

Thoreau at 200  
a sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson  
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UCV

This is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Henry David Thoreau, best known throughout the world as the author of *Walden, or Life in Woods*--a classic text for both philosophy and the environmental movement, and the celebrated essay "On Civil Disobedience," cited by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr for its influence on their philosophy and practice of nonviolent protest.

Last summer, Diana and I, along with our eldest son's family, visited the Tyler Arboretum in southeast Pennsylvania. On its grounds is a small pond, and an exact replica of the cabin which Thoreau built and lived in for two years and two months beginning in July 1845, starting when he was twenty-eight years old. Stepping into that cabin--it was like a time machine—and my four year old grandson Eli loves it, asks to keep returning to it—which they do. Back to that summer day, it welled up powerfully into me then that Thoreau preached a heresy that's shaped Unitarian theology and practice in North America, and it offers timely counsel and examples for living that are justly suited for this, our perilous moment in time.

Before going there, let's clear up some misconceptions about Thoreau. He was neither a hermit nor a misanthrope. He lived almost all of his life in Concord, then a bustling town of about 2000 people 15 miles west of Boston, mostly in his parents' home and, for a couple years with the Ralph Waldo Emerson family for whom he worked as a handyman and a tutor for the Emerson children. The cabin at Walden Pond was a twenty-minute walk from downtown Concord, to which he walked and where he visited frequently with family and friends. As well, he hosted numerous guests in the cabin, talking news, and ideas about nature, philosophy and agriculture. He led adults, as well as towns children, on hikes at the pond and in the nearby

woods. Kids adored him—not only did he resign from teaching in a Concord school because he refused to beat his students; there was something more: with a few distinctive notes, Thoreau could whistle birds down from the trees to perch on his shoulders and hands, critters from the bush to rest at his feet, and snakes to coil around his legs. While the respectable citizens may have thought him something of an oddity and a loafer for the way he could stand motionless and stare into a pond for hours, he was admired by neighbouring farmers due to the sincere interest he took in their lives and farming practices, the intimate knowledge he had of their landscape, and for the accuracy and honesty of his work as a seasonal land surveyor on their land.

He believed in justice, not in niceness and the civil graces. Though argumentative, he knew friendship and loved deeply. A proposal of marriage to young woman he truly loved was turned down by her father due to Thoreau's unorthodox beliefs and uncertain prospects. Near the end of his short life, he confessed to his sister, that his love for that young woman had never died. His beloved brother John died in his arms from an excruciating tetanus infection—an experience that devastated Thoreau. Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Emersons, Louisa May Alcott's father, vanguard abolitionists, and other luminaries were life-long associates. He loved watermelons, and threw an annual watermelon party for his friends. He travelled widely in New England, Quebec and the Mid Atlantic Coast as a traveller, scholar and lecturer. While in Quebec, he became fascinated and widely read in early Canadian Francophone history and culture. In New York City and beyond, he visited museums and met with editors, journalists, and writers, including a meeting with the poet Walt Whitman.

Thoreau was devoted to his family. He helped build their house and workshop in Concord—skills put to good use in building his own cabin at Walden. In the family home, he carried out most of his quarter of a century of prodigious reading, his studies of nature and

writing. He saved the family's pencil making business due to his knack for mechanical engineering, and by introducing innovations in materials which he'd learned from his research in German manufacturing. After the death of his parents, he helped transfer ownership of the small business to his sister Sophia. Speaking of which, he was no misogynist: for example—though Margaret Fuller, with scathing criticism, rejected several of his poems and essays from being printed in the journal of which she was editor, he accepted her reasons as just and fair; in fact, he went on to consider her a soul mate. And it was Thoreau who took on the wretched, vain work of trying to find her body on the beaches of Long Island after the ship carrying Margaret Fuller, her husband and infant child broke up and sunk in a freak storm. He found only a button from her husband's coat. While at Walden, he invited the Concord Women's Anti-Slavery Society, of whom his sister and mother were founding members, to convene their anniversary celebration of the emancipation of slaves in the Indies.

And he was no parochial rustic: The breadth and depth of his reading and writing were truly astonishing: fluent in classical Latin and Greek, along with French, German and Spanish, Thoreau read through and knew the philosophy and literature of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as that of the Chinese, Indian and Persian worlds. He read modern history, philosophy, economics, and accounts of exploration and travel, the new fields of anthropology and archaeology, and was an avid reader of natural history and biology. He was among the first American readers of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*—and he was in the vanguard of appreciating its ground-breaking importance.

