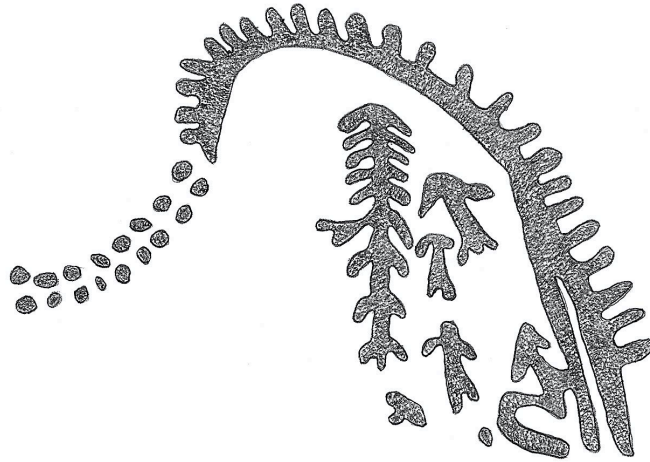
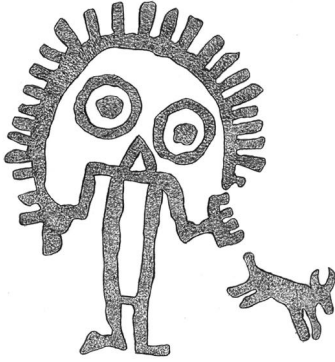


The Truths of Trees

Thomas Doty



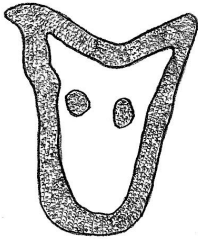
The Truths of Trees



A Doty & Coyote Story

Thomas Doty

Ashland, Oregon • 2020



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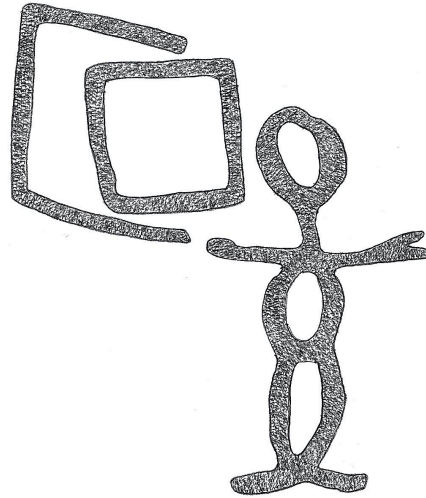
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When I was a child, I spent many days in my grandparents' home. There was a faded photograph of the redwoods on the wall, above a black rotary-dial telephone. Throughout my childhood I was fascinated with the photo.



One day I tried to make a connection between the telephone and the tall trees. I believed that if I dialed a secret number, I would find myself in the depths of the redwoods or some such magical place. I tried several numbers without success. These attempts ended abruptly when the next phone bill arrived. In my childish way, I suspected that the truth I was seeking was beyond my immediate experience, so I had dismissed local phone numbers early on. Why else would there be so many stories of treks to far-off mystical lands in search of something as worthwhile as truth? I spent a few weeks that summer working off the long distance charges in the family vegetable garden out back.

Out of financial necessity, I searched for new possibilities. The homemade picture frame caught my attention. The photo was framed by many seashells glued together. This was a clue I had overlooked at first, distracted by the telephone's false lure of a direct line to some spirit world. I considered that there must be a connection between the forest and the ocean. Both were vast and limitless, and both left clues in the form of debris: seashells and seaweed on the beach, limbs and shreds of bark on the floor of the forest. There had to be some cosmic reason for the frame to be made of seashells. I squinted and looked past the trees and caught a glimpse of salt spray from a sea wave crashing onto a beach.

In this moment, I knew intuitively that one way into the magic of the trees was through my own imagination. I left the telephone and the picture frame out of my sight and focused on the photo.

