

SECTION 1 for Living Into "An Economy of Abundance"

The cool breath of evening slips off the wooded hills, displacing the heat of the day, and with it come the birds, as eager for the cool as I am. They arrive in a flock of calls that sound like laughter, and I have to laugh back with the same delight. They are all around me, Cedar Waxwings and Catbirds and a flash of Bluebird iridescence. I have never felt such a kinship to my namesake, Robin, as in this moment when we are both stuffing our mouths with berries and chortling with happiness. The bushes are laden with fat clusters of red, blue, and wine purple, in every stage of ripeness, so many you can pick them by the handful. I'm glad I have a pail and wonder if the birds will be able to fly with their bellies as full as mine.

This abundance of berries feels like a pure gift from the land. I have not earned, paid for, nor labored for them. There is no mathematics of worthiness that reckons I deserve them in any way. And yet here they are—along with the sun and the air and the birds and the rain, gathering in the towers of cumulonimbi. You could call them natural resources or ecosystem services, but the Robins and I know them as gifts. We both sing gratitude with our mouths full.

Part of my delight comes from their unexpected presence. The local native Serviceberries, *Amelanchier arborea*, have small, hard fruits, which tend toward dryness, and only once in a while is there a tree with sweet offerings. The bounty in my bucket is a western species—*A. alnifolium*, known as Saskatoons—planted by my farmer neighbor, and this is their first bearing year, which they do with an enthusiasm that matches my own.

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Saskatoon, Juneberry, Shadbush, Shadblow, Sugarplum, Sarvis, Serviceberry—these are among the many names for *Amelanchier*.

Ethnobotanists know that the more names a plant has, the greater its cultural importance. The tree is beloved for its fruits, for medicinal use, and for the early froth of flowers that whiten woodland edges at the first hint of spring. Serviceberry is known as a calendar plant, so faithful is it to seasonal weather patterns. Its bloom is a sign that the ground has thawed and that the shad are running upstream—or at least it was back in the day, when rivers were clear and free enough to support their spawning. The derivation of the name “Service” from its relative *Sorbus* (also in the Rose Family) notwithstanding, the plant does provide myriad goods and services. Not only to humans but to many other citizens. It is a preferred browse of Deer and Moose, a vital source of early pollen for newly emerging insects, and host to a suite of butterfly larvae—like Tiger Swallowtails, Viceroy, Admirals, and Hairstreaks—and berry-feasting birds who rely on those calories in breeding season.

In Potawatomi, it is called *Bozakmin*, which is a superlative: the best of the berries. I agree with my ancestors on the rightness of that name. Imagine a fruit that tastes like a Blueberry crossed with the satisfying heft of an Apple, a touch of rosewater and a miniscule crunch of almond-flavored seeds. They taste like nothing a grocery store has to offer: wild, complex with a chemistry that your body recognizes as the real food it’s been waiting for.

For me, the most important part of the word *Bozakmin* is “min,” the root for “berry.” It appears in our Potawatomi words for Blueberry, Strawberry, Raspberry, even Apple, Maize, and Wild Rice. The revelation in that word is

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a treasure for me, because it is also the root word for "gift." In naming the plants who shower us with goodness, we recognize that these are gifts from our plant relatives, manifestations of their generosity, care, and creativity. When we speak of these not as things or products or commodities, but as gifts, the whole relationship changes. I can't help but gaze at them, cupped like jewels in my hand, and breathe out my gratitude.

In the presence of such gifts, gratitude is the intuitive first response. The gratitude flows toward our plant elders and radiates to the rain, to the sunshine, to the improbability of bushes spangled with morsels of sweetness in a world that can be bitter.

Gratitude is so much more than a polite thank you. It is the thread that connects us in a deep relationship, simultaneously physical and spiritual, as our bodies are fed and spirits nourished by the sense of belonging, which is the most vital of foods. Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, the knowing that you have what you need. In that climate of sufficiency, our hunger for more abates and we take only what we need, in respect for the generosity of the giver.

If our first response is gratitude, then our second is reciprocity: to give a gift in return. What could I give these plants in return for their generosity? It could be a direct response, like weeding or water or a song of thanks that sends appreciation out on the wind. Or indirect, like donating to my local land trust so that more habitat for the gift givers will be saved, or making art that invites others into the web of reciprocity.

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Gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of a gift economy, and they have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange, their energy concentrating as they pass from hand to hand, a truly renewable resource. I accept the gift from the bush and then spread that gift with a dish of berries to my neighbor, who makes a pie to share with his friend, who feels so wealthy in food and friendship that he volunteers at the food pantry. You know how it goes.

To name the world as gift is to feel one's membership in the web of reciprocity. It makes you happy—and it makes you accountable. Conceiving of something as a gift changes your relationship to it in a profound way, even though the physical makeup of the "thing" has not changed. A wooly knit hat that you purchase at the store will keep you warm regardless of its origin, but if it was hand knit by your favorite auntie, then you are in relationship to that "thing" in a very different way: you are responsible for it, and your gratitude has motive force in the world. You're likely to take much better care of the gift hat than the commodity hat, because it is knit of relationships. This is the power of gift thinking. I imagine if we acknowledged that everything we consume is the gift of Mother Earth, we would take better care of what we are given. Mistreating a gift has emotional and ethical gravity as well as ecological resonance.

How we think ripples out to how we behave. If we view these berries, or that coal or forest, as an object, as property, it can be exploited as a commodity in a market economy. We know the consequences of that.