



Season 7, Episode 1: An Economy of Reciprocity

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Robin Kimmerer, Distinguished Teaching Professor and Director, Center for Native Peoples and the Environment

[MUSIC]

Robin

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Joanie

Welcome to season seven of Campus Conversations, the podcast. I'm Joni Mahoney, and I have the honor of serving as SUNY ESF's president. This season, we're working to explore the engagement of our ESF community beyond our campus and highlighting the interdisciplinary centers and offerings on our Syracuse campus, like the center for Native Peoples and the Environment. It is thus my pleasure to welcome Doctor Robin Kimmerer back to the podcast.

Robin was on season one, and I encourage everyone to listen to that episode because we had an opportunity to learn more about your history and what brought you here to ESF. But now I can't wait to get started to talk about what's happened since we last spoke and this new book that you have that I know a lot of people are anxiously awaiting. So welcome back, Robin.

Robin

Thanks, Joanie.

Joanie

Just a quick reminder. Robin Kimmerer is a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

Robin

Potawatomi.

Joanie

Potawatomi. Thank you very much. Robin is the author of the *Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World*, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, which has earned Robin Wright acclaim.

Your first book, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, was awarded the John Burroughs Medal for Outstanding Nature writing, and your other work has appeared in *Orion*, *Whole Terrain*, and numerous scientific journals. In 2022, *Braiding Sweetgrass* was adapted for young adults by Monique Gray Smith, and the new edition reinforces how wider ecological understanding stems from listening to the Earth's oldest teachers the plants around us.

Before we get into the new book, I'm curious, you are introduced as a scientist and you are a bestselling author. Those don't always go together. And I wonder, do you feel like a scientist? Do you feel like an author, or do you feel like this wonderful blend of both?

Robin

I'm going to say both. You know, I, I feel so privileged to be able to claim both of those paths in my life. And yes, I am absolutely a scientist, trained as a as a botanist and a plant ecologist. But after I decided that I wanted to tell science stories more broadly, I had the great good fortune to have people be reading and listening to those ideas. So I love both elements of my career.

Joanie

And I know we do have members of the faculty here that are authors as well. There's just this wonderful mix between being a scientist and being able to communicate the science to this broader audience, because it's of a lot more value. The research and the understanding that you have and want to share if you're also this fabulous communicator. So we're lucky that you are both.

And I was curious. I know you are now Director Emeritus, but I was hoping that maybe you could give us a little bit of the history of how the Center for Native Peoples and the environment came to be at ESF.

Robin

Yeah. This center is about 20 years old now and it really came to be out of this. I'm going to be honest, out of the frustration that indigenous knowledge was very largely erased in academia and as a native person, I had access to these teachings and these ethics and to say nothing of land

based knowledge that can contribute so powerfully to looking for sustainability solutions. But it was largely absent from academic discourse.

And so the Center for Native Peoples and the environment was born out of a very strong intention to, in a sense, decolonize ice universities by creating opportunities for indigenous knowledge to be present in our curriculum and in our research, but also to present opportunities for native students to come to ESF and find their knowledge valued here, not sequestered in a back room somewhere.

Joanie

So you are the founder of the center. And then is it you who went out and found things like the opportunity that the Sloan Foundation brings to students that are here as graduate students at ESF?

Robin

Yes, yes. So much of the development of the center has relied on seeking external funding and opportunities, and we've been pretty lucky in that regard.

We started with the, we laugh and say where the center was really started with a bake sale.

Joanie

But it's probably not that far off, right?

Robin

It is not. It was something it felt so important to do. We're going to do it whether we had money or not. But we found ways to utilize funds that were out there and like for education, for undergraduate research. We said, great, I'm glad there those pools of money. We want to do undergraduate research for indigenous students in indigenous homelands.

So we really got our start with with trying to adapt what we wanted to do to the existing opportunities. I'm really glad to say that now we don't have to, wiggle our way into those funding opportunities, but just more and more, there are opportunities for bringing indigenous knowledge into the academic world.

Joanie

So the world is catching up with your 20 year old idea.

Robin

It sometimes it feels like that in a in a really wonderful way. Yeah.

Joanie

And I've had the opportunity to meet some of the students that have come because of the existence of the center, and especially you being here at ESF, and they are bringing all of that traditional knowledge here and combining it with the..

How do you describe the addition, to the traditional knowledge that students bring here?

Robin

I really refer to it as sort of conventional western science.

Joanie

Conventional western science.

Robin

Yeah, yeah.

