



# The Land Is Us

*Land contains the languages, the stories, and the histories of the people. It provides water, air, shelter, and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and songs. And land is home. —Thomas King<sup>1</sup>*



En'owkin Centre

The En'owkin Centre, which is located on the Penticton Indian Reserve. The En'owkin has a unique and diverse eco landscape surrounding the exterior of the facility.

Land plays a central role in the worldviews of most Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island. Land, however, is not understood as a piece of dirt, as real estate, as property, or as a resource. The animals, the plants, the mountains, the hills, and the rivers are a community to which one belongs.

Places are often associated with stories, meaning that the land is a teacher and the wellspring of meaning. To be separated from one's land, one's territory, then, is to be separated from one's culture, spirituality, and sense of self.

## The Land Is Us

*By Jeannette Armstrong<sup>2</sup>*

The land that I come from is very dry and semi arid. It's considered the northern tip of the Great Basin Desert and the ecosystem there is very, very fragile. At this time, the Okanagan is one of the most damaged areas and ecosystems in Canada because of its fragility. In our area many conservationists and environmentalists are very concerned about the species that are endangered and disappearing there. We live in an area where extirpations have been happening over the last one hundred years; I've seen some of those extirpations myself.

*This has been difficult because we grew up loving the land. We grew up loving each other on the land and loving each plant and each species the way we love our brothers and sisters and that's the point I want to get across.*



That doesn't just happen as an intellectual process. That doesn't just happen as a process of needing to gather food and needing to sustain our bodies for health. It happens as a result of how we interact with each other in our families..., in our extended family units, and in our communities; the networks that we make outward to other people who surround us on the land. Those networks are extremely important insofar as what happens to the land and how we interact with the land.

### ***My body is the land***

*In the Okanagan, our understanding of the land is that it's not just that we're part of the land, it's not just that we're part of the vast system that operates on the land, but that the land is us. In our language, the word for our bodies contains the word for land,*

so when I say that word, it means that not only is my ability to think and to dream present in that word but the last part of that word also means "the land."

Thus, in my mind, every time I say that word and I refer to myself, I realize that I am from the land. I'm saying that I'm from the land and that my body is the land...

I go out to the land to gather the foods that have given me life, and given my grandmothers life, and given my great-great-grandmothers life for many, many generations. When we go out to the land, our people have perfected a way of interacting with each other that is respectful to the land and respectful to each other but also fulfills some needs that we have that are human in terms of interaction and relationship to one another.

*What our grandparents have said is that the land feeds us, but we feed the land as well.*

What they meant by that was that we give our bodies back to the land in a very physical way, but we also do other things to the land. We live on the land and we use the land and, in so doing, we impact the land: we can destroy it, or we can love the land and it can love us back.

In the most basic sense, our use of the land relates to our need for food, for shelter, for clothing, and beyond.... There are things that we need to live and breathe every day. But beside that we need pleasure. We need to be loved and we need to have the support of our community and the love that people surrounding us can give us. If we think about how those two things are combined together and work together, if those two ideas and ideals can work together, then we can see how we can either impact the land in a negative way or in a positive way.

*If I look around at how the land has been impacted by what I call the Western culture, one of the things I see is an overuse of resources by some people and a lack of access to those same resources for others....*

There are some people who cannot access even the most basic things that they need.



*Healing Herbs, Diane Montreuil.*

# The Land Is Us

When you look at the idea of democracy from that perspective, you can see there's something profoundly wrong with a hierarchical system in which people sitting next to you or next door to you don't have access to the same things you do. That seems to me to be a profoundly basic communal principle: Everyone in a community needs to have the same access to the basics and the same access to the joys and pleasures of life....

## Speaking for the land

When we approach the decision-making process, ... we are different than other communities in that we have different people, trained as part of the family system, to be speakers for the children, for the mothers, for the Elders, for the medicine people, for the land, for the water....

My part has been to be trained by my Elders to think about the land and to speak about the land.... Each time a decision is made, even the smallest decision, my responsibility is to stand up and ask,

*How will it impact the land? How is it going to impact our food? How is it going to impact our water? How is it going to impact my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren: what's the land going to look like in their time?*

The realization that people and community are there to sustain you creates the most secure feeling in the world. When you feel that and you're immersed in that, then the fear starts to leave. When that happens, you're imbued with the hope that others surrounding you in your community can provide.... I'm talking about all of the people who live in the Okanagan and people who we reach outside of that. Not just the Indigenous People, because at this time in our lives, our Elders have said that unless we can "Okanaganize" those people in their thinking, we're all in danger in the Okanagan. It sounds very simple and yet it seems to be an overwhelming task....

The last thing that I want to share with you is something that makes a lot of sense to me and that is my father's words for insanity. For us it means that too many people are talking about different things rather than people talking about the same thing. There does seem to be insanity in the world because of what's missing inside in terms of our humanity with each other. When we start to take care of that, everything else will naturally follow.

