

People of Corn, People of Light
An excerpt from Braiding Sweetgrass¹

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Perhaps you can remember back to our first month, when we read the story of Skywoman. During this month of October, as we reflect on Indigenous People's Day (formerly Columbus Day), think again about what we've learned about the Doctrine of Discovery. Below is another beautiful story, this time about the creation of humans. Dr. Kimmerer shows us, once again, the importance of being one with Creation. She writes:

The story of our relationship to the earth is written more truthfully on the land than on the page. It lasts there. The land remembers what we said and what we did. Stories are among our most potent tools for restoring the land as well as our relationship to the land. We need to unearth the old stories that live in a place and begin to create new ones, for we are storymakers, not just storytellers. All stories are connected, new ones woven from the threads of the old. One of the ancestor stories, that waits for us to listen again with new ears, is the Mayan story of Creation.

It is said that in the beginning there was emptiness. The divine beings, the great thinkers, imagined the world into existence simply by saying its name. The world was populated with rich flora and fauna, called into being by words. But the divine beings were not satisfied. Among the wonderful beings they had created, none were articulate. They could sing and squawk and growl, but none had voice to tell the story of their creation nor praise it. So the gods set about to make humans.

The first humans, the gods shaped of mud. But the gods were none too happy with the result. The people were not beautiful; they were ugly and ill formed. They could not talk – they could barely walk and certainly could not dance or sing the praises of the gods. They were so crumbly and clumsy and inadequate that they could not even reproduce and just melted away in the rain.

So the gods tried again to make good people who would be givers of respect, givers of praise, providers and nurturers. To this end they carved a man from wood and a woman from the pith of a reed. Oh, these were beautiful people, lithe and strong; they could talk and dance and sing. Clever people, too: they learned to use the other beings; plants and animals, for their own purposes. They made many things, farms and pottery and houses, and nets to catch fish. As a result of their fine bodies and fine minds and hard work, these people reproduced and populated the world, filling it with their numbers.

But after a time the all-seeing gods realized that these people's hearts were empty of compassion and love. They could sing and talk, but their words were without gratitude for the sacred gifts they had received. These people did not know thanks or caring and so endangered the rest of the Creation. The gods wished to end this failed experiment in humanity and so they

¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Milkweed Editions, 2013, pp. 341-343

sent great catastrophes to the world – they sent a flood, and earthquakes, and most importantly, they loosed the retaliation of the other species. The previously mute trees and fish and clay were given voices for their grief and anger at the disrespect shown them by the humans made of wood. Trees ravaged against the humans for their sharp axes, the deer for their arrows, and even the pots made of earthen clay rose up in anger for the times they had been carelessly burnt. All of the misused members of Creation rallied together and destroyed the people made of wood in self-defense.

Once again the gods tried to make human beings, but this time purely of light, the sacred energy of the sun. These humans were dazzling to behold, seven times the color of the sun, beautiful, smart, and very, very powerful. They knew so much that they believed they knew everything. Instead of being grateful to the creators for their gifts, they believed themselves to be the gods' equals. The divine beings understood the danger posed by these people made of light and once more arranged for their demise.

And so the gods tried again to fashion humans who would live right in the beautiful world they had created, in respect and gratitude and humility. From two baskets of corn, yellow and white, they ground a fine meal, mixed it with water, and shaped a people made of corn. They were fed on corn liquor and oh these were good people. They could dance and sing and they had words to tell stories and offer up prayers. Their hearts were filled with compassion for the rest of Creation. They were wise enough to be grateful. The gods had learned their lesson, so to protect the corn people from the overpowering arrogance of their predecessors, the people made of light, they passed a veil before the eyes of the corn people, clouding their vision as breath clouds a mirror. These people of corn are the ones who were respectful and grateful for the world that sustained them -- and so they were the people who were sustained upon the earth. (Adapted from oral tradition)

Of all the materials, why is it that people of corn would inherit the earth, rather than people of mud or wood or light? Could it be that people made of corn are beings transformed? For what is corn, after all, but light transformed by relationship? Corn owes its existence to all four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. And corn is the product of relationship not only with the physical world, but with people too.

...Creation, then, is an ongoing process and the story is not history alone – it is also prophecy. Have we already become people of corn? Or are we still people made of wood? Are we people made of light, in thrall to our own power? Are we not yet transformed by relationship to earth?

As you reflect on this story, can you see our corn differently? Can you imagine, once again, the ways in which we are partners with God in the care of Creation?

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