

A Henry David Thoreau Thanksgiving

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When a book is published, knowing how the public will receive it is impossible. One hundred and fifty years ago, on August 9, 1854, under “New Publications” in the *New York Tribune* there appeared a ten-inch piece headlined “Unprecedented success of the greatest of American Romances, *Fashion and Famine* by Mrs. Ann S. Stephens” a novel about life in New York City. This was followed by a two-inch announcement, headed “Life in the Woods.” The smaller announcement described a new book published by a 37-year-old man who lived in Concord, Massachusetts. The full title of the new book was *Walden, or Life in the Woods*.

This was the second of two books that Henry David Thoreau would publish during his lifetime. Thoreau called the first *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. A printer produced a thousand copies in 1849, with Thoreau paying the cost. Four years later the printer still had 706 copies of *A week on the Concord and the Merrimack Rivers*. In October 1853 the publisher sent Thoreau the unsold books. Thoreau joked “I now have a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, more than seven hundred of which I wrote myself.”

Walden had no better success. A year after the publication Thoreau received his first royalties. He had made \$51.60. In the 1850s the story of a man living near a pond made scarcely a ripple in the publishing world.

In Concord most people saw him as an irresponsible idler and a trial to his family. Even his friend Emerson wrote “I fancy it an inexcusable fault in him that he is insignificant here in the town.”

Today more than twenty editions of *Walden* are in print, including a special 150th Anniversary Edition that appeared in August. Nevertheless, even now Thoreau has his critics. Only recently a newspaper columnist wrote that “Thoreau was a snob, a fraud, something of a fool and a pernicious influence on the life of the mind of America.” I found concise a review of *Walden* on the Internet. A young woman wrote: “I had to read this book for AP English in High School, it was horrible, I fell asleep during every page, it drags on so slow. If you like a boring read, go for it.” This young woman confirms my belief that any book we are forced to read becomes a bad book.

Still, this time of year, when I see the autumn harvest of apples I think of Thoreau. Throughout the late fall and winter he picked what he called the “wild fruit native to this quarter of the earth, fruit of old trees that have been dying ever since I was a boy and are not dead.” He said “Wild apples should be eaten in the fields, when your system is all aglow, when the frosty weather nips at your fingers, and the jay is heard screaming around.”

During this Thanksgiving season I think of Thoreau. The scarlet oak, he wrote, is “our chief November flower . . . It is remarkable that the latest

bright color that is general should be this deep, dark scarlet and red, the intensest of colors . . .”

When I see a sunset on Thanksgiving day, I think of Thoreau. He wrote: “We had a remarkable sunset one day last November. I was walking in a meadow, the source of a small brook, when the sun at last, just before setting, after a cold gray day, reached a clear strand in the horizon, . . . sunlight fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees in the opposite horizon, and on the leaves of the shrub-oaks on the hillside, while our shadows stretched along with a meadow eastward, as if we were the only motes in its beams. It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air was so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of the meadow.”

Henry David Thoreau graduated from Harvard College in 1837. He was twenty years old. Of medium height, with sloping shoulders, he had fine light brown hair. Those that knew him say that his eyes were bright blue in some lights, gray in others. After graduating from college he went back to his hometown of Concord living with his family and he started a new job teaching in the Concord public schools. Thoreau was in charge of teaching one hundred boys. Discipline was a problem from the start. About two weeks into the fall, one of the Concord school board members went to observe Thoreau’s teaching. The board member called Henry into the hall, and reprimanded him for not using the cane. Impulsively the 20-year-old teacher went back into the classroom, picked out six students at random and proceeded to beat each of them. He then resigned.

To earn a living Thoreau opened a small private academy of his own. Instead of a hundred students he now had four. He taught this small group each day from eight to four. He lived with his parents and he dreamed of becoming a writer.

In August of 1839 Ellen Sewall a young woman of seventeen, came to Concord for a two-week visit. Ellen’s eleven year old brother Edmund was a student in Thoreau’s school. Slender, well proportioned, with high cheekbones, a straight nose, and a pleasant mouth, Ellen Sewall was beautiful. Twenty-two year old Henry David Thoreau fell utterly in love with Ellen when she arrived. A single line occurs in his journal. “There is no remedy for love but to love more.”

Thoreau’s older brother John was also in love with Ellen. John proposed, and Ellen eventually turned him down, leaving the way free for Henry David.

In the summer of 1840 while she was visiting Concord he took her out in a row boat. He wrote: “The other day in my boat [was] a free, even lovely young lady. As I plied the oars, she sat in the stern—and there was nothing but she between me and the sky. So might all our loves be picturesque if they were free enough . . .”

November 9, 1840 Henry David proposed to Ellen in an emotionally intense letter. A few days later he received her reply. Ellen was willing, but her father had said no. Living with his parents, working as a teacher in a very small private school, Thoreau was not an attractive prospect. Four years later Ellen married a Unitarian minister. She was the one real love of Thoreau’s life. When he was dying and the subject of Ellen Sewall came up, he told his sister, “I have always loved her.”

