White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

A Fond Farewell to Walden

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FIRST READING

The first reading is from Henry David Thoreau, from an entry in his journal in 1857.

I come to my solitary woodland walk as the homesick go home. I thus dispose of the superfluous and see things as they are, grand and beautiful. I have told many that I walk every day about half the daylight, but I think they do not believe it. I wish to get the Concord, the Massachusetts, the America, out of my head and be sane a part of every day. I wish to know something; I wish to be made better; I wish to forget, a considerable part of every day, all mean, narrow and trivial [people], and therefore I come out to these solitudes, where the problem of existence is simplified. I get away a mile or two from the town into the stillness and solitude of nature, with rocks, trees, weeds, snow about me. I enter some glade in the woods, perchance, where a few weeds and dry leaves alone lift themselves above the surface of the snow, and it is as if I had come to an open window. It is as if I always met in those places some grand, serene, immortal, infinitely encouraging, though invisible, companion, and walked with him.
I come to myself, I once more feel myself grandly related, and I feel that cold and solitude are friends of mine. I suppose that this value, in my case, is equivalent to what others get by churchgoing and prayer.

SECOND READING

The second reading is from Thoreau's essay, Civil Disobedience."

If injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go. … If it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

THIRD READING

from the Journal, 1851

Now I yearn for one of those old, meandering, dry, uninhabited roads, which lead away from towns, which lead us away from temptation, which conduct to the outside of the earth, over its uppermost crust; where you may forget in what country you are traveling; where no farmer can complain that you are treading down his grass, no gentleman who has recently constructed a seat in the country that you are trespassing; along which you may travel like a pilgrim, going no-whither; where travelers are not too often to be met; where my spirit is free…
There I have freedom in my thought, and in my soul am free.

A Fond Farewell to Walden

A story is told about Henry David Thoreau, dying from tuberculosis in 1862. He was visited on his deathbed by Parker Pillsbury, "an old abolitionist warhorse, a former minister who had left his church over the slavery issue, a man of principle and proven courage, an old family friend… ," who could not, apparently, resist this close a glimpse of the afterlife.

You seem so near the brink of the dark river," Pillsbury said, "that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you." Thoreau's answer summed up his life. "One world at a time," he said. [In Robert Richardson's Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind]

One world of loveliness and sorrows,

one world of empirical, observable natural wonders and of mysteries;
one world of snowstorms and loons (and everything that Thoreau admired);
one world to contemplate in solitude and to act upon in public with outrage and conviction;
one world of human cruelty, human folly, human greed and ignorance;
one world of grasses and water and endless sky;
one lifetime and one earth to which it seems we are never quite enough present, alive, awakened, woke:

one world seemed like just about enough to Henry Thoreau as he lay dying at the age of 44, and it was enough while he lived.

But in 1862, as sometimes now in certain corners, reliance on and reverence for this one life and this one world, this life on earth, was not quite theologically fashionable; the anticipation of an afterlife was too appealing, the temptation to dismiss this veil of tears too easy. The holiness of swamps and caddis flies, white pine, and the holiness of human imperfection was not yet quite acknowledged as sufficient, and the transcendentalist ethic of integrity and intersection (one's own existence interlaced with everybody else's and interlaced with everything, the synthesis of mind, heart, spirit, action) had not quite yet taken hold. "One world at a time" was a shocking thing to say, especially as one prepared to leave it, and it was (and for some remains) a shocking way to live.

No life but this life, no world but this one, no holiness or hell but what we know right here. That kind of theology imposes on a person a certain kind of lived religion. We think of Thoreau as an eccentric and a recluse, nobly withdrawing to purity and seclusion in his hermitage at Walden Pond. But that was a two-year exercise, during which, with regularity, he walked out to have his laundry done *by his mother*, and he walked out for dinners with friends, and he invited people in, a steady stream of visitors. He was eccentrically, off-centeredly, emphatically engaged, not a recluse: actively, intellectually, morally, physically touching and touched by the world. And the fact is that he championed and is best remembered for a kind of rugged individualism that even he could never live by. He wrote famously about "marching to a different drummer," which each of us must in some way do, finding our own footing, finding our own voice, but he was also marching in a band.