Joanie

And so they, they marry that and we're all better off because of their participation here at ESF. So I know we have you to thank for that. And I know that you successfully handed the center directorship off to Neil Patterson, who I've also had the opportunity to speak with. But you're not too far away, I understand.

Robin

Oh, no. No, I continue to be, you know, play a mentoring vision or visioning role with the center, as well as to continue advising and collaborating with our students. But because of ESF support for the center, we went from basically the center being me and five undergraduates to we now have, multiple faculty members, whole curriculum, more than a dozen graduate students and undergraduates and beautiful staff who are doing the work of the center.

So it is a real joy to be able to step back and see that it's going to, continue flourishing without me.

Joanie

No, I can't imagine how gratifying it must be to see what you started grow into what it is today. And it's such an important part of ESF. So switching gears a little, I would love to talk about your new book, *The Serviceberry*.

I read a review of the book and I can't wait to be able to see it myself. I think I'll be able to read it. Tomorrow is November 19th, the day that it becomes available to the public.

Robin

It is.

Joanie

All right. So we're recording this on the 18th. People will probably have it available by the time they listen.

But like millions of other people, I've enjoyed your writing. And this *Serviceberry* is. Well, I'll let you tell us about the subject matter and why the *serviceberry* and what the *serviceberry tree* is.

Robin

You know, the invitation to have this book into the world came from, first of all, an essay that I wrote for *emergence* magazine a few years ago in *Joni*.

They asked, would you write us something about economics? And I said, no, I don't know anything about economics. And they said, are you sure you don't? And I began to reflect that. Of course, as an ecologist, I know a great deal about the economy of nature and have often felt that here we are complicit in a human economic system that I don't understand.

I know I'm part of it, but I, I don't really understand it. And so I said, sure, I'm going to think about this, to think about the way that the economies of nature is exemplified by a tree like the *serviceberry* could guide us to revisit some of the assumptions we have about our hyper capitalist economy.

Joanie

And we see now the outgrowth of that hyper capitalist economy. And it's really counter intuitive to us as a species because we're depleting, we're not reciprocating to the extent that we are supposed to be, and we'll be better off if we learn how to do. Is that right?

Robin

Exactly. That's exactly the idea. And it's, it's rooted in the contemporary science of biomimicry, of saying, how could we learn from nature, how it is that we might live. But that's a hallmark of indigenous knowledge as well. You know that indigenous knowledge is the original biomimicry of trying to take the lessons of the natural world and follow them.

But things like, we know that we need regenerative economies, right? We know we need circular economies in which there's no such thing as waste. There's just recycling and using again and again.

You know, the ideas of Western economics that say we must always be growing. Any ecologist will tell you that's not possible, right? The laws of thermodynamics have not been repealed on behalf of our species, and yet we behave as if they have. So, the book very explicitly looks at this wonderful, generous tree of upstate New York and many other places and says, well, how could we create an economy that more emulates the economies of nature so that we don't continue to outstrip the carrying capacity of our planet?

Joanie

You know, the very beginning of this review that I read, which I read to get, a little bit more understanding of what the book is. So we could have the conversation today, but it starts out with the tension between ecology and economics. And right in the very beginning, it jumps off the page at me as, why do we have tension between economics and ecology?

It's not going to work for us as a species on this planet. If we're doing anything to fight against the ecology of the planet. And so we do need to rethink our ideas of how the economy works.

Robin

Absolutely.

Joanie

So, *The Serviceberry*, then, if you could tell the listeners and me, how is it an example of the kind of economy that we could have?

Robin

Well, like many flowering plants, the serviceberry is really generous, you know, has this beautiful frost of white flowers. I think it's one of the first flowers to cut trees to flower in the spring. So it's giving away all this pollen right, to the bees in the, in the spring. And then around here and around the 4th of July, it has this beautiful crop of, of really juicy red berries which are super attractive to songbirds of all kinds.

So again, it's giving away its abundance. It's not hoarding what it has produced, right? It's not keeping it for themselves. There's a giveaway happening. But that giveaway is not like one direction. Like that. The serviceberry is a super altruist. No. In order, in return for all that pollen they're producing, they're attracting pollinators, right. That are going to complete the lifecycle of the plant in return for those delicious berries. Those birds are dispersed of the seeds. So it's like an exchange of gifts. The serviceberry gives the berries, the birds give delivery services, for, for dispersal. So it's reciprocity in action.

Joanie

So the serviceberry tree as a species exists because of the work the birds are doing.

