

The First Unitarian Church of Hamilton

Hamilton, Ontario

Sermon by Robert Nielsen, Sunday 15th February 2009

Service Leader: /Valerie Nielsen

Topic: "Henry David Thoreau: The Worst Man in the World?"

Henry David Thoreau: The Worst Man in the World?

by Robert Nielsen

Note: All quotations from Thoreau are in italics.

Sublime words from Henry David Thoreau are not difficult to find:

Why should I feel lonely? Is our planet not in the milky way?

What is the use of a house, if you don't have a tolerable planet to put it on?

Well, if you like these, you could probably become a rabid Thoreau fanatic. I must give you my top two favourites. These have been in my soul since I left the University of Alberta with my hard-earned B.A.

To make the earth say beans instead of grass - this was my daily work.

Some circumstantial evidence is overwhelming - like when you find a trout in the milk.

Some guys love baseball, some guys love cars, but I love figurative language.

The reason I lobbied for this opportunity to speak is because I wanted to run enough Henry David Thoreau by you to convince you to go home and haul out your mouldy copy of Walden,. Then you can share his extraordinary wisdom and spirituality, his foresight which made him, according to President Jimmy Carter, "the pioneer of the American environmental movement", his scintillating style, his genius for simile and metaphor, and - this may come as a surprise - his falling-off-the-couch humour, a rich ironic variety which I adore. And he has some answers; in the face of the complexities of modern civilization - 1854 or 2009 - his remedy is simplification, a more leisurely existence, with time for communion with Nature, and development of the individual to his highest possibilities.

Walden; or Life in the Woods was published in 1854, but I keep doing double takes as I read because it all seems so fresh.

A single word or two will zoom a sentence into the 21st century:

In his chapter "Winter Animals", Thoreau calls the partridge "Nature's own bird which lives on buds and diet-drink"

And he mentions "One old hunter who used to bathe in Walden once every year when the water was warmest...took his gun one afternoon and went out for a cruise in Walden Wood."

"Our woods team with them both, and around every swamp may be seen the partridge or rabbit walk, beset with twiggy fences and horsehair snares, which some cowboy sets."

"When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us if we walked only in a garden or a mall?"

Although he was a superb writer, according to Rocker Don Henley of "The Eagles" (about whom more later), "Thoreau published only a few articles and two books during his lifetime, and one sold so poorly that a large shipment was sent to Thoreau from his publisher - perhaps the first remainders in history. He wrote in his journal, 'I now have a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself.'" As a publisher, I can truly sympathize - with both the publisher and the author!

Here we go...

"I never dreamed of any enormity greater than I have committed. I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself."

- Henry David Thoreau

I wondered if the fact that Thoreau didn't go to church might help account for his poor self-image? He certainly wasn't keen to attend; he wasn't exactly a joiner, as indicated by this quote: "Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society."

Then what did Henry do instead of attending services? The editor of my Portable Thoreau knows: "...his distrust for the church as an institution almost equalled his contempt for trade. No one ever pointed out Thoreau as a church-goer; on Sunday morning when almost all Concord heeded the church bell, Henry Thoreau went for a walk by Walden Pond."

Thoreau recommends this practice in his journal, the source of most of his writings: "if the prospect of an early morning walk does not banish sleep, if the warble of the first bluebird does not thrill you, - know that the morning and spring of your life are past. Thus may you feel your pulse." But he adds in a lecture called "Life Without Principle", "If a man walk in the woods for the love of them, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!"

His remedy constitutes one of my favourite quotes from Thoreau - it is totally fresh and relevant today - and tomorrow:

"I think that each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, either in one body or several - where a stick should never be cut for fuel - nor for the navy nor to make wagons, but stand and decay for higher uses, a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation."

The composer John Cage tells about one result of Henry wandering in the woods instead of sitting in a pew: it's about "a proper Concord lady who each year would put flowers on the grave of Ralph Waldo Emerson. As she passed the nearby grave of Henry David Thoreau, she would mutter, 'And none for you, you dirty little atheist!'"

