

## John Muir's Legacy

Preface for an Evolving Curriculum on John Muir and Environmental History

by  
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*You make the thing because you love the thing  
and you love the thing because someone else loved it  
enough to make you love it.  
And with that your heart like a tent peg pounded  
toward the earth's core.  
And with that your heart on a beam burns  
through the ionosphere.  
And with that you go to work.—Thomas Lux, "An Horation Notion"*

We might argue—in these arguing times—we love wilderness now “because someone else loved it enough to make you love it.” John Muir has been in the headlines today—as improbable as it might seem about someone revered for barefoot first ascents and a disheveled defender of all things wild, because he “loved the thing” and he wanted us to love it. If we loved it, we would strive to protect and preserve it. Loving it was a matter of life and death. John Muir loved the wild at a time wild was defined and defiled as threat, wilderness as “waste.” The iconic man striding forth to the mountains on California’s quarter, celebrated in Disneyland’s California Adventure, for whom schools, ships, stars, flowers, trails, and inns are named, got his fame by winning us over, a strategy to make us love what we, in ignorance, devalued. No one wants to have their minds changed. But John Muir set out to change our minds, not only as a lover, but as a gentle lover, even a wuss, who sighed over the slightest flower, jumped for “the glory” at the sight of a rock. And he was taken seriously. Speaking in a broad civic “we” of legislation, he changed our minds because “he loved the thing.” As we grapple with the meaning of John Muir in our world today and the firestorm about who he was, I think of Thomas Lux’s quotation—the complexity and impact of love and all at stake in it: with a “heart on a beam,” the work to make us “love it.” This is what Muir set out to do with his—to quote another poet, Mary Oliver, “one wild and precious life.”

Part of this “love” work was with the Sierra Club, which he co-founded in 1892 as a legal and educational advocacy group, and served as its first president until he died in 1914. 106 years later, the Sierra Club’s leadership has stood up to recognize and open itself for examination of its founders’ views of race—including John Muir himself. I have received letters of anguish from all over the world regarding the sensationalized headlines of a wilderness saint besmirched by accusations of racial bias: is John Muir, beloved world citizen and activist on behalf of earth

itself, a flawed cultural monument? What is it we must recognize when we state his leading role in environmental history?

It is fair to ask. Readers accustomed to his dazzling rhetorical pyrotechnics, spiritual verbal athleticism on behalf of beholding, the art and science of being dazzled, and awe in the face of light on rock (“the glory!”), or moonlight on a waterfall, may be shocked to read in *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* quotations of Muir’s characterization of black Americans and native Americans and the Sierra Club’s own director acknowledging its “racist past.”

At a time of national self-reckoning, it strikes me that Muir would find such a move on the part of Sierra Club leaders brave and in the letter and spirit with which the Sierra Club has provided leadership on national issues, challenging our republic to think far more thoughtfully and inclusively and respectfully about our human role in and responsibility for this earth.

Muir is one of America’s greatest writers, but he is above all an educator. It is in this vein that I wish to share a sense of our opportunity I see as an educator in understanding and learning from his legacy. Having been taken to Yosemite in a picnic basket at age four weeks, heard ranger programs on Muir throughout my childhood, heard my father quote Muir from memory, having attended John Muir High School, written on Muir and as a scholar, lectured on John Muir’s cultural leadership, his purple prose strategies to save the earth, and performed his words, including a drama musical starring him, my own life has been transformed by his writings about earth, including in the Sierra Club headquarters in Yosemite National Park, the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center. I have even tried to follow in his footsteps as part of the Society of Women Geographers, going out alone to gaze at stars in the Florida marshes, and ending up unrecognizable because of bites.

For the public, leaders, adults in lifelong learning programs (our nation’s most active readers), students in degree programs across the university, and many organizations around the world, Muir’s life and achievements offer many lessons.

