

Thoreau-ly Satisfied
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona
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Readings

Excerpts from [Walden](#) by Henry David Thoreau:

When I have met an immigrant tottering under a bundle which contained his all-looking like an enormous wen which had grown out of the nape of his neck- I have pitied him, not because that was his all, but because he had all that to carry...

A lady once offered me a mat, but as I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it, I declined it, preferring to wipe my feet on the sod before my door. It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil...

The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run...

In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely...It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do...

My greatest skill has been to want but little...

One young man of my acquaintance, who has inherited some acres, told me that he thought he should live as I did, if he had the means. I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may 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. The youth may build or plant or sail, only let him not be hindered from doing that which he tells me he would like to do. It is by a mathematical point only that we are wise, as the sailor or the fugitive slave keeps the pole-star in his eye; but that is sufficient guidance for all our life. We may not arrive at our port within a calculable period, but we would preserve the true course.

Sermon

Today is the 192nd anniversary of the birth of Henry David Thoreau.

If Unitarian Universalists recognized saints, there is little doubt that Thoreau would *be* one. His call to *notice*, respect and celebrate the natural world; his affirmation of individual thought and conscience in opposition to the pressure to conform; his critique of the powers of oppression and greed; all of these resonate with us still. Though he left the Unitarian church upon becoming an adult, it is *his influence* on *our tradition*, rather than *our tradition's* influence upon *him*, that has resulted in countless Unitarian Universalist sermons and classes and book groups devoted to his life and work. There is even a Henry David Thoreau Unitarian Universalist congregation of Fort Bend County in Stafford, TX.

Yes, he would be—in an informal way, already is—one of our saints; our heroes; our prophets.

And that, I have to think, would make him laugh.

Because a funny thing happens with our saints, our prophets, our heroes, our saviors...we create stories around them. We exaggerate their actions and distort their lives with our adulation. They become symbols of our own opinions; desires; aspirations. We remove them from their own time and place, from their own flawed and fumbling humanity, and we create gods that we can worship, that we can club each other over the head with, that we can use to justify our own insights or prove the other person wrong.

And, not surprisingly, we eventually grow to resent these saints in their lofty positions. We look for chinks in the armor of divinity (which they never asked to wear, I might add). We find those places where they fail to reach the ideal that we have imposed (did Thoreau go into town and eat at restaurants during his Walden life?); we sniff out the compromises they made (didn't he still bring his laundry home to his mom?); we seize upon every tidbit that shows they were only human after all (wasn't there a bit of grandstanding in his insistence that he be put in jail?) and we pull the statues we have created off their pedestals to watch them smash on the hard, cold, merciless ground of everyday life.

And we go about our business.

Henry David Thoreau has something to say to us about *our business*. It is important that we not let our adulation drown out his words. It is important that we not let the *unauthorized biographical details* distract us from his words. It is important that we listen, to a man, a person like you and me, who took some time to look around, to think deeply, and to write down his thoughts to share with whoever wished to read them.

And with that said, I will admit to being resistant to Thoreau's work. As I read my way through the beginning of Walden, I found myself getting a little angry and defensive.

And that, of course, was not all about Thoreau. I have to own some of that, so consider this my public confession. I am not good at nature. For those of you birders who haven't already figured it out, I don't know the names of any birds. I can't identify flowers and plants. I am not a big hiker, mountain climber, swimmer, biker...sure, I've camped a little, but you would not take me along on the survival training expedition as an instructor. You probably would not want me along as a student...it would be too much work to make sure I was okay. Outside of typing, I do not work with my hands, and if you saw me try to drive a nail into the wall, you would probably marvel at the fact that I can type. So reading Thoreau--and especially reading Thoreau with the added baggage of my image of Saint Thoreau--was an intimidating experience. These are the words of probably the most famous nature writer of all time, the granddaddy of environmentalism, a prophet of Transcendentalism, a saint of Unitarian Universalism, for goodness sake, a tradition which I represent and uphold as minister of this congregation...and what was my very-mature first reaction?

"Yeah, yeah, you moved to the woods, you built your own cabin, you studied your surroundings, you lived on little or nothing, AND you can write beautiful prose...great for you! Just stop lecturing me."

And once I came to grips with my own inner *childishness*, I thought again about what I had read. It did seem to have the tone of a lecture. This is what *I* did. See how much sense it makes? Why aren't *you* doing this?

But as I took a step back from my own defensiveness, my own underlying certainty about what I *should* be doing and about what I fear I *can't do*...when I took a step back and looked again at Thoreau, I realized that, seen from this perspective, *Walden* is all about expectations. *Walden*, though it can come off as a lecture, was actually a bold, brash, sometimes-even-bratty *response* to lectures that Thoreau had probably heard, to expectations that he had felt from family and friends and the society-at-large about what was reasonable, practical, possible, and desirable. *Walden* is not, I believe, meant to impose expectations; it is a ragged, poetic, prophetic, impassioned, incessant plea to *rid ourselves* of the imposition of expectations from outside. Thoreau, I think, would be very disappointed if he thought that his work was being used to spread yet another layer of expectations on top of the many through which we wade throughout our lives.

“I desire that there may 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.”

It is not hard to see why *Walden* is a popular book among youth. It is about finding oneself amidst the many and varied pressures, opinions, and pronouncements of those who tell us they *know best*. He is adamant, sometimes outrageous even, in insisting that we must free ourselves of even the best advice if we are to hear our own souls speak. He writes:

Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned any thing of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young...I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me any thing, to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my Mentors said nothing about.

I wish to point out that that was Thoreau, not me. The old have no advice for the young? The wisest person has learned nothing of value? We may have our arguments with that, but I think this should be understood in terms of Thoreau's own context and in terms of his purpose. This is less about the value of anyone else's wisdom and more about the value of your own wisdom...you, the reader, the individual who is taking the time to listen to Thoreau. This is less about the merit of anyone else's words and more about the precious nature of your own voice that speaks within, faintly, a still small voice, as it were, that is too often drowned out by the hubbub of the everyday and the constant stream of conversation and the endless chatter of everyone else's best intentions.

And I mentioned the appeal of these ideas to the young: I've talked to young people who are intent on finding a way of integrity that allows them to engage life with the power of their own clear purpose, undeterred by the well-intentioned expectations of others. They are so intent on listening for that inner voice that it can seem as if they have closed their eyes and stuck their fingers in their ears and are babbling “lalalalalalalalalalalal” as you speak. It looks like stubbornness, defiance, avoidance...and there may be some parts of that, just as there are in Thoreau. But it may also be because they are desperately trying to hear their own voice. They are trying to shut out distraction so they can, in common usage, hear themselves think.

And though it is easy to see this process as a part of growing into adulthood, really it follows us throughout our lives. You can hear it in talking to young people, yes, but I also spoke to an elderly lady

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 man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.

Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

So may it be...