## A Source of Belonging or Belongings?

By Robin Wall Kimmerer<sup>3</sup>

Two worldviews met on this continent, worldviews which colour our relations with the living land, which shape our answer to the question "What does land mean?"

A worldview in which land was understood as sacred, as our sustainer, our pharmacy, our identity, our home, our library—the place where we play out our moral responsibility in return for our very lives peopled with our non-human relatives: This is a way of being in which the tar sands are unthinkable.

This view of the Earth suddenly encountered another view, a kind of climate change in values. The whole notion of land as a set of relationships and moral responsibilities was replaced by the notion of land as rights: rights to land as property.

And what our people called the gifts of the land suddenly became natural resources, ecosystem services, and capital. Nature as family became nature as machine and our non-human relatives, our teachers, became mere objects for consumption. This is a way of being that invites us to the tar sands.

*This is the same question that has us teetering on the precipice of unparalleled extinction and climate chaos: Is the land a source of belongings or a source of belonging?*

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a professor of Environmental Science and Forestry at the State University of New York (Syracuse), member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*.



## Reseeding the future

In the work that we do, one of the things I've learned is the power of taking our young people out to the land to gather seeds or to gather our Indigenous foods.

We started a program to replant Indigenous plants to renew the imperilled habitat that we share with some endangered animal species; we've got about ten thousand plants going now.

What we have found is that when we take the young people out to restore the land, all kinds of community members from the non-native community come out to participate, from multicultural societies or from the senior people's communities....

One offshoot of this is that for the young people who are having such a difficult time (all young people are having a difficult time), it heals them. The process of being with people, out there on the land, has a healing impact.

