

Thoreau: The Man and His Legacy

Homily delivered by Sue Dixon, January 31, 2016

We have a chalkboard on the wall in our downstairs bathroom, which I use as a sort of rotating marquee for inspirational sayings. In the past few weeks, as I immersed myself in the life and work of Henry David Thoreau to prepare for tonight, it has read:

“We make ourselves rich by making our wants few.” –[A good Thoreau quote if you happen to have a teenage daughter with a shopping habit!] I easily could have chosen one of many pithy Thoreau quotes:

- What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?
- Be not merely good, be good for something
- Go confidently in the direction of your dreams.
- Things do not change; we change.
- It is never too late to give up prejudices.
- If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.
- Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity.
- Be true to your work, your word, and your friend.
- How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.

Who was this man with such a gift with words?

The third of four children of Cynthia & John Thoreau, he was born July 12, 1817 on the farm of his maternal grandmother in Concord, MA – 200 miles southeast of here where he spent much of his life wondering the forests and footpaths, meadows and streams. He was christened David Henry Thoreau, it wasn't until after he graduated from Harvard College in 1837 and began to identify himself as a writer, that he changed the order of his given name to Henry David.

One of his earliest memories recorded in his journal was lying awake at night "looking through the stars to see if I could see God behind them." This thirst for spiritual connection within the realm of nature and the greater universe would define Thoreau's life and, in many ways, his legacy.

Thoreau and the Transcendentalist movement in New England grew up together. He was among a cadre of New Englanders who, in the late 1820's and '30's, gave shape to an American philosophical movement lead by Henry's friend, neighbor and mentor: Ralph Waldo Emerson. A lively band of Transcendentalists resided in Concord, among them: Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Hoar, Horace Greeley, and George Ripley. They espoused the inherent goodness of humans and the natural world, which was rather "edgy" at the time – and the polar opposite of the Calvinist preaching resonating from most New England pulpits that humans are sinful and the natural world is something to be conquered.

A main tenet of Transcendentalism is that nature is not some inert subject or matter of physics, but an organic, evolving force of the Universe and, if you will, a reflection of the Divine. Emerson would lecture that it has its own language, the interpretation of which depends upon an absolute reliance upon one's individual intuition. Transcendentalists placed tremendous importance upon self-reliance and intellectual independence. They believe that, as individuals, we are capable of original insight and inspiration without reliance on the ideas and influences of others before us. Emerson in many ways was the "brains" behind the movement, while Thoreau – 15 years his junior – strove to put these principles into action in his daily life.

The Thoreau family home in Concord was part of the Underground Railroad. Thoreau's mother Cynthia and all the relatives who resided in her house were active in the local antislavery movement. In his journals, Thoreau gives several accounts of assisting fugitive slaves on their journey north. He hid them, drove them to the train station, bought tickets, and sometimes even accompanied them to the next station.

A bit of a "Jack of all Trades," Thoreau's ideal lifestyle was to work one day and rest six. Responding to a Harvard alumni questionnaire about his occupation and activities, Henry wrote, "I am a Schoolmaster--a Private Tutor, a Surveyor--a Gardener, a Farmer--a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster [inferior poet]."

Whenever Henry was between things, he worked in the Thoreau family pencil factory. In those days pencils were made with graphite called "plumbago." Thoreau's uncle

Charles Dunbar discovered a thread of plumbago in New Hampshire and set up a pencil factory with his brother-in-law John Thoreau. English graphite was superior but it cost a fortune so most New Englanders settled for the greasy, smeary American quality. Being of bright mind, Henry figured out using clay as the binder made a better pencil out of inferior graphite. This superior, smear-free pencil made his family's company into America's leading pencil manufacturer.

While respected, Henry was always considered a bit of a prickly individualist. Baptized Unitarian, as a young adult he gave up on organized religion, preferring instead to immerse in Nature or texts such as the Bhagavad-Gita from Emerson's immense library. Henry was a vegetarian. "I have no doubt," he wrote, "That it is part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals." He sang with a choir and played the flute (something he learned from his father). He was an awesome ice skater, some said the best in town; and every summer when the watermelons ripened Henry would gather friends and neighbors for an annual "melon party" to enjoy the sweet fruit of summer together.

In 1845, Henry David Thoreau, writer and former teacher, pencil maker, and handyman, went to live by Walden Pond. He was 27 years old. "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. " Walden Pond is two miles outside of Concord, a 64.5-acre spring-fed kettle hole formed by retreating glaciers 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Believed by some to be bottomless, its waters are remarkably transparent and pure. Just ask our Pastor Mary, who grew up in Concord and has swum in the pond, these waters have a magical quality. To Thoreau they were emblematic of the mystery of the Universe.

Henry called his time at Walden Pond his "experiment." His days were filled with hard work - he built his own cabin, farmed, and worked odd jobs - long walks, nature observations, journal writing, and reflection. Although somewhat secluded, Henry was hardly a hermit. He frequently hosted and visited friends and neighbors. "I had three chairs in my house: one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society." He went to Walden not quite sure how he would spend his days and they ended being among the most productive in his life.

Henry wrote a book about his experiences called *Walden - A Life in the Woods*. It took nine years and seven drafts to write and sold for a dollar a copy when first published. The book inspired a new awareness about the nature and our relationship to it. For most students today, *Walden* is considered essential reading, it symbolizes:

- Tranquility in nature and in ourselves,
- Self exploration and our "inspired self,"
- The profound connection between people and the natural world,
- Balance between nature and society and the choices we face.

Most importantly, *Walden* represents the multitude of the natural places in the world - small or large - that desperately need our love and protection.

Henry, along with other Transcendentalists, considered Nature to be a spiritual entity. In *Walden* he wrote: "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads." Yet he was also practical, and understood that humans needed nature to survive. The wooded forest offered a withdrawn place for spiritual reflection and rest, but it also provided shelter and fuel for fire.

As local towns and farms developed around him, Henry encouraged his peers to preserve some of the natural woodlands. In the essay *Walking* he wrote, "A town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it, than by the woods and swamps that surround it. A township where one primitive forest waves above, while another primitive forest rots below-such a town is fitted to raise not only corn and potatoes, but poets and philosophers for the coming ages."

He mused on the many offices that the village supported, such as commissioners of trade and agriculture, and asked why there should not also be a commissioner of flowers, since observing nature was just as important an endeavor for the community.

Thoreau has earned the moniker of "father of environmentalism." His legacy endures today because so much of what he wrote about remains relevant, offering up an interesting antidote to living in the modern rat race.

Over the years, his work has inspired countless naturalists, environmentalists and writers. Photographer and environmentalist Herbert Wendell Gleason helped to popularize Thoreau by capturing images of the places that Thoreau had known in National Geographic.

Former Vermont Life editor, Tom Slayton retraces Thoreau's journeys from Mount Katahdin in Maine's north woods to Cape Cod in his delightful book *Searching for Thoreau on the Trails and Shores of Wild New England*. Reading it I was struck by how much the landscape – technology and society, our weather and planet – has changed in the 200 years since Henry David Thoreau walked with reverence among New England's fields and forests, and how much remains unchanged. Thoreau urges us to: "Take long walks in stormy weather or through deep snows in field and woods, if you would keep your spirits up. Deal with brute nature. Be cold and hungry and weary."

What lessons are there for us in Thoreau's legacy? How might our relationship to the world change if more of us took heed and felt a part of nature?

In the words of Thoreau himself: "A good question is never answered. It is not a bolt to be tightened into place, but a seed planted and to bear more seeds toward the hope of greening the land."