

INTRODUCTION

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF TREES

Henry David Thoreau was captivated by trees, and they played a significant role in his creativity as a writer, his work as a naturalist, his philosophical thought, and even his inner life. He responded to trees emotionally, but he also understood their lives in the forest as well as anyone in his day or since. Indeed, it sometimes seems that he could see the sap flowing beneath their bark. When he wrote in *The Maine Woods* that the poet loves the pine tree like his own shadow in the air, he was speaking about himself. In short, he spoke their language.

What drew him to trees? Their beauty and form delighted his eye. Their wildness struck a chord in him, and their patience reminded him that we will sooner overtake the dawn by remaining here, where we are, than by chasing the sun across the western hills. By spending his life rooted to Concord, he emulated trees' tenacious hold on earth.

Human nature appeared slightly bent to Thoreau, but he saw trees as upright and virtuous, the nobility of the vegetable kingdom. Their stance spoke of the "ancient rectitude and vigor of nature." Nothing, he said, "stands up more free from blame in this world than a pine tree."

Old trees connected Thoreau to a realm of time not counted on the town clock, an endless moment of fable and possibility. They reminded him "that I, too, am at least a remote descendant of the heroic race of men of whom there is tradition."

And they were his teachers. Although he called the shedding of leaves each fall a tragedy, he knew that the leaves that fell to the ground would enrich the soil and, in time, “stoop to rise” in new trees. By falling so airily, so contentedly, he said, they teach us how to die.

Thoreau wrote prolifically about trees for a quarter century, from 1836 to 1861. He observed them closely, knew them well, and described them in detail, but he did not presume to fully explain them. He respected a mysterious quality about trees, a way in which they point beyond themselves. For Thoreau, trees bore witness to the holy and emerged in his writings as special emblems and images of the divine.

Thoreau’s depictions, sketches, and meditations on trees in his journal, essays, and books, both fanciful and exact, are as vivid today as they were in 1891, when the English naturalist P. Anderson Graham wrote that he was unusually able to “to preserve the flashing forest colors in unfading light.” This book of those writings shows how Thoreau saw trees and what they meant to him. It is about his personal and creative response to trees: his keen perception of them, the joy they gave him, the poetry he saw in them, and how trees fed his soul.

Each of the chapters that follows contains a short essay and a selection of Thoreau’s writings about trees, the latter taken chiefly from his two-million-word journal. Although that sprawling, fourteen-volume work is increasingly seen as his true masterpiece, it is less well known to his readers. It is also Thoreau’s most direct and spontaneous writing and has rightly been called “a cache of love letters” to nature. The one hundred excerpts in the book are accompanied by seventy-two of my photographs of trees in Concord and elsewhere. They are also illustrated by photographs by Herbert Wendell Gleason, who created a visual archive of Thoreau’s world a century ago, and sixteen sketches by Thoreau himself illustrate others.

The book begins by exploring five characteristic ways in which Thoreau responded to trees. The first is the range and depth of his disciplined eye for them. Thoreau delighted in observing the parts, form, color, and stance of trees. He saw these with a kind of double vision. As a naturalist, he looked

for hard, empirical facts. As a poet and Transcendentalist, he sought the significance of those facts. Each viewpoint reinforced the other. Thoreau's detailed, minute observations of trees are thus infused with his insistent faith in nature.

The second is the joy that trees stirred in his heart. Thoreau's readiness to renounce, judge, and forgo is well known. But the beauty and resilience of trees brought out a boyish joy in him and excited exclamations about them in his prose. Trees allowed Thoreau to express his hopeful and affirmative side. He also personally identified with trees. He saw them as his friends and even as "distant relations."

Trees also awakened the muse in Thoreau, who made the forest a fount of figurative language in which to dip his pen. He created fresh, vivid images of them, depicting winter trees against the moon as "chandeliers of darkness" or seeing "a rich tracery to the forest windows" in scarlet oak leaves cut against the sky. At a deeper level, Thoreau also "browsed," or fed, his poetic imagination on them the way a moose browses their branches, for he believed trees were themselves "living poetry"—poems writ in nature's hand on the landscape. His wordplay not only lifted his own spirits but was also part of a consistent effort as a writer to jolt our customary perceptions of trees.

