

**The Washington Post**

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

**For three  
famous  
writers, grief  
was crushing**

# – and transformative

In 'Three Roads Back,' Robert D. Richardson illuminates how early losses shaped the thinking of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and William James

Review by Diane Cole

January 26, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EST

“After the first death, there is no other,” Dylan Thomas observed in his majestic elegy, “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.” Through the years, that striking line has helped me understand the formative impact of my first loss — my mother’s death, when I was 22 — and why I still feel its imprint, not only in how I’ve faced other calamities but in the very way I view the world.

And so it inescapably came to mind as I read acclaimed biographer Robert D. Richardson’s extraordinarily cogent and exquisitely concise exploration of the life-affecting course of early grief, “Three Roads Back: How Emerson, Thoreau, and William James Responded to the Greatest Losses of Their Lives.” Sadly, Richardson (1934-2020), an expert on all three intellectual giants, died before this final book appeared.

It is not a self-help book, but Richardson provides comfort and consolation simply by pointing out that even the most eminent figures in our cultural history were not immune to the stabbing ache of grief. Chapter by chapter we learn that they, too, struggled to make sense of the seemingly senseless: the deaths, long before their time, of Ralph Waldo Emerson's 19-year-old wife; of Henry David Thoreau's older brother, 27-year-old John; and of William James's much-loved 24-year-old cousin, Minny.

And when they emerged from their mourning, also like so many of us, something within them had shifted. For Emerson, Thoreau and James, Richardson tells us, it was as if their losses had marked their souls, altering their mind-sets and impelling them forward with different perspectives, and sometimes different directions, than before. "All faced disaster, loss, and defeat, and their examples of resilience count among the lasting contributions to modern life," Richardson writes. It is these journeys, from wreckage to a renewed sense of life, that he chronicles.

He begins with Emerson (1803-1882), who had yet to become the famed sage of Concord when his wife of less than two years died of tuberculosis in 1831. He described his emotional state as “unstrung, debilitated by grief,” and he walked daily from his home in Boston, where he was then a junior church minister, to visit her tomb in Roxbury. Over the next year, he continued to dutifully fulfill his pastoral obligations, despite his own inability to find spiritual consolation. His belief had been shaken and continued to shift as he turned from traditional Bible study to the rational analysis known as biblical criticism, and increasingly sought, and found, inspiration in the field then known as natural philosophy, what we now call science.

His mood remained bleak, but his mind had begun to stir: Could the cycle of life and death found in nature reveal to him the workings of the world in a way that faith alone could not? On his walk one day he went so far as to open his wife's coffin to see, with his own eyes, the result of the natural course of decay of her body. Years later, Emerson would write about the "vanishing volatile froth of the present." Richardson wonders if he was describing the sense of the irretrievable transience of life that had overcome him at his wife's death and that this glimpse into the grave had confirmed.

Soon after, he resigned his church ministry and departed for Europe. In Paris, at the vast botanical garden, Jardin des Plantes, the beauty, bounty and interconnectedness of all nature struck him like a vision. It crystallized the theme that would define his sensibility and his writing from that moment on, a revelation Richardson summarizes as “regeneration, not through Christ, but through Nature.” His journey was now set. In the fall of 1833, with his spirit revitalized, he returned to America, where he soon settled in Concord. There he remarried and began his new career as naturalist, author — and sage.

Richardson next turns to Emerson’s Concord neighbor and friend Thoreau (1817-1862). In January 1842, Thoreau’s brother, John, died of tetanus after cutting himself shaving. Thoreau nursed him as best he could through his excruciating last days, but in an era before antibiotics, there was no hope. Thoreau himself spent the next four weeks in bed. When he got up, he was still unsteady. “I feel like a feather floating in the atmosphere, on every side is depth unfathomable,” he wrote.

It took another month before he could begin to reconcile his beliefs in how the world worked with his brother's loss. He found the turning point in nature, Richardson writes, as he changed "from seeing the world made up of irreplaceable individuals to seeing it as a huge whole of which everything and everyone is just a tiny piece." This new perspective embraced what Thoreau perceived as the balance achieved by nature's alternating cycles of autumnal decay and spring renewal. Nature, he wrote, "finds her own again under new forms without loss. . . . When we look over the fields we are not saddened because these particular flowers or grasses will wither — for their death is the law of new life."



He had worked through these thoughts in conversation and in letters with Emerson, who himself was mourning the recent death of his 5-year old son, Waldo, from scarlet fever. There was no treatment yet for this disease, either, and like Thoreau's brother, young Waldo died within days. "I comprehend nothing of the fact [of Waldo's death] but its bitterness," Emerson wrote in his journal. In the aftermath of these losses, Emerson and Thoreau grieved together, and as they began to help heal each other, their shared consolation led Thoreau to another realization: that friendship, too, is a necessary part of nature. "My friend is my real brother," he wrote.

Emerson, also serving as Thoreau's mentor, commissioned an article for the magazine he edited. That piece, appearing six months after his brother's death, would become Thoreau's first mature work, Richardson notes. His grief had knocked him down but had also galvanized him to rethink and re-envision his still-inchoate views of the natural world — and in the process transformed him into the future author of "Walden."

James (1842-1910) is Richardson's final case history. After James's young cousin Minny Temple died of tuberculosis in 1870, he felt "the nothingness of all our egotistical fury," he wrote. Their affectionate friendship had been based on their shared intellectual interests, including religious struggles and experience. That is why Richardson thinks Minny was uppermost in James's mind when, a month after her death, he experienced what he described as an "acute neurasthenic attack" of "religious bearing" that caused "a horrible fear of my own existence." (So indelible was his panic that he would years later include it in "The Varieties of Religious Experience.") Yet three weeks after his horror, he excitedly wrote that he had arrived at what would prove his central, defining insights about free will, the autonomy of the self and practical strategies for changing habits, including the quelling of negative ruminative thoughts. All these ideas, Richardson suggests, resulted from James's attempts to free himself from the brooding thoughts and depression he had fallen into after Minny's death.

Richardson, who, as a college student, mourned the death of his 17-year-old brother from leukemia, narrates each ordeal with sympathy and compassion. His portrayal of their journeys from raw vulnerability to the reawakening to life's possibilities invites us inside their souls, and speaks to our own.

*Diane Cole is the author of the memoir “After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges.”*

## **Three Roads Back**

**How Emerson, Thoreau, and William James  
Responded to the Greatest Losses of Their Lives**

By Robert D. Richardson

Princeton. 108 pp. \$22.95.

## **A NOTE TO OUR READERS**

We are a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.