

## The Mystic's Resistance: Henry David Thoreau

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones, preaching  
December 3, 2017  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

### Hymns:

#1064 Blue Boat Home; #15 The Lone Wild Bird;  
#120 Turn Back, Turn Back.

### Reading from *Walden, or Life in the Woods*

Today's reading is a passage of American scripture.

Henry David Thoreau was born in 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts, a six hour walk from Boston, or an hour's drive if you are commuting in rush hour these days. When he was 28 he built a cabin in the woods near Walden Pond, two miles outside the town of Concord. He started work in March, digging a cellar in the ground. He bought a shanty from an Irish immigrant worker who was moving out of the area. Thoreau took it apart, board by board and nail by nail, hauled away the materials and built his place. He bought second-hand windows and bricks. He studied masonry to learn how to build a chimney and fireplace.

By July of 1845 it was ready. Thoreau lived in the cabin for two years. He treated his time there as an experiment in simplifying his life, as a private retreat, and an opportunity for self-study. Later he published the book *Walden*.



In the book *Walden* he says this:

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 proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world, or if it is sublime, to know it by experience and to be able to give a true account of it.



### Reflection by Larry Boles

Henry David Thoreau once said, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after."

I don't know when the trouble in my relationship began. Maybe it began before the relationship started. I've always had interesting timing that way. It took me a long time to see it. She would spend longer hours at work. I would not notice.

I was living with a woman in Vermont, and the relationship was breaking up. I didn't know it, of course. I had some things working against me. I was not a great listener, and I was male. A woman once told me that's really the same thing. But I do beg to differ. Still, at the time I didn't see it coming. I've tried to stick with things I know.

What I knew is that I loved to go fishing. There are awe inspiring streams in Vermont, and

the landscape is beautiful every season of the year. You could spend hours there, with time becoming just a lure you don't use anymore, down at the bottom of the tackle box.

I'd begun stopping by a stream on my way home from work at the hospital in Burlington. I probably looked ridiculous, with my sports coat and tie, out fishing in a stream just off the road a half mile or so. But I wasn't particularly worried about what I looked like. I rarely caught anything. It didn't matter to me.

Between you and me, it's hard to define what I was after. I'm sure it wasn't something at home, or in my tackle box. It wasn't swimming in the stream either. But being there, I could hear the water and smell the leaves. I could taste the essence of sadness and love and pain and beauty and healing, all on the side of a stream.



Commemorative stamp 2017

### Sermon by Roger Jones: The Mystic's Resistance

Live *your* life, not somebody else's. Your life is important—so make sure you are awake for it. No being is isolated, human or otherwise. Everyone is connected to every other life in this world—inter-connected, mutually dependent, and morally responsible. This is the gospel of Henry David Thoreau to me. In honor of his 200<sup>th</sup> birthday this year, I want to remember the rich inheritance we have from this prophet of simplicity and morality.

Born in 1817, Henry David Thoreau lived his life in Concord, Massachusetts. His father owned a pencil manufacturing company. He worked there for a time. Though eventually the firm did well, the family was not always well off. They could afford to put only one of their two sons through college, and this was Henry David. His mother and sisters were active in the feminist movement at the time, yet women could not attend Harvard College, as he could. Radcliffe College for women was not founded until 1879. So he lived in Cambridge and studied at Harvard from age 16 to age 20.

In addition to working for the family business, Thoreau was a teacher. He didn't last long at the public school, as he refused to administer daily beatings of students with a cane. He and his brother took over a private school, but it lasted only a few years.<sup>i</sup>

For a time, he tutored the children of his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, and stayed in their house. When he built his cabin by the pond, it was on land owned by the Emerson family. He stayed there for two years and two months, till Emerson asked him to move back and help with the children. Thoreau says, however, that he moved back because his experiment in the woods had come to its natural conclusion.<sup>ii</sup>

While at the cabin, Henry David wrote his book about a boating journey he'd made to New Hampshire with his brother, John, in 1839. Its title is *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. John died young of lockjaw—tetanus—three years after their trip, and that book was written in memory of him.

Though Henry David was a nonconformist, he was not a hermit, not a recluse. Staying a half-mile from the nearest neighbor gave him time alone for reading, writing and walking, but it also gave him company when he wanted. In his book *Walden*, he says he likes talking with other people.

