

Fellowship and Harmony in *Upstream* and *Braiding Sweetgrass*: Humankind's Kinship with the Natural World

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Throughout the centuries, people from various cultures have found a sense of harmony and unity with the natural world. Whether it is through their cultivation of the land, religious beliefs, or ecological studies, humankind has not only benefited from the natural world, but has also helped nourish that world in return. In their respective books, Mary Oliver and Robin W. Kimmerer praise the kinship between the natural world and humans through discussions of motherhood, unlikely friendships, and reciprocity, showing that this fellowship brings us not only closer to nature, but also closer to one another.

A large portion of Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, focuses on her role as a mother. As she raised her children, and even after they were grown and had left home, she saw her care for nature as a maternal act. In "A Mother's Work," she discusses how she tried to make the pond in her yard swimmable for her daughters. In the process, however, she began to consider the various life forms residing in the pond, and as a mother, she could not entirely destroy the home and lives of another mother's children. Kimmerer says, "I could work so much faster if I didn't have to stop and pick tadpoles from the tangle of every moral dilemma.... I sighed, but I knew what I had to do. I was driven to this chore by a mothering urge, to make a swimmable pond. In the process, I could hardly sacrifice another mother's children, who, after all, already have a pond to swim in" (89-90). While she was disrupting their environment, Kimmerer made sure to minimize the damage she was causing. She was driven to take extra care because of the kinship she felt with the other mothers in the natural world. In this case, the most prominent mother in her mind was the frog, and while she could not save every microscopic life in that pond, the preservation of the tadpoles was within her control.

In a chapter of her book discussing the relationship between humankind and rivers, Andrea Vianello states, "When we look at rivers and how humans used and adapted them, it is necessary to understand that changes are not necessarily negative or causing devastation to the environment.... The historical-archaeological approach, however, also suggests that heavy changes in the natural environment are not necessarily devastating per se, as long as humans maintain sustainability

in their management of natural resources through awareness of their environment and its development along with human activities" (9-13). In Kimmerer's case, she made the pond healthier both for her own children and the surrounding natural world. The living beings in the pond were no longer strangled by rampant, excess algae, and she even used the organic matter that she removed to sustain and nourish life in her garden. Her actions were sustainable as well as nurturing. She acted as a maternal figure for her own children and for the natural life around her.

Kimmerer worked in this pond even after her children had left for college. After they left, this work was a way for her to remain close to her children and prevent herself from losing her sense of purpose as a mother. But this project that she had originally started for her children caused her to form a relationship with all of the living beings in the environment. It expanded her role as a mother to encompass her neighbor's pond, which received runoff, frogs, geese, spores, and her future grandchildren. She says, "The pond has shown me that being a good mother doesn't end with creating a home where just my children can flourish. A good mother grows into a richly eutrophic old woman, knowing that her work doesn't end until she creates a home where all of life's beings can flourish" (97). While she still maintained her bond with her own children, her interaction with the natural world enabled Kimmerer to expand her idea of motherhood and work in harmony with and for the betterment of nature.

In "Swoon," Oliver shows a slightly different approach to motherhood. In her case, she essentially protects a mother spider from danger, allowing her young to range forth from the stairwell where the mother spider resides. In his essay discussing the destruction of the bond between Native Americans and the natural world due to relocation and colonization, Wayne Dodd says, "In addition, of course, the Indians represented a relationship to the natural world that was, whatever else it might represent to the predominantly European whites, a constant source of challenge to the entrepreneurial zeal to exploit, to develop, to change" (640). Oliver does not conform to the desire to change the natural elements around her as so many people do. Even though the spider is residing in the stairwell of the house that she has

rented, Oliver does not force her out. Through her act of maternal protection, Oliver provides another living being with a safe place to live, eat, and become a mother. She even passes on this maternal task to the cleaning crew and the next inhabitant, by leaving a note for the stairwell to remain untouched. While she will likely never meet any of these people, they are still engaging in this nurturing act together.

