

THE HONORABLE HARVEST

The crows see me coming across the field, a woman with a basket, and argue my provenance loudly among themselves. The soil is hard under my feet, bare except for a scattering of plow-scraped rocks and a few of last year's corn stalks, their remnant prop roots squatting like bleached-out spider legs. Years of herbicides and continuous corn have left the field sterile. Even in rain-soaked April not a blade of green shows its face. By August it will once again be a monoculture of corn plants in straight rows of indentured servitude, but for now it's my cross-country route to the woods.

My entourage of crows leaves me at the stone wall, a loose windrow of glacial cobbles raked from the field to mark its boundary. On the other side the ground is soft underfoot and deep in centuries of leaf mold, the forest floor flocked with tiny pink spring beauties and clumps of yellow violets. The humus stirs with trout lilies and trillium poised to rise through the winter-brown mat of leaves. A wood thrush hangs a silvery trill on the still-bare branches of the maples. The dense patches of leeks are among the first to appear in the spring, their green so vivid that they signal like a neon sign: PICK ME!

I resist the urge to answer their call immediately and instead address the plants the way I've been taught: introducing myself in case they've forgotten, even though we've been meeting like this for years. I explain why I've come and ask their permission to harvest, inquiring politely if they would be willing to share.

Eating leeks is a spring tonic that blurs the line between food and

medicine. It wakens the body from its winter lassitude and quickens the blood. But I have another need, too, that only greens from this particular woods can satisfy. Both of my daughters will be home for the weekend from the far places where they live. I ask these leeks to renew the bonds between this ground and my children, so that they will always carry the substance of home in the mineral of their bones.

Some of the leaves are already expanded—stretching toward the sun—while others are still rolled into a spear, thrusting up through the duff. I dig my trowel in around the edge of the clump, but they're deeply rooted and tightly packed, resisting my efforts. It's just a small trowel and it hurts my winter-softened hand, but at last I pry out a clump and shake away the dark earth.

I expected a cluster of fat white bulbs, but in their place I find ragged papery sheathes where the bulbs should be. Withered and flaccid, they look as if all the juice has already been sucked out of them. Which it has. If you ask permission, you have to listen to the answer. I tuck them back in the soil and go home. Along the stone wall, the elderberries have broken bud and their embryonic leaves reach out like gloved purple hands.

On a day like this, when the fiddleheads are unfurling and the air is petal soft, I am awash in longing. I know that "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's chloroplasts" is good advice and yet I must confess to full-blown chlorophyll envy. Sometimes I wish I could photosynthesize so that just by being, just by shimmering at the meadow's edge or floating lazily on a pond, I could be doing the work of the world while standing silent in the sun. The shadowy hemlocks and the waving grasses are spinning out sugar molecules and passing them on to hungry mouths and mandibles all the while listening to the warblers and watching the light dance on the water.

It would be so satisfying to provide for the well-being of others—like being a mother again, like being needed. Shade, medicine, berries, roots; there would be no end to it. As a plant I could make the campfire, hold the nest, heal the wound, fill the brimming pot.

But this generosity is beyond my realm, as I am a mere heterotroph,

a feeder on the carbon transmuted by others. In order to live, I must consume. That's the way the world works, the exchange of a life for a life, the endless cycling between my body and the body of the world. Forced to choose, I must admit I actually like my heterotroph role. Besides, if I could photosynthesize, I couldn't eat leeks.

So instead I live vicariously through the photosynthesis of others. I am not the vibrant leaves on the forest floor—I am the woman with the basket, and how I fill it is a question that matters. If we are fully awake, a moral question arises as we extinguish the other lives around us on behalf of our own. Whether we are digging wild leeks or going to the mall, how do we consume in a way that does justice to the lives that we take?

In our oldest stories, we are reminded that this was a question of profound concern for our ancestors. When we rely deeply on other lives, there is urgency to protect them. Our ancestors, who had so few material possessions, devoted a great deal of attention to this question, while we who are drowning in possessions scarcely give it a thought. The cultural landscape may have changed, but the conundrum has not—the need to resolve the inescapable tension between honoring life around us and taking it in order to live is part of being human.

A few weeks later I take up my basket and again cross the field, still bare while the earth on the other side of the wall is drifted in snowy white trillium blossoms like a late-season snowfall. I must look like a ballet dancer tiptoeing and spinning between clumps of delicate Dutchman's-breeches, mysterious blue shoots of cohosh, patches of bloodroot, and the green shoots of jack-in-the-pulpit and mayapple surging up through the leaves. I greet them one by one and feel as if they're glad to see me, too.

