

# Kimmerer and Oliver's Views on Fellowship

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Fellowship is often seen as a very human trait. Humans are programmed to be social creatures, building on a give and take style of relationship between each other. It is a friendly feeling between people who have a common shared interest, or a group of people with the same purpose. While these definitions are usually seen in light of human groups, such as fellowship at a church between congregational members or fellowship between friends, this can also be applied to the relationship between humans and nature. There is a mutual reciprocity between humans and the natural world, and this can be seen in humans' daily interactions with the outside world.

Often, fellowship is only considered to be a type of relationship, but it can be strengthened by gifts. This is the stance that Mary Oliver and Robin Wall Kimmerer take on the idea of fellowship in nature. They approach the ideas differently. Kimmerer tends to focus on the idea of gifts in their typical connotation, while Oliver focused on the gifts we can gain from the act of fellowship itself. While they look at the ideas of gifts differently, they both seem to focus on the same few relationships and types of gifts: relationship with gifts, the gift of thanks, the gift of well-being, the gift of education, and the gift of motherhood. Both of these authors present fellowship throughout their works, often using the idea that fellowship is given through gifts, both tangible and intangible.

Kimmerer focused on her relationship with gifts with the idea that relationships are fostered by the giving and receiving of gifts. This led to the knowledge that humans have a relationship with all things, in some sense. Eskildsen writes, "The people she refers to includes more than humans. For many indigenous nations, 'people' also refers to the many-legged, the winged, the finned, and those who just slither along...By calling them *people*, they are no longer *things*, but our relations." Kimmerer builds off of this idea that all things are a relation to humans in some sense and should therefore be treated as another living being that can be fellowshipped with. The maples of the Maple Nation fellowship with humans by offering their sap and providing wood. Lakes fellowship by providing peace and water. Humans fellowship by taking care of nature in return. This creates the unique reciprocity between the two worlds. Part of this may be fueled by the fact that "When we receive a gift from someone, it changes our relationship. We may feel obligated by social norms to return the favor, or we may feel a heartfelt desire to give something

in return, to show we value the relationship" (Eskildsen). Either way, that cycle of gift giving is Kimmerer's basis of fellowship.

Oliver considers the idea of gifts outside of their normal connotation, instead choosing to apply the idea of fellowship more literally. Instead, she writes about the importance of the relationship aspect of fellowship with nature. She emphasizes the importance of connecting with nature on a semi-spiritual level, often using nature as a pattern to follow in order to pursue happiness. In her writings, it is reflected that she feels she inherited her responsibility to nature from her ancestors but learned how to do so from other writers, such as Whitman and Emerson. Oliver also writes that while she did get gifts from nature, but her main reason for fellowship was to make a connection with natural found delight.

Kimmerer approaches the gift of thanks from fellowship based on the idea that people should thank the world regularly, including each part of it. This can be seen especially in "Allegiance to Gratitude." Kimmerer tells the story that students are required to recite the allegiance of gratitude of the Onondaga Nation. They say a pledge of thanks to everything in their life, including Mother Earth, the waters of the world, fish, plant life, berries, the Three Sister plants, medicinal herbs, trees, and animals. Each of these parts of nature are recognized as members of the world, circling back to Kimmerer's theme of fellowship in terms of giving and taking from each other. Kimmerer writes, "Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them" (115). This duty can be seen in the idea of an honorable harvest. This type of harvesting is all about what one can give in return to nature as a measure of thanks. People living in the maple nation do this by using what they have with wisdom and not taking more than they need. The Pigeon people do not waste a single scrap from the black ash tree they use to make their baskets. It can even be seen in the cleaning of the pond behind Kimmerer's house that provides peace and sanctuary.

Mary Oliver approaches the idea of thanks in terms of devotion. She writes, "Attention is the beginning of devotion" (8). Devotion is the ultimate form of thankfulness, since it means that there is a constant stream of attention and understanding for that object. In Oliver's case, that devotion is aimed at nature. Her idea is that if humans devote themselves

to nature and its preservation, they have no better way to effectively say thank you to the world that provides so willingly. Oliver extends this devotion of thankfulness to the things in nature that have somehow passed under the radar. This is seen in her writing, *Ponds*, "Most of these ponds have traditional names. Those without, I have named. Why not? The ponds are uprisings from the water table, shallow and shape-shifting as sand from the dunes blows into them, creating mass here, causing the water to spread" (42). Oliver shows that by giving native things names equates to giving them power. It also shows a respect for nature and an amount of devotion given to the things which might have otherwise been forgotten. This is the ultimate form of thankfulness in Oliver's eyes.

The gift of well-being is also a theme between these two authors. Kimmerer points out that if humans realize other things are people, or at least members of the world in the same way, they are better able to grasp the concept of providing well-being to nature. She highlights this idea in "Maple Nation," where she writes, "My Onondaga Nation neighbors call the maple the leader of the trees. Trees constitute the environmental quality committee...They're on every task force, from the historical society picnic to the highway department, school board, and library. When it comes to civic beautification, they alone create the crimson fall with little recognition" (169). If people were to consider the maples, the streams, or the animals as a member of the community, they would better be able to grasp the idea of how to give better well-being. They could even follow the rules of the Maple Nation sap workers: waste nothing unnecessarily, keep the forests intact so they can continue to provide, take what you are given and treat it correctly. By maintaining the honorable harvest and rules of the Maple Nation, humans are able to better learn how to provide the gift of well-being back to nature, the same way it is provided from nature.

