

Gifts of an Earth Brother: The Simplicity and Resistance of Henry David Thoreau

Sunday, August 16, 2026

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones; person reflection by Eric Gudz, Worship Associate (printed at end)

Hymns: 21, For the Beauty of the Earth; #391, Voice Still and Small; #108, My Life Flows on in Endless Song. Special Music (see notes on the music at end): Arthur Foote, Andante from 3 Pieces for cello and piano, Op.1, No.2 Amy Beach, "Dark Garden," tenor and piano; Edward A. MacDowell, "Once Through the Forest." from *Six Idyls after Goethe*.

Sermon Part 1 (see Sources Consulted list at end)

Henry David Thoreau was born in July of 1817 in the village of Concord, Massachusetts, 20 miles outside of Boston. He died at age 44 from tuberculosis in the same town. Except for a few excursions to explore forests, rivers and mountains in New England and eastern Canada, and except for a couple of short stays in Staten Island and Brooklyn, New York, he lived his entire life in Concord. By sharing the wisdom and inspiration he gained from his little piece of the world, his books and essays have had a powerful impact on people in all parts of the world. He showed us that if we slow down to behold what's around us, we might find the whole world wherever we may be.

Who was Thoreau? First, how do you say his name? On the recent series about him on Public Television you can hear scholars say THOR-eau as well as Thor-EAU, so let's not worry about it. He was the third child in a family of four kids. He attended progressive school, and at age 16 went to Harvard College. It was too costly to send both Henry and his older brother, and where his sisters couldn't even apply to Harvard back then. He graduated in the middle of his class. He became an elementary school teacher, but when he was told he must beat the students to keep them in line, he refused. He quit after two weeks.

He worked for a time in a factory owned by his father and uncle—a pencil factory. Henry devised mixing the graphite used for pencils with clay in various concentrations. This not only kept the pencil from smearing, it allowed for different grades of hardness of the lead, going from grade 1 to grade 4. Yes, we can thank Henry for the #2 pencil. Though the company prospered, he went back to teaching. That is, Henry and his brother, John, started a small school together. They encouraged the kids to express their thoughts and feelings and to voice their disagreements with the teachers. It lasted for only three years due to his brother's weak health.

Thoreau's deep calling was to be a writer. He became friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson. He moved into the Emerson family home, where he tutored their children and served as an assistant to Emerson, who became a mentor and father figure. Emerson had been a Unitarian minister for three years before he quit. After that, Emerson devoted himself to writing essays, giving lectures, and organizing the young men and women of the Transcendental Club, whose members would lead an intellectual revolution in this country.

Here's my quick summary of American Transcendentalism. It was a literary, philosophical, and political movement of the mid-1800s, inspired by British and European romanticism in art, literature, and music. It stressed human individuality over the confining expectations of society, trusting our personal intuition and our emotions, and learning lessons

from observing nature. The movement combined an emphasis on self-expression with a commitment to social reform.

The Transcendentalist journal was called *The Dial*, and its editor for a time was Margaret Fuller. Henry David Thoreau contributed to *The Dial*, especially essays about the scriptures of Hinduism and Buddhism. In 1840s America, this was remarkable. Many of the Transcendentalists had grown up as Unitarians in the Boston area, and some still went to church or even served as ministers. Some others, however, including Fuller, Emerson, and Thoreau, found their churches too conventional, cold, and boring.

Emerson's best advice to Thoreau was to write in a journal every day. He did this from age 20 until he died at 44, generating 47 handwritten journals. In his essays, Thoreau shines as a naturalist, with detailed and clear descriptions of what he observed hour after hour, day after day, season after season.

One reviewer says that Thoreau's journals "are so scrupulously attentive to the annual arrival and disappearance of plants that they have become a trove of data for climate scientists who study long-term ecological change."

Henry and his older brother John took a week-long hiking and canoeing trip along the Concord River and the Merrimack River. In his later book about the journey, Thoreau described a lot of beauty, yet he also wrote about the growth of the lumber and milling industries. He saw that a dam on the river had blocked fish from getting to their spawning grounds. He wrote that he'd like to break the dam with a crowbar.

The most famous book that he wrote is called *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. It's become a classic of naturalist literature. He built a cabin by a pond on land owned by the Emerson family. He recorded his life there for two years, two months, and two weeks. Thoreau called it an experiment in examining life slowly, carefully, and up close. He wanted to simplify life. He wanted to find out, he said, "what are the true necessities and means of life."

