

“Morning”

The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. The Vedas say “all intelligences awake with the morning. We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of men and women to elevate their lives by a conscious endeavour. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful. But it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do.

Sermon

“In sane moments,” says Thoreau, “we regard only the facts. Any truth is better than make-believe. Tom Hyde, the tinker, standing on the gallows, was asked if he had anything to say. ‘Tell the tailors, said, he, ‘to remember to make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch.’ His companion’s prayer is forgotten.”

It was to find the truth of his own life, however exalted or mundane, that a young Henry David Thoreau began to build a cabin in the spring of 1845 on the shores of Walden Pond, using a borrowed axe to hew white pine for the framing along with a few cast off boards and old bricks that together brought the cost of the enterprise to something over \$28. “There is some of the same fitness in a man building his own house that there is in a bird’s building it’s own nest,” he remarks. And if we were all so self-sufficient and usefully engaged, like the birds, then our toil would be no trouble and we too might sing as we go about our work.

Emerson, Alcott, Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller made for fabulous company, but of the various poets and writers who later lived in Concord, Thoreau was the only one born there. His father was a not-quite-successful storekeeper, and his mother worked by taking boarders into the home to increase the family income. There were four children altogether. It was not easy to buy a piano for the two girls, and even harder to scrimp for tuition to send Henry to Harvard College, but his parents wished their children to have whatever learning New England could offer. While fond of reading, their son turned out to be only a middling scholar,

perhaps because he was already bent on pursuing his own genius rather than following the course mapped out by his professors.

When he looked at the village where he grew up, Thoreau saw men and women mortgaged to dreams and ambitions that were not truly their own. "I have traveled a good deal in Concord," he said, "and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways." Their work seemed tedious and left little time for leisure or contemplation. Thoreau asked if life had to be so hard. Though he was sometimes a schoolteacher, occasionally a handyman, and did odd jobs of surveys for his neighbors, he never did settle into any permanent vocation. "As long as possible," he recommended, "live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail." "For myself," he said, "I found that the occupation of day-laborer was the most independent of any, especially as it required only thirty or forty days a year to support one. It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do."

He was the first apostle of simple living, the originator of the tiny house before tiny was cool. "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone," still useful advice for our wired, push button world. "Let your affairs be as two or three and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail."

He was in love once, but never married or had children, perhaps just as well, for though he delighted in the company of youngsters, parenting is hardly a recipe for simplifying your affairs, while sex and sensuality were foreign lands for Thoreau, probably unexplored. "Chastity," he declared, "is the flowering of man." A vegetarian and teetotaler, Thoreau prized the ideal of a pure body--the temple of the divine--as much as a pure heart and mind.

Maintaining moral purity put him in conflict with his neighbors and the law. "I have paid no poll tax for six years," as he explained in his essay on *Civil Disobedience*, a protest against funding the Mexican War that extended slavery into Texas. "I was put into jail once on this account for one night." The exchange where Emerson asked his friend what he was doing in there, countered with a reply "what are you doing *out there*?" is probably apocryphal. But when Thoreau said that "a man who is right is a majority of one" he was in full earnest. Unjust laws for him had no moral authority, and his life and writings, including a

defense of John Brown that compared the rebel's hanging to the martyrdom of Christ, would inspire later generations of activists from Gandhi to King.

Yet it is *Walden* for which Thoreau is best known and will be remembered, a book where bean fields and gardening tips grow naturally into ruminations on political economy, where meteorological data on melting ice are adorned with learned allusions to Virgil and the Bhagavad-Gita, where the most transcendent spiritual philosophy always seems to cross the path of a meandering muskrat or (as he calls these river dwelling rodents) mushquash. Some consider it the Bible of the modern environmental movement: not just a critique of the excesses of industrialism and overconsumption, but a sustained hymn to the necessity of wilderness. "Hope," Thoreau proclaimed, "comes from the swamps." Yet the pond where took refuge for two years, moving into his lakeside shanty on Independence Day, was hardly uncivilized. Famously, he was close enough to enjoy his mom's pie and take home laundry as needed. But he never pretended to be roughing it. The comfort and pleasure of his surroundings received far more ink than their ruggedness or austerity. "The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale," he confessed, "and though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore; yet this pond is so remarkable for its depth and purity as to merit a particular description. It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by clouds and evaporation."

The pond for him was a window into the ultimate, into being itself. "A lake," he exclaims, "is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature." Walden was not just a body of water but also a state of mind and a way of encountering reality directly and without impediments, enabling him to see that "heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads."

In a chapter called "Reading," he notes that "people sometimes speak as if the study of the classics would at length make way for more modern and practical studies [STEM we would say today]; but the adventurous student will always study classics, in whatever language they may be written and however ancient they may be. For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of humankind? We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old. To read well, that is, to read a true book in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that

will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem.”

Walden is one of those books which deserves to be called a classic. It is a true book, and to read it in a true spirit means asking ourselves how to live more vitally and intentionally in a world where we're always tempted to settle. To revisit *Walden* is to wonder if we cannot find some quiet pool of clarity and freshness within ourselves.

Thanks to his alternative lifestyle--rarely eating woodchuck, plenty of outdoor exercise, no smoking or booze--Thoreau was a picture of good health. His friends marveled at his fitness and stamina. He could walk thirty miles at a stretch, run up mountains, easily getting in his ten thousand steps before noon. But he also had tuberculosis, the disease that in those days killed whole families and claimed his own grandfather and older sister. It cut short Henry David's life at the age of 45. As he lay near death, a friend is said to have asked him if he had made his peace with God. "I wasn't aware," Thoreau responded, "that the two of us had ever quarreled."

Readings

"Economy" 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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear, nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it

"Solitude" I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house. Men frequently say to me, "I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially." I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself. I am no more lonely than a dandelion in a pasture, or a bean leaf, or sorrel,

or a horse-fly, or a humble-bee. I am no more lonely than the Mill Brook, or a weathercock, or the north star, or the south wind, or an April shower, or a January thaw, or the first spider in a new house. Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?

“The Village” One afternoon, near the end of the first summer, when I went to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler’s, I was seized and put into jail, because I did not pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women, and children like cattle at the door of its senate-house. I had gone down to the woods for other purposes. But wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their desperate odd-fellow society. It is true, I might have resisted forcibly with more or less effect, might have run “amok” against society; but I preferred that society should run “amok” against me, it being the desperate party. However, I was released the next day, obtained my mended shoe, and returned to the woods in season to get my dinner of huckle-berries on Fair-Haven hill. I was never molested by any person but those who represented the state. I had no lock nor bolt but for the desk which held my papers, not even a nail to put over my latch or windows. And yet my house was more respected than if it had been surrounded by a file or soldiers. I am convinced that if all men were to live as simply as I then did, thieving and robbery would be unknown.

“Higher Laws” Our village would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wilderness - to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that 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 unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature.

“Conclusions” I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advanced confidently in the direction of his dreams, and

endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundaries; new, universal and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them.

Closing Words

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry -- determined to make a day of it.