

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*
Completed 26 January 2012

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27 January 27, 2012

I'm not sure I've ever had my head in such a whirl as right now.

I approached *Walden* in a bit of a mental tumult to begin with. I don't remember when I first heard of *Walden* but I was little, probably well within single digits. When I was in high school, a friend of mine read it and became obsessed with *Walden*, with Thoreau, with living alone in the woods. He praised *Walden* to no end and treated it like his personal bible, a sort of manifesto.

One of the parents of a student I teach was talking with me one day about Thoreau, though, and remembered how angry she was once she read *Walden* and found out that Thoreau lived near town and wasn't really roughing it, in some sense. She was a young liberal at the time, I suspect, and had gathered an image of him as the patron saint of environmentalism. But in his own words:

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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear, nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (182)

Thoreau's time at *Walden* was for him a philosophical learning experience. Since 1854 when it was originally published, we—meaning we the readers, we the public consciousness—have transformed him into a demigod of the cabin. He neither asked nor expected this; he says, "to be awake is to be alive" and I think this is really what he wanted to achieve—a higher spiritual state of existence. Sure he had plenty of advantages going into the situation (health, money, the ability to live and build a house on his friend's land, the skills to do so, etc.), but his goals weren't in opposition to these advantages.

While I was reading *Walden*, I can say with minimal exaggeration that I hated it. Between the current dire economy, which breeds a certain utilitarian bent to many current endeavors, and my own skeptical, pragmatic inclination, I was hard pressed to truly enjoy the lengthy sections about the chirruping of squirrels. I know what squirrels sound like; I know what they act like. I spent a good portion of a class in animal behavior doing ethnographies of squirrels—and that observation wasn't a spiritual experience for me, no sir.

Yet I'm torn. For one thing, I believe (deeply) in context, and I know that "my" context is not the "right" one to really understand Thoreau. It's more than one hundred and fifty years since he

published *Walden* and times have changed. Many of the factors of society he rails about are ones we inevitably reflect on now as part of “the good old days.” *Walden* wasn’t tremendously popular when it was published—probably folks then were also not terribly inclined to read at length about the joys of squirrels and birds, particularly when they had wood to chop for winter and families to feed. Like this audience I am imagining, I too felt as though I had better things to do while reading large sections of the book. I have rabbits to feed! Friends I haven’t seen yet this semester! Homework for my other classes! I don’t *care* that one time a little bird landed on Thoreau’s shoulder, even if he did think it was more of an honor than any kind of epaulet. Big whup.

Take away context, though, and this book still comes up short in some ways. I know I’m reading this book with too much of a goal and a frenzy in my head; I know modern American society is vastly different from Thoreau’s America, and this changes how I can read this book. Still the book has idiosyncratic development (two main philosophical sections bookending easy-to-parody nature reverie) and many harsh criticisms against Thoreau’s fellow man. It also notably lacks any valuation of human contact for human contact’s sake. Human interdependence is scorned; familial feelings are not even mentioned (certainly not honored). There seems to be no room for love between humans for Thoreau, only one-sided love between humans and capital-N Nature. I can see no way to fall in love with anything but a bird or tree, under Thoreau’s philosophy, and this, very simply, makes me a little sad, a little disheartened.

Granted, some of my favorite moments are alone in the woods, or on the back of a horse, or snuggling up to one of my rabbits. I can even identify precisely with Thoreau’s thrill when a bird landed on his shoulder; as the caretaker of many a precocious chicken, I have been subject to a more domestic example of this effect. Once I had a quail chick for a few days, and its feather weight in my palm struck me with a sense of awe and nineteenth-century reverence that is, indeed, hard to match with ordinary human companionship.

Still, I believe in humanity. I believe in the power of groups and the ability for humans to enact positive change. In a culture rife with the threat of global warming, nuclear annihilation, and bad politicians (which is worst?), it’s easy to become incredibly depressed about the state of the world. Yet here we are, and this is where Thoreau *can* be useful. His diatribes about avoiding fancy styles of pants? Mostly beyond having much application in today’s society. But his valuation of the natural world (“Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.”) and, more importantly to me, his injunction to famously “Simplify, simplify, simplify” reach well into our time.

Finally, his anti-materialism goes overboard sometimes, in my opinion (Is there really anything wrong with a more well-rounded diet than gruel and corncakes? Could some of Thoreau’s later health problems be due in part to nutritional deficiencies?), but he gives us some catchy slogans: “Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts” (362); “it is life near the bone where it is the sweetest” (363). Pulling out these phrases in some ways may serve to trivialize his masterpiece, but in application it is these zingers which resound most profoundly to my ears and, I would suspect, to many others’ as well.

[To be continued.]