

Forest Family

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Loretta Pyles

“This Mother Tree was the central hub that the saplings and seedlings nested around, with threads of different fungal species, of different colors and weights, linking them, layer upon layer, in a strong, complex web.”

— Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest*¹

After years of walking the gauntlet to become a tenured full professor at a university, I was at a new crossroads. I had finally been awarded a sabbatical and could temporarily step away (no, run) from academic publishing, faculty meetings, student e-mails, and more recently, COVID-19 “pivots.” We who become academics apparently like school so much that we decide never to leave. But now its structures were living in my body and its hallowed halls dominating my consciousness. There are worse things, I know.

I had spent a good deal of the sabbatical bearing witness to my mother’s stumbles and falls through dementia. After an interminable COVID-induced separation, I sidled into her room at the nursing home where she now lived, half-way across the country, in Oklahoma City. Sitting in a wheelchair, cuddling a plastic baby doll, she greets me: “Are you Peter?” I gasp for air. I didn’t know of any Peter. “No Mom, it’s me, Loretta.” And thus began a corresponding unraveling of my own.

It’s almost the end of the sabbatical now, and I’ve given myself a nine-day training to become a mindful outdoor guide. It’s late spring and I drive an hour from home, arriving in the half-million-year-old Berkshire mountains in Western Massachusetts. After settling into my dorm room, our training group meets for the first time that evening. We are each gifted a hemlock sprig and assigned animal families. It’s basically adult summer camp. My group is the groundhogs and we admit we are a little disappointed, not getting to be something more epic like eagles or bears.

Early the next morning, bracing against the chill, I pace myself up the hill to basecamp, thinking about how on the way back down I’ll need to be extra careful with my wobbly knees on the steep, rocky steps. Ten or so people are already circled around the fire, bundled in layers and beanies. Tree stumps surround the blazing metal stove and I scan for a tall stump to sit on that will give my long legs some breathing room. I settle in and the circle gradually completes itself. By 6:30,

¹ Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (New York: Vintage, 2021), 228.

thirty of us are here — wordless — gazes transfixed to dancing flames.

This ancient rite — humans starting their day around a fire — is decidedly not the facsimile of the lonely light of a phone screen, but a warm gathering of souls. Our leader reads Wendell Berry who reminds us of “...the peace of wild things...who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.”

I reflect on how I got here. I grew up in a house of crashing and slamming, certain I didn’t belong, and afraid of my mother most of all. Escaping outside into the hush of the more than human world was my best move. In my own yard, my rounds included climbing the white paper birch tree in the front yard, building snow forts on the side yard and crossing the threshold into the world of talking rabbits in the backyard. I wandered, ran, biked, and played my way through the neighborhood for as long as I could get away with. I was also a Girl Scout and remained one even into high school.

By the time you’re seventeen, being a Girl Scout was about the most embarrassing thing you could be. Toward the end of high school, we had something like five people hanging on in our troop from across the Kansas City metro area where I grew up. But it wasn’t cool to be a Girl Scout, so we lied to our friends about what we were doing on meeting nights or camping trips — a church event, bowling, a family gathering, anything but being a Girl Scout. Note that church and bowling are clearly not very cool either, which tells you just how uncool being a high school Girl Scout was in 1987. I don’t imagine this has changed much. And no, we did not wear uniforms in high school.

I just wanted to go camping. I was (and still am) infatuated with every part of it—packing the bed roll just right, hiking, making fire, cooking a meal in aluminum foil, singing, sleeping outside. *Getting away.* I got as far as working on my Gold Award, the equivalent of an Eagle Scout, but never finished it because right around this time I discovered “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll.” Up until a few years ago, my mom periodically would lament, even three decades later, “I never got my mother’s pin for the Gold Award!” until she forgot to mention it anymore.

In the Berkshire mountains of Western Massachusetts, after fire meditation, we amble into the woods and fan out to our morning sit spots; mine was underneath a white pine surrounded by hemlocks. Propped on an old folded up yoga mat, I’m perched on a slope and can see the creek below out of the corner of my eye. Studying the forest floor, I see disorder: leaves, limbs, and all manner of dead matter. Oddly, I find myself having a conversation with the trees, taking on a disapproving, though humorous, curious tone.

“You kids have made a terrible mess here!” I declare.

“Ha, ha, we like it that way, we feel more creative when it’s messy.”

“What about that dead one over there?”

“Oh, Grandma? She still takes care of us and teaches us things.”

In the distance, I spy an American beech who has hung onto their tan leaves through the winter. One theory of why they hold onto them is that they are a more Southerly tree and haven't actually adapted to Northern winters yet.

