PEOPLE OF CORN, PEOPLE OF LIGHT

The story of our relationship to the earth is written more truthfully on the land than on the page. It lasts there. The land remembers what we said and what we did. Stories are among our most potent tools for restoring the land as well as our relationship to land. We need to unearth the old stories that live in a place and begin to create new ones, for we are storymakers, not just storytellers. All stories are connected, new ones woven from the threads of the old. One of the ancestor stories, that waits for us to listen again with new ears, is the Mayan story of Creation.

It is said that in the beginning there was emptiness. The divine beings, the great thinkers, imagined the world into existence simply by saying its name. The world was populated with a rich flora and fauna, called into being by words. But the divine beings were not satisfied. Among the wonderful beings they had created, none were articulate. They could sing and squawk and growl, but none had voice to tell the story of their creation nor praise it. So the gods set about to make humans.

The first humans, the gods shaped of mud. But the gods were none too happy with the result. The people were not beautiful; they were ugly and ill formed. They could not talk—they could barely walk and certainly could not dance or sing the praises of the gods. They were so crumbly and clumsy and inadequate that they could not even reproduce and just melted away in the rain.

So the gods tried again to make good people who would be givers of respect, givers of praise, providers and nurturers. To this end they carved a man from wood and a woman from the pith of a reed. Oh, these were beautiful people, lithe and strong; they could talk and dance and sing. Clever people, too: they learned to use the other beings, plants and animals, for their own purposes. They made many things, farms and pottery and houses, and nets to catch fish. As a result of their fine bodies and fine minds and hard work, these people reproduced and populated the world, filling it with their numbers.

But after a time the all-seeing gods realized that these people's hearts were empty of compassion and love. They could sing and talk, but their words were without gratitude for the sacred gifts that they had received. These clever people did not know thanks or caring and so endangered the rest of the Creation. The gods wished to end this failed experiment in humanity and so they sent great catastrophes to the world—they sent a flood, and earthquakes, and, most importantly, they loosed the retaliation of the other species. The previously mute trees and fish and clay were given voices for their grief and anger at the disrespect shown them by the humans made of wood. Trees raged against the humans for their sharp axes, the deer for their arrows, and even the pots made of earthen clay rose up in anger for the times they had been carelessly burnt. All of the misused members of Creation rallied together and destroyed the people made of wood in self-defense.

Once again the gods tried to make human beings, but this time purely of light, the sacred energy of the sun. These humans were dazzling to behold, seven times the color of the sun, beautiful, smart, and very, very powerful. They knew so much that they believed they knew everything. Instead of being grateful to the creators for their gifts, they believed themselves to be the gods' equals. The divine beings understood the danger posed by these people made of light and once more arranged for their demise.

And so the gods tried again to fashion humans who would live right in the beautiful world they had created, in respect and gratitude and humility. From two baskets of corn, yellow and white, they ground a fine meal, mixed it with water, and shaped a people made of corn. They were fed on corn liquor and oh these were good people. They could dance and sing and they had words to tell stories and offer up prayers. Their hearts were filled with compassion for the rest of Creation. They were wise enough to be grateful. The gods had learned their lesson, so to protect the corn people from the overpowering arrogance of their predecessors, the people made of light, they passed a veil before the eyes of the corn people, clouding their vision as breath clouds a mirror. These people of corn are the ones who were respectful and grateful for the world that sustained them—and so they were the people who were sustained upon the earth. *

Of all the materials, why is it that people of corn would inherit the earth, rather than people of mud or wood or light? Could it be that people made of corn are beings transformed? For what is corn, after all, but light transformed by relationship? Corn owes its existence to all four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. And corn is the product of relationship not only with the physical world, but with people too. The sacred plant of our origin created people, and

people created corn, a great agricultural innovation from its teosinthe ancestor. Corn cannot exist without us to sow it and tend its growth; our beings are joined in an obligate symbiosis. From these reciprocal acts of creation arise the elements that were missing from the other attempts to create sustainable humanity: gratitude, and a capacity for reciprocity.

I've read and loved this story as a history of sorts—a recounting of how, in long-ago times just at the edge of knowing, people were made of maize and lived happily ever after. But in many indigenous ways of knowing, time is not a river, but a lake in which the past, the present, and the future exist. Creation, then, is an ongoing process and the story is not history alone—it is also prophecy. Have we already become people of corn? Or are we still people made of wood? Are we people made of light, in thrall to our own power? Are we not yet transformed by relationship to earth?

Perhaps this story could be a user's manual for understanding how we become people of corn. The Popul Vuh, the Mayan sacred text in which this story is contained, is perceived as more than just a chronicle. As David Suzuki notes in *The Wisdom of the Elders*, the Mayan stories are understood as an *ilbal*—a precious seeing instrument, or lens, with which to view our sacred relationships. He suggests that such stories may offer us a corrective lens. But while our indigenous stories are rich in wisdom, and we need to hear them, I do not advocate their wholesale appropriation. As the world changes, an immigrant culture must write its own new stories of relationship to place—a new *ilbal*, but tempered by the wisdom of those who were old on this land long before we came.

So how, then, can science, art, and story give us a new lens to understand the relationship that people made of corn represent? Someone once said that sometimes a fact alone is a poem. Just so, the people of corn are embedded in a beautiful poem, written in the language of chemistry. The first stanza goes like this:

> Carbon dioxide plus water combined in the presence of light and chlorophyll in the beautiful membrane-bound machinery of life yields sugar and oxygen.

