

INDUCTION SPEECH TO HONOR JOHN MUIR

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When someone mentions the name *John Muir* to you, what images come to mind? An image of a tall, bearded naturalist writer, perhaps. Or maybe you think of the Sierra Club that he founded in 1892. In your mind, perhaps you paint pictures of the giant sequoias standing straight and tall in the Muir Woods of California.

Prior to conducting the research to support my remarks today, these were the initial images that came to my mind. But now other images accompany these. Upon looking deeper, I realized that John Muir was so much more than the man represented by my sketchy images.

In the next few minutes, I will give you the opportunity to more vividly sketch your own images of John Muir. I've selected several anecdotes to describe the events which led to the making of the man the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame inducted in 1985.

As a boy in Dunbar, Scotland, John was once described as adventure-loving, quick to accept a challenge, high spirited, irrepressible, and uncontainable. These qualities remained with him through his adult years.

He and his friends used to play a game of dares called "Scootchers." John Muir seemed most proud to tell this story of a scootcher which took place at Dunbar Castle in Scotland. This story is told in the words of James Clarke who wrote a biography of Muir's life:¹

"For a while it was exciting enough just to go from room to room and touch the bones of prisoners long dead and forgotten. But then the boys came to a room below the others, below the sea level outside. The ceiling had fallen in. This room was like a dark pit. The light of their candles did not reach the bottom. John Muir handed his candle to another boy and lowered himself over the edge. Digging his fingers into cracks and finding footholds on little shelves, he lowered himself slowly down the rough rock wall. Down, down and still down. It began to seem as if there was no bottom. At last his reaching foot found stones and rotting planks. He stood on the bottom, breathing hard and trying to stop the trembling of his muscles. The candlelight above seemed faint and far off. 'Are ye down, Johnny?' the boys kept asking. 'Aye,' said John Muir at last, and he began to climb up. It seemed a very long way. His fingers ached. His toes were bruised. He had to use his last strength to scramble up over the edge. The boys crowded around, asking questions and saying this was the best scootcher of all. None of them was willing to go into that pit.

"That evening, a woman got cross with John. 'Do you know where bad boys like you go?' she asked. 'To hell, that's where they go!'

'Well,' said John, 'if I do I'll climb right out again. I was down there today and here I am.'"

It was with this spirit of adventure that John Muir later explored the glaciers of Alaska. It was in this spirit that Muir took off for weeks at a time to live among the mountains. It was this spirit that possessed Muir to climb Mount Ranier in Washington, over 14,400 feet high, and later write to his wife that he "did not mean to climb it, but got excited, and soon was on top."

In 1849, his family moved from Dunbar to the farm on Fountain Lake near Portage, Wisconsin. John describes his first experience with one of our Wisconsin meadow marvels: "When we first saw Fountain Lake Meadow, on a sultry evening, sprinkled with millions of lightning-bugs throbbing with light, the effect was so strange and beautiful that it seemed far too marvelous to be real. I thought the whole wonderful fairy show must be in my eyes..."

John goes on to say: "Once I saw a splendid display of glow-worm light in the foothills of the Himalayas, but glorious as it appeared in pure starry radiance, it was far less impressive than the extravagant abounding, quivering, dancing fire on our Wisconsin meadow."

John was intrigued with the myriad of natural wonders around him. The thrill of each new discovery filled his soul. He later wrote: "These beautiful days must enrich all my life. They do not exist as mere pictures—maps hung upon the walls of memory...but they saturate themselves into every part of the body and live always."

Writing never came easy for John. He often complained that the reason was because: "Everything is so inseparably united. As soon as one begins to describe a flower or a tree or a storm or an Indian or a chipmunk, up jumps the whole heavens and earth and God himself..."

As a youngster, John took advantage of every spare moment to explore the natural world around him. But spare moments were found only after long hours of hard physical labor on the farm. These meager moments were not enough to satisfy his unquenchable curiosity about the Earth. John thirsted for knowledge and read every book he could find.

John tells the story of the hours that changed his life:

"I think it was in my fifteenth year that I began to relish good literature with enthusiasm, and smack my lips over favorite lines, but there was desperately little time for reading. Father's strict rule was, straight to bed immediately after family worship, which in winter was usually over by eight o'clock. I was in the habit of lingering in the kitchen with a book and candle after the rest of the family had retired, and considered myself fortunate if I got five minutes' reading before father noticed the light and ordered me to bed...(these were) magnificent golden blocks of time, long to be remembered like holidays or geological periods.

"One evening when I was reading Church history, father was particularly irritable and called out with hope-killing emphasis, 'John, go to bed! Must I give you a separate order every night to get you to go to bed? Now I will have no irregularity in the family; you must go when the rest go, and without my having to tell you.' Then, as an afterthought, as if judging that his words and tone of voice were too severe for so pardonable an offense as reading a religious book, he unwarily added: 'If you will read, get up in the morning and read. You may get up in the morning as early as you like.'