Robin

Exactly. And the pollinators and the birds exist because of the work the service berry is doing.

It's circular. It's this web of reciprocity. And, you know, because that tree is called the serviceberry, it seemed a really good companion if I was challenged to write about the delivery of goods and services, of an economy. And while I was writing this right in the midst of it, my neighbor calls me up, who is a farmer, and she says the service berries are ripe. Why don't you come over and pick some? And I'm like, what?

Joanie

Are you? I mean, that's like unbelievable.

Robin

Yeah.

Joanie

And had you settled on the serviceberry as part of your story about the economy before that. Oh my goodness. Wow.

Robin

And then my neighbor was modeling a gift economy. They have a lot of beautiful pick your own berries. But this particular happening was right in the midst of the pandemic. And she said people need something really good in their lives. I'm opening the farm for free. Pick your own.

So there she was, joining the gift economy that the serviceberries demonstrate. So that serendipity really led me to be thinking about the ways that, that we could disrupt the market economy with gift economies, not replace it. I don't think it's going market capitalism isn't going away. Anytime soon. But could we, through these small acts of mimicking the way that nature works could we create an economy based on reciprocity and gift exchange that creates community rather than disrupts community?

Joanie

So I just can't believe I, I would be so interested to see the inner workings of your mind that someone came to you and said, will you please write a book about the economy or economics? And you went to this serviceberry tree and were able to explain to people what the whole gift economy is by using the serviceberry tree as an example, and I just can't imagine being able to get from that to this book. And it's just wonderful that you are and that it became so clear for you. And then you were able, I think, in a pretty succinct way of telling this story for the lay people to understand what these gift economies are.

So the author of this article said that you make a powerful case for gift economies as an alternative to our market driven society. But it sounds like you're saying they can both exist. More of the gift economy will be better, even if we don't get everything. If we just move in that direction, we'll be better off?

Robin

Exactly. And once again, Joanie, I would say the way my mind works is I'm always looking at nature as an example of what are you what are you telling us about how we might live?

Joanie

That's the whole thing is, is your relationship with nature. And I think that a lot of us didn't have the benefit of growing up understanding that nature was telling us something. And you had this wonderful opportunity to grow up in a culture where that was front and center And we would all just be so much better off if we understood that that and had the humility to understand that we're just part of that. We're not. Lord of the nature, you know, we're part of that. So you have this innate and sort of default where you look to nature in a way that I can't imagine how long I would have been thinking before I could get from a book about the economy to this wonderful example of this serviceberry tree. Did you even know that you were going to write about the gift economy? Or did you have to stop and think about what kind of economy book you were going to write?

Robin

I did want to write about the gift economy. Because it's it's something that I touch upon in

Braiding Sweetgrass, but didn't really get a chance to dig into. I was interested in that. And again, the lessons of the land help respond to the question that you're asking of, of what role could a gift economy have? And it's not going to replace market capitalism. But just like in a forest, you know, a forest isn't a monoculture. There are little patches of diversity and, and, and really, rapid growth. For example, we have a mosaic of ecosystems. And I think we could have a mosaic of gift economies. And that's really sort of the call is to say yes, we have this overarching extractive capitalism which needs accountability and needs revision, but that's a very slow process.

But at the same time, couldn't we have running in parallel mosaics that include more gift economies, more reciprocity, with the hopes that eventually, like a forest understory, those gift economies will replace destructive capitalism?

Joanie

So I think you have an example or two of gift economies that already exist that we can illustrate for people. I read somewhere in here, like a public library system. Is that what you would call a good example of a gift economy?

Robin

That's one manifestation of it to me. I choose books, because I have too many books. Right? And economics is about what we do with surplus. So, you know, when I'm done with a book, I might say, you've got to read this and I'll give it to you. I'm not going to sell you that book. I'm going to give it to you because you're my friend, because I think you'll be interested. That's a tiny little gift economy. But what about in our neighborhoods, those little free libraries that come to our attention, right, where people have made these, these lovely structures into house books, to share with their neighbors for free? That's a step up from sharing one book with a friend, right to sharing with your neighbor. And then I think a public library is a step above it, above that. Not that it's better, but in social organization. But libraries are gift economies, right? We don't sell books. We borrow them. We understand that those books are common property and so we share them. We share them respectfully, we use them, and then we give them back. It's that notion that we don't all have to own everything

Joanie

So interesting.

Robin

We could share things. And when we look at what is propelling us to the brink of climate disaster, it's too much consumption, right? And so what if we say, well, we don't need to own everything?