Photosynthesis, in other words, in which air, light, and water are combined out of nothingness into sweet morsels of sugar—the stuff of redwoods and daffodils and corn. Straw spun to gold, water turned to wine, photosynthesis is the link between the inorganic realm and the living world, making the inanimate live. At the same time it gives us oxygen. Plants give us food and breath.

Here is the second stanza, the same as the first, but recited backward:

> Sugar combined with oxygen in the beautiful membrane-bound machinery of life called the mitochondria yields us right back where we began—carbon dioxide and water.

Respiration—the source of energy that lets us farm and dance and speak. The breath of plants gives life to animals and the breath of animals gives life to plants. My breath is your breath, your breath is mine. It's the great poem of give and take, of reciprocity that animates the world. Isn't that a story worth telling? Only when people understand the symbiotic relationships that sustain them can they become people of corn, capable of gratitude and reciprocity.

The very facts of the world *are* a poem. Light is turned to sugar. Salamanders find their way to ancestral ponds following magnetic lines radiating from the earth. The saliva of grazing buffalo causes the grass to grow taller. Tobacco seeds germinate when they smell smoke. Microbes in industrial waste can destroy mercury. Aren't these stories we should all know?

Who is it who holds them? In long-ago times, it was the elders who carried them. In the twenty-first century, it is often scientists who first hear them. The stories of buffalo and salamanders belong to the land, but scientists are one of their translators and carry a large responsibility for conveying their stories to the world.

And yet scientists mostly convey these stories in a language that excludes readers. Conventions for efficiency and precision make reading scientific papers very difficult for the rest of the world, and if the truth be known, for us as well. This has serious consequences for public dialogue about the environment and therefore for real democracy, especially the democracy of all species. For what good is knowing, unless it is coupled with caring? Science can give us knowing, but caring comes from someplace else.

I think it's fair to say that if the Western world has an *ilbal*, it is science. Science lets us see the dance of the chromosomes, the leaves of moss, and the farthest galaxy. But is it a sacred lens like the Popul Vuh? Does science allow us to perceive the sacred in the world, or does it bend light in such a way as to obscure it? A lens that brings the material world into focus but blurs the spiritual is the lens of a people made of wood. It is not more data that we need for our transformation to people of corn, but more wisdom.

While science could be a source of and repository for knowledge, the scientific worldview is all too often an enemy of ecological compassion. It is important in thinking about this lens to separate two ideas that are too often synonymous in the mind of the public: the practice of science and the scientific worldview that it feeds. Science is the process of

revealing the world through rational inquiry. The practice of doing real science brings the questioner into an unparalleled intimacy with nature fraught with wonder and creativity as we try to comprehend the mysteries of the more-than-human world. Trying to understand the life of another being or another system so unlike our own is often humbling and, for many scientists, is a deeply spiritual pursuit.

Contrasting with this is the scientific worldview, in which a culture uses the process of interpreting science in a cultural context that uses science and technology to reinforce reductionist, materialist economic and political agendas. I maintain that the destructive lens of the people made of wood is not science itself, but the lens of the scientific worldview, the illusion of dominance and control, the separation of knowledge from responsibility.

I dream of a world guided by a lens of stories rooted in the revelations of science and framed with an indigenous worldview—stories in which matter and spirit are both given voice.

Scientists are particularly good at learning about the lives of other species. The stories they could tell convey the intrinsic values of the lives of other beings, lives every bit as interesting, maybe more so, as those of *Homo sapiens*. But while scientists are among those who are privy to these other intelligences, many seem to believe that the intelligence they access is only their own. They lack the fundamental ingredient: humility. After the gods experimented with arrogance, they gave the people of corn humility, and it takes humility to learn from other species.

In the indigenous view, humans are viewed as somewhat lesser beings in the democracy of species. We are referred to as the younger brothers of Creation, so like younger brothers we must learn from our elders. Plants were here first and have had a long time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground and hold the earth in place. Plants know how to make food from light and water. Not only do they feed themselves, but they make enough to sustain the lives of all the rest of us. Plants are providers for the rest of the community and exemplify the virtue of generosity, always offering food. What if Western scientists saw plants as their teachers rather than their subjects? What if they told stories with that lens?

Many indigenous peoples share the understanding that we are each endowed with a particular gift, a unique ability. Birds to sing and stars to glitter, for instance. It is understood that these gifts have a dual nature, though: a gift is also a responsibility. If the bird's gift is song, then it has a responsibility to greet the day with music. It is the duty of birds to sing and the rest of us receive the song as a gift.

Asking what is our responsibility is perhaps also to ask, What is our gift? And how shall we use it? Stories like the one about the people of corn give us guidance, both to recognize the world as a gift and to think how we might respond. The people of mud and wood and light all lacked gratitude and the sense of reciprocity that flowed from it. It was only the people of corn, people transformed by awareness of their gifts and responsibilities, who were sustained on the earth. Gratitude comes first, but gratitude alone is not enough.

Other beings are known to be especially gifted, with attributes that humans lack. Other beings can fly, see at night, rip open trees with their claws, make maple syrup. What can humans do?

We may not have wings or leaves, but we humans do have words. Language is our gift and our responsibility. I've come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land. Words to remember old stories, words to tell new ones, stories that bring science and spirit back together to nurture our becoming people made of corn.

* Adapted from oral tradition.