We are told to take only that which is given, and when I was here last the leeks had nothing to give. Bulbs hold energy saved up for the next generation like money in the bank. Last fall the bulbs were sleek and fat, but, in the first days of spring, that savings account gets depleted as the roots send their stored energy into the emerging leaves to fuel their journey from soil to sunshine. In their first few days, the

leaves are consumers, taking from the root, shriveling it up and giving nothing back. But as they unfurl they become a powerful solar array that will recharge the energy of the roots, playing out the reciprocity between consuming and producing in a few short weeks.

The leeks today are twice the size they were on my first visit and the scent of onions is strong where a deer has bruised the leaves. I pass by the first clump and kneel by the second. Once again, I quietly ask permission.

Asking permission shows respect for the personhood of the plant, but it is also an assessment of the well-being of the population. Thus I must use both sides of my brain to listen to the answer. The analytic left reads the empirical signs to judge whether the population is large and healthy enough to sustain a harvest, whether it has enough to share. The intuitive right hemisphere is reading something else, a sense of generosity, an open-handed radiance that says *take me*, or sometimes a tight-lipped recalcitrance that makes me put my trowel away. I can't explain it, but it is a kind of knowing that is for me just as compelling as a no-trespassing sign. This time, when I push my trowel deep I come up with a thick cluster of gleaming white bulbs, plump, slippery, and aromatic. I hear *yes*, so I make a gift from the soft old tobacco pouch in my pocket and begin to dig.

Leeks are clonal plants that multiply by division, spreading the patch wider and wider. As a result, they tend to become crowded in the center of a patch, so I try to harvest there. In this way my taking can help the growth of the remaining plants by thinning them out. From camas bulbs to sweetgrass, blueberries to basket willow, our ancestors found ways to harvest that bring long-term benefit to plants and people.

While a sharp shovel would make digging more efficient, the truth is that it makes the work too fast. If I could get all the leeks I needed in five minutes, I'd lose that time on my knees watching the ginger poke up and listening to the oriole that has just returned home. This is truly a choice for "slow food." Besides, that simple shift in technology would also make it easy to slice through neighboring plants and take too much. Woods throughout the country are losing their leeks to

harvesters who love them to extinction. The difficulty of digging is an important constraint. Not everything should be convenient.

The traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous harvesters is rich in prescriptions for sustainability. They are found in Native science and philosophy, in lifeways and practices, but most of all in stories, the ones that are told to help restore balance, to locate ourselves once again in the circle.

Anishinaabe elder Basil Johnston tells of the time our teacher Nanabozho was fishing in the lake for supper, as he often did, with hook and line. Heron came striding along through the reeds on his long, bent legs, his beak like a spear. Heron is a good fisherman and a sharing friend, so he told Nanabozho about a new way to fish that would make his life much easier. Heron cautioned him to be careful not to take too many fish, but Nanabozho was already thinking of a feast. He went out early the next day and soon had a whole basketful of fish, so heavy he could barely carry it and far more than he could eat. So he cleaned all those fish and set them out to dry on the racks outside his lodge. The next day, with his belly still full, he went back to the lake and again did what Heron had showed him. "Aah," he thought as he carried home the fish, "I will have plenty to eat this winter."

Day after day he stuffed himself and, as the lake grew empty, his drying racks grew full, sending out a delicious smell into the forest where Fox was licking his lips. Again he went to the lake, so proud of himself. But that day his nets came up empty and Heron looked down on him as he flew over the lake with a critical eye. When Nanabozho got home to his lodge, he learned a key rule—never take more than you need. The racks of fish were toppled in the dirt and every bite was gone.

Cautionary stories of the consequences of taking too much are ubiquitous in Native cultures, but it's hard to recall a single one in English. Perhaps this helps to explain why we seem to be caught in a trap of overconsumption, which is as destructive to ourselves as to those we consume.

Collectively, the indigenous canon of principles and practices that govern the exchange of life for life is known as the Honorable Harvest. They are rules of sorts that govern our taking, shape our relationships with the natural world, and rein in our tendency to consume—that the world might be as rich for the seventh generation as it is for our own. The details are highly specific to different cultures and ecosystems, but the fundamental principles are nearly universal among peoples who live close to the land.

I am a student of this way of thinking, not a scholar. As a human being who cannot photosynthesize, I must struggle to participate in the Honorable Harvest. So I lean in close to watch and listen to those who are far wiser than I am. What I share here, in the same way they were shared with me, are seeds gleaned from the fields of their collective wisdom, the barest surface, the moss on the mountain of their knowledge. I feel grateful for their teachings and responsible for passing them on as best I can.