What if we have, a community tool shed with a lawn mower that five families use instead of everybody having their own lawn mower?

Well, you know, economists would say that's a terrible idea. We all need to buy, buy, buy things. But look at the environmental impact of that and the fact that you're now mowing your lawn alone. And not having relationships with your neighbors. If you're sharing, you're creating relationship and meeting your needs at the same time. So that's kind of the idea of these collaborative gift economies.

Joanie

And, you know, thinking about your example, you're also making it more likely that you're going to live on a planet that is comfortable and in balance. So there's a big benefit to me if my neighbors will share the lawn mower with me, rather than each of them by their own lawn mower, which has just in its manufacturing, a big negative impact.

I love the way you're explaining it to people, because it's something that I'm guessing you've always known that these gift economies exist and should exist. So is there an example from your youth? You and I were just starting to talk before we came out about a potlatch. What is a potlatch? I thought it was a typo in this article and they meant potluck, but it's not. It's something very different. So what is a potlatch?

Robin

A potlatch is an example of an indigenous gift economy from the Pacific Northwest. And potlatch is are ancient ceremonies that are big giveaways, where a family who is holding this ceremony gives away excess. You might give away almost everything that you own to your community, and it's a way of paying honor and respect of saying wealth in our society means I have enough to share and I'm going to share it. Not wealth is oh, look how much I have, and I'm going to put a wall around it and defend it fiercely. Wealth means I have enough to share. Look at this. I'm sharing everything. So it's a system of, in a way, economic wealth redistribution, because maybe next year another family is going to have a potlatch. And the very things that were given to them they will give away.

So it's a circular economy that creates mutual respect and allows everybody in the community to have what they need, rather than it all being accumulated in, in, in one family.

Joanie

And trying to keep up with the Joneses would be the opposite of that.

Robin

Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Joanie

It will be wonderful if folks who have so much and have enough to share would see the, sign of that being their ability to share, it would just make things, a lot better.

You know, I'm reminded of an idea that some ESF students had a few years ago where when students move out of Centennial Hall, they can leave the things that they used but won't need for wherever they're going. And then our students put them all out on tables when the new batch of students moves in in the fall, and if there's kitchen items there or things that you would like, rather than go out to the store and rebuy the rug and the lamp and, you know, the spatulas and the bowls, the mixing bowls take what you need. And then at the end of the year, bring it back and put it back on the table for the students that are coming. And I'll bet you that, I don't know, maybe they did know about a potlatch, but that's really an example. It seems.

Robin

It is a perfect example of how we already have these gift economies in our lives, and it's not any surprise that ESF students are doing that right, because they understand this and are modeling it. Yeah. So that is a really perfect example of the gift economies that can exist in our lives.

And as we amplify them, we reduce waste. We reduce consumption, and we create kind of intergenerational sharing, which is really how we want to live.

Joanie

And it's a wonderful sense of community. If you go over on the days that those events are happening at the end of the year, in the beginning of the year, it really is a wonderful sense of community that we get from that rather than packing everything into our box, throwing it in the car and driving away by ourselves. And you don't need all of those things that you had for that time in your life in that space. So I love that example.

But and, I imagine if you had the answer to this question, the world could change. But how do we get people to move toward a gift economy? I mean, your book is probably going to inspire a lot of that kind of thinking, but how do you think that we can convey that message that it's not all one way? It's better for all of us if we get this reciprocity and circular idea and own it.

Robin

Well, that's just the question I'm trying to explore. Like, how do we take these ideas which seem so commonsensical, right. How do we come to practice them? And I think it's kind of an exercise in expanding our imagination, because how many people have even heard of a gift economy? And to know that it is a longstanding way to provide for a community.

So what I hope to do is really nothing more than expand people's imagination to say, oh, capitalism in a market economy isn't the only way. There are these other ways. And, you know, with kind of been doing them all along, what if we amplified those? What if we made it more systemic rather than just a little backyard volunteering, which is not to take anything away from backyard volunteering? That's a gift economy right there. But how do we do more of that? And I think that reduces our consumption. I know it does. It increases our sense of community and well-being. And let's face it, when you have that sense of well-being, you're going to consume less because you don't need to you, you recognize the abundance in your life.

Joanie

I think that's true because I think a lot of consumption comes from people feeling like they're lacking something, and that going out and buying and filling up your house with things is filling some kind of void that really can be filled and better filled. If you have this sense of community, I'm gonna continue to think about the ways that we can model that here at ESF, but really just watch your students or watch the students that come here because they have these wonderful ideas.