In addition to writing two books published in his life time, he authored more than fifty essays, lectured widely, and wrote a two-million-word journal filled with reading notes, thoughts, aphorisms, and detailed studies of plants, animals, weather, seasons, and the physical

environs of Concord. Here he was expressed a well-informed conviction, along with naturalists like Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin, that Nature was a living web of organic life, bound together in intricate, complex, interdependent correlations. He was wide-awake to the beauty and mystery of world at our very feet. And besides, takes a keen and receptive mind to a worked-over pond near a railroad track, or to a melting mud-slope [as Thoreau did at Walden], he believed you may well see the universe.” (Jedediah Purdy) It doesn’t matter how far we travel, he wrote in his journal, “but how much alive we are. Be an explorer of your own streams and oceans.”

For the past couple of months, I’ve been kind of living with Thoreau. Finding myself looking down more at the ground, and out into the skies, and at the trees as they’ve shed the leaves of autumn—and asking myself why him, and why here, today? After all, having been raised a Unitarian, at the age of twenty-three, he resigned his membership in the church in Concord and never returned to the meetinghouse. Deeply influenced by Emerson and other dissident Unitarians, he believed you could find and experience divinity anywhere, if you knew how to look and listen: “The morning wind forever blows, the poem of the creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it.”

Why Thoreau, why now? The first, perhaps the most important thing is his insistent call to us to wake up, to be aware, to cultivate a way of attending to things in our lives that will allow them—and ourselves—to be experienced as elements of a meaningful world. No easy task—it was the work of his lifetime—to become and remain an appreciative, reliable knower and doer in the world. “Be forever on the alert...at what is to be seen,” he wrote in Walden. “How much of beauty—of color as well as form—on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us,” he lamented. He worried, given what we value, that “Nature has no human inhabitant who

appreciates her... If a person walks in the woods for love of them half of each day," he writes, "they are in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if they spend the whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious, intelligent, and enterprising citizen." "A man sees only what concerns him."

What Thoreau called "restless, nervous, bustling and trivial activity"—can so fill and profane the mind and what we do, that we can become blind to the "economy of Nature" all around us, where "a seed is far more precious than a diamond;" for the seed, he wrote, contains "the principle of growth, of life...and provides evidence that Nature is filled with creative genius." The good news, as lived and promised by Thoreau to us down the years, is that "Nature will reward the most careful attention paid by a person who is appropriately disposed." If we feel it, we'll see it; if we strive to give what he calls a "poetic and lively description of things," we will find ourselves in a "living, grand and beautiful world." And here's his challenge:

"Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito' wing that falls on the rails. Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance which covers the globe through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and [with] rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say: *This is, and no mistake.*"

In order to arrive there, however, Thoreau journeyed to the very margins of his culture, its sciences and sensibility—and enjoined us to follow. Note that one must even work through the tradition and delusion of Boston and Concord—and here he's talking about Emerson and the Transcendentalists and the Unitarians of Boston. The Unitarians in Boston would be fixed for

the rest of the 1800s and beyond, on shoring up the market economy, the miracles of the Bible, the Fatherhood of God, the leadership of Jesus, the stability of their churches, and the progress of Mankind onward and upward forever. While Emerson and the Transcendentalists asserted that true knowledge of things, including nature, was the product of highly individualistic intuition, something akin to revelation, not sense experience or the scientific observation. For the Transcendentalist, facts and nature's outward appearance were like a curtain that concealed higher spiritual realities and emblematic truths that could only be grasped by standing above and a part from Nature--

Here, Thoreau decisively parted ways. He began to observe nature—its details, correlations and connections. Beginning at Walden he completely reoriented his life with a new daily routine that required serious study and writing every morning and evening, punctuated by long afternoon walks for field observations and specimen collection. He measured the depth of streams and ponds, took temperatures and pressed plants. He counted the petals of a flower and tree rings of a felled trunk. In the spring, he recorded the arrivals of birds and in winter counted the frozen bubbles captured in the icy lid of a pond. His observations became so meticulous that scientists today use them to examine the impact of climate change; and go so far, in their published work, to call him their scientific colleague and co-author. No wonder, he's been called this continent's first environmentalist. "There is an advantage in hard and precise terms, like those employed by them who study lichens and pond scum," he wrote. "How hard one must work in order to acquire this language...[But] with knowledge of the name comes a distincter recognition and knowledge of the thing.. [And then] that shore becomes more describable, and poetic even."

