

# Attention, Gift, and the Discipline of Not Being Fooled

Brett Reynolds 

Humber Polytechnic & University of Toronto

3rd January 2026

## I THE HUNGER FOR A SANCTION

There's a peculiar opacity built into the way we take from the world now. It isn't the opacity of concealment; it's the opacity of distance. We purchase and others harvest. We flush and others purify. We eat the strawberry in its plastic cradle and send its remains into pipes designed to carry consequence out of sight. If this is civilization, it's at least a civilization whose decencies have side-effects that the decencies themselves can't see.

In earlier forms of life, the test of conduct lay close at hand. The one who took too much could be seen; the land, when overused, replied quickly. Our world delays replies and disperses responsibility. We take by proxy, and the proxy is organized by markets, contracts, engines, and infrastructure – not out of malice, but out of the ordinary pursuit of efficiency and comfort. Under such conditions, the old moral vocabularies – restraint, gratitude, reverence, permission – begin to float free of the practices that once gave them weight. You may say “gift” and mean only a mood. You may say “listening” and hear only the echo of your own wish to be the sort of person who listens.

It's in this context that certain books have acquired, for many readers, a kind of religious authority. They teach us not primarily what to think, but how to attend; and since attending is never innocent, how to be. Among these, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* have earned a reverence that is itself an instructive social fact. The reverence isn't only for their subjects – pond water, sweetgrass, salamanders, light – but for the promise that these subjects can be approached without the habitual profanations of our age: without the reduction that makes everything into resource, and without the sentimentality that makes everything into lesson.

I don't propose to set these writers against one another, as if we were choosing between rival prophets. Their difference isn't a difference of talent, nor simply of opinion; it's a difference of epistemic posture, and so of moral risk. Dillard is a severe witness. Her attention is pressed against the facts until they yield their sharp edges; when she finds herself driven toward worship, it's worship pursued through pain. She won't allow the reader to keep the clean hands of admiration while turning away from the bloody work by which the world maintains itself. Kimmerer, by contrast, is an

---

\*Contact: [brett.reynolds@humber.ca](mailto:brett.reynolds@humber.ca)

exhorter to relation. She speaks of gifts, reciprocity, gratitude, and the need to listen for teachings from beings that are not ourselves. She isn't less exacting; much of her argument is that the modern world is dishonourable precisely because it refuses the disciplines that gratitude would impose. The very warmth of her vocabulary, though, brings a different danger: that what ought to be a restraint becomes an absolution, and what ought to be a practice becomes a mood.

Adam Smith observed long ago that we desire not only to be loved, but to be *lovely* – that is, to be the natural and proper object of love; not only to be praised, but to be *praiseworthy*.<sup>1</sup> It's here that noble language can do its subtlest mischief, furnishing us with the inward sense of worthiness without the outward labour of becoming worthy. A man may say he takes “only what is given” and mean by “given” whatever he found. He may say he asked permission and mean by permission the agreeable quiet of his own conscience. Words that were meant to bind the taker can be turned, by that dexterity which self-love practises without instruction, into a ribbon on the same old taking.

We have to ask, then, not merely “Is this sentiment elevating?” but “What does it commit us to?” – and, more searchingly, “How would we know, when we're moved, that we're not merely moved?” The risk of a moral vocabulary isn't that it fails; it's that it succeeds too easily, producing the inward glow that readers mistake for changed conduct. In what follows, I mean to treat certain key words – gift, permission, listening – not as ornaments but as instruments. An instrument is judged by what it can do, and by what mischief it can do when it's in the hands of self-love. For each I'll ask: what practice does it demand; what failure does it anticipate; what correction does it admit; and where, in the end, does it place the burden of proof? A phrase that can't survive these questions may still be beautiful; but beauty that escapes them is what makes beauty dangerous in moral discourse.

If, in the end, these writers are asked how their vocabularies travel – how a private reverence becomes a public restraint, how a posture of gratitude becomes an institution that can say no – that isn't because I doubt their seriousness. It's because I take their seriousness seriously. A book that asks to re-form our relation to the world asks, whether it says so or not, to be tested at the very place where our relation to the world is most compromised: at the point where we would like an ethic that costs little, and where we would like a truth that demands nothing more than our assent.

## 2 OF GIFTS AND VETOES

If a moral vocabulary is to do more than decorate our aspirations, it needs to bear weight; and the first weight we ought to lay upon it is the weight of refusal. The chief temptation of ethical speech – especially ethical speech that's tender and elevating – is that it can become an accompaniment to life rather than an interruption of it. We praise, we assent, we're softened; and then we proceed as before, with a slight improvement in our feelings toward ourselves. The true test of a rule is whether it can thwart the very person who most enjoys repeating it.

Kimmerer's language of gifts is, in this regard, peculiarly instructive, because it touches a nerve that has always made moralists uneasy. A gift isn't simply a benefit; it's a relation. To accept a gift is to enter into obligation, to be placed under a debt which isn't necessarily measured in coin and is therefore liable to be both more beautiful and more treacherous. The beauty lies in the possibility that

---

<sup>1</sup>Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part III, Section 2 (TMS III.2).

the debt may dignify the debtor; the treachery lies in the ease with which a debt that can't be counted becomes a debt that need never be paid. When the gift is invoked as a way of speaking about our dealings with plants, water, and land, the charm is immediate: the world ceases to be a warehouse and becomes a benefactor. But the very immediacy of the charm demands a sterner question than the one we usually ask of charm. Not, "Is this a moving thought?" but, "Does this thought contain within it the power to say no?"

The phrase "ask permission ... abide by the answer," when it's taken seriously, is meant to do exactly that: to make taking contingent, to turn a habit into a negotiation. But it's here that the reader with a scrupulous conscience feels the first disturbance. In ordinary human affairs, permission has a recognizable grammar. It's given or withheld by someone whose will is, at least in principle, separable from ours. We may be mistaken about it; we may deceive ourselves; but we don't ordinarily doubt that there is such a thing as an answer. In the commerce between human and plant, the answer is more elusive. If permission is reduced to a sentiment of inward agreement, then the mind becomes judge in its own cause, and the moral imperative is converted into a ceremony for consecrating what we already intended. There's no surer recipe for self-approval than to lodge the veto in the same chamber where the desire resides.

You may, of course, reply that this is a misunderstanding: that the "asking" and "listening" in Kimmerer's sense are not claims about conversational exchange, but names for a discipline – an apprenticeship in attention. You may "ask" a plant by learning its season, its abundance, its role in a web of dependencies; you may "listen" by noticing scarcity, stress, the signs that the taking would be harmful. You may listen, too, by submitting yourself to communal rules – rules which are often older than your private wishes and which have the advantage of being indifferent to your self-description as a good person. Under such an interpretation, the permission isn't an occult whisper but an ecological and social constraint; and the "answer" can, in very plain ways, be no. Scarcity, prohibition, knowledge – these can all be refusals.

We can make the phrase do real work by externalizing the veto. "Permission", on this reading, is not an inward murmur but a constraint that can be read in public signs and public rules: season, abundance, reproductive capacity, closed areas, the standing norms of a place, the reprimand of someone who knows it, the law that's indifferent to your self-description as a good person. The gain is immediate: the ethic acquires teeth, because the "answer" is capable of contradicting you. What falls away is a certain ontological warmth. The suggestion that the more-than-human has *consented* no longer does the work; what does the work is the discipline of treating yourself as a recipient in a world where taking has become too easy. We don't need to banish metaphor, just metaphor without audit.

