

Henry David Thoreau: The True Harvest

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Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.

Henry David Thoreau

Just a week shy of twenty-nine when he began his experiment at Walden Pond (1845–1847), Henry David Thoreau was old enough to have suffered significant losses. In 1840, his marriage proposal to Ellen Sewall, to whom his brother John had already proposed, was rejected. (To the everlasting benefit of American literature, one might suppose, Sewall's father prevailed upon her to have nothing to do with those wild, freethinking Thoreau boys.) And in 1842, John, the dear companion of Henry's youth, contracted tetanus from a rusty razor cut and died in his brother's arms. Afterward Thoreau experienced weeks of a psychosomatic paralysis that mimicked the one John had endured, and then underwent a period of severe depression. 'The shock, the loss, and the sight of his brother's terrible suffering at the end, for a time overthrew Henry so utterly that a friend told me he sat still in the house, could do nothing, and his sisters led him out passive to try to help him,' wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson's son Edward. 'Near the same time died suddenly a beautiful child [the Emersons' Waldo, five years old], with whom he had played and talked almost daily.'

All of which is not to say that Thoreau's time in the woods signified a retreat from human feeling or a descent into extended mourning (he made it quite clear on the title page that *Walden* was not to be 'an ode to dejection'), but is simply to note that he had, however reluctantly, already been released from some of his strongest bonds of affection. Unacceptable to Ellen, unnecessary to John, and

temperamentally unsuited to the conciliations of village life, with its inhabitants sometimes more alien to him than 'Sandwich Islanders,' he was free (enough) to begin the experiment of a lifetime: 'I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.'

Thoreau's Concord, Massachusetts, was a center of intellectual fervency in his day, the place where a new American literature was (quite deliberately) being founded, and home to the leading lights of Transcendentalism, with its emphasis on nature, social reform, and self-fulfillment. In addition to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the movement's mainstay (and owner of the land on Walden Pond where Thoreau built his cabin), Henry was in contact with Nathaniel Hawthorne (and he with Herman Melville); A. Bronson Alcott (who advocated such radical educational reforms as allowing students to speak and ask questions in class and doing away with corporal punishment) and his daughter, Louisa May Alcott (who may have proposed marriage to Henry); Walt Whitman (whom Thoreau described as 'A remarkably strong though coarse nature, of a sweet disposition, and much prized by his friends'); and the brilliant early feminist (Sarah) Margaret Fuller (whose body and manuscripts Thoreau was sent to retrieve, though he was unable to, when she and her husband and child perished in a shipwreck). A little further away from Concord, in Amherst, influenced by the writings of the Transcendentalists and admiring enough of Thoreau to pen a poem about the 'fighting for his Life' he was doing 'In that Campaign inscrutable / Of the Interior' in which she, too, had enlisted, Emily Dickinson, relieved by eccentricity of the curse of self-prohibition and following the prescriptions of her genius, was writing her letter to the world – a dubious enterprise of which the Transcendentalists would have approved heartily.

'I am naturally no hermit,' Thoreau expressly pointed out, and though he took pleasure in (and was highly productive as a result of) his solitary state, even during his days at Walden Pond he was strongly connected to others. He was an intimate of the Emersons, living with the family for two years as their handyman and gardener, and later staying with Lydia and the children for ten months while Emerson lectured abroad. (Thoreau's letters express a deep love for Lydia, but there is no evidence to suggest that the relationship was other than platonic.) He was an impressive, oracular presence even in his circle of eminences ('Such dangerous frankness was in his dealing that his admirers called him "that terrible Thoreau," as if he spoke when silent, and was still present when he had departed,' wrote Emerson). And he was an involved and caring son and brother who

was wonderful with children, as described here by Edward Emerson, his unofficial little brother:

This youthful, cheery figure was a familiar one in our house, and when he, like the 'Pied Piper of Hamelin,' sounded his note in the hall, the children must needs come and hug his knees, and he struggled with them, nothing loath, to the fireplace, sat down and told stories, sometimes of the strange adventures of his childhood, or more often of squirrels, muskrats, hawks, he had seen that day, the Monitor-and-Merrimac duel of mud-turtles in the river, or the great Homeric battle of the red and black ants. Then he would make our pencils and knives disappear, and redeem them presently from our ears and noses; and last, would bring down the heavy copper warming-pan from the oblivion of the garret and unweariedly shake it over the blaze till reverberations arose within, and then opening it, let a white-blossoming explosion of popcorn fall over the little people on the rug.

