

Gratitude as a Systems-Wide Values-Based Approach to Enhance Sustainable Consumption Choices

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Abstract

What if the best approach to solving climate change was to emphasize an emotion the majority of the population felt? Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, subtitled *Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*, is a book very accurately presented by its subtitle. Kimmerer is a member of the Potawatomi Nation. Her writing draws upon stories from her own nation as well as stories and words from other Indigenous Nations. This article is a deep theoretical exploration of gratitude, largely informed by Indigenous oral histories as presented by Kimmerer. Throughout this paper, I will compare gratitude-based ways of knowing to mainstream ways of knowing, in the context of environmental communications. The analysis illustrates gratitude as potentially serving as an emotional (rather than logical) catalyst for change in human consumption behaviours. Also explored is the potential for gratitude to form cyclical systems interwoven with care, gifts, and reciprocity. Environmental activists have been seeking to enact change, largely through a wide-range of education-scoped efforts. Yet change does not happen. This article argues that Indigenous wisdom on the practice and experience of gratitude offers a profoundly more satisfying approach to relationship with nature, people, other-than-human plants and animals, and other humans. When more deeply experienced, gratitude seems capable of inspiring new programs of actions, education, and efforts to affect highly meaningful and engaging societal transformation towards greater ecological responsibility.

Keywords: *gratitude, climate change, environment, Robin Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass*

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Introduction

What if Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2013) perspective of gratitude in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, when fully realized, could create a sustainable flow of intrinsic motivation to build enduring ecological change. Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, subtitled *Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* is a book very accurately presented by its subtitle. Kimmerer is a member of the Potawatomi Nation. In addition to retelling stories from her own oral traditions, she also includes words and stories from Algonquin, Ojibwe, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and other Indigenous Nations. A current running through Kimmerer's storytelling is gratitude, presented as a powerful emotion. I suggest that *Braiding Sweetgrass* presents gratitude and its interwoven values system as an evidence-based approach that can guide human consumption practices towards sustainability. Given the ubiquitous nature of climate change, human consumption-exacerbated challenges, and the incredible ineffectiveness of modern scientific approaches to enact global transformation, it is imperative that the scientific community seek wisdom from alternate sources. Pre-colonial Indigenous constructs of gratitude, experienced through Kimmerer's retelling of oral histories, are a pathway to ameliorate societal discord on climate change, catalyze uptake of sustainable behaviours, and mitigate human-consumption-based root causes of climate change.

Braiding Sweetgrass, as a recounting of oral histories, does not meet the mainstream definition of scientific evidence. Yet, hooks (2014), in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, identifies the validity of testimony as evidence. If testimony is evidence, what form of testimony could be more legitimate than an oral history, a testimony passed down through generations for hundreds or even thousands of years? In effect, oral histories are a testimony peer-reviewed and accepted for publication with each generation as they are passed down. From this perspective,

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oral histories can and should be viewed as scientifically valid testimony. We can also see the scientific validity of oral history in Kimmerer's chapter "Mishkos Kenomagwen: The teachings of grass," where oral history and PhD botanists were at odds. Kimmerer (2013) highlights tenets of harvesting sweetgrass from the oral history like, "...take only what you need. I've always been told that you never take more than half," and "if we use a plant respectfully it will stay with us and flourish. If we ignore it, it will go away" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 157). When conflict emerged around falling sweetgrass plant populations, mainstream scientists disregarded oral histories and blamed Indigenous harvesting as the cause of the population decline. These scientists believed the best approach was to leave the sweetgrass untouched. The harvesting approach from the oral history led to growth in sweetgrass plant populations, whereas the leave-it-alone method of mainstream scientists was disproven (Kimmerer, 2013). Kimmerer (2013) concludes, "through reciprocity the gift is replenished" (p. 166), thus, gratitude serves as an interconnecting glue between reciprocity and gifts.

