

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** We overlook what we think of as the tiny and insignificant at our peril. Mosses, let's say in the boreal forest, in the taiga, in the tundra, how are they so stress tolerant? How have they lasted for eons? In large part, it's because they're not competing with one another. They are cooperating with one another.

[00:00:24] They are also working within the laws of thermodynamics. Mosses aren't big. They are using physics to live in the little tiny greenhouse that is created on top of every surface. And so they are working within the laws of nature to be successful, not trying to conquer those laws.

[00:00:51] **Nate Hagens:** Today I am joined by Robin Wall Kimmerer for a deep dive into the intersection of Western science and indigenous knowledge, especially through the lens of plants as teachers. Robin Wall Kimmerer is a plant ecologist, a bryologist, who is a botanist who works on mosses, liverworts, and hornworts. She is a writer and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

[00:01:23] Her books include *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, as well as, more recently, *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World*. She is a SUNY, State University of New York, Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, where she also founded and is the director emeritus of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment.

[00:01:52] In this conversation, we discuss her journey of learning through plants, from the three sisters of corn, beans and squash, to mosses in boreal forests. She also shares some of the foundational Potawatomi worldview that shaped her

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research and scientific career. Most of all, Robin and I discuss how these ideas move beyond philosophy and actually influence how we live, or are going to live, and could even shape the systems around us if humanity chooses that path.

[00:02:31] without further ado, please welcome Robin Wall Kimmerer. Robin Wall Kimmerer, at long last, welcome to the program

[00:02:40] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Thanks for inviting me, Nate.

[00:02:42] **Nate Hagens:** You have literally been one of the most requested guests over the last several years. so I'm glad finally, we're able to meet in person and have a conversation.

[00:02:53] You are a plant ecologist and author, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. You're well known for your book Braiding Sweetgrass, and you have a recent book, Serviceberry. And one of the themes in your work is plants. And I was hoping you could share one story about one plant and how knowing about plants can influence things about ourselves and human society.

[00:03:27] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah, you know, both as a plant scientist and as a Potawatomi scientist, plants in my culture are understood as our elders, as our teachers. And as a Western-trained plant ecologist, they are my teachers. And as an indigenous woman trying to figure out how it is that we live well here, they are my teachers.

[00:03:52] And I think that I would want to invoke the contemporary science of biomimicry that says, oh, given the evolution and problem-solving by plants throughout evolutionary time, how might we take lessons from them? How might we have the humility to view them as, as, as teachers and models? So hard to choose which plants to talk about, but I think I would choose the embodiment of traditional ecological knowledge as it regards plants and choose corn, beans, and

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squash growing together in the indigenous polyculture that we know of as the Three Sisters.

[00:04:38] Because as we know, in contrast to contemporary monoculture agriculture, by growing corn, beans, and squash together in a polyculture, it's better for the soil. You don't need any tillage. You don't need any pesticides. You don't need any fertilizer because the interaction between those three species provides everything that they need.

[00:05:02] So biophysically, they are a model of, symbiosis, of complementarity between those three species. And so I view them as our teachers. You know, the corn isn't going to be able to reach as much light if it doesn't have the beans to fix nitrogen and fuel that growth. Neither of them are going to be able to do their work unless the squash is cooling the soil and suppressing weeds.

[00:05:30] So the brilliance of planting those three species together is, I think, just a wonderful example of brilliance, but it also teaches us about complementarity, that we don't have to compete. We could be mutualists with one another. And so they teach us biophysically, and they teach us philosophically.

[00:05:53] **Nate Hagens:** This is gonna be a fun conversation 'cause already I have five questions that I didn't have a moment ago. So The three sisters, corn, beans, and squash, that actually was a human recognition that planting those together had a higher yield and less inputs needed and was more sustainable. So it was a co-evolution of sorts, right?

[00:06:20] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

[00:06:22] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Just out of curiosity, how long have you been at Syracuse?

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[00:06:29] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I have been at Syracuse for 33 years.

[00:06:32] **Nate Hagens:** So did you, back in the day, know David Pimentel, who was also a plant e- expert?

[00:06:38] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I certainly knew and admired his work.

[00:06:40] **Nate Hagens:** Okay.

[00:06:41] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** And I'm sure we met at the Ecological Society or something.

[00:06:44] Yeah. But no, we didn't really know one another.

[00:06:46] **Nate Hagens:** He, was o- in the late '90s, he was one of the authors that I came across that really, like, caused me to leave the dark path, and quit Wall Street and stum- come and study, ecological economics and such. We emailed a bunch back 25 years ago. so but I remember, that just jogged my memory that Cornell and Syracuse close.

[00:07:07] Mm-hmm. So, what else about plants? Like, do you literally, like, go through a forest or a garden or something and stop and think, "What can I learn from this plant?" Or, "What does it have to teach me?" Or do you observe the lessons? Or what do you actually mean by plants are your teachers?

[00:07:26] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Both of those things are true.

[00:07:28] I think first of all, if you have the mindset that these photosynthetic marvels can teach you something- you approach them in a very different way. To say, "What are you modeling? What are the signs and the patterns that I'm observing? And what are you teaching me about how the world works, about h- how your relationships work?"

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[00:07:52] So yeah, wh- when I'm w- walking in the woods or working in my garden, or pretty much always, I'm attuned to what it is that the plants are showing me. And when we say that plants tell us things, when we listen to the plants, for me it's really pattern recognition. It's looking at w- what are you doing?

[00:08:16] What are the relationships? What are the innovations that I didn't see two weeks ago when I was here? and so what has changed? So yeah, I'm always observing with that notion of what can you teach me? And, that is at heart what w- the way I do science in the field. I really view the mosses or the trees or the grasses that I'm studying as, it's like I n- I need to interview them as, as persons.

[00:08:49] But the scientific method and experimental design gives me a way to interview them, to say, "What do you think about the nitrogen regime here?" Well, I can set up an experiment in order that they can teach me about that. But there are also intuitive tools that we so often overlook that can lead us to new insights.

[00:09:12] **Nate Hagens:** So you are a scientist, but also an indigenous woman. Leaning on knowledge from your community, your elders, your historical arc, how do you bridge those, merge, science and Indigenous knowledge?

[00:09:33] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Well, one of the things that seems very present for me, and again, it goes back to this notion of the land as a source of knowledge and teachers, whether I'm approaching a question about ecology as a scientist or as an Indigenous person, I am inquiring of the land.

[00:09:52] So oftentimes there is convergence between Indigenous knowledge and Western science, because what we're in both cases trying to ascertain is what the land already knows. And so there is that, that commonality. But in Western science, of course, we have this notion that we can be purely objective and materialist in our observations.

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[00:10:17] That is, of course, a cultural construct. In Indigenous ways of knowing, we recognize the power of subjective intelligence and embrace both of them. So they're different tools, and I use them for different questions.

[00:10:34] **Nate Hagens:** Even on the objective side, one could argue that Indigenous knowledge is science, just with a huge historical pattern.

[00:10:45] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Oh, absolutely. That's why I call it Indigenous science. It absolutely is science.

[00:10:51] **Nate Hagens:** Getting back to the Three Sisters example, you know, we are alive at this anomalous time when we're drawing down ancient carbon, millions of times faster than the Earth built it up. And so we're untethered from our historical tribal crucible, backdrop and context.