My friend is the town clerk in a small Adirondack village. In the summer and fall there is a line outside her door for fishing and hunting licenses. With every laminated card, she hands out the harvesting regulations, pocket-size booklets on thin newsprint, printed in black and white except for glossy inserts with photos of the actual prey, just in case people don't know what they're shooting at. It happens: every year there is a story about triumphal deer hunters being stopped on the highway with a Jersey calf tied to their bumper.

A friend of mine once worked at a hunting check station during partridge season. A guy drove up in a big white Oldsmobile and proudly opened his trunk for inspection of his take. The birds were all neatly laid out on a canvas sheet, lined up beak to back with plumage scarcely ruffled, a whole brace of yellow-shafted flickers.

Traditional peoples who feed their families from the land have harvest guidelines too: detailed protocols designed to maintain the health and vigor of wildlife species. Like the state regulations, they too are

based on sophisticated ecological knowledge and long-term monitoring of populations. They share the common goal of protecting what hunting managers call "the resource," both for its own sake and to safeguard the sustainable supply for future generations.

Early colonists on Turtle Island were stunned by the plenitude they found here, attributing the richness to the bounty of nature. Settlers in the Great Lakes wrote in their journals about the extraordinary abundance of wild rice harvested by Native peoples; in just a few days, they could fill their canoes with enough rice to last all year. But the settlers were puzzled by the fact that, as one of them wrote, "the savages stopped gathering long before all the rice was harvested." She observed that "the rice harvest starts with a ceremony of thanksgiving and prayers for good weather for the next four days. They will harvest dawn till dusk for the prescribed four days and then stop, often leaving much rice to stand unreaped. This rice, they say, is not for them but for the Thunders. Nothing will compel them to continue, therefore much goes to waste." The settlers took this as certain evidence of laziness and lack of industry on the part of the heathens. They did not understand how indigenous land-care practices might contribute to the wealth they encountered.

I once met an engineering student visiting from Europe who told me excitedly about going ricing in Minnesota with his friend's Ojibwe family. He was eager to experience a bit of Native American culture. They were on the lake by dawn and all day long they poled through the rice beds, knocking the ripe seed into the canoe. "It didn't take long to collect quite a bit," he reported, "but it's not very efficient. At least half of the rice just falls in the water and they didn't seem to care. It's wasted." As a gesture of thanks to his hosts, a traditional ricing family, he offered to design a grain capture system that could be attached to the gunwales of their canoes. He sketched it out for them, showing how his technique could get 85 percent more rice. His hosts listened respectfully, then said, "Yes, we could get more that way. But it's got to seed itself for next year. And what we leave behind is not wasted. You know, we're not the only ones who like rice. Do you think

the ducks would stop here if we took it all?" Our teachings tell us to never take more than half.

When my basket holds enough leeks for dinner, I head home. Walking back through the flowers, I see a whole patch of snakeroot spreading its glistening leaves, which reminds me of a story told by an herbalist I know. She taught me one of the cardinal rules of gathering plants: "Never take the first plant you find, as it might be the last—and you want that first one to speak well of you to the others of her kind." That's not too hard to do when you come upon a whole stream bank of coltsfoot, when there's a third and a fourth right behind the first, but it's harder when the plants are few and the desire is great.

"Once I dreamed of a snakeroot and that I should bring it with me on a journey the next day. There was a need but I didn't know what it was. But it was still too early to harvest. The leaves wouldn't be up for another week or so. There was a chance it might be up early somewhere—maybe in a sunny spot, so I went to look in the usual place I pick those medicines," the herbalist recalled for me. The bloodroot was out and the spring beauties, too. She greeted them as she walked past, but saw none of the plant she sought. She stepped more slowly, opening her awareness, making her whole self into a halo of peripheral vision. Nestled at the base of a maple, on the southeast side, the snakeroot made itself visible, a glossy mass of dark-green leaves. She knelt, smiling, and spoke quietly. She thought of her upcoming journey, the empty bag in her pocket, and then slowly rose to her feet. Though her knees were stiff with age, she walked away, refraining from taking the first one.

She wandered through the woods, admiring the trillium just poking their heads up. And the leeks. But there was no more snakeroot. "I just figured I'd have to do without. I was halfway home when I found I'd lost my little shovel, the one I always use for digging medicine. So I had to go back. Well, I found it all right—it's got a red handle so it's easy to find. And you know, it had fallen from my pocket right in a patch of

root. So I talked to that plant, addressed it just like you would a person whose help you needed, and it gave me a bit of itself. When I got where I was going, sure enough, there was a woman there who needed that snakeroot medicine and I could pass on the gift. That plant reminded me that if we harvest with respect, the plants will help us."

