

## Gardening and the Secret of Happiness

by Maria Popova

"This is happiness," Willa Cather's fictional narrator gasps as he sinks into his grandmother's garden, "to be dissolved into something complete and great." A generation later, in a real-life counterpart, Virginia Woolf arrived at the greatest epiphany of her life — and to this day perhaps the finest definition of what it takes to be an artist — while contemplating the completeness and greatness abloom in the garden.

Nearly a century later, botanist and nature writer Robin Wall Kimmerer, who has written beautifully about the art of attentiveness to life at all scales, examines the revelations of the garden in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (public library) — an unusual and richly rewarding book blending botany, Native American mythology, natural history, and philosophy.

In a particularly enchanting passage, Kimmerer, who fuses her scientific training with her Native American storytelling heritage, considers happiness as a sort of reciprocity between the Earth and the human spirit — a gladdening mutuality of affections and animacy:

It came to me while picking beans, the secret of happiness.

I was hunting among the spiraling vines that envelop my teepees of pole beans, lifting the dark-green leaves to find handfuls of pods, long and green, firm and furred with tender fuzz. I snapped them off where they hung in slender twosomes, bit into one, and tasted nothing but August, distilled into pure, crisp beaniness... By the time I finished searching through just one trellis, my basket was full. To go and empty it in the kitchen, I stepped between heavy squash vines and around tomato plants fallen under the weight of their fruit. They sprawled at the feet of the sunflowers, whose heads bowed with the weight of maturing seeds.

Illustration by Emily Hughes from *Little Gardener*

Mid-stride in the garden, Kimmerer notices the potato patch her daughters had left off harvesting that morning. She twines this communion with the land and the commitment of good parenthood in a beautiful meditation on what it means to care for, to be a steward of, to love — be it a child or Mother Earth:

They complain about garden chores, as kids are supposed to do, but once they start they

get caught up in the softness of the dirt and the smell of the day and it is hours later when they come back into the house. Seeds for this basket of beans were poked into the ground by their fingers back in May. Seeing them plant and harvest makes me feel like a good mother, teaching them how to provide for themselves.

[...]

How do I show my girls I love them on a morning in June? I pick them wild strawberries. On a February afternoon we build snowmen and then sit by the fire. In March we make maple syrup. We pick violets in May and go swimming in July. On an August night we lay out blankets and watch meteor showers. In November, that great teacher the woodpile comes into our lives. That's just the beginning. How do we show our children our love? Each in our own way by a shower of gifts and a heavy rain of lessons.

Maybe it was the smell of ripe tomatoes, or the oriole singing, or that certain slant of light on a yellow afternoon and the beans hanging thick around me. It just came to me in a wash of happiness that made me laugh out loud, startling the chickadees who were picking at the sunflowers, raining black and white hulls on the ground. I knew it with a certainty as warm and clear as the September sunshine. The land loves us back. She loves us with beans and tomatoes, with roasting ears and blackberries and birdsongs. 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.

I was reminded of this passage from the altogether bewitching *Braiding Sweetgrass* by a mention in Kimmerer's terrific *On Being* conversation with Krista Tippett — listen and revel below:

[The] kind of deep attention that we pay as children is something that I cherish, that I think we all can cherish and reclaim — because attention is the doorway to gratitude, the doorway to wonder, the doorway to reciprocity. And it worries me greatly that today's children can recognize 100 corporate logos and fewer than 10 plants. That means they're not paying attention.

Complement with Mary Oliver — another patron saint of listening and of the Earth — on what it really means to pay attention, then revisit Kimmerer's exquisite writings about the magic of moss and how naming confers dignity upon existence.