Thoreau expresses his strong dislike of institutional religion. He writes, "The spirit of sect and bigotry has planted its foot amid the stars. You have only to discuss the problem, whether the stars are inhabited or not, in order to discover it." He blames what he calls "the D.D.s" for this - the Doctors of Divinity - and perhaps believes it had an adverse effect on his writing career: "There is not a popular magazine in this country that would dare to print a child's thought on important subjects without comment. It must be submitted to D.D.'s. I would it were the chickadee-dees."

Poor man seemed to have it in for the clergy. Especially when he thought he was being patronized. A clergyman, visiting after Henry had just been to Walden Pond, slapped him on the shoulder: "So here's the chap who camped in the woods!" Thoreau responded, "And here's the chap that camps in a pulpit."

Our own Bill Johnston, resident expert on Thoreau, sees the man as a possible candidate for our church, as expressed in a limerick:

Come awake, says Henry D. Thoreau

Live today, not the past or tomorrow

Be yourself. Take a stand

Simplify. Love the land.

Tell the truth. Live in joy, not sorrow.

Although Bill adds a caveat: "I think Thoreau was profound as mystic, social activist and environmentalist but his excessive individualism is a characteristic that still poisons our Unitarian Universalist movement today."

I showed up the first night of Dr. Karen Trollope-Kumar's course on Thoreau's Walden and we were asked why we were attending. Most people voiced a desire to know more about this famous and influential book, which they had previously encountered. I had read Walden - or rather, I thought I'd read Walden - way back as part of a course in American literature taught by Norman Shrive at McMaster University. (He was the only person I ever heard use the word "onomatopoeic", and I resolved to find an excuse to use it one day. Today is the day.) I thought I was quite well-versed in the works of the famous American writer - that he was a New Englander, born and raised in Concord Massachusetts, also home to his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, that he had graduated from Harvard, and later abandoned his house in Concord for a couple of years to live in a nearby forest in a shack he built for the occasion. And that he wrote a famous book about it, which I had read.

But I quickly discovered that all I had read was a single chapter, one entitled "Where I Lived, and What I Lived for." There were others I had somehow neglected to read - they numbered sixteen. However, that chapter contained some of the most startling sentences I had ever encountered - fresh and original - such as: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." And,

"Still we live meanly, like ants." And, "Our life is frittered away by detail." And, "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life?" And - especially - "Hardly a man takes a half hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, 'What's the news?'" I loved how he develops this idea:

I am sure I have never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter - we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications?

I think everybody in Karen's class was amused by the wide assortment of editions of Walden which we brought along. Some had been purchased many years ago, usually for a university course. Others were brand spanking new. It all attested to the longevity of this masterpiece; it speaks to millions today as loudly as it spoke to the few who first read it in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Years ago I visited The Thoreau Lyceum in Concord, which describes itself as "a 19th century shingled house on the southern extension of Belnap Street next to the lot on which the Thoreau family's 'Texas House' once stood." It has a museum, which includes "lead pencils made in the family business", which once employed Henry (I wish I'd had one to compose my sermon), and there is a "replica of the Walden House" in the backyard. The most memorable items I found in the museum were envelopes pinned on a bulletin board, all addressed to "Mr. H.D. Thoreau", and all of modern vintage, including an offer for a credit card from American Express.

I also have a tiny collection of Thoreauviana of my own. Here's a sticker I picked up with an uncannily timely quotation from Henry David: "In wilderness is the preservation of the world." My favourite souvenir of Thoreau is a card from my daughter Marina, stating "May You Have A THOREAULY HAPPY FATHER'S DAY!" Additionally, being a philatelist I take pride in my First Day Cover, issued "To Commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of the Author of 'Walden; or, Life in the Woods.'" It

bears an engraving of Thoreau's woodsbound shack, an 8-cent stamp with a portrait of the writer (not a pretty sight), and it's postmarked Concord, Massachusetts, 12 July 1967, "First Day of Issue." This was Canada's Centennial; Thoreau once visited our country, and wrote an essay called "A Yankee in Canada", which begins, "I fear that I have not got much to say about Canada, not having seen much; what I got by going to Canada was a cold."