He says he recruited neighbors to help frame his house, not that he couldn't frame it alone, but in order to promote neighborliness. I understand. When I can bring myself to ask for help, I realize how much others enjoy being generous. It makes a connection. When you have a talent you can offer, or time available, doesn't it sometimes feel nice when somebody asks you for a hand? Reaching out to give help and receive it—this is the practice of inter-dependence.



In the book Thoreau tallies the cost of materials for the house at \$28 and 12 ½ cents, not counting his labor in digging the cellar, toting materials, or nailing the boards. He says he went into town for work as a tutor and odd jobs as a handyman. He shared his money with his family

and made repairs at home. They did what little laundry he had, and served him dinner occasionally.

He went fishing a few times for food, and once he ate a woodchuck. Mostly, however, he stuck to a vegetarian diet. He would pick berries and chestnuts, and work in his field of peas and beans. In fact, he says the rows of his bean-field would extend seven miles if set end to end. He sounds to me like a modern zucchini gardener when he says, “I came to love my rows, though so many more than I wanted.”

His labors were always in relationship. He says, “[My helpers] are the dews and rains which water this dry soil, and what fertility is in the soil itself. My enemies are worms, cool days, and most of all woodchucks.” They once ate a quarter of an acre of his beans (146).<sup>iii</sup>

The spiritual highlights of his writing are intermingled with his close observation of nature. Once the pond had frozen over, he got down on the ice and looked. For three pages he describes the air bubbles in the layers of ice—their varied sizes and shapes—and the squeaks and pops of the air in the ice. Later, on a warm, sunny morning he sat in the doorway letting birds fly in, and observing a mosquito humming in the sunlight. His mystical moments are lovely. Furthermore, his close observations of nature and weather have been useful to later scientists, who have used his record of that local area to measure changes in climate patterns.



Thoreau is a 19<sup>th</sup> century example of being “spiritual but not religious.” As a young man Thoreau resigned from the First Parish of Concord, the Unitarian church where he had been christened as a baby and brought up in a liberal Christian atmosphere. In the Boston culture of the 1830s, it was not fashionable to *opt-out* of a church. In our time, however, it is not common to *seek* one out. Now, it’s counter-cultural to *belong* to a spiritual community.

As a writer, Henry David was part of the Transcendentalist movement of New England in the

1830s, 40s and 50s. His close friends were Unitarians, including ministers and former ones like Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Transcendentalists challenged the Christian Unitarianism in which they had grown up. To them it was cold, conventional, strict and limiting spiritually. People like Henry David would fit in much better with today’s Unitarian Universalist movement than in their old churches. For example, he studied various religions, which most Americans had never heard of. He embraced the scriptures of Hinduism and quoted from them. He compared the Buddha’s teachings to the ministry of Jesus Christ. He called on the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece and Rome. And of course, he studied the Divine by noticing the natural world—living as much as he could outside, observing nature and loving it. His writing does not condemn religious inspiration, only the religious conformity which inhibits our spiritual growth.

Furthermore, Thoreau’s words condemn all forms of conformity, including the change of tastes and fashions in society: “Every generation laughs at the old fashions but follows *religiously* the new [fashions],” he says (23, emphasis mine). The 20<sup>th</sup> century writer Kurt Vonnegut wrote his novels on a blue electric Smith- Corona typewriter on a short brown table. Carved in the table in white letters are these words from Henry David Thoreau: “Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.” In *Walden*, Thoreau says we need a transformed *person* in that clothing more than we need the new suit itself (21).

Thoreau is perhaps the original asker: are you a human being or a human doing? Doing, having, owning, wearing, shopping, chasing, grasping—when do these pursuits drown out the whisperings of your heart and your soul?

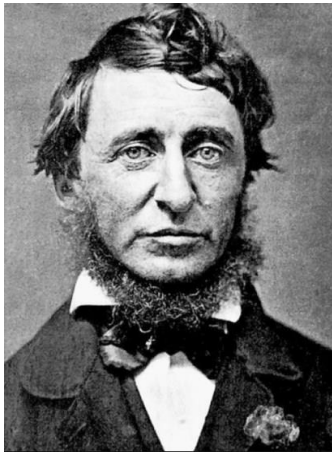
Thoreau sees everything as part of everything else; he saw people not as separate, but as connected to—and morally responsible for—one another. From this mystic’s vision came his resistance to unjust political systems.

