SUMMARY

BRAIDING SWEETGRASS

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

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Summary of “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Wall Kimmerer

Written by Alyssa Burnette

What Native American traditions can teach us about life and climate change.

Introduction

“Save more bees, plant more trees, clean our seas!”

We see a number of motivational slogans like these on eco-friendly t-shirts. And indeed, these pithy messages are great reminders that climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our era. Unfortunately, however, many people stop at wearing t-shirts that raise awareness. Having broadcasted their values on their clothing, many assume that they’ve done their part for saving the planet. And sadly, many of the people who proudly wear these t-shirts are the same people who don’t adjust their lifestyles to include sustainable practices. This is certainly bad, but it pales in comparison with those who ignore climate change altogether. So, what can we do? How can we get everyone on board and create a truly sustainable future? How can we give our planet what it needs? To answer these questions, we will turn to the wisdom of Native American people who have existed in harmony with nature for centuries. And over the course of this summary, we’ll explore the toxic impact of colonization on culture and climate change to learn why we should have listened to indigenous people a long time ago.

Torn Between Two Cultures

You might assume that the author's research on the sustainability practices of indigenous tribes is the result of interviews or an anthropological study. But the author is actually Native American herself! Her family is from the Potawatomi tribe. The Potawatomi are an Algonquian Native American people of the Great Plains, upper Mississippi River, and western Great Lakes region. The Potawatomi people speak their own language, also called Potawatomi, and in their language, the name of their tribe means "people of the place of fire." Like other Native American tribes, the Potawatomi have a rich cultural history that has been all but destroyed through decades of colonization and abuse by white oppressors. In the early 1800s, they were slowly starved off of their ancestral lands by American settlers until they had no choice but to give up their land and allow white colonists to settle there.

Once they had given up control, they were quickly marched out of the state and onto reservations in a manner very similar to the notorious forced relocation known as the Trail of Tears. Given this painful history of colonization and oppression, it's unsurprising that Potawatomi people would cling to their ancestral heritage and be suspicious of white American culture. As a result, the author often felt that she was torn between two worlds. She soaked up the native traditions and oral history of her grandmother and felt compelled to honor and embrace her heritage. But as an American kid growing up in New York, she also felt tremendous pressure to "be normal" and "fit in." While this is a difficult balance for every child to strike, the pressure is certainly more intense for children who are being raised in two different cultures.

The author felt that the strain was especially difficult because her two cultures were polar opposites. The dichotomy was especially obvious when it came to cultural attitudes toward food and farming. For example, her Potawatomi family taught her about the importance of gratitude, sustainability, and reciprocity. They believe that people and nature are

interconnected in a mutually beneficial relationship. So, when you are kind to the environment, you are also being kind to yourself and vice versa. They also believe that human beings have a moral obligation to show gratitude for nature's bounty. For example, if you enjoy wild berries or grains that you have grown or harvested yourself, you should be kind to nature and express gratitude for what you have enjoyed. In practice, this might mean that you plant a seed as a gesture of thanks or do something else that encourages nature to flourish.

Modern America, by contrast, is primarily interested in what it can take. Although we are seeing an increase in efforts to give back to nature and respect the planet, we have an overabundance of food waste, fast fashion, and deforestation. Rather than thanking the planet for what it gives us, we are violently taking what we want and giving little in return. Having noticed this catastrophic disparity between the values of her two worlds, the author began to think critically about the values of her native people. When you compare the two cultures, attitudes, and values, it's certainly easy to see which is preferable! And that's why Kimmerer thinks it's time that we normalize Native American sustainability practices.

Sustainability Through Reciprocity

Now that we've examined some of the core values of the Potawatomi, it's time to take a closer look at how these values would affect our lives in practice. The author believes that a shift in our attitude toward nature and our relationship with it would be the biggest step in the right direction. Because, as you can see from the previous chapter, our entire outlook would be different if we viewed ourselves as being in a mutually beneficial relationship with nature. In this respect, our relationship with the planet would be much like our relationship with a romantic partner or a friend. In either scenario, it's widely accepted that being selfish is a bad thing. No one wants to invest in a relationship where one person takes without giving anything in return. So, if we thought of ourselves as doing that to the planet, how would that impact our worldview? What would we stop doing? What practices would we implement instead?

For example, many people think of recycling as being an extremely environmentally- friendly practice. (And indeed it is!) But often, we do the bare minimum when it comes to recycling, and behave as though we expect to receive a trophy for our sacrifices and sustainability. This example shows exactly how skewed our worldview can be. Because it's highly unlikely that we would condone this attitude in our relationship with another person. For example, if you gave your boyfriend a kiss or remembered his birthday, would you think, "Wow, I'm the world's best girlfriend!" Probably not, right? Rather, you'd understand that you were doing the bare minimum (and that you should really up your game!) Instead of doing the bare minimum, you would probably think that you should do more to show that you love and appreciate him. And that's exactly how we should approach our relationship with the earth.

