

***Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer 2013): A Development Catalyst for Human
Metamorphosis**

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Introduction

Reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) is like the life cycle of a caterpillar. Caterpillars eat until they are fully grown and form a chrysalis in which specialized cells rapidly divide, forming the butterfly. The caterpillar's job is to eat, and the adult butterfly's job is to reproduce. Upon starting the book, readers are like caterpillars, eager to consume Kimmerer's lessons about connections between Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants. Reading the book itself is like a metamorphosis. Each chapter catalyzes changes in fundamental beliefs and values within the reader, much like the differentiation of specialized cells within the metamorphosing caterpillar. Upon finishing *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer's readers are fully fledged butterflies, fueled by her teachings, eager to pass on the book and its lessons, much like an adult butterfly is eager to reproduce. Kimmerer's book goes beyond the scope of academia and encourages paradigm shifts within readers to promote sustainable lifestyles through development of the mature 'authentic self'.

The 'authentic self' can be defined as core traits that all humans have the potential to display. These traits can be identified through the Mayan Story of Creation as shared by Kimmerer: honesty, respect, reciprocity, awareness and gratitude (p. 341-343). The early 'authentic self' is the lowest degree to which an individual exhibits these traits and, contrastingly, the mature 'authentic self' is the greatest degree to which these traits are expressed. The 'authentic self' cannot simply be unmasked, the 'authentic self' is a dynamic concept, evolving throughout one's lifetime of unique experiences and interactions with their environment.

In this essay, I will argue that *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer 2013) provides a critical developmental catalyst for metamorphosis from the early to the mature ‘authentic self’, and this can greatly help Biology undergraduate students successfully cope with the sustainability crisis.

Part I: Catalyzing the Development of the Mature ‘Authentic Self’

Skywoman Falling

The first story Kimmerer shares in *Braiding Sweetgrass* is called “Skywoman Falling” and it teaches readers reciprocity and gratitude for the environment and the organisms within it. “Skywoman Falling” tells the story of creation by Skywoman, helped by Goose, Turtle, Loon, Otter, Beaver and Sturgeon, all of whom contributed energy and effort to the formation of Turtle Island. Kimmerer writes, “The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle’s back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals’ gifts coupled with her deep gratitude” (p.4). By capitalizing each animal, Kimmerer shows her readers that the animals have identities and purposes beyond their standard animal behaviors. The story of Skywoman shows Kimmerer’s readers that awareness of one’s surroundings, maintaining a balance of give and take, and ultimately expressing gratitude are fundamental parts of the mature authentic human.

Asters and Goldenrods

The story of the Asters and Goldenrods goes hand in hand with the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing; the braiding of Indigenous Knowledge and Western Science together to maximize reconciliation. Throughout the chapter Kimmerer repeatedly describes the beauty of both Goldenrods and Asters but emphasizes that their beauty multiplies when they are complemented by one another. Kimmerer wrote, “Might science and traditional knowledge be purple and yellow to one another, might they be goldenrods and asters? We see the world more fully when

we use both” (p.46). Elder Albert of the Moose Clan explains Two-Eyed seeing to be “Learning to see from one eye with the *strengths* of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the *strengths* of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all” (Bartlett et al. 2012). Respect and reciprocity are two traits of the mature ‘authentic self’, and two critical traits of individuals who utilize Two-Eyed Seeing. Growing up surrounded by either Indigenous or Western ideologies causes the early ‘authentic self’ to develop very differently. An extension of the mature ‘authentic self’ is the ability to acknowledge the differences between these ideologies but also recognize how they complement each other. Part of Kimmerer’s own mature ‘authentic self’ development is the application of the reciprocity between Goldenrods and Asters to the relationship between Indigenous knowledge and Western Scientific knowledge, and by sharing this story Kimmerer provides her readers with an enzyme to catalyze their own realization.

Windigo Footprints

The last story Kimmerer shared in her book is about an Anishinaabe monster, the Windigo. The story of the cannibalistic Windigo teaches listeners the dangers of the positive feedback loop of greed and overconsumption many consumers fall victim to (Kimmerer p.304-309). However, in the chapter “Defeating Windigo”, Kimmerer demonstrates the power of external sources on one’s ‘authentic self’, and the power stories can have on personal development and therefore metamorphosis into the mature ‘authentic self’. Kimmerer breaks down the stubborn, cold-hearted creature in order to begin building a mature ‘authentic self’ in the Windigo by sharing the story of Skywoman. The positive lessons taught throughout Skywoman’s stories serve as evidence for the role storytelling can have in the development of the mature ‘authentic self’.