“What's up with that guy?” I ask.

“Oh, they're from out of town and don't know our customs yet. That we strip down and let our leaves go in the winter. We try not to make fun of them for dressing so funny.”

Our leader's owl call startles me as it echoes through the woods. I gather my things and back at the fire scribble in my journal about this children's book that has just played out in my mind, also thinking of Suzanne Simard's work about kinship and care in the plant world — “plants are attuned to one another's strengths and weaknesses, elegantly giving and taking to attain exquisite balance.” Could the forest be mirroring this extended kinship network for me? Modeling wholesome family attachments? I head back down the hill for breakfast.

Later that morning and into the afternoon, in our outdoor classroom, we function in analog — no Zoom or PowerPoint — a flipchart on a tripod our most advanced technology. We study the Mahican people who originally tended the land. We are all diagnosed with nature deficit disorder.

In the late afternoon, in an open field, we awaken our spirits with gentle yoga, deep breathing, and gratitude. Our leader invites us to look around at the glacial lake, the ancient mountains and multi-generational trees, asking us to consider that they are *gazing back at us*. I sense something, and shudder. Could it be *that* simple, that there is consciousness in these beings — water, mountain, tree — and that it's always been so, but that I just wasn't noticing? I care about the Earth. But *why would the Earth care about me?* This consistent loving gaze was missing in my home growing up; and now that this person who was my mother is slipping away; I will never get it. Yet, I'm finding what psychoanalyst Winnicott called a maternal “holding environment” here in the natural world.

We saunter through the woods, re-learning how to walk like our ancestors. As John Muir said, “we ought to saunter through them reverently not ‘hike’ through them.” We listen, touch, smell. It takes twenty minutes to walk about one hundred feet. We end our time sharing in a circle sitting on the forest floor.

During the week, we make our way through this routine together, early morning fire gazing and sit spot meditation. Days full of child-like investigation of shag bark hickories and coyote scat. We end the day with a saunter through the woods and I soon understand how Eastern hemlocks are thought to be the redwoods of the east. Bathed in the hemlock forest, I get a hit that also reminds

me of the Ponderosa pines I've become familiar with on my adventures in the American West.

On the day I have come to call "the cold day," the morning temperature is somewhere in the 20s (Fahrenheit), with wind advisories and fire bans. In my sit spot in the woods, wrapped in a wool blanket, my back leaning against my mother tree, the focus of the morning's meditation is fire. With a little more concentration than usual, I rest my awareness on the warmth within me. After all, it's something like 98 degrees (Fahrenheit) in there. Drawing inspiration from a Tibetan meditation practice from the frigid Himalayas I learned about years ago, called *tummo*, I marinate in my inner fire to stay warm.

On a hill and taking a direct hit, there's no block from the winds that continue to blast. There's a reason that humans seek shelter and warmth and have sought to progressively gain more comfort through time — *it's cold as fuck out; and it can kill you*. Icy gales whip in my direction and I cling to any semblance of warmth.

Suddenly though, I feel as if I'm sitting in the middle of a campfire. I realize what has happened. The wind has just stopped for a moment. It seems that the fire element was there all along. I feel comforted as I receive the warm nuzzles of universal fire energy. I am being led to the conclusion that there might be extremely powerful phenomena present whether one notices them or not.

Gazing up into the swaying treetops, I spy a pair of indiscernible birds land on the highest limbs, weaving back and forth in the grey sky, fully surrendered to the windy dance of trees. They live in such harsh conditions, but they have *the gift of being alive*. It has been said that the Hopi tribe chose to stay living in a difficult climate because it would force them to stay awake and close to their life source. We are a culture famished for anything to make us feel more alive.

I've always pursued intense experiences and sensations, whether it's the deepest of stretches in yoga poses, cold water plunges, long silent meditation retreats, or a rush of psychedelics. So, I'm feeling right at home in this regard. My search has been one for transcendence, and relief from an internal battle.

In our disconnected society, we over-do the mind, the other senses dumbed down. The human brain is quite remarkable in that it can fixate on something so minute and irrelevant and block out everything else. Soaked in the forest, the dialectics of a burned-out mind, fixated on *good-bad* or *this-that*, are resolving.

On afternoon walks, I take in the revelations of freaky mushrooms and caress the mossy forest floor. My feet grow roots as I stand next to a girthy hemlock. Reaching for the bark, I close my eyes and feel for a message. It says, "have mercy, this is a planet steeped in grace." On breaks throughout the week, I go to open spaces and lie down on the ground. With the back of my heart touching the earth, the detritus of my psyche composts as the earth's energy of the burrowing groundhog subsumes me.

