

First Unitarian Church

November 12, 2023

You may have heard of Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. She published it in 2013 and several years later it made the New York Times best seller list, mostly from word of mouth. Robin Wall Kimmerer has continued writing and doing interviews since then. She is a wise person. A prophetic voice for our times, but one that is somehow simultaneously soothing.

And I don't know about you, but I could use something that is both real and soothing today. So I'm going to draw a lot from Robin Wall Kimmerer this morning. I'm going to draw from an essay she published last fall in *Emergence Magazine*. The essay is called, "The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance." Robin Wall Kimmerer compares economics to what she knows about plants, both as a botanist and as a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, indigenous to this continent.¹

So yes, it's about berries and economics... but also about the miraculous, unremarkable gifts that surround us and offer themselves to us each day. Yes, even in a city in the desert.

How does that sound?

The serviceberry is a berry that grows wild, and it's one of those plants that has a lot of other names. Sugarplum, shadbush, juneberry....

The Potawatomi word for serviceberry is *Bozakmin*. Its root, *min*, is also the root of other berries like blueberries and strawberries.... And also apples, and maize. That root, *min*, is also the word for gift. Like calling blueberries bluegifts. And raspberries raspgifts. Gifts.

I grew up in Oregon, where fresh berries really are like gifts. They grow everywhere, especially blackberries, but also salmonberries, huckleberries, wild strawberries, and many more. Fresh berries are one of the things I miss the most about the Pacific Northwest. They are so abundant it's both a blessing and a curse at times.

My sister lives on a big piece of land in the Willamette Valley in Oregon, and she had to get goats and a tractor specifically to deal with the blackberries. If you ignore blackberry bushes, they will take over a whole field. They grow along roadsides, in ditches, in yards. I never knew an Oregonian who intentionally planted blackberries, because first of all they are already everywhere and, secondly, you can pretty much never unplant them. Even if you try to remove them using three goats and a tractor, they might grow back again. Just ask my sister.

Since blackberries are so prolific and don't require extra water or fertilizer to grow, a person might wonder why they are so expensive in stores. Store bought blackberries are usually rather firm and not very sweet. But a tiny container of them, maybe thirty berries, costs like \$6. Why?

The reason they are so expensive is because they grow in dense, extremely thorny thickets. My sister's baby goats chomp right through the thorns. No problem. But if you're a human, you have to reach carefully through the dense branches, precisely, precisely avoiding the thorns, to grab one berry at a time. And it's no use trying to wear gloves. When you pick wild blackberries, you aren't looking for the sturdy ones. You want the fat, sun sweetened ones that will turn to mush if you grab them with a big old leather glove. When I go back to Oregon in late summer, I

always end up with scratches on my hands and arms from foraging blackberries. Totally worth it. Blackberries. Gifts from the land. We don't specifically deserve them. They simply appear. They are an undeserved gift. Which is, I might add, the definition of *grace*.

They are part of such a graceful ecosystem, an inherently generous system in which the gifts of each part contribute to the abundance of the whole.

Considering the serviceberries, Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the energy it takes for the plant to make sweet berries. The plant has to get energy from the sun (another gift giver) and then convert it into sugar—a kind of stored energy. The plant does not store up that abundant energy for itself, but gives it away, first in nectar filled flowers for the pollinators, then in calorie filled berries for the birds and people and other winged and legged creatures. (Snakes do not eat berries).

There they are. Gifts for the taking. Picture a small leafy green tree, branches laden with purple and red berries, that come off right in your hand. Serviceberries taste a little like other berries, or an apple, but also unlike them. A unique gift, as each natural food is.

When's the last time you ate something like that? How about: when is the last time you ate a regular bite of fruit, even from a grocery store, and really noticed it? Or vegetable. Or any whole food.

A wild berry is special in part because it's so direct: when we find them we feel lucky to we see the gift at its source, firsthand. But all fruits and vegetables and herbs and spices—and nuts and tea and coffee, and, and--- start out that way. We can see them that way anytime if we look at them right, if we set our minds right.

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, "In the presence of such gifts, gratitude is the intuitive first response. The gratitude flows toward our plant elders and radiates to the rain, to the sunshine, to the improbability of bushes spangled with morsels of sweetness in a world that can be bitter."

Morsels of sweetness in a world that can be bitter. Morsels of nourishment, in a world that can make us so tired and so hungry.

In the presence of such gifts, gratitude is the intuitive first response. When we feel grateful, our second intuitive response is reciprocity. What can I give in return for this abundance?

Maybe we water a plant or weed out nearby invasive species of plants. Maybe we give back in a less direct way, expressing our gratitude by giving to someone else—whether that someone is a plant, person, or other kind of animal. Robin Wall Kimmerer calls this a kind of gift economy. A system of giving, gratitude, and reciprocity.

Here's the economics part. It's pretty great too though—stay with me.

