# “Windigo Footprints” Summary

From *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Kimmerer Chapter

"The Windigo is the legendary monster of our Anishinaabe people," writes Kimmerer, "the villain of a tale told on freezing nights in the north woods. You can feel it lurking behind you, a being in the shape of an outsized man, ten feet tall, with frost-white hair hanging from its shaking body. With arms like tree trunks, feet as big as snow-shoes, it travels easily through the blizzards of the hungry time, stalking us. The hideous stench of its carrion breath poisons the clean scent of snow as it pants behind us. Yellow fangs hang from its mouth that is raw where it has chewed off its lips from hunger. Most telling of all, its heart is made of ice....This monster is no bear or howling wolf, no natural beast. Windigos are not born, they are made. The Windigo is a human being who has become a cannibal monster. Its bite will transform victims into cannibals too....It is said that the Windigo will never enter the spirit world but will suffer the eternal pain of need, its essence a hunger that will never be sated. The more a Windigo eats, the more ravenous it becomes. Consumed by consumption, it lays waste to humankind."

"Traditional upbringing was designed to strengthen self-discipline, to build resistance against the insidious germ of taking too much. The old teachings recognized that Windigo nature is in each of us, so the monster was created in stories, that we might learn why we should recoil from the greedy part of ourselves. This is why Anishinaabe elders like Stewart King remind us always to acknowledge the two faces -- the light and the dark side of life -- in order to understand ourselves. See the dark, recognize its power, but do not feed it.

"The beast has been called an evil spirit that devours mankind. The very word, *Windigo*, according to Ojibwe scholar [Basil Johnston](http://www.ipl.org/div/natam/bin/browse.pl/A41), can be derived from roots meaning 'fat excess' or 'thinking only of oneself.' Writer [Steve Pitt](https://legionmagazine.com/en/2003/01/beware-the-windigo/) states 'a Windigo was a human whose selfishness has overpowered their self-control to the point where satisfaction is no longer possible.'

"No matter what they call it, Johnston and many other scholars point to the current epidemic of self-destructive practices -- addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, technology, and more -- as a sign than Windigo is alive and well. In Ojibwe ethics, Pitt says, 'any overindulgent habit is self-destructive, and self-destruction is Windigo.' And just as Windigo's bite is infectious, we know all too well that self-destruction drags along many more victims -- in our human families as well as in the more-than-human world.

"The native habitat of the Windigo is the north woods, but the range has expanded in the last few centuries. As Johnston suggests, multinational corporations have spawned a new breed of Windigo that insatiably devours the earth's resources 'not for need but for greed.' The footprints are all around us if you know what to look for."

"We are all complicit," notes Kimmerer. "We've allowed the 'market' to define what we value so that the redefined common good seems to depend on profligate lifestyles that enrich the sellers while impoverishing the soul and the earth. Cautionary Windigo tales arose in a commons-based society where sharing was essential to survival and greed in any individual a danger to the whole. In the old times, individuals who endangered the community by taking too much for themselves were first counseled, then ostracized, and if the greed continued, they were eventually banished. The Windigo myth may have arisen from the remembrance of the banished, doomed to wander hungry and alone, wreaking vengence on those who spurned them. It is a terrible punishment to be banished from the web of reciprocity, with no one to share with you and no one for you to care for.

"I remember walking a street in Manhattan, where the warm light of a lavish home spilled out onto the sidewalk on a man picking through the garbage for his dinner. Maybe we've all been banished to lonely corners by our obsession with private property. We've accepted banishment even from ourselves when we spend our beautiful, singular lives on making more money, to buy more things that will feed but never satisfy. It is the Windigo way that tricks us into believing that belongings will fill our hunger, when it is belonging that we crave. On a grander scale, too, we seem to be living in an era of Windigo economics of fabricated demand and compulsive overconsumption. What Native peoples once sought to rein in, we are now asked to unleash in a systematic policy of sanctioned greed.

"The fear for me is far greater than just acknowledging the Windigo within. The fear for me is that the world has been turned inside out, the dark side made to seem light. Indulgent self-interest that our people once held to be monstrous is now celebrated as success. We are asked to admire what our people once viewed as unforgiveable. The consumption-driven mind-set masquerades as 'quality of life' but eats us from within. It is as if we've been invited to a feast, but the table is laid with food that nourishes only emptiness, the black hole of the stomach that never fills. We have unleashed a monster."

Later in her book, Kimmerer discusses how to defeat the Windigo in our midst through the "economy of the commons, wherein resources fundamental to our well-being, like water and land and forests, are commonly held rather than commodified. Properly managed, the commons approach maintains abundance, not scarcity. These contemporary economic alternatives strongly echo the indigenous world view in which the earth exists not as private property, but as a commons to be tended with respect and reciprocity for the benefit of all.

"And yet, while creating an alternative to destructive economic structures is imperative, it is not enough. It is not just changes in policy that we need, but also changes to the heart. Scarcity and plenty are as much qualities of the mind and spirit as they are of the economy. Gratitude plants the seed for abundance.