

Shiver and Quiver: The History  
And Mythology of  
Trees

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Cinderella planted a branch near her mother's grave, and she wept so much that her tears watered the branch until it became a handsome tree. She prayed to her mother who replied "Do you know what you wish? Are you certain that what you wish is what you want? If you know what you want, then make a wish. Ask the tree, and you shall have your wish."

Shiver and quiver little tree.

Silver and Gold throw down on me.

"Gradually the leaves were unfolded, day after day becoming larger and more vivid green, until, in the height of summer, a verdant canopy would overshadow all the forest, and man in his nakedness would feel grateful for the welcome shade from the overpowering rays of the sun. To the tree he would assign a supernatural intelligence.... And as the days passed, the fall of the leaves would fill him with presentiment of evil, which would be realized by the trees becoming bare and apparently lifeless, leaving him shelter less against the biting blasts of winter. As year after year past with the same continual change, primitive imagination would people it (the forest) with all sorts of beings, such as Gods, Nymphs, and Demons." (Porteous, 2002, p. 150)

The history of trees. Trees have offered shelter, sustenance, and spiritual connection since the dawn of man. Ancient civilizations built homes, ships, fortresses, and aqueducts from wood. A set of interlocking logs, almost 500,000 years old, was recently found in Zambia (Glausiusz, 2025). Before the wheel, timber was used to transport stone to the Egyptian pyramids and to raise the statues on Easter Island. Trees have fed us with berries, fruits, and nuts. Their leaves and bark have had medicinal uses. From ships to stagecoaches to railroad ties, wood has been a staple of transportation. More importantly, trees were the primary source of heat and cooking fuel. The fireplace was the center of the room, not only warming us, but providing light well before the advent of electricity. I can remember as a child gathering firewood for the family room and how cozy the room was. The fireplace was a gathering place to foster bonds within the family. The hearth came to represent more than just the floor of a fireplace, it became a metaphor for home, family, and domestic life.

However, timber is being replaced today by other materials such as plastic. We don't need fireplaces like we used to. Central heating now provides our heat. Electricity lights our homes. These modern conveniences are safer and more energy efficient than fireplaces. Embers from a roaring fire are dangerous—they can burn our skin and even burn the house down. Electricity has more uses than firewood, and is much more portable. But we remain nostalgic for the hominess of the hearth, and so we still have fireplaces, even if they are imitation.

The evolution of fireplaces in my lifetime. This make-believe fireplace in a Residence Inn imitates the coziness without radiating any heat or reading light. It has no imitation chimney, flue or grate, and no fake logs. It has a very clever system to imitate real flames. It is as though modern progress is the ability to make the artificial seem as real as possible. Is that what modernity is about? Virtual reality instead of actual reality.

The biological evolution of trees. The metaphorical tree of life. When I was a biology major at Notre Dame, scientists were just beginning to wonder if mitochondria were actually primitive bacteria that were coopted by larger cells to provide energy. Indeed, it is now accepted that two types of bacteria have evolved to create energy for the tree of life. Mitochondria produce ATP for cellular metabolism in the animal kingdom, and chloroplasts produce photosynthesis for the plant kingdom.

In this depiction of the evolutionary tree, plant life developed along this line. Algae and mosses were small and low to the ground until they developed a vascular tissue. This circulation enabled trees to grow to majestic heights. The great forests began about 360 million years ago and put more oxygen in the atmosphere. Over time these forests decayed and when buried under pressure, they became lignite and ultimately coal. Today, we burn more coal than wood. (Oil comes from aquatic fossils.) And in my lifetime, plastics from petroleum have replaced wood in so many aspects of our lives. For millennia, trees were the primary source of heat and cooking fuel, as well as the primary element in almost everything that we built. This has all changed in the last 60 years.

Before we talk about the mythology of trees, let's review a little bit about mythology itself. Myths are stories that are based on tradition. Myths are sacred tales that explain the world and human experience. But where did they come from?

We are the only species that form myths. When did humans start to create myths? What cognitive capacity did we develop that enabled us to differentiate from the rest of the animal world and imagine other realities. Obviously, it has to do with abstract thinking, but what precise capacity would that be. I would suggest to you that the first myths were created when humans discovered time. Animals live in the present, but when humans discovered the notion of a tomorrow, they had to not only worry about that saber toothed tiger eating them today, but they also had to worry about tomorrow as well. Humans would have to seek shelter in a tree today and tomorrow. The abstract notions of past, present, and future evolved. This led to the concept of a beginning. When did we begin and where did we come from? And so, the first myth in all cultures is the creation myth--the answer to that fundamental question: where did we come from?

