## "THE CANDLES OUR ANCESTORS LIT FOR US: HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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I suppose the first thing I need to do today is come clean on Henry David Thoreau's religious affiliation. I've set this sermon up to claim Thoreau as a spiritual ancestor. You might assume that this means he was either a Unitarian or a Universalist. In fact, he wasn't either. In a long biography I read about Thoreau that was written by a Unitarian Universalist, our faith is mentioned twice—and neither reference is actually about Thoreau. A non-joiner at heart, Thoreau never affiliated with any congregation or sect. This hasn't stopped us Unitarian Universalists from claiming him—indeed, a Texas UU congregation established in 1996 is named after him.<sup>2</sup>

Now he was a Transcendentalist, and Transcendentalism was essentially a reform movement within Unitarianism in the 1830s and 40s. As I've argued in the past, I believe that Transcendentalism is the single most significant chapter in the long history of our faith. Transcendentalists rejected the then conventional Unitarian belief that the Bible is the only or principal source of revelation. Instead, Transcendentalists found revelation in lots of places besides the Bible—in other religions' sacred scriptures and myths, in nature, and within our souls. Thoreau reflected this change when he wrote in his journal one day after a walk following an ice storm: "God exhibits himself to the walker in a frosted bush today as much as a burning one to Moses of old." Over time this Transcendentalist belief about continuing and widespread revelation became dominant within Unitarian Universalism. This is a big part of the reason that today we hold such a wide assortment of beliefs in our congregation.

So I'm going to claim Thoreau as a spiritual ancestor even though he wasn't technically a Unitarian or a Universalist. At the least, he's had a huge impact on our faith. He deserves to have a UU congregation named after him!

Thoreau was a unique individual. In Walden, he writes, "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer."<sup>4</sup> This certainly applied to him. And this wasn't something that came with age and wisdom for Thoreau; this was always his inclination.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Robert Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: The Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 104, 206.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fort Bend County, Texas.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Richardson, p. 286.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Other Writers, edited by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam Books, 1978), p. 345.

Thoreau was also opinionated. He could be abrasive and aloof. He could also be arrogant. His response to a questionnaire from Harvard long after he graduated is revealing: "I beg that the class will not consider me an object of charity, and if any of them are in want of pecuniary assistance, and will make known their case to me, I will engage to give them some advice of more worth than money."<sup>5</sup> It's hard to imagine that this response endeared him to his fellow alumni.

Thoreau's first true calling in life was poetry. I would say he was a good poet, but not a great one. He excelled more in his journal writing, which he then used as the basis for articles and books such as Walden. He wasn't a wildly successful writer—in the first year Walden was published he made \$51.60 in royalties. Of course \$50 went a lot further then than now—it could pay for tuition in college for a year—but he wasn't really getting rich.<sup>6</sup> And he had even less success with his other writings. As a result, he was never able to make ends meet as a writer. So he worked as a teacher—for two weeks in the Concord public school (teaching a class of 50-100 wasn't his cup of tea) and for several years as a teacher in a tiny private school he ran with his brother. He also helped run his father's pencil factory (to which he contributed several notable innovations and inventions), and he was a skilled surveyor.

Thoreau was never married. The closest he came was proposing to a woman named Ellen Sewall several months after she turned down his brother's marriage proposal. She rejected Henry David's proposal with even less hesitation. He never asked anyone again.8

Thoreau is most famous for the two years and two month time-out he took on the shores of Walden Pond. I suspect a lot of us romanticize Walden Pond as a rugged, beautiful place far out in the wilderness. Though it was and is beautiful, in truth it was neither far out of the way nor particularly peaceful. It was near Concord, and a busy railroad line ran right next to the lake not far from Thoreau's cabin. As his biographer Robert Richardson writes, "Thoreau was well aware that what he was doing was not braving wilderness, but simulating its conditions in a sort of symbolic laboratory experiment."9

The main point of his experiment was to live simply. He wanted to show that it is possible for any of us anywhere to live simply. We don't have to move hundreds or thousands of miles away into wild lands. It is probably important to add that some luck helped Thoreau's experiment be feasible—starting with his (then) good friend Ralph Waldo Emerson letting Thoreau build on his land.

Thoreau lived for about fifteen more years after he ended his Walden experiment. During these years he continued to make pencils, survey, keep a journal, and write. He spent ten of the fifteen years working through several drafts of Walden. He typically took a four-hour walk each day—his observations from these walks fill his journals. And he continued to travel, most notably to Maine several times, to Cape Cod, and to Canada.