There's a further reason to insist on audit, and it has nothing to do with cynicism about individual hearts. It's a prediction about systems. Where restraint is costly and appearances are cheap, markets, reputations, and even congregations will tend to reward the appearance. The vocabulary of gift is especially vulnerable here because it can be performed at low marginal cost: a story, a posture, a label, a pleased ache of conscience that feels like payment. If you doubt it, watch how quickly moral words become product attributes. "Reciprocal", "regenerative", "ethical", "in relation" – these can

function, in practice, as price premiums for buyers who want the sensation of constraint without the inconvenience of it. Under such conditions, the serious question is not whether anyone is lying, but whether the language is incentive-compatible: whether a person who is indifferent, hurried, or merely strategic would still be forced, by the rules of the game, to behave as if the restraint mattered.

This is why “ask permission ... abide by the answer” has to be more than a devotional formula. It needs a place where the answer can be located before the appetite begins bargaining; it needs a public criterion by which others can say, “No, that doesn’t count” – not because they are purer, but because the self is a notoriously indulgent auditor of its own account. In a world of long supply chains and moral branding, the phrase becomes practical only when it is translated into commitments whose violation is legible: thresholds stated in advance; quantities recorded; seasons honoured; closures obeyed; and sanctions, formal or informal, that make the breach costly even for the person who tells himself a beautiful story about why this time is different.

This would be no loss, were it not for the fact that the human mind is rarely satisfied with a discipline that admits itself to be a contrivance. We long for our moral restraints to be written into the nature of things, because then obedience feels like intelligence. When Kimmerer writes as if the world offers itself, the reader feels less like a thief and more like a participant in a reciprocal economy. The danger is that this is precisely the point at which the rhetoric can become a solace rather than a shackle. A person who is eager to take will always find it easier to persuade himself that the gift was offered than to ask whether he has the right to accept. And – as we’ll see when we examine the strawberry more closely – the world may flourish from our appetite even when our moral posture is wholly disconnected from the mechanisms that sustain it.

Let us, then, be as exact as the subject requires. A gift, in its strictest sense, is an act of intention. It presupposes a giver who could have withheld and chose not to. If we’re to speak of gifts in relation to strawberries, sweetgrass, or salmon, we either mean that there is such a giver, or we mean something else. Kimmerer herself, at moments, clearly means something else; she’s too knowledgeable to suppose that a berry is a human hostess arranging a surprise. The berry, in the plain story, is an arrangement that serves the plant: a sweetness that recruits an eater, and by that eater’s wandering distributes the plant’s seeds. But here, almost as soon as we form the comforting picture of reciprocity, our own habits disclose how much of that picture we now inhabit only by metaphor.

Consider what most of us do with strawberries. Even when the little achenes are not wholly destroyed by digestion, we don’t, as a rule, wander into hedgerows and fallows afterwards, leaving behind a new scattering. We return to our homes; and the end of the strawberry’s ancient bargain – fruit to animal, animal to elsewhere – is, for modern eaters, commonly a porcelain conclusion and a journey through pipes. The seed’s path is no longer a path into the world; it’s a path out of it. In that sense, the very infrastructure of our decency – our cleanliness, our separation from our own refuse – quietly interrupts the form of reciprocity that the language of gift so readily calls up. If, then, we continue to speak as if the strawberry “gave itself” and we “reciprocate” by dispersal, we’re leaning upon an exchange we have arranged not to perform.

But the interruption of this particular loop has not prevented the multiplication of strawberries. On the contrary, we’ve brought strawberries into being on a scale that would astonish any pastoral age,

largely by methods that have nothing to do with our bowels and everything to do with our industry. The cultivated strawberry is commonly propagated not by the uncertain hope of seed, but by the plant's own runners and by deliberate cloning; global production has risen by many millions of tonnes within the last century.<sup>2</sup> The old mutualism – seed dispersed by animal – is no longer the main story of the plant's success; and this is why it's dangerous to let the moral language borrow its authority from that story. It's possible to multiply a species while abolishing the form of relationship by which we once excused ourselves as partners.

The alignment of desire and technology has been, as Michael Pollan puts it, “a great boon for the Russet Burbank, at least in terms of sheer numbers”.<sup>3</sup> The phrase is bracing because it exposes the convenience of confusing abundance with vindication. “Sheer numbers” are a kind of success; but no one, I suppose, wishes to rest the justification of our practices solely on the proposition that we have made more of the thing we like. To multiply a creature isn't necessarily to honour it; and to benefit a species, considered abstractly as a set of genes, isn't to settle our obligations to the particular lives, the particular landscapes, and the particular human and more-than-human costs by which that multiplication is achieved.

This brings us to the moral use of the strawberry-sewer fact: it forces us to say what we mean by reciprocity. If reciprocity is treated as a natural fact – an exchange already occurring, needing only our gratitude – then modern life, with its conduits and its distance, has made that account increasingly false in its plain sense. If, instead, reciprocity is treated as a discipline – an ethic we're obliged to institute because we have severed ourselves from the old checks – then the language of gift may still have its rightful work to do. But it's to be prevented from becoming an alibi. It ought not allow us to feel “in relation” while our arrangements ensure that the relation remains one-sided.

We confront, with sharper urgency, the phrase “ask permission ... abide by the answer.” If the old loops are broken, permission can't remain a private glow; it has to be located where it can still bite. The “answer” needs a grammar that can contradict us: the scarcity of a patch, the closed season, the visibly stressed stand, the communal rule, the reprimand from someone who knows the place better than we do, the law that doesn't consult our good intentions. In such a scheme, the ethic becomes more serious precisely because it no longer depends on the taker's own mood. The romance of consent retreats; what remains is the hard, necessary question of constraint.

Kimmerer's maxims – “never take the first,” “never take the last,” “take only what you need,” “use everything you take” – are attempts to give the posture of gratitude a spine. But we acknowledge the familiar difficulty: a maxim that's too rigid becomes inhuman, and a maxim that's too indeterminate becomes a benediction. “Never take the first,” read as it's plainly meant to be read, doesn't prohibit all gathering; it counsels forbearance at the threshold, leaving the first fruits of a season or a patch as an offering – to other beings, to the plant's own continuance, and perhaps to your own impatience. “Never take the last” likewise has an intelligible moral aim: to prevent your appetite from becoming the final cause of another's scarcity. But the intelligibility of the aim doesn't by itself settle the practice. What counts as “the first” – the first ripe berry you see, the first day of ripening, the first portion of

<sup>2</sup>See J. F. Hancock, ed., *Strawberries* (Wallingford: CABI, 2020), ch. 3; and FAO, *FAOSTAT Statistical Database* (Rome: FAO, 2021), reporting over 9 million tonnes of global strawberry production.

<sup>3</sup>Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire* (New York: Random House, 2001), 209.

the patch? What counts as “the last” – the last visible berry, the last portion that would have fed birds, the last margin required for regeneration? If the rule is to bind rather than merely to bless, it needs to be made answerable to conditions: to abundance and scarcity, to reproductive capacity, to the claims of others, to thresholds that can contradict us. We ask to operationalize it. We translate the beautiful negations into margins that can be kept, checked, and – when temptation is strong – enforced.

