

A Paradox for Mother's Day  
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Suzanne Simard (Sim-ard like Simone) is a Canadian researcher, who has studied forests for more than 30 years. Her research began in sustainable forest management, and grew as she learned more about the ecology of forests as a whole, how the entire organism is connected. She studied how trees communicate with one another, which, in part, happens through layers of fungi throughout the forest, embedded with root systems of trees. It is fascinating stuff, and I encourage you to read up on her work if it is exciting for you, but today the part of the story I wanted to focus on is, how before Simard's work, the assumption in modern forest management was that the trees in the understory were challenged by the older, taller trees that had access to more light, and shaded the new growth. So often the larger older trees were harvested to "help" the forest. This is one of a number of ideas that turned out to be incorrect. It turns out that the older trees, as Simard calls them, mother trees, are performing a vital function in helping nurture the growth of networks of younger trees all around them. They communicate out important information to the surrounding trees, and share carbon and other nutrients underground to help the new trees grow and thrive. Also, as the oldest trees begin to die, over decades they send out even more nutrients and information to the nearby trees. At one point the prevailing wisdom was that once a tree was dying it was best to take it down immediately, but Simard has proven that there is an important role these trees play, even, or especially, in their passing.<sup>1</sup>

We make assumptions in science about what is true, we make observations and come to conclusions based on our experience and the knowledge that we share. This is also true of theology, in study of the ultimate. As we learn in community, we change our minds, learn and grow. When we get things wrong or make mistakes, we learn and adapt. As in any field, theology can grow with new ways of interpreting scripture, tradition and experience, and challenge assumptions of truth in religious life. In considering the stories of three different images of mother this morning, the mother tree, the mother of the universe from the *Tao te Ching*, and the spiritual mother in the interpretation of Psalm 23 we just heard, we are invited to look anew at our experience, our assumptions, and we have yet to learn.

The *Tao te Ching*, invites a spiritual practice and inquiry of holding opposite truths at the same time, of leaning into paradox. The *Tao*, the way, is named and unnamed, is being and non-being all at once. Chapter 25 of the *Tao* begins:

There was something formless and perfect  
before the universe was born.

It is serene. Empty.

Solitary. Unchanging.

Infinite. Eternally present.

It is the mother of the universe.

For lack of a better name,

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<sup>1</sup> Trees Talk To Each Other. 'Mother Tree' Ecologist Hears Lessons For People, Too  
May 4, 2021:39 PM ET, Heard on Fresh Air -  
<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/05/04/993430007/trees-talk-to-each-other-mother-tree-ecologist-hears-lessons-for-people-too>

I call it the Tao.<sup>2</sup>

Before there was the universe, there was something, that something was emptiness. It is solitary and infinite, eternal and before us.

Holding truths that are a paradox takes practice. Looking back into the forest, the truth of experience is almost always vastly more complicated than we first imagined, and yet is more simple. Both are true, the paradox holds. A forest is a complicated network of fungi, trees, bugs, and who knows what else communicating with one another, being impacted by us, and helping us live. And it is simple, in that, this whole earth is one organism, living and breathing, dying and growing, together. There is no discrete me or you, we are one being. In that we are one being, we are also nonbeing at the same time. The I that is me, is and isn't me--because I am me *and* everything, you are you *and* everything. We are radically interdependent, we are one organism together, we nurture and are nurtured by all that is. When we are attentive to that, open to that connection, we have an opportunity for real spiritual deepening and learning.

In Psalm 23, there is a relational image of God, and in Bobby McFerrin's mother language interpretation, there is a sense of care with images like 'she makes me lie down' 'I'm in her hand,' 'she will lead,' and so on. This Psalm is likely the most familiar in western culture. It is used in secular memorial services, and represents more than just the words sung or printed on the page. One of the reasons that many find this particular musical setting so compelling, I think, is because by changing the pronouns in the text, McFerrin invites us to see the images anew, to move out of the story that this is a funeral reading, and to pay attention. What do you learn when a metaphor is changed and put in a new context? How are our assumptions about meaning and truth impacted? Perhaps the image of a relational God is not one that is your understanding of the universe, your metaphor, but in the spirit of leaning into paradox, what might you learn by imaging that it were? By exploring ideas and metaphors that are less travelled in our own practice, we can see our experience in new ways, find deeper truth. And perhaps get more comfortable with not knowing.

In order to grow in our spiritual lives we need to challenge our assumptions. Every day things are being discovered and understood in new ways that change our perceptions of reality and truth. That doesn't mean that there is *no* truth, but it is certainly a reminder to hold our ideas loosely. Each time we encounter new information, hear a new story, meet a new person, read another book, our understanding of our world deepens. My invitation to you is sometime soon, as you are making a judgment or decision to pause for reflection. Pay attention to what knowledge you lean on and why, what your assumptions are, and consider what do we not know that we don't know. Our universe, our experience, our world, our relationships are infinitely complicated, and profoundly simple, all at once. We know so much about our world, and only a fraction of what is possible to know. We have access to an experience of the infinite, and are discrete beings in physical space. We are individuals *and* everything. We experience suffering and compassion. We are whole *and* we are broken. We are on a journey together. May we be gentle with one another, offer grace, and also challenge each other to continue to grow. May we continue to practice together that we might look anew at our experience, our assumptions, and we have yet to learn.

So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Tao te Ching* Chapter 25, Stephen Mitchell translation