In *Walden*, he wrote about the meals he ate, the plants he grew for food, and the fish he caught in the pond. The book is bursting with mystical moments. Thoreau conveyed the bliss of lying in the sunshine coming through his cabin's open doorway, watching birds, dragonflies and mosquitoes in the light. He described a mouse that crawled over his boot, snacking on fallen crumbs. Eventually it would climb up the sleeves of his shirt and down the other side in its explorations.

Thoreau recounted how much money he spent, and on what, and the money he made by selling some of the produce he grew. Using repurposed lumber, he built the cabin 10 feet by 15 feet--one hundred fifty square feet. That's less than the half the size of a studio apartment in San Francisco or New York City, but he wanted to simplify. And of course he had lots of extra space just outside the cabin door.

If you visit Massachusetts, you can go to Walden Pond in Concord to see a replica of the cabin. In it you will see that in addition to having a twin bed, a writing desk and a table, Thoreau had three chairs. Three. "One for solitude," he said; "two for friendship, and three for society."

He had plenty of solitude, but he was not alone all the time. That is, he lived only a mile from neighbors. He walked to the village every few days "to hear the gossip," he said. He was not hiding from humanity in the woods, only getting a little distance to look at how society causes us to live. Over his two years and two months in the cabin, he befriended Native

Americans nearby as well as a free Black family. He realized that indigenous people had lived on that land many years longer than white people. He realized that free Black farmers were not free enough to have access to decent soil, which made it hard to flourish as independent farmers.

Published three years after his experiment had concluded, the book *Walden* is a loving account of the ways of nature in that particular part of the world. It's a critical reflection on the challenge of living with purpose and attention in what he saw was a distracted consumer society. It's amazing that he wrote it 170 years ago. He asked the question which continues to speak to us: How much is enough?

Indeed, his words can still speak to us about our modern human dissatisfaction with what we have, our habit of grasping for more instead of embracing what's here and now. He wrote: "Fools stand on their island of opportunities—and look toward another land. There is no other land. There is no other life but this."

In our own lives, may we find reminders to notice this life, and embrace each day as a gift. Amen.

Personal Reflection by Eric (printed at end)

Sermon Part 2

Henry David Thoreau lived in his cabin at Walden Pond for two years, two months, and two weeks, July of 1845 to September of 1847. He went into the village of Concord every few days, chatting with people, doing odd jobs, and visiting his family. They were not wealthy, and Henry helped out with household expenses and minor repairs. His mother did his laundry and sometimes fed him a meal.

On one afternoon in July of 1846, while Thoreau was walking on a Concord street, he encountered Sam Staples, the tax assessor. Staples noted that Henry David had not paid his poll tax for four years and asked him to do so. In the mid-1800s, the poll tax was required of every adult white male citizen—the only ones who had the right to vote.¹ Thoreau said no; he would not pay it. He even refused the man's offer to pay the tax for him. Staples was also the constable and jailer, so he took him in and locked him up.

A few years later, Thoreau explained the reasons for his actions in an essay which we know as *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*. Unlike the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's notable *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, from 1963, Thoreau didn't write his essay while incarcerated. That's because after just one day after he was locked up, he was bailed out by one of his relatives, who paid his tax bill. Thoreau was *not* happy about it.

The essay was printed in a journal published by Elizabeth Peabody, another Boston-area Unitarian and a leading Transcendentalist. The essay ran under the title *Resistance to Civil Government*.

Thoreau had refused to pay the tax for two reasons of morality. One was the enslavement of Black adults and children in the southern states of this country, combined with the complicity of northern industries that relied on the products of enslaved labor—industries and consumers. The second reason was the United States war with Mexico then taking place. We had already taken over Texas, and fights around a border area there led to our full-scale invasion of the Republic of Mexico. Anti-slavery activists were opposed adding western territories because the

likely result of an annexation would be an extension of slavery into those places. Indeed, this turned out to be the case in Texas.

Thoreau had learned about these issues from the women in his family and from Ralph Waldo Emerson's wife, Lydia, in whose house Thoreau lived for several years. They all were members of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society. Its name doesn't sound radical, but it was. Founded by white women and a free Black woman, that organization worked against the Indian Removal Act, the Fugitive Slave Law, and the war with Mexico. They supported the Underground Railroad, a secret network through which enslaved people could get to Canada, a land of refuge where they would not be abducted.

Once, the Female Anti-Slavery Society invited Lewis Hayden to lecture in Concord. Hayden was a free Black man who had been enslaved; he and his siblings had been split up and sold as children. By this time, the Female Anti-slavery Society had become so disliked that leaders of the local Unitarian parish refused to let them hold it in their church, even though other lectures had taken place there. The program was moved to the courthouse, where the town's leaders wanted it to have a low profile. Before the lecture began, however, Henry David Thoreau slipped into the bell tower, and rang the bell, drawing an audience.

