



One of the hallmarks of our liberal religious heritage is a reticence to embrace the religious concepts of sainthood and prophecy. It's not that we don't recognize the extraordinary contributions of gifted individuals who have left a lasting mark on our culture and tradition, it is that we are hesitant to ascribe their giftedness to a uniquely divine origin. Instead, we prefer to note the circumstances, values and commitments of an ordinary life lived well that have produced into extraordinary outcomes. This shift in thinking allows us to embrace the possibility that each one of us may somehow have the potential to reach such heights, not simply those few set apart for greatness.

However, even in our discomfort with sainthood, there are those individuals connected to our tradition that we embrace and hold up from generation to generation, those individuals who continue to inspire our living into the future.

Such is the life and legacy of Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau, which I must stress is now commonly pronounced like the words thorough or furrow, not THOR-eau, as I learned growing up, may even be one exception to our UU saint rule. This year marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Thoreau's birth, which is being widely celebrated, both within our small but mighty denomination, and in the nation at large. Thoreau's legacy still has much to teach generations of Unitarian Universalists, members of a Uniquely American spiritual movement inspired by his ideals, trying to live not as saints but as ordinary people, living simply and deliberately, engaging our democracy directly as citizens, and preserving our planet for ourselves and future generations.

Let's review a little bit about Thoreau's life.

He was born on July 12<sup>th</sup>, 1817, the third of four children in Concord, Massachusetts. The Thoreau family business was pencil manufacturing, which Thoreau helped maintain throughout his life in addition to his paid work as a surveyor and lecturer. After his education at Harvard, Thoreau returned to his native Concord in 1837 and found himself surrounded by a bustling spiritual and intellectual movement we now understand as Transcendentalism.

The movement was largely theological, finding its origin with disaffected Unitarian ministers like William Ellery Channing, often called the grandfather of Unitarianism, Orestes Brownson and of course, perhaps most famously, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Joining the ranks of the former ministers were educators and social reformers like Bronson Alcott and women breaking ground in the literary world like Margaret Fuller. Thoreau was fascinated by the movement, and in particular with the work of his neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson, fourteen years his senior and already an established philosopher and popular lecturer. Emerson saw Thoreau's potential, and invited him into the Transcendentalist circles, and his own home, where he lived as a live-in tutor for Emerson's children, groundskeeper and handyman.

The spiritual core of the transcendentalist movement came from a discontent with the state of American Protestantism, as found in the Unitarian churches of Boston and its suburbs. The movement was influenced by German idealist philosophers like Immanuel Kant, who began to describe human religious insight as

originating from one's own intuition and independent connection to God, as perceived through human reason and the five senses.

In Emerson's words, he wished to have an "original relationship with the universe," unmediated through the words of the bible or interpreted through the words of a preacher. This was a hugely important turn in religious history, which our faith today still stands upon. If Christian religious dogma and scripture did not exclusively hold religious truth, there suddenly opened possibilities for religious connection outside of the institution of the Christian church, and beyond the bible. This opened doors to other religions could also hold truth and wisdom, specifically eastern traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism, which the transcendentalists studied and helped to translate into English. Beyond this, one didn't actually need any religious text or tradition at all to be a spiritual person—rather, one could connect through nature or simply through deep self-reflection. These were all radical spiritual concepts at the time, which have become hallmarks of American spirituality.

The term Transcendentalist was first used as a way to criticize these wayward ministers, who some perceived had abandoned their pulpits in pursuit of self-centered intellectual pursuits. Some, like William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker, remained in their pulpit and turned their congregations theologically towards more open and expansive theology.

Overall, the Transcendentalist group was known for risk taking in and outside of their institutions, whether religious, educational or social services, and rigorous pursuit of intellectual freedom. Emerson once said "All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better."

Steeped in the theories of Emerson, Thoreau was eager to take up his own transcendentalist experiment. It was Emerson who leant Henry the parcel of land on Walden Pond, just a mile from Concord center, a beautiful wooded landscape largely untouched by human hand. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1845, Thoreau began his two year project in "living deliberately" on Walden Pond, building what we could deem a modern day "tiny house" with only a simple pallet for a bed, a fireplace for cooking and warmth, and a small table with three small chairs—in his words "one for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society." He spent his days walking over four hours a day, chronicling the plant and animal life of the surrounding area, and reflecting on the state of the times.

He also reflected on the signs of the times: a northern society rapidly industrializing and brimming with new ideas and economies, a southern society held hostage by the stain of slavery. He wrote on the duties of the engaged citizen, collecting his ideas into long form essays and speeches, most famously published as *Civil Disobedience*. Incensed by the senseless violence of the Mexican American war and the ongoing injustice of slavery, Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax and spent a night in the Concord jail, citing the responsibility of the everyday citizen to resist unjust laws. He was an ardent supporter of abolitionist efforts, and applauded the resistance to slavery embodied by John Brown.

If Thoreau were alive today, he would surely raise his voice for the injustices of our time, calling for us to resist unjust laws like the travel ban and to help advance economic and racial equality. The spirit of transcendentalism, as he saw it, was a quintessential American democratic ideal of equality and liberty that each person, regardless of class, race, and creed, should enjoy.

Thoreau's two year sojourn to Walden Pond reminds us just how difficult it is to live in community, especially during eras of moral and political strife. Many of us know firsthand how it appealing to withdraw from the world altogether, how difficult people can be and how slow change can feel. Thoreau's Walden experiment

shows us how we still need periods of withdrawal to restore ourselves spiritually and reconnect with the natural world in order to be more engaged and active citizens of our democracy.

