



Wisconsin UCC Conference  
BIG READ  
2021-2022

# Study Guide

## C O N T E N T S

Preface: Why this book?

About the author, Robin Wall Kimmerer

Our conversation community: Conference-wide activities

### **I. Discussion Approaches**

Using the questions in this study guide

Creating space for good conversations

Some preliminary questions: premises & point of view

### **II. Discussion Questions (by section of Braiding Sweetgrass)**

Session #1 Planting Sweetgrass

Session #2 Tending Sweetgrass

Session #3 Picking Sweetgrass

Session #4 Braiding Sweetgrass

Session #5 Burning Sweetgrass

Session #6 Epilogue: Returning the Gift

## Preface

From the Creation Care Team of the Wisconsin Conference, UCC:

*Greetings from the Wisconsin Conference Creation Care Team. A little over a year ago at our first virtual Annual Meeting gathered around the theme of “Healing Our Earthly Home” the Creation Care Team encouraged the Conference to consider the Kairos Call to Action from our UCC Council for Climate Justice, which challenged us to take immediate action to address the urgent needs of climate change and environmental injustice. At that meeting we covenanted as congregations and as a Conference to take on the crucial and urgent work on behalf of God’s good creation in crisis.*

*This year, as we enter the fall season, in cooperation with the Alliance for Justice and our United Church Camps, the Creation Care Team is inviting all of our congregations, members and communities to literally get on the same page by joining a Big Read of Robin Wall Kimmerer’s award-winning and provocative book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. As she weaves together stories from Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, we gain a deeper understanding of and respect for the Native traditions that have honored and made this land sacred for thousands of years.*

*As we engage one another in conversation and listen to the wisdom of those with a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all things, we add a depth to our understanding that can undergird the sacred, healing and urgent work before us. We hope you will join us and invite others into an on-going conversation and commitment to “Healing Our Earthly Home.”*

Rev. Bob Ullman  
Rev. John Helt  
Co-Chairs

From the editors of this study guide:

*Robin Wall Kimmerer’s “Braiding Sweetgrass” is such a tremendously rich text that it would be impossible to suggest all the possible avenues for discussion. From among many possible themes, we chose to emphasize a small number, particularly those of Time, Attention, and Agency.*

*One reason is that those themes serve as “gifts that keep on giving,” i.e. attending to those themes equips discussion participants to keep going deeper on that which is most important.*

*Another reason is that those themes seem so important to us for pursuing the objective that the Creation Care Team has set forth: “covenant” in response to the “Kairos moment” in which we find ourselves with respect to the environment, climate, sustainability, and community.*

*Our greatest wish is that this Big Read can give congregations throughout the Conference the opportunity to use this book as a catalyst for deepening conversation and deepening ties within and among our communities.*

Prof. Kelley Greene  
Coordinator for Congregational Life  
First Congregational Church, Oshkosh

Joe Scarry  
Member  
St. John's UCC, Madeline Island

## About the author, Robin Wall Kimmerer

From Robin Wall Kimmerer's website:

Robin Wall Kimmerer “[i]s a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She is the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, which has earned Kimmerer wide acclaim. Her first book, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for outstanding nature writing, and her other work has appeared in *Orion*, *Whole Terrain*, and numerous scientific journals. She tours widely and has been featured on NPR's *On Being* with Krista Tippett and in 2015 addressed the general assembly of the United Nations on the topic of “Healing Our Relationship with Nature.”

“Kimmerer is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, and the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, whose mission is to create programs which draw on the wisdom of both indigenous and scientific...”



Image credit Potawatomi.org

Additional information:

[Interview with the author at Potawatomi.org](https://www.potawatomi.org/interview-with-robin-wall-kimmerer)

[More about the Potawatomi Nation](https://www.potawatomi.org/about)

Additional resources about the author, including video, can be found at:

[www.robinwallkimmerer.com](http://www.robinwallkimmerer.com)

## Our conversation community: Conference-wide activities

The Big Read will include opportunities to connect with others throughout the Conference – both for gatherings at specific times (synchronous experience) and through a web-based comment-sharing and discussion tool (asynchronous experience).