[00:11:16] So we choose to plant monocrops with machines, and deplete the topsoil and use 10 to one fossil inputs to get out one calorie. That's what our culture has learned to do, given our objectives. Are we gonna need to do corn, beans, and squash again at a large scale in the future?

[00:11:38] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I think we're gonna have to go to polycultures.

[00:11:40] It is a self-sustaining system that operates without all those energy and nutrient subsidies. Yes, of course.

[00:11:51] **Nate Hagens:** Except we're gonna need a lot more human labor, because one tractor can cover so far, and if we start to do agriculture more sustainably for the long, long run, we're gonna need a lot more people working in the fields in the soil than we do have in office buildings and all the stuff going on here in New York City.

[00:12:14] What, what do you-- what are your thoughts on that?

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[00:12:16] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** My thoughts are that people returning to hands in the soil, to understanding where our food comes from participating in the economy of the land, is altogether a good thing. Those are the kinds of... How can we learn these lessons from the land if we're not in contact with the land?

[00:12:37] And, you know, the question that you ask about scale is important, of course, but oftentimes people are all about, "Well, how do we scale this up?"

[00:12:47] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:12:47] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** And I don't think that's the right question. I think in many cases we need to scale it down. We need to scale it down to relationships with our home places, because when you know your home place, when you know the soil, when you are invested in that soil because it's got to feed your great-grandchildren as well as you, you have a very different relationship with, land that can lead us to a, an enduringly sustainable future.

[00:13:16] **Nate Hagens:** On these issues, you're a very well-known author on the two books I mentioned. You've written other books as well. What, have you really learned, like personally as a human who's growing and observing the world, on these topics, like in the last few years? What, what is like, "Oh, I, I get it now"?

[00:13:36] Have you had any big learnings?

[00:13:38] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I think one of the things that I really value is because I study sometimes tiny systems like mossy logs, sometimes big systems, like forests. And understanding the fractal nature of the living world has been really helpful to me in thinking across scales and saying, "What are the organizing principles that help a moss microcosm stay in balance and support all kinds of biodiversity?"

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[00:14:15] And are the patterns that happen when the forest is, you know, an inch tall, how do those compare when the forest is 100 feet tall?" So it has helped me really be clearer around the organizing principles in the fractal organization of nature.

[00:14:36] **Nate Hagens:** And what do we miss in the micro, because we're so focused on the charismatic megafauna like dolphins, and orangutans, and elephants, and elk, and moose, and bear, and wolves.

[00:14:48] But what's going on at the micro scale even, even if it's fractal that is so important to our lives and our existence?

[00:14:58] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Oh, man. We overlook what we think of as the tiny and insignificant at our peril. Within mosses, let's say in the boreal forest, in the taiga, in the tundra, mosses hold and sequester more carbon than the forests do.

[00:15:15] What? Yes.

[00:15:16] **Nate Hagens:** I d- I had no idea. Yes.

[00:15:18] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yes.

[00:15:19] **Nate Hagens:** The little mosses on the ground- Yes ... and on the sides of the trees.

[00:15:22] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yes, but collectively, also you think about the way that they're peat forming. Those mosses are forming peat and organic, deep organic soils. So you've got the top layer that's alive, and below them are generations and generations of their elders, who are now soil carbon.

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[00:15:44] And mosses midwife. You think about the mosses in the tundra, in the permafrost, that's mostly moss. As we know, it's a, it's been called the ticking carbon bomb, right? Yeah, permafrost ... because so much carbon is held in moss biomass.

[00:16:02] **Nate Hagens:** So sometimes when, well, in my case it w– it would be a, a, a coach who's helping me, they ask you to imagine your happy place, like a serene visualization.

[00:16:15] And for me, it is the mossy wet forest in British Columbia where there's-- it's October, and it's kind of damp and moist, and there's trees everywhere, and there's moss everywhere, and there's, king bolete mushrooms popping up. That's my happy place.

[00:16:33] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Mm–hmm. I'll meet you there.

[00:16:36] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. So yeah. Well, you've probably been.

[00:16:38] I sure

[00:16:38] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** have.

[00:16:39] **Nate Hagens:** you mentioned the taiga and

[00:16:40] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** everything. I sure have. And one of the things that is so striking in terms of a lesson from those tiny little mosses who we might just walk by, say insignificant, in every way, those charismatic microflora of mosses also help us redefine what does it mean to be successful.

[00:17:02] We might look in that forest at the old growth cedars and say, "Oh, that being big, and passing lots of energy through you, that's what it means to be successful." But one of the fascinating things about mosses is that when you look

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at fossil mosses, the first plants to come out on land, and you look at contemporary mosses, they are little changed.

[00:17:27] That's very unusual in evolutionary biology, right? When 99% of all the organisms that are re- ever evolved are extinct. Not so the mosses. They're-- to me, they are a marker of the kind of success that comes with long-term persistence and explosive biodiversity. We wouldn't think of them as successful, but they have been over time.

[00:17:53] It, to me, redefines what it means to be successful.

[00:17:58] **Nate Hagens:** I had a French biologist a couple months ago. His name was Olivier Hamant, and his whole thing is that we over-optimize for efficiency, and instead, a successful evolutionary species is robust. And, he-- oh, well, another thing he said is we're leaving the era of the mean and headed towards the era of the standard deviation.

[00:18:20] But with respect to what you just said, does it imply that mosses are more successful or more resilient, or is it maybe that they just have a much wider niche and a standard deviation of hot and cold, dry and wet they can survive, whereas a lot of species, humans maybe, have a much smaller ecological window of conditions that we can thrive in?

[00:18:45] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah, it's absolutely true that within the tremendous biodiversity of mosses, there are stress tolerators, there are ones who need really mesic, lush places like in those old growth forests of BC. But one of the most important things to understand about mosses and their success is that it's the power of being small.

[00:19:08] And this, I think, is a great lesson for us as human people. How do they do this? How are they so stress tolerant? How have they colonized virtually every

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niche on the planet and lasted for eons? How have they done it? In large part, it's because they're not competing with one another. They are cooperating with one another.

[00:19:34] they are also working within what I think of as the laws of thermodynamics. Mosses aren't big. They stay only this big because they're living within the boundary layer. They are using physics to live in the little tiny greenhouse that is created on top of every surface. And so they are working within the laws of nature to be successful, not trying to conquer those laws.

[00:20:03] **Nate Hagens:** Not to name drop again, but you probably at Binghamton know David Sloan Wilson.

[00:20:09] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Mm-hmm.

[00:20:10] **Nate Hagens:** So David's been on the program, and I was a longtime fan of his, writing with E.O. Wilson. And, that is kind of another still unfortunately somewhat contentious biological, finding that we are a product both of competitive and cooperative forces in our tribal ancestral past.

[00:20:33] So tell me about cooperation in nature from a plant biologist indigenous, lens. We are in this country right now, the ruling narrative is that competition, individuality, that's the goal. You gotta get your stuff, and it's been that way for most of our lives. But it hasn't been that way for most of our species.

[00:20:57] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Correct.

[00:20:58] **Nate Hagens:** So what, are your thoughts on that?

[00:21:00] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah, for most of our time of human history, save this blink, eye blink in time really of the last 500 years, where this industrial competitive worldview has, has dominated. I think that maybe a good way to

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frame my thinking about that is that both in evolution and you as thinking about economics, recognize that there's this notion that all beings will act in their own self-interest, right?

