

# The Nurse Log's Tale

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Opening reading: Ecclesiastes Chapter 3

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While trekking through the Maine woods on a brief furlough from Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau noticed “faint yellowish-green lines of featherlike moss” a foot or so wide and several feet long lacing the forest floor. They were, he surmised, the last vestiges of trees long ago fallen, now rotted and nourishing new life. I remember such logs as I hiked through the woods of New England where I grew up and attended Unitarian Church only a bike ride from Henry’s Concord. But it was not until Sharon and I moved here to the Pacific Northwest eleven years ago that we learned to call them “nurse logs.”

Goethe once said that “every object, well contemplated, creates an organ within us.” I invite us this afternoon to contemplate this nurse log.

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Let me introduce you to Nurse Log!

If you are a nurse log, the line between life and death is very fine indeed. Life moves through a nurse log like light through a mountain stream, or wind through the forest. It is virtually impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends.

This log was born into its present life perhaps five centuries ago—about the time that the first Europeans arrived on this continent—and fell perhaps 300 years later, as Lewis and Clark were making their way down the Columbia river. It will take about as long to rot away as it took to grow in the first place.

A Douglas-fir, it must have remained alive on the ground for several years before the tree-life flickered out. And even as it lay there still breathing, a host of bark borers, Ambrosia beetles, and carpenter ants had begun their work, drilling through the protective bark, devouring the sugary cambium, clearing dark tunnels through the wood, making a dwelling place for fungi, bacteria, and uncounted microbes to decompose the cellulose and lignin, replacing one form of life with their own, blurring the line between this life and the next.

Whole worlds flourished inside the log as it slowly, inexorably relaxed into its earthy mattress. Meanwhile, a half dozen mosses—leafy Mnium, stately Tree Moss, electric green Broom Moss, elegant Feather Moss—several lichens of indescribable shapes, a couple of humble liverworts, and maybe even a slime mold snuggled together on its surface and made a bed for showers of tiny, vulnerable seeds of evergreen huckleberry, cedar and hemlock.

As it lay on the side of a slope, it held soil in place against winter rains, fed generations of winter wrens on larvae (or voles on truffles), and held gallons of water through the annual summer drought, keeping the forest floor moist, cool, and fertile.

There is more life in this log now, in far more forms, than ever before in its history. The soil it will leave behind when it has finally rotted (in almost the same amount of time it took to grow in the first place) will be three times richer in nitrogen and phosphorus.

This is what we mean when we speak of a transformational community—a place of rebirth over and over and over again. Contemplating this living, green miracle, how can we help but be reminded and reminded and reminded that all Creation is an interdependent web of life? How can we forget what John Muir told us, *“If you try to pull out any one part of Nature, you find it’s hitched to everything else in the Universe.”*

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We are near the close of what is traditionally called the Lenten season—that cusp between the stolid inwardness of deep winter and the explosive exhilaration of Spring. Indeed, before the new birth, there is a falling away of old life, a letting go, and with it inevitably, a poignancy, a loss, something to wonder at and perhaps to grieve. Here is the poet, Sharon Olds:

### 35/10

Brushing out our daughter's brown silken hair before the mirror,  
I see the grey gleaming on my head,  
the silver-haired servant behind her.

Why is it? Just as we begin to go, they begin to arrive,  
the fold in my neck clarifying  
as the fine bones of her hips sharpen?

As my skin shows its dry pitting,  
she opens like a moist precise flower on the tip of a cactus;  
as my last chances to bear a child are falling through my body, the duds  
among them,  
her full purse of eggs, round and firm as hard-boiled yolks,  
is about to snap its clasp.

I brush her tangled fragrant hair at bedtime.  
It's an old story—the oldest we have on our planet—  
the story of replacement.

There is a deep, rumbling truth in the poem. The old falls away even as the new emerges: innocent, fecund, luxuriant. What does it mean, this urgent upwelling, this brutal,

indifferent profusion thrusting us aside so soon? We are not yet ready. “Wait a minute,” some voice in us wants to call out. “*We got here first!*”

Perhaps “replacement” is not quite the right word. Do we merely crumble into dust as the next rank marches over the broken ruins of our memories? Is it all, as the preacher says, “vanity”? Or is there something more to that familiar incantation, “a time to be born and a time to die”? *What comes after that?* I’d like to know.

Almost exactly 166 years ago, on March 19<sup>th</sup>, a 24-year-old Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal,

Nature has her russet hues as well as green. Indeed, our eye splits on every object, and we can as well take one path as the other. If I consider its history, it is old; if its destiny, it is new...I will not be imposed upon and think Nature is old because the season is advanced. I will study the botany of the mosses and fungi on the decayed wood and remember that decayed wood is not old, but has just begun to be what it is.