### Four gatherings

There will be four opportunities this fall to gather online with other participants throughout the Wisconsin Conference. (Please register for these events using the links provided on the Wisconsin Conference website: <https://www.wcucc.org/the-big-read-braiding-sweetgrass/> )

#1 Thursday, **September 9** (7:00-8:30 pm) – Zoom webinar – “Get your hands around *Sweetgrass*:

*How to get the most out of your congregational Braiding Sweetgrass reading group experience,”*

#2 Thursday, **September 30** (7:00-8:30 pm) – Zoom webinar – “*Braiding Sweetgrass and the Kairos Covenant: Time, Attention, Agency*”

**#3 FEATURED EVENT!** Saturday, **October 9** (9:45 am – 12 noon) – *Braiding Sweetgrass* author Robin Wall Kimmerer presentation via Zoom to WCUCS audience

#4 Thursday, **October 21** (7:00-8:30 pm) – Zoom webinar – “Learnings from congregational reading groups this fall . . . and where do we go from here?”

### Connecting online

In addition, you can go online for the **UCC Big Read Braiding Sweetgrass Discussion** on Flipgrid. Flipgrid is an online tool that has become extremely popular, particularly with younger users and those in learning settings. Flipgrid allows people to join moderated groups and pose discussion questions as well as respond to questions posed by others in the group by recording a short video.

This will be a great tool for sharing\* learnings and resources among study groups throughout Wisconsin, and strengthening connections throughout the Conference!

***We strongly encourage you to “join the conversation” in our Flipgrid group!*** Email Kelley Greene at [Kelley@fccoshkosh.org](mailto:Kelley@fccoshkosh.org) for access.

\* As a starter, we’ve added a prompt for each session outlined in Part II of this study guide: ***“Share on Flipgrid! . . . Please share with other groups something that particularly resonated***

*with your group! What came up for your group that you want to share others studying Braiding Sweetgrass?"*

## I. Discussion Approaches

Using the questions in this study guide

Creating space for good conversations

Some preliminary questions: premises & point of view



## Using the questions in this study guide

This guide is a suggested framework for study in six sessions based on Kimmerer's division of chapters into six sections, each with its own title. While this assumes that a group will progress through the five main sections of the book steadily, leaving the final session for wrap-up, this should be no means limit approaches to experience of the book. Indeed, Kimmerer's structure follows an agrarian cycle, beginning with planting and arriving at grateful return of "Honorable Harvest" to its source. Readers and study groups are encouraged to explore the chapters and sections in whatever order it makes most sense to them.

The guide sections and page numbers refer to the 2013 Milkweed edition. Study Sessions refer to chapters as they appear in order in each of the six sections. For example, the first chapter, "Skywoman Falling," appearing in the first section, *Planting Sweetgrass* will be identified as 1.1; the seventh chapter, "Maple Sugar Moon," appearing in the second section, *Tending Sweetgrass*, will be indicated as 2.1; and so on.

## Creating space for good conversations

Facilitators may want to establish a practice of repeating a general prompt to begin each session.

For example,

***“Let’s start by asking each person to just share one thing that struck you in the reading for this session -- just take a minute or two to lift up something that you noticed or wondered about.”***

***“What did you notice as you began to read the stories that Robin Wall Kimmerer tells? What’s particular about it? How do you feel about it?”***

***“What came up for you as you were reading? What connections did you make to your own life?”***

For many people, reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* is very evocative. Allowing the discussion agenda to emerge from the sharing of people’s noticings and wonderings can lead to very positive group experience.

## Some preliminary questions: premises & point of view

In her preface to *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer explains that her book is meant to be a “braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world” (p. x). A helpful first step in approaching the book is to consider Kimmerer’s fundamental premise(s), implied in that statement.

- Kimmerer implies the readers share certain common understandings when she refers to “our” relationship with “the world.” Do you share with the members of your study group a common notion of who “we” are? And what “the world” that we’re concerned about is?
- She speaks of “healing” our relationship with the world – suggesting that something in it is injured or damaged. Are there ways in which *you* see/experience such an injured relationship? What might bring Kimmerer to such a conclusion?
- How might your understanding and feelings about Kimmerer’s premises color the way you engage with her book?