Thoreau, who built his cabin with his own hands, understood early on that, as a house comes into being board by board, so a man is built by the books he reads, each period a nail, each strip of white between the lines a chinking of silence:

There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book! The book exists for us, perchance, which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered.

Thoreau considered the written word to be his (and everyone else's) absolute birthright. Edward Emerson writes that Thoreau at Harvard 'saw that the curriculum was narrow, and to make the sacrifice worth while he must not stick too closely to it,' and that 'even although the loss of marks involved nearly cost the important relief of a scholarship and brought some disapproval of his teachers, he deliberately devoted much of his time to the College library.' And Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his eulogy for Thoreau, notes that when Henry, graduated from Harvard and no longer legally able to borrow books, was denied in the attempt, he reacted with the ferocity of a trapped wild

creature, using his version of claws and teeth (his words!) to fight for what to him was essential to his survival, the words of others:

Mr. Thoreau explained to the President... that the library was useless, yes, and President and College useless, on the terms of his rules, – that the one benefit he owed to the College was its library, – that, at this moment, not only his want of books was imperative, but he wanted a large number of books, and assured him that he, Thoreau, and not the librarian, was the proper custodian of these. In short, the President found the petitioner so formidable, and the rules getting to look so ridiculous, that he ended by giving him a privilege which in his hands proved unlimited thereafter.

Thoreau believed that 'Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they [are] written.' He advocated reading always above ourselves, not what we already know, but those books 'we have to stand on tip-toe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to.' Patrician in his reading tastes, preferring Homer and Dante and Shakespeare and the ancient classics, he was nevertheless fiercely egalitarian in insisting that the writer speaks 'to all in any age who can understand him.' He lectured at the Concord Lyceum and was an early proponent of continuing education: 'It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women. It is time that villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure [...] to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives.' And he believed communities should be willing to pay for the privilege: 'If it is necessary, omit one bridge over the river, go round a little there, and throw one arch at least over the darker gulf of ignorance which surrounds us.'

Yet the philosopher-poet of Walden Pond who lived so happily in his head could also be practical when necessary. He could easily repair all manner of things, and was a skilled and sought-after surveyor. In order to increase his family's financial security, he made ingenious, state of the art improvements to their pencil-making business, adding clay to the graphite and creating a machine that would insert the lead without causing the wood to split. He even invented the grading system that gives us our #2 pencils.

He also possessed a keen, understated sense of humor not always apparent to his neighbors. When *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the record of the last trip he took with John, failed to sell, he was philosophical: 'I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself.'

And when he was dying of tuberculosis, his Calvinist aunt asked, 'Henry, have you made your peace with God?' His answer: 'I was not aware we had ever quarreled.'

Thoreau carried on a spirited and lifelong argument with the status quo: the naturalist William Burroughs said of him that 'In the great army of Mammon, the great army of the fashionable, the complacent and church-going, Thoreau was a skulker, even a deserter, if you please – yea, a traitor fighting on the other side.' In 1846 he was jailed for a night for refusing, in protest against slavery and the Mexican War, to pay his poll tax. His essay 'Civil Disobedience' ('Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine') powerfully influenced both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

As is characteristic of a great debater, he did not readily cede points to the institutions and personalities he perceived as his opponents. But rather than being a detriment to his writing, the sureties of one-sidedness are actually the basis of its strength and humanity. Opposites and absolutes were Thoreau's consuming interest and his area of expertise, and he spoke eloquently and compellingly on behalf of them: of poverty ('Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul') and solitude ('I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls'); of the misfit ('If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away') and the animal ('No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The hare in its extremity cries like a child'); and even, as 'attorney of the indigenous plants,' as Emerson described him, for mute nature ('We need the tonic of wildness [...] We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander').

