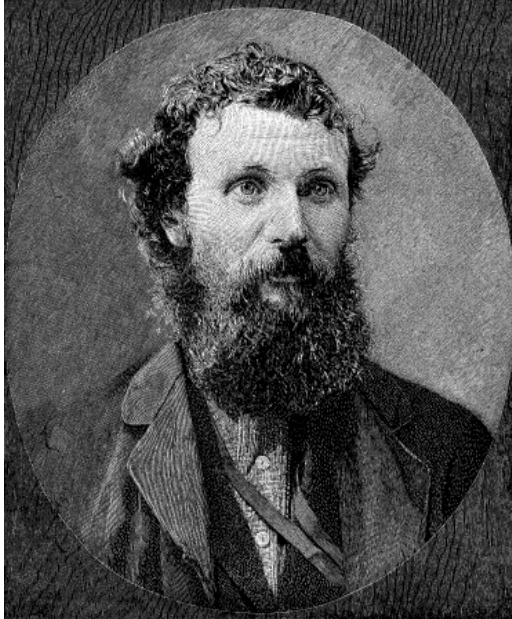


John Muir Quotes on Death

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John Muir (1838-1914) was America's most famous and influential naturalist and conservationist. Although known for his advocacy for wilderness preservation and establishment of national parks, his greatest legacy may be teaching us the essential characteristic of the science of ecology, the interrelatedness of all living things. He summed it up nicely: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."

Through his many wilderness adventures, Muir had experiences around death which led him to an inner peace with death that is rare today. He experienced our planet as a home of beauty for all living things, plants and animals and human alike, all sharing the same fate as "fellow mortals." His thoughts alternate from the sublime to the humorous, from the contemplative, to the ecstatic!

"Death is a kind nurse saying, "Come, children, to bed and get up in the morning" a gracious mother calling her children home."

- *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (1938), pg.440.

"The rugged old Norsemen spoke of death as *Heimgang*---home-going. So snow-flowers go home when they melt and flow to the sea, and the rock ferns, after unrolling their fronds to the light and beautifying the rocks, roll them up close again in the autumn and blend with the soil."

- *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (1938), pg.439.

"On no subject are our ideas more warped and pitiable than of death. Instead of the friendly sympathy, the union of life and death so apparent in Nature, we are taught that death is an accident, a deplorable punishment for the oldest sin, the arch-enemy of life, etc."

- *A Thousand-Mile Walk To the Gulf*, pg.70

“Let children walk with nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life, and that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony.”

–from *A Thousand-Mile Walk To the Gulf*

“Myriads of rejoicing living creatures, daily, hourly, perhaps every moment sink into death’s arms, dust to dust, spirit to spirit-waited on, watched over, noticed only by their Maker, each arriving at its own Heaven-dealt destiny. All the merry dwellers of the trees and streams, and the myriad swarms of the air, called into life by the sunbeam of a summer morning, go home through death, wings folded perhaps in the last red rays of sunset of the day they were first tried. Trees towering in the sky, braving storms of centuries, flowers turning faces to the light for a single day or hour, having enjoyed their share of life’s feast-all alike pass on and away under the law of death and love. Yet all are our brothers and they enjoy life as we do, share Heaven’s blessings with us, die and are buried in hallowed ground, come with us out of eternity and return into eternity. "Our lives are rounded with a sleep."

- *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (1938), p. 339-340.

“There need be no lasting sorrow for the death of any of Nature’s creations, because for every death there is always born a corresponding life.”

- *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (1938), pg 168.

"Like trees in autumn shedding their leaves, going to dust like beautiful days to night, proclaiming as with the tongues of angels the natural beauty of death."

- *Steep Trails*, pg.271

“One is constantly reminded of the infinite lavishness and fertility of Nature -- inexhaustible abundance amid what seems enormous waste. And yet when we look into any of her operations that lie within reach of our minds, we learn that no particle of her material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty; and we soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unspendable wealth of the universe, and faithfully watch and wait the reappearance of everything that melts and fades and dies about us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better and more beautiful than the last.”

- *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911) chapter 10.

“Plants, animals, and stars are all kept in place, bridled along appointed ways, with one another, and through the midst of one another -- killing and being killed, eating and being eaten, in harmonious proportions and quantities.”

- from "Wild Wool", from "Overland Monthly" (April 1875) reprinted in *Steep Trails* (1918) chapter 1.

“I have often wondered by what means bears, wild sheep, and other large animals were so hidden at death as seldom to be visible. One may walk these woods from year to year without even snuffing a single tainted smell. Pollution, defilement, squalor are words that never would have been created had man lived conformably to Nature. Birds, insects, bears die as cleanly and are disposed of as beautifully as flies. The woods are full of dead and dying trees, yet needed for their beauty to complete the beauty of the living.... How beautiful is all Death!”

- *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (1938), pg. 222.

“Nature loves man, beetles, and birds with the same love. With her storms of snow, hail, volcanic fire, and lightning, she seems to scatter firebrands, arrows, and death among her creatures, and so she does, but they are scattered as the stars are scattered in the heavens, each in its place, singing together in faithful harmony.”

- *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (1938), pg. 66.