Also, it can be helpful to notice Kimmerer’s expository strategy. She uses the metaphor of braiding in several ways to suggest how the pieces of the book fit together. For one thing, she calls the book a “braid of stories.” In addition, she speaks of three different points of view as being strands in the braid: the first two are “Indigenous ways of knowing” and “scientific knowledge”; the third is Kimmerer’s own experience of being “an Anishinaabe scientist trying to bring [the first two] together in service to what matters most” (p. x).



- How do you feel about the prospect of engaging with a “braid of stories”? What are some of the ways that *you* like to engage with information?
- How do you feel about the prospect of engaging with multiple points of view in a single book? Do you have feelings about “Indigenous ways of knowing” and/or “scientific knowledge”? Do *you* have a particular point of view that you bring to experience?
- What is your personal experience with activities such as braiding? Have you ever braided anything? Before you begin your study, try doing it. (See [How to Braid](#)) In what ways might your physical experience of braiding enhance your understanding of Kimmerer’s efforts as a writer?

More on sweetgrass: [Identifying Sweetgrass](#)

## II. Discussion Questions (by section of *Braiding Sweetgrass*)

Session #1 Planting Sweetgrass

Session #2 Tending Sweetgrass

Session #3 Picking Sweetgrass

Session #4 Braiding Sweetgrass

Session #5 Burning Sweetgrass

Session #6 Epilogue: Returning the Gift

## Session #1 Planting Sweetgrass

This session is based on the first section of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Planting Sweetgrass.” Chapters in this section (and the references numbers we use for convenience) are:

- Skywoman Falling [1.1]
- The Council of Pecans [1.2]
- The Gift of Strawberries [1.3]
- An Offering [1.4]
- Asters and Goldenrod [1.5]
- Learning the Grammar of Animacy [1.6]

**Our principal questions for this session focus on “An Offering” [1.4].**

Kimmerer talks in a number of different ways about how we focus our attention. (For example, see the discussion of ceremonies on p. 36-7. (See also the discussion of using Native or traditional words for things in “Learning the Grammar of Animacy” [1.6].)

- Did this discussion of ceremonies have resonance in your own life? How about the broader emphasis on where we focus attention?
- What are some of the ways that *you* choose to direct your attention?
- What are some of the types of *media* through which you experience the world? What are some of the ways you experience the world in a completely *unmediated* way?
- What might be different if you treated “attention-giving” as a more intentional choice?
- What is the relationship between the things you end up doing in (and with) your life and your attention-giving?

**More generally . . .** Why do you think Kimmerer chose the section heading “Planting Sweetgrass”? Are there associations that come to mind for you when someone talks about “planting” (or sowing)?

**Share on Flipgrid! . . .** Please share with other groups: was there one of the themes or chapters in this section that particularly resonated with your group? What came up for your group that you want to share others studying *Braiding Sweetgrass*?

**A possible next step . . .** Have you ever kept an “attention journal,” in which you make notes of the places you put your attention each day? Would you and the members of your study group consider keeping such journals for a week, and then sharing some of the things you notice?

## Supplementary questions

In *“Skywoman Falling”* [1.1], Kimmerer expresses dismay when her students are unable to conceive of positive interactions between humans and the earth/other species (p. 6). What positive interactions come to mind for you? Later, Kimmerer talks about the importance of being “indigenous to place” (p. 9). What does this mean to *you*?

*“The Council of Pecans”* [1.2] -- How would your daily life be different if science proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that plants are sentient beings capable of community, communication, “thought” and emotion—even if this sentience was different than the way that we experience it as humans? (p. 19). What do you know of the history of Indian Removal programs that Kimmerer discusses in this section? Do you have similar experiences/stories of displacement in your family history? Do you experience yourself as connected to or disconnected from land that is sacred to you in any way?