In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau said the whole country was complicit in slavery. Its supporters, he wrote, were not merely southern politicians, but "merchants and farmers here [in the north] who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity. [They are not prepared, he said] to do justice to the slave and Mexico."

I feel his criticism finding its way to us in 21st century America and into my own life and my choices. That is, even if we dislike the kinds of injustice taking place around us, technology and commerce draw us toward comfort and convenience rather than the discomfort and risk of resisting. He writes: "There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the war, who in effect do nothing to put an end to them."

Thoreau acknowledged that making the moral choice in such situations has a cost, but he said that doing what is just and right is its own reward.

As I noted, Henry David Thoreau learned his moral views from women in his life, but it's still worth asking: How did someone so devoted to developing his spirituality get so political? *Where* in his words of affection for ponds, forests, insects, wild animals, and the soil could this come from? How is it that a writer who loved solitude and simplicity would take such a strident moral stand against the government?

What connected Thoreau's loving attention of the natural world to his political worldview, it seems clear, was his understanding of interdependence. In vivid word-pictures he showed how all of life is mutually dependent. In a web of relationships, everything is connected to everything else. Likewise, every member of the human family is connected. And our connections make us responsible.

Duke University legal scholar Jedidiah Purdy has written, "Thoreau realized that he could not separate himself from the crimes of his country, however much he would have liked to do just that. And so... he became an activist because he could not help being a citizen, and because as a citizen he could not help being implicated in his country's intolerable wrongs."

The idealism of Thoreau's love of the land and its plants and creatures is the same idealism that envisions a government that honors the dignity and freedom of every human

person. Thoreau said: “I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all people, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor.”

In the words of Laura Dassow Walls, a biographer of Thoreau, for him, “Resistance... means...[defending] all those lives entangled with our own.”

From his experiments in solitude and simplicity, he preached the gospel that each person must notice to the ordinary magnificence of the world around you, pay attention to the world inside you, and be yourself. At the same time, he reminded us that we are never alone. We depend on other beings and other people, and they depend on us.

In the days to come, let us remember the legacy of these lessons. May they give us gratitude, courage, and hope. Amen.

Personal Reflection by Eric, Worship Associate

A few weeks ago I was reclining in Southern Oregon’s Rogue River on our family’s first big road trip, submerged in my precariously balanced chair and watching loose pebbles slowly sift through my hands in the clear waters below. Untethered, unbothered, and away from the static of society, I simply just existed in that river for a time, taking in the lessons of the water and wind and allowing myself to fully embrace these precious moments of simplicity as I watch my family soak up the summer day. A few weeks before that I was trying to keep up with our teens as they raced up to a lofty overlook and began to survey a valley carved by glaciers nearly 9,000 feet above sea level. Looking down on the glorious Twin Lakes deep in the Eldorado Forest literally took my breath away, and not because I was straight winded trying to keep up.

Moments like these draw me to Thoreau’s wisdom, in particular this excerpt about simplicity: *“I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest thinks he must attend to in a day; how singular an affair he thinks he must omit. When the mathematician would solve a difficult problem, he first frees the equation of all incumbrances, and reduces it to its simplest terms. So simplify the problem of life, distinguish the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots run.”*

That last sentence has been a grounding one for me recently, one that I have called upon a bit in recent months as I grapple with my own persistent struggles as well as the future. I’ve always appreciated Thoreau’s adherence to finding wisdom in the woods and among our natural world, and I can attest that I’ve learned some of my best lessons out in the wild too. Lessons of Patience, Forgiveness, Resiliency. Within the solitude of nature is where I really learned simplicity. I learned how accessible joy can be, but that I couldn’t hold onto everything to have it. I learned there are places on Earth where I could just be, without expectation, anxiety, or anything else from society. The liberation, the freedom I feel when among the woods is unparalleled.

I still think about Thoreau's warning from time to time: "*The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation*" and reflect on the authentic, wild edges of my own soul that remain mostly out of sight, emerging more often now in fleeting memories of a more curious and adventurous self. What awaits me should I go down that more adventurous path? More wilderness; or perhaps more clarity?

Truly, the paralysis of this analysis is omnipresent in my life, save when I surrender myself to the simplicity of our natural world. One of the few true anecdotes to my stressors and anxieties, and one that brings me to a place of comfort, of community. In my times of need, I draw upon these lessons deeply to bring myself back to the present, back to simply existing as part of one giant, living, breathing, interconnected web of life. I hope you all can draw upon Thoreau's reflections of simplicity and admiration for the natural world as much as I have, and may it bring you enduring comfort.

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¹Black men got the right to vote in Massachusetts and a few other New England states in 1860.