What if that mother’s word were not “replacement,” but “ripening”? What if this decaying wood that is our bodies is not just growing *older*, but has, in fact, just begun to be what it is?

And what might that be, you ask? Ripening sounds fine—growing sweeter, more nourishing. Like a tomato on the sill, a banana in the bowl. But *then* what? We all know where it leads, this “ripening,” and it is *not* pretty.

Before we go there, let me share a little story. Some years ago, when I was rounding mid-life, I taught a course for adults called “The Journey of Life.” Among other things, I asked the students what the goal of their journey was. What was their highest aspiration? Some spoke of seeing their children or grandchildren happy, some of travel to wondrous places, still others of a world of peace and justice. When they turned to me, caught off guard but magnificently inflated, I replied that my highest aspiration was to dissolve into pure light. At the time, it seemed a profoundly spiritual assertion, a wildly courageous imagination.

I am embarrassed and not a little appalled by it today. I should have known better. All the great journey tales remind us that before the light must come the darkness: Odysseus enters the underworld before reaching home, Dante drops down through Inferno before ascending the seven-storey mountain to Paradise, Jesus has his Gethemane and Golgotha before he ascends. The path to heaven leads straight down.

Once, after a lecture on these matters, Joseph Campbell was approached by a fresh young thing who informed him that this darkness business was all well and good but that her guru had informed her that it was no longer necessary. One could go directly from this plane to Pure Light. “Yes,” replied Campbell, “and all you miss along the way is life itself!”

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light,” said Carl Jung, “but by making the darkness conscious.”

We do that by saying *yes* to what is dark and moist beneath our feet.

So let’s take a look at what actually happens when something rots. What will become of this nurse log when it is finally transformed into soil?

The soil in these parts is not deep. There was nothing here but us rocks only 10,000 years ago—as the glaciers headed back home, dragging their stony claws sullenly over the landscape. Allowing for a long, slow start, there has been time for maybe only a dozen or so generations of mature forest, each laying down perhaps an inch or so of soil. If you dig down in most old growth forest, you will hit gravel within eight or ten inches.

And yet this soil is among the richest soils in the world, yielding a density of biomass rivaling that of the Amazon basin. A single tablespoon of it may contain hundreds of microscopic arthropods, nematodes, and protozoa; millions of bacteria, and enough fungal threads to go from here to Seattle. These threads attach themselves to the roots of almost every plant in the forest, from fragile forest lilies to giant Douglas firs, sharing sugars from one to another, vastly increasing the capacity of the forest to sustain itself, and actually enabling stronger trees to channel nutrients to weaker ones. Rather than depriving subsequent generations of nourishment, each aging monarch marks a path for its successor as rotting tree roots provide nourishment and mark the way down for new growth. Generation after generation, the forest grows richer, the mat of life more complex and interconnected.

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“The eye splits on every object,” Thoreau reminds us. So we have a choice: we can continue arching upward to the light in a fruitless bid to preserve the precious particularity of what we have come to call our “self,” wizing our imagination in some Arizona of the soul, or like Henry, we can “study the botany of the mosses and fungi on the decayed wood and remember that decayed wood is not old, but has just begun to be what it is.” We can attend to the ancient wisdom that the way to the light leads downward, and we can welcome the darkness, the moist, the unknown, knowing that we are moving into something deeper than imagination, aware that the life we so long to preserve will last but a few dozen years while Life itself has been around on this planet for three and a half billion years—and who knows how much longer in the universe? By what wild conceit do we imagine that this is all we are? Life is a constant shape-shifter, an ongoing process of transformation, taking ever different forms, sometimes ebbing, sometimes flowing, but always emergent, always dependent on what came before. Life connects us not merely across space but through time as well. We *are* life. Our work in this lifetime is simply to learn this, over and over and over again.

And so the question for us: *If we would make the fullest use of this tiny corner we were given in the great forest, how might we so live that when we go down, we leave behind a world richer than ever before in love, justice, and wisdom?* And as we meditate our way through this season of Lent, Good Friday, and Easter—this time of descent, resurrection, and transformation—I invite you to glance downward, to recall the Nurse Log’s tale, and to remember the words of the preacher: *To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.*

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Dave Cauffman closed with the following quote:

*“We are not asked to look at the light.  
We are asked to look at, and understand, and love,  
And heal the world this light illumines.”*

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