This is where scientific and policy work becomes indispensable – not as a triumphalist replacement of one tradition by another, but as the way a moral ideal ceases to be merely exhortation and becomes a restraint that can survive our ingenuity at self-justification. We now possess whole sciences devoted to the translation of reverence into thresholds: to the measurement of regeneration and collapse, to the estimation of what can be taken without destroying what sustains. We know how easily “need” inflates when left to private judgement; we know, too, that “minimising harm” can’t safely remain unmeasured when our appetites are large and our methods powerful. If the gift ethic is to avoid becoming a self-confirming posture, it finds its way – at least in part – into these operational languages: into closures, limits, habitat protections, restoration obligations, and the public accounting that makes it possible to say not only “we’re grateful,” but “we were wrong.” Problems like climate change are not solved by better beliefs alone, because our arrangements still let us take the gains and send much of the damage elsewhere; the restraint has to be built into the arrangements themselves, not left to improved sentiments.<sup>4</sup>

You may object that such demands make poetry answerable to policy, and that a writer of moral imagination can’t be required to draft legislation. I grant the distinction; but the distinction doesn’t relieve the difficulty – it only names it. Moral teaching that never descends into the world of mechanisms and prohibitions remains, for many of us, an agreeable elevation. We don’t ask whether a writer is required to supply policy; we ask whether her moral language contains within it the seed of enforceable restraint, or whether it depends chiefly on the reader’s good nature and will be most persuasive precisely to those who need it least. We have seen, in the strawberry’s journey from field to sewer, how thoroughly modern life can detach desire from consequence. In such a world, the most dangerous ethics are the ones that succeed too easily: those that provide the inward sensation of reciprocity while leaving the outward arrangements unchanged.

### 3 LISTENING, AND THE RISK OF ECHO

We can begin by admitting what is simple and too often denied: the greater part of what we call listening isn’t reception at all, but selection. We don’t take the world into us as a blank tablet receives an impression; we take it in as a living creature takes food, choosing, rejecting, shaping what is received to fit what we can digest. The mind comes laden with expectations, desires, fears, and theories; and these are not afterwards added to perception as ornaments. They’re present in perception as its very condition. Our most sincere listening is always in danger of being a refined form of hearing ourselves.

This danger isn’t incidental. Those who have studied the ways of belief, whether in the laboratory, the courtroom, the church, or the household, have found again and again that a human being is

---

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Heath, “It’s Not Easy Being Green,” *Literary Review of Canada*, December 2011; Joseph Heath, “The Failure of Traditional Environmental Philosophy,” *Res Publica* 28, no. 1 (2021): 1–16.

wonderfully adept at mistaking what she wants to be true for what she has discovered to be true. We are all familiar, from bitter experience, with the neighbour who can interpret every sign as proof of his own rightness; but we're less familiar with the same mechanism in ourselves, because it wears, in us, a more respectable face. In one person it's called obstinacy; in another, conviction. In one, it's credulity; in another, openness to mystery. It's no small matter to ask a reader to "listen" to plants, rivers, or ancestors. The very nobility of the request can shelter its most convenient misuse.

What, then, could "listening" mean, if we refuse to allow it to mean merely the echo of our wishes? There are, it seems to me, three meanings available, and Kimmerer's book moves among them with an ease that's sometimes a strength and sometimes, when the meanings are not distinguished, a license.

The first meaning is the most sober, and it's one that Kimmerer herself frequently inhabits: listening as ecological literacy. To listen, in this sense, is to learn to read. It's to notice the signs that the living world gives, not by intention, but by consequence: the timing of bloom, the thinning of a stand, the absence of an insect, the change of water temperature, the altered behaviour of a fish. It's to attend to relations as relations, to accept that the world is speaking to us in the only language it can be relied upon to speak – outcomes. This is a listening that has correction built into it, because the world can't be argued out of its own condition. When the run collapses, the collapse is the answer. When the stand fails to regenerate, the failure is the answer. Here listening isn't mystical; it's moral because it's empirical. You may bring reverence to it, but you can't substitute reverence for it.

The second meaning is social and institutional: listening as submission to correction from persons. Here the "plants" are not, in themselves, the speakers. The speakers are those who have inherited a body of practice, and who may, by authority and by experience, restrain the novice's enthusiasm. To listen, in this sense, is to accept that your private virtue isn't the measure of your right. It's to accept that someone may say, "Not here," "Not now," "Not that much," and that the prohibition has force even when the prohibition wounds your self-image. There's nothing romantic about this; it's the very opposite of romance. It's the slow, sometimes humiliating work of being governed.

This kind of listening has a clear advantage over the first, because it addresses the moral problem of inflated "need" and self-authorizing "permission." But it has its own danger, which the reverent reader is often reluctant to name: authority can protect truth, and authority can protect error. A community can preserve restraint, and a community can preserve cruelty. A community can transmit careful knowledge, and a community can transmit the very habits that ought to have been revised when the world changed. To say this isn't to deny the value of tradition; it's to refuse the idol of tradition. Any living culture, if it's to persist, is necessarily conformist in some degree; it assimilates its young; it rewards some actions and shames others. We don't ask whether it does these things, but whether it possesses any mechanism for revising itself without calling revision betrayal.

This third meaning is the one most likely to trouble a scrupulous reader: listening as ontological communion. Here, plants and rivers are not simply objects of study or sites of regulation; they are, in some sense, interlocutors. The "answer" isn't merely the collapse of a run or the rebuke of a neighbour; it's a communication received by the attentive person. This is the meaning that gives the language of "teachers" and "permission" its greatest warmth. It offers companionship and the sweet relief of not being alone in consciousness. It also offers, as you have already discerned, the greatest

opportunities for epistemic convenience.

If the “answer” is received as an inward impression, how is it to be distinguished from the inward wish? If the plant is said to withhold permission, by what sign will we know it has withheld? If the river is said to grant or refuse, how can we tell the difference between the river’s refusal and our own reluctance to do what we have planned? And if the only correction available is that an Elder might say, “You are listening wrongly,” the question doesn’t vanish; it only moves. By what discipline is the Elder corrected? By what means do we distinguish a hard truth from an authoritative preference? These questions are not insolent. They’re precisely the questions you ask when you believe that a practice is important enough to be more than charming.

Now, it’s possible – even likely – that Kimmerer would reply that such questions already betray the very stance that makes listening possible. The modern mind, she might say, demands control: it demands that knowledge be separable from relationship, and that the knower be sovereign. To ask for error-conditions and public criteria is, on this view, to smuggle back the old arrogance under the guise of humility. You enter, she might say, the practice first; the criteria come later, if they come at all. There’s truth in this. No one learns a language by demanding, before the first conversation, a proof that conversation will be worth having.

This reply isn’t sufficient, and it’s not sufficient for a reason that’s as moral as it’s epistemic. The practice of listening, in Kimmerer’s sense, is meant to regulate taking. It’s meant to restrain appetite. It’s meant, often, to govern actions that have irreversible consequences. When the stakes are low, we may afford ourselves a certain looseness: we may allow the imagination to try on metaphors and see what virtue they produce. But when the stakes are high – when we’re justifying harvest, killing, extraction – looseness becomes dangerous. A method that can be used to sanctify harm is a method that needs to disclose its safeguards.