Though Thoreau was perhaps America's most eloquent explicator of solitude's compensations, an alert reader will find the tracks of his loneliness there along the pond's edge, though he brushed them over for our benefit. Referring to a custom from the *Vishnu Purana*, a Hindu religious text, in which 'The house-holder is to remain at eventide in his courtyard as long as it takes to milk a cow, or longer if he pleases, to await the arrival of a guest,' Thoreau writes, 'There too, as everywhere, I sometimes expected the Visitor who never comes [...] I often performed this duty of hospitality, waited long enough to milk a whole herd of cows, but did not see the man approaching from the town.' In a similar rare moment, Thoreau

acknowledges in this mysterious passage of pure longing all things loved and lost and never to be found again:

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travelers I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who had heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.

Thoreau and his family were active in the Underground Railroad. In addition to lecturing against slavery, speaking out on behalf of the radical abolitionist John Brown, with whom he once had lunch, and even helping one of Brown's men to escape to Canada, Thoreau himself hid fugitive slaves and helped them on to safety, as in Edward Emerson's relation of a story told by Moncure D. Conway, a 'brave young Virginian preacher' who lived near the Thoreaus 'when a hunted slave came to the village by night to the home of that family':

When I went [there] next morning, I found them all in a state of excitement by reason of the arrival of a fugitive negro from the South, who had come fainting to their door about daybreak and thrown himself upon their mercy [...] I sat and watched the singularly tender and lowly devotion of the scholar to the slave. He must be fed, his swollen feet bathed, and he must think of nothing but rest: again and again this coolest and calmest of men drew near to the trembling negro, and soothed him and bade him feel at home, and have no fear that any power should again wrong him. Thoreau could not walk with me that day, as had been agreed, but must mount guard over the fugitive, for slave-hunters were not extinct in those days, and so I went away, after a while, much impressed by many little traits that I had seen as they appeared in this emergency.

Thoreau tenderly nursed through their dying days not only his brother John, but also his father, and he was on fond terms with all the natural world. He played water tag with a loon, shared his table with a mouse ('when at last I held still a piece of cheese between my thumb and finger, it came and nibbled it, sitting in my hand'), and let the birds flit through his cabin. He 'grieved' for fallen trees and looked 'at his woodpile with a kind of affection.' Thoreau would

have been a remarkable man had he never picked up a pen at all. But, of course, he did.

In a review of *Walden* written for *Westminster Review* in 1856, George Eliot, whose own life and thought persistently outpaced the village mentality in its slow progress along the beaten path, hails a fellow outlaw sensibility from the woods of the New World, praising Thoreau's 'energetic, yet calm spirit of innovation, that practical as well as theoretic independence of formulae, which is peculiar to some of the finer American minds.' In particular, she notes that his 'observations of natural phenomena are not only made by a keen eye, but have their interest enhanced by passing through the medium of a deep poetic sensibility.'

Given Eliot's uncommon gifts and the isolation she experienced as a woman in unorthodox relation to family and society, she might well have felt a kinship with this refined yet very free man, living remote from the daily ebb and flow, segregated from normalcy by the implacable authenticities of genius. Both worked on in the wilderness of the self with optimism and devotion, and, far from abandoning those who could not keep pace, were magnanimous enough in spirit to send back eloquent and encouraging dispatches to anyone willing to read and be changed. Writing of Thoreau's critics, Eliot would have understood only too well the tyranny of 'People – very wise in their own eyes – who would have every man's life ordered according to a particular pattern, and who are intolerant of every existence the utility of which is not palpable to them.'