The Potawatomi understand this and they put this into practice through many facets of their everyday lives. One example can be seen through a tradition known as "the honorable harvest." The honorable harvest is founded on the principle that the earth does not exist solely for human

consumption. Other animals and plants depend on nature for survival as well. The Potawatomi believe that you must respect this balance if you want to live in harmony with nature. So, when they grew crops, the people only harvested half of what they grew. That half was used to feed their families. The other half was used to feed the wild animals and plants who lived in the area and depended on the availability of crops and fertile soil to grow. In doing so, the Potawatomi believe that they are giving back to nature and thanking the land and other animals by acknowledging their mutually beneficial relationship.

This practice is not mandated by the government or enforced in any way. Rather, it's something that people do willingly, out of the goodness of their own hearts, because it's a value they cherish. And, having considered this example, the author posits that modern American society should introduce similar practices. Although we currently have no such laws on the books, Kimmerer argues that we shouldn't have to make this practice a legal statute. Instead, what if we simply showed people the importance of being kind to the planet as we are kind to one another? What if this was something people wanted to do?

If we could orchestrate a shift in our cultural mentality and view sustainability practices as an act of kindness, then we wouldn't try to pat ourselves on the back for simple acts like recycling. And we wouldn't waste our time trying to legislate practices that many people wouldn't follow anyway. Instead, we would willingly engage in sustainability through a sense of reciprocity. And rather than snatching resources from the earth, we could revolutionize our attitudes about what we need and what we have a right to take from nature. That's why the author posits that the concept of reciprocity is key to conceptualizing our relationship with nature. By definition, reciprocity means "the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit, especially privileges granted by one country or organization to another." And whether we think about it in those terms or not, we already rely heavily on the concept of reciprocity in other facets of our lives.

For example, as previously mentioned, most of our human relationships are centered around an equal balance of give and take. We share our resources, our support, and our knowledge with others. We give freely of our time, energy, love, and friendship. When we learn something new, most of us understand that we should take the opportunity to enrich someone else's life by teaching them that skill. And in return, others do the same for us. In fact, our earliest lessons about life are shaped by the concept of reciprocity. As early as pre-school, we learn that "sharing is caring." We are taught to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And from these lessons, we glean a clear message about the world: if we are kind, others will be kind to us. If we do the right thing, other people will do the right thing too. We think of this when we offer someone our seat, when we hold the door, when we say "please" or "thank you." We think of this whenever we do something that we would want others to do for us. So, why can't we think about this when it comes to our relationship with nature?

Practicing Sustainability the Potawatomi Way

In the previous chapter, we established that a shift in our attitude is the first big step for implementing sustainability practices. But now it's time to take a look at the other things we should do. The author's actionable strategies on this topic stem from a combination of her Potawatomi heritage and her experience as a professor of environmental biology. Throughout her career, Kimmerer has found that blending her culture and her education has proved invaluable because her heritage has enabled her to teach sustainability practices in a uniquely compelling way.

Drawing on her grandmother's teachings about reciprocity and the honorable harvest, the author typically invites her students to truly go out and engage with nature. Rather than learning about it from a textbook, she encourages them to get their hands dirty in her very own garden and witness the interconnected life cycle of plants, animals, and humans for themselves. She also blends traditional teaching methods with stories about indigenous agricultural practices. These stories help her to illustrate the point that we should concentrate on the interconnectedness of all life. We should plant seeds that are compatible with one another and that will grow well together. We should learn about the relationships between plants and identify those that will naturally coexist in a harmonious, mutually beneficial relationship. And by allowing plants to flourish and protect each other, we could eliminate toxic and unsustainable practices like covering our crops in harmful pesticides.

And above all, we can pass our wisdom on to the next generation. This is perhaps the most vital lesson of all because our future depends on our children. No one is born with an unkind view of the earth just as no one is born racist. We learn hatred, prejudice, and selfishness from the ignorance of those who teach us. But what if we taught our children to be thankful above all else? What if we taught them to view the earth as their friend? What if we encouraged them to look after the planet and each other? If we

want the next generation to have a future, then we need to teach them to give back to the planet.

Final Summary

When people hear about climate change, they often scornfully dismiss it as a hoax or a divisive political issue. But the author believes that our relationship with the planet should be neither divisive nor political. Rather, we should take care of the earth because we want to, because we understand that humans and nature are inexorably intertwined. That's what the author learned from her Potawatomi family. They taught her to take only what she needs from the planet, to be thankful for the earth, and to give back with a grateful heart.

These life lessons have not only shaped her worldview, but they have influenced her career as a professor of environmental biology. And as a Native American woman and an academic, Kimmerer firmly believes that indigenous teachings should be included in the conversation on sustainability. If we implemented Native American sustainability practices and passed these values on to the next generation, we might truly have a shot at creating a beautiful and sustainable future for our children.