

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*

I'd like to start with an exchange I had with my son Peter a couple of weeks ago. We had just had some windows put in one of our bedrooms, and Pete volunteered to help me paint them. So while we driving to Home Depot to get the paint and brushes, he asks me what else I've been up to this summer. I tell him that I'm involved with this First Year Reading Initiative. And that the book we're doing is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, and I'm supposed to present it to the incoming freshmen. Pete hadn't read the book, so I told him it was about a guy who decides to pack it up and unplug from his hometown of Concord and go out in the woods near Walden Pond. He builds a cabin himself and grows some beans to break even over the next two years and two months, while he thinks about things—what he values, what he thinks of people and attitudes, what he really wants to do with his life. And then he comes back into town. That's it.

And then Peter says, "*Well, good luck,*" in that peculiar tone he reserves for me when he sees his father about to drive off yet another cliff. I said, "What's the matter with that?" And he says, "Don't you understand what's going on in the mind of entering freshmen? They're coming into a new place; they don't know anybody; they probably haven't made any friends yet, and they're under tremendous peer pressure—they don't want to unplug; they want to *connect*." I should explain that Peter just graduated from IC last year, and he was a sociology major, so he really uses phrases like "peer pressure" in ordinary conversation. So I say, "But there may be some ways that these incoming

students, like Thoreau, have unplugged from their lives in high school, from their hometown and high school friends, and, whether they like it or not, now have four years to think about what it is they are going to do *after* Ithaca College, after they leave here and go back out to wherever they are going to go.” So Peter—who is always willing to concede a point but never a position—says, “Well, OK, but you should keep in mind what’s going on in *their* heads as well as what’s going in yours.” And I said, “Now Pete, *that* is good advice.”

So why Thoreau? And why *Walden*? As you probably know, people usually react to *Walden* in two very different ways. One way is to see him as the cranky misanthrope who thinks ordinary people are completely deluded and that people should really cut down on what they spend and what they wear and what they eat (that’s the “simplify, simplify” message). One contemporary of Thoreau said he thought Thoreau wanted everyone to live like woodchucks, and he wasn’t about to give up his dinner parties for Thoreau’s version of the exemplary life. If you have been following the webpage exchange we’ve had up for the last week or two, you’ve seen that several of you see him as an elitist, especially when he goes on about reading classical literature in the original languages. One of you even called him a prick for his attitude about the poor and philanthropy. Usually this cranky part is concentrated toward the beginning of the book, and his famous one-liner, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” sums up his criticism: most people are unhappy with their lives, even if they don’t say anything about it out loud.

On the other hand, the other way of looking at Thoreau in this book is to see him as an inspirational idealist, the guy who confidently tells us the value of self-examination, and urges us to take hold of our own lives, to open ourselves up to the world around us, to discover our deepest values, and to direct our lives accordingly. When people think about Thoreau in this way, they usually remember some of the great lines toward the end of the book: “No matter how mean your life is, meet it and live it” or “I learned this, at least, by my experience; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with success unexpected in common hours” or maybe the most famous passage in the book “Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? 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 he hears, however measured or far away.” Now you can of course feel both of these ways about Thoreau at the same time, and what I like about the comments that several of you posted is that, even if you didn’t like some parts of *Walden*, there were other parts that seemed provocative and interesting.

By the way, in the history of this book, most of the people who really like *Walden* read it before they are 25 years old, and most of the people who don’t like it at all read it later in life. Part of the reason for this may be the way Thoreau lambasts the conventional wisdom that insists everyone has to follow expected patterns of behavior and belief, a position that might be more appealing to someone who has not yet settled into a groove.

As I said, it seems at the beginning of the book Thoreau has one kind of attitude, and by the end a very different one, but, if you look closely enough, you can find both of

them intertwined in the middle sections when he talks about his stay in the woods, especially in his descriptions of Walden Pond in autumn, in winter, and finally in spring. One of the ways we might be able to reconcile, or at least understand better, these very different tones or attitudes or stances found in Walden is to place the book into the circumstances of Henry David Thoreau's life. Remember this is someone just eight years out of college, someone who, the week before his 28th birthday, decides to take off and live by Walden Pond. His background is pretty hardscrabble: his father was an unsuccessful businessman who had a hard time collecting on the credit he extended to his clients and customers. The father's one marginally successful enterprise was a pencil factory he set up in a shed behind his house, a factory where Henry had to work to make ends meet when he couldn't make it doing anything else.

