

## Odyssey and The Giving Trees



Odyssey the blue-furred otter adjusted his cool sunglasses as he welcomed a group of curious students to the enchanted forests of Jocassee Gorges.

"Today," he chirped excitedly, "we're going to learn about what the Cherokee people called 'the givers' - the magnificent trees that make our home possible!"

As they ventured deeper into the forest, Odyssey pointed upward. "Look at that canopy above us. It's like a giant green umbrella! But can you imagine what it looked like hundreds of years ago?"

The children gazed up, trying to picture it.

"Once upon a time," Odyssey continued, "American chestnut trees grew so tall and wide that their branches blocked out the sky. And tulip poplars? They were wider than grown-ups are tall!"

"What happened to those giant trees?" asked Maria, a fourth grader with bright curious eyes.

Odyssey's expression grew thoughtful. "Many of the chestnuts got sick with a fungus that humans accidentally brought to America. Others were cut down to build houses and furniture. But some special trees have survived for hundreds of years!"

As they walked, Odyssey stopped beside a medium-sized oak tree. "This tree might not look super old, but it has its own story to tell. Let's be detectives and look for clues about its life!"

He pointed to a peculiar bend in the trunk. "See this curve? Something probably fell on this tree when it was young, but it kept growing anyway, just in a new direction!"

The students examined other trees, finding all sorts of clues - woodpecker holes, lightning scars, and unusual branching patterns.

"Trees are like history books," Odyssey explained. "If you know how to read them, they'll tell you amazing stories!"

They continued their hike until they reached a small clearing where sunlight streamed through the leaves. Odyssey took a deep breath.

"Everyone, take a big breath in," he instructed. The children inhaled deeply.

"You just breathed in oxygen that these trees made today! They take in carbon dioxide - the air we breathe out - and transform it into oxygen that we need to live. It's like they're breathing out while we're breathing in!"

"So we're connected to the trees?" asked Jamal, a thoughtful third grader.

"Exactly!" Odyssey's whiskers twitched with delight. "That's why the Cherokee called them 'the givers.' Trees give us so much - clean air, shelter, food, and even medicine."

Odyssey pointed to different trees as he explained their gifts. "Oak trees give acorns that feed squirrels, deer, and bears. Maple trees give sweet sap for syrup. Pine trees give homes to woodpeckers and owls."

The children looked around with new appreciation, noticing how many creatures depended on the forest.

"And the best part?" Odyssey added. "Trees are still giving even after they die. Look at that fallen log!"

He led them to an old decaying trunk teeming with mushrooms, beetles, and a salamander hiding underneath.

"This tree is now giving food and shelter to hundreds of creatures. Nothing in the forest is ever wasted."

As their adventure came to an end, Odyssey handed each child a small acorn. "Take this home and plant it if you can. One day, it could grow into a mighty oak that gives gifts to your grandchildren and great-grandchildren!"

The students clutched their acorns carefully, their eyes wide with possibility.

"Remember," Odyssey said as they headed back, his blue fur gleaming in the dappled sunlight, "when you protect forests like the Jocassee Gorges, you're protecting all the amazing gifts that trees have been giving for thousands of years – and will continue giving long after we're gone."

The children nodded solemnly, each making a silent promise to the forest that had shared so many secrets with them that day.