LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES, PLANT BY PLANT WITH BRAIDING SWEETGRASS' ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

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LAURA FLANDERS: Human beings. We all know by now that we can be a menace to the natural world, but can we also be medicine? With her latest project, bestselling author Robin Wall Kimmerer not only answers in the affirmative, but describes how restoring plants can restore our sense of reciprocity with the land, each other, and the earth. Kimmerer is the author of the runaway bestseller, "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants," as well as "Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses," and "The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World." She doesn't just study plants, she says she listens to them. And with her brand new initiative, Plant Baby Plant, she is heeding a call to mobilize communities, to restore plants in a way that, as she puts it, transforms love of land into social change through acts of creative resistance. "Regeneration starts with seeds, stories, and remembering what it means to be a good relative," she writes. So, let's get to it. It is my great pleasure and honor to have you with me here on "Laura Flanders & Friends." Thanks for taking the time. I'm going to begin by asking you to introduce yourself. How would you describe who you are?

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: I would begin in my language and say, Hello my relatives. I've told you that my name and my language is Light Shining Through Sky Woman and I'm a member of the Potawatomi Nation. I'm also a student of the plants, a mother, a grandmother, a professor of environmental biology at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and the founding director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, we often begin, I know that I've come from somewhere, going somewhere, and so have you. So just to kind of settle ourselves, place ourselves in this conversation, who is uppermost on your mind or on your heart as we begin?

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: Hmm, I am really deeply enmeshed in this moment at getting Plant Baby Plant off the ground and trying to consider what does it mean to create community when we have only virtual tools? My favorite way of creating community is working with people in person, outdoors. But this is a whole new skillset for me, a whole new approach to creating community. So I'm thinking a lot about, how can we act big in a microcosm?

LAURA FLANDERS: One of the things that I've learned from your work is that I think, if you'll forgive me, that if plants and animals had a preferred pronoun, it wouldn't be it. And that in your language, the Potawatomi language, it's not it. The grammar is different and that changes us. Can you talk about that?

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: Here I am, spending my life literally on my knees before plants, learning from them. And then, when it comes time to write about them, the English language not only gives me permission, but indeed a sort of a mandate that I have to refer to them as it, as if they were objects, these wise, brilliant teachers of mine. And I found the solution to that problematic objectification of other living beings as I was beginning to learn my own Indigenous language, Anishinaabemowin or the Potawatomi language. And what you're referring to is that in our language, we speak a grammar of animacy. And so it's impossible to say "it", about plants or animals, or indeed any other living, animate being. So there was a powerful moment and understanding the lens shift, the whole frame shift that happens with a different language, with a different worldview, to view the plants, the animals, the waters, as our relatives, not as our possessions, as our objects. And so I've been writing and working quite a bit in this field of thinking to reflect a worldview of relatedness rather than a worldview of human superiority, and therefore, extraction from the earth.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do you also grapple with the grief that comes from that kind of heartfelt connecting to the world?

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: I think it is so important that we embrace ecological grief rather than look away. We have to embrace it. And the reason I say that is not only to ground us in the reality of what we are doing, but when we recognize that that pain that we feel for the natural world, for our relationships with the natural world is also the measure of our love for the living world. And it is that love which is mirrored in the grief that makes you get back up and say, "Not on my watch. I love this land. I love these beings, my relatives too much to stand idly by." And Laura, that's where Plant Baby Plant came from. I give more than a hundred talks every year. And at the end of those hours, people are weeping because they love the world so much. There is this longing to say, "Well, what can I do? What can I do with this love?" And it is out of carrying that away from every audience that I thought we have to push back against a worldview of "Drill, Baby, Drill" that will continue to lead us down that path and replace it with the notion of regeneration of "No, I am going to resist. I am going to ally myself with the plants who build biodiversity, who take carbon out of the atmosphere, who help us bring and build community." That Plant Baby Plant grows directly from that grief, from that love and from that longing, and offers an invitation to be in a more just and reciprocal relationship with land.

LAURA FLANDERS: That relatedness comes up a lot in "The Serviceberry" too. And I have to say that many of the sources that you cite in that book, which is a lot about economics, really, the

economics of nature are economists we've had on this program. People like Kate Raworth and Elinor Ostrom and others. You bring, or maybe the berries bring another sort of perspective. Do you call it a kind of economy of nature? What do you call it? And how does it add to our picture of our relationship to the world?

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: My project in "The Serviceberry" was as an ecologist to ask the question of why is it that we have created this human market capitalism, extractive capitalism, economic system, which is so at odds with the way that nature works? Nature doesn't promote scarcity and hoarding of capital or resources or private property. Nature is much more around circular economy since there's no such thing as waste, is that the resource, if you will, it's constantly in motion being shared among all sectors of the natural economy, i.e. different species. And so "Serviceberry" is really an inquiry into a kind of biomimicry. Could we engage the principles of biomimicry to think about a different kind of economy, which doesn't destroy nature and human community, but in fact, enhances it?

