

Remarks from Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer

Mr. President,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to be able to join today's 5th dialogue of the General Assembly on "Harmony with Nature" to commemorate International Mother Earth Day as I believe that transformation of our relationship to the Earth is among the greatest challenges and responsibilities of our time.

*Bozho. Shaapodaske Gizhgokwe nedezhnekas. Anishinaabe Bodwewadmikwe ndaw. Mgize ndoodem minwa mko. Megwech kine gego ga mizhang.* In my ancestral language I greet you all, and introduce myself as a Potawatomi woman, a member of the Anishinaabe peoples, of the eagle clan and the bear. I am honored to be here and grateful for all that has been given to us.

As we celebrate Mother Earth, Let us begin with gratitude, for we are showered daily with the gifts of Mother Earth, food to eat, sweet air to breathe and the preciousness of water. Gratitude for each other as people, for the privilege of our work and for the original peoples in whose homelands we meet today. Although we come from many different places, we stand upon the ultimate common ground, with our feet upon Mother Earth. No matter what language we speak we are grateful for the birdsong that greets the day, Can we agree that our lives are made possible, and made sweeter by the other lives which surround us, both the human and the more-than-human beings with who we share the earth?

*Shaapodaske Gizhgokwe*, my name in my ancestral language refers to light shining through sky, onto the face of Mother Earth and I carry the responsibility for that name, but I never would have dreamed that responsibility would lead me here. For you see, a little more than one hundred years ago, my grandfather was taken away from his family in Indian Territory, to a government run boarding school where the policy was to wipe away every trace of the indigenous worldview from our people- and replace it with the western settler mindset. It is a miracle that today-his granddaughter has been invited here to speak of our worldview at a time

of accelerating climate change, as we enter the Age of the Sixth Extinction- when the world now has need of the wisdom that was very nearly driven to extinction. This very fact is a source of great hope, for it shows that the world can change, that we human people can transform our beliefs, that we can, together, grow toward justice. The perspectives I share today are not mine alone, but the collective wisdom of our people and the Earth herself.

I am a professor of environmental biology, an ecological scientist by training and profession, working to create a symbiosis between indigenous and scientific knowledge systems. I am also, by culture an indigenous woman, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. My work has led me to understand the power of complementarity between these two different ways of knowing the world, which has I think, benefits for sustainability.

Since the time of my grandfather, we have seen dramatic advances in the quality of life for some; we have also seen the costs of environmental degradation. So much so that the UN Millennium report calls into question our continued survival

As a plant ecologist, aspects of my scientific research involve understanding how we might repair damaged ecosystems and return them to productivity. It's imperative that we restore the land from the damage we have inflicted. But in my restoration research, I have come to understand that it is not only the land which has been broken, but it is our relationship to land. A key to sustainability is not only restoring the land, but restoring our relationship. If we are to survive, and if our more than human relatives are to survive as well, we need a change in worldview.

After receiving your kind invitation to speak about traditional ecological knowledge and worldview, I asked my Potawatomi elders for their thoughts, as carriers of the indigenous worldview. Their answer surprised me at first, because their response was just a single word. Moccasin. And its derivation. The word moccasin, literally instructs us to walk gently upon the land. This is the richness of indigenous languages and worldview that even the word for shoes carries ethical teachings. Walk gently upon the Mother Earth.

The question of course is how do we do that? How do we walk gently on the Earth and at the same time provide dignity and well-being to the world's people? These are the same questions addressed in the UN post-2015 sustainable development goals. The UN goals of envisioning and negotiating these aspirations is a major achievement, demonstrating strong commitment to alleviating environmental damage and improvement of the human condition. Member states have made great strides and the goals and outcomes are laudable and ask much of us. As they should.

The arguments for transformation of the worldview are both pragmatic and ethical. The dominance of the anthropocentric worldview, may limit the achievement of the 2015 sustainable development goals. In a bio-centric worldview, science, economics, ethics and values are more closely aligned with one another, bringing the scientifically sound into alignment with the ecologically and morally responsible.

As a scientist, I have come to understand that while science is a powerful tool that should play a primary role in our decision making, it is not the only tool. One of the traits of science is that it strives to be purely objective and strictly material in its explanations. The influence of values is intentionally excluded. However many of the sustainability issues we face lie at the intersection of nature and culture, they lie with human values...and so value-free science cannot be the only approach we rely upon. Can we collectively imagine a new kind of knowledge, in which science is guided by indigenous environmental philosophy? This new kind of science is well represented in ancestral ways of knowing, in traditional ecological knowledge.

The earth-centered worldview is part of our human heritage. It is a worldview that still guides indigenous cultures around the world. And is in the hearts of many in the developed and developing worlds who long for its wholeness and the satisfaction of living in Harmony with Nature. We are the descendants of ancestral cultures living by the values of a worldview which understands that humans are one member of the living community of earth, and that we have responsibilities to ensure the thriving of the other non-human species with whom we share the Earth.

