

Plant Lover's Almanac

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In my last article I closed with a lead-in to this Almanac, promising the saga of the Karner blue butterfly. But instead of "*Your life or your lupines*" I shall do "*something entirely different*". Karner blues must wait. They are used to it; let us imagine that in their process of complete metamorphosis they are now pupating, between caterpillar and butterfly.

The reason for this delay is a wonderful book I received for Christmas, thanks to my sister and law Jane and her husband David, mailed from Seattle. Seattle and Ohio are a long way from Concord Massachusetts and Walden Pond, but this book has much to say to us today. It is all about – trees.

The book is "Thoreau and the Language of Trees" by Richard Higgins and it juxtaposes Higgin's commentary with Thoreau's words in the 14 volumes (over two million words) of "The Journal of Henry David Thoreau" edited by Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen. First, some poesy from Thoreau:

*"Where was the sap, the sap, the value of the forest for  
me, but in that line where it was relieved against the sky?"*

*That was my woodlot, that was my lot in the woods.*

*The silvery needles of the pine straining the sky."*

Thoreau loved the trees in the woods, whole and in their parts, together as forests and individually. As Higgins noted, he "*looks at each twig, each leaf, each bud, with as Thoreau said: a "separate intention of the eye."*

John Muir, not many years later, scribbled that "*Between any two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life.*" Thoreau wrote in "The Maine Woods" that "*the poet loves the pine tree like his own shadow in the air*". Higgins writes that "*the white pine was the emblem of his life. And that "upon seeing a pine grove lit up by the sun" Thoreau wrote "my spirit is like a lit tree"*".

In his troubled times, as in ours, Thoreau saw trees as righteous. Nothing "*stands up more free from blame in this world than a pine tree of nature...ancient rectitude and vigor.*" Go to the woods and soak up this rectitude and rigor, and be ye refreshed. And do it now, amidst our winter chill.

From Higgins: "*After a winter storm he was out in the woods to see them, excited as a child on Christmas morning*" In winter, Thoreau would "*tramp through the snow knee-high to keep an appointment with a beech tree, or a yellow b birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines.*" Thoreau noted "*No two trees wear the ice alike.*" Check this out, from firs to hemlocks, from white pines to the little sock-hats of sweetgums, it is a wonderland.

Thoreau wrote of specific trees.

*“I am struck and attracted by the parallelism of the twigs of hornbeam”. Of elms in fall... “great yellow canopies or parasols held over our heads and by the mile together, making the village’ all one and compact – an ulmian – or elm nursery, which is at the same time a nursery of men.” Of hemlocks: “Two or more hemlocks on opposite sides of a brook make the most beautiful frame to a waterscape, especially in a deciduous wood, where the light is somber and not too glaring.”*

Thoreau, with all his lyrical descriptions of trees, their “*living poetry*”, was also a keen scientific observer and thinker. He was an early dendrochronologist, measuring the growth rate of trees. His phenological observations, matching environmental conditions of temperature with plant leafing and flowering are crucial historical data for scientists today. He coined the term “forest succession”, looking at how the history from field to forest follows a pattern. He understood the interconnectedness of the parts of the tree and of trees to other trees.

This interconnectedness is a hot topic scientifically today as we learn about the communication of trees through mycorrhizal (fungus-root) connections in the forest. It also has a more immediate and physical resonance. At our most recent tornado at Secret Arboretum the dawnredwood grove again stood resolute, despite individual baldcyprees in front of them and arborvitae behind them that were felled. I suspect their intertwined roots protected them.

Let us listen to Thoreau, though.

*“Two sturdy oaks, I mean, which side by side,*

*Withstand the winter storm,*

*And spite of wind and tide,*

*Grow up the meadows pride,*

*For both are strong.*

*Above they barely touch, but undermined*

*Down to their deepest source,*

*Admiring you shall find*

*Their roots are intertwined*

*Inseparably.”*

A final note: I also promised last time a picture of my broccoli casserole, which indeed we did enjoy for the Christmas season. Alas, I forgot to send an image of this to the *Beacon* this week. So, next time. While you wait, ponder this: what is the difference between broccoli and boogers? A sort of “*But I don’t like broccoli!*” sort of thing. Until we meet again, three weeks hence.

Really, really, final note: Let us give it to Thoreau: *What would human life be without forests, these natural cities?”*