Mary Oliver writes on how we can take care of nature and its inhabitants as well, specifically in the sense of the animals. Part of a fellowship relationship is taking care of one another, not simply being taken care of. As nature gives to humans, they give back by using sustainable energy or resourcing, as well as protecting and caring for the hurt animals they may come across. Oliver writes about the day she brought home an injured black-backed gull. She took it in, giving it water and food. She notes, "M. and I talked to it, it looked at us directly. It showed neither fear nor aggression, and we sensed quickly that it did not like to be alone" (128). The bird was not left alone much as Oliver attempted to nurse it back to a health where it may live on its own. They took care of the bird by inventing games for it, drawing things for the gull to peck at, throwing feathers for it to catch, playing in water with it. However, she knew the inevitable would happen and that the gull would die. Even though she knew that her attempts to help the bird would be futile, Oliver insisted that her way of providing well-being would be to give the gull as long of a life as she could while maintaining its entertainment with the

various games. This way her way of providing the gift to one of nature's members.

Kimmerer believes the gift of education is required for the reciprocal nature of humanity's relationship with the natural world. She wrote, "If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human's education is to know those duties and how to perform them" (115). By being educated on the workings of nature and the inner relationships between the other members of it, humans are able to effectively give back that gift of well-being. And humans learn this education by observation. This can be seen in her writing, *The Teachings of Grass*. As she leads her student on this case study of sweetgrass and its growing habits, she combines her two loves, nature and science, in a way that both can benefit. This education was helpful to the native tribes that use sweetgrass as part of their culture, showing that through compensatory growth, the sweetgrass is thriving. It supported the old ancestral advice that if one does not take more than they need, then nature will continue to provide.

Oliver approaches the idea of education from nature from a spiritual standpoint. Heitman noted, "She finds the most durable connections with the divine in the woods, a bond forged more through intuition than formal logic." She does not focus on the education humans get from nature considering the logistics and traits that can be used to best survive, instead on more of an idea of how to mirror nature in order to live the best life humans are capable of. By mimicking things in nature, from a fox to an adopted dog to a spider, humans can learn how to best approach a lifestyle ensuring happiness. All things and members of nature can be teachers, if only one looks closely enough. However, this knowledge of nature is not only to be used for survival. Oliver writes, "The palace of knowledge is different from the palace of discovery, in which I am, truly, a Copernicus. *The world is not what I thought, but different, and more! I have seen it with my own eyes!* But a spider? Even that? Even that" (125). The knowledge gained from nature is more of a spiritual type of discovery rather than the logistics of a simple education.

Finally, the gift of motherhood is provided by nature. Of course, this is an obvious statement in the sense of science and the workings of the world. This gift is the ultimate link between the previous three, and it links humans with the ultimate over-arching idea of Mother Nature. As a mother, it is an inherent instinct to want a relationship with the offspring. Mothers want their child to be healthy and happy, and they want to teach the child the important parts of life, while also letting them learn on their own. In the human version of maternity, there is the reflection of the gifts nature provides and the gifts a mother provides her young. In order to take care of future generations, humans have to take care of the earth now. This is the best way a person can prepare their child for the world, succeeding and fulfilling the ultimate goal of a mother.

This is the success of the fellowship all humans and beings on earth can relate to.

Kimmerer has a continuous theme through her writings that instills the ultimate goal but also the saddest part of maternity. A mother doing her best job is preparing her child to eventually leave and stand on their own. This is a parallel of the fact that Mother Nature does her best job to give humans what they need in order to succeed. This can be seen in the gift given by showing native ancestors the three sister plants, or by the fact that humans have always been able to observe nature in order to learn. This even comes from the very idea that Skywoman brought down the world from the heavens and was pregnant at the time. Mothers give love through lessons, and Mother Nature does the same. Humans have always found a type of maternal love in nature, and it can be seen by watching the mothers of other animals.

Oliver approaches the idea of maternity in a similar way to Kimmerer. She agrees with the fact that humans can learn maternal values from even the smallest creatures in nature. This is highlighted in her essay *Swoon*. By observing the spider in the stairway closet, Oliver observes the pattern of motherhood this small creature takes part in. One part of this story that sticks out is the fact that the male is seen, but he takes no real part in the cycle of the offspring. While it takes two to mate in any species that reproduces sexually, it is always the mother that is seen and observed. This shows that it is mothers who are the ones held more responsible for offspring, but the fellowship between these two creatures is interesting as well. Oliver points out that the male of the species does not have the biologic makeup necessary to spin webs in order to catch food. This shows that the mothers are the ones that are more capable for caring for the offspring. Oliver takes this as lesson in motherhood by observing the fellowship between the male and

female species of various species. And Oliver offers her own gift of fellowship by employing the idea that the best way to care for something might just be to leave it alone and let it live in peace.

Both of these authors approach the idea of fellowship in their own way, but they also tend to follow the same trends. They look at fellowship with nature as a relationship of reciprocity, where gifts are exchanged in terms of well-being, education, and motherhood. With these writings, readers can begin to understand how a fellowship with nature might impact more than just daily living styles or health effects. Nature has a way to balance mental behaviors, lessons for how to interact with others, human or not, and shows ways that women can grow as mothers, while also showing that motherhood is a lasting way to take care of the world.

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