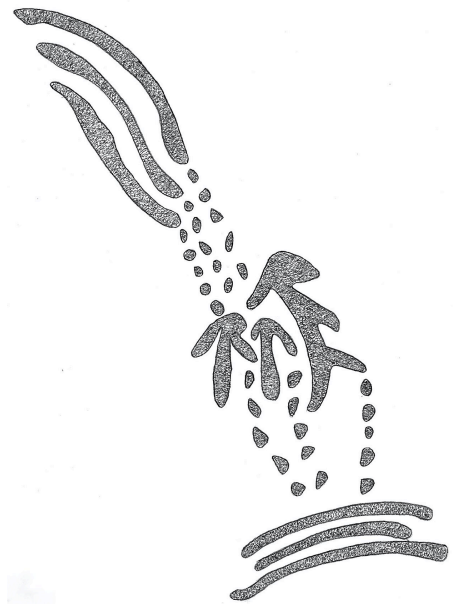
In the shadows of redwoods, the leaves of smaller trees and bushes were yellow with fall. Angled shafts of sunlight gave the grove an otherworldly guise. A narrow highway with a faint yellow stripe wandered through the trees, disappearing around a corner beyond where I could see. The road must lead not only through the grove but beyond, to a glimpse of the sea. Beneath the redwoods, the soil looked damp and rich. It came up to the edge of the road and spilled onto it.

This road belonged in these woods. This was a rare instance when I accepted a modern intrusion into an ancient and sacred place. Years later, I protested the building of another road through redwood groves that would have devastated native shrines.

This road of my childhood was a different kind of road. It added the lure of a journey to the photo. Through the length of my youth, I made mental treks into places that invited spiritual contemplation and discovery. This was labeled daydreaming by adults, but I was convinced I knew more than they did. My thoughts were not idle, useless daydreams, but dream-like explorations into the rich beginnings of stories.

I entered the photo and stretched its boundaries beyond the frame. I pursued the fall season into the Mythtime and Dreamtime of winter. I traveled the old highway around the curve through other groves and eventually to the Pacific. My eyes grew wide as I looked up and followed the length of giant trees into coastal fog, where their crowns hid in the damp swirl of a great mystery. I imagined that the tall trees connected this grove to a mirror grove on a planet several galaxies away.

I was convinced that redwoods had a long reach through time and space. They stretched to the stars and back to the beginnings of creation. They had deep roots in their homeland. They were the key to knowing where our



oldest stories began. These inner journeys blended with family trips into the redwoods and to the beach. To this day my memories of each are inseparable.

There is truth in trees. As the redwoods are ancient and many, they contain many ancient truths. In Old English the word for tree and truth is the same word: treow. It means to be firm, solid, steadfast. We enter the wilderness looking for truth. We journey into the interior for wisdom. We desire our truths to be steadfast and deeply rooted, and outlast centuries.

Following the deaths of my grandparents, we grandchildren were asked to select things from their home we would like to have as our own. I chose the old photo, and it now hangs in my home next to a window, a fair distance from the telephone. I look at the photo and see the trees of my childhood. I look out the window and see more trees. In each view, I gaze beyond the frame to where the truths of trees reside. One fall day, with yellow leaves still clinging to the oaks near my home, I decide to go searching for the trees in the photo.

Before dawn, I carry a sleepy Coyote out the door of our mountain lair and relocate him to his doggy bed in the backseat of my rig. One eye opens as I lift him and closes when I put him down, and that's the extent of his interest in this journey. "Want to go for a ride?" is a phrase that sends most pooches into tail-wagging, drooling rages of anticipation followed by ear-flapping, wind-barking ecstasy. But not Coyote, unless there's something big in it for himself.