To begin, let's explore common environmental communications practices with goals to reduce consumption behaviours. A common recipe for environmental communications involves a communicator who persuasively shares information, builds awareness, and through logic convinces the audience to implement a desired behaviour. Communications like these are built upon a belief in the Information Deficit Model, which suggests that people fail to act due to being at a deficit of information. If people had more information, they would make different choices, so communicators give information. This style of communication has repeatedly and continuously failed to affect meaningful change (McDivitt, 2016; Schultz, 2011). Fear-based, scientific, and helping-styled communications are delivered to "correct" a person's choices towards less consumption. Such approaches are doomed to failure and are well-known to evoke

resistance, sow discord in relationships, and lead to entrenchment of the very behaviour targeted for change (Miller, 2012; Hall, 2012; O'Neill, 2009). Consumption of cigarettes is an excellent example of this. Smokers know smoking causes cancer, but this fear-inducing information does not drive quitting behaviour (Williams et al., 1999). Even incentive programs are plagued by a gross misunderstanding on the psychological impacts of their use (Gneezy, 2011). These common mistakes emerge when environmentalists hold decision-making power in themselves during their attempts to change the behaviours of another individual. Conversely, gratitude-based interactions release the need for environmentalists to see themselves as the drivers of other people's environmental choices. Power yielding is an explicit form of agency building and is well aligned with evidence-based approaches to change from the psychology literature (Miller, 2009). Gratitude and its humble power-yielding ethos is ever present in Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. By retelling oral histories of gratitude practiced on Turtle Island from time immemorial, Kimmerer (2013) reveals a holistic vision of gratitude.

In the text, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, care is named over 99 times, gift is named over 99 times, gratitude is named 75 times, and reciprocity is named 91 times (Kimmerer, 2013). Through careful study of each of Kimmerer's uses of these words (many detailed in this article), I envision the words care, gift, gratitude, and reciprocity as being chronologically linked into a self-propagating cycle. Care evokes gifts, gifts evoke gratitude, gratitude evokes reciprocity, and reciprocity evokes care and gifts to restart the cycle. Like any cycle with a regenerating feedback loop, it has great potential to grow over time. The existence of such powerful lessons of gratitude in oral histories suggests that in Indigenous cultures, gratitude is a profound way of being and knowing.

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The word gift, in the context of Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), is far different than the commercial western view of a holiday gift. An example of a giver is a strawberry plant; its biological processes form a strawberry, and it offers the gift of a strawberry to a person who eats the berry with a spirit of gratitude for the plant (Kimmerer, 2013). The feeling of gratitude enhances the experience for the human, who in gratitude has a greater appreciation for the gift. The human, now, has created a bond with the plant that nourished them. Gratitude evokes a sense of indebtedness to the plant, and a need to do right by the plant, perhaps by transporting a berry a short distance and planting it. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer sees how care for humans can originate in plants, "the maples each year carry out their part of the original instructions, to care for the people" (p. 148). Here we see how the care of a maple tree starts a gratitude cycle through the production of its sugars which will create the opportunity for people to enjoy the gift of maple syrup. Plants provide original care for us, in the form of a gift and we have an opportunity to respond in gratitude. In a life full of gratitude, every meal and every drink of tea and coffee, every shade giving tree on a hot summer day is both gift and invitation for a person to join the gratitude economy plants have offered us.

Kimmerer's (2013) words shed light on how gratitude creates a natural resistance to problematic consumption. In the following example, we see a void where Kimmerer would like to experience gratitude, but doing so is unpracticable:

"two hundred million years ago [diatoms] lived well and fell to the bottom of an ancient sea, where under great pressure of a shifting earth they became oil that was pumped from the ground to a refinery where it was broken down and then polymerized to make the case of my laptop or the cap of the aspirin bottle – but being mindful in the vast network

of hyper industrialized goods really gives me a headache. We weren't made for that sort of constant awareness” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 155).