The guidelines for the Honorable Harvest are not written down, or even consistently spoken of as a whole—they are reinforced in small acts of daily life. But if you were to list them, they might look something like this:

Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them.

Introduce yourself. Be accountable as the one who comes asking for life.

Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.

Never take the first. Never take the last.

Take only what you need.

Take only that which is given.

Never take more than half. Leave some for others.

Harvest in a way that minimizes harm.

Use it respectfully. Never waste what you have taken.

Share.

Give thanks for what you have been given.

Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.

Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever.

The state guidelines on hunting and gathering are based exclusively in the biophysical realm, while the rules of the Honorable Harvest are based on accountability to both the physical and the metaphysical worlds. The taking of another life to support your own is far more significant when you recognize the beings who are harvested as persons, nonhuman persons vested with awareness, intelligence, spirit—and who have families waiting for them at home. Killing a *who* demands something different than killing an *it*. When you regard those nonhuman persons as kinfolk, another set of harvesting regulations extends beyond bag limits and legal seasons.

The state regulations are, by and large, lists of illegal practices: "It is unlawful to keep a rainbow trout whose length from snout to posterior fin does not exceed twelve inches." The consequences for breaking the law are clearly stipulated and involve a financial transaction after a visit with your friendly conservation officer.

Unlike the state laws, the Honorable Harvest is not an enforced legal policy, but it is an agreement nonetheless, among people and most especially between consumers and providers. The providers have the upper hand. The deer, the sturgeon, the berries, and the leeks say, "If you follow these rules, we will continue to give our lives so that you may live."

Imagination is one of our most powerful tools. What we imagine, we can become. I like to imagine what it would be like if the Honorable Harvest were the law of the land today, as it was in our past. Imagine if a developer, eyeing open land for a shopping mall, had to ask the goldenrod, the meadowlarks, and the monarch butterflies for permission to take their homeland. What if he had to abide by the answer? Why not?

I like to imagine a laminated card, like the one my friend the town clerk hands out with the hunting and fishing licenses, embossed with the rules of the Honorable Harvest. Everyone would be subject to the same laws, since they are, after all, the dictates of the *real* government: the democracy of species, the laws of Mother Nature.

When I ask my elders about the ways our people lived in order to keep the world whole and healthy, I hear the mandate to take only what you need. But we human people, descendants of Nanabozho, struggle, as he did, with self-restraint. The dictum to take only what you need leaves a lot of room for interpretation when our needs get so tangled with our wants.

This gray area yields then to a rule more primal than need, an old teaching nearly forgotten now in the din of industry and technology. Deeply rooted in cultures of gratitude, this ancient rule is not just to take only what you need, but to take only that which is given.

At the level of human interactions, we already do this. It's what we teach our kids. If you're visiting your sweet grandma and she offers you homemade cookies on her favorite china plate, you know what to do.

You accept them with many "thank yous" and cherish the relationship reinforced by cinnamon and sugar. You gratefully take what has been given. But you wouldn't dream of breaking into her pantry and just taking all the cookies without invitation, grabbing her china plate for good measure. That would be at a minimum a breach of good manners, a betrayal of the loving relationship. What's more, your grandma would be heartbroken, and not inclined to bake more cookies for you any time soon.

As a culture, though, we seem unable to extend these good manners to the natural world. The dishonorable harvest has become a way of life—we take what doesn't belong to us and destroy it beyond repair: Onondaga Lake, the Alberta tar sands, the rainforests of Malaysia, the list is endless. They are gifts from our sweet Grandmother Earth, which we take without asking. How do we find the Honorable Harvest again?

If we're picking berries or gathering nuts, taking only what is given makes a lot of sense. They offer themselves and by taking them we fulfill our reciprocal responsibility. After all, the plants have made these fruits with the express purpose of our taking them, to disperse and plant. By our use of their gifts, both species prosper and life is magnified. But what about when something is taken without a clear avenue for mutual benefit, when someone is going to lose?

How can we distinguish between that which is given by the earth and that which is not? When does taking become outright theft? I think my elders would counsel that there is no one path, that each of us must find our own way. In my wandering with this question, I've found dead ends and clear openings. Discerning all that it might mean is like bushwhacking through dense undergrowth. Sometimes I get faint glimpses of a deer trail.

It is hunting season and we are sitting on the porch of the cookhouse at Onondaga on a hazy October day. The leaves are smoky gold and fluttering down while we listen to the men tell stories. Jake, with a red bandanna around his hair, gets everybody laughing with a story about