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, this is exactly where you're going with Plant Baby Plant and we're going to get right there next. But before we do, I just want to share with our audience. A few years ago, the good people at The Commons at the University of Kansas made this video of you taking us on a guided nature tour of the Clark Reservation State Park there in Jamesville, New York. Check this out.

> ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: Just standing in this place, I see the food of the hickory, the food of the maples, the string of the basswood. And I see medicine right here in front of us, that black flaky bark is a black cherry. And did you ever wonder why cough drops almost always come in black cherry flavor? It's because black cherry is a cough medicine. And the bark of the twigs of that tree boiled down make a really good, soothing cough medicine. And so yes, you look at the world as full of biodiversity in these amazing beings living their lives, but they also are in relationship with us. And you see the cedars, really good respiratory medicine. We'll get close to one later. We came by a hemlock, which is super good for colds. It has tons of vitamin C in it. So they're medicines, they're medicines all around us to be honored, to be respected. In fact, in our Potawatomi language, the word for plants is Mshkeke. which means the medicines. But it also means, if you take that word Mshkeke apart, it means the strength of the earth.

LAURA FLANDERS: I do have to ask you about some of the other people who draw on laws of nature, or rules of nature as they call them. Because it's not just you, I wish it was. But we also have Eugenicists and white supremacists and Malthusians, and people who preach a doctrine that they say is a natural doctrine of survival of the fittest and culling the herd. You've got Broligarchs out there now saying that they're going to create a new planet and that's what a new

future species or, you know, cultivate a new planet with enough science. Did they just get wrong? Or are we in a contentious dispute here over the laws of nature?

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: The politic thing to say would be that we are in a contentious dispute. I think they plain old got it wrong, as has happened so many times when people hijack science in order to support a political agenda. And over the last several decades, the research into cooperation, into mutualism has repeatedly shown that mutual benefit, that cooperation can be selected for by evolution, by natural selection, as well and often is. And so this notion of nature, red in tooth and claw, is very much being replaced by this much more balanced framework to understand that all flourishing is mutual. An individual cannot thrive unless their neighbors thrive because we're all dependent on each other.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm not Indigenous, probably Celtic of some kind, who the heck knows, from Europe. I was trained in the kind of Marxist tradition and Marx should be said, was very adamant that natural words like growth should not be applied to the manmade capitalist economy. He was very clear that there was a conflict there and that the language of nature shouldn't be applied to these manmade systems. And as I thought of your work, I thought how all of us in fact have been, Marx would use the word alienated from that natural world, from our relationship to it. And for a lot of us, we've felt like, well, the best thing we can do is just leave it alone. Not go there, not touch, not pick, not dig. But you are offering us another way to return to a reciprocal relationship. And that's a good long way of asking you a question about Plant Baby Plant, I guess.

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: I love how you framed that, Laura, because it's really a very active choice and decision that we have to kind of decolonize our minds from this industrial revolution concept that the earth belongs to us, is a source of nothing more than belongings, natural resources that are our property that were there to take. There is this notion in many Indigenous worldviews that human beings play a critical role in maintaining balance. That the way that we take from the living world can actually be regenerative. Some of my own research with sweetgrass has shown that sweetgrass, left alone, declines. Sweetgrass, harvested in a respectful, sustainable way, doubles its population.

LAURA FLANDERS: Give us some examples of this sort of creative resistance.

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: We know that forest health in this country declined when colonists came and suppressed Indigenous fire, made it illegal to take care of the land using fire. My own ancestors could be jailed, were jailed, for setting cultural fires that are good for the land, that renew the land. And of course, that fire suppression under the colonial agenda led to forest situations that were ripe for wildfire, for catastrophic conflagrations, right? So there are so many examples now of the return of cultural Indigenous burning in this country and all around the

world. And it is renewing biodiversity, renewing forest health, and healing a relationship between people in place that say, "We have to take care. We have to play an active role in caring for our land." So that's a very big and timely sort of newsworthy way of thinking about human intervention. But it can also be as small as replacing lawns with wildflower. When you convert a lawn into a wildflower meadow, or perennials or native plant landscapes at an orchard for you and your neighborhood, suddenly, you shift that balance. You are now sequestering, storing carbon in soil, in plant biomass. So you take an active step to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere in the choices of your landscaping.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm curious what you would like urban people to see as their role. Because we can often feel very removed from even having a yard, but certainly from the natural world.

