**Tree Wisdom**

Suzanne Simard, Professor of Forest Ecology at the University of British Columbia, says: “My queries started from a place of solemn concern for the future of our forests but grew into an intense curiosity, one clue leading to another, about how the forest was more than just a collection of trees. In this search for the truth, the trees have shown me their perceptiveness and responsiveness, connections and conversations. What started as a legacy, and then a place of childhood home, solace, and adventure in western Canada, has grown into a fuller understanding of the intelligence of the forest and, further, an exploration of how we can regain our respect for this wisdom and heal our relationship with nature.” [4]

Does Simard really mean that trees have intelligence like humans and a wisdom that is sadly lacking in our knowledge and relationship with nature? She explains how her research supports these conclusions.

“One of the first clues came while I was tapping into the messages that the trees were relaying back and forth through a cryptic underground fungal network. When I followed the clandestine path of the conversations, I learned that this network is pervasive through the entire forest floor, connecting all the trees in a constellation of tree hubs and fungal links. A crude map revealed, stunningly, that the biggest, oldest timbers are the sources of fungal connections to regenerating seedlings. Not only that, these mother trees connect to all neighbors, young and old, serving as the linchpins for a jungle of threads and synapses and nodes. I’ll take you through the journey that revealed the most shocking aspect of this pattern—that it has similarities with our own human brains. In it, the old and young are perceiving, communicating, and responding to one another by emitting chemical signals. *Chemicals identical to our own neurotransmitters. Signals created by ions cascading across fungal membranes*. [5]

Simard’s research not only altered forestry science, but also transformed her view of the natural world. She learned: “The older trees are able to discern which seedlings are their own kin. The old trees nurture the young ones and provide them food and water just as we do with our own children. It is enough to make one pause, take a deep breath, and contemplate the social nature of the forest and how this is critical for evolution. The fungal network appears to wire the trees for fitness. And more. These old trees are mothering their children.” [8]

Forests are filled with families. Clear cutting trees in a forest destroys a living-world that is intelligent and wise. “Our modern societies have made the assumption,” Simard asserts, “that trees don’t have the same capacities as humans. They don’t have nurturing instincts. They don’t cure one another, don’t administer care. But now we know Mother Trees can truly nurture their offspring. Douglas firs, it turns out, recognize their kin and distinguish them from other families and different species. They communicate and send carbon, the building block of life, not just to the mycorrhizas [fungal networks] of their kin but also to other members of the community. To help keep it whole.” [225]

Her forest research revealed to Simard that ecosystems are like human societies: "they’re  built on relationships. The stronger those are, the more resilient the system. And since our world’s systems are composed of individual organisms, they have the capacity to change. We creatures adapt, our genes evolve, and we can learn from experience. A system is ever changing because its parts—the trees and fungi and people—are constantly responding to one another and to the environment. Our success in coevolution—our success as a productive society—is only as good as the strength of these bonds with other individuals and species. Out of the resulting adaptation and evolution emerge behaviors that help us survive, grow, and thrive.” [189]

Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2021).

**Would reading this book be an eco-choice for you? Might you recommend it to someone who sees trees simply as potential lumber? Or values trees only because they reduce the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere? Might you spend more time with your trees?**