In *“The Gift of Strawberries”* [1.3], Kimmerer writes, “In Western thinking, private land is understood to be a ‘bundle of rights’ whereas in a gift economy, property has a ‘bundle of responsibilities’ attached” (p. 28). In what way do you see this distinction as meaningful with respect to the way that laws and policies regarding land use and ownership are approached locally?

In *“Asters and Goldenrod”* [1.5], Kimmerer quotes native scholar [Greg Cajete](#) in order to explain deep knowing, i.e. “with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit” (p. 47). Can you think of something that *you* know in this way? What might this be like when it occurs as a result of intentionally opening yourself up to experiencing the world around you? What is different about this type of approach? Do you experience obstacles *preventing* you from experiencing this type of knowing?

*“Learning the Grammar of Animacy”* [1.6] -- “If a maple is an *it*, we can take up a chain saw. If a maple is a *her*, we think twice” (p. 57). Can you think of a way *your* language (e.g. word choice) shapes the way you understand the world? Or an example of how a new understanding led you to choose particular language or wording? Kimmerer observes that cultural habits of mind are both *shaped by* and *reflected in* a culture’s words. This would seem to be highly relevant to all instances of *intercultural* communication today. How might this observation be helpful to efforts at intercultural communication? Can you think of ways that it might do the opposite?

## Session #2: Tending Sweetgrass

This session is based on the second section of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Tending Sweetgrass.” Chapters in this section (and the references numbers we use for convenience) are:

- Maple Sugar Moon [2.1]
- Witch Hazel [2.2]
- A Mother’s Work [2.3]
- The Consolation of Water Lilies [2.4]
- Allegiance to Gratitude [2.5]

**Our principal questions for this session focus on “Maple Sugar Moon” [2.1].**

Along with *attention*, Kimmerer asks us to think about how we spend our valuable *time*. In “Maple Sugar Moon,” Kimmerer invites readers to savor the sweet slowness of collecting and boiling maple sap into maple syrup using traditional methods. She describes the patience and labor that is involved in collecting maple sap – how much is required to make just a little syrup and how much labor is involved not only for the people collecting and making it, but for the trees themselves to produce the sap. (Similarly, two chapters later, in “A Mother’s Work” [2.3], she describes the years it took to restore a pond using loving and traditional methods.)

- What kinds of activities do you take *your* time with and why?
- Think of an activity in your life that takes up a *substantial amount* of time. What types of choices does that represent?
- Think of an activity in your life that represents an amount of time that is *unusually abbreviated*. What shortcuts/conveniences do you rely on to live your daily life as you do? What would happen to your schedule if you could not count on these conveniences?
- What things would you *like* to spend more time developing/processing than you do currently and what keeps you from doing that?
- Have you ever thought about *time* – yours or in general – as a resource? What do you think about that idea?
- On page 69, Kimmerer invokes Nanabozho, the Original Ancestor of the Anishinabe: she remarks that he “made certain that the work would never be too easy,” and suggests a symmetry between labor given and gifts received. What is your response to this suggestion?
- , Is it necessary for a certain amount of time to be spent on an activity if personal

transformation of some kind is to occur? Why?

- Think about the influences that define *your* “culture.” What attitudes toward time and the use of time do you inherit and/or absorb from your culture.

**More generally . . .** Why do you think Kimmerer chose the section heading “Tending Sweetgrass”? What does it mean to “tend”? What’s the relationship between *tending* and *time*?

**Share on Flipgrid! . . .** Please share with other groups: was there one of the themes or chapters in this section that particularly resonated with your group? What came up for your group that you want to share others studying *Braiding Sweetgrass*?

**A possible next step . . .** Kimmerer describes the intentional choice to participate in an activity that progresses *s-l-o-w-l-y* over an extended period of time. Think about the choice to be in a study group with others: what might it look like to apply similar principles to this activity? Would you and the members of your study group consider agreeing to do an experiment of this sort together?

## Supplementary questions

The chapter “*Witch Hazel*” [2.2] centers on what’s involved in obtaining a substance like witch hazel that soothes aches, then concludes by saying “there are some aches witch hazel can’t assuage; for those we need each other” (p. 81). Have you experienced or witnessed particular “aches” either in the recent past or in the present. What “medicine” might soothe those aches? What’s involved in giving and/or receiving it? Does anything hold you back from entering into the kind of exchange(s) that is needed?