[00:21:35] Okay, let's-- we can explore that assumption, but what I think's really important to explore is what do we mean by self? Do we mean this atomized individual sitting here in, in this chair? Or do we mean our self-interest with a permeable boundary between me and the plants who are my food, a permeable boundary between the minerals that are in my bones.

[00:22:06] I say, "Oh, I'm me. Those are my minerals." Yeah, they were in my groundwater yesterday. Who's me? So I think that this notion of cooperation is grounded, yes, in self-interest, but a big self, that I like to call the great green we, that I am not really, different from the forest that I live in.

[00:22:32] And so my wellbeing is linked to the wellbeing of the forest, and we have forgotten that. We say it's all about me, in Western economics.

[00:22:42] **Nate Hagens:** Well, Rex Weyler, and Nora Bateson were on the show talking about, when does the apple become me, and when does the bee pollinating the apple become the apple- Correct

[00:22:54] and things like that. But can you widen it further? And, I mean, we have 8.2 billion of us now in the concrete jungle where you and I are recording this. But in ancestral times, could the permeable barrier of self extend within the human tribe, like even beyond the level of the individual because it's our tribe acting as a unit?

[00:23:22] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Sure. especially living in close relationship to the vagaries and the uncertainties of a fluctuating natural world, absolutely, your wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of your family, of your

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clan, of your elders. You know, when I think about the great value that our indigenous peoples, broadly speaking, place on our elders in contrast to this individ- individualistic production efficiency worldview where elders become expendable, right?

[00:24:02] but so valued in indigenous societies for that continuity of knowledge and relationship to land that helps the group survive.

[00:24:12] **Nate Hagens:** And in non-human mammals-

[00:24:14] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Oh,

[00:24:14] **Nate Hagens:** yeah ... like elephants and such. Absolutely. Okay. So crystal clear to me, porous boundaries of self in nature and in humans. So given the challenges of the world today, how can we use that obvious biological historical truism to help our situation?

[00:24:36] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** You know, I think when we think about our situation broadly speaking, let's just say, you know, biodiversity loss, climate injustice, all of the crises, the polycrises that we live in, to me all I don't wanna be over simplistic about this, but they have their root in the story that we have been told of what it means to be a human being.

[00:25:03] I think about that as, I think it's been called the fictional pyramid of human exceptionalism. Goes all the way back to Aristotle's scale of nature, right? With angels at the top, humans, and then all, everything else, and the plants way down at, at, at the bottom, right? Lower than, lesser than. They are our property, not our kinfolk, and we are in charge.

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[00:25:28] We are the best. Human exceptionalism. You look at our economic system, you look at industrialization, you look at colonization, those are all reflections of human exceptionalism.

[00:25:41] **Nate Hagens:** Is it safe to say that nowhere do you see that in indigenous communities around the world?

[00:25:46] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I certainly could not speak for all those communities.

[00:25:50] In the communities that I know of—

[00:25:51] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah ...

[00:25:52] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** human exceptionalism is laughable.

[00:25:55] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:25:55] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** One of the values that, of the many that, we're taught is, *dbaadendiziwin* and the value of humility. My Haudenosaunee neighbors call human people the younger brothers of creation. We were the last ones to be here. We are to look to our more than human relatives for examples of how to live.

[00:26:16] Completely different worldview.

[00:26:18] **Nate Hagens:** That is actually science. We are the younger brothers and sisters. Like indeed. Like absolutely are.

[00:26:23] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Exactly, and that's one of the things that I find so powerful about indigenous science, is that it is empirical. It is physically, objectively verifiable. But indigenous science values empiricism, absolutely, the powers of observation, but also emotional intelligence and also spiritual tools.

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[00:26:47] All of those are parts of indigenous science, whereas in my training as a Western scientist, we're told, you leave those other things aside. Only that which can be measured and tested with a hypothesis is valid knowledge." I disagree.

[00:27:03] **Nate Hagens:** Let me ask you a difficult question. There's a lot of, clamoring and, social, discussion about whether we need to integrate indigenous wi- wisdom, indigenous peoples more in conversations about the future.

[00:27:28] And I think when a lot of people hear that, they think it is charity towards the ecocide and the destruction of the cultures that existed in this continent before, it was colonized. and they leave it there as if, oh, we want to help these people that were wronged But if we flip that, like really, and we're all living in this country and this continent and this world at this time on the precipice of a lot of ecological socioeconomic, challenges, can we look to indigenous knowledge?

[00:28:08] and would indigenous people even be willing to help? What can we learn and, how do we, actually... Well, I shouldn't ask you this after what you said earlier, but how do we scale that, and just get a lot more indigenous conversations and what we can learn and listen to? What are your thoughts as a broad question?

[00:28:31] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I think I would want to begin for someone who is asking that question of what does this mean beyond repair of past injustice- Okay ... which must happen. Must happen. But it's so much more than that. You know, I remember as a young person being given the, the teachings that Let me back up and say, you know, given every th- the attempted genocide of Native peoples in this country, it is a miracle that our knowledge has persisted.

[00:29:06] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

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[00:29:07] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** It is a miracle. My grandfather was a victim of the boarding schools. You know, it's a miracle that our knowledge persists. But I remember being told that the reason that our people hid the knowledge away and kept practicing it underground, held so tightly to it, is that there would come a time in human history when the whole world needed to remember what we know, what we remember.

[00:29:35] So hold that tight. Hold that tight, because that's medicine that the world is going to need. As a young person, I d- didn't really know what that meant, but it was certainly deeply-- created deep obligation and reverence for that knowledge.

[00:29:50] **Nate Hagens:** Well, even there, it's not about the self and the tribe. You're holding the knowledge because the world will need it.

[00:29:57] Mm-hmm. Which is a selfless aspiration in itself.

[00:30:00] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** It is. Yeah. Yeah. It's our obligation. Yeah. Those are our... Yeah. That's what it means to be a human person. it's not this atomized individual, but, a participant in this whole web, this kinship worldview, as opposed to the human exceptionalism-

[00:30:16] -worldview. But, you know, one of the, I think, astounding facts that might help people to understand the pragmatic values here is, you know, the UN biodiversity report of what? Three years ago now. heartbreaking documents that describe the exponential loss in biodiversity all over the world, as we know.

[00:30:41] But in that r- UN report, there are bright spots, and one of those bright spots is that there are places on the planet where that rate of loss is far less. And what are those places? Places stewarded by Indigenous peoples. Biodiversity and

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linguistic cultural diversity map onto each other. And so wouldn't it be wise for us to say, "Why?"

[00:31:10] Why are there places where native peoples are stewarding those lands that have an absolutely opposite trajectory to the harm that we are inflicting?" W— don't we have something to learn here? The estimates vary, but it's been suggested that around 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity is in indigenous homelands.

[00:31:33] that's staggering. And then we say, "Why?" Because of a kinship worldview, because of the application of indigenous science, because of a worldview that says we are not just takers from the land, we are participants in the wellbeing. We are co-creators of biodiversity.

[00:31:54] **Nate Hagens:** I'm down with all that. I completely agree with you, but as a scientist, I oft— I, just wondered as you were explaining that Could it also be somewhat correlated with those lands having a lower population density than the rest of the world?

[00:32:11] Could that explain some of that?

[00:32:13] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah. Yeah. There are certainly many factors with any of these complex patterns that contribute to that, to, to isolation, nature of the inherent biodiversity of said places. Yeah, there are a lot of factors. But I think one of the things that we tend not to look at is to say, what are native peoples doing right?

