

On Language

BY SUSAN BONTHRON

I was a teenager the first time I ever questioned my own language. I learned that native peoples of the far north had many more words for snow than I did. I was stunned. For the first time I realized that where and how you lived could determine the language you knew and used. Later it occurred to me that it works the other way around, too: the language you learn from birth determines how you become aware of and think about the world and your place in it.

The English language is rich in nouns. Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass**, points out that 70 percent of English words are nouns, while in the native language of her people, Potawatomi, 70 percent of words are verbs. When, as an adult, she was trying to learn Potawatomi (of which there were only nine native speakers remaining), she was frustrated at first by the fact that what would be a simple noun in English—such as “bay”—actually involved a verb in Potawatomi: “to be a bay.” She writes:

“And then I swear I heard the zap of synapses firing....In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay is a noun only if the water

is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. ‘To be a bay’ holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that too.”

Kimmerer goes on to describe how other nouns can be verbs “in a world where everything is alive...the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. This is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us.”

Kimmerer calls this the grammar of animacy. As a trained biologist, she knows the language of science is useful for differentiating between one thing and another, but not so useful for understanding relationships between beings. She quotes the ecotheologian Thomas Berry, “...we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.” If we imagine

bears, trees, rocks, water as living beings rather than things referred to as “it”, the relationship between us changes. If the mountain is a being, we might not be so quick to take its top off to mine its contents. If the giant sequoia is a being, we might not reach for the chainsaw so fast.

English grammar as currently constructed allows only humans to have standing in the world. Now that scientists have begun to learn about the layered interconnections between the inhabitants of a forest—or any other ecosystem—the language of animacy begins to make sense. Trees communicate danger to other trees by means of pheromones they send out into the air. Networks of fungus are the largest known beings on the planet, and connect entire forests in ways we humans are just beginning to understand.

In the language of animacy, all beings—and the earth herself—become our teachers. We humans need to honor and learn from them.

Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer, © 2013, Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, MN.

Investments in Education, continued

Setting the Property Tax Rate: Because of an unprecedented \$95.7 million surplus in our Education Fund, we were able to return \$20 million to taxpayers while also funding universal school meals for 2022–2023 (\$29 million), PCB testing and remediation in our schools (\$22 million), and new investments in our public

pension system. We’re also creating a new program through our career and technical education centers that will teach students the construction trades by building and rehabbing housing and other community projects (\$15 million). Despite strong statewide growth in education spending, the bill projects an average homestead tax rate of \$1.385, significantly lower than last year’s rate.

Please reach out anytime by email Scoffey@leg.state.vt.us or by phone: 802-257-0288 if I can provide any support or answer questions. It continues to be an honor to serve the State Representative for Guilford.

I hope you continue to enjoy your summer and I look forward to seeing you at the Guilford Fair!



SHANAHAN CONSTRUCTION SUPPLY

298 AVENUE A
TURNERS FALLS, MA 01376
Phone: 413-863-4322
Fax: 413-863-3508
TED@SHANAHANSUPPLY.COM
www.shanahanconstructionsupply.com

TED WHELAN
OWNER / PRESIDENT

SEED TO JAR · SMALL BATCH · PLANT-POWERED



GOOD[®]
BODY PRODUCTS

MADE IN GUILFORD VERMONT

BODY HEALING WITH NATURE

goodbodyproducts.com · (802) 254-1290 · [info@](mailto:info@goodbodyproducts.com)