

DEFEATING WINDIGO

In the spring I walk across the meadow toward my medicine woods, where the plants give their gifts with unstinting generosity. It is mine not by deed, but by care. I've come here for decades to be with them, to listen, to learn, and to gather.

The woods are a drift of white trillium where the snow was, but still I feel a chill. The light is somehow different. I cross the ridge where unrecognizable footprints followed mine in last winter's blizzard. I should have known what those tracks meant. Where they were I now find the deep-rutted prints of trucks headed across the field. The flowers are there, as they have been beyond memory, but the trees are gone. My neighbor brought in the loggers over the winter.

There are so many ways to harvest honorably, but he chose otherwise, leaving only diseased beech and a few old hemlocks, worthless to the mill. The trillium, bloodroot, hepatica, bellwort, trout lily, ginger, and wild leeks are all smiling their last into the spring sun, which will burn them out when summer comes to a forest without trees. They trusted that the maples would be there, but the maples are gone. And they trusted me. Next year this will all be brambles—garlic mustard and buckthorn, the invasive species that follow Windigo footprints.

I fear that a world made of gifts cannot coexist with a world made of commodities. I fear that I have no power to protect what I love against the Windigo.

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In days of legend, the people were so terrorized by the specter of Windigos that they tried to devise ways of defeating them. Given the rampant destruction wrought by our contemporary Windigo-mind, I wondered if our ancient stories contained some wisdom that might guide us today.

There are stories of banishment that we might emulate, making pariahs of the destroyers and divesting ourselves of complicity with their enterprises. There are stories of attempted drownings, burnings, and assorted murders, but the Windigo always comes back. There are endless tales of brave men on snowshoes, fighting through blizzards to track and kill the Windigo before it preyed again, but the beast almost always slips away in the storm.

Some folks argue that we need do nothing at all—that the unholy coupling of greed and growth and carbon will make the world hot enough to melt the Windigo heart once and for all. Climate change will unequivocally defeat economies that are based on constant taking without giving in return. But before the Windigo dies, it will take so much that we love along with it. We can wait for climate change to turn the world and the Windigo into a puddle of red-tinged meltwater, or we can strap on our snowshoes and track him down.

In our stories, when humans alone could not conquer them, the people called upon their champion, Nanabozho, to be light against darkness, a song against the shriek of the Windigo. Basil Johnston tells the story of an epic battle fought for many days with legions of warriors, led by their hero. There was fierce fighting, many weapons, trickery, and courage as they sought to surround the monster in his lair. But I noticed something in the background of this story different from any Windigo tale I'd ever heard: You can smell flowers. There was no snow, no blizzard; the only ice was in the heart of the Windigo. Nanabozho had chosen to hunt down the monster in the summer. The warriors paddled across ice-free lakes to the island where the Windigo had his summer refuge. The Windigo is most powerful in the Hungry Time, in winter. With the warm breezes his power wanes.

Summer in our language is *niibin*—the time of plenty—and it was

in *niibin* that Nanabozho faced down the Windigo and defeated him. Here is the arrow that weakens the monster of overconsumption, a medicine that heals the sickness: its name is plenty. In winter, when scarcity is at its zenith, the Windigo rages beyond control, but when abundance reigns the hunger fades away and with it the power of the monster.

In an essay describing hunter-gatherer peoples with few possessions as the original affluent society, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins reminds us that, “modern capitalist societies, however richly endowed, dedicate themselves to the proposition of scarcity. Inadequacy of economic means is the first principle of the world’s wealthiest peoples.” The shortage is due not to how much material wealth there actually is, but to the way in which it is exchanged or circulated. The market system artificially creates scarcity by blocking the flow between the source and the consumer. Grain may rot in the warehouse while hungry people starve because they cannot pay for it. The result is famine for some and diseases of excess for others. The very earth that sustains us is being destroyed to fuel injustice. An economy that grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings: this is a Windigo economy.

What is the alternative? And how do we get there? I don’t know for certain, but I believe the answer is contained within our teachings of “One Bowl and One Spoon,” which holds that the gifts of the earth are all in one bowl, all to be shared from a single spoon. This is the vision of the economy of the commons, wherein resources fundamental to our well-being, like water and land and forests, are commonly held rather than commodified. Properly managed, the commons approach maintains abundance, not scarcity. These contemporary economic alternatives strongly echo the indigenous worldview in which the earth exists not as private property, but as a commons, to be tended with respect and reciprocity for the benefit of all.

And yet, while creating an alternative to destructive economic structures is imperative, it is not enough. It is not just changes in policies that we need, but also changes to the heart. Scarcity and plenty are as much qualities of the mind and spirit as they are of the economy. Gratitude plants the seed for abundance.

Each of us comes from people who were once indigenous. We can reclaim our membership in the cultures of gratitude that formed our old relationships with the living earth. Gratitude is a powerful antidote to Windigo psychosis. A deep awareness of the gifts of the earth and of each other is medicine. The practice of gratitude lets us hear the badgering of marketers as the stomach grumblings of a Windigo. It celebrates cultures of regenerative reciprocity, where wealth is understood to be having enough to share and riches are counted in mutually beneficial relationships. Besides, it makes us happy.

Gratitude for all the earth has given us lends us courage to turn and face the Windigo that stalks us, to refuse to participate in an economy that destroys the beloved earth to line the pockets of the greedy, to demand an economy that is aligned with life, not stacked against it. It's easy to write that, harder to do.