[00:32:35] Because we assume that they are behaving in their landscapes just as we behave in ours. Right. And therefore, lower population density must be the explanation.

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[00:32:46] Or it could be that they are living and guided by this sense of expanded self, of the kinship worldview, and that manifests very differently on the land.

[00:32:59] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you for that clarification. What could we learn, and what are the barriers between us right now and, being open to that learning? I mean, to me, it seems like it's obvious that we are part of the web of life, and we are a young, part of the web of life, and that we used to be more sustainable, and we got hijacked by this economic superorganism extractive juggernaut, and that we have to have a wider porous boundary of self and a reconnection to the web of life and inter-being, as Thich Nhat Hanh would say.

[00:33:44] Obviously, we should be asking people that lived this way for a long time for advice and direction.

[00:33:51] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yes, absolutely. But I think it's also, not but, and, it's also useful to try to understand where those ethics come from. It would be easy for me to say, and sit here and say, "Well, there, there are these practical ethics of the honorable harvest that have enabled, native peoples to live well in their places since time immemorial.

[00:34:17] Let's analyze that. Let's adopt that." And I think we should. But if we take a step back from that and say, "Where did these ethics of honorable consumption come from?"

[00:34:29] **Nate Hagens:** I've never heard that term, honorable consumption. Is that a thing?

[00:34:33] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** The honorable harvest? Yeah.

[00:34:34] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Okay.

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[00:34:35] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah. The honorable harvest is a code of very practical ethics that is present in any indigenous society with which I am aware, which says, you know, which recognizes the biological fact that we humans cannot photosynthesize, unlike our revered plant relatives.

[00:34:59] We ha-- we're heterotrophs. We have to consume. And if you live, if you have a worldview of human exceptionalism that says, "Well, it's all stuff. It's just all natural resources--" Just go to the grocery store. "... it belongs to us. It's our stuff--" Yeah ... then you are not concerned with harness-- with honorably harvesting.

[00:35:17] It's just your stuff. You just take it. Yeah. And indeed, our economic system rewards just such behavior. But what if all of those plants and animals that enable your life are your relatives? What if they're your honored teachers, and yet you have to eat them? Oh, you have a very different proposition, don't you?

[00:35:42] Because you're talking about what are the guidelines under which I will eat my relatives. That's where the honorable harvest comes from. The honorable ha- harvest is this code of ethics that s- that insists on consent. You have to have consent from those organisms. You have to ask permission. You have to listen for the answer.

[00:36:03] And when that answer is given, you never take more than half. You share everything that you take, because that being shared its life and its offspring with you. You give gratitude. You never use tools that disrupt the way of being of those who are caring for you. You reciprocate the gift. If those beings have given their lives for you, you have to give something back to them, and it finishes with taking only that which has been given to you.

[00:36:41] It's this whole set of guidelines that have promoted sustainability and wellbeing.

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[00:36:48] **Nate Hagens:** I feel somewhat embarrassed that I didn't know that. That seems totally true and real, and you said that as far as you know, the indigenous tribes that you're aware of, they all have some version of that?

[00:37:02] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Mm-hmm. Yeah.

[00:37:03] **Nate Hagens:** And yet our economic system is effectively running a dishonorable harvest at full speed.

[00:37:10] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yes, exactly.

[00:37:12] **Nate Hagens:** I forgot who told me, but, Wisdom in many different Indigenous, cultures is correlated with restraint. There's a high correlation there. Does that rhyme with what you just said?

[00:37:27] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Absolutely. With restraint.

[00:37:30] that inherent restraint in-- There's so many formulations of the Honorable Harvest. One that you hear all the time is never take the first one. You never take the first one. It's disrespectful to that nation that as soon as you see them, you could take them. no, you pay them respect by waiting, and it's an inherent conservation ethic.

[00:37:51] If you never take the first one, you'll never take the last. Do we start to understand why 80% of the world's biodiversity is in Indigenous homelands--

[00:38:00] **Nate Hagens:** We

[00:38:00] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** do ... governed by such rules? Yeah. These are very concrete, actionable ethics. And we say then, "Well, where did they come from?" And oftentimes, people will say, "Oh, well, that's fine for Native people because you inherited those ways of being."

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[00:38:20] I'm sorry, but ethics don't come with a chromosome. They come with relationships, attention to your teacher, to the land. Where did the Honorable Harvest come from? Why is it almost universal? It comes from recognizing your mistakes. We're all human people. Haven't we all taken too much at some point? And then we pay attention to the consequences.

[00:38:49] **Nate Hagens:** And if we look at all the elders of your tribe and others, well, all tribes, we have a pattern recognition of all the historical mistakes, and that is knowledge that's passed down over time. Well, this segues with my work, which is that the entire illusion of progress isn't because of technology and money, or not alone.

[00:39:15] It's based on the extraction and drawing down of a fossil bank account that we're treating as interest, but it's really drawing down the principle of this incredibly powerful energy, and non-renewable materials. And since we had access to that, we didn't need any restraint. So these stories from older times just seem less and less believable and less plausible, but they're even more true than ever given w- the plateau that we're on right now.

[00:39:49] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Absolutely. Absolutely. And, you know, when that notion of learning from your mistakes, requires humility, it requires wisdom, right? It requires, or at least is embedded in this kin-centric worldview that says it's not all about me, it's about all my relatives as well. Those are sacred words. We say, "All my relations."

[00:40:17] You know, that- that's deeply meaningful 'cause you're always thinking about all your relationships. You're more than human as well. And it is those guidelines then that made us say, "Oh yeah, remember that time when we were not respectful of the rabbit population, and we took too much, and we didn't follow the honorable harvest?"

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[00:40:39] Oh, we were hungry that winter. There was a lot of mortality that winter. We're not going to do that again." So I think that y– it, this humility to recognize your mistakes and turn another way is the moment that we are in right now, to be able to say, "Oh, these 500 years have shown us this dishonorable harvest that threatens the wellbeing of life on our planet."

[00:41:08] Isn't that a big enough kick in the pants to say, "Oh, maybe we better change our ways. Maybe we should learn and move toward these ways that have sustained people for, again, since time immemorial."

[00:41:23] **Nate Hagens:** So before, we sat down, you told me, that your tribe, Potawatomi, had a prophecy or stories about, w– when there would be, I forgot the words you used, a great simplification, and the things that, that would need to be done, like s– some advice,

[00:41:45] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah.

[00:41:46] You know, I am guided in my own work and in just living by these teachings that in Potawatomi ways, are called the, the teachings of the seventh fire or the prophecies of the seven fires. And those seven fires refer to historical eras in our people's lives. And we don't need to go into all of them to say that in these prophecies, it's coupled to a migration story that says our people used to live with our Wabanaki relatives on the East Coast.

[00:42:23] And teachers came and said, "You know, big changes are coming here to Turtle Island. S– we need to send the sacred fire inward, inland to protect it." And so our people divided, and those people who left to go to the interior became the Nishnabe and the Potawatomi. And we were told that there would come a time when, you know, the black robes came among us to disrupt our spirituality.

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[00:42:51] Keep going.

[00:42:52] **Nate Hagens:** What's the black robes?

[00:42:55] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Christian missionaries.

[00:42:56] **Nate Hagens:** Oh, okay.

[00:42:57] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yep. The colon-- the church as colonizers.

There would come a time when we're kicked off from our homelands, as we know happened, right? There would come a time when we no longer could speak our own languages. Yep, that happened. There will come a time when they take our children from us, and this happened.

