

***Henry David Thoreau
Transcendentalist or Unitarian?***

George Wolfe

COPYRIGHT © 2009 by George W. Wolfe; ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

In the summer of 1845, Henry David Thoreau began his experiment of living in a hut built with his own hands at Walden Pond. The property was owned by the famous transcendentalist author Ralph Waldo Emerson. According to Thoreau, he went to Walden “to live deliberately, to front the essential facts of life,” but an equally compelling reason was to recover from the loss of his brother John, who, as the result of a razor cut, suffered a painful death from lock jaw. Henry and his brother had taken a boat trip down the Concord and Merrimack rivers, and together they ran their own private school, the Concord Academy, for three years (Harding, pgs. 75-93).

While at Walden, Thoreau wrote his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, which he published at his own expense in 1849 and dedicated to his brother. This effort, at the time however, turned out to be a failure, as the publisher soon returned to him over 700 of the 1000 printed copies because the book would not sell. While it had received some favorable reviews, especially in England, the combination of travel log with philosophical reflection that characterize the book simply made it unmarketable. Thoreau spent time working in his father’s pencil factory to help pay for publication.

Thoreau’s most famous work, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, was published in 1854. It fared somewhat better, but was by no means an instant success. Most of Thoreau’s work was published after his death. Thoreau died May 6th 1862 at the age 44 from Tuberculosis.

It is now universally accepted that *Walden* is a literary masterpiece. To this day there are many scholars who consider it to be the greatest American prose work. Rich in

natural philosophy, deistic transcendentalism and uncompromising individualism, Thoreau championed Emerson's call to self-reliance and drew on his own vast knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Oriental philosophy and mythology, expressing it in a language so poetic that Thoreau is said by many to be the most quoted American author.

“The Forsaking of Works”

In July of 2009 I ventured to Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts where I found a rustic spot near where Thoreau built his cabin. The weather was perfect as I sauntered along the shoreline path. Sitting down by a hardy tree, I enjoyed the harmony of a sublime evening breeze as I intoned a Sanskrit hymn to settle into a deep meditation, my mind savoring the clarity of awareness for which the clear Walden spring water has served as metaphor. Thoreau, in his own words, describes such a meditative experience far more masterfully than I. In his chapter in *Walden*, entitled *Sounds*, we writes:

There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of head or hands. Sometimes in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise to till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realize what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works. (*Walden*, pg. 105, 106)

Those who practice a form of Meditation or introspective prayer surely can identify with Thoreau's words, to grow “like corn in the night,” and to experience one's meditative sittings as time added to one's life rather than hours subtracted from it. We grow as spiritual beings by awakening those faculties of insight and realization, faculties that enable a person to think and perceive more deeply, and which, unlike classical science, bestow upon us interpretative wisdom rather than offering mere facts.

In the domain of religion, the awakening experience is usually associated with Buddhism, referring to verses in the Dhammapada which say “The disciples of Buddha are always well awake.” (Ch. 21, verses 296-301). But the concept of awakening is also found in Hindu and Christian scripture.¹ Thoreau elaborates on the awakening process in Walden, where he relates it to an inner dawn and a perpetual morning.

Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, ... to a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bare its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light. That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. The Vedas says, "all intelligences awake with the morning." Poetry and art, and the fairest most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. ... To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I awake and there is a dawn in me. (Walden, pg. 84)

Like a Hindu or Buddhist sage, Thoreau frequently inverts the values of the world, turning reality upside down. It is said that he would sometime stand with his head down, looking backward through his legs to view a landscape from a novel perspective. When asked what he would do when living alone in the woods, he replied: “Is it not employment enough to watch the changing of the seasons?” Rather than work six days a week and rest for one as the Creator did in chapter one of the Biblical book of Genesis, Thoreau purposed we should live simply enough to work but one day a week and rest six! However, rest for him was not idleness, but spending time contemplating the deeper meaning on life.

Thoreau’s concept of simplicity therefore, was not merely to reject materialism, but to free ourselves from becoming slaves to our own possessions and from our “daily

¹ The Katha Upanishad commands the disciple to “arise, awake, sit at the feet of the master and know Brahman,” and in his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul declares: “Awake, O sleeper and rise from the dead, and Christ will give thee light” (Eph. 5:14). In the Gospel of Mark, (Ch. 13:35 and 36), Jesus expresses this in the negative, cautioning his disciples not to be caught sleeping: “Watch therefore, for you do not know when the Master of the house will come...lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.”

life of routine habit” that is “built on purely illusory foundations” (Walden pg. 90). He challenges us to “cultivate poverty like a garden herb” (Walden pg.307), and rid ourselves from complex circumstances that force us into living “lives of quiet desperation” (Walden: pg. 6). Thoreau applied his predilection for value inversion in his assessment of the railroad:

We do not ride on the railroad; it rides on us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. (Walden, pg. 87)

However brief, this statement may be the earliest manifesto against the capitalist exploitation of labor.

