

The "Honorable Harvest": Lessons From an Indigenous Tradition of Giving Thanks by Robin Wall Kimmerer

What if this holiday season we fill our shopping baskets with only that which is needed and give something back in return?

In this season of harvest, our baskets are full, rounded with fragrant apples and heaped with winter squash. So too are the steel shopping carts that clatter across the parking lot, plastic bags whipping in the wind. How do we even name such abundance? Are these commodities? Natural resources? Ecosystem services? In the indigenous worldview, we call them gifts.

We are showered every day with the gifts of the Earth: air to breathe, fresh water, the companionship of geese and maples—and food. Since we lack the gift of photosynthesis, we animals are destined by biology to be utterly dependent upon the lives of others, the inherently generous, more-than-human persons with whom we share the planet.

If we understand the Earth as just a collection of objects, then apples and the land that offers them fall outside our circle of moral consideration. We tell ourselves that we can use them however we please, because their lives don't matter. But in a worldview that understands them as persons, their lives matter very much. Recognition of personhood does not mean that we don't consume, but that we are accountable for the lives that we take. When we speak of the living world as kin, we also are called to act in new ways, so that when we take those lives, we must do it in such a way that brings honor to the life that is taken and honor to the ones receiving it.

The canon of indigenous principles that govern the exchange of life for life is known as the Honorable Harvest. They are "rules" of sorts that govern our taking, so that the world is as rich for the seventh generation as it is for us.

The Honorable Harvest, a practice both ancient and urgent, applies to every exchange

between people and the Earth. Its protocol is not written down, but if it were, it would look something like this:

Ask permission of the ones whose lives you seek. Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last.

Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Take only what you need and leave some for others.

Use everything that you take.

Take only that which is given to you.

Share it, as the Earth has shared with you.

Be grateful.

Reciprocate the gift.

Sustain the ones who sustain you, and the Earth will last forever.

Though we live in a world made of gifts, we find ourselves harnessed to institutions and an economy that relentlessly ask, “What more can we take from the Earth?” In order for balance to occur, we cannot keep taking without replenishing. Don’t we need to ask, “What can we give?”

The Honorable Harvest is a covenant of reciprocity between humans and the land. This simple list may seem like a quaint prescription for how to pick berries, but it is the root of a sophisticated ethical protocol that could guide us in a time when unbridled exploitation threatens the life that surrounds us. Western economies and institutions enmesh us all in a profoundly dishonorable harvest. Collectively, by assent or by inaction, we have chosen the policies we live by. We can choose again.

What if the Honorable Harvest were the law of the land? And humans—not just plants and animals—fulfilled the purpose of supporting the lives of others? What would the world look like if a developer poised to convert a meadow to a shopping mall had first to ask permission of the meadowlarks and the goldenrod? And abide by their answer? What if we fill our shopping baskets with only that which is needed and give something back in return?

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 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. Whatever our gift, we are called to give it and dance for the renewal of the world.