July 12 was Thoreau's 200th birthday. I'm thinking about our relationship, as 21st century Unitarian Universalists, to this different drummer who boasted once of having "traveled widely in Concord," Massachusetts, and almost no where else, but whose work transcended geography and time, shaping the moral imagination of Tolstoy, Gandhi, Dr. King profoundly. He was a mystic, a philosopher, naturalist, war resistor, tax resistor, abolitionist and conductor on the underground railroad, defying the Fugitive Slave Law, a vicious assault on human dignity which could have been drafted by our current President. He hated the lethal threat that law posed not only to individual lives – Black lives – but also the lethal threat it posed to the conscience of white law-abiding citizens. It implicated everyone in evil. You were mandated, north and south, to report any suspicion, any sign, of a runaway slave. If you saw something, you had to say something. To harbor, feed, help, provide any kind of sanctuary meant prison or a fine of $1000 – an astronomical amount. There was no way to be law-abiding and also be good. Thoreau coined the phrase "civil disobedience," and practiced it, but though we associate it now with non-violence (Gandhi's *satyagraha*, King's soul-force), Thoreau was notorious in his own time and derided for his defense of John Brown, who had taken up arms against slave-holders and was hanged by the state as a terrorist. We remember Thoreau now for his call to material simplicity, but he was complicated. By most accounts, he was anti-social, awkward, arrogant, self-absorbed, strange, at once ferocious and gentle, quiet and noisy. His grave at Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery is marked by a small, plain brick that simply says, "Henry," out of the way and off to the side, but the path to it is well-worn, often crowded, littered with pinecones, feathers, prayer beads, poems, tokens, talismans, and flowers left by pilgrims from all over the world. His legacy is claimed by Unitarians, libertarians, climate activists, contemplatives, new age healers, veterans of the civil rights movement, and by most high school English teachers- including my father, who hoped all his life that his three children would memorize, as he had, long chapters from *Walden*, the way other kids memorize scripture. None of us did, though I did choose *Walden* for my senior translation project as a French major in college. My professor was patient and unimpressed. She said the words could translate mechanically if I were determined to do it, but the spirit blowing through the pages would remain elusive. *It is utterly American*, she said. She was right.

In 1861, a year before his death, Thoreau made his first and only visit to Minnesota. The territory had achieved official statehood just three years prior, and was still held by those out east to be, if not the "far" west, then plenty far enough, and wild. Thoreau came on the advice of his physician, who recommended a change of climate to heal his lungs. The "prairie cure" was all the rage in the middle of the 19th century - hundreds of people came out on the brand-new railroad wrapped in blankets, full of hope and ignorance about tuberculosis, coughing blood and breathing more infection all the way. Thoreau travelled by rail and river, up the Mississippi past La Crosse, Winona, Wabasha (these exotic places), past Lake Pepin and Red Wing into St. Paul, and then went further west by carriage, then on horseback, then on foot. It was the farthest he would ever go from Concord.

He came for his health and also seeking specimens of a particular variety of wild crabapple, a tree once common but now vanished from New England, whose seeds, he believed, had been blown by wind or carried by birds hundreds of miles to the west. He wanted to see that tree and other plants and wild things no longer native to the east. And there was a deeper restlessness. In his journal there's a tiny poem:

The needles of the pine
All to the West incline.

and there is the famous passage about how the American west was another name for wilderness, and *in wildness is the preservation of the world*. Something urgent in him, something wild, was inclining toward the west; the journey was a pilgrimage.

