

Discussion questions for

# *The Tree at the Center*

by Kathryn Knight Sonntag

*The Tree at the Center deals with women's language, the divine feminine, and environmental stewardship/feminist ecology of the divine. This guide presents several of the many facets for study and reflection from the book and is designed to enable women to lead conversations about their own sacred experience and address the linguistic and theological inequities that women deal with every day.*

- 1 *The Tree at the Center* opens on a world that may feel foreign to those who are not used to hearing the language of women. Many societies are built with language spoken by and for men, which can leave women feeling like their experiences are secondary to men's. But as Knight Sonntag explores in "Nüshu," p. 5, societies exist where female-created language thrives. Without hearing and honoring this language, people cannot understand women's perspectives, experiences, realities, or divine identities.  
  
Do you feel like there is a female language you are missing in your daily living? Do you find outlets for creating/discovering it with other women? When you talk from a purely female perspective what is it like? How do men generally respond to it? Why is it important for women *and* men to cultivate an understanding of female-driven language?
- 2 Nüshu, translated "female script," was a secret language, used by women from the Jiangyong area of China's Hunan Province, with characters that resemble birds' footprints. The language, dating back to 1600–1100 B.C.E., originated from a female society that worshiped birds, and serves as an example of how women have long written in code to protect and empower themselves. Studies of the script describe how women used to gather and sing their autobiographical stories, demonstrating how they portrayed their own identities. One could conclude that birds, with their chirps, warbles, and trills, are doing the same. What connections do you draw between the development of their language and their deep connection to and worship of nature?
- 3 The divine feminine (Heavenly Mother) is the central figure of *The Tree at the Center*. She is also the central point of humanity's spiritual growth and the abundant source of life on Earth and into eternity. How does reframing restoration theology with the Mother at the center (the tree from which Christ the fruit is born) affect how we see the roles of women, their eternal identities, and their connection to creation?
- 4 What can we learn by observing that the divine feminine is symbolized as a tree, and is the cosmological center in cosmologies from cultures all over the world? (See "World Tree," p. 12.)
- 5 What does it mean to you for the womb to be described as a palimpsest, a manuscript or piece of writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing but of which traces remain? What does it signify that the womb is "scripted, washed, / scripted—with the ordinances / of creation?" (See "Palimpsest," p. 45.)
- 6 Do you agree with the author that how women are treated is directly connected to how the earth and physical creation are treated?

- 7 As the collection progresses, Knight Sonntag suggests that coming to know the Divine Mother is necessary to develop a “women’s language.” Do you agree? What else do you feel is necessary to create this language?
- 8 The poem “One Thousand Two Hundred Sixty Days” refers to the time when “the woman clothed with the sun” from the Book of Revelation was banished from Jerusalem to wander in the wilderness until she is welcomed back to the city and to her home within the Holy of Holies of the temple. Why did the woman (interpreted as the Mother of the Lord by many scholars, including Margaret Barker) go to the wilderness? What do the scriptures say about her departure and return? How would the return of the Mother of the Lord to the latter-day temple change the way we worship and women’s understanding of their divinity (Revelation 12:6-14)?
- 9 The poem “Holy of Holies” equates the womb with the Holy of Holies in the temple (both ancient and modern), where the mysteries of creation are kept. How does this more specific understanding of the female body as temple inform our view of ourselves and of creation? What are the implications of this within restoration theology?
- 10 Some of the most holy moments in Christendom and Mormondom occurred in a grove or under a tree. How does seeing the Mother as the olive grove of Gethsemane, the cross from which Christ’s body hung, the Tree of Life witnessed as the source of eternal life by Lehi and Nephi, and the Sacred Grove which surrounded Joseph Smith as he witnessed the heavens open change your understanding of divinity?
- 11 How does this poetry collection as a whole suggest we recover the sacred (archetypal) feminine identity in restoration theology? How does the collection invite us to recover the divine feminine identity in the daily experience of women (and men)?
- 12 Theophany is often used to describe ascension events. While called “ascensions”, the experience can also include God descending to the person, such as Joseph Smith seeing the Lord in his First Vision. Also, in some instances the person sees God on a mountain top (symbolically the Holy of Holies). In many instances, the individual experiences God in His throne room in His heavenly temple (the Holy of Holies).

How does *The Tree at the Center* function as an ascension text? How does the symbol of The Tree of Life function as a diagram of the ascent of the soul?

Bonus: What part of the book resonated with you most? What insight will you carry with you?