"That night I went to bed wishing with all my heart and soul that somebody or something might call me out of sleep to avail myself of this wonderful indulgence; and next morning to my joyful surprise, I awoke before Father called me. I sprang out of bed as if called by a trumpet blast, rushed downstairs, enormously eager to see how much time I had won....I had gained five huge, solid hours! I can hardly think of any other event in my life, any discovery I ever made that gave birth to joy so transportingly glorious as the possession of these five frosty hours."²

He spent those precious moments inventing assorted measuring devices such as barometers, thermometers, and clocks. Though John had never seen the inner workings of a clock, he whittled the gears of wood and created accurate timepieces. Some would say he was a genius in this respect.

A friend recommended that John display his inventions at the State Fair in Madison. It was this Fair that set him in a new direction—away from Fountain Lake forever. John took courses at the University in Madison, not to obtain a degree, but for the pure pleasure of learning. Muir describes his departure from the University: “....I was only leaving one University for another, the Wisconsin University for the University of the Wilderness.”³ He was on his way to study what he called the “inventions of God.”

John traveled for seven years. He walked a thousand miles from Indianapolis to the Gulf of Mexico. He sailed to Panama, crossed the Isthmus and continued to San Francisco. From that moment on, in March of 1868, though he would later travel around the world, California became John’s home. In the mountains there, John indeed found the inventions of God. He called it the “land of flowers.” With a passion for life and new discoveries, he explored the area and helped to piece together its geological history.

Through his explorations, John became ever more aware of the human encroachment on the wild mountain gardens. Finally, in 1889, John Muir set out to halt the devastation of Yosemite Valley caused by hordes of sheep—“hooved locusts” as he called them. Armed with a quill and a strong will to succeed in protecting the valley from further abuse, he awakened public-spirited people from all over the country. They rallied to support Muir in the passage of legislation to set aside Yosemite National Park in 1890.

And the push continued. In 1897, Muir wrote these words in one of more than ten articles as an appeal to the people to set aside forest reserves in America:

“The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God, for they were the best he ever planted....

“After the Atlantic coast...had been mostly cleared and scorched into ruins, the over-flowing multitude of bread and money seekers poured over the Alleghenies into the Middle West...over the rich valley of the Mississippi...Then still Westward the invading horde of destroyers, called settlers, made its fiery way—over the broad Rocky Mountains, felling and burning more fiercely than ever, until now it has reached the wild side of the Continent and entered the last of the great virgin forests on the shores of the Pacific.

“....Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed—chased and hunted down as long as fun or a dollar could be got out of their bark hides....Through all the...centuries since Christ’s time—and long before that—God has cared for these trees....but he cannot save them from fools—only Uncle Sam can do that.”⁴

His articles turned the tide of public sentiment. For in 1898, when the enemies of the reservation policy made a move, the Chairman of the Public Lands Committee of the House insisted that Muir’s judgment was probably better than that of any of his opponents. Muir had now become the acknowledged leader of the forest conservation movement in the United States.

In the spring of 1903, John Muir went on a brief camping trip in and about Yosemite with Theodore Roosevelt who was then in his first term as President. Muir used the opportunity to express his views on the urgent need for more forest reserves and national parks. The following six years of Roosevelt’s presidency were distinguished by the setting aside of 148 million acres of additional forest reserves, the establishment of sixteen national monuments, and the doubling of the number of national parks.

We honor John Muir during this week of his 150th birthday for giving us the opportunity to share these priceless natural gifts.

But Muir did not win all the battles in his lifetime. In the last six years of his life, he was saddened by the unsuccessful struggle to preserve Yosemite's Hetch-Hetchy Valley from conversion into a reservoir to provide better water for San Francisco. Muir later wrote: "...it behooves us all faithfully to do our part in seeing that our wild mountain parks are passed on unspoiled to those who come after us, for they are national properties in which every man has a right and interest."

I think that we can extend these words to encompass not only the parks, but the whole Earth.

John Muir. Now what images come to mind for you?

Enos Mills once said: "The grandest character in national park history and nature literature is John Muir. His memory is destined to be forever...with every song that Nature sings in the wild gardens of the world."

I have written a song (for guitar and voice) which conveys this spirit—the spirit of Muir's life and work. I will conclude my remarks by singing it in honor of John Muir on this very special day. I've entitled it: *A Tribute*.

¹Clarke, J. M. 1979. *The Life and Adventures of John Muir*. San Diego, CA: Word Shop Publications.

²Muir, J. 1913. *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

³Ibid.

⁴Muir, J. 1901. *Our National Parks*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.