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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, & the Teachings of Plants

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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Joy Harjo is our current United States Poet Laureate, and the first enrolled member of a Native American tribe to hold the position. Harjo began writing in the early 1970s as a college student and in the decades since has published eight books of poetry, a memoir and two books for young audiences.

Her latest poetry collection, titled *An American Sunrise*, was published this year. And I was interested to discover that the title poem in that book is inspired by “We Real Cool,” the most anthologized poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, who was the first black person to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

“We Real Cool” is a short poem (only 24 words) that Harjo uses as a base that she expands into a longer poem [my bolding below]. Brooks describes her poem as about seven pool players that she happened to notice one day at a local bar.

Speculating as to their self-perception, she writes:

We real cool. **We**
Left school. **We**
Lurk late. **We**
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

I've also bolded the interpolation of Brooks's poem in Harjo's poem. And I love that there's not an explicit reference to Brooks's poem in Harjo's book; rather it's a hidden "Easter egg" on the border of her poem for anyone who knows Brooks's poetry:

We were running out of breath, as we ran out to meet ourselves. **We** were surfacing the edge of our ancestors' fights, and ready to **strike**. It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were **straight**. Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. **We** made plans to be professional — and did. And some of us could **sing** so we drummed a fire-lit pathway up to those starry stars. **Sin** was invented by the Christians, as was the Devil, we sang. **We** were the heathens, but needed to be saved from them — **thin** chance. We knew we were all related in this story, a little **gin** will clarify the dark and make us all feel like dancing. **We** had something to do with the origins of blues and **jazz**. I argued with a Pueblo as I filled the jukebox with dimes in **June**, forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. **We** know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out. They **die soon**.

In resonance with those final lines, Harjo has said that, "**My poems are about confronting the kind of society that would diminish Native people, disappear us from the story of this country.**"

With that intention in mind, I invite you to hear one more poem from Harjo titled "For Those Who Would Govern":

First question: Can you first govern yourself?

Second question: What is the state of your own household?

Third question: Do you have a proven record of community service and compassionate acts?

Fourth question: Do you know the history and laws of your principalities?

Fifth question: "Do you follow sound principles? Look for fresh vision to lift all the inhabitants of the land, including animals, plants, elements, all who share this earth?"

Sixth question: Are you owned by lawyers, bankers, insurance agents, lobbyists, or other politicians, anyone else who would unfairly profit by your decisions?

Seventh question: Do you have authority by the original keepers of the lands, those who obey natural law and are in the service of the lands on which you stand?

These questions seem particularly poignant on the eve of Indigenous Peoples' Day, which is celebrated annually on the second Monday in October.

Indigenous Peoples' Day celebrates and honors Native American peoples and commemorates their histories and cultures. It is an intentional reframing that seeks to flip the script on the U.S. federal holiday of Columbus Day, and an increasing number of cities and states celebrate Indigenous People's Day.

Relatedly, I was excited to learn that the new UUA Common Read is the powerful book *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. That book was published a few years ago, and I've preached on it previously, but it is very much worth revisiting even if you have read it. And there is also a new version, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People*. I encourage you to read or revisit either one of these books in preparation for our Congregational Conversation about it during the 10:30am Middle Hour on Sunday, May 17. So you've got seven months to get it read!

This book was chosen because a year from now, November 2020 will be the 400th anniversary of the 1620 landing of the Pilgrims and their relationship with the Wampanoag people. And our UU General Assembly next summer is intentionally in Providence, Rhode Island (about an hour away from Plymouth Rock) as part of reflecting on and reframing that anniversary.

When I reflect what it can mean to be in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples' rights in today's world, one of the first things that comes to mind is the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. Although the pipeline was eventually built, the nearly yearlong effort was the most significant Indigenous protest in decades (since the 1960s and early 1970s). And it succeeded in both bringing together more than three hundred tribal nations as part of the struggle and in raising awareness about climate justice (Gilio-Whitaker 10).

Considering, however, the ultimate defeat of the Dakota Access Pipeline protesters, it is sobering to remember the words of the preeminent Indian law scholar Felix Cohen who warned that the treatment of Native Americans should be viewed as the “canary in the coal mine.” Most of you probably know the practice of miners taking a canary (a type of bird) in a cage with them into a coal mine: If dangerous gases were building up in the tunnel, the gases would be fatal to the smaller canary before it would kill the larger miners—so the canary death was a signal to escape the mine immediately.

Thus, from Cohen’s perspective, the treatment of Native Americans in U.S. history is the “canary in the coal mine” of how we will all be treated if we don’t act together against climate change and wealth inequality. As one Indigenous activist has written, from a Native American perspective, the potential sixth mass extinction on this planet from climate change means that, “**We’re all on the reservation now**” (ix).

Now, don’t get me wrong, as I’ve preached previously, I am all for seeking creative solutions for mitigating climate change. But as we already face the ongoing effects of climate change, there is significant Indigenous wisdom for how we might live, adapt, and act. After all, as historians remind us:

To be a person of direct Indigenous descent in the U.S. today is to have survived a genocide of cataclysmic proportions. Some Native people have described the experience of living in today’s world as post apocalyptic. Based on sheer numbers, if we assume an estimate of eighteen million Indigenous people on the continent north of Mesoamerica in 1492 and compare that number to the Native American population count of roughly 228,0000 in the 1890 census—the nadir of the Native American population—we see a **population decline of approximately 99 percent.** (49)

Learning more about history from an Indigenous perspective is both a warning (“the canary in the coal mine”) and a resource for resilience.