I should mention another article he wrote, one which had earth-shaking results. It came up on Jeopardy last Wednesday, when Alex asked, "He wrote 'Civil Disobedience' as a result of not paying his taxes to support the Mexican-American War." Thoreau went to jail for a day as a result of defending what he called "the basic principle that if an institution is doing wrong, you must fight the institution - not with 'rifle and knife' but with conscientious civil disobedience." It was influential in the future career of one Mahatma Gandhi, who read it as a young man in South Africa, and pronounced, "It left a deep impression upon me."

Thoreau was also a poet. My favourite of his verses form a single rhyming couplet which sums up his career:

My life has been the poem I would have writ;

But I could not both live and utter it.

What about Thoreau the man? He came across as a cold person, and edgy. Acquaintances found him uncomfortable company. Here is a quick sketch by his friend - not a close friend, because Thoreau got on the man's nerves, and was in love with his wife - Ralph Waldo Emerson:

He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh; he drank no wine; he never knew the use of tobacco; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. He chose, wisely, no doubt, for himself, to be the bachelor of thought and nature.

Emerson also said he'd rather take the branch of an elm tree than the arm of Henry David Thoreau. He could be prickly, and Emerson wrote that he was only comfortable "in opposition" to another person.

Henry idealized women and kept them at a distance. He lived with the Emersons for some time, and couldn't enter Mrs. Emerson's kitchen without blushing. He once wrote to her that he wanted in their relationship "a love of woman quite transcending marriage." Some wag claimed, "It has been sagely remarked that Henry Thoreau could get more out of ten minutes with a woodchuck than most men could from a night with Cleopatra."

Here's something a little more contemporary, a book put together by Don Henley in 1991.

Heaven is Under Our Feet: A Book for Walden Woods, consists of sixty-seven essays by famous people - such as Jack Nicholson, Sting, Kurt Vonnegut, Bette Midler, Robert Redford - need I go on? Although don't let me forget my personal favourites, Paula Abdul and Janet Jackson. They are all supporters of the Walden Woods Project, an attempt to save parts of the site from developers determined to build office buildings and condos on land made sacrosanct by Thoreau.

Here is Tom Cruise, under the title "On Walden", addressing his fellow citizens. He has been stirred to action after witnessing firsthand the destruction of the rain forest in the Amazon:

We start in our own front yard. We must protect Walden Woods! Walden is not just a local squabble between developers and environmentalists over a sentimental icon. It is our environmental front yard. It's just nonsense that someone ever considered disturbing it. Walden is a place where man restores his communication with nature. Thoreau knew this.

And here is Gregory Peck's contribution:

If we begin to haphazardly surrender our Waldens to the greed of developers, we will be letting our history slip away like so many grains of sand through our fingers. It will disappear gradually, undetectably, until one day we will realize our folly and it will be too late.

I attended a talk by Eleanore Kosydor about a book of photos which she and her husband created. It's called The Dundas Valley, and I was surprised to hear Eleanore refer to a pond in one photo as "Walden Two". She told me it is an artificial pond, created when the owner of the former McCormack farm dammed a stream to make a reservoir for his cattle. The result was a body of water which resembles Walden Pond, bordered on three sides with pine trees which reach to the shore. The location is the Dundas Conservation Authority, specifically just off McCormack Lane, and a quarter mile north of Governor's Road.

In closing, I might have suggested we consider naming this church after the great man I have just discussed. But not surprisingly, it has already been done elsewhere. If you ever find yourself staying as a B&B in Stafford Texas, make sure you pay a visit to the Henry David Thoreau Unitarian Universal Congregation of Fort Bend County.