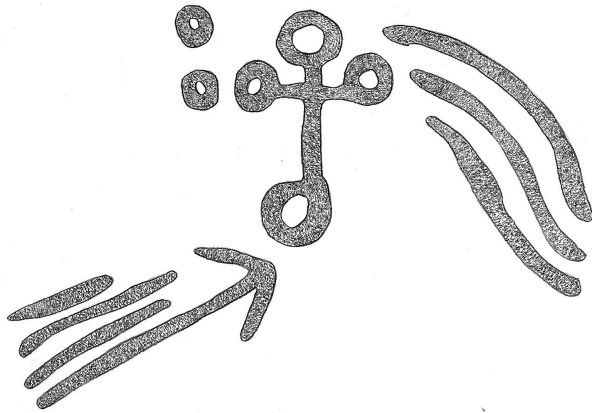
As Coyote dozes on, I head down the road. The Redwood Highway has been widened and paved over again and again, but most redwoods outlast roads, and I am hoping to recognize the giant trees that entranced me as a child. I want to walk into the grove and listen to the stories of the place. In the first faint light of morning, I glance out the car window and the first redwoods come into view.

Coyote wakes up, and his larger-than-life mythic view of himself is stirred. As if drawn to some self-serving satisfaction of conquest that comes from lifting his leg on the largest trees in the world, he whines to be let out. Unlike Steinbeck's French poodle, Charley, who failed to recognize redwoods as trees — they were too big and outside his personal experience — Coyote knows a giant tree when he sees one, and these redwoods are whoppers.

Coyote hits five redwoods in a single round. It doesn't take long to be satisfied with his supremacy, and he is soon curled up in the rig. By the time I stop again, Coyote is asleep. I park on the side of the road near a curve that looks too familiar to pass by. Leaving Coyote snoozing, I walk into the grove as the autumn dawn sends shafts of light angling through the trees.

Light in the redwoods is always dramatic. Creation must have looked like this, dim at first, and damp. Each dawn retells the Tolowa story of the first light streaming through the limbs of the first tree....

There was nothing but water and darkness. The Creator thought the world into existence, and it came floating from the south to its center at Yokokut. The First Redwood grew here, and around its base, the earth was patterned with the tracks of many people: Animal People, Star People, Rock People, Water People, and many more. They were human-like but had characteristics of the beings they would eventually become. They had also been thought into being by the Creator.



When Human People arrived, the others went away and became animals, constellations, rocks, rivers, trees. The Human People settled first at Yokokut, but soon there were many villages in the redwoods, along creeks and rivers and up and down the coast. Each village was the offspring of that first village, and each redwood tree a descendent of the First Redwood.

There was a time when all beings spoke the same language and talked with each other, but now the world has changed and only certain people know how to do this. Sometimes, deep in the groves, those willing to listen hear echoes and whispers of stories and conversations from times long ago.

Each sunrise is the first light after darkness, within each animal is an awareness of the Animal People, each tree is the spirit of the First Redwood, and each dark night filled with rain is a memory from that time before creation when there was nothing but water and darkness. Our ancestors are more than human.

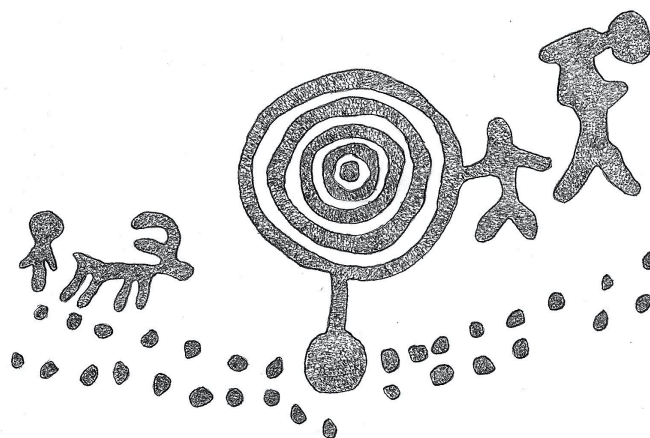
I stand at the edge of the grove. These trees look just like the ones in my photo. No quest is this simple. To us humans, there must be thousands of Tree People who look similar. For the moment, I want to believe that these are the very trees. Leaving the rig and the highway behind, I walk deeper into the grove, and my mind moves into a scene from my childhood....

Midmorning. Clouds roll in from the coast and wrap the trees in mist. The boy Tommy and his cocker spaniel Tippy escape the family hike in the redwoods and go off on their own, deeper into the trees. The hugeness of the redwoods is overwhelming, more than a little boy and his dog can contemplate, but their curiosity draws them deeper in.