Chapter 4 turns to Thoreau's energetic study of trees as a naturalist in the 1850s, and to his philosophical thought about them. Through years of close observation, he learned how forests regenerate. He dated the ages of trees and estimated their rates of growth by counting their rings. Both were far ahead of the science of his day. Thoreau's scientific study of trees increased, rather than diminished, his symbolic understanding of them. He came to see trees as universal templates of form, expressing universal laws and symbolizing nature's deep impulse for renewal.

Chapter 5 examines how trees nurtured Thoreau's soul. They disclosed the divine to him and gave expression to his deeply religious nature. Trees symbolized a kind of immortality in which Thoreau could believe. A tall white pine in Maine, he wrote, was "as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still."

The book next considers Thoreau's response to notable individual trees or specific groups of trees. Chapter 6 delves into Thoreau's deep affinity for an iconic American tree, *Pinus strobus*, the Eastern white pine. He admired the tree's tall, ramrod straight trunk and nearly horizontal branches, and he loved to see light reflected through its luminous, waxy needles. Thoreau identified strongly with the tree's wild, indomitable spirit. The white pine, he wrote, was the emblem of his life.

Chapters 7 and 8 present Thoreau's romantic view of old trees as links to a nobler, more heroic past. As Concord began to shed its rural character in the 1850s, Thoreau wrote about trees as symbols of the simpler, preindustrial town of his youth and imbued them with noble qualities that he found lacking in society. In 1856, when the Davis Elm, a huge historic landmark in Concord, was felled, Thoreau was incensed. He cast it and all of the town's elms as beacons of moral principle, writing that they discharged their civic duties more faithfully than did Concord's residents.

A similar romantic impulse drove Thoreau's writing about Inches Woods, a forest of old-growth oaks that he was amazed to find, in 1860, only eight miles from his home. He took the ancient oaks to be vestiges of nature in precolonial New England and portrayed them as symbols of hidden riches that we do not value. The oaks elicited some of Thoreau's most rousing calls to preserve trees, which he used to conclude his unfinished work "Wild Fruits."

Chapter 9 discusses Thoreau's special fondness for trees transfigured by snow. After a winter storm, he was out in the woods to see them, excited as a child on Christmas morning. Trees draped in snow disclosed surreal forms to him. An added bonus was that winter made the familiar trees he saw all year suddenly look fresh and new. Glistening with ice or clad in a coat of white, trees in snow quickened Thoreau's pulse and stirred his pen.

Finally, Thoreau had a metaphorical vision of the forest as a maritime main and imagined individual trees to be schooners and barques. He sails this sea of green in chapter 10, calling on many ports in the woods. Thoreau's extended nautical imagery of trees linked his love of the ocean and his love of the woods.

Thoreau became fond of trees in his boyhood as he roamed the woods and fields of Concord, the rural farm town where he was born, in 1817. On his first visit to Walden Pond, during an outing with his family at the age of five, he felt an instinctive affinity for the trees around the pond. “That sweet solitude my spirit seemed so early to require,” he said, “at once gave preference to this recess among the pines . . . as if it had found its proper nursery.” He wrote mainly about the changes in trees—“now the fruit begins to form on the trees”—when he composed a school essay on the four seasons at age eleven. And as a college student, he confessed to spending hours roaming the woods of Concord that could have been used to study.

That bond was never broken. As a saunterer, poet, surveyor, and naturalist, Thoreau loved trees and wrote about them his whole adult life. In the 1850s, he began to study them in depth. By 1860, his life revolved around trees. His detailed observations about the growth and life span of trees, their methods of propagation and how they succeed each other in the forest, although mostly ignored in professional forestry, were decades ahead of his time.