At this point, the comparison with science becomes unavoidable, though we make it without piety. Science, as an institution, is conformist and assimilative; it trains its novices; it rewards certain types of speech; it punishes others; it has fashions, prejudices, and incentives that distort inquiry. But it possesses, at least in principle, a distinctive kind of corrective: it forces claims to be stated in ways that allow contradiction by others. It doesn’t rely on the moral purity of the claimant; it relies on exposure. Its virtues are not the virtues of saintliness; they’re the virtues of publicity – methods, data, critique, replication, the rude possibility that someone else may show you wrong.

We are living in an era when the institutions of science are themselves being examined with a candour that would have seemed, not long ago, almost indecent. There are now researchers who have taken it upon themselves to count our errors – not as a vague moral failing, but as a measurable feature of a system – to ask how often claims survive their first triumph, how readily novelty is rewarded over correction, how reputations and incentives can delay contradiction, and how long a falsehood may keep its seat merely because no one is paid to evict it.<sup>5</sup> The point here challenges not the worth of science, but the superstition that it corrects itself as a body heals itself, without attention, without

---

<sup>5</sup>On the labour of scientific correction and the problem of replication, see John P. A. Ioannidis, “Why Most Published Research Findings Are False”, *PLOS Medicine* 2, no. 8 (2005); and the Open Science Collaboration, “Estimating the Reproducibility of Psychological Science”, *Science* 349, no. 6251 (2015).



cost, without organized labour. The virtue of the enterprise lies, when it lies anywhere, in publicity: in the rude possibility that someone else may show you wrong, and that the showing may be made in daylight.

If Kimmerer wants “listening” to do epistemic work – if she wishes it to be more than a poetic exhortation – she is obliged, in effect, to tell us where its contradiction resides. Is it in the world’s outcomes? Then listening is ecological literacy, and the method is near to science, though it may be inhabited with a different ethic. Is it in communal authority? Then listening is submission, and we ask how authority is itself corrected – how it revises without naming revision betrayal. Is it in communion with more-than-human persons? Then listening makes ontological claims; and we ask what prevents those claims, precisely because they’re morally elevating, from becoming the most exquisite form of self-licensing.<sup>6</sup> We don’t ask whether the posture is beautiful; the question is whether the posture can survive a constraint external to itself.

The most charitable reading of Kimmerer, and perhaps the one that preserves what is best in her project, is that she intends the meanings to be nested: communion is meant to motivate literacy; reverence is meant to sustain restraint; the moral imagination is meant to keep the empiricist from becoming merely clever. But nesting isn’t the same as substitution. If the book permits a reader to take the warmth of communion as a replacement for the labour of literacy – or permits a reader to take the dignity of tradition as a replacement for public correction – then it will have offered, along with its genuine moral medicine, a sweetened draught by which people can continue without changing.

One way to keep the third listening without letting it become a licence is to treat it as aspirational speech rather than as evidential speech: not a report of what the plant *said*, but a vow about what the listener will submit herself to. On that understanding, “the plants can tell us” is not a metaphysical certificate; it is a promissory note. It doesn’t excuse the labour of ecological literacy; it binds the speaker to it. It doesn’t confer innocence in advance; it obliges the speaker to build, in advance, a route by which she could be shown wrong.

The discipline can be stated plainly. If you claim that you have “asked permission” in a case where taking is at stake, you owe (i) a criterion that was fixed before the taking began (what would have counted as “no”); (ii) a record that others could inspect (how much, when, from where, under what conditions); and (iii) an authority external to your own tenderness that could overrule you (a closure, a rule of a place, a knowledgeable rebuke, a monitoring regime). Without those three, the language may still be beautiful, but it is operating as self-soothing rather than self-binding. With them, the language can do what it claims to do: it can become a way of putting appetite under constraint without pretending that constraint arrives as a whisper of consent.

The third kind of listening, the ontological kind, is where Kimmerer’s language becomes most beautiful and most precarious. She writes:

In the western tradition there’s a recognized hierarchy of being with of course the human being on top – the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of creation – and the plants at

---

<sup>6</sup>On motivated reasoning and the risk that moral certainty licenses epistemic convenience, see Ziva Kunda, “The Case for Motivated Reasoning,” *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 480–98.

the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation”. We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn – we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on the earth far longer than we have, and have had time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground, joining Skyworld to the earth. Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.

I like to imagine that when Skywoman scattered her handful of seeds across Turtle Island, she was sowing sustenance for the body and also for the mind, emotion, and spirit: she was leaving us teachers. The plants can tell us her story; we need to learn to listen.<sup>7</sup>

This appeal is undeniable; if we are the younger siblings, we may learn without the cheap relief of having to say we were wrong; and if the plants are elders, the hierarchies that made us careless may be gently inverted. But the evolutionary gloss – deep time as accumulated wisdom – offers a comfort that the biology doesn’t underwrite. Photosynthesis in plants is ancient not because plants “figured things out,” but because early eukaryotes engulfed and retained a cyanobacterium and, over geological time, integrated it into the cell. The chloroplast isn’t a parable of deliberative counsel; it’s the memorial of an asymmetric incorporation: an endosymbiotic event, and then an inheritance. If we recruit biology as moral warrant, we should read the syllabus honestly. Plants are older than us; but their age isn’t a form of pedagogy, and their persistence isn’t a vote of confidence in our conduct.

Scepticism alone won’t do the work Kimmerer asks us to do. You can be sceptical and still be a destroyer; you can see clearly and still take. The true demand, then, is double: we require a discipline that resists epistemic convenience, and we require an ethic that binds appetite. The question is whether the language of “listening,” as employed in these books, can satisfy both demands at once.

The next step is to take Kimmerer’s strongest claims – those that govern action, those that press upon harvest and consumption – and ask of them what we ask of any claim that wishes to guide life. What is the practice? What are the failure modes? Where is correction located? And – because we’re not merely solitary souls but citizens embedded in infrastructures – how does the practice scale? A private person may listen and take less; but a society takes through markets, laws, pipes, and engines. In such a society, the listening that shapes outcomes most often happens not at the edge of the forest but in the places where budgets are set, regulations written, and votes cast – places this essay can name but not enter. An ethic that can’t travel there is an ethic that risks becoming a refinement for the already scrupulous.

If, then, “listening” is to remain something more than an agreeable name for our better feelings, it needs to learn to speak the grammar of refusal. It needs the capacity to say no where the appetite says yes, and to do so by means that don’t depend wholly upon the appetite’s own consent. It seeks, in short, to invent for itself a way of being contradicted. Without that invention, the word will continue to do what beautiful words so often do: it will produce in the reader the sensation of virtue, while leaving the world to be managed by the old instruments of desire.

---

<sup>7</sup>Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 10.

## 4 THE GIFT IN THE AGE OF PIPES

The temptation of “gift” language is, in our conditions, both more understandable and more perilous than it would have been for a village. It’s understandable because it’s a protest against abstraction: it seeks to return relation to what commerce has rendered impersonal. It’s perilous because it can be enjoyed as a substitute for relation: it can give the inward sensation of reciprocity where the outward arrangement forbids it. We are all acquainted with the pleasing sensation of being, in our own imaginations, better than the system in which we participate. The very vocabulary intended to restrain us may become, in the hands of a comfortable reader, a refinement of comfort.