They are not just a boy and his pooch. They are mythic heroes in the great playground of their imagination, on a high adventure in the deepest forests of the world. Their village is dying. Everyone is sick. Somewhere deep in the forest is a cure. They were chosen for the quest.

Rain begins. To Tommy and Tippy, this is more than rain. It is a battle of floodwater put in their path by their enemies, those villains who unleashed the deadly sickness on their village.

Tommy and Tippy struggle on against great odds, hungry, exhausted, the rain streaming down and soaking them through. Ahead they see the largest redwood they have ever seen. Its trunk is hollowed out by time, and inside is a room. Using their last bit of energy, they crawl into the heart of the tree's trunk. The dirt floor is covered with the tracks of other critters who have found refuge here. Though it is damp and dark, it is out of the battle of the storm and they feel safe, wrapped in the protection of the tree.



Tommy notices an earthy odor rising from somewhere deep down where the roots live. This is it, he thinks. The medicine to cure the sickness is in the roots of the tree! They have found the

elixir, the treasure tree of health, and now they can take a cure back to their village. The primordial race of Tree People have more than their share of Old Time doctors. Tippy digs through the dirt and uncovers the medicine, and Tommy carefully places it into his backpack.

Tommy and Tippy wait for the rain to let up. As the trees drip their last drops, sunshine streams through the grove. They race back through the woods and triumphantly rejoin the others. Their world has been saved.

I walk deeper into the grove. Midday sunlight streams down, picks up the green of the redwood limbs and gives the grove a pastel look of primal holiness. I sit in this light until my own breathing joins the breath of the trees and I feel part of the green calm of this ancient forest.

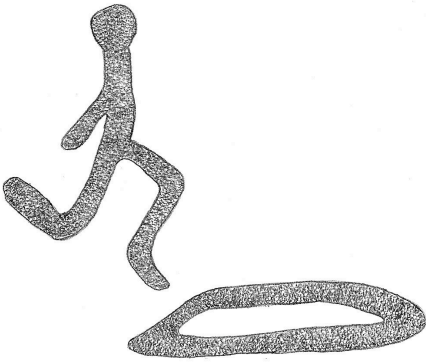
Though the ocean is not far off, I don't hear the hissing of the surf nor do I hear traffic from the highway. The thickness of the grove muffles outside noises and creates an amphitheater for smaller sounds within its hearing: the trickling of a creek, squirrels scurrying through the undergrowth, the songs of birds, and, below the soil, a deep groan from the depths. I imagine I hear redwood roots slowly stretching and pushing the trees higher and higher.

Also contained within the grove is the weather. Like lofty mountain peaks, these tall trees reshape sunlight and clouds into patterns uniquely their own. Light struggles to filter through the thick branches of the trees. By the time it reaches the forest floor, it has fractured into many spots of light, some lighting the trunks of trees, some the dark-green ferns and carpets of clover, some sending light deep into pools in the creek.

Likewise, large banks of clouds are split into pockets of fog and mist as they settle into the grove, adding moisture to the soil and droplets to the broad leaves of a diversity of rainforest plants. The redwoods drink up much of this moisture, eventually giving it back to the grove in a self-created gentle rain.

The thickest groves lack the undergrowth of other trees and plants that show the seasons. Here the redwoods control the weather to such an extreme that no particular season is apparent. A scene of fog and damp ferns, a trickling creek, the reddish bark and green boughs of the trees ... this scene might be a day in January or its twin in July.

This existence outside our rules of time gives each grove an ageless aura. I imagine how things looked on the first morning of Mythtime. Did the beginnings of our oldest stories have the same light and texture as I now experience in this forest? I let my imagination explore. I whisper the first word of an old myth and the sound feels at home in this grove.



This quiet time in the trees doesn't last long. A canine interruption of everything sacred appears out of nowhere. In a theatrical hiatus of self-applauding wolf whistles and howls, Mister Coyote enters and plays all of his roles. He is the Creator's truth-making Fool, a hot-headed doggy demagogue, a canine rabble-rouser, a self-styled spiritual advisor, the master tale teller of all Mythtime. He swaggers into the heart of the trees and poses at the bottom of a shaft of sunshine like a vainglorious pup of an actor in his spotlight. He extends a paw, makes a satire of a sweeping Shakespearean gesture, and narrows it at me. Coyote's voice is made dramatic by its raspy whisper.