[00:43:15] All of these things happened. You know, in Potawatomi ways of thinking, time runs in a circle, so it's no coincidence that history and prophecy converge because that's the way time flows. But it's said that there will come a time when you can no longer dip your cup into the river and drink.

[00:43:40] That was unthinkable. Like, what? That's what rivers are for, you know? But they said that's gonna happen. There's gonna come a time when the air is too thick to breathe, and there will be even a time when our plant and animal relatives turn their faces away from us. That time we will know as the time of the seventh fire Sounds pretty familiar, doesn't it?

[00:44:07] **Nate Hagens:** Is there a happy ending to the story?

[00:44:09] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** There's not an ending to the story. What it said is that in that time when life is in peril, all of the people in the world, the newcomers as well as the original peoples, are gonna stand at a fork in the road, and we have to decide. There are two paths. One of them is burnt and black, and it's a dead end, and the other one is soft and green and goes on.

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[00:44:34] And so the story may-- the, the prophecy may seem very simple, like, well, duh, we know which one--

[00:44:40] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah ...

[00:44:40] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** we want to go down. But the brilliance of these teachings is that you can't. You can't just go down that green path. You have to walk back along the ancestor path and pick up those things that were dropped along the way.

[00:44:57] You have to pick up the language. You have to pick up the stories. You have to pick up the land. You have to pick up more than human relatives, and that every single person needs to walk back that path and pick up what was left for them to carry. And then we're gonna meet again at that road, and whatever we have picked up and tenderly wrapped up and put in our bundles, we will carry to the other side through the bottleneck of this time.

[00:45:28] It speaks of the bottleneck, of the great narrowing. Only that which we have picked up along the ancestor path that we carry will make it to the other side. And when we do, is there a happy ending, you say? What if the people make that-- If the people pick up those things, then they light the eighth fire, which will burn forever.

[00:45:52] It's a powerful teaching that tells us about what are the characteristics that people of the seventh fire are going to need, because this will be a time of great suffering for human people and more than human people. We need each other. We need courage. We need the presence of our ancestors and their knowledge walking beside us.

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[00:46:14] We need imagination for the future. All of those are the things that we will need. And so there are these profound teachings about this moment and who we are called to be in this extraordinary time.

[00:46:30] **Nate Hagens:** So I have two, two immediate reactions to that, Robin. The first is that you're talking about how the Potawatomi tribe was telling these stories.

[00:46:44] But what you just described is a microcosm for our entire species—reaching a rite of passage moment with those two paths. And the Seven Fires and the things we have to pick up, that's, to use Bill Plotkin's terms, s— striving towards ecological adulthood, along with the grief and the responsibility and the restraint and the wisdom and, the sacrifice and the courage and all the things.

[00:47:12] The second reaction I had, if, I'm honest, is I feel a little bit of shame, because four years ago when I started this podcast, I was dead set on describing the energetic benefits that we're getting from the carbon pulse, and those are going away, and climate change, can't you see? And the geopolitical arrangements and debt is fake claims that we're gonna ha— And indigenous wisdom seemed like a just n— irrelevant distraction to me

[00:47:54] I, I now get it. So I feel like I had to go full circle to, like, feel the weight of what you just shared. So thank you for that. But it's just like Yeah, y— so Indigenous people don't necessarily know all the facts I know about energy depletion and debt and whatever, but your ancestors f— foresaw the trends of what was going wrong and extrapolated that forward into some of these predictions.

[00:48:29] And you're right, all those things are coming to pass.

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[00:48:33] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** And for me, there is some powerful energy there because, you know, there are so many different terminologies for this moment of crisis we're in. We're in the Anthropocene, right? We are in the age of the sixth extinction. What helps me move through this and helps sort of navigate for me is the naming of this time when we are standing at that fork in the road as the age of remembering. It is, as we said, just an eye blink of time, 500 years.

[00:49:15] If we remember the ethics of living in the right relationship with the land, and this age of remembering feels very poignant because we have lived through 500 years of dismembering, the community of life, dismembering indigenous communities, so much dismembering. And so remembering is not only casting your mind back to what we used to know, it's a lot more than that because we are asked to be a member again.

[00:49:50] We are asked to be a member of this family of life. We are once again back to that pyramid of human exceptionalism. To remember, we have to flick the human person off from the top of that pyramid, it's lonely at the top, and back into the arms of our relatives, of our kinfolk. And so that can be this joyous sort of reunion of re-membering.

[00:50:21] So in this time of great suffering, which is undeniable, we also have to understand the work and the reunion that can come from that.

[00:50:32] **Nate Hagens:** Okay, another difficult question. I fully agree with what you just said. Can this remembering, and re-embedding within the web of life and our kin, our nieces, nephews, cousins, aunts and uncles in nature, can that happen at scale before a disruption?

[00:50:54] Or is that going to be the aspirational path after a disruption that will s- hopefully a lot of humans will self-organize and walk that path?

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[00:51:05] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Nate, I don't know.

[00:51:06] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:51:09] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** It is my fervent desire, of course, that we remember in time I don't know that we will

[00:51:20] **Nate Hagens:** In your years, decades, but especially recently since you've become well-known with your book, have you seen a lot more people waking up and remembering?

[00:51:31] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I sure have. I sure have. It's not the leaders.

[00:51:37] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:51:38] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Right? They are still sound asleep and hitting the snooze on the alarms, right? They don't wanna be woken up. but at the grassroots level and in indigenous communities, and grassroots people all around are saying, "No, I, I, will not accept this future that is being offered to me.

[00:51:58] I'm going to create my future right here in my community. I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna take this action." And, it is, small actions in the face of destructive forces that take a lot of courage and a lot of vision to say what it is that is how you want to live. But yeah, I see this, you know, spontaneous co-arising, as they say, all over the place.

[00:52:26] **Nate Hagens:** Can you talk to me a bit about governance and leadership in indigenous communities and how that differs from our modern culture and what we might be able to learn?

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[00:52:36] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Well, you know, I'm hesitant to do that simply because, you know, just within the boundaries of what is today called the United States, there are 574 different Indigenous nations.

[00:52:47] **Nate Hagens:** Okay.

[00:52:47] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** All with their own different governance, et-

[00:52:50] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, okay ...

[00:52:50] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** et cetera. So, that's hard to say.

[00:52:54] **Nate Hagens:** would it be correct to say that women generally have a larger role?

[00:52:59] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** That's right where I was going. Yes. Yeah. Oftentimes, yeah, most times. women's knowledge, women's leadership is at the forefront in lots of different forms of governance and matrilineality, and matriarchy in all its different forms.

[00:53:19] But yes, absolutely, women's leadership, where women are-- women as the life givers are the ones who are supposed to be making the decisions about life. When we think about seven generations thinking, can you imagine seven generations thinking as opposed to the quarterly profits report? you know, that's a hallmark of Indigenous governance and, wellbeing is to always be thinking into the future.

[00:53:48] And one of the formulations that is oftentimes tied to that seven generations thinking is this notion that mystically you could think seven generations in the future. Ooh, that's a long time. The world changes. You know, that's pretty hard to do. The formulation of seven generations thinking is, really the seven generations that you're connected to.

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[00:54:11] You know, think about your ch– the wellbeing of your children, your grandchildren, and if you're very lucky– Great-grandchildren ... your great-great-grand, your great-ch-grandchildren, and the ones, as they say, whose faces are still coming toward us. And we think about the wellbeing of our parents, our grandparents, and if we're very lucky, our great-grandparents.