In his days in the woods and beyond, Thoreau was also a dedicated naturalist. For over 10 years of his short adult life, he chronicled the flora and fauna of Walden Pond, leaving behind traces for modern climate scientists.

Richard Primack is a professor of biology at Boston University, a climate scientist who focuses his research on the effects of global warming on the flora and fauna of Massachusetts. Primack is the author of the book *Walden Warming: Climate Change Comes to Walden Woods*. Over ten years ago, he discovered that Thoreau's passion for observing the natural world had motivated him to meticulously record the "timing of seasonal changes for every species and plant he knew in Concord."

Primack writes of Thoreau's journals:

*Over the course of time, he extracted information on flowering times from his field notes and journals and compiled them into tables on large sheets of surveyor's paper—the action of a scientist. However, Thoreau was also preoccupied with the connections among beauty, philosophy and the natural rhythms of the seasons. He wanted to use his time with nature to enrich his own sense of life. He wanted to see as deeply as possible into nature, not through it or beyond it.*

Because of Thoreau's journals, a rare and precious set of data, scientists like Primack are able to uniquely track global warming's effect on Walden. He writes:

*The timing of many of the events that Thoreau noted — the days that blueberries flowered, yellow-rumped warblers arrived, or ice melted on Walden Pond — are exquisitely sensitive to changes in temperature. They reveal that because of warming temperatures in Concord (warming associated with human-induced climate change) many plants now flower and leaf out about 10 days earlier than in Thoreau's time. Warming temperatures have also contributed to the decline of many of our most treasured wildflowers in Concord — think lilies and orchids — and have facilitated the spread of invasive species such as purple loosestrife.*

Primack calls Thoreau a world class climate scientist, far ahead of his time.

As we consider Thoreau's legacy at 200, it is most certainly for us to continue to uphold the evidence of global warming and to heed the call to protect our planet in every way we can. As our new administration withdraws our nation from the Paris Climate accord, we know that our local efforts to preserve and protect our planet are more important than ever, and that we must help our state of California be the national leader on climate issues. Our congregation is poised to do this work, having affirmed a charge to explore becoming a Net-zero carbon emissions congregation. I look forward to our environmental justice work over the coming months and years.

Thoreau's life demonstrated how the simple act of being in relationship with a landscape, consistently over time, is a necessity both for adequate environmental stewardship and for essential spiritual practice. Summer is a season when many of us retreat to beloved natural landscapes again and again. Whether we go to Camp DeBonneville, the High Sierras, Big Bear Lake or simply take the newly extended Metro to the beaches, we need these sacred spaces to refresh our spirits and reflect on our lives. From the gratitude we have for these places in our lives, we are motivated to preserve and protect them in the near term and long term for future generations.

I grew up in the Concord, Massachusetts Unitarian Universalist congregation, and have been making a pilgrimage to Walden Pond since I was a teenager growing up in the First Parish, Concord Unitarian Church. I have returned to the quiet woods by myself, with lovers and friends, with my family, and with members of congregations making a Boston pilgrimage. I have been in every season, rain or shine. I love the gold and crimson leaves as much as I do the barren trees and frozen ground. One time, I'll confess I illegally took to the waters in moonlight one summer I lived in Boston as a college student. It was worth it.

While I am not a scientist, I am comforted that neither was Thoreau. I channel Thoreau's transcendentalist spirit on each of these visits, paying careful attention to the changes I note each visit: both the changes in the land, the rise and fall of the waters, the quality of the sand, and the changes in the world and my own life. I return to the pond to review the seasons of my life. I recall important moments marked there, with tears and laughter: reckoning with disappointment of a failed relationship, grief over the loss of a close friend, joy at being credentialed as a minister. I returned there right before I moved to California to begin serving here, facing the uncertainty and excitement of a new settlement thousands of miles from my New England home.

This year, I returned to Walden Pond with my mother. We walked around the pond as we always do, chatting in periods and silent in others. We both were marking milestone in our lives: my mother, moving forward from the grief over losing her beloved partner. Me, marking a very different milestone that I am so thrilled yet nervous to share with you. If all goes well, which it has so far, Sam and I will be adding a new member to the congregation! We are expecting our first child in January. We ask for your support and blessing as we start our family, we know she will be very loved!!

So back to our Pond walk. This year, as I walked the sandy trails alongside Walden's tranquil waters, I the miracle of the new life inside me lifting me kindling an overflowing of gratitude and peace, coupled with the great responsibility and terror I feel as I carry this child. I confessed to my mother my hopes and my fears. At one point, my mother pointed out a shady, wooded shoreline spot where she and her deceased partner had one of their first dates. There Bob first confessed his terminal illness to her. She teared up thinking of how fearful he was that she would leave him as his illness progressed, and how his living and even his dying had blessed her. We were both keenly aware of how fragile life can be, and what a great risk to dare to bring forth new love in the face of death, to bring forth new life into a beautiful and broken world. We finished our walk and stepped into the depth of the pond's cool waters, refreshed and made new once again. Thoreau once wrote: "A lake is a landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is Earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."

We need to return to the natural world when we are lost, to restore our sense of self and to help us make sense of the seasons of our lives, and the mystery of time. These sacred natural landscapes help us to pay attention, to be profoundly awake as a witness to the changes wrought by a swiftly changing planet on a place, and on our own lives: praising what is good and beautiful, mourning what is lost and broken, facing our fears, awakening gratitude and inspiring our conservation commitments.

May it be so, and Amen.