In 1861 his chronically precarious health took a nosedive. Doctors advised him to move to a more suitable climate. He ruled out Europe because it was too expensive, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Richardson, p. 185.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.

the Caribbean because it was too muggy. He went to Minnesota instead. Although Minnesota's dry climate was widely praised at the time, it still seems odd Thoreau went there for a better climate! Nothing against Minnesota, but we know better! The truth is that wild and unsettled lands beyond Concord and Walden always called to him. Presumably this is what really beckoned him to Minnesota, which had only become a state a few years earlier and was still relatively unsettled.<sup>10</sup>

Not too surprisingly, the trip didn't do much to restore his health. Instead his health worsened. After he returned home, he realized that he was dying. He met his approaching death with great equanimity. Near the end, his Aunt Louisa asked him if he had made peace with God. His reply is classic: "I did not know that we ever quarreled." He died in 1862 at the age of forty-four.

Thoreau is justifiably most renowned for his writings on nature. Thoreau himself claimed nature as his religion. He had a keen eye for nature and wrote skillfully and beautifully about it. His writing especially comes alive when he writes about his greatest loves in nature: the woods, rivers and lakes. Not the ocean—the inland waters spoke to him more than the ocean. Robert Richardson notes that when we read Thoreau, we get the sense we're walking in the woods right next to him. I should add that I am indebted to Richardson for his excellent biography of Thoreau for much that is in this sermon.

Nature had an enormous pull on Thoreau. He had the sense that nature is a mirror for our souls. The laws of nature are the same laws our souls live by, and we can see reflected in nature the rhythms and movement of our interior lives. For example, the cycle of the year—which he studied in great detail—reflects the cycle of our lives as we move inexorably from birth to death.

As I mentioned in connection with his ill-fated respite trip to Minnesota, Thoreau felt sharply the call of the wild. Rather than fearing the wild he sought it out. It was in the wild that he felt the most alive. <sup>14</sup> I feel exactly the same way. This is why hiking is my favorite activity—even in a dangerous place like bear country. For him (and me), being in the wild feels liberating. It helps us get in touch with that which is wild and free within ourselves. <sup>15</sup>

Thoreau so valued the wild that he powerfully expressed the need to preserve it: "In the wild is the preservation of the world," he writes. Arguably, he more than any other American is the source of the preservation ethic in the United States today. 16

A year or two ago I shared a passage from Annie Dillard that captures nature's cruel side. She describes watching in horror as a giant water bug sucks the life out of a frog until there's nothing left of the frog but a rumpled, formless sack of skin that slowly sinks in the water. This isn't much like the natural world Thoreau describes in *Walden*. There he writes about the "infinite and unaccountable friendliness" of nature. This is quite different from Dillard's giant water bug.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Richardson., pp. 386.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 388-389.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225, 303.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 5-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Thoreau, pp. 202-203.

But it turns out that Thoreau may have been a source for Dillard after all: in other works he writes about the indifference and even hostility of nature. The first place he expresses this is in his account of a late summer climb up Mount Katahdin in Maine. It was a cold, misty, wind swept climb that revealed to him the utter indifference of nature. <sup>19</sup> Nature was not his friend that day.

His account of the climb makes me think of the day I climbed Katahdin 136 years and one month after Thoreau's climb. Our climb that day was even worse than Thoreau's. As we neared the summit, the mist turned into snow. The winds nearly blew us off the top, so we didn't linger there. On our way down the mountain, the snow turned into torrential rain. There's nothing like getting soaked by rain in 33 degree weather! The trail quickly became a small river. My rain poncho was not remotely up to the task of repelling the water. My boots were even worse, recalling a Thoreau poem about a similar pair of boots he wore: "Anon with gaping fearlessness they quaff/The dewy nectar with a natural thirst." After a miserable descent of some four hours duration, we discovered that our tents were completely waterlogged. We quickly abandoned our plans to camp there another night and made the three hour retreat by car to my roommate's parents' house in Bangor. I remember stripping off all of my wet clothes and huddling in the back of the station wagon in a wet sleeping bag. Nature was not my friend that day, either. But as with Thoreau, the wild of Katahdin continues to beckon: I am currently plotting a return trip to the summit this summer. At least now I have better boots.

Not long after his unpleasant climb up Katahdin, Thoreau traveled to Cape Cod. The first thing he saw there was the grisly aftermath of a ship that had been smashed on the rocks by a terrible storm. He wrote graphically about mangled human bodies washed up on shore. In the face of such violence and indifference, Christian salvation and even the more tangible work of the rescue houses dotting the shoreline are pretty much impotent. Thoreau writes, "Not only is the Christian promise of saving souls no longer credible, but even the practical measures of modern charitable societies for saving bodies are ineffectual. There is no salvation, there is only salvage." "Such is nature," he concludes near the end of his life, "who gave one creature a taste or yearning for another's entrails as its favorite tidbit!!"

