

As we enter the first month of our 2020 Vision for Racial Justice, our reflection piece encourages us to consider our different cultural contexts when we think about story and spirituality. Here is a lovely, but challenging piece on thinking about Creation.

SKYWOMAN FALLING

An excerpt from Braiding Sweetgrass

By Robin Wall Kimmerer,

A mother, a scientist, and a decorated professor who is an enrolled member
Of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation¹

*In winter, when the green earth lies resting beneath a blanket of snow,
this is the time for storytelling. The storytellers begin by calling upon those who came
before who passed the stories down to us, for we are only messengers.
In the beginning there was the Skyworld.*

She fell like a maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze.ⁱⁱ A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before. It took her a long time to fall. In fear, or maybe hope, she clutched a bundle tightly in her hand.

Hurting downward, she saw only dark water below. But in that emptiness there were many eyes gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman, arms outstretched, long black hair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them.

The geese nodded at one another and rose together from the water in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath to break her fall. Far from the only home she'd ever known, she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers as they gently carried her downward. And so it began.

The geese could not hold the woman above the water for much longer, so they called a council to decide what to do. Resting on their wings, she saw them all gather: loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds. A great turtle floated in their midst and offered his back for her to rest upon. Gratefully, she stepped from the goose wings onto the dome of his shell. The others understood that she needed land for her home and discussed how they might serve her need. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreed to go find some.

Loon dove first, but the distance was too far and after a long while he surfaced with nothing to show for his efforts. One by one, the other animals offered to help – Otter, Beaver, Sturgeon – but the depth, the darkness, and the pressures were too great for even the strongest of swimmers. They returned gasping for air with their heads ringing. Some did not return at all. Soon only little Muskrat was left, the weakest diver of all. He volunteered to go while the others looked on doubtfully. His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward and he was gone a very long time.

They waited and waited for him to return, fearing the worst for their relative, and, before long, a stream of bubbles rose with the small limp body of the muskrat. He had given his life to aid this helpless human. But then the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched

and, when they opened it, there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said, “Here, put it on my back and I will hold it.”

Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals, she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, from the dab of mud on Turtle’s back until the whole earth was made. Not by Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals’ gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home.

Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed. The bundle was still clutched in her hand. When she toppled from the hole in the Skyworld she had reached out to grab onto the Tree of Life that grew there. In her grasp were branches – fruits and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green. Sunlight streamed through the hole from the Skyworld, allowing the seeds to flourish. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere. And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island.

The author continues with a short reflection on sweetgrass, telling the reader that it was the first plant to grow on earth, its fragrance a memory of Skywoman’s hand. “Breathe in its scent,” she writes, “and you start to remember things you didn’t know you’d forgotten.” She reflects on the tenderness in braiding the hair of someone you love and reminds us that sweetgrass can be woven into baskets. “We say it is the flowing hair of Mother Earth. When we braid sweetgrass, we are braiding the hair of Mother Earth, showing her our loving attention, our care for her beauty and well-being, in gratitude for all she has given us.” Finally she reflects on how children learn the story of Skywoman early in their lives, and thus they also know from birth, the responsibility that flows between humans and the earth.

Then Professor Kimmerer shares something of her life as an academic. She writes:

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 9:35 a.m., I am usually in a lecture hall at the university, expounding about botany and ecology – trying, in short, to explain to my students how Skywoman’s gardens, known by some as “global ecosystems,” function. One otherwise unremarkable morning I gave the students in my General Ecology class a survey. Among other things, they were asked to rate their understanding of the negative interactions between humans and the environment. Nearly every one of the two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are bad mix. These were third-year students who had selected a career in environmental protection, so the response was, in a way, not very surprising. . . . Later in the survey, they were asked to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was “none.”

I was stunned. How is it possible that in twenty years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment? Perhaps the negative examples they see every day – brown fields, factory farms, urban sprawl – truncated their ability to see some good between humans and the earth. . . . When we talked about this after class, I realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their

species and others might look like. How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like? If we can't imagine the generosity of geese? These students were not raised on the story of Skywoman.

On one side of the world were people whose relationship with the living world was shaped by Skywoman, who created a garden for the well-being of all. On the other side was another woman with a garden and a tree. But for tasting its fruit, she was banished from the garden and the gates clanged shut behind her. That mother of men was made to wander in the wilderness and eat her bread by the sweat of her brow, not by filling her mouth with the sweet juicy fruits that bend the branches low. In order to eat, she was instructed to subdue the wilderness into which she was cast.

Same species, same earth, different stories. Like Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness. One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a co-creator of the good green world that would be the home of her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven.

And then they met – the offspring of Skywoman and the children of Eve – and the land around us bears the scars of that meeting, the echoes of our stories.ⁱⁱⁱ

What do you especially appreciate in reading the story of Skywoman?

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ⁱⁱ Adapted from oral tradition and Shenandoah and George, 1988.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Milkweed Editions, 2013, pp. 5-7