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CMCL

**Genesis 3:16, Hosea 11:3-4, 13:8, Deuteronomy 32:18, Isaiah 66:13,
42:14, Psalm 131:2, Matthew 23:37, Luke 13:34**
On Mother Trees and Labor

There is a very tall bush flourishing in my back yard that has been coming to bloom all week. The blooms start out the same color as the leaves and stalk—a fresh, mint green, all monochromatic. But as the week of the blooming progresses, the blooms slowly shed their color, becoming paler and paler, until this morning, they were standing out in gorgeous contrast to the leaves – the creamiest white petals.

I've always known I wanted a snowball bush, because there's always been a snowball bush in the houses where my mother has lived. And not just any snowball bush – they were all cuttings, or children of cuttings, from the same snowball bush back in Virginia at the home place of my mother's great-grandmother. But somehow in her last move, she didn't take a cutting of the snowball bush, so I thought I'd lost my chance to have a daughter of the matriarchy tree in my own yard. Though I'd lost the chance to carry it with me, Naomi-and-Ruth style, "whither I goeth, thou wilt go" (ok, I guess that's not exactly how the verse goes!). I didn't think about it very often, partly because I'm not much of a gardener or green thumb. But I never forgot about it, either.

And so four years ago, while I was on my first sabbatical from CMCL, I got a gut-ripping phone call. My first cousin had died. We'll probably never know the story, whether there was choice in the matter (it was the anniversary of her mother's death, a loss that had rocked her world years before) or whether it was an accident. Either way, a gun went off, with tragic results: a daughter was taken from her father, a sister from her brother, a wife from her husband, a mother from her sons.

As my mother and I left her funeral, winding around the back roads of Rockingham County, Virginia, we found ourselves driving close to that great-grandmother's old home place. On a whim, we turned down the lane, then into the driveway, and found ourselves nose to nose with an overgrowth of snowball bush. Out in the yard, the wife of a 2nd cousin I've not seen since childhood walked toward us, with a baby on her hips. We explained who we were, and asked if we could dig up a cutting of the snowball bush. Somehow, due to her generosity (and a shovel and a spare pot), we drove away with my longed-for cutting of the matriarchy bush.

For me, so much of mothering is tied up in the symbol of this plant; how something can be so cherished, and passed down from generation to generation; how it can thrive in so many different places and times, in the care of so many different people; the continuity and convolutions of its passing down, but also the interruptions – the times when it didn't pass down; and yet the steadfastness and groundedness of the Great Mother-plant that was still there to reach back to; in the way I learned to love it from my mother, who learned to love it from her mother, and how somehow my cousin's death

and the great disruption of the mothering line in her family brought me back to the Mother Tree or brought it back to me.

But even as I paint this metaphorical picture of matriarchy, there is so much it doesn't touch ... The fact that I was interrupted in the writing of this story to help toilet a daughter with an upset stomach and then cradle her back to sleep. Even as I trace the fond tale of this quite-literal family tree, I sit with the knowledge that my husband's family tracings reach back, as so many black families in the U.S., barely a hundred years, and slam against the wall of slavery and the limits of documentation; 1870 – the year that the census first began recording the names of enslaved persons, not just their quantities as inventory.

This is the year so many inquiries can go no further back; yet another door of no return. And it's about the same time that my great-great grandparents might have been planting that snowball bush in Rockingham County, swapping tales of their own known and named great-grandparents and their lives back in the Alsace-Lorraine. While mothers were torn from children on plantations and on auction blocks as they are now legally torn from one another once again if they enter the country illegally.

The scriptures of our Judeo-Christian tradition also use trees metaphorically, and record family trees in great detail. And there are some mothers in that tracing ... noteworthy by being the exceptions to the primarily patriarchal threads. Ruth makes a showing, as does Rahab. But it's a run-in with a tree at the very beginning of Genesis, back at the root of the human family tree, that sets the tone of mothering in the Abrahamic traditions: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve tasted the fruit of the forbidden one, and the writers of our oldest traditions say that she was cursed for it ... labor and childbirth would be painful, and she would be ruled over by man.

The skeptic in me always whispers, surely this is a “Just So Story” – a tale written backwards to give justification to an all-too-common reality. Surely some indignant and precocious little girl, a few thousand years ago, asked a trusted adult, or maybe just older sibling: Why does it hurt so much when mommies have babies? (She'd likely known many who'd died in the ordeal) And why do women put up with being told what to do?? It doesn't make sense! And that person said, Well, honey, maybe it was like this ...

And how convenient – it's a divine curse, so we don't even have to try to fix it. It's just the way it is and always will be. Amen. Much less often quoted is the line in Deuteronomy: “I set before you blessing and curse: Choose. Choose life ... choose blessing!”