An enduring critique of the Transcendentalists is that they were idealistic, overly intellectual eggheads who were disconnected from the everyday realities of life. Related to this is the charge that they didn't do enough to build a better world. This really is an unfair charge. Most of the Transcendentalists—including Thoreau—were passionately committed to the concrete work of justice. In truth they were radical activists.<sup>23</sup>

Thoreau for example famously stopped paying the poll tax as a protest against the war with Mexico and the evil of slavery. This finally landed him in jail for a night before he was bailed out by a friend whose identity remains a mystery. Out of this experience he wrote the landmark essay on civil disobedience. He writes in that essay, "I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave's* government also." He argues that the higher law of conscience may necessitate the

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Richardson, p. 180.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

breaking of unjust laws: "If it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, buck the law." And he concludes: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison."<sup>24</sup>

He continued to speak out forcefully against slavery, and he helped at least one fugitive slave escape to Canada. He urged others to actively disobey the fugitive slave law, too. He supported John Brown's anti-slavery fight and gradually backpedaled on his calls for peaceful action against slavery, which he increasingly viewed as a greater evil than violence. He eventually concluded that violence might be the only way to get rid of slavery.<sup>25</sup>

When I look at the whole of Thoreau's writings and life, maybe more than anything they call us to wake up and see the world. For him seeing the world with a keen eye and being awake are cardinal virtues. No wonder Buddhism and its focus on attentiveness to the present appealed to him. "To be awake," he writes in *Walden*, "is to be alive." He particularly associated his favorite time of day—early morning—and his favorite season of the year—the spring—with being awake. The stirring last three sentences of *Walden* are vintage Thoreau: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star." The irony of all this is that Thoreau suffered from narcolepsy—the disorder that makes it hard to stay awake. Maybe this is why staying awake was such a focus of his spirituality.

Thoreau's dictum to be awake to this moment and this place kept his focus firmly on this life. He had no use for dwelling on heaven or what happens after death. In *Walden*, he writes, "Talk of heaven! ye disgrace the earth" and "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads." Only a few days before his death an old Abolitionist minister friend said to him, "You seem so near the brink of the dark river that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you." Refusing to cast his eye even for a moment in the direction of the "opposite shore," Thoreau replied, "One world at a time."

Ultimately Thoreau did not believe that it was his voice or his experiences that should matter in our own lives. He wanted everyone to experiment as he did at Walden Pond. So it seems fitting today to close not with something from Thoreau but with an experience of my own in nature.

This particular hike was considerably sunnier and more pleasant than my—or Thoreau's—first hike up Katahdin. Last October I had a free morning in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park. I decided to take advantage of a beautiful sunny day—the last nice day before the first winter storm of the year was predicted to clobber Colorado. The hike I chose was more than eight miles round trip and had an elevation gain of 2400 feet. I knew I had to be in my rental car headed to the airport in Denver by noon, so I had to get an early start and move at a pretty good clip.

The first part of the hike was long and hard and quite unrewarding. It was completely in the woods. I like the woods, but I was beginning to think I'd never

<sup>25</sup> Richardson, pp. 249, 369-372.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Thoreau, pp. 88-94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Thoreau, p. 172.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Thoreau, p. 351.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Richardson, p. 126.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Thoreau, pp. 253, 314.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Richardson, p. 389.

actually see a mountain. And then abruptly the woods stopped and the trail opened up into a most breath-taking vista. The mountains gleamed all around me, including Longs Peak, the highest mountain in the park. The trail continued its strenuous climb for a few miles through open, boulder-strewn tundra. At one point the trail made its way along a rather dramatic edge of a cliff. On one side, a crystal clear lake sparkled several hundred feet below. I thought it might be Chasm Lake, the destination of the trail. But it turned out to be a different lake. I had further to go.

The last part of the trail was snow-covered. The trail seemed to come to an end, but there was a sign pointing up a steep and icy rise to Chasm Lake. I still couldn't see the lake. I scampered up the rise, mostly on my hands and knees, and at last arrived at the beautiful little lake. Though it was so worth the effort to get there, I didn't have long to linger because of the plane and because I was freezing once I stopped. So after a few minutes I turned around and slid back down the rise. I made my way through the huge and beautiful landscape until I finally—with some sadness—came back into the woods. I arrived at my car at five minutes to noon.

I hope that I will always remember that hike on the last nice day of the autumn. I hope that I will remember the boulder-strewn landscape that made me feel both totally insignificant and (briefly) part of something very grand. I hope I will remember the bright sunlight and the clear blue sky and the beautiful mountain lakes and the majestic mountains.

Who needs heaven indeed!

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