Last month the Reverend William Barber II gave a lecture at St. Mark’s United Methodist Church, and the crowd included a few Unitarian Universalists. Barber has led the NAACP in North Carolina, where he started the Moral Monday civil disobedience protests for democracy and economic

justice. In a powerful speech to us, he touched on crippling poverty and racism, and on threats to our democracy which have enabled injustice to grow. Barber said these issues are *all* moral issues. He named Americans who had resisted unjust systems in this country. He named Martin Luther King Jr. and Henry David Thoreau. Like them, Barber said, “We must love our democracy enough to go to jail for it.”<sup>iv</sup>

After Henry David’s two years at Walden Pond, the local tax collector caught up with him. He told him he owed back taxes on the local poll tax, which was a fixed amount levied on every white male adult—the people who could vote. Thoreau refused to pay it. He said he would not be an agent of injustice. He objected to American slavery and he opposed U.S. imperialism. Earlier in that year of 1848, the U.S. victory in the Mexican-American war had brought California, Texas and New Mexico into U.S. possession. Imperialism, he called it.

As punishment for his refusal to pay, Thoreau was put in the local jail. A relative paid the tax right away and he was released after only a night there. While it may seem to be a small sacrifice for him to make, it’s worth noting how rare civil disobedience was before Thoreau. He brought attention to the moral need for such resistance. Later he gave a lecture in Concord which then was published as an essay, “Resistance to Civil Government.” We know it as *Civil Disobedience*.



Using the metaphor of the government as a machine, Thoreau writes that moral citizens must provide resistance when the state is moving in an unjust and immoral direction—provide a counter-action to the machine, he says. In like spirit, anti-war protestors have spoken of breaking the gears of our war machinery in acts of passive resistance.

Captain John Brown didn’t believe that passive resistance was enough. A radical abolitionist, he argued that American slavery must be fought with force. In October of 1859, Captain Brown, a 59-year-old white man, led 16 white men and five black men in a raid on the United States armory in Harper’s Ferry, in Virginia at the time. His goal was to spur an insurrection of slaves and to give them weapons. Brown’s raid failed, but it killed several men from the state militia and U.S. Marines. Brown was convicted of treason and murder and hanged in December.

Brown had already been a controversial figure for his violent efforts to stop the spread of slavery in Kansas. He was single-minded, obsessive and militant. Many leaders regarded him as insane. A month before Brown was executed, Henry David Thoreau gave a speech in Boston to a crowd of 2,500 people.<sup>v</sup> Thoreau said he was making a plea for Brown—not a plea for Brown’s life—but for how to regard the man’s character. He regarded Brown not as a traitor but as a martyr.

Thoreau said: “Newspaper editors argue ... that it is a proof of his insanity that Brown thought he was appointed to do this work.... They talk as if it were impossible that a man could be ‘divinely appointed’ in these days to do any work whatever; as if vows and religion were out of date as connected with any man’s daily work.... These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live.”<sup>vi</sup>

Thoreau predicted that Brown’s “acts and words [would] create a revival” in the opposition of slavery. He said Brown’s example “has already quickened the feeble pulse of the North, and infused more and more generous blood into her veins and heart, than [could] any number of years of what is called ... prosperity.”

That attack is credited with raising the tensions which led to the Civil War. Indeed, barely more than a year later, the Confederacy fired on the Union’s Fort Sumpter, starting the war. Yet it’s been argued that Thoreau’s address—given to a large Boston crowd and then published—is what sped up Northern and Southern animosities. It caused the Northern and Southern wings of the Democratic Party to run two separate candidates for President in 1860, enabling the Republican Abraham Lincoln to win.

Was Thoreau endorsing the violence of John Brown's raid? It's not clear. But given the persistence of the violence of slavery, he made the case that an armed assault was an understandable and inevitable response. Indeed, slavery was ended only through the worst war in the nation's history. John Brown didn't wait for the political system to bring force to the question of slavery.

Though of course Jesus of Nazareth had been a nonviolent figure, Thoreau made a connection between the crucifixion of Christ for treason against the Roman empire and the hanging of John Brown for treason against slavery's empire. As I noted earlier, Thoreau opposed the American empire's wars of expansion by refusing to pay his local tax.

At the same time, he opposed the empire of conformity. Our spiritual repression comes from a sense of duty and busy-ness and fear and conformity. It is caused by the distractions that keep us from receiving the simple gift of life. Thoreau calls this not living, not being awake to life.

