

BRAIDING SWEETGRASS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS¹

DISCUSSION APRIL 15, 2022

Part 5: Burning Sweetgrass (pp. 303 - 379 in Milkweed Editions, 2013)

+ Epilogue: Returning the Gift

Read chapters twenty-six through thirty-one + Epilogue and write reflections on each of the following:

"A Sweetgrass braid is burned to create a ceremonial smudge that washes the recipient in kindness and compassion to heal the body and the spirit." (p. 301) Conversely, in 'Windigo Footprints' (pp. 303 - 309), Kimmerer draws parallels between the indigenous people's stories of the Windigo monster and the greedy nature of mankind today that allows for the destruction of nature's structures, habitats, and balance in the name of progress and profit. This selfish behavior is our Windigo.

The need for the healing of the land and the ecological restoration of the gifts that Mother Earth has given us is passionately presented in the 'The Sacred and the Superfund' (pp. 310 - 340) chapter. Onondaga Lake, located outside of Syracuse, New York, was turned into a Superfund site following years of destructive industrial misuse that began prior to 1940 and continued into the 1970's. Kimmerer states that "scarcely thirty years ago, covering up your mess passed for responsibility—a kind of land-as-litter-box approach." (p. 329) She points out the difference in the approach to ecological restoration when land is "just real estate, then restoration looks very different than if land is the source of a subsistence economy and a spiritual home. Restoring land for production of natural resources is not the same as renewal of land as cultural identity." (p. 328)

1. Kimmerer states that "we seem to be living in an era of Windigo economics of fabricated demand and compulsive overconsumption" (p. 308) In addition, "Our leaders willfully ignore the wisdom and the models of every other species on the planet—except of course those that have gone extinct. Windigo thinking." (p. 309) Can you provide examples of unnecessary overconsumption? What would we need to change in our society to stop these practices?
2. "The Onondaga people still live by the precepts of the Great Law and still believe that, in return for the gifts of Mother Earth, human people have responsibility for caring for the nonhuman people, for stewardship of the land." (p. 319) What do you believe are the responsibilities of our government and our society in aiding the Onondaga Nation in its efforts to restore Onondaga Lake to a healthy state?
3. Reflect upon Kimmerer's statement "environmentalism becomes synonymous with dire predictions and powerless feelings." (p. 327) What action can you take within your community to bring about positive environmentalism and ecological restoration/preservation?
4. Based upon the central themes as presented by Dr. Kimmerer in Braiding Sweetgrass, explain the differences between reciprocity and the current ecological movement known as sustainability.

¹ From the Longwood Gardens Discussion and Question Guide for [Community Read 2015](https://longwoodgardens.org/education/community-read/community-read-2015) (<https://longwoodgardens.org/education/community-read/community-read-2015>) in Kennett Square, PA