

Wisdom and Worship
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“...in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn – we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live... They've been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out.” Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants, by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

I do not feel wise. Especially now, Saturday the 29th, as I write a talk I've had weeks to prepare.

Merriam-Webster defines wisdom as “the ability to discern inner qualities and relationships”, “good sense”, “a generally accepted belief”, or “accumulated philosophical or scientific learning.”

I would define wisdom in a different way. Like Robin Wall Kimmerer, who I quoted earlier, and like Rev Kali, I believe there is much to be said for age. To me, wisdom is being adapted to your environment.

Those who have lived on this earth for decades or millenia have had time to accumulate knowledge about how to live in the world. Moss is wise, because it knows how to keep living. Grow slow and steady. Push your roots into the cracks, and make yourself a home.

But in the long, long years of moss's evolution, there were less pollutants, and more time to grow. Many mosses are struggling to survive in an environment that their old wisdom does not apply to. They are no longer so well-adapted to their environment.

Like moss, I think we all find ourselves bewildered by the way the world is changing. How can we discern any inner qualities and relationships before they change again?

I do not feel wise, I say again. And by this I mean, I do not feel adapted to the world I find myself in. It is scary, and big, and there are a million things to pay attention to. I know how to write papers the night before they're due. I know how to be in school. But I do not know how to live with something like justice, with something like care. I've never done it before.

It is like I am at the base of a mountain. The path forward seems more or less clear, and my foothold seems steady enough, for now; there is no history of earthquakes here. And yet I can look around and see avalanches everywhere.

Change isn't new. Every year, some creatures find themselves outcompeted, overhunted, and unable to keep up. But today's extinction rate is hundreds of times the norm. Species are dying, and people are dying, and all of these problems feel impossibly urgent, impossibly important, and just *impossible*.

Any real wisdom must be able to account for avalanches. Wisdom is not only being adapted to your environment, but knowing how to pick yourself up when that environment changes. Wisdom tells me that, even when I feel like everything is pointless and nothing matters, I will be grateful in the morning if I get my laundry done.

But on its own, I don't think that wisdom is enough to get through sudden upheavals. Worship is necessary, too.

Worship is a word I find difficult to define, because I do not believe in any deities. For me, it is closely related to the word 'sacred'. Here are a few things which feel sacred to me:

- Grieving the loss of a friendship I thought would be mine forever.
- Sprinting through the parking lot of a grocery store, because no one can stop me.
- Laughing so hard I can't breathe with someone I really love.

These are moments which are not normal. They are nearly impossible to get adapted to. No one can force hysterical laughter, and every friendship ends a different way. I can control the running through a grocery store parking lot thing, but I can tell you that I don't always have the energy to sprint like that.

And so in this way, worship is the opposite of wisdom. Wisdom is settling in, and figuring out what will work almost every single day. Worship, on the other hand, is taking the time to notice the moments which are ineffable, unpredictable, and un-asked for. It is choosing to be entirely in the moment. In the midst of learning what beliefs are generally accepted, 'worship' reminds me to choose joy.

We all need both worship and wisdom. No life is entirely predictable, or entirely unpredictable.

Set your sights on a peak, and learn how to climb on the way. This is some combination of wisdom and worship – the hope and faith that if we begin, our goals will be there in the end. We'll be able to make the world a little more just, a little more kind, a little more beautiful, though in each moment we can only see the rocky dirt path in front of us.

We all have our own store of wisdom; we have learned the ways we can live in our lives, and keep moving forward through them. Reading *Singing the Living Tradition*, I recognized so many ways of worshipping which were not my own. Some stories spoke to me, and helped me find my path, and yet I still move forward alone. I must make my own mistakes and worship in my own way.

I want to take a moment to be proud of all of you, and of myself. I do not feel wise, and yet I have made it through the foothills, and I am still alive, and there sacred moments in my life. I know how to learn to take the next step forward.

The wisdom you have gained in your life may not all apply, anymore, but it was hard-won all the same, and it matters that you have climbed as far as you have.

No matter which paths we choose, we cannot control the avalanches and the sudden detours of our lives. No matter what wisdom we gain, some days we will find ourselves lost.

In those moments of fear, in dark nights of the soul, let yourself see the unexpected sunrises, the butterflies flitting across your vision; the moss gathered in the craggiest of rocks.

I do not feel wise. I know that the road is treacherous. And yet I will climb this mountain, even so.