In Kimmerer’s words, we see the effects of someone steeped in gratitude, trying to feel gratitude while considering complex short-lived products. It is headache inducing. Interestingly, the headache can be reframed as a gift. Imagine Kimmerer’s headache as a gift from a self-regulating process of a gratitude-based ethical system. Kimmerer seeks to fulfill her values-based need to offer gratitude. While seeking to offer gratitude the complexities of global supply chains create great distances both physically and mentally, making gratitude feel out of reach. Kimmerer experiences cognitive dissonance when purchasing a product seemingly out of range of gratitude. The headache seems to be saying, “less unsustainable goods, please”.

For gratitude to be considered a viable ethical system, there must be people who adhere to it. Human values are considered relatively stable over time (Rokeach, 1973). Research suggests that values change only happens in certain circumstances such as major life transition (Goodwin, Polek & Bardi 2012, Bardi & Goodwin, 2011). This is certainly a driving factor in Manfredo’s (2017) finding that shifting human values is an ineffective way to catalyze human change. So, if shifting values is unlikely to be effective, then teaching gratitude to young people is a critical approach and of course this is exactly what Kimmerer (2013) suggests, “imagine raising children in a culture in which gratitude was the first priority” (p. 227). Given the politics involved in the curricula of what and how children are educated, for example, the teaching of evolution or sex education (Irvine, 2004), a substantial portion of the adult population would need to approve. According to Wood (2007), gratitude, as a value, is held and observed by an average of 2 out of 3 people. In some homes this may take the form of saying grace, which is a Christian ceremony of gratitude prior to a meal. Such a ceremony bears much in common with

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Kimmerer's chapter "Allegiance to Gratitude" with the key difference being Kimmerer's gratitude would direct gratitude to the plants and animals that gave their lives to feed us. Imagine if Christian families thanked both God and the plants and animals of their meal during their grace ceremonies. Such grace ceremonies may lead to reductions of food waste, improved satiety, and other benefits. I therefore call on the faithful, regardless of denomination, to consider preaching on not only the value of honouring one's God, but also the bountiful creations of God. If we look around our living spaces, we may find many meaningful targets for our gratitude. I suggest a practice of re-seeing infrastructure, such as gratitude for walls, pillars, tables, furniture, doors, windows, roads, trains, and bridges.

Throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass* Kimmerer (2013) builds a holistic sophisticated view of gratitude, where each use of gratitude demonstrates new meanings and features of gratitude (later in this article I will detail these constituent elements). The sophistication, and profoundness presented by Kimmerer leads me to believe that educating on gratitude requires a multi-pronged, experiential approach. Experiential learning environments can be leveraged to start new gratitude cycles, and lead to many experiences of gratitude over time. Multi-pronged because gratitude, as presented by Kimmerer has many faces, as compared to the limited and tokenistic meanings of gratitude experienced within mainstream cultures. Next, we must explore the many faces of gratitude presented by Kimmerer.

In the chapter "Skywoman Falling," the gifts of the animals and Skywoman's gratitude are paired together to form Turtle Island (Kimmerer, 2013). Here we see that gratitude has a body in the land (Kimmerer, 2013). Now we could say, "that's dumb, land doesn't think" or "neither land nor gratitude have a body." Yet doing so removes the land's sentience and disregards the human-land relationship that gratitude can be. When we feel a relationship with

land, we can pick up a handful of soil knowing that billions of lifeforms are in our hand, and our human fate is inextricably linked to theirs. The Earth has been ripe with life for billions of years, when humans see land in this way it is with reverence, gratitude comes easy, and we treat the land with respect. If the land is not the object of our care and gratitude, it becomes a resource to be dominated, leading to exploitation. The land, broken by plows, and mines, covered by pavement and structures loses the ability to absorb water, grow life, and be a hospitable home for life. Therefore, gratitude protects us from the human desire to take too much. When we see the land as alive, and worthy of our gratitude, our relationship with the land is improved.