[00:54:34] **Nate Hagens:** So as a scientist and as someone who grew up in a thinking seven generations, culture, I have another difficult question for you . Because if you understand the climate models, for our world, seven generations from now, gives a pretty ominous view. S– how do, how are those paired, if, at all?

[00:54:57] Like, do you talk to indigenous people about climate change and w– what the next century will bring? Or is that not a typical conversation?

[00:55:08] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Oh, there's all kinds of, really innovative work being done in indigenous communities around climate resilience. and how do we prepare ourselves for the changes that are coming?

[00:55:21] There's no head in the sand about this, you know? over–

[00:55:26] **Nate Hagens:** I just asked– Yeah ... because I was just in India, and, like, India's gonna take it on the brunt, the Indian South c– subcontinent. Very few people there are aware of climate change or talking about it, like the common people that I met.

[00:55:40] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Oh, interesting.

[00:55:41] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, I– half our country or more– Yeah ... doesn't really–

[00:55:46] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah ...

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[00:55:46] **Nate Hagens:** talk about it or... But I think in the next six months, it's gonna become another hot topic, no pun intended, because of the El Niño. El Niño,

[00:55:55] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** yep.

[00:55:55] **Nate Hagens:** So, tell me a little bit about your new book, Service Berry, and what was the genesis of that, and why do you think, reciprocity and service is something important and overlooked?

[00:56:07] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah. You know, writing the, The Service Berry really has kind of an interesting origin story. I was asked to write about economics, and I said, "Well, I can't possibly do that. I'm a botanist." like, why are you asking me? they should be asking you." and the answer from, Emergence Magazine came back, "Well, that's exactly why we asked you.

[00:56:29] you are somebody deeply familiar with the economy of nature, so reflect on the human economy. and so I chose to write about serviceberries, both because they're a wonderful relative, who exemplify reciprocity, but just in the name, the serviceberry. I mean, what is an economy? The way that we deliver goods and services for the wellbeing of our community.

[00:56:56] Well, how do serviceberries and all their plant relatives do that? They do that, but with this flow from the commons, the free energy, if you will, of the sun. Plants have already converted to a 100% solar economy, right? And then what those plants make in berries, in leaves, in blossoms, in roots, they don't hoard as private property.

[00:57:22] They pass it on. They pass it on to pollinators. They pass it on to birds. They pass it on to foxes. They pass it on to the soil. So the abundance of nature is because of the flow of materials. It's not blocked. And this is sort of the essence

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of the gift economy, of whatever you have in abundance, give it away, and then the whole web will flourish, which is such a contrast to the notion of exploiting the commons in a market economy to privatize it, hoard that, make it scarce, and, degrade community.

[00:58:04] **Nate Hagens:** I think there's an interesting clarification here. We hear a lot of criticism of the extractive economy, but nature is also extractive in some of the examples you just said, but then we give back.

[00:58:18] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Right.

[00:58:19] **Nate Hagens:** And humans extract, but we don't give back– Mm–hmm ... except for the pollution.

[00:58:22] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Mm–hmm.

[00:58:23] **Nate Hagens:** And that's where the break is– Mm–hmm

[00:58:24] I think.

[00:58:25] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah. Oh, absolutely. There's, there, there isn't this notion that we don't have to take.

[00:58:30] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[00:58:31] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Of course we do, because we're heterotrophs. Yeah ... we have to take it. And that's why the honorable harvest matters, because we say it matters how you take it. If you want the gifts to keep flowing, you better give your gifts back.

[00:58:44] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

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[00:58:45] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah.

[00:58:46] **Nate Hagens:** So keep going with the concept in the book and the importance of service.

[00:58:51] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah. And, so the call is really to take a biomimicry approach, look at our own economy, which for me, I just sort of accepted as the unfortunate default. Like, yeah, this is the economy I'm living in. I don't like it, but there it is.

[00:59:06] But this really made me sort of align what I revere about the economy of nature with dismay at the human economy. And then to say, in what ways could we behave in a way that, pokes at the market economy and begins to build a gift economy where reciprocity does prevail, where we do give back, where we see our role as humans is not only takers, necessarily takers, but also givers.

[00:59:43] And mostly I think today people have lost that knowledge that people can be medicine for the land. We just have this notion that humans are bad. We're always going to destroy nature, that is our nature. And, indigenous worldview would say, "No, that is not our nature." we have to give back. In fact, it's what we do.

[01:00:07] That's why we're here.

[01:00:08] **Nate Hagens:** I forgot who it was in the last few days that pointed this out, that humans are keystone species actually, and that we have a huge potential. Like, what other species could heal and regenerate the Earth in the places it needs to be—

[01:00:24] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Mm-hmm ...

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[01:00:25] **Nate Hagens:** given the technology and the will and the organizational capacity?

[01:00:28] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Absolutely. Yeah. That's why I'm a restoration ecologist. To me, it is exactly the-- It's what is called for spiritually as well as ecologically. This is our work as humans. Who else is gonna do it? Well, the beaver. The beaver will do it. The aspen will do it. Actually, there's a lot of them who will, but so should we.

[01:00:47] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:00:47] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** So should we.

[01:00:48] **Nate Hagens:** Give me a couple of, hopeful stories on, in the land of restoration ecology that you've been involved in or experienced.

[01:00:55] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Oh, too many to mention, Nate, of, I think about one of the sort of the landmark cases is things like restoration of tallgrass prairie that, you know, less than 1% of the original tallgrass prairie that covered so much of this country is left.

[01:01:15] It's all corn and soybeans, right? Here, this amazing engine of soil building, of that we have mined all that prairie soil, right, for monocrop ag-agriculture for 100 years. So tallgrass prairie restoration is one of the brilliant, and successful examples, and it's being done at scale. Sometimes it's being done in schoolyards, but it's also being done on old army munitions dumps and abandoned airports.

[01:01:47] People are using the tools of restoration ecology to bring tallgrass prairie back from the brink. There are lots of examples.

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[01:01:58] **Nate Hagens:** Not to put you on the spot, and I'm gonna put you on the spot at least two more times in the next 15 minutes, but, If people really understood what we face and there was an ethos and resources and leadership and infrastructure to move our country and maybe other countries in the direction of living systems, regenerative agriculture, how would you envision and give advice as a restoration ecologist on how to think about that project?

[01:02:33] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** One of the things that you learn right away in doing restoration ecology is, that with engineering and, with our scientific tools, fixing ecosystem structure and function is no easy task, but it's doable. We know enough to be able to help put those things back. But at root, the repair that has to happen is because it's not just the land that's broken, it's our relationship to land that has been broken.

[01:03:05] And so healing one without healing the other is an exercise in, It's Sisyphean. We'll simply have to keep restoring land because we haven't fixed who we are.

[01:03:16] **Nate Hagens:** So if we just do the land itself, it's just kind of like a Band-Aid. Yes. So we need to heal the relationship first or, simultaneously.

[01:03:24] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yes. And this is what I and others have called the pairing of restoration and re-story-ation. That one of the bottlenecks, if you will, to move toward this way of being is that we don't have a compelling story that helps us move in this direction. We are still stuck with the story of human exceptionalism.