"Having a little New Age moment, are we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't forget, Mister Native Storyteller. Each New Age is a shadow of an older age."

"I see. Care to elaborate?"

"Of course! You're wise to ask the expert. I am the shining star of the Old Time stories. I was here at the beginning and I'm still here. Most of the footprints around the First Redwood are my paw prints. Me and the Creator have been buddies for a long time."

"Just what did you do in this neck of the woods?"

"For one thing, I stole fire and gave it to the people. I hid the power of fire in the redwoods. That's why redwoods have thick bark. They are keepers of the fire, by my permission, of course."

"Of course. Anything else?"

"I know all the Old Time people who live around here: the giant serpents who nap in the lakes and use submerged redwoods for pillows, and monsters and dark ghosts who give you humans the willies, and the heroes of the stories — Raven, Bear, Eagle. The heroes are me in disguise, you know. I have a large collection of masks. There are more stories about me in the redwoods than you can ever imagine."

"Since you know everything, have you heard the story of the two-headed monster?"

"What a silly question! I was there when the four brothers fought the monster. When that two-mouthed, truth-twisting, two-timing monster walked through the redwoods, he was the

pounding wind of a fierce storm. Branches broke off everywhere he went, and entire trees toppled and crashed to the ground. The world shook with every step he took. He killed three of the brothers, but the fourth, the youngest, succeeded in slaying the monster. I would have killed him myself if I hadn't been delayed in another story. But I got there in time to see the final battle.”

“Where did this happen?”

“Not far from here. Monsters are never far away.”

“Have you been there lately?”

“Some of us have the courage to visit places where evil forces destroy people and level the giant trees. Others I know play it safe and hang out in the old growth, meditating, concocting coyote-less chants, embracing ancient trees, and happily feeling part of something universally sacred, moderately shallow and obviously obscure. Personally, I prefer to experience the entire story.”

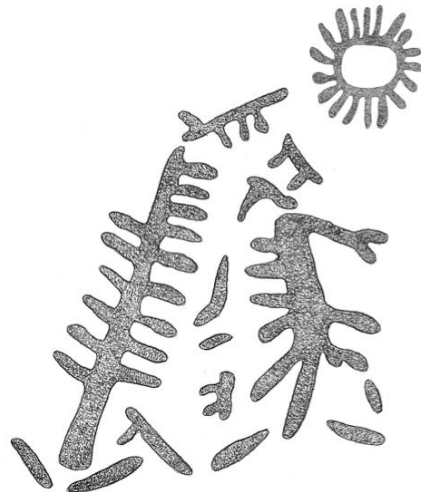
“Okay, Mister Dog, you’re pouring it on pretty thick. What are you getting at?”

“Who, me?”

“Yes, you. What’s up?”

“Want a challenge? Something with depth in your New Age? Want to experience the pawnote to all the Old Time stories you’ve been studying? Want to be a storyteller with qualifications?”

“What do you have in mind?”



“Take a little walk. Have a look at the clearcut beyond these trees. Just make sure you search deep for those stories that matter.”

“What will I find?”

“The truths of trees.”

“In the absence of trees?”

“You harebrained human! You have trouble interpreting your own gut feelings. Not even the logger who felled those giants ate his lunch in the cut. He went back into the trees where it’s shady and comfortable.”

“What’s that got to do with stories?”

“Must I always explain everything about stories to the so-called storyteller? Well, listen up. You might learn something. When the youngest brother killed the two-headed monster, the monster limped away from the downed trees, deep into the living forest to gasp his last breath. At the end of his life, he was drawn to his roots. In addition, if I hadn’t been there and had a look at things, I wouldn’t be able to tell the story as it happened. The story would have been lost.”

“What about the youngest brother? Didn’t he tell the story?”

