



## Returning the Gift, by Robin Wall Kimmerer

In the teachings of my Potawatomi ancestors, responsibilities and gifts are understood as two sides of the same coin. The possession of a gift is coupled with a duty to use it for the benefit of all. A thrush is given the gift of song—and so has a responsibility to greet the day with music. Salmon have the gift of travel, so they accept the duty of carrying food upriver. So when we ask ourselves, what is our responsibility to the Earth, we are also asking, “What is our gift?”

As human people, most recently evolved here, we lack the gifts of our companion species, of nitrogen fixation, pollination, and 3000-mile migrations under magnetic guidance. We can’t even photosynthesize.

But we carry gifts of our own, which the Earth urgently needs. Among the most potent of these is gratitude.

Gratitude may seem like weak tea given the desperate challenges that lie before us, but it is powerful medicine, much more than a simple thank you. Giving thanks implies recognition not only of the gift, but of the giver. When I eat an apple, my gratitude is directed to that wide-armed tree whose tart offspring are now in my mouth, whose life has become my own. Gratitude is founded on the deep knowing that our very existence relies on the gifts of beings who can in fact photosynthesize. Gratitude propels the recognition of the personhood of all beings and challenges the fallacy of human exceptionalism—the idea that we are somehow better, more deserving of the wealth and services of the Earth than other species.

The evolutionary advantage for cultures of gratitude is compelling. This human emotion has adaptive value, because it engenders practical outcomes for sustainability. The practice of gratitude can, in a very real way, lead to the practice of self-restraint, of taking only what we need. Acknowledging the gifts that surround us creates a sense of satisfaction, a feeling of enough-ness which is an antidote to the societal messages that drill into our spirits telling us we must have more. Practicing contentment is a radical act in a consumption-driven society.

Indigenous story traditions are full of cautionary tales about the failure of gratitude. When people forget to honor the gift, the consequences are always material as well as spiritual. The spring dries up, the corn doesn’t grow, the animals do not return, and the legions of offended plants and animals and rivers rise up against the ones who neglected gratitude. The Western storytelling tradition is strangely silent on this matter, and so we find ourselves in an era

when we are rightly afraid of the climate we have created.

We human people have protocols for gratitude; we apply them formally to one another. We say thank you. We understand that receiving a gift incurs a responsibility to give a gift in return. The next step in our cultural evolution, if we are to persist as a species on this beautiful planet, is to expand our protocols for gratitude to the living Earth. Gratitude is most powerful as a response to the Earth because it provides an opening to reciprocity, to the act of giving back.

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