In the chapter, “the Gift of Strawberries” Kimmerer (2013) describes a humbleness and gratitude in the context of receiving the unexpected gift of a patch of wild strawberries. Many plants give gifts of food and medicine but to continue doing so human beings must reciprocate with habitat maintenance, sowing of seeds, and other nurturance. Here the gift of the strawberries evokes gratitude and ultimately gratitude-affiliated follow up behaviours. The result is a cycle of gratitude and reciprocity which after many revolutions transforms into a currency. Interestingly, gratitude itself sets the ground rules for the transactions and economies it facilitates. The act of taking and never giving back is out of alignment with the essence of gratitude and provides emotional feedback that redirects towards gratitude, making the gratitude values system and its created cycles and economy naturally self-regulating.

Kimmerer (2013) also reveals what gratitude is by demonstrating what happens in its absence, namely the development of Windigo. The concept of Windigo, at its simplest, is a human with disordered consumption practices. Kimmerer’s (2013) words reveal how a gratitude-deficit could lead to an insatiable appetite, “a life has been given for yours, when there is no gratitude in return – that food may not satisfy” (p. 81). Many humans today live in a world of

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abundant goods and services but also live in a state of dissatisfaction. Consumption grows as humans seek to satisfy perceived needs. Yet consumption increases and satiety decreases; empathy and gratitude are diminished. This is seen far beyond just physical goods and is perhaps most clearly seen through all sorts of addictive internet, electronic gaming, and social media paradigms. Each of the following are examples of how services are delivered with a Windigoizing effect on their consumers:

- Infinity scrolling within Facebook and Twitter (Neyman, 2017)
- Microtransactions, in game currencies, and other psychologically addictive monetization schemes of electronic games (Dreier et al., 2017; Søraker, 2016)
- Click-bait recommended options within YouTube and Pornhub (Neyman, 2017)
- Utopianism in Instagram (Szczepaniak, 2021)

We all become vulnerable to developing the pathologies of Windigo after consuming services designed to leave us unsatiated and wanting more. In an ethical quandary, game companies are now hiring clinical psychologists who are actively making games more addictive (Brady & Prentice, 2021; Søraker, 2016). Experiences based in gratitude are being driven out, in favor of creating Windigo, because serving Windigo is far more profitable. We can see such characters in science fiction, like Jimmy and Crake from Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. The two young men hedonistically bounce from one vice to another escalating the thrill with each experience in a series of unsuccessful attempts to satiate the growing dissatisfaction in their lives. Simply put, they are addicted to thrill seeking, but every thrill ultimately feels mundane, and they are left in a state of hungry boredom (Atwood, 2010). Without gratitude they cannot find satisfaction, instead "an increase in Windigo hunger causes an increase in Windigo eating, and that increased eating promotes only more rampant hunger in an eventual frenzy of

uncontrolled consumption” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 305). In this scope we may find more targets for gratitude by identifying problematic consumption within ourselves. By identifying personal behaviours that are difficult to moderate, such as water consumption during a shower, or social media use, we might find relief through greater satiety in a practice of gratitude. Imagine if we have gratitude for the first 10 gallons of water in a shower, or gratitude for the first cute cat video, gratitude’s gift of enhanced satiety may free us from the need to take a long hot shower, or to watch 5 videos.

The values system of gratitude as represented by Kimmerer has built in protection to Windigo. In the words of Kimmerer (2013), “gratitude is a powerful antidote to Windigo Psychosis... The practice of gratitude lets us hear the badgering of marketers as the stomach grumblings of a Windigo” (p. 713). Gratitude serves as two types of treatment against Windigo psychosis. As a powerful antidote, gratitude serves in a curative path for people who have succumbed to Windigo. As a filter to the badgering of marketers, gratitude takes up more the role of preventative medicine, protecting people from Windigo taking hold within them. Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* shows gratitude as a holistic medicine, way of being, way of knowing, complete with its own pedagogy; it is a millennia-old approach to consumption management.