“*A Mother’s Work*” [2.3] -- What does it mean to you to be a “good mother?” What, if any, ideas that Kimmerer offers on this subject resonate with you and why? Do any of them chafe at you? Why?

In “*The Consolation of Water Lilies*” [2.4], Kimmerer describes a connection between waterlilies that stretches across generations, between “the young and the old,” and she characterizes it as “one long breath” (p. 103). What does this image evoke for you? What has *your* experience of connections across generations been like? Is anything suggested to you when you think of such connections across generations as “one long breath”?

In “*Allegiance to Gratitude*” [2.5], Kimmerer asks us to “[i]magine raising children in a culture in which gratitude is the first priority” (p. 111), and comparing that to what “we” experience in contemporary US culture.



- Within the culture in which you live, how much of a priority is gratitude? How does that come to be?
- How does Kimmerer characterize contemporary US culture? What seem to be the factors that most influence her point of view?
- What does this bring up for you about the type of culture in which you hope to live?

Kimmerer describes how Haudenosaunee children attending a school near her home recite a Thanksgiving Address every day.

- Imagine a public-school day in a typical public school in your area. What might it be like if the children followed a practice similar to the one Kimmerer describes in the school that the Haudenosaunee children attend?
- Is this a realistic suggestion? Why or why not?
- Compare this to other common schoolroom practices, like reciting the “Pledge of Allegiance.” In what ways is might this be similar? In what ways different?
- What does this bring up for you about the changes you are willing to work for in order to live in the type of culture in which you hope to live?

## Session 3: Picking Sweetgrass

This session is based on the third section of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Picking Sweetgrass.” Chapters in this section (and the references numbers we use for convenience) are:

Epiphany in the Beans [3.1]  
 The Three Sisters [3.2]  
*Wisgaak Gokpenagen*: A Black Ash Basket [3.3]  
*Mishkos Kenomagwen*: The Teachings of Grass [3.4]  
 Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide [3.5]  
 The Honorable Harvest [3.6]

**Our principal questions for this session focus on “*The Honorable Harvest*” [3.6].**

- How would *you* summarize the idea of “Honorable Harvest” that Kimmerer presents?
  - Can you think of one or more aspects of this have importance in your own life?
  - How does your personal experience of Honorable Harvest reflect your power to make choices, and to act on your choices?
  - How do you feel generally about your power to do things in the world, that is, your sense of “agency”?
- Kimmerer’s presents an explicit list of the rules of Honorable Harvest on p. 183. How might a set of rules such as this help you expand or deepen your appreciation of Honorable Harvest beyond the thumbnail summary you gave above?
- Kimmerer encourages us to consider the degree of *reciprocity* in our transactions.
  - How adequately do you think our money-based economy provides for reciprocity? (Kimmerer asks herself on page 177, “How do we consume in a way that does justice to the lives we take?”)
  - In what ways might the *convenience* of all of our “taking” -- what Kimmerer sees as the rampant consumerism of modern life -- complicate our participation in this reciprocity? What do you think about Kimmerer’s conclusion that “[n]ot everything should be convenient” (179)?
  - How might the rules of Honorable Harvest find adoption in our modern economy? What choices would consumers have to make in order for that to happen?
  - How might cultural values stand in the way of such adoption? (Recall Kimmerer’s description of early European who regarded the rules of Honorable Harvest as laziness.)
- Now focus on how this applies to the question of *energy*. Kimmerer says, “By no stretch of the imagination is coal given to us” (p. 187). Might the rules of Honorable Harvest be applicable to energy consumption?
- What are some of the choices that Kimmerer is asking us to think about in this chapter?

**More generally . . .** Why do you think Kimmerer chose the section heading “Picking Sweetgrass”? Think about how Kimmerer stresses hands-on activities like tending plants, weaving baskets, etc. in the various chapters that lead up to this chapter? Discuss the possible relevance of activities like picking, gathering, choosing, etc. to the themes that have emerged as you progressed through the first three sessions.

