

Pass It On®...

The Woman Who Talks to Trees.

Understanding the power of relationships in the natural world will help us heal the people we share our communities with.

Suzanne Simard grew up in the woods. Her family worked as loggers, and when she was old enough, she, too, could be found in the trees. She loved the work, which she describes as “extremely exciting because it was so dangerous” and because she was one of the first women in the industry.

The wilderness was exhilarating and full of life in an array of colors. “In the forest floor, there’s all kinds of bugs, but there’s also lots of fungi. And the fungi are so colorful. There are yellow ones and purple ones and white ones, and they grow right through the forest floor to the point where it kind of looks like gauze.”

Soon enough, Simard realized trees would be her life’s work. As modern logging techniques took over her area in Canada, she began to wonder about the health of the forest. There was a common misconception that some kinds of trees were hogging sunlight and nutrients and that, by getting rid of them, the more desirable trees would thrive. After earning a bachelor’s degree in forest resource management and becoming a Registered Professional Forester in British Columbia, Simard earned a PhD in forest ecology and delved into serious research.

She discovered that healthy forests are biodiverse, nutrients are shared among families of similar trees like cedars, and Douglas firs distribute higher amounts of carbon to baby Douglas firs in their network than those outside it. This means that trees work in cooperation, supporting each other with a variety of nutrient and sunlight needs like a community that shares milk, eggs, meat and bread. This diversity makes for healthy individuals.

Perhaps the most significant breakthrough in Simard’s research is that tree communities do more than share nutrients. There is always a hub or “mother” tree. This tree sends and receives signals from the other trees and helps balance the distribution of nutrients. And when this tree dies, like all trees do, it passes slowly, sharing nutrients

and distributing carbon to promote the future health of the tree community.

“That was when I started working with kin recognition, seeing whether or not these old trees, especially when they were dying, could recognize and help their kin,” Simard notes. She found that trees do recognize their kin. They take care of the seedlings and the sick trees. Turns out families are important to trees, too.

All this research on trees and their relationships to each other took on new meaning when Simard learned she had cancer. During her treatment, she learned that one of the medicines she needed during chemotherapy was a derivative of a substance trees make for their defense. As she got better, her connection to the forest continued to deepen.

Old trees support seedlings until they are old enough to stand on their own. A variety of trees collaborate for the health of the whole community. And trees produce a healing chemical that helps humans fight cancer. So, the next time you enjoy a nice walk in the forest, thank Simard Simard for taking the time to listen to the trees and understand just how important they are to our well-being.

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