In the chapter “Maple Sugar Moon” Kimmerer (2013) says, “it is our work and our gratitude, that distills the sweetness” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 150). Here we see gratitude as a force of production and productivity. Gratitude is a source of positive affect, and shifts human perception of difficult work, and counters toxic negative human relationships to work. In the chapter “Three Sisters” Kimmerer (2013) says, “in gratitude for their generosity, the three sisters revealed their true identities” (p. 260). Here we see gratitude as a method and process of

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acceptance, helping others to be true and open. In the presence of gratitude, emotions run calm. In this mental state, self-actualization is more readily developed.

If we were to build Kimmerer's understanding of gratitude into a model it might look like this. Each definition of gratitude is drawn from a different instance of use of the word in Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. The model uses dotted outlines to indicate the porousness of gratitude and showing the nature of gratitude as non-judgmental. Its constituent parts being:

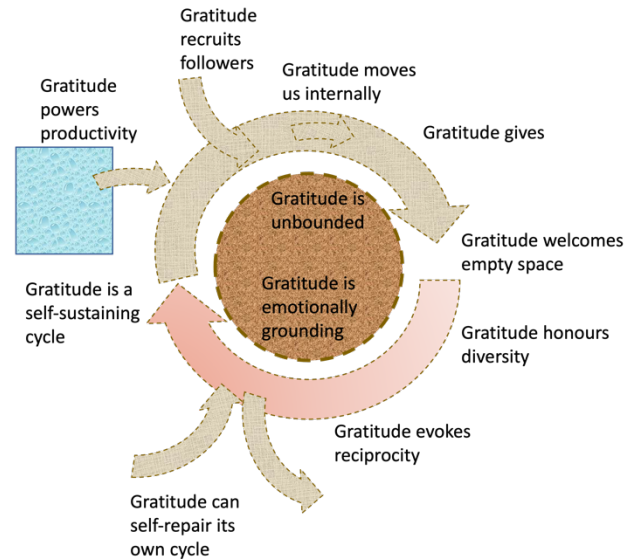


Figure 1: A model to unify many definitions of gratitude.

- 1) Nature receives light from the sun, and through photosynthesis creates gifts that improve human life and make human life possible. Therefore, gratitude recruits followers.
- 2) The positive experience of gratitude improves satiety gained from a wide band of all human experiences. Therefore, gratitude moves us internally.
- 3) Gratitude is inherently wrapped in the art of giving. The giving is different from a transactional western form of giving. Therefore, gratitude gives.
- 4) Gratitude is non-judgmental and demands nothing in return and payment is not required for a gift. Therefore, gratitude welcomes space.
- 5) Gratitude understands that the world is uneven. We as humans cannot honour berries by giving berries, and even if we could that would not serve the berry bush which has berries aplenty. In a cyclical gratitude economy, each participants contribution is unique and different. Therefore, gratitude honours diversity.

- 6) Gratitude evokes a sense of indebtedness towards that which we have received a gift from. This indebtedness calls us to be empathic towards the gift giver, to use our full powers of observation, and intellect to meet the needs of the gift giver. Therefore, gratitude evokes reciprocity in resolution of indebtedness.
- 7) As humans begin to participate in a gratitude economy, they can find more satisfaction in life. Eating a berry, which evokes planting a berry, which results in seeing a berry bush grow, ultimately leading to a bush that bears fruit and continues to evoke gratitude. Therefore, gratitude is a self-sustaining cycle.
- 8) Gratitude directed towards work, working relationships, and working activities can improve human relationships and perceptions of work, improving morale and preventing negative affect associated with otherwise negative affect generating work tasks. Therefore, gratitude improves productivity.
- 9) Gratitude can be directed towards plants, animals, people, as well as to inanimate objects, such as feeling gratitude for the lights by which one reads at night, or the hot water which makes a soothing shower. Therefore, gratitude is unbounded.
- 10) Gratitude counters toxic and aggressive feelings towards others in the world and can cultivate a more positive view of others than might have emerged without its presence. Therefore, gratitude is emotional grounded.