We have already seen the difficulty with the strawberry. Abundance isn’t absolution; a thing may “succeed” in sheer numbers while the manner of that success remains harsh. If gratitude is to be more than a mood, it learns to count. Kimmerer’s injunctions – “never take the first,” “never take the last” – reveal their seriousness here: they’re attempts to frustrate impatience and to prevent your appetite from becoming the final cause of another’s scarcity. But in a world where the take is organized at scale, these maxims can’t remain purely personal. A conscientious forager may leave the first berries; a conscientious shopper can’t, by leaving the first clamshell on the shelf, protect a fishery. The question is what becomes of them when the taking is performed by the long chain that lets us buy at one end and strip the world at the other.

Restraint, when it’s real and not merely wished for, is an institutional achievement. Studies of communities that have been obliged to govern common resources show that rules bind only when they have boundaries, oversight that doesn’t depend upon goodwill, penalties that grow sharper with persistence, and some settled way of hearing disputes.<sup>8</sup> If you wished to translate “ask permission ... abide by the answer” into a form that could survive the ingenuity of self-love, Ostrom’s principles would be a good place to start. “Permission,” in such a scheme, isn’t a glow in the conscience. It’s a rule that can be enforced, and – crucially – enforced even when the rule is inconvenient.

There’s a caution. James C. Scott has shown how readily large arrangements purchase their power by narrowing sight. The state, and in its own way the corporation, is driven to make the world legible: it prefers what can be named, counted, standardized, and audited from afar. In doing so it often replaces the thick knowledge of places with thin descriptions of them, and mistakes its abstraction for the thing itself.<sup>9</sup> The danger, then, isn’t only that “gift” language may become a private consolation; it’s that the public remedies we devise – rules, quotas, metrics – may themselves become a new species of moral convenience, if they silence the very local knowledge and local contradiction that would have kept the rule honest.

Here, too, we ought to pause over the word itself. Modern anthropology has taught us, with a severity that ought to delight any moralist who distrusts sweetness, that gifts are seldom free. Mauss’s

<sup>8</sup>Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), especially the discussion of design principles (boundaries, monitoring, graduated sanctions, conflict-resolution mechanisms).

<sup>9</sup>James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), on administrative “legibility,” high-modernist simplification, and *mētis* as local practical knowledge.

famous study was an investigation of how gifts bind: they create debts; they establish relations of honour and shame; they may serve as instruments of domination under the guise of generosity.<sup>10</sup> The obligation is threefold: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. A gift that goes unreciprocated isn't merely a social lapse; it's an assertion of superiority, a debt that humiliates by remaining unpaid. In some of the societies Mauss describes, the potlatch becomes an arena of competitive generosity in which giving is a form of aggression – you crush your rival by giving more than he can return.

To speak of a “gift economy,” then, isn't to invoke a pastoral Eden in which all exchange is kindly. It invokes a system of obligations and reputations, a system in which taking is never merely taking because taking always incurs a debt. This can be morally fruitful: the debt keeps the account open, refuses the closure that price provides, insists that something further is owed. But it can also be coercive: the generous patron holds the dependent client in a bond that can't be discharged, and the appearance of kindness conceals a structure of power. We don't ask whether obligation is good – without obligation, we should have no moral life at all – but what sorts of obligation we're creating, and who is empowered to declare the debt paid.

Kimmerer's gift vocabulary draws on a different tradition than Mauss's Melanesian and Northwest Coast examples, and it would be crude to treat them as interchangeable. Her gifts are offered by more-than-human beings who don't, presumably, seek to dominate by generosity. But Mauss's analysis clarifies what's at stake in any gift language: it clarifies that “gift” is never simply an alternative to exchange, but a different kind of exchange – one in which the terms aren't specified in advance and the account doesn't close. If we receive the world as gift, we're placed under obligation; but the shape of that obligation remains to be determined. The risk isn't that the obligation is too heavy; it's that, because it isn't specified, we may satisfy it too cheaply – with a sentiment, a phrase, a posture of gratitude that costs us nothing we weren't already willing to pay.

When Kimmerer urges us toward reciprocity, she is, in effect, urging us to reintroduce debt into a world that has disguised debt behind price. Price gives a peculiar sort of permission: it tells the buyer that the transaction is finished, that nothing further is owed. Gift language refuses that closure; it keeps the account open. But an open account requires a ledger, otherwise it becomes a theatre for self-congratulation. And every ledger depends on legibility; and a legibility designed for distant oversight will always be tempted to thinness – columns that can be audited at a glance, even when what matters is entangled, seasonal, and local. We arrive, again, at the same stern demand: where does the veto live, and where does the correction live? If the only ledger is the private self, we will be tempted to pay ourselves in sentiment and call ourselves solvent. In Smith's terms, we're in constant danger of mistaking the desire to be praiseworthy for the possession of praiseworthiness, and of accepting the warmth of approbation, whether from society or from an imagined Nature, as if it were proof that our account is truly paid. If the ledger is communal and public, if it's ecological in the strict sense, attentive to regeneration and collapse, then the account may become not only morally stirring but morally binding.

The question that has pursued us persists: where does the veto live? The forms of listening we

<sup>10</sup>Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don* (1925); English trans. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*.

distinguished earlier – empirical, social, ontological – submit themselves to discipline only when they expose themselves to the possibility of being contradicted. Otherwise the practice becomes a liturgy for desire. And here we touch the deepest asymmetry between solitary ethics and institutional life. A solitary person may be scrupulous but effect little; for the decisive acts of taking are no longer performed chiefly by hands, but by systems. If Kimmerer’s ethic is to travel beyond the circle of already-scrupulous readers, it asks to speak not only to the heart but to the arrangements.

I don’t mean that the moral imagination should become bureaucratic. I mean that it observes an honesty about the kind of world it addresses. The old forms of reciprocity were enforced by proximity: the one who took too much could be seen; the land, when over-used, replied quickly. Our world delays replies and disperses responsibility. In such a world, the most dangerous moral language is the one that permits the reader to feel reconciled without having altered anything that has the power to harm.

If, then, we’re to take Kimmerer seriously, as she asks to be taken, we ask of her beautiful words the question that every ethic faces when it enters modernity: what are the institutions that will carry it, and what are the sanctions that will protect it from being turned into a decoration – and how will they remain answerable to the thick knowledge of places, rather than only to what can be counted from afar? It may be that her answer lies, in part, in the very old human technology of story: the Windigo tale, the parable of excess, the narrative that makes greed shameful. But stories, too, can become ornaments, unless they’re joined to practices that make greed costly. We are brought to a subject that can’t be avoided: the negative image that accompanies the gift, the figure of the taker who can’t be satisfied, and the social machinery that’s required if such a figure is to remain a warning rather than a prophecy.

## 5 THE WINDIGO

If we wanted to rescue Kimmerer from the charge of moral convenience, we would do well not to begin with her most consolatory passages, but with her most frightening. She does, after all, set a dark figure at the centre of her moral imagination: the Windigo, that appetite which is never fed, that freezing of the heart which turns the world into a larder and other beings into mere provisions.<sup>11</sup> Here there’s no easy absolution. The whole point of the tale is that the taker isn’t merely a sinner against an external rule, but a kind of person whose desire has ceased to be answerable to any answer at all: it can receive no “no” from the forest, because it no longer recognises any voice but its own hunger.

