor their well-being, and fight for their existence if we don't even know their names?

We have enabled a state of nameless anonymity, bringing human people to a condition of isolation and disconnection, that philosophers have called "species loneliness." Species loneliness—this deep, unnamed sadness—is the cost of estrangement from the rest of creation, from the loss of relationship. Our Potawatomi stories tell 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 we can no longer call our neighbors by name. 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 whom 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's a neighbor to Maple, who offers you the gift of syrup on Sunday morning pancakes. Paying attention is a pathway to gratitude.

The Cherokee poet Marilou Awiakta has been listening. In her poem, "When the Earth Becomes an 'It,'" she reports that Earth asks that we call her by name.

> 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.

And in the absence of names, it all comes down to pronouns. Grammar is the way we chart relationships in language, and, as it happens, relationships with the living world. In English grammar, a being is either a person or a thing. We refer to our family and our fellow humans with the grammar of gendered personhood: we say "he" or "she." To refer to a human being as "it" is deeply disrespectful; it robs one of personhood and kinship and reduces one to a thing. Yet in English, we are given no other way to refer to non-human beings. Understanding other beings as objects, as mere "its," opens the door to exploitation. Linguistics code for 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 have to think twice.

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However, in our Potawatomi language and indeed many other indigenous languages, there is no "it" for birds or berries. The language does not divide the world into him and her, but into animate and inanimate. And the grammar of animacy is applied to all that lives: sturgeon, mayflies, blueberries, boulders, and rivers. We refer to other members of the living world with the same language that we use for our family. Because it is our family.

If we are to survive here—and if our neighbors are to survive, too—we need to learn to speak the grammar of animacy.

THE EARTH CALLS US TO RECOGNIZE THE PERSONHOOD OF ALL BEINGS

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 live. Science and spirituality both demonstrate the fundamental nature of our relatedness with all life forms: we are more the same 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 the Earth is populated by non-human persons. How different our world would be if we extended the same respect and compassion and

agency to other species as we do to human people. We tolerate governance that grants legal personhood and free speech to corporations, but that 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

Potawatomi Territory 1650

wealth and services of the Earth than other species. Recognition of the personhood of other beings asks that we relinquish our perceived role as masters of the universe 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 the understanding that we are surrounded by intelligences other than our own: 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.

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 door to ecological justice. Our laws today are all about governing our rights to the land. The shift we need is 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 around the world: the Maori, who granted personhood to a river; the Ecuadorian constitution, which 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.

THE EARTH ASKS US TO CHANGE

The Earth asks us to change as everything changes and evolves, like the flesh-tearing Allosaurus who became a warbler singing from the treetops when the time for flesh-tearing was over. For if we don't change, we will, like all that does not change, perish.

The Earth herself is changing, by our hands. The responses from our government leaders to the "clear and present danger" of climate disruption have been wholly inadequate in scale, in urgency, and in imagination. The limited strategies advanced by politicians, economists, scientists, and engineers have a common theme. Most take the approach that to "solve the climate problem," we must in some way change the environment. They propose wave turbines, ocean fertilization, seawalls, photoelectric paint, plants genetically modified to withstand a traumatic drought, and heaven forbid one more new kind of light bulb. We will no doubt need all the good new ideas we can get. But while we race around asking how we might change technology or tax structures, the change that might save us goes unspoken: what we need to change is ourselves. The danger is that we have been captured by a worldview that no longer serves our world, if it ever did—a worldview whose manifestation is destroying our beloved homelands, our fellow species, and ourselves. But all we can talk about is changing light bulbs.

I don't think that it is more technology we need, or more money or more data. We need a change in heart, a change in ethics, away from an anthropocentric worldview that considers the Earth our exploitable property to a biocentric, life-centered worldview in which an ethic of respect and reciprocity can grow.

The philosopher Joanna Macy has called this "The Great Turning"—the essential adventure of our time, shifting from the age of industrial growth to the age of life-sustaining civilization. Her work and the work of countless others describe the accelerating momentum of the transition already in progress, in acts large and small, as humans reclaim an ancient way of knowing in which human life is aligned with ecological process-

es, not against them. The question is, will the circle turn in time to save us? That's up to us.