**Share on Flipgrid! . . .** Please share with other groups: was there one of the themes or chapters in this section that particularly resonated with your group? What came up for your group that you want to share others studying *Braiding Sweetgrass*?

**A possible next step . . .** Kimmerer describes trying to shop for paper and pens with the kind of intentional awareness that she would hope to bring to selecting ash for a basket or hunting for a deer. What might such intentional awareness look like in *your* consumption activities? Would you and the members of your study group consider agreeing to do an experiment of this sort together?

## Supplementary questions

In “*Epiphany in the Beans*” [3.1], Kimmerer writes, “The land loves us back” (p. 122). If this is true, what are the implications of this for modern life? What do you think of Kimmerer’s list of “loving behaviors” on page 123? Do you have such a list? If so, how does it agree with and/or diverge from Kimmerer’s list? How did you choose the behaviors that appear on yours? On page 126, Kimmerer describes food that is forcibly taken from the earth and shipped to stores as “mummified in plastic.” What does that image evoke for you? Why?

In “*The Three Sisters*” [3.2], Kimmerer says, “When the colonists on the Massachusetts shore first saw indigenous gardens, they inferred that the savages did not know how to farm. To their minds, a garden meant straight rows of single species, not a three-dimensional sprawl of abundance” (p. 129). Do you see evidence of this mindset reflected in the agricultural practices in your area? If so, where? Do you see it in other places? If so, where, and how does it show up, and are there consequences of this, good or bad? Do you agree with Kimmerer that “the most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world” (p. 134)? What choices need to be made by those who wish to do that?

“*Wisgaak Gokpengen: A Black Ash Basket*” [3.3] - Making baskets, for the Pigeon family, is both a conscious choice and a generational calling. Can you think of anything that you put that much thought into and choose again and again even though it is not the most convenient or fastest choice? Why do you choose it? Are there choices that any of us can make that would help the ash trees survive the Ash Borer? Why might we want to do that? Why might we choose not to? Do you agree with Kimmerer that it is too difficult for “us” to be “mindful in the vast network of hyperindustrialized goods” (p. 155)? Why or why not?

***“The Teachings of Grass” [3.4]*** - What does Kimmerer’s choice of format for this chapter reveal about the tension between modern science and traditional ways of knowing, which is one of the tensions she most wants to explore in the book? Are you familiar with this format? How does it help or hinder your deep understanding of Kimmerer’s points in this chapter? Discuss her “Discussion” section on page 163. Do you agree with her observations, particularly those about worldviews? Why or why not?

In ***“Maple Nation” [3.5]***, Kimmerer suggests, “Good communities don’t make themselves” (p. 169). “Most people are indifferent [to the machinery of government] unless their self-interest is at stake.” Do you see evidence of this in your own community? How does your community make decisions? Are you involved in those decisions yourself? Why or why not? What would happen if your community decided to treat the non-human “people” who live there as equal citizens? Why? Can you list the “ecosystem services” upon which your life is made possible? How often do you notice them? What choices is your community making on in the interest of these natural supports and structures? Are any of them being “exiled from their homelands for the price of cheap gas?” (p. 173).

## Session #4: Braiding Sweetgrass

This session is based on the fourth section of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, itself called “Braiding Sweetgrass.” Chapters in this section (and the references numbers we use for convenience) are:

In the Footsteps of Nanabozho: Becoming Indigenous to Place [4.1]  
 The Sound of Silverbells [4.2]  
 Sitting in a Circle [4.3]  
 Burning Cascade Head [4.4]  
 Putting Down Roots [4.5]  
*Umbilicuria*: The Belly Button of the World [4.6]  
 Old-Growth Children [4.7]  
 Witness to the Rain [4.8]

**Our principal questions for this session focus on “*The Sound of Silverbells*” [4.2].**

In the preface to her book, Kimmerer gives us the image of two people with their heads together, braiding sacred sweetgrass – both a gift *from* the earth and a gift *to* the earth.