Notice, too, how quickly the story ceases to be a picturesque survivance and becomes a diagnosis of present institutions. When she returns to her “medicine woods” and finds the deep ruts of trucks, and the forest opened to the sun like a wound, she doesn’t flatter herself with the notion that her love is protection. She admits fear – fear, not merely of loss, but of a structural incompatibility: “a world made of gifts can’t coexist with a world made of commodities.”<sup>12</sup> This isn’t the language of a writer who believes that inherited maxims will automatically do their work; it’s the language of someone who has recognized that the modern economy answers to principles her elders did not reckon with.

<sup>11</sup>Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), “Windigo Footprints” and “Defeating Windigo.”

<sup>12</sup>Kimmerer, “Defeating Windigo,” on the incompatibility of gift and commodity worlds.

In the very act of refusing comfort, she offers herself a more difficult form of hope: not the hope that the monster is imaginary, but the hope that it's defeatable. Here she does something rhetorically daring and epistemically revealing. She takes the old stories of attempted drownings, burnings, and banishments – some of them, by her own telling, rather brutish – and asks whether they contain usable instruction for a modern conscience.<sup>13</sup> She doesn't conceal the awkwardness of this inheritance. The Windigo isn't always slain; "the beast almost always slips away in the storm." Even her most ringing moral sentences – refuse complicity, demand an economy aligned with life – are followed by a plain confession: "It's easy to write that, harder to do."<sup>14</sup> A writer in search of mere benediction would have omitted that line. It's the line of self-criticism; it's also, more subtly, the line of methodological honesty, the acknowledgement that exhortation isn't a mechanism.

Where is the mechanism to come from? Here the braid is at its tightest, because she reaches for a language in which we can speak of mechanisms without stripping the world of meaning. She tells us that Nanabozho hunted the monster not in the Hungry Time, when scarcity magnifies the frenzy, but in summer, *niibin*, the time of plenty.<sup>15</sup> This isn't merely mythic decoration. It's a claim about leverage: if the monster feeds on scarcity, then we understand scarcity not only as a lack of things, but as a structure of circulation. Accordingly she borrows, without apology, the anthropologist's formula: modern capitalist societies, "however richly endowed," dedicate themselves to scarcity as an organizing proposition. From there she moves – almost brusquely – into the language of systems and exchange: warehouses of grain rotting while others starve; famine for some and diseases of excess for others; an economy that grants personhood to corporations while denying it to the more-than-human beings. Whatever you think of the phrasing, the operation is clear. She is translating a moral monster into a model of feedback loops: blockage of flow creates scarcity; scarcity intensifies hunger; intensified hunger justifies further taking; and the loop becomes self-reinforcing. The old story is made answerable to inspection, because the proposed causes – property regimes, commodification, market blocking – can be argued with, measured, and, at least in principle, altered. But we add that the very measurability which makes alteration thinkable is also what makes extraction administrable: the monster is fed not only by hunger, but by the simplifications that permit hunger to operate at scale.

This is the point at which the earlier worry about "listening" and "permission" becomes more than a philosophical nicety. In this Windigo chapter, she shows that she herself doesn't rest content with the claim that gratitude alone is sufficient. Elsewhere she records an elder saying as much, and she honours the humility in it; but she also admits that "the philosophy of reciprocity is beautiful in the abstract, but the practical is harder," and she lets her students press the question in terms that are almost offensively modern – "shoplifting" at the swamp.<sup>16</sup> That little vulgarity is useful. It reminds

<sup>13</sup>Kimmerer, "Defeating Windigo," on the old banishment stories and the Windigo's recurring escapes: "the beast almost always slips away in the storm."

<sup>14</sup>Kimmerer, "Defeating Windigo," after the injunction to refuse participation in the Windigo economy.

<sup>15</sup>Kimmerer, "Defeating Windigo," on hunting the Windigo in *niibin* (summer, the time of plenty), and on Marshall Sahlins's description of modern scarcity as an organizing proposition of capitalist societies "however richly endowed."

<sup>16</sup>Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the cattail-weaving classroom discussion on reciprocity as "beautiful in the abstract, but the practical is harder," and the student's "shoplifted at the swamp" formulation.



us that moral language has to meet the world at the point where the world resists being moralized. If we can “ask permission” but still take an “awful lot of stuff,” then the rule is either incomplete or it’s being misapplied; and in either case, what is needed isn’t increased reverence but increased specification.

Here, then, is one way of stating the difference between Kimmerer and Dillard that doesn’t collapse into temperamental contrast. Dillard, when she is at her best, won’t allow her tradition – Christian, American, literary – to smooth the surface of experience into moral legibility. She keeps returning to the fact of predation, waste, and indifferent abundance, and she lets that fact wound her metaphors. Her scrutiny is often turned as sharply upon her own desire for meaning as upon the natural scene that provokes it. Kimmerer’s scrutiny, by contrast, is frequently turned outward: upon the market story, upon the colonial story, upon the late-modern habit of substituting rights for responsibilities. That outwardness isn’t a defect; it’s, in some respects, her strength. But it introduces a recurring risk: that the monster becomes *other* – a thing “out there” in the economy, in the settlers, in “our leaders” – rather than a possibility within the very self who speaks against it. She guards against this by using a first-person grief, by admitting fear, by confessing impotence. Still, the structure of the rhetoric – monster here, champions there, medicine woods violated, plants conspire – invites a certain dramatization which can, if one isn’t vigilant, distribute moral agency too neatly.

What would count as vigilance? Not the banishment of myth, for that would be to discard one of our few languages for desire and restraint that doesn’t immediately become either sanctimonious or bureaucratic. But vigilance would require that the Windigo story be treated not as an emblem that certifies your virtue, but as a diagnostic that can indict your own practice. In that case, we ask not simply whether the tale condemns greed – it does – but whether it supplies, or encourages us to supply, an internal method of correction: something like the corrective discipline of scientific inquiry, by which error isn’t merely denounced but discovered through procedure. The Windigo chapter gestures toward such a method when it speaks of plenty not as a mood but as a structure, and when it insists that changes of policy are not enough without changes of heart. The gesture is promising; it’s also a challenge. A culture of gratitude without a culture of correction can become, in the end, a culture of good conscience.

## 6 SEEING, AND THE REFUSAL OF CONSOLATION

If Kimmerer’s governing words are words of obligation, Dillard’s governing word – her repeated exhortation – is simply: see. She binds the hand only indirectly, by attempting to discipline the eye; and her wager is that a certain kind of attention, steadily practised, will make a certain kind of complacency impossible. The reader isn’t asked to petition the woods for leave, but to endure what the woods are: not merely beautiful, but lavish; not merely lavish, but prodigal; not merely prodigal, but terrible in a way that refuses our preferred consolations.