In the brief space of a one-paragraph review, she puts her finger on perhaps the most essential aspect of Thoreau's considerable literary endowment: his 'deep poetic sensibility.' Though he wrote verse throughout his life ('Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird, / Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight'), he was not a gifted poet. As Emerson put it, 'he no doubt wanted a lyric facility and technical skill'. But as Eliot was quick to notice, Thoreau's way of seeing, though informed by a naturalist's attentiveness, was essentially that of the poet (lyrical, metaphorical, in love with the particulars that lead us deeper into meaning). If he was a mere rhymester when he turned his attentions to versifying, he was, paradoxically, the truest poet when he turned to prose, as in this almost heroically compressed but electric description not only of a rainbow's discrete loveliness but the ecstatic quality of its penetration of his soul, and of beauty's power to transform or even unhinge the life open enough to receive it:

Once it chanced that I stood in the very abutment of a rainbow's arch, which filled the lower stratum of the

atmosphere, tinging the grass and leaves around, and dazzling me as if I looked through colored crystal. It was a lake of rainbow light, in which, for a short while, I lived like a dolphin. If it had lasted longer it might have tinged my employments and life.

Who has ever watched a dolphin, so at home in the water, without envying the sheer freedom and belonging of its movements and receiving from the oneness of animal and element an overpowering sense of the two-legged clumsiness, the partial commitment with which human beings embrace or flee their fates? Yet the experience also evokes an immediate, joyful entry into the greater miracle (however you describe it to yourself) that engenders it. And it is this stepping out of our awkwardness and into our joy, regardless of what occasions it, that the generous Thoreau – often at one remove from his fellow man, but at home on his own in that other, wilder kind of belonging – wants for us all.

Thoreau's work is a hymn to interconnectedness. Consider how the following passage begins in his detailed notation of the world before him, then spirals down deeper into economics and the human cost of the (to him) inexplicable bad bargains we humans make, penetrating finally to an utterly strange and disturbing bedrock image of the taming of the American West that suddenly pulls the pain of all human progress from the very grass beneath your feet:

I went a-graping to the river meadows, and loaded myself with clusters more precious for their beauty and fragrance than for food. There, too, I admired, though I did not gather, the cranberries, small waxen gems, pendants of the meadow grass, pearly and red, which the farmer plucks with an ugly rake, leaving the smooth meadow in a snarl, heedlessly measuring them by the bushel and the dollar only, and sells the spoils of the meads to Boston and New York; destined to be jammed, to satisfy the tastes of lovers of Nature there. So butchers rake the tongues of bison out of the prairie grass, regardless of the torn and drooping plant.

The plant's fate symbolizes the soullessness of economic necessity, the decline of the indigenous way of life, the demise of the West and (worse yet, in Thoreau's mind) the loss of wildness itself, and yet his scrupulous descriptions of natural phenomena and his fearless exploration of the higher reaches of human thought are filtered always through one man's days, and thus create the possibility of connection

to the struggles of every human life. He wrote that 'If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them,' and in a true sense, this describes his contribution to Transcendentalism. That with a poet's impassioned perception he unites the purely natural and the purely philosophical and finds occasion for their expression in the personal is what accounts for his greatness. The bison tongues are not only the tongues of bison, or the symbolic discards of human progress. Be careful what you trade for in your own life, too, he warns. What you end up with will be only what you insist upon, and what you stand to lose is always far more than you could have imagined.

William Burroughs notes that "Thoreau brings the stars as near as any writer I know of," and he was always glad to share their light. "The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles!" he writes in *Walden*, marveling at "What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment!" And this is perhaps the most useful metaphor for the relation of Thoreau to his reader: though apart in time, they yet remain connected by his words, each to the other, and both to the highest brightness discernible from earth. Look up!, he counsels. Among the stars, you will recognize your own true life. As he did with the strangers who were welcome to his unlocked cabin even when he was not at home, Thoreau, the 'hermit,' though dead now almost a century and a half, is still sharing Walden Pond, is still making new friends, as can be seen in these messages left for him on a website containing a photograph of his original gravestone, marked simply, as if there could be no other, HENRY:

- Hey Henry, I saw you the other day. I sat beside you and arranged the flowers.
- HOPE TO WALK WITH YOU IN WALDEN WOODS SOMEDAY R.I.P.
- I sometimes 'step to a different drummer, the music which I hear'
- Thank you for everything, Beloved Henry.
- I HOPE YOU FOUND PEACE