

# Walking the Sweetgrass Road: Sweet Water Reflections

By Kim Wheatley Traditional Anishinaabe Grandmother

As we approach the oncoming season of spring, many of us will be engaged in a beloved winter activity called maple syrup harvesting. Some may head out to trails, and some may attend teaching spaces, but wherever you go, what you will meet is the ancient indigenous practice of harvesting from one of our most precious gifts of creation.

Ininaatig (The Standing Being), or the Sugar Maple as its known in English, is a magical tree in some ways. The gift of the sweet water which becomes some of the most treasured syrup in the world, and distinctly a prized Canadian export, has its roots firmly embedded within Indigenous ingenuity. The coveted maple syrup that is acquired through the gathering of sap is a gift that only occurs once a year.

This syrup finds a reason to make an appearance only when the wintery days begin to warm a little bit, but the nights are still frosty cold. It's a gift from the trees and Canada exports about 75% of the world's maple syrup.

Maple Syrup is multifunctional and the traditional Indigenous historical use of this gift is quite diverse. For example: it was used as a sweetening agent for otherwise unpleasant medicines and foods, was always an important trade item, also a healing agent, and the list goes on for its uses. This miracle liquid continues to thrill tastebuds locally, nationally and internationally.

The manner in which this gift was given from Creation is ancient and has been captured in many diverse origin stories. The stories centre around Nanaboozhoo's (Nanabush) adventures. He is the great superhero of the Anishinaabe Nations and was believed to be half-human and half-spirit which gave him great powers. This sacred being left many lessons for the original People of this great country to ruminate on. He is the one whose stories are told during the winter season and these stories continue to be handed down from generation to generation.

One of the ways I look at the sugaring time is with immense gratitude, mostly because it is still here, gifting us with its continued presence regardless of the hardships the Standing Beings (trees) are struggling to withstand. It is so very difficult to see the destruction of old growth forests and thousand-year-old trees cut down under the guise of resource extraction for an all-mighty dollar. The deep question needs to be asked ? ?For whose benefit?? Will our great-great-grandchildren experience the gifts of trees?

Anyone who knows me, knows I love trees! I talk to them, I hug them and I thank them daily for their continued presence, sacrifice and resilience. I apologize to them for the terrible treatment they continue to endure. Science has proven that these are indeed beings who respond to hugs, love, care and companionship. They have an incredible communication system that is superior to our cell and house phones. This communication system resides in the roots and mycelium conductors. They operate at lightening speed communication all out of sight but, with extraordinary accuracy regardless of distances.

Science has demonstrated that the intelligence of trees allows the old ones to protect the younger generation in so many ways. For instance, during a drought the ?old ones? will redirect water to the youngsters to encourage resilience and survival. During fires they warn their relatives of the coming devastation so resources can be pushed back into the earth. New technology has even captured some of the sounds this communication trail makes.

When it comes to human benefits the list of supports, help and food they provide is irreplaceable. We know they can cool us down on a hot day?it can be up to 10 degrees cooler in the shade of a tree. They have a higher oxygen level that makes us feel good around them. They feed and protect us. The smell of trees has been shown to directly improve depression with regular exposure. The sight of a tree is good medicine for blood pressure reduction. The benefits of trees are undeniable.

However, their living value is limited in our world today. So many cultures around the world celebrate their arrival, existence and sacrifices through ceremonies, songs, stories, poetry and artwork. We too can remember and celebrate the trees every day and not

just during the holiday seasons or special ceremonies or because they can give us something. Their existence is one of the most magical gifts on the planet.

What can we learn from trees? Well, for starters, that resilience is a choice. That sacrifice can meet the needs of the greater good, that even in the worst of times we can still hold each other up, that connections run deep and that's why knowing your roots matters.

It would be a massive change to the resource extraction economy in some ways to undertake a shift in value of these incredible beings, but could it be possible to look at a forest of trees and see their spirits instead of dollar figures? That would be a dream come true for someone like me and indeed many others.

We were deeply reminded of their incredible value during the COVID shutdown when city folks in particular began flooding parks and trails to sit and visit with nature.

Environmental complexities require a solid chain of relationships to be solidly in place. This means watching and learning from the expertise of the trees who are ancient beings of great wisdom.

They are part of a specific chain of creation with original instructions to take care of humans and animals. They are also required to take care of each other and so forests matter.

Each tree matters, diversity is something they are really good at managing. They are never an inconvenience, in my view. Cities tend to overlook the value of these incredible beings because the real estate they require doesn't pay taxes. The sight of trees in cities is delegated to small parkettes, occasional street and lawn ornaments, or as decorative seasonal guests.

I think it's about time that we see them as the lungs of the earth, as incredible air cleaners, as safe shelter for many of our nonhuman relatives, as beings worthy of protection, valued for their sheer presence, let alone the diverse gifts they bring to the world.

They should be given legal protection that allows them to thrive and survive.

I am a proud tree hugger and lover. This sweet relationship will never end for me as I hope it doesn't for more and more tree lovers.

This spring get to know a tree, give them a hug or two, and remember to thank them so they will continue to be here for generations to come.