Both authors also discuss the forming of unlikely friendships through a bond with the natural world. In "Witch Hazel," this name labels both a plant and a woman. Reflecting on this figure from her childhood, Kimmerer's daughter says, "I'd never heard of a person named Hazel, but I'd heard of Witch Hazel and was quite certain that this much be the witch herself" (73). Kimmerer and Hazel became friends by "trading recipes and garden tips" (73). While Kimmerer was a college professor and Hazel was a poor old woman who could not return to her home, they were still able to form a bond through their shared love of the natural world. In his essay, Dodd asks, "And what can most of us in America today, great layers of concrete and steel and asphalt and artificial light between us and the physical life of the continent, nature now only an abstract concept—what can we know of the once elemental power of the words for water and sunlight and the parent soil to call forth the mystery of the living earth, to utter the wonder of our existence on it?" (655). Hazel and Kimmerer, however, had not lost their curiosity and respect for the natural world. Because of that one commonality, they were able to become friends, even though their different positions in life would ordinarily prevent them from ever crossing paths.

In "Bird," Oliver makes friends not just across economic differences, but also across species. Her care for this injured bird could also be considered a maternal act, but Oliver and her partner both developed a bond with this bird. They both cared for and played with the bird as if it was their friend, and over time, she began to see that the bird had a personality. She describes their interactions, saying, "I would fling the water around with my finger, he, again, would follow with that spirited beak, dashing the water from the bowl, making it fly in all directions. His eyes sparkled. We gave him a stuffed toy—a lion as it happened—and he would peck the lion's red nose very gently, and lean against him while he slept" (129). In her description of the bird, it is clear that she recognized a personality in the animal and formed a friendship based on that personality and the act of caring for him.

As the bird slowly loses the ability to walk and other motor functions, she suffers along with him. When he finally dies, Oliver grieves for him. In most circumstances, a human would not form a bond with a beach gull. We are always discouraged from feeding them and from getting too close to them, because they might carry diseases or be dangerous in some other way. But through her respect for the natural world, Oliver saw only a fellow living being in trouble, and she sought to help him.

Friendship and fellowship are largely built on reciprocity. Kimmerer was taught the importance of reciprocity since she was a child, which she discusses in "An Offering." Her father pouring the first cup of coffee on the ground was meant to be a way of saying "thank you" for all of the things that the natural world had provided and given to his family. She says again and again that her family were "the ones who know how to say thank you" (34). For Kimmerer's family, this solidified their relationship with each other as well as with the natural world.

This relationship has been lost in the majority of cultures today. In his essay "Ecosystem Services, Nonhuman Agencies, and Diffuse Dependence," Keith Peterson explains, "Unsurprisingly, the dominant metaphors employed in them to express the vital relations between humanity and nonhuman nature are primarily economic. Humanity is encountering an 'ecological credit crunch,' and 'we' must reduce our impact on 'the services provided by the Earth's natural systems,' as well as become better at 'managing the ecosystems that provide those services'" (2). The interactions between humans and the natural world have been reduced to statistics and economics rather than sustained as an actual relationship. He goes on to explain that, "In this discourse nature provides valuable 'services.' This rhetoric might be seen as an advance beyond the more traditional term 'natural resources,' since 'services' connote both some attention to processuality as well as a modicum of intentional recognition, where 'resources' are perceived to lie passively at one's disposal" (2). If the resources provided by the natural world do not contribute to the GDP or in some monetary or economic capacity, then people tend to disregard the importance of that resource. What many people have forgotten is that these resources do not passively exist for humanity to take and use them; people must find a way to nurture and give back if that relationship is to continue.