And this is the thing that makes Thoreau interesting to me. Between the time he graduated college in 1837 and the time he goes off to Walden Pond in 1845, his life or career was one of intermittent failure. What follows Thoreau's graduation from college, at least in career choices, is one disaster after another. The most famous of them was his first job teaching in the Concord public schools. He was only there a few weeks when a member of the School Committee heard that Thoreau did not apply corporal punishment in his teaching, that is, he didn't hit the students in order to get them to learn. He came to Thoreau's class to register his disapproval, and Thoreau's response provides some insight into his strident form of idealism: he chooses six students at random from the class, whacks them with the cane, and then hands in his resignation. On the one hand, he wanted to demonstrate that his refraining from caning the students was not out of faintheartedness—he was no wuss--; on the other hand, he would not allow anyone to

interfere with his teaching. (As I said to the other facilitators over the summer, you wonder how Thoreau would make out in the tenure process at IC.)

He was out of work for about a year, and then decided to try something with his older brother John. They started their own school and it was going along well for a while. In fact, it was at this time Thoreau and John took a boating trip between school terms up along the Concord and Merrimac rivers, and it was something of a great vacation lark. [And I should say something here about Thoreau's brother John—he was two years older than Henry, and apparently everyone's real favorite. He was a warm and gregarious guy; the students at the school loved him, and Henry himself hero-worshipped him. It was clear the Thoreau family only had enough money to send one of their boys to college, and so it was a bit unusual that Henry the younger one got to instead of John the older. One way or the other, it seemed that the two Thoreau brothers' destinies were intertwined. As it turns out, they even proposed marriage to—and were turned down by—the same woman.]

In any event, this collective effort at education also failed. They had to close the school after a year due to John's poor health (TB runs in the family, and Thoreau would die of the disease at age 44). It was at this time Thoreau gets invited into Ralph Waldo Emerson's house as a kind of jack-of-all-trades handyman for the next two years.

But then something happens that I think is key in understanding Thoreau. In January 1842 John, as a result of a small nick from his shaving razor, contracted lockjaw—tetanus—and, after a week of awful pain and degeneration during which Thoreau was his constant nurse, John died in his brother's arms. One indication of the depth of the shock to Thoreau is that he himself began immediately to display symptoms

of lockjaw, and his family thought that he was going to die too. He did recover, though it took a full month's convalescence back at his parents' house, and in retrospect Thoreau's illness seems a classic case of a psychosomatic reaction to John's death.

Thoreau wanted to be a writer, but because he had so little time for writing, the desire to commemorate and memorialize that excursion along the Concord and Merrimac rivers with John became more compelling. He was now back working full time at his father's pencil factory, a job which generated some cash, but gave him just about no time for his interior life [he summed up the entire year in an autobiographical reprise in four words: "Made pencils in 1844"]. He needed to find a way to create a space and an opportunity to think through—and find some way to affirm—what had been surely the most important relationship in his life. In addition, that spring while building a fire to cook some fish he and a friend had caught, some sparks leapt to the dry grass surrounding the campsite, and the result was a 300-acre blaze destroying a good bit of forest and farmland. If anything, by the time Thoreau decided to take up residence at Walden he was best known to the town citizens not as an aspiring writer and intellectual of great promise, but as the guy who burnt down the Concord woods—in short, the local slacker and screw-up.

I'm providing all this biographical context because there's a sentence in the opening chapter which I think we should keep in mind while reading through and reacting to this book. Thoreau says, in the long riff he has about clothes, "Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives" (21). Like the snake shedding its skin or the bird shedding its feathers, we should understand the turning points in our

lives as a crisis: something really intense, something possibly dangerous, in any event something very important. Interestingly enough, the first definition of the word “crisis” in the Oxford English Dictionary is a medical one: “The point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death; the turning-point of a disease for better or worse.” Could Thoreau be consciously—or subconsciously—thinking back to the trauma of his brother’s death, one which he psychically repeated before his own recovery?

Most of the time, though, when people read *Walden*, they don’t hear that sense of personal crisis, personal moulting, in Thoreau’s voice. Instead, they hear that confident, strident, and frequently scolding tone at the opening of the book telling people to wake up and live. If anything, when Thoreau gets around to talking about his personal life, he gets weirdly allegorical (that passage on “I lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove” is the most notorious example). But I think there are places where this other voice breaks through, in unexpected ways and in unexpected language.

