# Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer

## Asters and Goldenrod

At her freshman interview, Robin Wall told the professor that she wanted to study botany because she wanted to learn why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together. He said, “Miss Wall, I must tell you that *that* is not science.” Science does not concern itself with questions of beauty.

Science is limited by the questions it asks. It does not ask why the world is so beautiful or what the source is of the gold and purple pattern.

Robin did not have the words to resist scientific point of view. The professor was the source of authority. He made her doubt where she came from, what she knew. His way was simply the *right* way.

In the scientific world view, “Questions scientists raised were not ‘Who are you?’ but ‘What is it?’ No one asked plants ‘What can you tell us?’ The primary question was ‘How does it work?’” The botany Robin was taught was reductionist, mechanistic, and strictly objective. Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects. The science was rigorous in separating the observer from the observed.

[Until quantum physicists found that they could not separate the observation from the observed. This has been a revolution.]

Robin learned what she was taught and continued to earn a Ph.D. in botany. Although her professor’s recommendation for graduate work read, “She’s done remarkably well for an Indian girl.” When Robin became a faculty member she taught science as she had been taught.



However, her heritage called her back. She was called back to the indigenous way of knowing. Called back to the question of beautiful. Back to the questions that science does not ask, not because they are not important, because science as a way of knowing is too narrow for the task

Purple and yellow are reciprocal colors. The human eye is superbly equipped to detect this pair. Putting them together makes each one more vivid. It turns out that goldenrod and asters appear very similarly to bee eyes and human eyes.

Native scholar Greg Cajete has written that in indigenous ways of knowing, we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being—mind, body, emotion, and spirit. Science privileges only one, possibly two of those ways of knowing—mind and body. Science and art, matter and spirit, indigenous knowledge and Western science—can they be goldenrod and asters for each other, each complementing the other?