And I'm always bragging about our students when I'm out and about. And, you know, I don't want to put the weight of the world on their shoulders. So I want to be careful how I say it, but they are just going to make things so much better the way they think. And the way they're willing to cooperate with each other. And there isn't this race to consume. There's a zero waste mentality that they come here with and then build on.

But I, I have heard students say we don't really like hearing all the time that we're the solution, and that you're just waiting for all of us to get out there to solve all the problems that the world created before we got here.

So that's one of the reasons I tell people you'll love ESF. If you're a student that feels that way, because you will come here and work alongside faculty that feel the same way you do, and they've dedicated their entire professional careers to being part of the solution, so you won't feel like you're in this alone, and that all the generations ahead of you selfishly took and just left you to clean up the mess. It's not that way here at ESF.

Robin

Yeah, that's what I treasure about our community here, too. That real dedication to doing things differently and to it's it's intergenerational. Right. We're all in this together. And I think that's very much practiced here. And, you know, to that end, one of the elements in writing this piece is in my own recognition. Like, I don't know anything about economics, but my colleagues do. And so one of the first people I talked to was Doctor Valerie Luzadis, this a wonderful economist. And I think she's former president of the Society of Ecological Economics. And so I had in our faculty someone to bounce these ideas off. And so I picked a big bowl of serviceberries and brought it to Valerie. And a little gift exchange of berries for knowledge. And vocabulary.

So what you say is exactly right. You know, our faculty are leading the way as well as our students.

Joanie

And I'll bet you that you learned along the way that you did know more about economics than you thought. Because once you hear these ideas, you just see them through a different lens.

Robin

It's true, it's true. And my lack of understanding and my acknowledged ignorance and I'll call it acknowledged humility, made some things glaringly obvious to me. And, you know, the book writes a lot about, well, where you were going with scarcity, this scarcity mindset of, oh, you, you gotta buy more because you're not good enough until you do. That scarcity mindset is manufactured scarcity, right? Oh, it's not even real.

Joanie

We have been manipulated, right? I mean, there's a whole industry of people who are paid to convey this idea of scarcity to us, and then we react the way they want us to react by buying and buying and buying, which increases their bottom line, but ultimately leaves us all on a planet that's not healthy.

Robin

Yes, yes. And in fact, that idea of scarcity, I think we have just seen play out in in an election where people have come to have embraced that story, that I need more, I need more, and

Joanie

Me first.

Robin

Me first. And so these ideas are pervasive. And so anything we can do to see those values that are underlying our economy and just say, are those my values? And if not, how will we change that?

Joanie

And that's the question, how will we change that? Because the fighting and the name calling isn't going to change anyone's mind on either side. I had this incredible opportunity a couple weeks ago, maybe a month ago, to hear Jane Goodall. I mean, it was wonderful to sit in the room where

she was interviewed by a New York Times reporter during Climate Week, and it was just one on one. And they had a conversation and I was able to listen to her ideas, and she talked about what she thinks and how she lives. And when the interviewer said, do you try to change people's minds, like, do you advocate those positions with people that you meet? And she said, no. She said, I can't walk into this room and tell people what they should think and what they should do, she said. I just tell them why I think the things I think and why I do the things I do, and I'm able to change their hearts and change their minds, but not by judgment or finger pointing or dictating how they should think and the things that they should do.

And it was just like a light bulb because it was. It's the way I feel about a lot of the things that you write. And I don't know how you react to this, but it is true that it makes so much sense. I don't want to take away from the brilliance by saying it is obvious. But we didn't all think about it and what we're doing hasn't been working, and we needed somebody to spell it out for us in a simple way and just let the light bulbs go off and listening to Jane Goodall, I've repeated that to my children. My my grown adult children.

You know, in this election season we just had there's just been so much acrimony and debate. And I've tried to say, you know, we could learn a lot from that mindset where you're not trying to beat people. You know, you're not trying to bash them over the head with their thinking. You know, you want to change their mind.

How could someone change your mind? I ask my sons, you know, are they going to change your mind by telling you you're stupid or you're ignorant, right? No, you're probably not going to be motivated to rethink things. But if you talk to somebody who says, you know, I support this candidate because here's all these wonderful things, they've said or done, or this is the way my mind thinks about the planet that we're living in.

And, you know, you might prompt different thinking that way. And I hope that this book does that, and I hope it does it in a really broad way. I don't know, with *Braiding Sweetgrass*, that book was handed around so much. It's amazing you're a bestselling author because we all read the same books over and over. Everybody was engaged in a gift economy, right?