[01:03:52] We're still stuck with the story of extractive capitalism. We don't know any other stories. Indigenous stories, ways of being like the Honorable Harvest have been deliberately hidden from us. Did you learn about those in school? Of

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course you didn't. Of course you didn't. In sustainability sciences today– Do we learn about indigenous ethics and ways of being?

[01:04:20] We do not, except for in very rare places like our program at ESF. So no, those, those things, we have to unlearn and then learn again. We need a different story. At root, I think that is our-- the call, is both to restore and to restory. And the new nonprofit that, I and co-conspirators have been putting together, Plant Baby Plants.

[01:04:52] Thank you for laughing. You know? Drill baby drill, no thank you. Yeah. It's a restoration, isn't it? Yeah, it– Not drill baby drill, plant baby plant. And so, the goal of Plant Baby Plant is to encourage people to use the tools of science, engineering, and ecology to restore the land, and to use the tools of arts to restore our relationship with land, and that we need both of those things.

[01:05:27] **Nate Hagens:** Just kind of a random question, Robin, but what would an Indigenous, perspective say about artificial intelligence or colonizing Mars, and some of the themes in the news these days?

[01:05:40] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Well, again, I can't speak for Indigenous perspectives writ large. I c– large, I can tell you what I think, but–

[01:05:46] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Okay, please

[01:05:48] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** You know, as an ecologist, I know that we have only scratched the surface of what I would call natural intelligence.

[01:05:55] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. On our own home planet.

[01:05:57] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** On our own home planet. And so to me, the investments that we need are there in our beloved home. I don't want to fall into the trap of being, you know, completely black and white about this. There are

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elements of the, use of the tools of, AI that might help us solve some of these incredibly complex problems, but not without ethical guidelines in place.

[01:06:30] We have made this mistake, if we go back to mistakes, huh? If we-- Do we have the humility to use this, this powerful tool of artificial intelligence? We do not. and the precautionary principle to me would say don't. As far as colonizing Mars, to those folks who want to get in a rocket and go to Mars, I say, "Please do."

[01:06:59] **Nate Hagens:** we just met today. you probably don't know much about my podcast. We've had many people talk about English as a noun-based language, including Victoria Sweet yesterday, and how that changes one's experience of reality, and I didn't until recently realize that came from your book, Braiding Sweetgrass.

[01:07:23] All of my guests probably read that and have been-- ... telling me that story. So please tell me what-- why is that important? I think you call it the grammar of animacy, and why is using English to describe all these things part of why it's difficult to maybe re-story some of these themes?

[01:07:43] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** absolutely.

[01:07:44] Those things are deeply connected. And my understanding of this came when I began learning my own Potawatomi language, and it is a very difficult language to learn.

[01:07:56] **Nate Hagens:** Could you speak a few sentences about it?

[01:08:06] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** It's

[01:08:09] **Nate Hagens:** beautiful and difficult and almost sounds Russian, but holy cow, that does sound hard.

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[01:08:17] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** and one of the things that's so hard about it is that it's a verb-based language. And any of us who have studied languages know that, oh, verbs, you gotta conjugate all those, right? Yeah. So it makes that very, very difficult because unlike, say, romance languages where we might have gendered nouns, we don't have that in Potawatomi.

[01:08:39] But what we-- the cases that we have for the verbs, two of the cases that we have for the verbs are animate and inanimate. If we hear... The example I love to use is if you hear a truck going by, you hear that with a dif- with an inanimate verb because it's an inanimate thing.

[01:09:02] **Nate Hagens:** If- So something just passed it, passed us that was not alive.

[01:09:05] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Right. And I would have to use an inanimate verb for that. But if I heard a bird singing, I would have to say I hear it with an animate verb.

[01:09:15] **Nate Hagens:** That's cool.

[01:09:16] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** It's very cool. So we are showing respect for our kinfolk because, Nate, would I ever say about you, it's asking good questions? No, I would never call you an it, right?

[01:09:31] I always use grammar for human people, which is respectful. It's a special case And, but in English, if for that bird, we're just gonna say, "It is singing." I would never say, "It is asking questions," but it's okay if I say, "It is singing." So in English, we have special grammar for members of our own species.

[01:09:56] At the top of that pyramid of human exceptionalism, everything else is an it. That is impossible in Potawatomi. I cannot speak of living things with

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anything but respectful grammar. We use the same grammar for plants and squirrels as we do for members of our family, because they're our family.

[01:10:20] **Nate Hagens:** So just there, and I'm sure you have much more to say on that, but just that, imagine how that changes our life experience and the stories that we tell.

[01:10:30] If we have a language that is everything other than he, she, or mister, missus, he, his, is it. Like w- like where is the life and vibrancy and respect and kinship? Like, it makes it difficult to tell a story. The story that we're talking about today.

[01:10:50] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** And it's so tied up with everything we've been talking about.

[01:10:53] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:10:53] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** You know, the notion of plants as teachers. Well, if you grow up in a language that just calls them, like they're just things, it's hard to think of them as teachers. But if you speak a language that speaks of those plants as your elders, your respected elders, w- well, they are.

[01:11:13] **Nate Hagens:** and that-

[01:11:13] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah ...

[01:11:13] **Nate Hagens:** Is what Potomont- Potawatomi does?

[01:11:15] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yes.

[01:11:16] **Nate Hagens:** The names for plants are associated with elders?

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[01:11:20] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Well, the, the general concept of plants– Okay ... as our elders, but all of their names are animate. W– they, they are familial names. We did talk about, after all, the three sisters.

[01:11:32] **Nate Hagens:** Sisters. Oh, so even when you told me that story– I assumed it was some white farmer that made that name.

[01:11:40] I wasn't even thinking that it is obviously a Native translation.

[01:11:45] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah. Yeah. That concept of relationship. And see, see, it all goes back to that kinship worldview, where you speak respectfully of all the beings who are in that network, as opposed to the pyramid of human exceptionalism, where we speak respectfully of each other, but not of anyone else.

[01:12:05] **Nate Hagens:** Let, let me ask you this. So yesterday I did a podcast with Indy Johar, originally from India. He's in-- He's British. Huge heart, huge mind. And he made me pause and think that, he said in 1968, the astronauts taking the picture from the Moon of the Earth, called Earthrise, that was the beginning of the Earth becoming self-aware via a species on Earth noticing and building on this.

[01:12:41] And I think some of this conversation is a species, yes, and an anthropocentric species growing up and learning and becoming self-aware of our-- the, the two paths you mentioned, earlier. And it just feels almost serendipitous and paradoxical that at this 11th hour before major crises on our planet, in our culture, we are having these conversations very quickly, but perhaps too late, learning about what's at stake and what we might lose and all the things.

[01:13:22] Now I know many people have already gone through what I call a great simplification. I-- and I don't mean to diminish that at all, but we are at a total

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species-wide transition moment right now. I don't know if there's a question in there, but it's just a thought I had. Do you have any thoughts on that?

[01:13:42] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Listening to your reflection on that, Nate, makes me think about that moment of realization about this beautiful home that we have, will we finally understand why our people always call her Mother Earth?

[01:14:05] **Nate Hagens:** Excellent. One more question if you have time before I get to the closing questions. In both of your books, you talk a lot about abundance. I kind of have an aversion to that word just because I'm a biophysical economist, and I I- I'm-- I think we're headed for a world of less material abundance on average But I think you come at it from a different perspective of an attitude and, well, please, what, do you think about abundance, and why is that perspec- perceptive, perspective important?