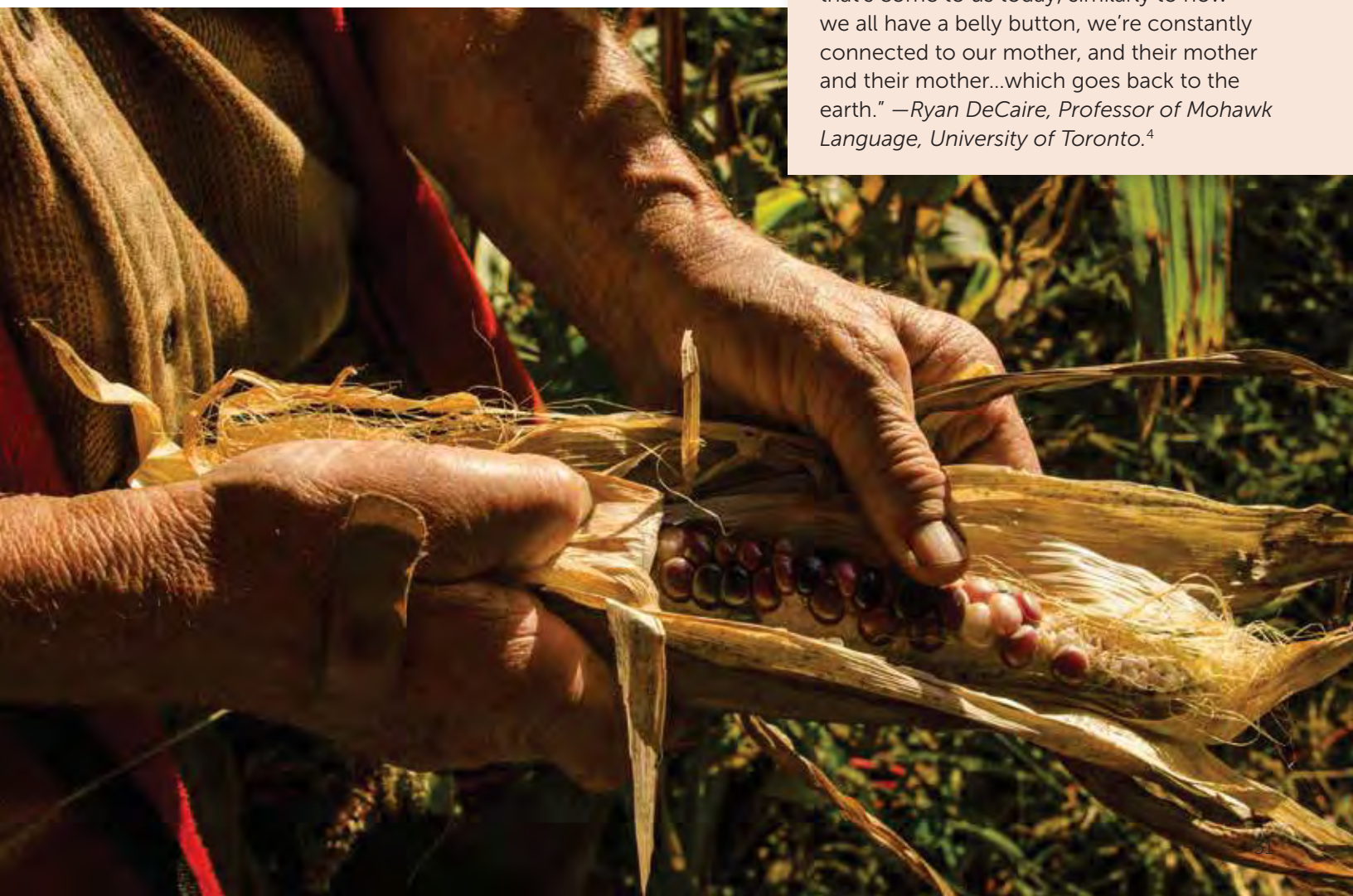
Earth to Table Legacies/Deborah Barndt

It's not just the work of collecting the seeds. People who are in farming know this: It's not just the work of collecting but it's being with people, the community, and communing with each other. It is how the land communes its spirit to you: it heals people and it does this in an incredibly profound way.

We need to think about how we can do more of that.

*Jeannette Armstrong is a Syilx Okanagan author, artist, and environmental educator. She is the director of the En'owkin International School of Writing and Arts and a council member of the Okanagan Nation, British Columbia.*

"[Corn is ] a connection to our ancestors because there are people who planted that corn for thousands and thousands of years, and had that connection with the earth and that's come to us today; similarly to how we all have a belly button, we're constantly connected to our mother, and their mother and their mother...which goes back to the earth." —Ryan DeCaire, Professor of Mohawk Language, University of Toronto.<sup>4</sup>



# The Land Is Us

## A Haudenosaunee Greeting: Giving Thanks for Our Relationships

By John Mohawk<sup>5</sup>

This is the talk that our people give at the beginning and at the end of every group gathering, so that we remember our relationships. The point of the talk is to remember that we are related to one another, related to the Earth, and related to all the things that support life—and we are related to the universe, too. I've always thought it a very useful thing to remember that relationship requires us to be thankful:

It is right when people come together that the first thing they do is greet one another. It's also true that we depend on our fraternity and sorority together, our friendships together. We acknowledge that we need

one another, we who walk about on the earth. We extend greetings and thanksgiving to each other, so be it our minds.

*We walk about on the Earth, she supports our feet, and we have been instructed that we will call her our Mother, the Earth. It is good when we come together that we remember her, and we think about what we owe her. We extend greetings and thanksgiving to our Mother, the Earth, so be it our minds.*

We look about us and we see growing from the Earth also the small grass life and herb life, thrush life. We know that from these things we get many things that we need. We get fiber to make things with, medicines, and even food. We need to put our minds to thinking about all the herbs and thinking about all the grasses, to think about



*Sunrise Prayer*, Diane Montreuil.



all the low-growing vegetable life that comes to us, and extend to them, the grass people, as we extend to people, our greetings and thanksgiving, so be it our minds.

There are others, too, as we walk about and see the waters. We see many different kinds of water. The waters that flow in small streams and the ones in great rivers and the ones in great oceans, and we also see that water is very central to our life. About the first thing we do in the morning when we get up is we use water to wash ourselves with, we use it to cook with. We need the water. Within our veins flows that water. We want to extend greetings and thanksgiving to the waters and all the water life, so be it our minds.

There is another: As you look about, what grows within our sight is the new tree life. The tree life also provides us with medicines, wood that keeps us warm, things we use to build our houses, but it does more than that. It also provides us with beauty, things that we can see and appreciate about the world we live in. Among those, there's a leader; in the world I come from it is the maple syrup tree. We want to think about that tree, too. We put our minds together as one mind and extend greetings and thanksgiving to all of the tree life and all of the spirit of the tree life in all of the world, so be it our minds.

And there's another. As we look up higher into the sky, we see those ones that fly about around us. When they come north in the springtime, they bring us a good song and cheer. They always lift up our spirits. As we look at them too, they know that they bring us knowledge and intelligence about the world that they have inhabited for so long. Let us think about all the bird life, especially that of the greatest birds—the eagles and the high-flying birds, too, the migratory birds. We extend greetings and thanksgiving to all the bird life, so be it our minds.

As we walk upon the earth, we see that there are others: four-legged beings that are related to us, and these four-legged beings also exist in a way in the world that brings us delight and brings us good cheer of our minds. To all of the four-legged beasts and all of the animals that walk about on the earth, we extend greetings and thanksgiving in the same spirit that we extend the greetings and thanksgiving to others.