The indigenous worldview has been marginalized for generations because it was seen as antiquated and unscientific- and its ethics of respect for Mother Earth were in conflict with the

industrial worldview, bent on treatment of the Earth as if what native people call gifts were nothing more than resources destined for consumption by humans. But now, in this time of climate change and massive loss of biodiversity we understand that the indigenous worldview is neither unscientific nor antiquated, but is in fact a source of wisdom that we urgently need.

As we value the ancestral worldviews and sustainability models they offer, it is critical that we include indigenous voices in decision making and protect native peoples lands and cultures as global sustainability goals are adopted, protecting native peoples from harm from climate change outcomes and mitigation policies which they no role in producing. The provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples should be fully implemented as a complementary partner to sustainability goals. I would look forward to the synergy created between the UNDRIP and the Sustainable Development goals, to further the vision of the Harmony with Nature Initiative.

I want to emphasize that while the earth-centered, bio-centric worldview is has antecedents in indigenous philosophy, the worldview that we live by is not linked to genetic identity. A world view is learned, a worldview can be chosen. We will need to enlist artists and poets, storytellers and musicians to remind us of what we love, of what we value, of what makes us deeply happy as humans. For the most powerful transformations are motivated by love.

Like my elders, the Sustainable Development goals also articulate the desire to walk gently on the earth but with a rather different orientation to the world. I understood the language of “people centered” goals as an emphasis that development benefits should flow to people, that people’s ideas and values and priorities shape the development agenda, rather than institutions, governments or corporations.

But-in this same language of “people-centered” we might also hear the expression of the anthropocentric-human centered worldview that pervades our societies. That the natural wealth of the earth belongs and is rightly appropriated for human benefit alone. When we gather as Nations, should we not also counsel on behalf of the Tree Nations, the Bird Nations, the Fish Nations, on behalf of soil? And seeds? And our precious water? Let us broaden our definition of “people centered” to include them, our more than human relatives.

We see the anthropocentric worldview even in our carefully crafted definitions of sustainable development. Sustainability goals revolve around the search for strategies by which we can continue to take from the Earth into the future. When these definitions were presented to traditional elders they observed “it sounds to me like they just want to keep taking” when the question we should be asking is “what can we give?” What does the Earth ask of us in return for all that we have taken? Our definitions of sustainable development are embedded in the idea that humans are fundamentally takers. The indigenous/ancestral worldview offers another conception of ourselves as givers, as well.

One of the hallmarks of the indigenous worldview is that humans and nature are linked in reciprocity. As the Earth sustains us, we must sustain the Earth. A fundamental piece of indigenous environmental philosophy asks in return for the gifts of the Earth, for all that we have taken-what shall we give in return?

The philosophy and practice of reciprocity- returning the gift- is not just good ethics; it is how the biophysical world works. Balance in ecological systems arises from negative feedback loops, from cycles of giving and taking. Living and dying, production and consumption, biogeochemical cycles. Reciprocity among parts of the living Earth produces equilibrium, in which life as we know it can flourish. It is reciprocity that produces Harmony in Nature. Positive feedback loops in which interactions spur one another away from balance produce radical change, often to a point of no return. Such as climate change. We must understand that we, like every other successful organism, must play by the rules that govern ecosystem function. And that law is reciprocity. The laws of thermodynamics have not been suspended on our behalf Can we turn our attention away from the fallacy of unlimited growth and embrace instead the covenant of reciprocity?

How do we enter into reciprocity with the natural world? Traditional ecological knowledge is rich with examples. We exercise reciprocity through gratitude, through paying attention, in ceremony, in land care, in restoration, in protection, regenerative economies, environmental justice, acknowledgement of the personhood of all beings, in language, in art, in science... but I will touch on only two today, that seem to me to be particularly linked to the post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

Let us consider the metaphor of One Bowl, One Spoon, as it expressed by my Haudenosaunee neighbors, in which the gifts of the Earth are understood as filling a single bowl from which we all might eat. It serves as a reminder that our very lives depend on the generosity of the Earth. It reminds us that that bowl is not bottomless. It's not just about the Bowl, but also about the Spoon. There's just one. It's the same size for everyone, not a little teaspoon for some people and a big gouging shovel for others. The bowl is meant to be shared by all people. And that includes the Bird People and the Tree People. The Fish People have just as much need of the river as do human people, and an equal claim upon it. The gifts of Mother Earth are being destroyed in many cases in order to bring profit to a few and continued poverty for many. The teaching of one bowl one spoon challenges privatization and corporate control of common resources, the gifts that Mother Earth provides freely to all people, such as water, should not be privatized.