[01:14:43] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I absolutely agree with you that we are-- the pathways of taking too much that we have indulged in for the last 500 years will lead us to true scarcity because of resource depletion- Yeah ... because of taking too much. The kind of abundance that I mean is enough.

[01:15:07] I think that we have to, again, redefine what it means to be successful, to have enough, and that if you have enough, and your relatives, human and more, also have enough, then that is-- that's sufficiency.

[01:15:26] That's, that, that's harmony. That abundance is enough. And in many indigenous societies, abundance and wealth are understood as, how much do you have to give away? How much do you have to share with your kinfolk because of this deeply held belief that all flourishing is mutual? So abundance comes by sharing.

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[01:15:51] That doesn't mean that there isn't going to be real physical scarcity. And so what that also calls upon us to do is to say, "Yes, we have depleted the abundance of the planet," and so that means that we can ask less of her now. We can't have everything we want. We might be able to have everything that we need, and we need to take a lesson from the mosses and be small, cooperative, and in that way, we have enduring success, not flash-in-the-pan success.

[01:16:29] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you, for everything you've shared. If you have a few more minutes in your schedule, I have some questions I ask all of our guests at the closing. What advice do you have for people watching this episode who are aware of the pathways ahead of us and of all the constraints that we've discussed and others that we didn't?

[01:16:50] Do you have personal advice for the viewers of the program?

[01:16:54] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** The personal advice that I have is that given the weight of the challenges of this time, it's perhaps a very natural response to sink into despair but that doesn't get us anywhere. That is paralysis, right? And so to me, the invitation to everyone is to recognize the grief that we bear for our planet, for each other, for our ideals, for our values, which are under threat, is to stand up and fight for them.

[01:17:32] The antidote to despair, to me, is to roll up your sleeves and get to work, and get to work in solidarity with your community and reclaim our agency. That's what I would invite people to do.

[01:17:47] **Nate Hagens:** I agree with that. Are you teaching now? Do you teach classes in the fall?

[01:17:53] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** No, I am not.

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[01:17:55] **Nate Hagens:** Okay. But you've taught for a long time.

[01:17:57] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yes.

[01:17:58] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:17:58] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah. And I–

[01:17:59] **Nate Hagens:** And, so how would you change what you just said to a young human just becoming aware of all the ecological, economic, social constraints? What advice do you have for someone in their teens or early 20s?

[01:18:12] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Can I tell you a story–

[01:18:13] **Nate Hagens:** Please ...

[01:18:14] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** That, to me, answers that, best of all, because it is with-- It's a story of a young person and I having exactly that conversation.

[01:18:22] One of my beloved students when... It was on commencement day. You know, she was graduating and going off to answer that question, "What shall I be doing in, in, in the world?" And I remember saying to her, "I am so sorry that you still have to carry this burden." I was part of the first Earth Day, you know, many, many–

[01:18:42] **Nate Hagens:** 1970.

[01:18:44] What?

[01:18:45] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I was in high school.

[01:18:46] **Nate Hagens:** Wow.

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[01:18:47] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Yeah. And I thought back to that time and realized that I'm sorry, you know, when I thought that by now, 50-plus years later, we would have had this figured out. And I'm sorry. I am sorry, my beloved student, that you still have to fight for this. and she said to me, as I would say to young people today, she said, "Robin, don't you realize that this is the best possible time to be alive?"

[01:19:17] And I thought, "Tell me about that." Climate change, just, you know, extinction, take your choice of, crisis. And she said, "Yeah, it's the best possible time to be alive." And she began invoking Wile E. Coyote ca-cartoons, and she said, "You know, when they're-- when it's all chaos, and everyone's chasing each other, the world's about to end, and it always ends on a precipice, right?"

[01:19:43] And there's that board teetering on the edge of the precipice, and whoever it is on the board backpedaling. They're about to go over." She said, "That's where we are right now in human history." And I said, "I know." Yes. "Why is this the best possible time?" And she said, "Because it matters where I stand."

[01:20:04] When everything is on the precipice, it means that I can change the future by the choices that I make of where I stand. And she said, it's-- this is the best possible time to be alive because I can live a purpose-driven life and choose that every decision I make helps us in that teetering moment.

[01:20:30] And I just cried. I-- oh, thank you. Thank you for the wisdom of this young person in understanding her role, understanding all of our roles. It matters where we stand.

[01:20:44] **Nate Hagens:** I hope she turns into-- grows up to be a teacher, maybe.

[01:20:48] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** She is.

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[01:20:48] **Nate Hagens:** She is? She

[01:20:49] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** is.

[01:20:50] **Nate Hagens:** Excellent. Thank you for that. What do you care most about in the world, Robin?

[01:20:57] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** That's a really hard question to answer. I would, of course, put my family first, as I think everyone would.

[01:21:08] **Nate Hagens:** Mm-hmm.

[01:21:09] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** And so really the question for me is what is second on that list? And to me, it is the community of life.

[01:21:20] **Nate Hagens:** Which is also your family.

[01:21:22] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Indeed.

[01:21:23] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. This is kind of an odd question, but if you had a magic wand, and there was one thing you could do to change human and plans more than human futures, there was no risk to yourself personally, what would you do?

[01:21:38] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I would plant forests. Easy.

[01:21:42] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:21:42] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Easy answer.

[01:21:44] **Nate Hagens:** I mean, you're not the first to say that. Personally, I think the things we really need to prioritize is protecting and maintaining the existing

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forests and planting more. But that's gonna be a lifeline for us on weather systems and rain and sequestration and carbon and all kinds of things, and it's one of those things we just take for granted.

[01:22:09] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Mm-hmm. Plants know what to do about climate change.

[01:22:13] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:22:13] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Right? You know, sequester carbon, build soil, build biodiversity, cool the air. They know what to do. Plants are our oldest teachers. We could follow them.

[01:22:24] **Nate Hagens:** What are you most worried about, and what are you most hopeful about in the coming ten years or so?

[01:22:31] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** I'm worried about defeatism. I'm worried that the problems that we have created for ourselves are so huge that people throw up their hands and say that there's nothing I c- I can do, that they give up. The problem of a carbon-enriched atmosphere is something that we created molecule by molecule, choice by choice.

[01:22:59] And that's gonna also be the way we get out of it, right? So everybody has a role to play. But I worry about people giving up, and, I suppose not surprisingly, the opposite of that is, my firmly held belief. I don't know that I'd call it hope, but, you know, what propels me is not so much hope.

[01:23:25] Hope seems sort of passive. Like, I don't even know what I'm hoping for. Like, a less bad outcome? I don't know what that means. But so the way I like to think about it is, how do you harness love? That powerful love, for the world, for other beings. And when that is engaged, I think we can do anything.

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[01:23:53] **Nate Hagens:** Robin Wall Kimmerer, thank you so much for your continued work and eloquence on these issues. Thanks for your time today, and I hope we can talk again in the future.

[01:24:03] **Robin Wall Kimmerer:** Thank you, Nate.

[01:24:04] **Nate Hagens:** If you'd like to learn more about this episode, please visit thegreatsimplification.com for references and show notes.

[01:24:12] From there, you can also join our Hylo community and subscribe to our Substack newsletter. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett and Lizzy Sirianni. Our production team also includes Leslie Batt-Lutz, Brady Heyen, Julia Maxwell, Gabriella Sleiman, and Grace Brunfelt.

[01:24:36] Thank you for listening, and we'll see you on the next episode