In "The Gift of Strawberries," Kimmerer gives an example of what that sort of reciprocal relationship could look like. She assists the strawberry vine in finding a place to root, and as a result, it provides fresh strawberries for her to eat. She goes on to explain the difference between a gift and a resource, saying, "From the viewpoint of a private property economy, the 'gift' is deemed to be 'free' because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in the gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity" (28). The strawberries grown in the wild were different from the ones purchased in the grocery store, because instead of a monetary exchange, there was an exchange of care. Kimmerer had respect for the strawberry plants, and while she wanted to pick them as soon as she saw them, she waited until the plant was ready to relinquish its fruit. In this way, she valued the plant even more and received a richer, better fruit as a gift.

This relationship between humankind and the natural world is exemplified in the tale of Skywoman. This folktale is evident throughout Kimmerer's writing and guides her through

her interactions with nature. Skywoman's historical relationship with the animals and nature is quite different from humankind's modern-day relationship with the natural world. As Antoine C. Dussault explains, "This concept rests on a human/nature dualism which defines the natural in opposition to the cultural and the artefactual, and thus in principle places humans outside the natural realm. This makes it conceptually impossible for humans to intervene in nature without denaturing it" (1). This prevents any kind of relationship between humankind and the natural world, and thus eliminates the possibility of reciprocity. Dussault goes on to say

the concept of wilderness is tied to an outdated Christian and Cartesian mind/matter dualism, which sets humans apart from nature on the grounds that their immortal soul distinguishes them from purely material beings. This dualism is incompatible with the Darwinian discovery that we are part of nature insofar as we are the result of the same evolutionary processes as all other living beings. In the context of ecology, this dualistic view has often undergirded the increasingly questioned assumption that nature, in the absence of human intervention, exists in an unperturbed state of equilibrium (a balance of nature). As Callicott remarks, this assumption tends to downplay the omnipresence of change and perturbations in the ecological world. (2)

Dussault saying that an equal exchange and relationship between humankind and the natural world is not only beneficial, but also necessary.

As Kimmerer explains in "Wisgaak Gokpenagen: A Black Ash Basket" and in "Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass," the natural world sometimes needs the assistance of humankind in order to thrive. By cutting down some of the ash trees to make their baskets, the Pigeon family thins the forest enough so that new trees have room to grow tall and strong. But they do not cut down so many trees as to endanger their existence. The gatherers of sweetgrass do the same. Thinning the groupings of sweetgrass gives the plant more room to thrive and flourish. In each of these relationships, however, the people always ask permission, and they give back with a gift of tobacco or simply by providing a healthy environment, continuing the relationship of reciprocity. These methods brought the people within those communities closer together, and as they introduced their practices to outsiders, they expanded their relations and communities, forging new bonds. In the case of "Mishkos Kenomagwen: The Teachings of Grass," the aspiring PhD created a relationship between the

harvesters of the grass and the faculty committee, people who never even met each other.

In a less culturally-based way, Oliver also discusses the act of reciprocity. In "Winter Hours," she says,

I would say that there exist a thousand unbreakable links between each of us and everything else, and that our dignity and our chances are one. The farthest star and the mud at our feet are a family; and there is no decency or sense in honoring one thing, or a few things, and then closing the list. The pine tree, the leopard, the Platte River, and ourselves—we are at risk together, or we are on our way to a sustainable world together. We are each other's destiny. (154)

Oliver's idea of a link between everything is an example of reciprocity, because if that link is not nurtured by all parties, then all will suffer. Her viewpoint does not distinguish between human and non-human or breathing and photosynthesizing organisms. Every living thing in the world is connected in some way, so reciprocity is necessary to create a healthy, thriving planet.

In both Kimmerer's and Oliver's work, the themes of motherhood, unlikely friendships, and reciprocity solidify the concept of fellowship and harmony between humankind and the natural world. Through maternal, cultural, and empathetic connections with nature, people are also able to strengthen their bonds with one another. Whether it is an act of solidifying already existing relationships or forging new ones, this harmony brings all of humanity together in order to make a better, more compassionate world for all of the living beings that come after us.

Works Cited

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