Witnessing Illusion

It is known that Ralph Waldo Emerson provided Thoreau with sacred books from the East, many of which are quoted from or cited in *Walden*. In Indian Philosophy, the culmination of the awakening process is the realization of Atman or higher “Self” as being one with Brahman. The experience is also expressed as “involuntary mindfulness” where one’s awareness is observing one’s thoughts, feelings and actions on the background of that inner silence one comes to know as pure consciousness. Using his remarkable literary gift, Thoreau describes this witnessing experience in his chapter in *Walden* entitled “Solitude.”

By a conscious effort of the mind, we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it.² I *may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to

² Indra is the Hindu god of rain and of war, also referred to as the “King of the gods.”

...speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. (Walden, pg. 127, 128)

In this passage, Thoreau's characterization of his experiences as "a work of the imagination," is consistent with Indian philosophy, which, contrary to the domain of science, sees the world of a projection of "maya" or illusion. The illusion, in so far as it causes one to mistaken one's true nature, is portrayed in the following parable which Thoreau includes in the second chapter of Walden.

I have read in a Hindoo³ book, that "there was a kings son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father's ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. So soul," continues the Hindoo philosopher, "from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be Brahme."⁴ Walden, pg. 90)

Involuntary mindfulness is first experienced on the deep and quiet levels of the mind during meditation. With regular practice, one begins to notice involuntary mindfulness accompanying activity in the waking state. Eventually one starts to witness dream state of consciousness, and ultimately deep sleep, recognizing that there is a part of the nervous system that remains awake, even when one is sound asleep. Thoreau poetically refers to this as he concludes his exposition on the "perpetual morning."

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. (Walden, pg.85)

³ Hindoo: an older spelling for Hindu.

⁴ Brahme is an older spelling for Brahman.

The path of awakening to self-realization is said to free a person from assumptions and past associations that restrict one's ability to perceive an object as it is, free from unconscious bias and the "baggage" of past experiences. Indian and Buddhist philosophy refers to this state of awareness as *buddhi-satva*, meaning "pure" or, as I call it, the "pristine intellect," the inter-religious metaphor for which is the innocent perception of a child.⁵ Thoreau captures this experience in a journal entry dated June 12th of 1852 when he writes of his mystical definition of music.

A child loves to strike on a tin pan or other ringing vessel with a stick, because, its ears being fresh, sound, attentive, and percipient, it detects the finest music in the sound, at which all nature assists.... So clear and unprejudiced ears hear the sweetest and most soul-stirring melody in tinkling cowbells and the like (dogs baying the moon), not to be referred to association, but intrinsic to the sound itself...Ah, that I were so much a child that I could unfailingly draw music from a quart pot! Its little ears tingle with the melody. To it there is music in sound alone.

Moreover, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack River*, Thoreau describes hearing the beating of a drum from afar to which he and his brother "listened with such an unprejudiced sense as if for the first time we heard at all." Notice that in this passage, he is not saying that he hears the music for the first time. Rather, he is taking it to the level of ultimate innocence with the words "first time we heard at all," as if he and his brother had been awakened to a pristine perception to which there were no past associations or contexts that would apply. The lesson here inspires us to let go of our past impressions, no matter how negative or unforgiving.

Thoreau's definitions of music embrace the concept of harmony in the broadest sense. "The human soul," he wrote in his journal, "is a silent harp in God's quire, whose strings need only to be swept by the divine breath to chime in with the harmonies of

⁵ Jesus told his disciples that one must become like a child again to enter the Kingdom of God (Mark 10: 15, RSV), and Chapter 28 of the Tao Te Ching, says: "Ever true and unswerving, become as a lit child once more."

creation (August 10th, 1838). Thus music, for Thoreau, had the potential for placing him in touch with the harmony of the inner self, assisting the process of awakening the genius within that enables a person to live “with the license of a higher order of beings” (Walden, pg. 303).

Was Thoreau a Unitarian?

On October 12, 1817, Thoreau was christened at the age of three months at the First Parish Church in Concord. He was originally named David Henry after his paternal uncle David Thoreau who died six weeks after Henry's birth. Years later, Thoreau would reverse his first and middle names (Harding, 1982:11).

Reverend Ezra Ripley served as pastor to the First Parish Church. Under his leadership, the church gradually moved to a Unitarian theology, rejecting, or at least de-emphasizing the concept of Trinity central to orthodox Christianity. This shift eventually resulted in a schism within the church led by seven of its members, three of which were Thoreau's aunts on his mother's side. The result was the formation of the Trinitarian Congregational Church of Concord. According to biographer Walter Harding, Henry Thoreau's mother Cynthia sought membership in the new Trinitarian congregation but her request was rejected. She then returned to Rev. Ripley's First Parish Church (Harding, 1982:23-25).

