Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer
The passages below have been selected for what they may reveal about the author's perspective and personal experiences. Share some of these with your students and ask them how the writing made them feel, wonder about the writer, think about nature.

select passages:

One otherwise unremarkable morning I gave the students in my General Ecology class a survey. Among other things, they were asked to rate their understanding of the negative interactions between humans and the environment. Nearly every one of the two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix. These were third-year students who had selected a career in environmental protection, so the response was, in a way, not very surprising. They were well schooled in the mechanics of climate change, toxins in the land and water, and the crisis of habitat loss. Later in the survey, they were asked to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was "none."

I was stunned. How is it possible that in twenty years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment? Perhaps the negative examples they see every day— brownfields, factory farms, suburban sprawl—truncated their ability to see some good between humans and the earth. As the land becomes impoverished, so too does the scope of their vision. When we talked about this after class, I realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like. How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like? If we can't imagine the generosity of geese?

Even before I arrived at school, I had all of my answers prepared for the freshman intake interview. I wanted to make a good first impression. There were hardly any women at the forestry school in those days and certainly none who looked like me. The adviser peered at me over his glasses and said, "So, why do you want to major in botany?" His pencil was poised over the registrar's form.

How could I answer, how could I tell him that I was born a botanist, that I had shoeboxes of seeds and piles of pressed leaves under my bed, that I'd stop my bike along the road to identify a new species, that plants colored my dreams, that the plants had chosen me? So I told him the truth. I was proud of my well-planned answer, its freshman sophistication apparent to anyone, the way it showed that I already knew some plants and their habitats, that I had thought deeply about their nature and was clearly well prepared for college work. I told him that I chose botany because I wanted to learn about why asters and goldenrod looked so beautiful together. I'm sure I was smiling then, in my red plaid shirt.

But he was not. He laid down his pencil as if there was no need to record what I had said. “Miss Wall,” he said, fixing me with a disappointed smile, “I must tell you that that is not science. That is not at all the sort of thing with which botanists concern themselves.” But he promised to put me right. “I’ll enroll you in General Botany so you can learn what it is.” And so it began. I like to imagine that they were the first flowers I saw, over my mother’s shoulder, as the pink blanket slipped away from my face and their colors flooded my consciousness. I’ve heard that early experience can attune the brain to certain stimuli, so that they are processed with greater speed and certainty, so that they can be used again and again, so that we remember. Love at first sight. Through cloudy newborn eyes their radiance formed the first botanical synapses in my wide-awake, newborn brain, which until then had encountered only the blurry gentleness of pink faces. I’m guessing all eyes were on me, a little round baby all swaddled in bunting, but mine were on Goldenrod and Asters. I was born to these flowers and they came back for my birthday every year, weaving me into our mutual celebration…

…But my adviser said, “It’s not science,” not what botany was about. I wanted to know why certain stems bent easily for baskets and some would break, why the biggest berries grew in the shade and why they made us medicines, which plants are edible, why those little pink orchids only grow under pines. “Not science,” he said, and he ought to know, sitting in his laboratory, a learned professor of botany. “And if you want to study beauty, you should go to art school.” He reminded me of my deliberations over choosing a college, when I had vacillated between training as a botanist or as a poet. Since everyone told me I couldn’t do both, I’d chosen plants. He told me that science was not about beauty, not about the embrace between plants and humans….

…I knew plants as teachers and companions to whom I was linked with mutual responsibility, into the realm of science. The questions scientists raised were not “Who are you? ” but “What is it?” No one asked plants, “What can you tell us?” The primary question was “How does it work?” The botany I was taught was reductionist, mechanistic, and strictly objective. Plants were reduced to objects; they were not subjects. The way botany was conceived and taught didn’t seem to leave much room for a person who thought the way I did. The only way I could make sense of it was to conclude that the things I had always believed about plants must not be true after all.

That first plant science class was a disaster. I barely scraped by with a C and could not muster much enthusiasm for memorizing the concentrations of essential plant nutrients. There were times when I wanted to quit, but the more I learned, the more fascinated I became with the intricate structures that made up a leaf and the alchemy of photosynthesis. Companionship between asters and goldenrod was never mentioned, but I memorized botanical Latin as if it was poetry, eagerly tossing aside the name “goldenrod” for Solidago canadensis. I was mesmerized by plant ecology, evolution, taxonomy, physiology, soils, and fungi. All around me were my good teachers, the plants. I found good mentors, too, warm and kind professors who were doing heart-driven science, whether they could admit it or not. They too were my

teachers. And yet there was always something tapping at my shoulder, willing me to turn around. When I did, I did not know how to recognize what stood behind me…

…I scarcely doubted the primacy of scientific thought. Following the path of science trained me to separate, to distinguish perception from physical reality, to atomize complexity into its smallest components, to honor the chain of evidence and logic, to discern one thing from another, to savor the pleasure of precision. The more I did this, the better I got at it, and I was accepted to do graduate work in one of the world's finest botany programs, no doubt on the strength of the letter of recommendation from my adviser, which read, "She's done remarkably well for an Indian girl." A master's degree, a PhD, and a faculty position followed. I am grateful for the knowledge that was shared with me and deeply privileged to carry the powerful tools of science as a way of engaging the world. It took me to other plant communities, far from the asters and goldenrod. I remember feeling, as a new faculty member, as if I finally understood plants. I too began to teach the mechanics of botany, emulating the approach that I had been taught. (pp. 42-43)

Despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency. It blinds us to our own power and the power of the earth. Environmental despair is a poison every bit as destructive as the methylated mercury in the bottom of Onondaga Lake. But how can we submit to despair while the land is saying "Help"? Restoration is a powerful antidote to despair. Restoration offers concrete means by which humans humans can once again enter into positive, creative relationship with the more-than-human world, meeting responsibilities that are simultaneously material and spiritual. It's not enough to grieve. It's not enough to just stop doing bad things.

We have enjoyed the feast generously laid out for us by Mother Earth, but now the plates are empty and the dining room is a mess. It's time we started doing the dishes in Mother Earth's kitchen. Doing dishes has gotten a bad rap, but everyone who migrates to the kitchen after a meal knows that that's where the laughter happens, the good conversations, the friendships. Doing dishes, like doing restoration, forms relationships.

How we approach restoration of land depends, of course, on what we believe that "land" means. If land is just real estate, then restoration looks very different than if land is the source of a subsistence economy and a spiritual home. Restoring land for production of natural resources is not the same as renewal of land as cultural identity. We have to think about what land means.