As our ability for abstract thinking continued to expand, man would begin to see patterns such as the four seasons. Trees would shed their leaves in the fall only to be reborn in the spring, coming back stronger and taller. The sun would always rise in the east and set in the west. We would develop a sense of a natural order with predictable patterns—patterns that might be considered natural laws. But of course, that natural order could be interrupted by unpredictable floods and storms and famines. The normal cycle of life could be interrupted suddenly by mysterious diseases and maladies. Can you imagine what might have gone through the primitive imagination when a child was born with a birth defect, like a cleft palate or club foot? So, the next class of myths would try to explain these chaotic aberrations by creating supernatural spirits who would intentionally disrupt the natural order. Rain dances and sacrificial offerings emerged to appease these supernatural forces.

And finally, we would come to think more about meaning and purpose in our lives. We would not just build clay pottery—we would decorate our creations. We would discover beauty and goodness. We would not only seek shelter in a cave—we would adorn the walls with murals to proclaim our existence, documenting our presence on this earth for posterity. *Homo sapiens*, the thinker, would begin to ask the existential questions. What is life really about?

A few mythical trees:

The World Tree is known as the ash Yggdrasil. It was believed to have sprung from the central primordial abyss and to have had three roots – one for the past, one for the present, and one for the future. It is an immense sacred ash tree central to Norse mythology. Creatures live within the tree including a dragon, a squirrel, a hawk, and 4 stags. Its roots descend into the underworld, and its tall branches reach to the heavens. (Wikipedia/Yggdrasil)

Where did the laurel tree come from? In Greek mythology, to protect herself from Apollo's advances, the nymph Daphne turned herself into a laurel tree.

African legend says that the baobab tree was planted upside down by gods as punishment for arrogance and complaints about its appearance.

In Chinese mythology, Fusang refers to both a divine tree and an island, which are located in the East, from where the sun rises. Sacrifices to the volcano god were made as the volcano god held the elixir of life.

The sacred Hindu Kalpavriksha tree is believed to have emerged during the cosmic event known as the “Churning of the Mild Ocean,” and is associated with the story of god's quest for immortality. The Kalpavriksha is believed to grant wishes, provide abundance, prosperity, and fulfillment. (Old World Gods, 2025)

Ever wonder where the pine tree came from? The goddess Rhea pledged her love to her shepherd. When the shepherd became unfaithful (he had an affair with a nymph), she turned him into a Pinetree. However, she continued to mourn her faithless lover, often sitting in the shade of the tree. The god Jupiter, to please Rhea, decreed the tree should remain evergreen. (Porteous, 2002, p. 175)

These mythical trees addressed the primordial questions about creation, the supernatural, and eternal life. I noticed that some of these myths have a modern interpretation. The Yggdrasil is depicted here focuses on mental health and the ideal self. This tree focuses on what nurtures you and what challenges you. Dragons and nymphs have quietly disappeared.

Modern attitudes toward trees continue to evolve. When I first received this quest paper topic, a memory from college came to mind. On the first day of environmental ethics, as Dr. Goodpaster was reviewing the syllabus, he mentioned

that we would be reading a book entitled *Should Trees Have Standing?* That's right, should trees have legal rights? Sounds crazy, right? But the author, Christopher D Stone, argued that all of the rights that we honor today were unthinkable at one point in time. Black people have rights that a white man should respect? Not so fast says *Plessy v Ferguson*. And not so long ago it was unthinkable that women should have a right to vote. (Who do you think you are, Susan B Anthony?) If you think about it, all of the rights that we cherish today, and mostly take for granted, have evolved from more primitive rights. And so, as we would learn more about nature and our interdependence with trees, Dr. Stone argued that the environment as a whole would be bestowed with legal rights, so that the voiceless elements in nature would be protected for future generations.

This lone Sycamore tree was known as the Sycamore Gap on Hadrian's Wall. In 2022, it was felled one evening in a drunken stupor by Daniel Graham and Adam Carruthers. They received four-year prison sentences for their crime, the first time anyone has been sent to jail for illegally chopping down a tree (Glausiusz, 2025). (If you are counting, that's about 50 years from the crazy idea of legal rights for trees and a four-year prison sentence.)