We don't have to invent this; it's something we already know. From the time of Skywoman, we have lived this way before—and well. I've heard the elders say all we must do is "remember to remember."

Scientists are deep in a debate about whether to recognize the end of the Holocene—the aptly named "Recent Era"—and declare that we live in a wholly new geologic era, the Anthropocene—the Era of Man. The proposed designation would recognize that humans, not "natural" forces, are the dominant force on the planet today—the major influence on the atmosphere, biogeochemical cycles, and even the evolutionary destinies of species. It is, of course, undeniable that the human species has caused great disruption—indeed, of geologic proportion. But to declare the Age of the Anthropocene smacks of the terrible arrogance that got us into this predicament, which is embodied in Stewart Brand's famous quote, "We *are* as gods and might as well get good at it." It is a fatal error to think that we are in charge; the instructive myths of most every culture hold that lesson. If we don't remember that, I'm sure that the viruses will be happy to remind us.

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I don't believe that we are entering the Anthropocene, but that we are living in a transient period of profoundly painful error and correction on our way to a humbler consideration of ourselves. In the geologic scope of things, the Industrial Revolution that fueled the expansion of the exploitative, mechanistic worldview was only an eye blink ago. For eons before that, there was a long time on this planet when humans lived well, in relative homeostasis with biotic processes, embodying a worldview of reciprocity that was simultaneously material and spiritual. There was a time when we considered ourselves the "younger brothers of creation," not the masters of the universe. Our current adversarial relationship with the rest of the living world is not necessarily all that we are as a species. We are a species that 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 who can change.

THE EARTH CALLS US TO RECIPROCITY

What does the Earth ask of us? To meet our responsibilities and to give our gifts. Naming responsibility is often understood as accepting a burden, but in the teachings of my ancestors, responsibilities and gifts are understood as two sides of the same coin. The possession of a gift is coupled with a duty to use it for the benefit of all. A thrush is given the gift of song, and so has a responsibility to greet the day with music, which is in turn received as a gift to us as we watch the sky grow pink with dawn. Salmon have the gift of travel, so they accept the duty of carrying food upriver. The stars were given the gift of sparkle, coupled with the responsibility of guiding us at night. So when we ask ourselves, what is our responsibility to the Earth, we are also asking "What is our gift?"

As human people, most recently evolved here, we lack the gifts of our companion species: of nitrogen fixation, pollination, and three-thousand-mile migrations under magnetic guidance. We can't even photosynthesize. But we carry gifts of our own that the Earth urgently needs.

Reciprocity—returning the gift—is not just good manners; it is how the biophysical world works. Balance in ecological systems arises from negative feedback loops, from cycles of giving and taking: living and dying, production and consumption, biogeochemical cycles, water to cloud and back to water again. Reciprocity among parts of the living Earth produces equilibrium in which life as we know it can flourish. Positive feedback loops—in which interactions spur one another away from balance—produce radical change, often to a point of no return. We must understand that we, like every other successful organism, must play by the rules that govern ecosystem function. The laws of thermodynamics have not been suspended on our behalf. Unlimited growth is not possible. In a finite world you cannot relentlessly take without replenishment.

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How can we reciprocate the gifts of the Earth? In gratitude, in ceremony, through acts of practical reverence and land stewardship, in fierce defense of the beings and places we love, in art, in science, in song, in gardens, in children, in ballots, in stories of renewal, in creative resistance, in how we spend our money and our precious lives, by refusing to be complicit with the

forces of ecological destruction. In healing.

Ecological restoration is an act of reciprocity, and the Earth asks us to turn our gifts to healing the damage we have done. The Earth-shaping prowess that we thoughtlessly use to sicken the land can be used to heal it. It is not just the land that is broken, but our relationship with land. We can be partners in renewal; we can be medicine for the Earth.

If our leaders don't lead then we have to. If all our leaders ask is that we are quietly complicit with destruction, we say we are a better species than that. All over Turtle Island people are rising up to reclaim their roles as caregivers for the Earth, to be more than consumers, to be givers.

We humans carry gifts of our own; we are scientists and storytellers. We are change-makers; we are Earth-shapers riding on the back of the turtle. We can remember the covenant of reciprocity, seeking what Onondaga Clan Mother Audrey Shenandoah called "Justice not only for ourselves, but justice for all of Creation."

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