We might be tempted to treat Dillard as the corrective to the difficulty we have found in Kimmerer: where Kimmerer risks making nature morally convenient – gifted, consenting, pedagogical – Dillard risks making nature morally *inconvenient*, a theatre in which the categories by which we flatter ourselves – kindness, fairness, recompense – are continually affronted by predation and waste. Her most famous scene is famous for a reason: the frog whose living body is drained by a giant water bug isn’t easily

received as a teacher in any comforting sense. You may call it a lesson, but it's a lesson that bruises the learner. The world, in this telling, doesn't present itself as a moral guardian; if it instructs, it does so by refusing to behave as if it knew our needs.

Dillard's theology isn't easy to name, and she doesn't make it easier. She writes as a Christian, or at least from within a Christian inheritance, but the God who appears in her pages isn't the moral governor of the Sunday school, nor the watchful accountant of evangelical conscience. He is – if we may use the pronoun at all – extravagant. He isn't economical. He makes, by her reckoning, too much of everything: too many eggs, too many seeds, too many stars, too many ways of killing and too many ways of being born. “Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me”,<sup>17</sup> she writes, and the sentence isn't complaint but report. The fecundity is terrible because it isn't arranged for our comfort. Nature “does not call any attention to itself”; it simply is, and we're the ones who are left to decide whether to look.

This is why Dillard can pursue worship without offering consolation. The object of her attention doesn't need her attention in order to be what it is. She isn't being listened to; she isn't being taught; she certainly isn't being given permission. She is, at most, being permitted to see – and what she sees is a world that would continue, in all its prodigal invention, whether she witnessed it or not. The *via negativa*, the approach to God through what can't be said, is her natural mode; but she can't rest there either, because the creek keeps presenting her with positives – with herons, muskrats, the copper light on water – that demand some response other than silence.

Her one unambiguous vision, the famous moment of the tree with the lights in it, is instructive because of what she doesn't do with it. She sees the cedar “charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame”; she receives what she calls “the tree with the lights in it”<sup>18</sup> – and then she spends years not seeing it again. The vision doesn't become a method. It can't be reproduced by discipline or summoned by reverence. It came, it went, and what remains isn't a technique but a memory that keeps the lesser sightings honest. She writes: “I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck.” But a bell doesn't strike itself; and the being struck isn't something she can take credit for, or teach, or make into a curriculum.

Here is the difference that matters. Kimmerer's creation teaches because it's conceived as relational: the plants are elders, the world is a gift economy, and the human being who listens well may receive instruction. Dillard's creation doesn't teach in that sense. It overwhelms. It provides, if you wish to use the word, data – but the data is excessive, contradictory, and under no obligation to cohere into a lesson. The creek is an altar, but an altar to a God who isn't waiting behind it to approve our offerings. You may worship there anyway. Dillard does. But the worship isn't a transaction, and the worshipper isn't thereby enrolled in a moral order that will guide her taking. She is left, after the vision fades, with the common world and her own conscience, and no assurance that the two are joined by anything but her willingness to keep looking.

This is bracing, but it's also, in its own way, limited. A person may be chastened into attention and still be useless. A person may see clearly and never act. Dillard knows this; her book isn't a

---

<sup>17</sup>Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 178.

<sup>18</sup>Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 33.



programme. But it means that her discipline, stringent as it is, can't by itself do what Kimmerer's vocabulary at least attempts: it can't bind the hand. It can only make the mind uneasy with its own satisfactions.

But the advantage isn't as simple as it appears. You can refuse consolation and still be consoled; there are consolations that depend upon a cultivated hardness. A reader may begin to admire himself for his capacity to look at cruelty without blinking, and to convert that admiration into a private moral capital. It's among the oldest stratagems of self-love to take a painful knowledge as a proof of virtue; and here Adam Smith's remark applies with particular force: we desire not only to be praised, but to be praiseworthy, and we're ingeniously ready to accept a posture as evidence of a character. The stoic who can stomach an indifferent universe may become, in his own eyes, a better kind of person than the sentimentalist who requires benevolence; and so the refusal of comfort becomes a new form of comfort.

Dillard's best pages resist this stratagem, not by an argument but by a habit. She keeps interrupting her own satisfactions. She doesn't deny herself beauty; she denies beauty the right to close the account. The mind, when it's pleased, tries at once to convert pleasure into a verdict: the world is good, the world is meant, the world approves us. Dillard's scrutiny is directed, as sharply as it can be, at that conversion. She watches herself in the act of making meaning, and then she places in front of that meaning some blunt fact that won't cooperate. The effect isn't scepticism for its own sake; it's a refusal to let coherence be purchased too cheaply.

For this reason the word *creation* functions, in Dillard, quite differently from its function in Kimmerer. In Kimmerer, *creation* is invoked as relation: humans as younger siblings, plants as elders, and the moral force lies in the reversal of entitlement. In Dillard, *creation* is a provocation. It's the name for a mystery that won't reliably behave like a moral governor. The reader who expects *creation* to underwrite *teacherhood* – who expects the world to be, in any steady way, didactic – is repeatedly unsettled. The world gives, but it gives without promising; it takes, but it takes without malice; it overflows, but it overflows without apology.

In that sense, Dillard supplies an epistemic service that Kimmerer, by the very warmth of her ethic, can't always supply. She makes it difficult to smuggle in the conclusion that because you feel reverent you are correct, or because you feel grateful you are innocent. Even her most rapturous attentions are shadowed by the knowledge that rapture can be a form of evasion – an absorption in splendour that permits you to forget the cost of splendour, or to treat your own heightened feeling as the main fact. Her book is, among other things, a sustained attempt to prevent the reader's best emotions from becoming certificates.

Because Dillard refuses the social metaphor, she lacks what Kimmerer possesses: a grammar for shared restraint. Dillard can teach us how to see; she can teach us how to be astonished; she can even teach us how to suffer the world's strangeness without turning away. But she can't teach us how to negotiate a harvest. She can't tell a community where to set the limit. Her ethic is the ethic of the witness, not of the steward. The witness needs to guard against blindness; the steward needs to guard against theft. And while blindness is a sin of the spirit, theft is a sin of the hand, and it requires a different kind of law to bind it.

If, then, we're to continue the work these writers have begun, we're obliged to do something that neither of them does fully. We are obliged to braid the witness with the steward. We are obliged to subject the "gift" to the rigour of the "count," and to insist that the "listening" include the possibility of a "no" that we can't override.

## 7 THE BRAID

If you were obliged to name, in a single sentence, what these books share, you might say that each is an attempt to defeat a certain late-modern enchantment: the enchantment by which the world is reduced to "resources" and the self is reduced to "preferences," and the traffic between them is declared finished the moment money changes hands. Both writers refuse that closure. Both insist that the relation isn't exhausted by price. Both seek, by different routes, to restore consequence to desire.

They seek it with instruments so different that their virtues are also their characteristic temptations. Dillard's instrument is the disciplined eye. She tries to make the reader endure the real – insect, frog, flood, and splendour – without allowing the mind to paste over the scene with a moral label that flatters us. Her correction is immediate: the next encounter contradicts the last interpretation, the remembered mechanism breaks the sentimental inference, and the reader is trained, by repetition, into a kind of intellectual modesty. Kimmerer's instrument is the binding word. She tries to place the reader under obligation: gratitude isn't an emotion to be enjoyed, but a debt to be paid; gift isn't a metaphor to be admired, but a ledger to be kept open. Her correction, at its best, is social: the elder's "no," the rule of the harvest, the shame attached to excess, the story that turns appetite into a monster.

