

Earth as a Gift

I'm a plant scientist, and I am also a poet. The world speaks to me in metaphor. When I speak of the gift of berries, I do not mean that *Fragaria virginiana* has been up all night making a present just for me. I mean our human relationship with strawberries is transformed by our point of view. When we view the world as a gift, strawberries and humans alike are transformed. The relationship of gratitude and reciprocity can increase the evolutionary fitness of both plant and human. A species and a culture that treat the natural world with respect and reciprocity will surely pass on genes to ensuing generations with a higher frequency than the people who destroy it.

In the old times, when people's lives were so directly tied to the land, it was easy to know the world as a gift. When fall came, the skies would darken with flocks of geese honking, "Here we are." It reminded the people of the Creation story when the geese came to save Skywoman. The people are hungry, winter is coming, and the geese fill the marshes with food. The geese are a gift, and the people receive them with thanksgiving, love, and respect.

But when the food does not come from a flock in the sky, when you don't feel the warm feathers cool in your hand and know that a life has been given for yours, when there is no gratitude in return- that food may not satisfy. It may leave the spirit hungry while the belly is full.

Something is broken when the food comes on a Styrofoam tray wrapped in slippery plastic, a carcass of a being whose only chance at life was a cramped cage. That is not a gift of life. It is a theft. How, in our modern world, can we find our way to understand the earth as a gift again?