- How does this idea of sacred reciprocity and connection weave through the chapters in this section? For example, Kimmerer asks, “How will people ever care for the fate of moss spiders if we don’t teach students to recognize and respond to the world as a gift?” (p. 221).
- In what ways do you feel yourself connected to the divine through relationship with the land?
- What does it mean to you to be “indigenous to the land?” Is it possible for the descendants of European white settlers to be indigenous to the land our ancestors occupied by displacement of native people? Why or why not?
- How do you spend your time and focus your attention on the land that you inhabit every day? Do you notice what is around you? What do you notice? Why?
- An implicit part of all of the stories Kimmerer shares is that she has somehow developed intimate familiarity with each of the natural settings with which she interacts. Think about the opportunities people have to interact with nature near where this study group is gathering. What are the features that invite lots of the kind of interaction Kimmerer seems to think is valuable?

**More generally . . .** why do you think Kimmerer chose the section heading “Braiding Sweetgrass”? Does it go beyond the aspects referenced at the beginning of this study guide, in

the section entitled, “Preliminary questions for readers”?) How are the concepts of braiding, connection, synthesis, and integration important to the themes of this study? What are some of the different ways we come to *know* and *understand* how things fit together?

**Share on Flipgrid!** . . . Please share with other groups: was there one of the themes or chapters in this section that particularly resonated with your group? What came up for your group that you want to share others studying *Braiding Sweetgrass*?

**A possible next step** . . . Kimmerer describes numerous examples of groups of people stewarding a particular area of land. Can you think of ways that that is done by members of your congregation and/or within the nearby community? Would you and the members of your study group consider picking a particular piece of land and rolling up your sleeves to work together and care for it?

## Supplementary questions

**“Sitting in a Circle” [4.3]** describes time Kimmerer spent with students in the field, including in a swamp where they learn to use cattails, and in a forest where they dig under the soil for spruce roots. Did this description remind you of experiences you have had? What do you notice about the experience of exploring something in nature with another person or persons?

**“Burning Cascade Head” [4.4]** emphasizes ceremonies associated with salmon harvesting in the Pacific Northwest, and asks us to think about how to create ceremonies that “have agency in the world.” Have you ever been involved in creating or shaping a ceremony? What can you say about how the choices you made helped the ceremony “have agency in the world”?

**“Putting Down Roots” [4.5]** describes the history of Indian boarding schools, and the example of an intentional community formed in New York State which attempts to enact a different future.

- What are people in your community discussing about the history of Indian boarding schools in the United States, and particularly those in Wisconsin? Why is it important to know this history?
- Have you ever had any experience of an “intentional community”? What was that experience like?

**“Umbilicaria: The Belly Button of the World” [4.6]** is a deep dive on the themes of “reciprocity and connection” as they relate to lichen. A particularly wide range of reactions to this chapter is possible. Did you “connect” to the exploration of the world of fungi and algae in the pages of this chapter? (And what about your encounters with them out in nature?) How can we best put the role of this aspect of nature in proper perspective?

Returning to the question above, “How do you spend your time and focus your attention on the land that you inhabit every day?”, consider this passage from the chapter **“Old Growth Children” [Ch. 4.7]**: “As Franz [Dolp] wrote, ‘It is important to engage in restoration with development of a personal relationship with the land and its living things.’ In working with the land, he wrote of the loving relationship that grew between them: ‘It was as if I discovered a lost part of myself’” (p. 285).

**“Witness to the Rain” [4.8]** is, in a way, a sort of poem to being in the forest in the rain, and the range of sensations that experience arouses. This theme is woven throughout the book. Can you say anything about the way your senses have been aroused in unaccustomed ways when you are in nature? What might this mean for your experience of the big phenomena we’ve been discussing -- like “time” and “attention”?