The difficulty, which now ought to be plain, is that each instrument fails in the other's domain. Dillard can correct interpretation without necessarily restraining taking. Kimmerer can restrain taking without necessarily correcting interpretation. In both cases, the trap is the same: the substitution of an inward condition for an outward constraint, and the acceptance of a noble posture as if it were a sufficient deed. Smith's old warning returns: the soul isn't a reliable auditor of its own accounts.

What would it mean to hold them together? It would mean, first, that Kimmerer's key words are made answerable to Dillard's scrutiny. "Gift" isn't permitted to be a vague benevolence; it needs to be specified as an obligation that can be broken. "Listening" includes the difficult work of hearing what we don't wish to hear – including the indifference of the system we address. "Permission" becomes answerable to public rules and verifiable thresholds, not merely to private feeling. It finds its way into policy and communal self-binding. It needs to say, in the end, "We limit ourselves not because the world is watching, but because we're watching the world, and we know what we're capable of taking."

The moment we build these mechanisms – the moment we translate "reverence" into "regulation" – we face a second risk: the risk that in securing the rule, we lose the heart. We ask, then, that Dillard's rigour be warmed by Kimmerer's gratitude. A rule that's only a rule is brittle; it breeds resentment and evasion. To be durable, a restraint includes a vocabulary of value – a way of saying why the world is worth the trouble of leaving it alone. Kimmerer provides that vocabulary. She reminds us that the restraint isn't a privation but a recognition of life.

When we speak of public forms, we re-enter the problem of scale. We need to ask not only what a conscientious person can do, but what can be required of an arrangement. Here we face a tension

on two sides. Ostrom teaches that restraint, when it's real, is rarely the achievement of private virtue; it's the achievement of institutions: of boundaries, oversight, penalties, and procedures that don't depend upon saintliness. Scott teaches that institutions purchase their power by simplification: they prefer what can be counted from afar, and in doing so they risk mistaking their thin description for the thick life it replaces. We can't simply say "build mechanisms" and imagine the matter solved. The mechanism itself may become a new convenience, a new way of silencing local contradiction by rendering it illegible.

The braid, if it's to hold, needs a principle of its own: that correction be both public and plural. Public, so that the veto doesn't reside only in the private self; plural, so that no single mode of legibility is permitted to crown itself as the whole truth. We want metrics, but not only metrics; we want rules, but not only rules; we want local knowledge, but not only local knowledge. The proper enemy isn't system but monism: the belief that one instrument is sufficient, and that all other instruments are noise.

This is, perhaps, a more exact way of stating what "braiding" should mean if it's to be epistemically serious. The strands are not merely different emphases; they are different error-checks. The scientific strand is strong where the question is causal and the penalty for error is high: it forces the claim into a form that can be contradicted by others, and it insists on the stubbornness of mechanism. The Indigenous strand, in Kimmerer's hands, is strong where the danger is moral closure: it refuses to let price finish the account, it keeps debt visible, it turns excess into shame, and it insists that a human being isn't merely a consumer but a relative. The literary strand – Dillard's strand – is strong where the danger is that either of the other strands becomes too smooth: it returns us to the scene, it reintroduces surprise, it keeps language from becoming a screen between ourselves and the real.

If this is right, then the inquiry that has accompanied us throughout – where does the veto live? – receives a composite answer. The veto lives, in part, in the world's outcomes: the collapse of a run, the failure of regeneration, the measurable damage that no rhetoric can persuade away. It lives, in part, in communal authority: in norms that can say no, and in practices that make the no costly to evade. It lives, in part, in institutional form: in enforceable limits that don't depend upon private mood. And it lives, finally, in the trained mind: in the habit of being contradicted, in the refusal to treat beauty as proof, and in the willingness to ask, of your own best phrases, whether they're doing work or merely conferring sweetness.

This last requirement is, I think, the one most easily neglected, and it returns us to the moral psychology with which we began. Because the more a phrase is capable of giving us the feeling of being good, the more it needs to be subjected to the possibility that it's flattering us. It isn't enough to say "we have traditions that restrain." Traditions, too, can be recruited to excuse what is convenient. It isn't enough to say "we have science that corrects." Science, too, can be recruited to serve what is profitable. It isn't enough to say "we have literature that awakens." Literature, too, can be recruited as a luxury for the awakened.

If, then, the reverence surrounding these books is itself an instructive social fact, the instruction may be this: our age is hungry for an ethic that binds without sanctimony and an epistemology that corrects without cynicism. Dillard offers the correction without the binding; Kimmerer offers the

binding without always showing the correction. To read them together is to feel, with unusual clarity, the double labour we're trying to avoid: the labour of being disenchanted without being indifferent, and the labour of being obligated without being self-deceived. The braid, if it's anything more than a pleasing image, is that double labour made continuous.

It remains to ask, finally, what such labour looks like when it's not merely a private refinement but a public practice: when a society decides what it will treat as a gift, what it will treat as inventory, and what, having counted and listened and been contradicted, it will nevertheless refuse to take.

Restraint, however, is only half the question. The other half is repair – and here Kimmerer's work has ambitions the essay has not yet examined. She doesn't only ask us to take less; she asks us to give back. Her students plant sweetgrass in degraded wetlands. Her colleagues restore prairies, reintroduce fire, remove invasive species, and coax damaged land toward something like its former composition. This isn't sentiment; it's labour, and labour that can be measured. A restored wetland sequesters carbon, filters water, and supports species that were locally extinct. The work answers, in a concrete way, the question of what reciprocity might mean when the old loops have been broken: if we can no longer disperse the strawberry's seeds by wandering, we can at least restore the habitat in which strawberries and their dispersers might persist.

And yet repair, too, has its moral hazards – perhaps especially for the comfortable. Restoration can become a technology of absolution: you continue to take at one site while giving back at another, and the ledger, viewed from a sufficient distance, appears to balance. Carbon offsets are the obvious case, but the logic extends wherever repair is detached from the habits that created the damage. If I fund a reforestation project while maintaining the consumption that deforests, I have purchased the feeling of reciprocity without altering the structure of my taking. Kimmerer isn't naïve about this. Her insistence that gratitude is a discipline, not a sentiment, applies equally to repair: a restored acre isn't an indulgence that licenses continued harm elsewhere. But the insistence, again, requires operationalising. It requires some way of distinguishing genuine restoration from the performance of restoration – and some way of preventing the performance from becoming, for those with means, the preferred substitute for change.

Here the books converge on a difficulty neither fully resolves, but which they together make visible. Dillard offers no programme of repair; her discipline is one of attention, not action. Kimmerer offers a programme, but if it's to be more than an ethic for the already-scrupulous, it needs the institutional skeleton that an essay in moral exhortation can't provide. The essay, however, can provide the test. In the end, a moral vocabulary isn't judged by the sweetness of the mood it induces, nor by the reverence of the posture it recommends. It's judged by whether it provides a language for being contradicted: whether it locates the veto in a place where our own desire can't silence it. An ethic that can say "give back" but can't say "how much, verified by whom, and what happens if you don't" is an ethic still floating free of the conditions it hopes to change; but an ethic that invites the veto is an ethic that has begun to land.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was drafted with the assistance of large language models (ChatGPT 5.2 and Claude Opus 4.5). All content has been reviewed and revised by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final text.