Thoreau had an uncanny grasp of the meaning of his moment – his historical moment, what was happening to the people and the land in 1861. He wrote like a scientist, without nostalgia or sentimentality, but with steady, sad and chilling accuracy, what industrialization was going to mean, what westward expansion of white settlers and entrepreneurs would mean, to the earth, to first peoples, and to the spiritual equilibrium of the country. He wrote about the railroad and the bison and the native people and the apples with a prophetic sympathy. At one time, long before this trip, he had compiled a glossary of over 500,000 indigenous words from the peoples of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maine, because he knew the music of those languages would soon be lost. He learned those words in conversation, in one to one relationships. So near the end of his life, with the sickness already in him, he came west to Minnesota, where another life – a larger life - was also ending, infected with a different, more comprehensive soul-sickness. He stood on the threshold of the open prairie on the outskirts of what was then the village of St. Anthony, and he knew he would be among the last people of any race to see that ocean of grass; he knew it existed nowhere else on the planet. There are prairies elsewhere, but not this prairie, not this one world. One day he joined a tourist excursion at which people could buy tickets to watch Governor Ramsey make the annual payment of $20 to each “brave” at the Lower Sioux Agency on the Mississippi, and he knew the world was ending. He saw the people starving and said of the proceedings: *The Indians as usual had the advantage in point of truth and earnestness, and therefore of eloquence.* He wrote, *We survive [as individuals], in one sense, in our posterity and in the continuance of our [species], but when a race of men, of Indians, for instance, becomes extinct, is not that the end of the world for them? Suppose we were to foresee that the Saxon race to which we belong would become extinct the present winter – disappear from the face of the earth – would it not look to us like the dissolution of the world?*

And within a year, Little Crow would lead the uprising that became the Minnesota Indian war, after which the Lakota were effectively banished from the state. Thoreau could not foresee what we now know is true: that people did in fact survive - they are still here and their children are powerful - but he did comprehend the devastation and the deliberate genocide.

He was here for three weeks. He did find the lost apple. He spent many happy days, sick as he was, standing waist-deep in marshes, just looking down at stuff for hours, and wandering the forest which grew where now the streets and neighborhoods of Minneapolis are planted. (This wasn’t really very long ago.) He recorded rafts of loons on Lake Calhoun, *Mde- maka –skah*, and great mosquitoes “in a cloud so thick you can barely see through them.” His traveling companion, Horace Mann, Jr., said they were as large as pigeons (the same ones we see now)! He never saw the buffalo, but he was enchanted by prairie dogs and all the little gophers on the ground.

He didn't write about the prairie, or the great expanse of sky. One historian has said, "Minnesota and Henry Thoreau, standing face to face, found nothing to say to one another," but I don't think that's true. They were both in transition, the land and the visitor, changing, dying, transforming. They met too late for words. We do know, because witnesses recorded it, that when he spoke his last sentence, a year later, back in Concord, only two words were audible, and these were, quite distinctly, *Indian* and *Moose*.

Thoreau was raised a Unitarian but in his early twenties he resigned his membership in First Parish Concord, and would not again belong to any church with walls. He knew the Bible well, and was an early reader of Hindu scriptures. He said that a snowstorm was more real to him than Christ, more real in its radiance, more present in its power to affect him. When his Aunt asked him in his last days if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know that we had ever quarreled, Aunt."

I think this is the thing most relevant and helpful to us now, this integrity of spirit. His life as a naturalist, out in the field for days at a time, months at a time, was not escapism; it was all of a piece with his life as a writer, reporting out what he had seen, which was consistent with his life (awkward as it was) as a neighbor, an uncle, a brother and a friend, intimate, small-town relationships which had bearing on his life as an activist, a speaker, a radical reformer in a dangerously unhinged political time. This public resistance, in turn was grounded in and centered by his long hours in the woods, in the meadows, on frozen lakes and summer lakes, watching and listening to the empirical revelations of nature and the God with whom he knew he'd never quarreled. It was all one life, one world at one time.