So today, in the spirit of Henry David, I urge you to take a few minutes every day this month to be calm and still, whether walking or sitting. And in that stillness, be awake to life. Give thanks for yourself and your life and the miracle of life around you. Then, for a few moments, just listen to the whisperings of your heart. When you're done, say thank you.

Bill McKibben, the progressive Christian environmental activist and writer, says Thoreau's example has given our modern consumer society "the most deeply subversive question you can ... pose," and that is: How much is enough?

McKibben says, "We've been carefully trained to [think] that the answer is always: More."<sup>vii</sup>

Experimenting with simplicity, Thoreau monitored and measured how he spent his money and his time. He used quiet and stillness to listen to his heart and pay attention to the present moment. What would Thoreau think of our smart phones glowing and beeping all the time, social media prodding us with updates, non-stop news channels, and endless YouTube distractions? Well, he does write this: "Men have become the tools of their

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tools." (34) Indeed, don't we have so many devices and options that often we are not using them, but being used by them? What would he say about Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday, shopping malls, Amazon-dot-com, and rentable storage sheds? Well, in observing the estate sales around his own town, Thoreau says they are evidence of how much the deceased was constrained by the stuff they owned. Soon, he writes, all that stuff will be crowding in somebody else's living quarters and crowding in their soul.

Yet what he might say to us is not how *he* feels about it. Instead he might ask us how *we* feel. How does all this affect our own spirits, our relationships, and our sense of peace? How much is enough, and how do you know? These *are* subversive questions—they are spiritual questions and moral ones and political ones.

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy credits Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* as formative of his own Christian pacifism. Mohandas K. Gandhi led India's freedom struggle on the principles of nonviolent resistance that combined his own tradition with Thoreau's philosophy, and then Martin Luther King drew inspiration from Gandhi's example.

At the neighborhood level, all around North America, experiments in simple living, conservation, tiny houses, growing our own food, reduce/reuse/and recycle—many movements can give credit to Thoreau's words about simplicity and about human life as part and parcel of the natural world.

Henry David Thoreau died in 1862 from a series of respiratory illnesses ending in tuberculosis. He was 45. Sensing he would not recover, he revised lectures and essays to be published after his death. Except for four years in college over at

Harvard and two years in that cabin two miles outside his hometown, Thoreau never moved away.

He was born in Concord and he died there. Yet he changed lives around the world. His courage in living and loving life has touched people of all traditions and places. His eloquence in recounting his motivations, choices, explorations and questions has nourished so many spirits. He has inspired those of us who care about the quality of our lives together.

Thoreau would be happy to know that many of us continue to love democracy, insist on freedom, care about the planet, and strive to simplify our lives, take time off-line and get outside. Yet he would not want us to follow him, but follow our own hearts. This is his gospel.

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<sup>ii</sup> Robert D. Richardson, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley, 1986: University of California Press).

<sup>ii</sup> Barry Andrews, "Henry David Thoreau," Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography. Accessed December 2, 2017. <http://uudb.org/articles/henrydavidthoreau.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Every parenthetical page number is a reference to Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, (Boston, 2017: Beacon Press).

<sup>iv</sup> William Barber II, Moon Lecture, St. Mark's United Methodist Church, Sacramento, November 3, 2017. For more information see the Poor People's Campaign at Repairers of the Breach website: <https://www.breachrepairers.org>

<sup>v</sup> Jedediah Purdy, "A Radical for All Seasons," *The Nation*, June 1, 2017. Accessed December 1, 2017.

Live *your* life, not somebody else's. Whoever you are, your life is important—so make sure you are awake for it. Every day is a new opportunity to be awake to life. No being is isolated, human or otherwise. Every *one* is connected to every other life in this world—inter-connected, mutually dependent, and morally responsible. So may we strive to live, and so may it be.

Amen.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/thoreau-radical-seasons/>

<sup>vi</sup> Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," read to the Citizens of Concord, Massachusetts Sunday evening, October 30, 1859, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School.

[http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/thoreau001.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/thoreau001.asp) Note: Jedediah Purdy writes that he read this plea aloud on November 1, 1859, to an audience of 2,500 in Boston: Jedediah Purdy, "A Radical for All Seasons," *The Nation*, June 1, 2017.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/thoreau-radical-seasons/>

<sup>vii</sup> Bill McKibben, "Introduction," in *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, by Henry David Thoreau (Boston, 2017: Beacon Press), xii.