At the end of the long “Economy” chapter which opens the book, Thoreau retells a parable from Persian literature, and it’s worth quoting the whole paragraph (it’s on page 73, if you want to follow):

I read in the *Gulistan*, or *Flower Garden*, of Sheik Sadi of Shiraz, that “They asked a wise man, saying, Of the many celebrated trees which the Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous, they call none *azad*, or free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is there in this? He replied: Each has its appropriate produce, and appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of this nature

are the azads, or religious independents.—Fix not thy heart on that which is transitory; for the Dijlah, or Tigris, will continue to flow on through Bagdad after the race of the caliphs is extinct: if thy hand has plenty, be liberal as the date tree; but if it affords nothing to give away; be an azad, or free man, like the cypress.’

From one perspective, this is a haunting evocation of a life of renunciation; a willingness to transform a life of bare bones impoverishment into ecstatic self-denial. But from another, and more personal understanding of Thoreau’s circumstances, I hear a great sadness in this passage, a sense of elegiac loss—and not just for his brother—which Thoreau wishes deliberately to transform into philosophical consolation.

What follows after this passage are the sixteen chapters in which Thoreau recounts his personal “experiment,” as he calls it, in the woods. I’m not going to go through all the details of what he says and does, though I should point out that he was out at the pond for two years, two months, and two days, starting appropriately enough on Independence Day, July 4. But instead of telling us what happened during all that time, he compresses his experiment into a single year, so that he can end his story in the season of spring, which he does. When the earth and the pond come back to life, so does Henry David Thoreau, and so by implication should the rest of us.

But what I would like to call attention to is the way Thoreau thinks and relates his experience while he’s out there. A number of readers get frustrated with what they see as Thoreau’s contradictions or his digressions because he seems to wander from topic to topic (one of you called it “a series of rambles”). Probably the most flagrant example of this occurs in the chapters on “Solitude” and “Visitors.” In “Solitude” he says:

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time.
To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and
dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that
was so companionable as solitude. (128)

And then—four pages later (!)—at the opening of the chapter on “Visitors”:

I think I love society as much as most, and am ready enough
to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-
blooded man that comes in my way. I am naturally no hermit,
but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room,
if my business called me thither. (132)

What I'd like to suggest is that Thoreau is doing this on purpose. Each time he explores one aspect of his life at the pond, it seems almost inevitable that the next chapter will explore some antithetical, or apparently contradictory, aspect of the same experience. It's what I call zigzagging toward illumination, which I hope you'll see is not the same as flipflopping. I picked this term up from Emerson's "Self-Reliance," the same place Thoreau may have picked up this way of thinking. Here's Emerson's image about the voyage of thinking:

The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency.

When Thoreau thinks about and through any subject, it seems, he wants to think about it from a number of points of view, without starting off with some preconceived notion, and without worrying about some kind of rigid consistency. Instead of thinking in terms of

exclusionary terms—it's *either* this *or* it's that, he thinks in terms of inclusiveness—it's *both* this *and* that. In this sense, zigzagging is the opposite of flip-flopping. In a more civil world of political discourse, we might call this openmindedness.

But following this kind of thinking in *Walden* requires close attention. What happens too frequently is that readers of *Walden* will latch to one aspect or stance of Thoreau and simply forget about the other. This inattentiveness more than anything else is why I think people who would ordinarily be seen as polar opposites have no trouble quoting *Walden* to support their position. For example, Thoreau says, when recalling his youth when he, along with every New England boy between the ages of ten and fourteen, used to go hunting and fishing: “The hunter is the greatest friend of the animals hunted, not excepting the Humane Society.” It's easy to imagine the NRA quoting that line to stick a thumb in the eye of the PETA people.

But then he goes on, a page or two later, to say “no humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature, which holds life by the same tenure that he does.” And even further, that anyone with an imagination must, sooner or later, become a vegetarian, and finally, “I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other.” But just in case there's someone out there—like that guy on the School Committee—who thinks Thoreau is being fainthearted in his dietary choices, he throws in a typically Thoreauvian aside, “Yet, for my part, I was never unusually squeamish; I could sometimes eat a fried rat with a good relish, if it were necessary.”