If gratitude as a values-based approach to reducing consumption is effective, then it bears merit to consider how a cyclical model of gratitude moves through time, and how it compares to cultures of environmental discourse over time.

A powerful way to view culture is through the structure of dispositif. A dispositif is a set of actants, both animate (people, speeches, organizations) and inanimate (knowledge, objects,

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reports, buildings) that define a thing, and maintain its defining characteristics (Deleuze, 1992).

It is a powerful frame to use to understand social power structures, through perception of the actants which maintain power structures over time. The act of assigning a descriptive adjective to a dispositif is a powerful act of sense making, empowering similarities across actant type to be observed. This was done by Bencze in exploration of environmental themes where an environmental contaminant and the community experienced a “silencing” dispositif (Bencze & Pouliot, 2017, p. 13).

The assigning of an adjective was repeated to describe the culture of environmental communications, and it was described as a “polarizing dispositif”, in that actants are bi-modally aligned to left and right political ideologies (Schutt, 2019). On the political left, the culture of environmental communications can be described as an educational future-focused dispositif. This meaning that organizations, structures, documents, foundations, and other constituent parts that make up left-leaning environmental communications culture are unified in an unwritten theory of change defined by the following 3 steps: (1) environmental-minded people educate others; (2) others change; (3) future worlds have enhanced livability. On the right side of the culture exists a protective past-focused dispositif. This meaning that the organizations, structures, documents, foundations, and a plurality of other constituent parts that make up right-leaning environmental communications culture are unified in an unwritten theory of staying the same defined as: the systems and structures of the past are good, we should retain these systems because they work.



The experience of gratitude, as an emotion, offers a very present, centering perspective. Each of the above 10 definitions of



gratitude emerge when gratitude is practiced mindfully as a present-focused experience. To experience life from a place of gratitude, and its present-moment centering show how life for environmental communicators can be

viewed in different ways; from the vantage point of different dispositifs. Conservative political ideologies focus on the tradition dispositif and has a past orientation. We see this in the tag line MAGA, or Make America Great Again, which is a past, tradition focused actant. Progressive political ideologies, on the other hand, largely adhere to an educational dispositif and seem to be future focused. In each of these instances, a uniformity of direction, and focus is created. While local cases may reveal collaboration between conservative and progressive, at the cultural level, the overwhelming force of culture directs adherents to choose environmental communications within the constraints of their aligned dispositif.