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: Well, in the Plant Baby Plant movement, we recognize that not everybody has the privilege of caring for a piece of land. So one of our goals in Plant Baby Plant is to heal land. But one of the other acts of creative resistance is to build community. And the third one is to build power. And building community and building power are I think the gifts of urban communities, right? The dialogue, the resources, the activation that can happen there to hold our leaders accountable to direct resources to land care, and to just political and green action. So we're absolutely mindful that this care for land doesn't just happen with seeds and a shovel. It can happen with a laptop, and a ballot box and talking to your neighbors. Now that's not to say that there aren't on the ground solutions in urban landscape, there are! Oh, my goodness! Community gardens, community urban farming that does all those things that heals land. It builds community and builds power as well. There's a wonderful movement called The Tree Equity Movement, particularly focused in our urban, and to some extent, suburban landscapes, which looks at the distribution of the benefits of nature of a tree canopy. And when you look at that distribution in cities, what you find is not surprising that it follows redlining, right? There is a huge justice gap between the access to trees and demographics in our cities. So the Tree Equity Movement is one and the Community Garden Movement are ways that that urban folks can participate. It's even been shown that the small act of pollinator gardens create resources when magnified over a whole block for pollinators and for birds.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm a big advocate of potlucks, very simple, very pollinating of ideas and power and connections, works for me. And there's another story that I was struck by as I looked at the history of "Braiding Sweetgrass," your book that sort of speaks to this as well. The book was published in 2013. You took it to a small independent publisher, Milkweed Editions in Minnesota. It didn't get any major reviews, but seven years later because of booksellers and buyers, and word of mouth, it is a worldwide bestseller. You've got like 3 million copies sold, 20 languages it's been translated into. To me, that's sort of a lesson of reciprocity of a certain kind, people power. With your most recent book, "Serviceberry," you are taking an action in the

publishing too. When I got to the end of the book, I realized, "Oh, you're donating your advanced royalties." To what extent is what you are doing, how you are doing it, also important to the message that you are bringing?

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: Thank you for realizing that, Laura, exactly.

LAURA FLANDERS: Great story.

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: Right? You know, we don't have to be complicit with these structures that are exploitive. And I love that. I love that the process by which we create community and share stories, and try to catalyze a kind of cultural transformation to a reciprocal worldview rather than an extractive worldview. It matters how we do it. And I love, love, love your notion of a potluck. To me, in Plant Baby Plant, that's the vibe. We want to create is to say, "Let's come together, build community, which builds resistance in a time when we are increasingly in this hyper individual, highly polarized environment."

LAURA FLANDERS: Name one practice perhaps that we could all get better at as we try to implement what you're talking about.

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: I want to name two practices, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: Go for it.

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: One, an internal practice of gratitude, of being actively grateful for the gifts of the land, to name them. To name them, this big inventory of the abundance of the natural world that has tremendous practical, as well as spiritual and community value because gratitude makes you want to give your gift back. And so the first is gratitude. And when activated to reciprocity by gratitude to say what could I give back to the earth in return for all of these gifts, plant something.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, you are the perfect person to ask our closing question, which is about the story the future will tell of now. You've alluded to it, but what do you think is the story that the future, I don't know, 25, 50, 100 years, will tell about us in this moment?

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: That this is a time of remembering. When we cast off the stories that industrial colonialism told us of who we are as people and we remembered that we can be givers to the land, we remembered that word is so important, I'm not just casting my mind back but forward because remembering our kinship with the living world and acting out of that kinship is the nature of this moment, the potential of this moment to be in the age of remembering who we are as humans.

LAURA FLANDERS: Beautiful, Robin Wall Kimmerer, thank you so much for all your work and for Plant Baby Plant. I encourage people to check it out. It's been really a pleasure and an honor having you with me here on "Laura Flanders & Friends."

ROBIN WALL KIMMERER: Thank you, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: It wasn't easy to separate people from plants and animals and nature. It wasn't easy, no, it took a lot of force. Just think of witch burning and enclosure and colonization, land theft and incarceration. And if you want to know more about any of those processes, you can, through checking out the work of historians, or my interviews with people like Silvia Federici, and Peter Linebaugh and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. No, it wasn't peaceful, it was brutal. But our behavior is still being modified today. Only this time, it's happening through processes so intimate, we barely notice. The devices directing our attention today are all about that directing our focus from here to there, from this to that, from her to him, you get it. We hold screens in our laps on our hands, we put buds in our ears, and who knows what in front of our eyes, and that's changing us. So how do we resist? They've always been resistors. My favorite is put down the phone, go for a walk. Make odd, unusual choices. See what you notice, I'd love to hear. You can find all my uncut conversations with our recent guests and our full archive through subscribing to our free podcast, or my Substack or our newsletter. All the information's at the website. We are listener and viewers-supported and we thank you. We noticed you. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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