But the labor of motherhood is hard ... Even the word labor is hard. I am a mother who has carried two children in my body, and yet I've never been in labor. Both times, at medical recommendation, I was delivered by C-section at 39 weeks, before my babies were stirring, and before my body was beginning to dilate or efface at all. C-section delivery and recovery is no cake walk – but I will never know what contractions feel like, or what labor and delivery feel like.

There is pain in the loss of that kind of labor. There is pain in the loss of labor due to lack or loss of pregnancy; there is pain in the labor of delivering a child who will not be born alive ... There is pain in the labor and cramps of a period come, yet again, when a pregnancy is longed for. There is pain the labor of being asked to explain childlessness, whether it's intentional or not. There is pain in the labor and delivery of the healthy child, even in the "best" of outcomes. There is pain, as Genesis predicts, in longing for that which we have no control over. Longing for that which we desire, whether we want to desire it or not.

And there is pain in the labor of childrearing ... you don't have to click far on the internet to read about the statistical disparities in what's being called "emotional labor" in parenting shared between male and female parents. Women still statistically bear a much heavier load in the management and coordination of childcare, in addition to continuing to do the lion's share of childcare and housework, whether or not they work outside the home. And women still just plain do more hours per week of housework and childcare.

And the Bible is much like current reality, in that it can so poetically laud mothering as a verb, even attributing it to God, who is usually "masculine," of course, and romanticizing the achievement of becoming a mother. For so many women in the Bible, their whole storyline is about the longing for and then achieving of motherhood, and then it gets "happily ever aftered." The reality of mothering is lost to the history books. But those who give their life to mothering, to nurturing our children, are paid poorly or not at all, and men who are primary parents and homekeepers often find that liberal society supports them more in theory than in practice; so the prejudice often follows the work rather than the value of the work being lifted by the status of the worker.

I find myself often exhausted from the labors of working, mothering and homekeeping ... There's a reason I told Anne and Ken my thought that, "I heard the voice of Jesus say, come unto me and rest" would be a great gathering hymn for Mother's Day, especially after a week of single parenting. As much as I loathe the obligatoriness and superficiality of "Mother's Day," and the way it feels like one day of attention is supposed to somehow make up for 364 days of inadequate support and recognition, I do find it meaningful to be recognized ... to have labor recognized, and in theory to be able to not labor for one day sounds great (although I think we all know how that actually turns out).

I even (mostly) fit the storyline that Mother's Day was made for – a married, cishet woman, I wanted children and was able to have them, and still have them in my home with me; and I am a woman who was mothered well, and whose mother still lives, and lives nearby. I am one of the lucky ones on Mother's Day, in many ways. The snowball bush is my glowing reminder of those un-interrupted roots in my life.

So what is the good news on Mother's Day, 2018? For me, it's the reminder to choose the blessing, not the curse. The pains of labor of every kind will be just that, painful. Even when it is labor that is life-giving. The labor of nurturing and caring for children is no curse, but labor to be valued.

And I hold out three possibilities for you for this day, amidst your many already well-laid plans, I'm sure. 1) REST – take that invitation to rest from your labors today; You know if you need to, whether or not your story or your need is known by anyone else. I refuse to be baited by the Mary/Martha dichotomy – all labor counts! Or perhaps you feel called to enable someone else who labors long to nurture and care for others (or who longs to have others to care for) to rest.

2) Consider helping others in this country connect the missing or cut threads back through their family trees. There's a project I just learned about called: "Last Seen: Finding Family After Slavery" and they're asking for your – for anyone's – help. They're searching microfilms of old newspaper ads from the 1860s to 1900, transcribing "Information Wanted" ads that were placed by formerly enslaved persons who had been separated from their families during slavery. These ads, such as this 1865 ad from a son seeking his mother:

Evans Green desires to find his mother, Mrs Phillis Green, whom he left in Virginia some years ago. She belonged to old Squire Cook, Winchester, whose son was an attorney-at-law. Any info respecting her will be thankfully received.

These ads help people living today to connect the dots in their family trees; to find their lost ancestors, to cross that 1870 line, a line that is currently a barrier in my husband's family tree. Anyone can go to their website and volunteer to be a transcriber – they'll send you copies of old ads, and you can type them up in a searchable format.
informationwanted.org

3) Another way you can labor on behalf of mothers this Mother's Day, is to support the Black Mamas Bail Out, part of National Bail Out, an effort to raise money to release black mothers and caregivers who are in jail, pre-trial, because they cannot afford bail. If you're interested in finding out more, just google "Black Mamas Bail Out" or "National Bail Out". Or go straight to <https://nomoremoneybail.org/>

May you flourish and bloom, as a tree planted by streams of water, no matter whether you're a bloom on an ancient Mother Tree, or a transplanted cutting, putting down roots far away. Amen.