“...we find in the fields of Nature no place that is blank or barren ; every spot on land or sea is covered with harvests, and these harvests are always ripe and ready to be gathered, and no toiler is ever underpaid. Not in these fields, God's wilds, will you ever hear the sad moan of disappointment, `All is vanity .' No, we are overpaid a thousand times for all our toil, and a single day in so divine an atmosphere of beauty and love would be well worth living for, and at its close, should death come, without any hope of another life, we could still say, `Thank you, God, for the glorious gift!' and pass on. Indeed, some of the days I have spent alone in the depths of the wilderness have shown me that immortal life beyond the grave is not essential to perfect happiness, for these diverse days were so complete there was no sense of time in them, they had no definite beginning or ending, and formed a kind of terrestrial immortality. After days like these we are ready for any fate — pain, grief, death or oblivion — with grateful heart for the glorious gift as long as hearts shall endure. In the meantime, our indebtedness is growing ever more. The sun shines and the stars, and new beauty meets us at every step in all our wanderings.”

- *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. by Linnie Marsh Wolfe, (1938), pg. 301.

“We must risk our lives to save them. At the worst we can only slip, and then how grand a grave we will have, and by and by our nice bones will do good in the terminal moraine.”

- John Muir, speaking to his canine companion, Stickeen, in *Stickeen: The Story of a Dog*, by John Muir (1909).

John Muir on Bonaventure Cemetery

Muir spent 5 days “camping out” in the Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia on his “thousand-mile walk to the Gulf” and experienced the beauty of nature in the old, historic graveyard which was slowly being taken over by nature. His description of that cemetery - already historic when Muir visited it in 1867 - shows how a cemetery can be “green” and full of life, not the manicured, sterile, herbicide and pesticide - sprayed places they have so often become today. What he found was a cemetery where humans and Nature collaborated: “Part of the grounds was



cultivated and planted with live-oak, about a hundred years ago, by a wealthy gentleman who had his country residence here But much the greater part is undisturbed.” Muir wrote: “Bonaventure to me is one of the most impressive assemblages of animal and plant creatures I ever met.” The following excerpts shows his joy in visiting this cemetery:

“The most conspicuous glory of Bonaventure is its noble avenue of live-oaks. They are the most magnificent planted trees I have ever seen, about fifty feet high and perhaps three or four feet in diameter, with broad spreading leafy heads... There are also thousands of smaller trees and clustered bushes, covered almost from sight in the glorious brightness of their own light... Many bald eagles roost among the trees along the side of the marsh... Large flocks of butterflies, all kinds of happy insects, seem to be in a perfect fever of joy and sportive gladness. The whole place seems like a center of life. The dead do not reign there alone.”

“I gazed awe-stricken as one new-arrived from another world. Bonaventure is called a graveyard, a town of the dead, but the graves are powerless in such a depth of life. The rippling of living waters, the song of birds, the joyous confidence of flower, the calm, undisturbable grandeur of the oaks, mark this place of graves as one of the Lord’s most favored abodes of life and light...”

“Most of the graves of Bonaventure are planted with flowers. There is generally a magnolia at the head, near the strictly erect marble (of the headstones), a rose-bush or two at the foot, and some violets and showy exotics along the sides or one the tops. All is enclosed by a black iron railing, composed of rigid bars that might have been spears or bludgeons from a battlefield in Pandemonium.”

“It is interesting to observe how assiduously Nature seeks to remedy these labored art blunders. She corrodes the iron and marble, and gradually levels the hills which is always heaped up, as if a sufficiently heavy quantity of clods could not be laid on the dead. Arching grasses come one by one; seeds come flying on downy wings, silent as fate, to give life’s dearest beauty for the ashes of art; and strong evergreen arms laden with ferns and tillandsia drapery are spread over all—Life at work everywhere, obliterating all memory of the confusion of man...”

“Though tired, I sauntered a while enchanted, then lay down under one of the great oaks. I found a little mound that served for a pillow, placed my plant press and bag beside me and rested fairly well... When I awoke, the sun was up and all Nature was rejoicing... On rising I found that my head had been resting on a grave, and though my sleep had not been quite so sound as that of the person below, I arose refreshed, and looking about me, the morning sunbeams pouring through the oaks and gardens dripping with dew, the beauty displayed was so glorious and exhilarating that hunger and care seemed only a dream.”

- Chapter 4, “Camping Among the Tombs” in *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*.

https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/a_thousand_mile_walk_to_the_gulf/chapter_4.aspx

John Muir’s Home Funeral:

Just as today organizations like the Home Funeral Alliance support a movement to allow people to conduct their own home funerals for loved ones, Muir had a home funeral of his own, with a ceremony conducted in his own house, with a simple casket, and graveside ceremonies presided over by “God’s feathered creatures:”

The *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper reported on the ceremony on December 28, 1914:

“The funeral was attended by over 100 members of the Sierra Club...At the Muir House, the simple casket rested in a bay window just below the study where he wrote most of his books. It was covered with a drapery of ferns and violets...Some mourners brought branches of fir or pine to place beside the coffin. Among the floral tributes were a large laurel wreath with purple and gold ribbon, from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a wreath of red roses from the National Institute of Arts and Letters.... Moving to the gravesite at a shady spot alongside Alhambra Creek a mile away, a brief ceremony was held... As the coffin was lowered into the ground, ‘a member of the Sierra Club placed on the coffin a bough of the Sequoia gigantea which the naturalist had planted with his own hand near what is now his grave.’ The *San Francisco Chronicle*, in uncharacteristic poetic fashion, reported that ‘As the beloved body was being lowered into the grave, quail on the side hills called out their farewells and overhead, in trees Muir himself planted forty years ago, God’s feathered creatures, that had come to know, and not to fear the man, sang his requiem.”

San Francisco Chronicle, December 28, 1914, pg. 9.

https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_laid_to_rest_sf_chron.aspx

For information about John Muir’s gravesite, see:

https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/john_muir_national_historic_site/gravesite.aspx

For information about Green Burial, see:

<https://www.greenburialcouncil.org>

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