“Not with my artistic flair, and he lacked my astute powers of observation, not to mention my ability to shapeshift between worlds. There’s something to be said for tellers who have first-hand experiences with their stories.”

“It’s more difficult to find Old Time stories these days.”

“Not for those with their eyes open.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Wander between worlds. Take a walk out of the trees. Visit the battlefield and confront the monster. Time might have altered the monster but it hasn’t changed his story. It still lingers there. Perhaps you’re scared to leave the coziness of your unscathed womb of the woods.”

Coyote stands tall in the sunlight. He takes several bows, applauds himself, and waves to the trees. He knows when to exit. He howls and laughs as he scampers off his self-made stage. He disappears into the shadows. Coyote never repeats a curtain call.

I think things through. As much as I hesitate to admit it, Coyote’s foolish talk is woven with wisdom. I draw a deep breath in the trees. I grip Coyote’s challenge. I walk out of the grove and into the devastation of a coastal clearcut.

Twilight softens the view with gentle light and long shadows. At this time between day and night, the path to Mythtime becomes visible. I imagine centuries of storytellers sharing their stories here where the trees once stood. I imagine the laughter of children as they listen to tales

that dramatize the many antics of clever Coyote. I hear friendly arguments among their parents, “Which are older? The trees or the stories?” An elder answers, “They’re the same age. They’re twins. They came into the world together.”

This clearcut might be a graveyard for trees and stories, but where the dead are, their ghosts live. Though the stories are fractured, there are whispers of monologues that rise out of stumps and dialogues that speak through heaps of broken branches. Echoes of entire stories swirl like fog over a bare hillside of newly planted seedlings, as if trying to wake them up and make them grow.



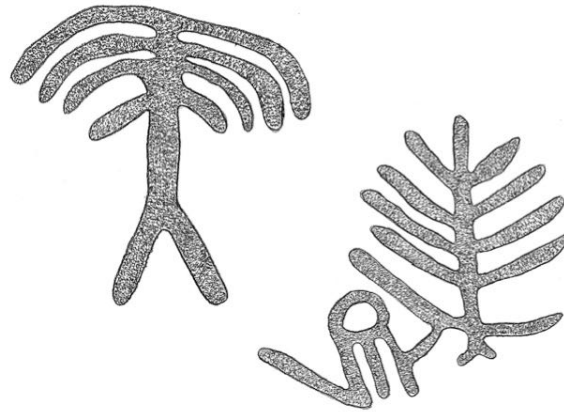
Standing on the edge, I clearly hear the most recent native story, which is also the most ominous. When she was 102 years old, Chilula elder and religious leader Minnie Reeves warned us of this moment.

“The redwood trees are sacred. They are a special gift and reminder from the Great Creator to the human beings. The Great Creator made everything, including trees of all kinds, but he wanted to leave a special gift for his children. So he took a little medicine from each tree, he said a prayer and sang a powerful song, and then he mixed it all with the blood of our people. Then he created this special redwood tree from his medicine. He left it on Earth as a demonstration of his love for his children. The redwood trees have a lot of power: they are the tallest, live the longest, and are the most beautiful trees in the world. Destroy these trees and you destroy the Creator’s love. And if you destroy that which the Creator loves so much, you will eventually destroy mankind.”

I sit all night on a log on the edge between the grove and the clearcut. I listen to the footsteps of animals, the breath of the wind as it sweeps up from the coast and intermingles with the trees,

the deep night filled with the wisdom of silence. Beyond the silence I hear voices of trees whispering their truths.

There is little light at sunrise. Clouds roll in from the ocean and dim the first light of the day. Fall colors look pale. Here is the faded photograph of my childhood with a new lure. I look past the picture frame and know I have more journeys to make. Through the long, dark winter ahead, I'll return and share the traditional stories. Someone should speak them here or they'll be forgotten. I'll listen to the landscape, learn the newest stories, and share them, as well. In the spring sunshine, from the edge of the grove, I'll watch the seedlings grow. In the company of stories, I'll welcome them home.



“One of the best of Oregon’s storytellers!”

“A cultural treasure.” — “A master of his art.”



Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

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