Most relevant for today, Muir’s life illustrates the power of language to change the world. He demonstrated with his life works that language describing something could impact how that entity is seen and valued. His words have served as inspiration for legislation for our national parks; while the value of national parks today seems self-evident, it was controversial when Muir fought for their creation, and as we have seen in recent years, the debate over western federal lands is still going on.

We do not memorialize people because they are perfect. No one is—at least, no humans. Creatures and creations of the universe cannot be morally lacking, unlike us, who seem to squander our incredible intellectual and spiritual abilities to rise above violence, to think critically and empathically, to realize how we are related, how we are kin (and thus, act **kind**). This is hard work. We so often fail. Perhaps the best part of being human is a conscience, to feel

anguish in how we disappoint ourselves, let each other down, always keeping our heels to the fire: we aren't good enough; we don't deserve. We have to be better. And this is what our nation is now doing as a collective process, in coming to terms with how, for example, African Americans and indigenous peoples—among others, so many others—have been treated. And more to the point, how people have been treated now and in the past, a consciousness that may not have been acknowledged on broad public scales, beyond scholarly communities. And perhaps that is one of the points: to be fair to people, we must read the scholarship. We must support the scholarship. We must make the scholarship part of how we teach civic life and responsibility.

In terms of how we treat each other and our earth, we humans have stubbornly and often righteously excluded others from the rights and respect of our communities. Scratch anyone on earth, and find bias towards others. Every one of us is part of a larger culture in which we learn language to engage with our world. We inherit and absorb a way of speaking and thinking. The wonder is how anyone transcends even a portion of conventional ideas and values. To think differently from the crowd is a miracle of consciousness and conscience.

If you think differently, however, it is not a blessing--you expose yourself to rejection, one of the greatest fears of the human heart. It takes courage to not only think differently but act on what one sees. To my mind, when we hold up someone like John Muir for his work on behalf of wilderness, we are marveling at bravery. We are honoring courage in which one's own fears are less important than one's sense of responsibility to others.

So how do we process what kind of man John Muir was, and the responsibility of his Sierra Club today to examine the whole record including racist behavior of its founders? While every scholar of John Muir attests to instances of his pejorative language, and locate it early in his life—a native American woman wears a “dirty” dress, a man is a “Sambo,” one can regret it but not excuse it. We can say how people are “men of their time,” and while true, that is not to excuse hurtful thought and expression. To examine Muir or anyone in history fairly, we look at the context in which they developed. As we judge any person, we judge a whole society; even the most idealistic and heroic are part of their ages. John Muir and his contemporaries grew up in a world in which it was legal to own fellow human beings—regarded as property—and who literally tore each other to pieces over different ideas about human worth and who belongs at the table. But Muir didn't want any part of it—not the war, not the engagement. Like many geniuses confined or restricted in their lives, he kept to himself, his companions the books he read, the scientists and civic leaders he corresponded with. He was physically and emotionally abused in his family; he was poor. He walked to his college (and dropped out for lack of funds). He walked to Canada to escape the Civil War. He lived most of his days and hours alone, in the wilderness; even a married man with children, he was a loner. And he was angry at what most of humanity did to each other and the earth. Convinced that the beauty of the wilderness was divine creation, it seemed incomprehensible to him that the emblem of holiness right before his eyes was heedlessly slashed and burned, poisoned, eradicated. You wouldn't do that to something you loved.

So his strategy was to make people love it.

That is the story we need to hear: how do you use language to raise people's consciousness, to see differently? As we undertake the issue of how and why to identify monuments and heroes for our society, I reflect on just why John Muir has been held aloft in the nation's mind to this point, and what we lose if we do not tell the whole story as it applies to each of us today.