The development goals rightly recognize that constantly accelerating consumption is one of the greatest dangers we face, especially as we know that consumption is tightly tied to climate change. Traditional ecological knowledge offers insights for what sustainable consumption might look like, through the indigenous canon of principles and practices that govern consumption -known as The Honorable Harvest. They are "rules" of sorts that govern our taking, so that the world is as rich for the seventh generation as it is for us.

The Honorable Harvest is a covenant of reciprocity between humans and the living world. The protocols offer inspiration for how we might walk gently on the Earth while at the same time satisfying human needs. It is a practice with great relevance for our time; it is both ancient and urgent.

The guidelines for the Honorable Harvest were taught to me by generous teachers, while respectfully picking medicines or berries but it applies to every exchange between people and the earth, to everything we consume.

- In taking from the Earth we are taught to never take the first... Never taking the first, means you'll never take the last.
- And then, we ask permission. If you're going to take a life, you have to be personally accountable. I know, in some places if you talked to a plant they'd call you crazy. But in a worldview that regards them as people, we just call it respect.

- If you're going to ask permission, you have to listen for the answer.
- If you are granted permission, then take only what you need and no more.
- The Honorable Harvest counsels also that we take in such a way that does the least harm as possible.
- Use everything that you take...it is disrespectful of the life that is given to waste it. We have forgotten this-the easiest way to have what you need is to not waste what you have.
- Be grateful. Gratitude is powerful, much more than a simple thank you. Gratitude reminds us that our very existence relies on the gifts of others. And gratitude is humbling. It reminds us that we are just one member of the democracy of species. It reminds us that the earth does not belong to us.
- The next tenet of the Honorable Harvest is to share with others-human and non. The Earth has shared generously with us, so we model that behavior in return.
- Reciprocate the gift .... In return for the gifts of the Earth, we are called to give our own in return.
- And finally, to take only that which is given to us.

Today, our social institutions and exploitative economies trap us in a profoundly dishonorable harvest. I wonder, if we had adopted the ancient practices of the Honorable Harvest, would we have to be afraid today of our own atmosphere?

I believe that today we are living in a transient period of profoundly painful error and also correction on our way to a humbler consideration of ourselves. In the scope of human history, the Industrial Revolution that fueled the expansion of the exploitative worldview was only an eye blink ago. For eons before that, there was a long time on this planet when humans lived well, in relative homeostasis with biotic processes, embodying a worldview of reciprocity. There was a time when we considered ourselves the "younger brothers of creation," and not the masters of the universe. We are a species that can learn from the global mistakes we are making. We have stories to help us remember a different past and imaginations to help us find the new path. We are a species who can change.

The danger is that we have been captured by a worldview that no longer serves our world, if it ever did, —a worldview whose manifestation is destroying our beloved homelands, our fellow species, and ourselves. We need to move beyond the idea that the Earth is our exploitable property to a life-centered worldview, in which an ethic of respect and reciprocity can grow.

The philosopher Joanna Macy has called this “The Great Turning” — the essential adventure of our time, shifting from the age of industrial growth to the age of life-sustaining civilization. There is accelerating momentum of the transition already in progress, in acts large and small, as humans reclaim an ancient way of knowing in which human life is aligned **with** ecological processes, not against them. The question is will the circle turn in time to save us? That’s up to us.

The UN has an honorable history of endorsing the expansion of rights...of human rights, of women’s rights, rights of indigenous peoples...this Harmony with Nature initiative has the potential to lead the UN to truly transformative leadership, in leading the expansion of rights to Mother Earth. Right to be whole, healthy, for other species to exist, give their gifts...in this spirit I offer support for the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth.

It’s a good place to start. But as we commemorate International Mother Earth Day I think what we need most is a Declaration of our **Responsibilities** to Mother Earth. I’m under no illusion that the United Nations can change a worldview, but in naming our priorities, it can serve as a counterweight to those forces which undermine our values, our innate biophilia and our responsibilities for life. We have allowed social institutions and extractive economies that science tells us are not sustainable and our hearts tell us are not right. We can change that. The arguments are not economic but moral. Human beings were given the abilities and the responsibility to care for the rest of creation. When we look about us at the beauty of the Earth, do we want to be the one species that threw it all away? Do we want to be the ones who violated the fundamental laws of reciprocity? As we give thanks for the Earth, will we live in such a way that the Earth can be grateful for us?

The investments we need are to reclaim our roles as partners in the flourishing of Earth, in return for all that the Earth provides us with, in return for the privilege of breath.

We humans are more than consumers; we have gifts of our own to give to the Earth. We are scientists and artists and farmers and storytellers. We can join in the covenant of reciprocity, seeking what Onondaga Clan Mother Audrey Shenandoah called “Justice not only for ourselves, but justice for all of Creation.”

*Mi iw. Megwech.*