Two events in 1860 deepened Thoreau’s interest in trees. That September Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune* published Thoreau’s lecture “The Succession of Forest Trees.” It became the most widely printed of Thoreau’s essays during his lifetime. Its success buoyed his spirits, and he redoubled his work on trees. In October he conducted a forest survey to determine which trees in Concord were the oldest. In November, having concluded that no old-growth trees remained in his vicinity, he was stunned to discover Inches Woods, the primitive oak forest in nearby Boxborough. For days on end that fall, Thoreau counted the rings in stumps or in the trunks of dead or blown-down trees. He clawed at roots to expose shoots and stubs of shoots, which hold clues to the history of a tree. While counting rings in hickory trees on a rainy and cold December 3, he caught a cold that quickly worsened. His left his journal blank for eighteen days—during which he nevertheless traveled through a snowstorm to Waterbury, Connecticut, to give his lecture “Autumnal Tints.” The cold turned into bronchitis and then the tuberculosis from which he never recovered. Thoreau died on May 6, 1862. He

spent his last months editing “Autumnal Tints,” his brilliant meditation on the death of nature in autumn. Trees figured in other late works, including “Wild Apples,” his ode to the ancient apple tree, and “The Dispersion of Seeds,” which he left unfinished.

Thoreau’s lifetime overlapped with the apex of deforestation in New England. By 1850, save for wetlands, inaccessible woods, or land not fit to farm, Concord was largely shorn of its trees. “Every larger tree which I knew and admired is being gradually culled out and carried to mill,” Thoreau wrote in his journal on December 3, 1855. “I miss them as surely and with the same feeling that I do the old inhabitants out of the village street.” The loss also made him angry. “Thank God, they cannot cut down the clouds!” he wrote as the woods around Walden Pond were being heavily cut for firewood. Thoreau felt their loss all the more acutely for knowing the ecological and psychological value of trees. They were “rivers of sap” flowing “from the atmosphere and emptying into the earth,” and they were also essential to the human spirit. “What would human life be without forests, those natural cities?” he asked. From them come the “tonics and barks which brace mankind.” “A town is saved,” he wrote in “Walking,” “not more by the righteous men in it, than by the woods and swamps that surround it.”

Thoreau’s wisdom about trees still speaks to us today. Indeed, it appears strikingly prescient. Every tree “sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild,” in which lies “the preservation of the world,” he also wrote in “Walking.” The contemporary understanding of trees as “carbon sinks” that help reduce global warming makes Thoreau’s words seem almost clairvoyant. A century before “nurse logs” became a popular term in forest ecology, Thoreau said pine trees were “nurses” to the oak saplings that take root around them. He described trees as fountains of water and purifiers of the air. He did not use the word “ecology,” but he saw forests as whole landscapes that transcended public and private boundaries and urged that they be preserved as such. The German forester and author Peter Wohlleben’s idea that trees exchange signals across fungal “social networks” was unthinkable to Thoreau, but he did intuit that they could perhaps communicate. On March 10, 1859, after

sensing that sap had begun to flow in the woods, he wrote in his journal, “Such is the genialness of nature that the trees appear to have put out feelers by which our senses apprehend them more tenderly.” And despite the relentless cutting of woods around him, Thoreau foresaw that “one day they will be planted and nature reinstated to some extent.”

In his own day, however, loggers still had the upper hand. In response, Thoreau used his gifts as a writer to challenge the petty calculus that reduced forests to so many board feet of lumber. He knew that without trees, nature would wither, and therefore human life would as well. Trees, he said with his customary frugal eloquence, “are good for other things than boards and shingles.” They should be allowed to “stand and decay for higher uses.”

In “Walking,” Thoreau recounts climbing a tall white pine on a hill in late June. Near the top he found, at the ends of the highest branches, “a few minute and delicate red cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine looking heavenward.” He took one down with him and showed it around town to whomever he met on the street—people at the courthouse, farmers, lumber dealers, and woodchoppers. “Not one had ever seen the like before,” he wrote, “but they wondered as at a star dropped down. Tell of ancient architects finishing their works on the tops of columns as perfectly as on the lower and more visible parts! . . . The pines have developed their delicate blossoms on the highest twigs of the wood every summer for ages . . . yet scarcely a farmer or hunter in the land has ever seen them.” Two hundred years after his birth, Thoreau is still helping us see trees in new ways. How they change with the seasons or compose their arms; their solid, comforting presence and their fleeting beauties—such things take on deeper meanings when we look at them through Thoreau’s eyes. Trees were wordless poems to him, and the message he heard from them was one of life itself. His writing about trees illustrates the power they exert over us all.