At a time when Abraham Lincoln signed both The Yosemite Act establishing the roots of the national park, as well as the Emancipation Proclamation, it seemed that two kinds of values struggles were shaping up. One was social justice—an enlarged inclusive enfranchisement. One was the worth of wildness—and this also was inextricable with social justice, for creating natural public spaces came at a price of human lives, indeed. Even so, the case for preserving natural wilderness was as heretical in the civic polity as the abolitionists' case for the humanity and rights of enslaved Africans. In shocking ways, both struggles challenged prevailing ideas about property and ownership. Who and what can be "owned?" Who has the power to designate whom and what are free?

At the time Muir wrote, to be wild was literally a death sentence: *wild* still is defined in most dictionaries as "wasteland," "ungovernable," "disordered," "crazy"—pejorative terms suggesting that anything designated as wild is not only disposable but a threat to human lawful society. Muir took up what was at the time the "wildly" unpopular action to speak in defense of creation that was regarded as a commodity, at best-- to be cut down, corralled, fenced in, fenced out, fenced off, controlled, and diminished.

Muir did not fight for wildness and earth because he was a botanist and geologist. He was a botanist and geologist because he loved the earth, and felt its creations were part of a one-ness that was divine. When we think of Muir's people, the community to whom he felt accountable, they are scientists and poets trained on earth. His mentor, like Henry David Thoreau, was Ralph Waldo Emerson who advocated courageous advocacy, a philosophical stance of civil disobedience that in turn over the years inspired Gandhi, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others. Muir spoke in defense of the wild, doing what we tell our children: using his words. He used the words of inclusion, to make us see earth in a different light, as belonging inextricably to what we consider family, kin: flowers, trees, gnats, bears, and even rocks were children, oldsters, lovable, cherished. He thought if he could paint them in a light that made us see them as lovable, we would care about them, and support legislation to protect them. He argued for extending enfranchisement of all creation. Law cases have been based on these ideas: do trees have standing in a court of law? Can non-humans experience deprivation of rights? In Muir's words, everything in the universe was a text that could be read, a holy message. John Muir's strategy to save the earth was purple prose designed to change our minds and hearts.

His use of artist's and scientist's language to describe why and how to love wilderness defines his leadership for our country. He was challenging our assumptions about what and how we

love. He was giving us a new way to think about what we had consigned as threat, trash, or only a value as a crop.

What about how he characterized fellow humans, also not included at the table? Earth citizens deprived of rights and respect? Scholars of his journals and letters provide evidence that in his early years Muir mentions fellow humans with impatience, harsh judgment, dismissal. We can say in this, again, he was a man of his times--lazy as an uncritical thinker in his use of words. But this ignorance and arrogance changed. He developed a singular relationship of respect with native Americans, especially in Alaska, where he was honored. His relations with indigenous people became one of mutual respect. His beloved story "Stickeen" about a dog he befriends in Alaska is a narrative of his own transformation, his humbled recognition of his dismissive assumptions even towards animals. This story is his awakening to his empathy of seeing every Other as "fellow mortal." I can see him in later years cringing along with us at his arrogant write-off and acceptance of slurs and stereotypes of people. If he could change, if he could grow, perhaps we can do so ourselves. We need to know his story.

For the fact of the matter is that John Muir was not only ahead of his time in his perception of wilderness and the entire cosmic ecosystem; scholars show us he was ahead of his time in his thinking about his "fellow mortals," including black Americans and most notably, native Americans. If he disparaged a native woman for her dirty dress, it was the human conditions that made for it. Scholars have provided evidence of John Muir's work in Alaska among the native Americans as one of mutual respect and commitment. His work to support the Sequoyah League—which both he and his daughter were members of-- shows how he gave his own monies to fund displaced native Americans, fight "immoral" legislation and policy regarding native Americans.

Yes, Sierra Club: continue the educational work that is required to sustain a cultural climate for preserving earth, and see this work as inextricable from social justice. Highlight the leadership thinking and moral activism of John Muir which eclipsed his days' social norms and mores. Do justice not only to his personal growth as he experienced the life and situation of black and native Americans, but to his actual accomplishments ahead of his time, and not only that, but proactively empathetic and anguished. He can be studied as a conscience in a world of complexity. He insisted everything was all one and could not be separated out: he would cheer us on to conceive our fellow mortals and not leave anyone or anything out of our conception of value for our world.

