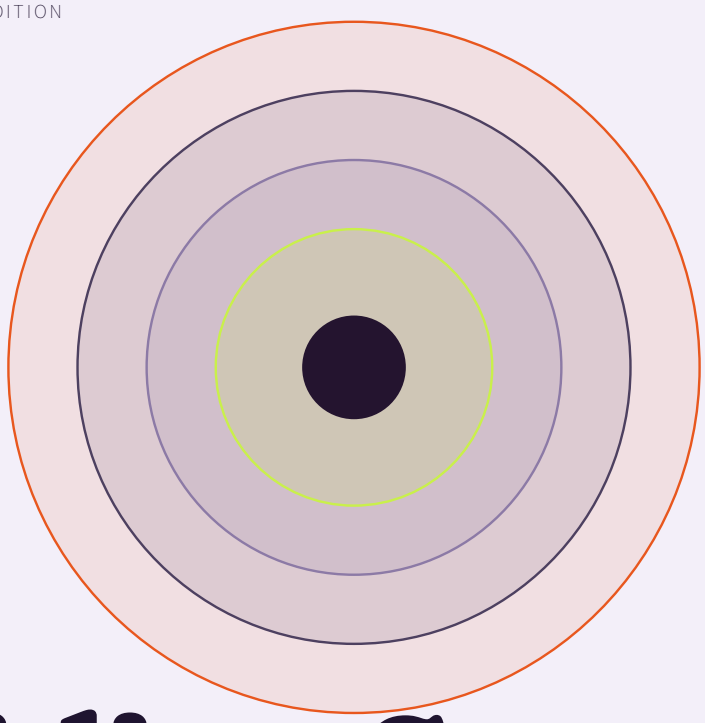


Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants

A reading of the book by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013)

1. ACTION BOOK

CONTENTS

Inside this edition

The book in a minute 4

The takeaways 5

Your action book 7

Before you go 8

PART TWO · THE ACTION BOOK

The setup checklist 10

Say thank you before you take 11

Leave at least half 12

Give one gift back each week 13

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a botanist, a professor at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. In Braiding Sweetgrass she braids three strands together: Indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and her own story as a scientist and a mother. Her argument is that the living world is a gift, and that a gift asks for something back: gratitude, care and reciprocity. She sets out the Honorable Harvest, a set of guidelines for taking only what is given, and contrasts a gift economy with a market one. The essays move from wild strawberries and maple sugaring to a Three Sisters garden, a black ash basket and a polluted lake in upstate New York.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A gift starts a relationship. A purchase usually ends one.

Kimmerer grew up picking wild strawberries and understood them as gifts from the land, not goods. A gift comes with a bond and a duty to give something in return. Bought goods change hands and the bond ends at the till. She asks what would change if we treated more of what we receive as gifts.

2

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Whatever you take, something should go back.

Reciprocity is the thread through the whole book. The living world gives, and people owe a return. That return can be care, attention, restoration or simple thanks. Kimmerer treats it as the basic test of a good relationship with land.

3

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The Honorable Harvest: take only what is given, leave enough, and use it well.

Kimmerer describes the Honorable Harvest as a set of unwritten guidelines for taking. Ask first. Never take the first or the last. Take only what you need, leave some for others, waste nothing, share, give thanks and give a gift back. She shows them at a small scale, digging wild leeks in spring, then asks how they would read if a whole economy followed them.

4

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

The words we use for plants and animals decide whether we treat them as beings or as things.

Learning Potawatomi as an adult, Kimmerer found a grammar that marks the living world as animate. English sorts almost everything that is not human into objects. She suggests that the habits of a language shape the habits of care.

5

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Corn, beans and squash grow better together than any of them grows alone.

In a Three Sisters garden the corn gives a stalk to climb, the beans feed nitrogen into the soil, and the squash shades the ground with broad leaves that hold water and keep weeds down. Kimmerer reads it as a model of a community where each member brings a different gift and all of them are needed.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Science and Indigenous knowledge can be braided together instead of set against each other.

As a first-year botany student, Kimmerer said she wanted to learn why asters and goldenrod look so beautiful together, and was told that was not a question for science. Later she found part of the answer in how pollinators respond to purple and yellow side by side. The book joins careful observation with the idea that plants have something to teach.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Gratitude is a way of noticing that you already have enough.

Kimmerer describes the Thanksgiving Address of the Haudenosaunee, which greets and thanks each part of the natural world in turn, and which children at the Onondaga Nation School recite in place of a pledge. She argues that gratitude works against the endless wanting a consumer economy depends on.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Land that is tended with care can do better than land left alone.

A graduate student's study found that sweetgrass harvested in the traditional way came back stronger than plots that were never picked. For Kimmerer it upends the idea that the best thing people can do for nature is to stay away. The better question is how to take part well.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

An appetite that is never satisfied eats up the thing that feeds it.

Kimmerer draws on the Windigo of Anishinaabe stories, a being whose hunger grows the more it eats. She uses it to describe an economy of endless consumption, and answers it with the habits that starve it: gratitude, restraint and reciprocity.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Run the harvest check once
- [ ] Learn five plants near you by name
- [ ] Start a reciprocity ledger
- [ ] Plant something that feeds others
- [ ] Learn whose land you live on

KEEP UP DAILY

- [ ] Say thank you before you take
- [ ] Leave at least half
- [ ] Give one gift back each week

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Run the harvest check once

Pick one thing you take often, such as your morning coffee, your lunch or an hour of someone's help.

Run it through the Honorable Harvest check on this page and note the guideline you skip most.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Learn five plants near you by name

Walk your street or a nearby park with a field guide or a plant ID app.

Learn five plants by name and write down where each one grows.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Start a reciprocity ledger

Keep a page with two columns: what I received and what I gave back.

Fill in the last seven days to see where the balance sits.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Plant something that feeds others

Sow a pot of herbs, a native flower for pollinators or, if you have the room, a small Three Sisters bed of corn, beans and squash.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Learn whose land you live on

Look up the Indigenous nations whose homelands include the place you live, starting with a nation's own website or your local library.

Write down one thing you learn.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Say thank you before you take

Before a meal, a walk or the first coffee of the day, name one thing you are grateful for.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Leave at least half

When you pick, forage or take from a shared supply, take less than half of what is there.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Give one gift back each week

Pick up litter on a walk you love, water a street tree, or give an hour to a community garden.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
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December 2026

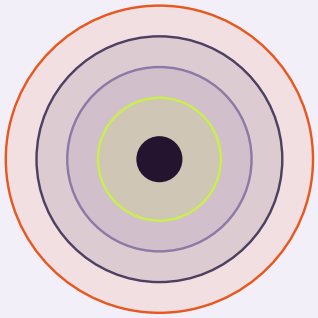
MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Take what is given, give something back, and the gift keeps moving.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER ROBIN WALL KIMMERER

Read it online, and vote on the take-aways: hourlife.com/books/braiding-sweetgrass
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