



Robin Kimmerer (1953-Present)

Distinguished Teaching Professor and
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the Environment**

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**SUNY College of Environmental Science
and Forestry in Syracuse, New York**

"I was born to be a botanist." Robin Kimmerer, 2004.

Early Life and Education

Robin Kimmerer was born in 1953 to Robert and Patricia Wall in a rural upstate of New York. Growing up, she spent most of her time in the woods and fields. It was in this same naturalistic setting that she started to observe plants and cultivate her appreciation for nature. Kimmerer's parents were also an important factor in her growth as an environmental scientist. It was very important to her parents to conserve the environment, and to appreciate it in all of its glory. When she was a child, her parents gave her a book written by an ecologist, and soon thereafter, she found out that she could have a career based on the study of plants. It was based on this realization that she began her educational track towards a degree in botany.

Kimmerer attended the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Environmental Science and Forestry for her undergraduate studies; she earned a degree in Botany in 1975. In that same year, Kimmerer began working as a microbiologist in an optical division of Bausch & Lomb. Two years after she started her job, Kimmerer decided that corporate America was not for her, so she attended graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, obtaining a master's degree in botany in 1979 and a Ph.D. in plant ecology in 1983. After graduate school, Kimmerer started a family, and worked part-time at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky while raising her children. At Transylvania University, Kimmerer taught field biology and botany. She left Transylvania University to work at Centre College – a liberal arts college in Danville, Kentucky. There, she taught general biology, botany, ecology, field biology, plants and culture, and tropical ecology. She got tenure at Centre College but longed to return to her roots.

Kimmerer returned home to teach at the State University of New York (SUNY) because she felt it was more rewarding to give back to her home state. She was also interested in working with Native Americans

as well as conducting research that was not possible to do at Transylvania University or Centre College. Kimmerer applied for and received a position at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and has been there for the past eleven years.

Importance of Mentorship to Career

Kimmerer has attributed her success to the many people that made a great impact on her life. She had a several mentors and advisors who helped to guide her. An undergraduate professor Ed Cetchledge gave her the confidence to persevere even when she did not think she could be a scientist. Mr. Cetchledge was such an important part of her life that they have kept in touch over the years. During graduate school, Kimmerer had advisors and peers who were a great source of support. Specifically, Dr. Orié Loucks took great interest in her work, and counseled her about possible career moves that could be beneficial to her.

Due to the help she received, Kimmerer now extends herself to help other minorities in the field. For example, Kimmerer has helped sponsor the Undergraduate Mentoring in Environmental Biology (UMEB) project, which pairs students of color with faculty members in the enviro-bio sciences while they work together to research environmental biology. Kimmerer is also a part of the United States Department of Agriculture's Higher Education Multicultural Scholars Program. The purpose of this program is to provide students with real-world experiences that involve complex problem solving. Kimmerer is also a mentor to students on the SUNY campus – a campus on which there are few female and minority environmental faculty. She enjoys the community in which she mentors native and non-native students. Kimmerer is also involved in the American Indian Science & Engineering Society (AISES), and works with the Onondaga nation's school, doing community outreach. Kimmerer also uses traditional knowledge and science collectively for ecological restoration in research. Lastly, Kimmerer fosters diversity in the field by showing how multiculturalism makes a significant difference in the way that science is carried out. This is particularly true in the field of ecological restoration. Kimmerer enjoys her job and duties, and has experienced many highlights in her career.

Highlights

In 2003, Kimmerer published her first book entitled *Gathering Moss: a Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. In the book, she was able to offer several insights into herself, including her experiences as a plant ecologist and her understanding of traditional knowledge. She feels the combination of indigenous and scientific perspectives gave an "authentic voice" to her work. Kimmerer can also be credited with starting a program dedicated to the study of traditional ecological knowledge at the university. She currently strives to further the aims of that unit. It is important to her to be accepted in the science community, but she would also like to be known for bringing a unique perspective to the understanding of plant ecology. Although Kimmerer has had many achievements that she is proud of, times have not always been easy.

Challenges

A low point of Kimmerer's career is the sense of isolation she has felt throughout her occupation. The feeling of isolation she experienced is not always in the forefront, but it is there nonetheless. She also says

that although it is necessary to be a part of “the group” by following the traditional path set by others in her field, she struggles to do her work her own way. Despite these difficulties, Kimmerer loves her job.

Contributions

Kimmerer loves to create a community of people interested in strengthening the environmental field. Most importantly, she gets lots of support and recognition from her students; this makes a huge difference, and puts a value on her work. Her most significant achievement was raising two daughters as a single parent while pursuing a career. Her achievements and status within the environmental field make her a great person to turn to for words of wisdom.

Advice to Young Professionals

Kimmerer speaks many words of wisdom to minorities who are considering a career in the environmental field. First, she says they should learn about how the system works in order to have credentials, and to bring all of themselves selves to the process of becoming the best in the field. She continues to say that science suffers from narrow vision because it is a self-perpetuating domain riddled with roadblocks. Consequently, students should bring their own unique perspective with them, because it is much needed.

For More Information

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This interview was conducted in 2015.