Gift economies are a real kind of economy—they aren't just for ecosystems. Gift economies are systems of exchange where gifts are given with no explicit expectation of reward. Reciprocity is expected, but unlike bartering or buying, it does not have to be direct. Giving and receiving flow freely, so that everyone gives from what they have and receives what they need from others.

Kimmerer tells the story of an anthropologist who was studying a hunter gatherer tribe. He observed a hunter catch a large animal, much too large for the hunter's own family. So he asked the hunter how he would store the meat. Would he salt it, smoke it, dry it? The hunter was confused. Store it? I store the meat in the belly of my brother, the hunter said. He called everyone to come have a big feast.

In a gift economy, a person is considered wealthy if they have enough to share. Abundance is managed by giving it away. The hunter knew that later someone else would have an abundance of food. The community would thrive through reciprocity. Through relationship.

Keeping all those berries, trying to hoard them, would be no use to the serviceberry tree. Instead, it uses its flowers and berries to develop a relationship with pollinators and birds—and other creatures that eat the berries. The tree develops a mutually beneficial relationship, in which its flowers get pollinated and its seeds get spread around. The pollinators and critters take part because they benefit from the calories—and if you watch them, don't they also look delighted?

What *about* the trees?

Have you ever wondered about the fact that we call trees "it?" What kind of tree is "it?" we ask. Where does "it" grow? Robin Wall Kimmerer points out if we call a person "it," that's considered extremely rude. For our own species, we say they, she, he or something like that. But for other species and especially for plants, in English we say *it*. In the Potawatomi language, the distinction is between animate and inanimate, and it is impossible in that language to speak of other living beings as "its" because they are alive.ⁱⁱ Water and rocks and other things are also considered "alive." They are alive in a different way than a bear or a butterfly. But they are alive nonetheless. Inanimate things are something else: things made by people, for example, like a table. Only those inanimate things are *its*.

What we call *it* we objectify. But with a "you" we form a relationship. We sense the other saying "you" back to us. When we receive something, whether we think of the source as a "you" or as an "it" influences the value we place on that thing. If your friend knits you some handwarmers, they will be much more special to you than a pair you buy from some big box store, made in a factory somewhere vaguely on the other side of the world, where you may worry someone was forced to work under terrible circumstances but they are only an idea in your mind, not a "you." Both do the same thing: keep your hands warm. They may even look similar. But one feels like a gift to be cherished, the other a product generated for consumers to consume.

The economic system we all know and live in is not a gift economy. It is built on the assumption of scarcity and private property. Material things are accumulated for the benefit of the individual or sold for money. In our market economy, the earth's gifts are privatized and sold as commodities. Think of spring water, sold in plastic bottles that are manufactured in factories that pollute other water, making fresh spring water more and more lucrative for private companies. What should have been abundant and free—clean water—is made scarce so that instead of everyone having a wealth of water, that abundance is transformed into monetary wealth for a few. This is obviously destructive.

Considering these things, Robin Wall Kimmerer wondered whether natural ecosystems could be seen as economic models for humans. She consulted her colleague, the ecological economist Dr. Valerie Luzadis.

Valerie Luzadis explains that in ecological economics, “the focus is on creating an economy that provides for a just and sustainable future in which both human life and nonhuman life can flourish... With a Serviceberry economy as our model, it prompts the opportunity for articulation of the value of gratitude and reciprocity as essential foundations for an economy.”

It is possible for humans to live in such a way as to be beneficial to other beings and to our ecosystems.

I am so glad to know there are ecological economists. They are long term thinkers. They are going to be important as we find our way forward from the short-term system we’ve inherited.

In the meantime, most of us cannot remove ourselves from the market economy and the feelings it stirs in us—or the real scarcity it creates. But we can also live *as though* in a gift economy. We can shift our perspective to one of seeing and receiving the gifts we have come to think of as ordinary. What are they? Fresh food, yes. And sunlight. And water—even if it is routed through a tap. Air. Sky. The community of creatures—animal and plant. Roadrunners, coyotes, rabbits, cottonwoods, New Mexico olive trees, turtles, beavers, porcupines, fish, frogs, great horned owls, bald eagles... You can spot all of these in the bosque right here in Albuquerque. I have. Yes, even bald eagles.

The other day I attached a birdfeeder to one of the windows of my apartment with suction cups and filled it with seeds. Now at about 8am every day, three finches visit it right there where I can sneakily, joyfully watch them.

That’s a reciprocal gift.

And this is my invitation to you as we head into the season of giving. To notice what you receive. To think of yourself as some kind of wealthy if you have enough—of anything—to share. To join in the gift economy, with its random acts of kindness and spirit of radical love.

ⁱ The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance, Robin Wall Kimmerer <https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-serviceberry>

ⁱⁱ <https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-wall-kimmerer-the-intelligence-of-plants-2022/>