After her rejection, Thoreau turned to the natural world for emotional support. He went for long walks in the November woods, observing the migrating otter tracks and the young pines springing up in the fields. All nature was pleasing to his senses. He wrote: “In the fields lights and shadows are my diet. How all trees tell of the sun. . . nothing is so beautiful as the tree tops . . . I should wither and dry up if it were not for the lakes and rivers.” He felt literally “Invigorated by the cones and needles of the pine seen against the frosty air.” He wrote, “When most at one with nature I feel supported and propped up on all sides. . .”

For lack of students the Thoreau brothers closed their private school in 1841. Henry worked as an editor for Emerson, and for a while in New York City he went door to door trying to sell magazine subscriptions. Unable to sell his writing, he spent a good deal of time working for his father in Concord. The family business was grinding graphite and making pencils. Thoreau found a way to mix graphite with fine clay instead of the traditional mixture of bayberry wax and glue. The new mixture produced a smoother lead. He also designed and built a new grinding mill to produce finer and more evenly ground graphite. He developed a way to bake the graphite and clay mixture and invented a saw to cut out individual leads. Next he invented a way to bake the leads in just the right size so they would not have to be sawed. Finally instead of cutting the wood in half, then gluing it back together, he invented a way of drilling a hole in the wood for the lead. As a result Thoreau pencils were some of the best made in America.

Still, his real love was writing about nature. He believed that woods are necessarily for the spiritual well-being and health of all people. In the Spring of 1845 he received permission from Emerson to build a one room cabin on Walden Pond. At the age of 28 Thoreau had lived with his family, or in a Harvard dorm, or as a guest in Emerson’s house. Living near the pond was Thoreau’s experiment in freedom.

The single most famous incident in Thoreau’s life occurred half way through his stay on Walden Pond. He went to jail for one day because he refused to pay a tax, in protest of slavery and a war with Mexico. There is no basis in fact for the often repeated story about Emerson seeing Thoreau in jail and asking what he was doing in there and Thoreau asking in reply. “What are you doing out there?” Thoreau did say “I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government that is the slave’s government also.” Later Gandhi used Thoreau’s essay *Civil Disobedience* as his guide for non violent resistance in South Africa and India.

An intense interest in the wonders of the visible world marked Thoreau’s writing. In the afternoon while out walking, he would write a few words, phrases, or sentences on the backs of envelopes or other scraps of paper. The next morning, back in his room, he would expand the notes in a notebook. Much of his creative work, the polishing of his sentences, came in this journal or notebook stage. He would write and rewrite. He kept indexes for his notebooks so he could find things in what became an increasingly complicated multi volume storehouse of material. Later still he would work up an essay by pulling together bits from the notebooks, some of which could be many years old. Using this process, it took him nine years to finish the book *Walden*.

Readers nearly ignored the book when it was first published. Today, however, the story of the two years and two months Thoreau stayed at Walden is familiar to every educated American. Even if we have never read the book, we know the key phrases.

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

“A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.”

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

“Why should we live with such hurry and waste life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry.”

“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.”

At the end he says: “I learned this, at least, by my experiment, that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

Theologically Thoreau believed that we can identify God with nature. Put another way, he believed that all of nature is a manifestation of God. He worshiped nature.

At one point he writes “There is something invigorating in this air, . . . a real wind, blowing over the surface of a planet. I look out my eyes, I come to my window, and I feel and breathe the fresh air. It is a fact equally glorious with the most inward experience. Why have we ever slandered the outward? The perception of surfaces will always have the effect of miracle to a sane sense.”

Thoreau died at the age of forty-four from tuberculosis. He died unaware that in the years to come scholars would call him a god of modern literature.

A few days before his death a minister friend visited and said “You seem so near the brink of the dark river that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you.”

Instead of joining in speculating about life after death, Thoreau simply replied to his friend: “One world at a time.”

This time of year I remember Thoreau. About November he wrote: “Now a new season begins, the pure November season of the russet earth and withered leaf and bare twigs and hoary wither goldenrods. . . . A cool silvery light is the prevailing one; dark-blue or slate-colored clouds in the west, and the sun going down in them. All the light of November may be called an afterglow.”

On Thanksgiving morning I think of Thoreau. He wrote: There are, from time to time mornings . . . when especially the world seems to begin anew.

. . . Mornings of creation I call them. . . . Mornings when men are new-born, men who have the seeds of life in them. It should be part of my religion to [be] abroad then.”

As I say my prayers of Thanksgiving, I recall his words to a friend: “I am grateful for what I am and have. My thanksgiving is perpetual. It is surprising how contented one can be with nothing definite—only a sense of existence.”