Although we have a penchant for nostalgia, we also wonder how previous generations could not have seen what we see today. How could they have been so naïve? Is there something today that future generations will wonder about? Is there something today that we people of 2025 just don't get? When Susan B Anthony stood before Judge Ward Hunt in 1873, convicted of voting in an election, the judge simply didn't know what to do with her. When the judge asked her if she had anything to say, well she used the opportunity to accuse the law of infringing on her rights as a citizen, rights that the judge did not think applied to her. Suffrage for women is now settled. But is there a case today that the courts just don't know what to do with?

Ten years ago, 21 children sued the federal government in *Juliana v. United States*. They sued the federal government for knowingly fueling the climate crisis for fifty years and violating their constitutional rights. What rights you ask—that the law must protect their right to live, to breathe, to grow up in a safe and healthy climate. After dismissing a related case in October of 2025, the judge

acknowledged the merits of the case (when under oath, no one is challenging the factual basis of climate change and the extensive data the plaintiffs are presenting), the judge said that his hands were tied by precedent and reluctantly dismissed the case—even “inviting the Ninth Circuit to correct him.” (Lighthiser v Trump). We simply don’t know how to mentalize these claims. Our framework of rights and privileges is simply unable to deal with the issue of climate change and the rights of these children. Our legal system can’t deal with these children any more than Judge Hunt knew what to do with Susan B Anthony, or, for that matter, Chief Justice John Marshall Harlan knew what to do with Homer Plessy.

We have left out one more historical use of trees: wood pulp for the printed page. Combined with the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, humanity could record history and spread information faster than ever before. Literacy exploded. Philosophers could pen their new thoughts and spread around the world creating the Enlightenment. From Descartes to Hobbes to Adam Smith to Shakespeare, ideas about who we are and how we should relate to each other evolved. We would create a new set of myths to resolve the existential questions about our existence, all brought to us by paper. We would begin to focus more on the good, the true, and the beautiful.

Probably the most famous words written on parchment. Our founding fathers wrote that “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights.” Notice that the founders did not reference supernatural forces. They did not even specify who or what the creator was. Our modern myths do not rely upon mystical spirits or jealous gods. Rather, they speak about a natural order of how we should relate to each other, and how we should govern each other. We have mythical beliefs about the American dream, free will, democracy, free markets, economic prosperity, individual rights, and many others. We organize our societies around these mythical ideals, just as ancient mythical stories guided their respective societies. When we hold healthy mythical ideals such as equal protection under the law, and when fairness is our NorthStar, we may have a more just and prosperous society.

In addition to books, where would modern life be without newspapers? Before radio and television, almost all news was spread by newspapers made from trees. Newspapers give us the news, sports, finance, entertainment, and crossword

puzzles. But they also stand for something. The importance of newspapers may best be seen in their mottos, their aspirational ideals. “Democracy dies in darkness” from the Washington Post. “All the news that’s fit to print” from the New York Times. “Of the people, by the people, for the people” from the Chicago Tribune. The Wall Street Journal doesn’t have a simple motto but their editorial mission is “we are the definitive source of news and information through the lens(es) of business, finance, economics and money-global forces that shape the world and are key to understanding it.” The WSJ wants to understand the world. From the Epic Times, “Truth, Hope, and Tradition.” And from Al Jazeera “the opinion and the other opinion.” And from the San Francisco Chronicle “we will inform, inspire and provoke while being honest, fearless and original.” All of these are mythical ideals. But notice how these have evolved from the more primitive myths. There is no talk about creation and where we came from. There is no talk about supernatural spirits, or what an afterlife might entail. These mythical ideas are about the human condition and how we should relate to each other. They are mythical because you can’t prove the existence of them any more than you can prove the existence of a supernatural spirit.

We can learn more about our NorthStars by examining the mythical ideals of our universities. Indiana University: “We seek to create dynamic partnerships with our communities in economic, social, and cultural development to contribute to economic prosperity in Indiana and beyond.”

From the current Purdue President Mung Chiang: “With Excellence at Scale, Purdue University creates talents, jobs and innovation along America’s Hard Tech Corridor. Boilermaker students, faculty, staff and alumni take small steps each day that turn into giant leaps in the discovery and dissemination of knowledge.”

The University of Notre Dame: “It seeks to cultivate in its students not only an appreciation for the great achievements of human beings, but also a disciplined sensibility to the poverty, injustice, and oppression that burden the lives of so many. The aim is to create a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good that will bear fruit as learning becomes service to justice.”

Notice the focus on economic prosperity by IU, pursuit of knowledge by Purdue, and human solidarity and service by ND. All are worthy ideals. All brought to us on paper.