## Session 5: Burning Sweetgrass

This session is based on the fifth section of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Burning Sweetgrass.” Chapters in this section (and the references numbers we use for convenience) are:

Windigo Footprints [5.1]  
 The Sacred and the Superfund [5.2]  
 People of Corn, People of Light [5.3]  
 Collateral Damage [5.4]  
*Shkitagen*: People of the Seventh Fire [5.5]  
 Defeating Windigo [5.6]

**Our principal questions for this session focus on “Windigo Footprints” [5.1].** Here are some of the ways Kimmerer introduces the idea of “Windigo”:

*“Born of our fears and our failings, Windigo is the name for that within us which cares more for its own survival than for anything else.” (p. 305)*

*“self-destructive practices -- addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, technology, and more” (p. 306)*

*“insatiable consumption” (p. 307)*

*“indulgent self-interest”; “neoclassical fallacy”; “infinite growth on a finite planet” (p. 308)*

Questions to consider:

- How does the idea of “Windigo” appear for you in your daily life? Are there decisions that you have made that have been (over)determined by this sort of “Windigo” energy? How have the results/consequences of those decisions affected your time, attention, and agency?
- Do you see the “Windigo” concept playing out in large scale anywhere? Where and how?
- What’s different when people *point to and name* the thing they are against (e.g. identifying it as Windigo)? How does that complement the effort to *act* for something?

**More generally . . .** why do you think Kimmerer chose the section heading “Burning Sweetgrass”? What are some of your associations with “burning”? Does “burning” bring up ideas about threat, challenge, or risk? The need for vigilance? Feelings such as fear? or relief? How about change, renewal, cleansing?



**Share on Flipgrid!** . . . Please share with other groups: was there one of the themes or chapters in this section that particularly resonated with your group? What came up for your group that you want to share others studying *Braiding Sweetgrass*?

**A possible next step** . . . In this section, Kimmerer describes a number of cases of groups of people “taking on,” and trying to “turn around,” situations that have become over-influenced or overdetermined by Windigo energy. Does that ever happen in *your* community? Could you and the members of your study group (or possibly your whole congregation) think of a way to have an intentional conversation about what it is that is worth “taking on” and trying to “turn around”? Would you be willing to lead an effort to *point to and name* the underlying thing, the spiritual root cause, the “Windigo”?

### Supplementary questions

In *“People of Corn, People of Light”* [5.3], Kimmerer talks about *corn* harnessing the power of the sun in a life-giving way, and suggests that a scientific worldview needs to be leavened with humility. What came to mind for you as you were reading this? (p. 342 describes a mythological era in which people were made “purely of light, the sacred energy of the sun,” but were so powerful that they were dangerous.) Do you see a relationship in this to our discussion of Windigo?

*“Collateral Damage”* [5.4] refers to a phenomenon called “species loneliness.” What do you think about the suggestion that there is something to be gained by trying to “connect” to other creatures? What about creatures other than those “charismatic mammals that look back at us with Bambi’s grateful eyes,” e.g. salamanders (p. 358)? Does this idea bear any relationship to our discussion of Windigo?

Might those of us living through this current generation be said to be the *“People of the Seventh Fire”* [5.5]? Explain why/why not. Explore possible ramifications for the global community either way.

In *“Defeating Windigo”* [5.6], Kimmerer cites the work of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, and suggests, “The shortage is due not to how much material wealth there actually is, but to the way in which it is exchanged or circulated” (p. 376). What feelings come up when you think about this proposition? and about the topics of shortage and abundance comes up? How might this be related to the idea of Windigo?

## Session #6 Epilogue: Returning the Gift

This session is based on the final section of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Epilogue: Returning the Gift.”

The brief final chapter of *Braiding Sweetgrass* invites us to struggle with how we carry forward all that we have experienced over the course of reading and discussing the book. Kimmerer compares it to the problem of how we respond to the enormous abundance that the world freely gives to us. (p. 382 - “Something beyond gratitude is asked of us. . . . We are bound in a covenant of reciprocity.”)

- How do you understand this struggle in your own life?
- Is it possible to live happily without dealing with this proposition?
- For you, is this more a question of how to *think* about the world? or what to *say*? or what to *do*?
- What are the stakes?
- *What are the resources at your disposal as you address this?*

Where do you want to go from here?

What do you hope to do?

Who do you hope to do it with?