It's tempting to try to separate the Henry David Thoreau of Walden Pond, the caricature of contemplative solitude and deliberate simplicity, the "spiritual" Thoreau, from the Henry David Thoreau of "Civil Disobedience," who went to jail rather than pay taxes to a government he could not respect nor trust for a war he despised – a caricature of action, engagement and deliberate complexity. But he was *one person*, struggling, as we are struggling now, to stay awake, stay woke, to the devastating beauty and the devastating sadness of his world, which is our same world. Jedediah Purdy, an historian at Duke, says *Thoreau was fundamentally a religious thinker, who believed it is possible to fail at living, to live a life that is no life at all. He may not have believed in quite the same soul as his puritan ancestors and neighbors but he believed his soul was at stake in relation to nature, to America and to himself. He was not sure it was possible to get these relations right.* We gave his life to trying.

For us in our age of distractions, there is something in the consistent quality of his attention to what matters, to what specifically matters:

- the bug on the leaf;
- the particular lost apple;
- the peculiar sound, the music, made by corn growing on summer night;
- the precise number of nails and boards and cups and chairs and shirts, and pounds of coffee and flour and salt a person actually requires in a year;
- the line (which is a moral line, and an aesthetic line, and a political line) between need and desire.

These are the details, the significant details of which our world (physical word, spiritual world) is made, and when we fail to notice them and name them, the world can come apart. He gave these things a certain quality of attention, despite multiple distractions (just like we have) and the same focus he brought to the marsh or the apple or the weather he brought to the social ecology. He looked deeply, chose to look deeply, into all laws and customs, the patterns and details politely designed to preserve propriety, civility, the rule of law and a robust economy, at the expense of black bodies, red nations, green prairies and the conscience of every complicit citizen. He focused his attention, his heart, his passion and compassion, on all the significant details.

Jedediah Purdy writes: *Henry Thoreau was a genuine American weirdo. He did not believe in niceness, or even civility, but in justice. He believed his soul was at stake in it, even though he was not sure his true self was part of this world at all. Most of us move, like him, between engagement and detachment, between feeling the justice and wrongs of our communities as our own, and becoming insensate to them. Thoreau is no model, but he is a useful and difficult conversation partner across the centuries, a difficult friend as he was a difficult citizen. He did not solve any of our problems, but he felt their extreme poles so acutely that he still casts his broken shaft of light on them today.*

It's not practical now, nor even conscionable, to take him literally, to renounce the world and run off to handmade cabins in the wilderness. That kind of real estate reeks of privilege and does tremendous harm – though it *is* good to go outside.

It's not useful now, nor even moral, to adopt the righteous individualism that Thoreau and all his Unitarian friends so cherished. Our understanding of nobility has evolved and for now we know our only strength, our survival, our sanity, is in community, collaboration, intersection and interconnection. It is good, though, to know your own heart. We can still read *Walden*, even memorize the chapters, translate them into our own clumsy modern language, but we can't live there, any more than Henry Thoreau could. "One world at a time," and it's this messy, messed up world, and we're all in it together.

Bill McKibben, climate activist and writer, has written the Introduction to a new edition of *Walden*, brought out for Henry's bicentennial. McKibben writes:

He posed the two practical questions that must come to dominate this age: How much is enough? and How do I know what I want? He was an American avatar in a long line that stretches back at least to Buddha, the line that runs straight through Jesus and St. Francis and a hundred other cranks and gurus. Simplicity, calmness, quiet—these were the preconditions for a moral life, a true life, a philosophical life, but he went about it in practical, prosaic ways: he was Buddha with a receipt from the warehouse store.

When he left Walden Pond after two years and two months in the woods, Thoreau wrote, "I am a sojourner in civilized life again," and that's what we all are, all the time – we're sojourners in civilization, passing through and trying to make sense of our own lives, our common life, the mystery around us and the moment that we're in, with as much integrity and awe as we can

muster. We're here in this world to pay loving, practical attention, to simplify our lives enough, and our desires, to attend to the myriad, mysterious details. *Only that day dawns*, he said, *to which we are awake*.