Our group eats our meals together and we have long conversations that close down the dining room. I befriend two librarians from Indiana who have traveled here together. One's face has lit up. Over the course of the week, she has gone from appearing traumatized and worn out, to happy and energetic. Perhaps experiencing some kind of ancestral transmission, she says everything changed on the day we birthed fire from steel and flint. The other, an only child growing up, is in the bear family with three men. She says she feels like she has three brothers now.

When I was growing up, I had two brothers and no sisters and wanted to be one of the boys. I was what they called "a tomboy," preferring plaid button-down shirts and jeans. I tried to hold my ground on the tomboy fashion front with my mother, whose image for me was dresses and lace, but she stood firm on the lace question and in my 3rd grade photo, I'm wearing a red plaid shirt with a lace collar.

A few months before this outdoor retreat, my sister-in-law sent me 52 dollars for my 52nd birthday. In a shop in Chatham, New York one afternoon after a hike in the Taconic Hills, I have cash in hand. Two items jumped out — a set of Tarot cards and a mushroom sweatshirt, which improbably totaled 52 dollars. In terms of the former, I've never owned a set nor knew much about them, but they almost literally leapt into my hands, so I adopted them. The mushroom sweatshirt was one of a kind, a print covered completely in many varieties of colorful fungi.

Toward the end of the week at camp, I don my mushroom hoodie. In professional settings in the academy, I'm pretty sure I'm bad at clothes; dressing myself appropriately, a puzzle I can't seem to solve. It turns out that a mushroom hoodie is a huge hit with mindful outdoor guides though. In fact, I've never gotten more positive comments about *anything I've ever worn in my entire life*. It's like I'd finally hit the pitch perfect fashion note at the right time and place, a mushroom sweatshirt landing well with a bunch of cold dirty outdoor souls drawn to intense experiences. One of my fellow groundhogs commented, "you pull that off well," by which I think she meant "for a grown ass woman wearing a mushroom hoodie, you don't look ridiculous."

In the natural world, there is an undoing, of the burdens and oppressions of civilization, of the sticky places in the mind. In the Adirondacks not far from near where I live, I always say that you don't actually have to do anything when you get there for it to have an effect on you. Granted, there's a lot of outdoor fun to be had. But all you really have to do is show up and it does its work on you at the cellular level; the forest a womb of stored energy just waiting to gift you.

On the last morning in my sit spot, I end my practice by giving something back to the forest, creating a mandala of sticks and pinecones, and circumambulating the trunk that has consecrated me. I softly chant an old favorite mantra.

To complete the journey, some of us organize a cold plunge in the lake. One of my roommates

strides in wearing all her clothes, including her hiking boots and jacket. My fellow groundhog, my new Irish mate, declares her “mad.” The woman who spent much of the training barefoot has stripped down to her skivvies. This ritual baptizes us in the water element.

We cling to our final moments, eating our last meal together, drawing out our goodbyes. We are all too aware that we are in a rare liminal space — adults with responsibilities away from home connecting with like-minded others in the more than human world. The laughter, friendships and solidarity have been the biggest surprise of all. In *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard explains that beneath the surface of the forest floor, the roots of trees and micro-fungi form a web of interconnections that render the forest one big extended family. I have come to learn that family — human and more than human — is ever-present.

A month after I arrive home from the retreat, I get the word that my mom has passed. Our family buries her in Minnesota on the land where she was born, gently ushered through the process by a kind funeral director named Peter. The Peter my mom was looking for had finally appeared.

Shortly after the funeral, I pull the Tower card. It’s a picture of a tall building collapsing, people flying out of windows in every direction. This card is no joke. The shit has hit the fan and everything you thought you could count on—all the tired structures—come tumbling down. It’s a big mess. The old habits, the compulsions, the workaholism, the escapist fantasies—none of it will hold.

The mythology of the naturalist or transcendentalist alone in the woods is delusional, if not dangerous, especially for a planet that must collectively reckon with climate catastrophe. Another, related, disaster is a feeling of a lack of *belonging*. In an economy and culture of exclusion, a fear that we have been or will be kicked out of the clan cuts to the bone. In nature though, everyone is included, and can be engaged with good purpose. Human families can have trouble doing this well, but I know it’s possible to re-learn.

As I make my way through the weeds of loss, I go outside to my morning sit spot in my own backyard and lean back against an old White pine, listening to the neighborhood birds call to one other. En route, I visit the plants in my garden and I’m sure a sunflower is looking back at me. Next week, I’m taking a road trip to go camping with the Indiana librarians.

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