Along those lines of seeking signs of hope that remain despite all the historic trauma and betrayal, have you ever had the experience of hearing about a book from a bunch of different people? Most recently that has been the case for me with the book Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of

Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer. It was published in 2013, and for the past few years, I kept hearing the book referenced—and people saying in response, “I love that book.” And I would agree that it is a beautiful meditation on living in this world from someone who deeply loves both science and Indigenous wisdom.

Dr. Kimmerer is an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation as well as a Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology at SUNY (the State University of New York) and the founding director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. More simply, she is a plant scientist *and* a poet (29). But for a long time she was told that she couldn’t be both—that she had to choose, and for many years she chose science.

She found the field of botany fascinating. But she would also find herself captivated by a plants with the eyes of a poet. And on the one hand, it is useful and informative to know that the scientific classification for the Canada Goldenrod is *Solidago canadensis* from the Aster family:

This is a herbaceous perennial plant with a central stem that is 2-6' tall....

The alternate leaves are about 4-6" long and 1" wide, becoming slightly smaller towards the apex of the plant. They are lanceolate [shaped like the head of a lance] to broadly linear in shape, and usually have small teeth along the margins, otherwise the margins are smooth....

The scientific description goes on at length from there. And I’m grateful this information is available. On the other hand, consider this description of the same plant:

If a fountain could jet bouquets of chrome yellow in dazzling arches of chrysanthemum fireworks, that would be Canada Goldenrod. Each three-foot stem is a geyser of tiny gold daisies, ladylike in miniature, exuberant *en masse*. Where the soil is damp enough, they stand side by side with their perfect counterpart, New England Asters. Not the pale domesticates of the perennial border, the weak sauce of lavender or sky blue, but full-on royal purple that would make a violet shrink. The daisy-like fringes of purple petals surround a disc as bright as the sun at high noon, a golden-orange pool, just a tantalizing shade darker than the surrounding goldenrod. Alone, each is a botanical superlative. Together, the visual

effect is stunning. Purple and gold, the herald colors of the king and queen of the meadow, a regal procession in complementary colors. (40-41)

Dr. Kimmerer ends that poetic description with the words: “I wanted to know why.” The scientific impulse remains amidst the poetry. And from my perspective, it is less the science and more the poetry that makes me want to go out into a field and study flowers for hours. For me, and I suspect for many others, it is the poetry and the beauty of the initial attraction, that makes me then want to go back and later dive into the science. But Kimmerer was told by her academic advisor “If you want to study beauty, you should go to art school” (41).

So for many years to survive as an Indigenous woman in the white male-dominated world of science, she chose science alone. And by all means, science also can be a powerful and transformative worldview. But not long after she earned her Ph.D., she received a fateful invitation

to a small gathering of Native elders, to talk about traditional knowledge of plants.... A Navajo woman without a day of university botany training in her life—spoke for hours and I hung on every word. One by one, name by name, she told of the planets in her valley. Where each one lived, when it bloomed, who it liked to live near and all its relationships, who ate it, who lined their nest with its fibers, what kind of medicine it offered. She also shared the stories held by those plants, their origin myths, how they got their names, and what they have to tell us. She spoke of beauty.

The newly-minted Dr. Kimmerer said, “**Her words were like smelling salts waking me to what I had known...**” (44).

By no means did this awakening mean leaving science behind. Rather it meant adding additional perspectives. As Native scholar Greg Cajete has written, “**In indigenous ways of knowing, we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit**” (47). Science is a one transformative way of knowing, especially through mind. And indigenous practices point us toward additional ways of knowing through the wisdom of our body, mind, emotions, and spirit.

Related to indigenous ways of experiencing the world, I also appreciated Dr. Kimmerer's reflections on her experience as a young child of being required to say the "Pledge of Allegiance" in school. She remembers, "The pledge was a puzzlement to me, as I'm sure it is to most students. I had no earthly idea what a republic even was, and was none too sure about God, either. And you didn't have to be an eight-year-old Indian to know that 'liberty and justice for all' was a questionable premise."

More recently, she received a call from her daughter's teacher when her daughter chose to sit silently in her desk instead of rising to repeat the pledge. Her daughter said, "Mom, I'm not going to stand there and lie. And it's not exactly liberty if they force you to say it, it is" (106)? From the mouths of babes....

To give you a little more background, consider that the Pledge of Allegiance was first used in public schools on October 12, 1892, during Columbus Day observances" — which is precisely the day that is being reframed as Indigenous Peoples' Day. As the bumper sticker says, "I love my country, but I think we should start seeing other people."

In that spirit, Kimmerer compares the daily recitation of the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance with the "Words That Come Before All Else" recited at the beginning of each week in the ancestral homelands of the Onondaga Nation, where she owns a home (107). Significantly longer than the relatively short U.S. Pledge, the Words, also known as "Greeting and Thanks to the Natural World" is a litany of gratitude for multitudinous aspects of this wondrous Earth on which we find ourselves (108).

Kimmerer writes:

Imagine raising children in a culture in which gratitude is the first priority....
You can't listen to the Thanksgiving Address without feeling wealthy. And, while expressing gratitude seems innocent enough, it is a revolutionary idea. **In a consumer society, contentment is a radical proposition.**
(111)

If you choose to read *Braiding Sweetgrass*, you can get a much more expansive taste for Kimmerer's perspective as well as a much longer excerpt of the Onondaga Thanksgiving Addresses. For now, I will conclude with the final stanza of the Thanksgiving Address:

We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. Of all the things we have named, it is not our intention to leave anything out. If something was forgotten, we leave it to each individual to send such greetings and thanks in their own way. And now our minds are one. (117)