The more his knowledge of particular things and their interconnections grew, Thoreau saw not only harmonious laws at work, but also Nature's inscrutable, mysterious, ever fecund wildness—"primeval, untamed and forever untameable." What he calls wildness is not located only in the non-human world; the same creative force of the "living earth...[its] slumbering subterranean fire which never goes out" wells forth in us in just the same way that a "plant springs and grows by its own vitality," because we are a part of Nature. Thoreau's call to follow the promptings of what he called our own genius, or creative power, was based on his belief that by obeying our own wild nature, we are aligning ourselves with sacred power. What inspires us to realize our highest potential is the "primitive vigor of Nature in us." Perhaps, we find something of this in each other in an unlikely place—like this congregation—after all.

Having left both Boston and Concord behind him, immersing in rigorous scientific observation, discovering the names of things, the "infinite extent of our relations," and the wildness of nature without and within, Thoreau voyaged out well beyond most of his contemporaries. One of them, the editor Horace Greeley, put his finger on it, when he called out Thoreau for his "defiant pantheism"—which, in a word, means that you can't separate Nature and the Divine; they are, essentially one and the same. "I love Nature," said Thoreau, "partly *because* she is not man. None of his institutions [including religion] control or pervade her.... Even as we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable; that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us, because they are unfathomable.... *There* a different kind of right prevails...[Man] is constraint, *she* is freedom. *He* makes me wish for another world. *She* makes me content with this one...because Nature is life, and life is all there is that matters."

This is the source and strength Thoreau called upon to become the author of “On Civil Disobedience,” and an icon of political dissent. For Thoreau, Nature is a point of reference outside of society, providing valuable moral guidance—reminding us that we and our culture are not the measure of all things. In nonhuman natural world and in our own “wildness,” we can more readily discover that the standards of our civilization are all-too-often flawed and thus liberate ourselves from slavish adherence to prevailing attitudes. It’s what empowered him to go against the grain and settled opinions of his era.

During his lifetime, Thoreau spoke out against the Mexican American War, refused to pay taxes in its support, and was jailed for his defiance. Having met with, studied, interviewed, traveled and worked with Native Americans, he railed against their subjugation. He was active in circulating petitions for neighbours in need. He campaigned aggressively in favour of bio-regionalism and the protection of animals and the natural environment. Along with his family and others, he protested against the Fugitive Slave Law, and in violation of it, gave active support to the Underground Railroad. To those who dismissed the violent abolitionism of John Brown by calling him “insane,” Thoreau defiantly countered that no one should be so labeled by virtue of dissenting from the majority. Brown’s anger, Thoreau wrote, was grounded upon his awareness that slavery is a gross violation of human rights. And he rounded on the good citizens of Massachusetts by asserting that passively and quietly allowing an unjust practice to continue is tantamount to collaborating with evil, and that injustice in the community touches everyone.

But transgression of an unjust law is not an end in itself; it’s the beginning. “Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence”—a “counter friction to stop the machine...of practices and laws that are not righteous,” he wrote. It’s not no government that he wants, but better government. What he refuses to acknowledge is the authority of one



that has become so ethically bankrupt, so out of tune with the wildness and freedom of Nature, as to lose its moral compass and the consent of the governed. “There will never be a really free and enlightened State,” he argued, “until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its power and authority are derived, and treats them accordingly.” There are simply more sacred laws than the laws of society, and a just government—should there ever be such a thing—would not be in conflict with the conscience of the ethically upright person and the wildness of Nature.

In closing, Thoreau did not set out to reform his Unitarian church. Like Groucho Marx, he probably wouldn't want to join any club that would have him as a member. That said, if he were to return and see us today, he would, perhaps, be in for a surprise. Take one look down the Principles and Sources of our faith—it's like a roll call of basic Thoreauvian ideas: from human dignity and worth to respect for the interdependent web of all existence to the mystery and wonder which moves us to a renewal of the spirit in that which upholds life and all things.

His extraordinary encounter with the myriad sources of the wisdom, peoples and sciences of the world—from his own neighbourhood to the utmost bounds, his deep self-inquiry and life's work to arouse himself and us from dogmatic slumbers, his unending fascination and love of Nature—from the heights of Mount Katahdin to the green scum on the banks of Walden Pond wherein he glimpsed a global ecosystem and the immensity of the cosmos—these, and more have and continue to suggest that Thoreau is relevant today.

He didn't so much move away from us; it is we who have been drawn to him.

"I went to the woods," he wrote, "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essentials of life... How novel and “original must be each person's view of the universe! For it suggests to us what worlds remain to be unveiled.”

*Chalice Lighting*

We light this chalice, symbol of our faith. Here, we affirm the worth and dignity of every person, this one and precious life, and the interdependence of all existence which we are called to nourish, respect and serve.

*Meditation*

the questions posed by Hillel the Elder over two thousand years ago when he asked: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”