I throw myself on the ground, pounding my fists and grieving the assault on my medicine woods. I don't know how to defeat the monster. I have no arsenal of weapons, no legions of fighters like those who followed Nanabozho into battle. I am not a warrior. I was raised by Strawberries, who even now are budding at my feet. Amid the Violets. And Yarrow. And Asters and Goldenrod that are just emerging, and the blades of Sweetgrass shining in the sun. In that moment, I know that I am not alone. I lie in the meadow surrounded by the legions who do stand with me. I may not know what to do, but they do, giving of their medicine gifts as they always do, to sustain the world. We are not powerless against the Windigo, they say. Remember that we already have everything we need. And so—we conspire.

When I get to my feet, Nanabozho has appeared beside me, with resolute eyes and a trickster grin. "You have to think like the monster to defeat him," he says. "Like dissolves like." He points with his eyes to a line of dense shrubs at the edge of the woods. "Give him a taste of his own medicine," he says with a smirk. He walks into the gray thicket and laughter overtakes him as he disappears.

I've never gathered buckthorn before; the blue-black berries stain my fingers. I've tried to stay away from it, but it follows you. It is a rampant

invader of disturbed places. It takes over the forest, starving other plants of light and space. Buckthorn also poisons the soil, preventing the growth of any species but itself, creating a floristic desert. You have to acknowledge that it's a winner in the free market, a success story built on efficiency, monopoly, and the creation of scarcity. It is a botanical imperialist, stealing land from the native species.

I gather all summer, sitting with each species that offers itself to the cause, listening and learning its gifts. I've always made teas for colds, salves for skin, but never this. Making medicine is not undertaken lightly. It is a sacred responsibility. The beams in my house are hung with drying plants, shelves filled with jars of roots and leaves. Waiting for winter.

When it comes, I walk the woods in my snowshoes, leaving an unmistakable trail toward home. A braid of sweetgrass hangs by my door. The three shining strands represent the unity of mind, body, and spirit that makes us whole. In the Windigo, the braid is unraveled; that is the disease that drives him to destruction. That braid reminds me that when we braid the hair of Mother Earth we remember all that is given to us and our responsibility to care for those gifts in return. In this way the gifts are sustained and all are fed. No one goes hungry.

Last night, my house was full of food and friends, the laughter and light spilling out on the snow. I thought I saw him pass by the window, gazing in with hunger. But tonight I am alone and the wind is rising.

I heft my cast-iron kettle, the biggest pot I have, onto the stove and set the water to boil. I add to it a good handful of dried berries. And then another. The berries dissolve to a syrupy liquid, blue-black and inky. Remembering Nanabozho's counsel, I say a prayer and empty in the rest of the jar.

Into a second pot I pour a pitcher of purest spring water and onto its surface I scatter a pinch of petals from one jar, bark shreds from another. All carefully chosen, each to its purpose. I add a length of root, a handful of leaves, and a spoonful of berries to the golden tea, tinged with rosy pink. I set it to simmer and sit by the fire to wait.

The snow hisses against the window, the wind moans in the trees. He has come, followed my tracks home just as I knew he would. I put the sweetgrass in my pocket, take a deep breath, and open the door. I'm afraid to do this, but more afraid of what happens if I don't.

He looms above me, wild red eyes blazing against the hoar frost of his face. He bares his yellow fangs and reaches for me with his bony hands. My own hands tremble as I thrust into his bloodstained fingers a cup of scalding buckthorn tea. He slurps it down at once and starts to howl for more—devoured by the pain of emptiness, he always wants more. He pulls the whole iron kettle from me and drinks it in greedy gulps, the syrup freezing to his chin in dripping black icicles. Throwing the empty pot aside, he reaches for me again, but before his fingers can surround my neck he turns from the door and staggers backward out into the snow.

I see him doubled over, overcome with violent retching. The carrion stench of his breath mixes with the reek of shit as the buckthorn loosens his bowels. A small dose of buckthorn is a laxative. A strong dose is a purgative, and a whole kettle, an emetic. It is Windigo nature: he wanted every last drop. So now he is vomiting up coins and coal slurry, clumps of sawdust from my woods, clots of tar sand, and the little bones of birds. He spews Solvay waste, gags on an entire oil slick. When he's done, his stomach continues to heave but all that comes up is the thin liquid of loneliness.

He lies spent in the snow, a stinking carcass, but still dangerous when the hunger rises to fill the new emptiness. I run back in the house for the second pot and carry it to his side, where the snow has melted around him. His eyes are glazed over but I hear his stomach rumble so I hold the cup to his lips. He turns his head away as if it were poison. I take a sip, to reassure him and because he is not the only one who needs it. I feel the medicines standing beside me. And then he drinks, just a sip at a time of the golden-pink tea, tea of Willow to quell the fever of want and Strawberries to mend the heart. With the nourishing broth of the Three Sisters and infused with savory Wild Leeks, the medicines enter his bloodstream: White Pine for unity, justice from Pecans, the humility of Spruce roots. He drinks down the compassion of Witch Hazel, the respect of Cedars, a blessing of Silverbells, all sweetened with the Maple of gratitude. You can't know reciprocity until you know the gift. He is helpless before their power.

His head falls back, leaving the cup still full. He closes his eyes. There is just one more part of the medicine. I am no longer afraid. I sit down beside him on the newly greenening grass. "Let me tell you a story," I say as the ice melts away. "She fell like a maple seed, pirouetting from the autumn sky."