In 1833, Thoreau entered Harvard College from which he would eventually graduate. Harvard was a seminary for Unitarians, so along with his First Parish Church upbringing, Henry was amply exposed to the independence of Unitarian thought and its rejection of Trinitarian dogma. Transcendentalism in Concord, Massachusetts was in part a reaction against the ideas of John Locke who postulated in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that a child is born without knowledge, its mind being a "tabula Rasa" or blank slate. Knowledge was gained entirely through the senses, i.e., observation through the scientific method. In contrast, the Transcendentalists asserted that there is a form of knowledge that transcends the senses and that, in addition to observation, knowledge is gained through insight and listening to the “voice of God within.” The mind, one could say, is not so much a vessel to be filled, as it was a lamp to be lit. It is

through hearing the inner voice and apprehending the insights available to the perceptive mind that a person can properly evaluate and find meaning in what is observed (Harding, 1982:61).

After graduating from Harvard, Thoreau became a member of a group of intellectuals and writers that met regularly at Ralph Waldo Emerson's home. They became known as the "Hedge Club" after Rev. Frederick Henry Hedge who was pastor at a Unitarian church in Bangor Maine and who frequented Concord. As Walter Harding points out, Thoreau "was a true transcendentalist to the end of his life." (Harding, 1982:63-64).

In the following passage from *Walden*, which contains some surprisingly contemporary sounding language, Thoreau aligns Jesus with the Persian prophet Zoroaster.

The solitary hired man on a farm in the outskirts of Concord, who has had his second birth and peculiar religious experience, and is driven as he believes into silent gravity and exclusiveness by his faith, may think it is not true; but Zoroaster thousands of years ago, traveled the same road and had the same experience; but he, being wise, knew it to be universal and treated his neighbors accordingly, and is even said to have invented and established worship among men. Let him humbly commune with Zoroaster then, and, through the liberalizing influence of all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself, and let "our church" go by the board. (*Walden*, pg. 102)

Thoreau is undoubtedly referring to God when he writes of "the greater Benefactor and Intelligence that stands over me" (*Walden* – pg. 311), and he links his experience of God and eternity to the present moment.

In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. (*Walden*, pg. 91)

Undoubtedly Thoreau would have been attracted to the absence of dogma in the Unitarian tradition. Nevertheless he appears to emphatically embrace the ancient view

that humans have an unclean lower nature in addition the higher spiritual consciousness he so adamantly aspires to realize.

A command over our passions, and over the external senses of the body, and good acts, are declared by the Ved [Vedas] to be indispensable in the mind's approximation to God. Yet the spirit can for the time pervade and control every member and function of the body, and transmute what in form is the grossest sensuality into purity and devotion. The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates us and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what is called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turn our purity inspires us and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established. (Walden, pg. 206)

I suspect this characterization of the “unclean” sensuous side of human nature smacks too much of Original Sin for the modern Unitarian Universalist to accept.

We can say with a great degree of certainty that Thoreau had little use for institutionalized religion, and I fear the Unitarian Universalist Church as it exists today with its upper-class architecture, high-end budgets, preoccupation with stewardship and fund-raising, national conventions, and ordained clergy, would keep him away from our doors. I suspect, however, that as the author of the seminal essay *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* resulting from his night spent in jail to protest the poll tax, he would admire our history of activism in the pursuit of social justice.

Seeing Beyond the Verge of Sight

The true power of Thoreau’s legacy, I believe, lies in this brilliant use of myth and poetic language. It is ripe with phrases that months and years later, trigger epiphanies bursting with meaning.

Years ago, I became fascinated by two lines in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, where Thoreau wrote:

I hear beyond the range of sound,
I see beyond the verge of sight. (pg. 217)

Originally I viewed these lines as referring to aesthetic experience, as one who deeply appreciates art responds to the subtle messages inherent to the mood and meaning captured by a particular work. But later in life I encountered a significance to these lines that was beyond my expectations.

Sometime ago a friend of mine recounted his experience of holding the hand of his aunt as she lay dying in bed before him. It was a precious moment when he suddenly intuitively realized the breath she had just begun would be her last. And after her final expiration came the unexpected experience of her departing spirit, as it was released from the body that was hers – or, as Thoreau described it; “When the play is over, the spectator goes its way.” Prior to that moment, my friend was not a religious person, but because of this experience, he now regularly attends my monthly theistic interfaith services.

Having had comparable subtle perceptions, both in my youth and later with the passing of my father, I realize now that reading Thoreau had opened my mind so that I could, on rare but significant occasions, "hear beyond the range of sound," and “see beyond the verge of sight.”

References

Harding, W. *The Days of Henry Thoreau: A Biography*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1982.

Muller, F. M. trans. *The Dhammapada*. Norwood Australia: Deodan Books, 2002.

Thoreau, H.D. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1966.

Thoreau, H.D. *Walden*, (with an introduction and annotations by Bill McKibben). Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

* * * * *

Journal selections are taken from: *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen, editors. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1962).