Thoreau follows this kind of zigzag exploration through the autumn and the winter and finally arrives in spring. While he's there he debunks the myth that Walden Pond is bottomless; he measures it with a plumb and string and discovers it's 102 feet deep. But he also discovers that there are things about Walden which he will never be able to pin down: the color of the water, for example, is wonderfully blue or green from exactly the same vantage point, and that will forever be a part of the pond's mystery. But somehow, when he witnesses the regeneration of life in the pond and the wonderful shapes that thawing sand takes along a railroad bank, he feels a deep sense of restoration and what he calls "recovered innocence." He's not sure how this has happened: he says he feels as if a question was put to him while he was sleeping and he awakes to an answered question. But what he is sure is that something very positive has happened to him, and that what happened to him can happen to anyone else. But one thing Thoreau is very careful about—and this is something else that people frequently forget—he has no intention of recommending his retreat into the woods to anyone else.

I would not have anyone adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another one for myself, I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.

What he *does* recommend and encourage in this final chapter is a very practical version of self-reliance and self-confidence, one that, if followed, can and should lead to "a success unexpected in common hours." But we should also keep in mind that the encouragement is as much directed at Thoreau himself as at his presumed audience of

poor students. Those ringing phrases that permeate the final chapter (“Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away” or “Let us not play at kittlybenders [that’s the game of running across thin ice, by the way]; there is a solid bottom everywhere.”) are a call for the reader or auditor to join in this action with the speaker.

Just as Thoreau ends “Economy” with a parable from Persian literature, he here places, just before the end of the conclusion, a parable supposedly drawn from Indian literature, but in fact one made up by Thoreau himself. He tells of an artist from the ancient city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive after perfection. Once this artist decides to make a staff, he realizes that he shouldn’t allow time to be an element in his work, since in an imperfect work time is an ingredient. And so he sets about finding the perfect stick in the forest, which takes many years, and whittling the stick to perfection, which takes many ages, and finally placing the ferule and precious jewels on the staff which, in this parable, takes billions of years. But in the end, what seemed to be so long a period of time miraculously turns out to be but “a single scintillation [a flash or a spark] from the brain of Brahma.” Needless to say, the perfect staff is a handy stand-in for the book Thoreau himself has just written, and the parable itself becomes an exhortation for Thoreau to persist in his vocation of writing even if it means turning away from conventional or material forms of recognition or accomplishment in favor of a kind of “success unexpected in common hours.”

But Thoreau’s personal parable has its moral for the readers of *Walden* as well. Even if you are not a musician or an artist or a writer, there is another, more personal way in which each of us is an artist and has—or should have—an artistic goal. The great work of art, it turns out, is to shape the meaning of our own lives. And there is a specific

parallel to be drawn between Thoreau's time away from the conventional social and economic distractions of Concord and the time a college student has to consider his or her own talents and interests. You have four years during the transition from the dependency of home and family to the independence of a self-sustaining life and vocation. Four years to think through all that you had been taught to accept before you arrived on this campus, four years to explore what you really want and value, four years to take yourself seriously.

The dark side of that moral, of course, is what may happen if we don't take up that challenge and that goal, what may happen when we play at kittlybenders. While there have been many readers who don't like the tone or the extremity of *Walden*, no one, interestingly enough, has challenged his observation about the mass of men living lives of quiet desperation. What was true back in the 1840's is just as true in the twentieth-first century. If you let life happen to you rather than giving it some active thought and work, you may well end up as one of those persons who, five or ten or fifteen years out of college, sit bolt upright in the middle of the night realizing that you are in a job or a life that makes you unhappy, that you too have, just by going with the flow, become one of quiet desperation people.

These four years are the opportune time to start this exploration, to give some real thought to what constitutes your own "solid bottom." In that sense, the conclusion to this book is as much a beginning as an end, a takeoff point for the rest of our lives. So just as Thoreau cultivated beans out there by Walden Pond, you should cultivate your curiosity here at Ithaca College. Follow your own zigzag interests and intuitions. Take that course in jazz or astronomy or photography or poetry. Meet somebody who doesn't look like

you, who doesn't *think* like you. There's a lot here at Ithaca College, but you have to, as Thoreau says, "meet it and live it." The other thing to keep in mind is that this exploration cannot and should not be finished in college. The voyage of a hundred tacks just starts here. It took the artist that Thoreau imagines in Kooroo all the time he had available to finish his perfect staff; so too it will take exactly one lifetime to craft the deep and final meaning of our lives. Let's get started.

Kevin Murphy
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