If we are to be judged, finally, for how we are as human beings, it is to be hoped that what we grow out of, and what we grow into, is how we are known. And it is this reality of John Muir that scholars from around the world have set forth for us. We turn now to the scholars, to the texts, to the words, which Muir felt could change the world.

No one would have been more insistent that words can impact and change the world than John Muir. He devoted his life to the careful use of words in the face of uphill battles, going against

the prevailing winds of thought, counter to conventional rhetoric and manners of speaking, wanting to change our minds by engaging our hearts—or changing our hearts by engaging our minds. Words were a matter of life and death. It mattered utterly what was said about you, how you were perceived. Called “wild,” you were considered a threat and could die. 95% of wilderness did die on Muir’s watch. Called “wild,” you were valuable to the point you served society. Yosemite’s twin valley, the Hetch Hetchy, for which he devoted his last years and hours, was drowned for subsidized water and power for the city of San Francisco. Congress and the President allowed this. Muir wrote *The Yosemite* to try to make the case for why the valley should be saved. If he judges himself, it was that his words could not save.

Yet he continued to try to use words usefully. He died in a hospital bed surrounded by pages of manuscript, trying to express the wonder of northern lights, trying to do justice to the reality he saw. If we could see the world this way, we would save it; he believed in the political process, “the heart of the American people.”

Of course John Muir would regret his own earlier careless use of inhumane words, however rare those occasions when he did. But now we have the chance to consider and take seriously the totality of his life in his conscious use of language, as an example of how a culture impacts thinking. Even people we admire for their progressive ideas about social and environmental justice fall short in ideas and behavior about others, whether gender, or age, or disability, or religious belief, or ethnic or regional or cultural or physical traits. Meanness, carelessness: we each can look within and find plenty of examples. Someday, perhaps, future societies will look at us and wonder how we could have eaten creature with eyes, denuded forests, poisoned rivers, blown up earth, topped mountains, denied childcare, allowed starving, fostered homelessness, denied rights, chained animals, shamed people’s identities. Things that seem okay now may appear tragic in a later context. Progress is made as we absorb the insights of those who see differently, who challenge us. We can rejoice that there are always some people who can rise above conventional knowledge and thought; they are our beacons.

We are evolved to the point that we are trying to understand how it is that despite prevailing ideas about others, some people break free of their context and think independently. John Muir was one of those who chose to argue in the public arena on behalf of kindness—the vision of how we are kin—of those held in repugnance and fear and dismissal. Through the lens of his love, we could imagine caring for the fate of gnats and squirrels, redwoods and glaciers, and yes, the way of life of native Americans.

It was some miracle that Muir, abused physically and emotionally as a child, so poor he attended school sporadically, walking to college and leaving without a degree because he could not afford food and tuition, saw the grandeur in what was considered alien. Yet in his own healing forgiveness, he saw the world as miracle and beauty and divine, and found the language to make us love it enough to enact laws to protect it. He overcame his personal trauma to promote a vision of healing.

I believe John Muir would want a take-away from his life to be greater vigilance not only in what we say about others but how empathically we think. For us today, we can honor Muir's greater purpose and achievement by understanding the cultural context in which he wrote and that he transcended. We can be fellow botanists and go down to the roots and study our psychic soil samples. We can be fellow geologists and study our fault lines, what destabilizes us, our intellectual and spiritual bedrock. We can learn the art and science of trans-formation. We can learn from how he used his words in such an ethos one hundred years ago to change our minds, even today: his purple prose strategy to make us love. If we can realize the power and hope of language to save lives, through a scrutiny of environmental writers of the past, this will honor his legacy most fairly. He had his work; now we have ours. It is all about love.