And probably a big part of you appreciated that, that people were sharing your book and how many more people read it probably than ever bought it, right?

Robin

Yes, I love that.

Joanie

And I hope that Service Berry is just really widely read. And you know, I'm gonna continue to think about the ways that we can change hearts and minds and, you know, with a little drop of cynicism on my part, maybe engage in the opposite manipulation.

We've been manipulated to think about this scarcity and to overconsume and create all this waste. And but what are the things that are motivating the people that have a lot invested in this hyper-capitalist economy and overconsumption? Like what motivates them to do that? And so if we can find the ways that a gift economy satisfies that...

Robin

Yes,

Joanie

...motivation. And if we could just let people know that keeping up with the Joneses means giving more away. If you're the one who gives away the most, you're the best, right?

Robin

Right, right. It is it it would. We are really thinking about like, Jane Goodall approach. I love how you've shared that. Not telling people what to do, but saying, you know, there are other options. Here's one. You know, you could choose that or not.

And, you know, there's a place where I turn again to indigenous knowledge in trying to upset that status, of seeing the one who has the most status is the one who gives away the most. In Potawatomi thinking we actually have a monster. The evil one and the evil one. We it's called the the Windigo. And they are evil because they care more for themselves than for their community.

A Windigo, by definition, the monster is the one who takes too much. And so in our culture it is already flipped. And so we can look at those individuals around us who are claiming to be, you know, powerful and at the top of the heap. But in my way of thinking, they would be the monsters.

Joanie

Interesting. And you had the benefit of growing up with that knowledge and that mindset. I wonder how you stay so patient and calm, because when you watch everything that's happening around you and you know there's other ways, perhaps better ways to be doing things, how are you resisting? Just screaming at the rest of us about the error of our ways?

Robin

I'll scream into my pillow, don't! Of course, of course. I feel that rage, that anger, that sort of disbelief, like it's right there. Look at the answer is an answer. I don't ever claim to have the answer, but an answer is right here.

But you know, it was just this weekend that I was at a think tank between folks from the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, Haudenosaunee leaders, conservation leaders, and, the late Tadodaho Leon Shenandoah was quoted. And, is probably not exactly the words, but he said that gentleness is the greatest strength, and gentleness is the most powerful tool that we have. And that sense of treating people with kindness and respect, not knocking him upside the head, is a powerful tool. Takes a long time, but it's a real change that happens and so I know that I'm guided by that kind of thinking.

Joanie

And you're a perfect illustration of that kind of thinking. I would put you and Doctor Goodall in the same category, because look at the megaphone that you now have and the power that you now have because of an accumulation of gentleness and your way of talking to people and explaining your point of view on things, has earned you this ability now to reach millions of people.

And I think if you compare that maybe to some of the people that are doing the screaming, you'll find that you have earned more power through that gentleness. Your strength really has come from that gentleness. I thought the same thing about Jane Goodall. When I was listening to her, I thought, how could this woman walk into a room and tell people why she lives the way she lives and not be compelling?

And can you think of an elected official? And I'm a former one, so I can say this, that ever gets that kind of respect, where they can just walk into a room and you can hear a pin drop, and everybody wants to do things the way they're doing it. They don't really have that same strength...

Robin

That's true

Joanie

...you have by being the way you are. So I guess that answers my question about why you're not screaming from the top of the mountain, because you're more effective.

Robin

It doesn't work.

Joanie

It doesn't work. I wish you had told me that like 30 years ago. Robin. I was more the scream at the top of the mountain kind of person. But I can still learn, right?

Robin

Well, I also want to say that there are times, there are times for that big voice from the top of the mountain. Absolutely. To shake people up and get them to pay attention. Absolutely.

Joanie

But you have to have earned their attention. And that's the patience with the kindness and the gentleness. Because if you ever did that right now, if you ever stood at the top of the mountain and screamed, people would be listening, but they might not have. If that's how you started, your...

Robin

Could be.

Joanie

...messages, right?

Robin

Yes, yes.

Joanie

And you know, one of the things about this book that I want to make sure that we say is it's a really hopeful book. And I think this is simple, but it's so true, and I think it will bring peace to a lot of people. When you wrote that all that we need to live flows through the land. It's so true.

Robin

Yeah.