However, we don't need trees like we used to. We don't need them for fuel, reading light, or boats. And now digital newspapers are replacing the physical copy. But we yearn for what trees meant to us. We can be very nostalgic about trees. Many of us still love to curl up with a newspaper or good book. We build houses with imitation wood grain in our flooring and furniture. And every home seems to need a fireplace, even if it is completely fake.

This nostalgia also speaks to meaning and purpose in our lives, creating a good life today and in the future. Many of us old-timers worry about the future and whether we are losing our way. How many of us sense today that social media has not always been good for us? How many of us have observed that our attention spans are not what they used to be? One nostalgic writer bemoaning new technology suggested that the generation born after this one will never have any real conversations. People will just go into their own separate corners and they won't know how to talk to anyone. What is this new technology? You might think the author was talking about the iPhone, but the year was 1843. It was Nathaniel Hawthorne complaining about the cooking stove replacing the open hearth! (Grant, 2025) Ah, the nostalgia for the community around the fireplace.

There is one more archetypal myth to mention—the hero's journey. In all cultures, there are heroes that exhibit admirable qualities worth emulating, even if they become tragic figures such as in ancient Greek tragedies or Shakespearean dramas. One of my heroes is Justice Thurgood Marshall. When he returned to his alma mater, the law school at Howard University, he posed a question to the budding young lawyers: "what is the quality of your intent?" For whether the candidates were thinking about a career in civil law or corporate law or criminal law, he wanted them to think about the quality of their choice. He wanted them to think about their own NorthStar and how they created meaning and purpose in their own lives. I would reword his question as what is the quality of your mythical ideal?

There are not very many modern myths about trees. However, trees still symbolize strength, growth, resilience, and the cycle of life, so we may choose to plant a tree

in honor of someone. Most mortuaries, for \$100, will plant a tree in someone's honor. And our national seal still has a symbolic olive branch.

There is one mythical tree that is very appropriate today. George Washington confessed to his father that he chopped down a cherry tree because he could not tell a lie. Although there is doubt as to the factual basis of this myth, it should still resonate with us today. The story relates the importance of telling the truth – respecting and acknowledging that there is a truth. The story encourages us to seek the truth and to seek what is real. Indeed, that is our mission at Quest—the pursuit of knowledge.

I have reviewed with you some botanical evolution, some of the many uses of timber, a few mythical trees, how myths have evolved, and how we are nostalgic for what trees have given us over the centuries, even though we do not need them quite like we used to. One final thought to leave you with.

In this holiday season, many of us will soon gather with friends and family. As I approach next week, this is what I envision. More than likely, as I walk up the sidewalk to our gathering, I will be greeted at the front door with a wreath, a wreath made of plastic. It will not be anything like the real thing that I sold to neighbors when I was a boy scout. The vinyl siding on the home will have imitation wood grain. The flooring will almost certainly be composite fabricated to look like real wood. There is a good chance that the tree will be synthetic. Children will play games in virtual reality and my audio book will be read to me by an artificial intelligence voice. And the hearth may not have genuine flames or warmth either. I might just have to close my eyes and pray:

Oh, Christmas tree:  
Shiver and quiver and please tell me.  
Is there anything real left to see?

Ladies and gentlemen of Quest, in this holiday season, I would like you to venture into the woods. Put on your coat and boots and meander through the trees. Get in touch with Nature again. Feel the ground under your feet. Find a large tree and examine the bark. Witness the intricate corrugations. Notice the unique patterns of

different species. Listen to the sounds of the forest. Maybe you will hear a squirrel rummaging for buried treasure. Can you hear the birds singing to each other? What are they saying to each other? Pick up a leaf and find its branching veins. It is those veins that allow trees to grow majestically skyward. And as you witness the reality that is the forest, you might just be able to appreciate how ancient peoples could populate the forest with spirits. You just might find yourself gazing into the forest with a new sense of wonder and awe as you stand in the middle of nature's creation. You just might find enchantment.

And when you gather next week with loved ones, bring some of that enchantment. Look for what is real—the people, the relationships, the blessings of community. Go to the hearth and think about your NorthStar. Think about what really matters to you. Think about what you desire for the future for your loved ones and community. Think about the quality and wisdom of your intent. And then, like Cinderella, when you are certain that what you wish for is what you want, go ahead and make your wish for a better world. But realize that it will not just magically happen. So, resolve to actively work to make your wish come true. Go to the hearth, shiver and quiver, and resolve to make a better world a reality. Make it REAL.