And there's another. As we look up higher into the sky we see, also, that there is the one that walks across the sky in the daytime and brings light. That's the one that we call our elder brother, the sun. Let us think about that sun. It is the one that represents the power of the universe. We put



Owl's Path Media

*Sea King and Grizzly Bear, Tim Paul.*

our minds together as one mind and extend greetings and thanksgiving to our brother, the sun.

There's a nighttime sun, that's the grandmother moon, the one that also regulates the birth of everything on the earth, and we want to extend greetings and thanksgiving to our grandmother, the moon, so be it our minds.

There's another that each year comes from the West, what we call the thunder voices, and the thunder voices are the ones that bring the winds and the weather that changes and cleanses the earth. We want to acknowledge that those spirits change and cleanse the earth. We put our minds together as one mind and extend greetings and thanksgiving to the thunder voices.

There are the others. When we look up high in the sky, we can see that there are the stars that represent the face of the universe, unknowable to us, with knowledge that we've already forgotten. We want to extend greetings and thanksgiving to all of that, to all of the universe, to all the life of the universe, so be it our minds.

Finally, there's another. There's a mystery about the universe, a plan that brought us and made all of this coherent, the intelligence that created everything. We want to think about that. We want to extend greetings and thanksgiving to what they call the Great Creator, so be it our minds.

*John Mohawk was a respected teacher and farmer from the Turtle Clan of the Seneca (Onödowága, Haudenosaunee Confederacy) from Cattaraugus First Nation, New York, who died in 2006.*

 **Find out more about the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address here: [ltiv.ca/3/](http://ltiv.ca/3/)**



# The Land Is Us

## Acknowledging the Land

By *âpihtawikosisân*<sup>6</sup>

While acknowledging the land and the peoples who have traditionally inhabited a territory can serve a purpose, we must go well beyond a mere repetition of words.

If we think of territorial acknowledgments as sites of potential disruption, they can be transformative acts that to some extent undo Indigenous erasure. I believe this is true as long as these acknowledgments discomfit both those speaking and hearing the words. The fact of Indigenous presence should force non-Indigenous peoples to confront their own place on these lands. I would like to see territorial acknowledgments happening in spaces where they are currently absent....

However, as we are already seeing,

| *territorial acknowledgments can become stripped of their disruptive power through repetition.*

The purpose cannot merely be to inform an ignorant public that Indigenous peoples exist, and that Canada has a history of colonialism....

Moving beyond territorial acknowledgments means asking hard questions about what needs to be done once we're 'aware of Indigenous presence'.

| *It requires that we remain uncomfortable, and it means making concrete, disruptive change.*

How can you be in good relationship with Indigenous peoples, with non-human beings, with the land and water?

Writer and educator *Chelsea Vowel (âpihtawikosisân)* is Métis from *manitow-sâkahikan (Lac Ste. Anne)*, Alberta, residing in *amiskwaciwâskahikan (Edmonton)*.

📺 Find out more about land acknowledgements using the video resource from York University at [ltiv.ca/3/](http://ltiv.ca/3/)





## Classroom Connections

### Sacred Places

What are some of the places that have been considered of particular cultural or spiritual importance for the Indigenous Peoples living in your area?

- Divide into groups to research each site identified.
- Try to learn the traditional name(s) for each site identified.
- Find out about the stories associated with this place and why it is significant.
- If possible, visit one or more of the sacred sites identified.
- In your group, create your own land acknowledgement.  
(For examples, see: [ltiv.ca/3/](http://ltiv.ca/3/))

### Ecological Issues in Your Area

Identify a key ecological issue in your area.

This could involve water, mining, logging, construction, or other activities that endanger local ecosystems.

- Based on Robin Wall Kimmerer's and Jeannette Armstrong's reflections, how might these issues be seen from a perspective that perceives land as a sacred community rather than as a resource to be used?
- Are local Indigenous communities involved in any way in the ecological issue you have considered? Are there opportunities to get involved in this issue? (Writing letters, meeting with politicians, working with local Indigenous communities?) If so, choose at least one action.
- How can the Greening Initiative at your school connect with the learning of Armstrong's and Kimmerer's articles?
- Create a garden inspired by native plants and practices that reflects the culture of the Indigenous Peoples whose land you share. Find out about the medicinal and cultural significance of each plant in your garden.
- Plan an excursion to an Indigenous community or local conservation area.

## Sharing Circle

Before beginning your group dialogue, we suggest that you read out the Haudenosaunee Greeting, taking turns to read paragraphs as you move around the circle.



1. What struck you most in this session?
2. Describe a place in nature that is special to you. How do you feel when you are there? How might you feel if that place were lost or harmed?
3. How would our ways of life change if we understood land as "a source of belonging" rather than "a source of belongings"? "How can you be in good relationship with Indigenous Peoples, with non-human beings, with the land and water?"
4. Share a quote, insight, or image that sticks with you as we conclude this session.