Joanie

Everything we need to live nature gives us. All it needs is for us to make it possible for nature to continue to give it to us. Right? I mean, we're supposed to be the birds eating the berries and

making the species stronger and spread the seeds and survive. But we're just taking without doing the spreading part of that analogy.

Robin

Yes, exactly. It is that invitation to be like those birds, to be in reciprocity with the gifts of the earth, not just blindly accumulating them with our eyes close to the damage that that does. But the thing is, is isn't that also more fun? Isn't that joyful?

Joanie

Yes.

Robin

You know, to be in community and say, look what I can do. I'm not just a wrecker of the planet. I'm a healer of the planet. Just by being a real human, by being, you know, but by exercising my responsibilities as a human. And I think that's another way that we win against a destructive economy. Because when you have more fulfillment and meaning and happiness, I mean, isn't that what economies are for?

Joanie

Yes. Presumably.

Robin

Presumably. Right.

Joanie

I love this too. The author says that this way of thinking aligns with the so-called cuddly capitalism seen in some Nordic countries, where policies prioritize well-being and foster high levels of happiness. And I've never heard of a cuddly capitalism, but it's somewhere between what we are talking about here with the gift economy.

And, you know, in my mind when you're talking about it, I'm imagining bringing you to someone's house where, like locked up in the attic. If you open the doors, it's just all this abundance, right? But, I mean, what good is that doing you if you have more than you can use? And it would just be so much better if a status sign as a human being would be how much you're giving away.

And it's also just a mindset. I believe that the clutter is so damaging to our, our sense of well-being and just more and more and more stuff, you know, so it's a gift to me to be able to use your lawnmower and that whole idea of everything, practically everything that I use, we could share.

Robin

Yeah. And we probably have more friends and, and more neighbors and

Joanie

Yeah.

Robin

And more good conversations over the fence. And, you know, when we look at some of the studies that have shown that isolation and loneliness in the United States is rampant, so much so that it's, deleterious to public health. Well, sharing things in this way also as an antidote to that kind of loneliness.

Joanie

You know, I love that kind of thinking, because young people are really struggling with social media and the isolation that it is. It's like these virtual friends without any real human connection. And this gift economy presents an opportunity for connection in the real world.

Robin

It does.

Joanie

So we have our work cut out for us. You have given us a blueprint of another way that can be healing and helpful. We just need to figure out in our own lives how to put it into practice.

Like you said, the forest floor is made up of all these separate. What did you call them? Are they ecosystems or.

Robin

Little mosaic patches?

Joanie

Mosaic patches, right. So in my mosaic patch, how do I create a gift economy? I have heard about local business owners that have adopted kind of a bartering system. Where they say, I'm the dry

cleaner and I'll give you some free dry cleaning if you'll repair my jewelry. And the bartering is another way.

Robin

Yeah. Mutual aid societies. There's, repair cafes, there's all these kind of creative things that people are doing. If when you put them all together, it starts looking like a serviceberry economy.

Joanie

You know, we've come up with a few different ways that we can be like that serviceberry gift economy. So I encourage people to read it. And I will say we didn't talk about it, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention that you have earned a lot of accolades for your work, and one that I say all the time is the MacArthur genius.

And one of the things that I think is most touching and really illustrates for people, your humility is how they couldn't get a hold of you to tell you that they were trying to make you a MacArthur genius. I mean, you're just so not in this for the accolades that they had to find other ways to get a hold of you, to tell you that you had won.

But congratulations on that award. And then earlier this fall, you were in the white House. What was that?

Robin

Boy, that was another phone call. I never expected to get.

Joanie

I can't imagine how fun it would be to be your daughter and just get to witness this, day to day life of Doctor Robin Kimmerer.

Robin

Oh, man. We laugh. Yeah, I was so privileged and honored to have a call from the white House to let me know that President Biden wanted to give me the National Humanities Medal.

Joanie

That is amazing and so well deserved. So what does that entail?

Robin

I sort of said, well, I got to look at my schedule and who's the person on for the way I said, most people clear their calendars.

Joanie

But I might have a student that needs me, right?

Robin

I cleared my calendar.

Joanie

How much time between the call and the event?

Robin

About ten days.

Joanie

Oh my goodness. Okay. And then I would be a little less surprised. I had no idea. I did not know that you had won that award and were going to the white House until I saw the photos.

Robin

Yeah, we weren't allowed to tell anybody either. It was embargoed until the day of the ceremony. But my my daughter's and my ten year old grandson got to go with me.

Joanie

Oh, nice.