Part II: The Role of the ‘Authentic Self’ in Coping with the Sustainability Crisis

Empathy and Authenticity

Empathy is a crucial trait of the mature ‘authentic self’, and is deeply rooted in human evolution because it promotes gene transmission. Being an empathic individual promotes survival and reproduction (and therefore gene transmission) through the building of meaningful relationships and awareness of emotions of oneself and others in their environment. Professor Lonnie Aarssen explores the genetic and cultural evolution of empathy and the role the trait may have in successfully coping with the sustainability crisis. Aarssen hypothesizes that the key to rescuing civilization is extending “empathetic human nature to a global scale” through cultural evolution (2013). Successfully coping with the sustainability crisis may then rely on extension of an individual’s empathy to others beyond their genetic kin. Aarssen further explains that it is those individuals who recognize overpopulation and consequently abstain from reproducing that possess empathy on a global scale. Therefore, ironically, it is actually those individuals who are the most important people to reproduce as they may pass on this global scale empathy to their offspring (Aarssen 2013). If empathy can be a genetically transmitted trait, as Aarssen is suggesting, successful development of the mature ‘authentic self’ will lead to further genetic transmission of traits critical for coping with environmental sustainability in a positive feedback loop-like manner.

Awareness and Self Deception

Another key trait of the mature ‘authentic self’ promoted through Kimmerer’s book is awareness. In his 2013 book, *What We Are*, Aarssen explains how humans have developed self deception which can be interpreted as essentially the opposite of awareness. Aarssen writes, “self-deception (cognitive bias) makes it easier to be complacent, distracted, deluded, or in denial

about unpleasant things, like inevitable mortality, climate change or an impending collapse of civilization” (p.169). Self-deception is the evolved coping mechanism for the extreme anxiety humans would otherwise face regarding large scale problems such as climate change. Becoming aware of not only our self-deception, but also educating oneself on alternate coping mechanisms for the “unpleasant things” is key to developing a mature ‘authentic self’ and therefore increased sustainability. Authenticity is positively correlated with an individual's willingness to participate in environmentally friendly behavior (Yang et al. 2021). If awareness is a trait of the mature ‘authentic self’, and increased authenticity is positively correlated with environmental friendliness, increasing society-wide awareness may help us to overcome self-deception and find solutions to the sustainability crisis that are manageable for human cognition.

Conclusion

Constraints and Future Directions

Kimmerer’s book is not perfect, nor should it be the only book by an Indigenous author read in order to shape the development of the ‘authentic self’. However, for biology students looking for an alternative perspective on sustainability, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer 2013) provides eye-opening stories rooted deeply in both Indigenous and Western scientific values. The main limitation of *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer 2013), is the requirement that the reader have an open-minded perspective, so that the book can catalyze development of the mature self through the personal nature of Kimmerer’s stories. By integrating writing from more Indigenous authors into mainstream biology courses and exposing biology students to new, impactful perspectives and stories, reconciliation may become a powerful method for coping with the climate crisis.

Kimmerer’s Impact: As told by a Queen’s University Undergraduate Biology Student

Ultimately, the greatest evidence I have for the impact of Kimmerer's book on the metamorphosis from the early to the mature 'authentic self' is the intense impact the book has had on myself and my fellow undergraduate biology classmates. The statement, "Language is our gift and our responsibility," (Kimmerer p.347), demonstrated how truly powerful the Indigenous stories were in promoting traits of the mature 'authentic self' in me. To synthesize our seminar class based on *Braiding Sweetgrass* and its influence on sustainability, we developed a "To-Be" list of traits we all hope to display. Empathy, humility, awareness and gratitude are central lessons in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, key characteristics of the mature 'authentic self', critical for the successful coping of the sustainability crisis. Metamorphosis into the mature 'authentic self' is an ongoing journey, constantly ebbing and flowing with one's unique life experiences and I am grateful for the developmental catalyst *Braiding Sweetgrass* has been on my own metamorphosis. After complete metamorphosis, adult butterflies are fully developed and eager to reproduce. Similarly, following my metamorphosis through reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I am eager to share this book and its stories with fellow biology students in hope that increasing awareness and empathy within my peers can help us finally cope with the sustainability crisis.

Works Cited

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