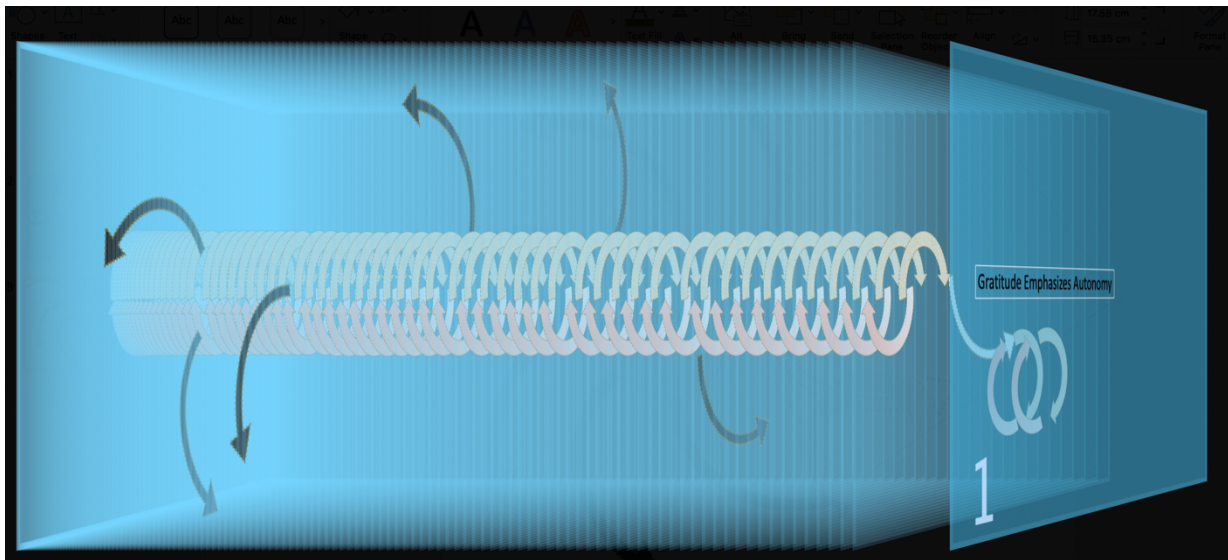


Figure 2: A model of gratitude cycles over time, and walkouts departing the cycle

spins forward through time, mindfully in the present. The gifts received today with gratitude are returned when tomorrow becomes today. Each day, experienced in the present, creates a

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gratitude cycle moving towards the future, the indebtedness of gratitude and reciprocity bearing the cycle forward into the future. In each of these ideological gathering places, tradition – past focused; education – future focused; and gratitude – present-focused, there will be individuals who leave. Wheatley and Frieze (2011) refer to those who leave systems as a walk out who has walked on. In *Walk Out Walk On*, (Wheatley and Freize, 2011) walk outs leave systems, bureaucracies, and structures that fail to meet their needs, or who fail to serve the purpose they were made for (e.g., an educational institution which fails to provide self-actualization to its students). Two questions emerge:

1. How does a system respond to walk out?
2. What does a walk out do when they walk out?

To answer the first question, the sustainability of gratitude systems arranged to the natural world seem resilient to departure. Kimmerer (2013) identifies the bounties of plants as the primary givers and starters of gratitude-based cycles. Since plants give and give, and the source of their giving is powered by the sun, their gifts are both timeless and boundless. The active giving of plants provides continuous invitations for individuals to join gratitude-based systems. Furthermore, adherents of a gratitude system observing a walkout, seem more capable of letting go, or practicing mindful acceptance of a walkouts autonomy and right to choose their own path. It even seems likely that those within the cyclical system of gratitude will experience a form of empathic gratitude for the walkout pursuing the direction that best fits them. Quite the contrary, walkouts from either the traditional or educational dispositifs of environmental communications are likely to be judged and labeled as traitor, quitter, or alarmist. Here we see that a cyclical system of gratitude is capable of sustainably generating walkouts who can then go forth and create new actants. These actants can serve to disrupt the bi-modal homogeneity of

actants directing people's environmental communications to be scoped as either traditional or educational.

I suggest that research, programming, and education on building streams of gratitude be expanded. The environmentalist movement has yet to find wide-scope meaningful behavioural approaches to help communities around the world to manage problematic consumption. Home weatherization programs like the Canada Greener Homes Grant focus communications on monetary incentives. Communications for the program frame weatherization as valuable due to wealth (you save money). But what is the prevalence of wealth as an intrinsic value in people and do people connect it to climate change? In a human values and climate concerns task done by Schutt & Mah (2017), 32% of all participants connected health to climate concerns, while only 8% connected wealth to climate concerns. Government programs may be trying to build behaviour changes on intrinsic motivators, but this suggests that wealth-based frames of communication connect intrinsically with only a small percentage of people. If environmental program communications were framed on health, rather than wealth, a gratitude-based cycle may be more practicable.

Gratitude offers an intrinsic, values-based, self-regenerating, perpetually inviting, and system-wide approach to addressing human over-consumption. Gratitude is uniquely special in that it can inhibit consumption, while increasing quality of life through improved satisfaction of the present! Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* can serve as a primary teacher and guide for a deeper meaning of gratitude. Creating sustainable systems of gratitude can protect ourselves and our communities against the dissatisfaction of Windigo, while also providing a sustained source of walk outs who will walk on to empower the emergence of a new environmentalism.

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