Robin

It was very special. And to hear President Biden speak of the role of culture and arts in transforming societies towards sustainability and justice, it was really deeply meaningful, seemingly for for the nation and certainly for the medalists. It was it was really, a day to remember.

Joanie

That must have been gratifying to hear somebody at that level saying the right things.

Robin

Yes.

Joanie

That's great. And I saw some pictures. Is Larkin your daughter's name?

Robin

Yes.

Joanie

Larkin shared some photos of you with some really famous people. You were in good company down there. I looked at the list of awardees I saw. Aaron Sorkin was on the list. LeVar Burton was on the list?

Robin

Yes.

Joanie

Queen Latifah was not on the list. But I saw you in a picture with Queen Latifah. That was wild.

Robin

Well, because they gave the, National Medal for the Arts in the same ceremony as the National Medal for Humanities. So Queen Latifah was in the arts list.

Joanie

Okay, okay. In my mind, I had her there because she was honoring, you know, where she should be, right? Right.

Robin

No, no, no. But it was pretty heady to be with these incredible artists.

Joanie

That must have been such a fun experience.

Robin

It was.

Joanie

And to share that. Did you say granddaughter or grandson?

Robin

My grandson and he's of my grandchildren old enough to go to the White House. And, it was so touching. After we had our pictures taken and the medal bestowed, President Biden in this really grandfatherly way, puts his arm around my grandson and said, "Here. I shouldn't do this. They'll tell me I'm taking too much time, but come here". And he brought him. This was in the Oval Office. He brought him behind the resolute desk and had my grandson sit in the president's chair.

Joanie

Oh, I have goosebumps,

Robin

Joanie. It was amazing. And he said, "You know, I just want you to get a feel for this chair in case you ever want to be president".

Joanie

Oh my goodness. I think President Biden is such a nice person. Did you make any connection to Syracuse when you were with him?

Robin

Yes. Yes of course. Yes. Yeah. We had a little bit of time to chat and, yeah. So I said we're we're here from Syracuse.

Joanie

He has a lot of his heart still here in Syracuse.

Robin

He does.

Joanie

He's made that clear in the past. He lived here when he was in law school and unfortunately lost his first wife and baby daughter. He had just, I think, been elected to the Senate. And between the time he was elected and when he took office. And he's been through a lot of tragedy. And I don't think it's a coincidence that he's just this wonderful, kind person. I mean, whether you agree with this politics or not is a totally different conversation.

Robin

Exactly.

Joanie

But as a human being and the way he treated your grandson, I think is pretty remarkable.

It says a lot about him as a person. So I'm glad you had that experience and that you could share it with your grandson. I'm sure he'll never forget that.

Robin

Never forget that. And I would say that in the backdrop of getting to meet LeVar Burton, and Queen Latifah and, you know, Joy Harjo, for me, one of the most wonderful moments, as well as when we walked into the room for this ceremony, there was Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland,

Joanie

Oh, that's great. And did your grandson get to meet her as well?

Robin

Yes. Yeah.

Joanie

That's great. And I'm imagining that she's, her term is coming to an end.

Robin

I imagine that's true.

Joanie

Yeah, unfortunately. Do you have a relationship with her? Did you know her before she had this role?

Robin

No. We've had years long mutual admiration society, I guess. I say, and some conversations in the past, but I wouldn't say that I really know her. But she's one of my heroes.

Joanie

In a conversation for another day, I've been listening to a podcast and it's, a biography of the US presidents in chronological order. And it's just amazing to me how wrongheaded we were as a society in so many ways when it comes to indigenous people, and not the least of which is that all of this knowledge that we should have been absorbing like a sponge, we were trying to change.

Do you feel like you've seen that change in your life, where your traditional ways are people are hearing it better now?

Robin

Oh yeah. You know, when I think about, you know, the fact that as we talked last time, I think about my grandfather, who was sent away to those residential schools in order to extinguish our knowledge, and it was just two years ago now that the Biden administration put forward a memorandum saying that the federal government in all land management decision making, should elevate traditional ecological knowledge from attempted erasure to current federal policy, that it's a huge transformation.

Joanie

And you were here for both your grandfather and for the...

Robin

I was I know it is.

Joanie

I mean, it's wonderful that we're on the right track, but if only your grandfather was here to hear that, you know. So. Well, I, I feel like the luckiest person, Robin, that I get my time with you like this. I hope everybody else enjoys this conversation. And I look forward to the book release and more conversations about this gift economy and the ways we can be participating ourselves.

Robin

Thank you so much, Joanie.

Joanie

Thanks, Robin.