

Taking Notice: The Spiritual Practice of Observing Nature

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*Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world,
do we begin to find ourselves and realize where we are
and the infinite extent of our relations.*

— Henry David Thoreau

Invitation to Worship "In the Garden"² by Geneva Politzer

Here, in my small unkempt garden,
even the weeds wear holy robes.
Amid a nervous system of jeweled spider webs,
pansies overgrow the old brick path,
its mossy mortar the artwork of Omega.

I know these faces, raised in reverence—
a perennial invitation to worship
the silence of an opening bud, invisible
to the eye but all the nourishment I need
to fuel my hunger for divinity.

My garden has no plan
It springs from an imagination
as fertile as verdant loam; thorns
remind me to practice great care
with life's fragility. God whispers,

"I Am here, in the intricate veins
of inverted leaves; in earthworms and dew."
I gave up on plots & plans & herbicides
long ago—my small, unkempt garden
is its own answered prayer.



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Reading
from *The Maine Woods*
by Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau wrote about climbing Mt. Katahdin in Maine. It was early September of 1846. Here he's describing coming down the mountain

"... continually crossing and recrossing [Abol Stream], leaping rock to rock, and jumping with the stream down falls of seven or eight feet, or sometimes sliding down on our backs in a thin sheet of water. ... The cool air above, and the continual bathing of our bodies in mountain water, ... made this walk exceedingly refreshing"

"Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untameable *Nature* ... [W]e have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear, and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I look with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work.

"This was the Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhand-selled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth. ...

"Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact!* *Contact!* *Who* are we? *Where* are we?"

Sermon³
Duane Fickeisen

No matter which creation story you prefer — either one of the two in the Hebrew book of Genesis, the Big Bang theory, the Raven stories from indigenous people of the Northwest coast, or some other one — isn't the world around us a wondrous marvel? It is a great mystery — perhaps one that can be explained by invoking an intelligent creator, the laws of quan-

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tum physics and the theory of evolution, or the metaphysics of process.

But no matter the source or process, the result is marvelous, awful and monstrous, sometimes incredibly beautiful, frighteningly violent and amazingly creative. The complexity of living systems, the fragility of its components, the resiliency of the whole system and its responsiveness to challenge and change, its apparent ability to self-regulate and to heal, and the interdependence of the complex web are simply stunning. But it is not limitlessly resilient. We have the potential to cause irreparable damage, to destroy whole species and perhaps even to push systems so far out of whack that they can't recover.

Dust is quickened into life, and after death we return to dust. In the interval between, perhaps our primary task is to notice, to take it in, to experience the wonder of it, and to fall in love with it. To be transformed by our experience. And by falling in love and being transformed, to become committed to care for all of the Earth, for the interdependent web of existence — the living organisms and the non-living material — and for all people.

For examples of how to experience nature's wonders, we could hardly do better than to turn to Henry David Thoreau, whose 192nd birthday anniversary we mark and celebrate today.

It would be easy to think of Thoreau as a recluse, sitting alone in his hut by Walden Pond, and making detailed notes about his day's stroll through the nearby woods or editing one of the essays that he published as *Walden*. But the cabin he built was more a writing studio, observation post, and simple living demonstration site than an escape.

The country was in a serious economic depression in the early 1840s when Thoreau lived at Walden. Nine out of ten New England factories had shut down. Unemployment was very high. Many of those who had work didn't earn enough even for the basic needs of food and shelter. The economy in New England was shifting away from agriculture and craftsmanship. There was a growing disparity between the very wealthy and the rest of the population and the middle class was particularly hard hit. A quarter of all mercantile and

manufacturing businesses were bankrupt. In short, it was a much bigger mess than the current downturn.

So in addition to wanting a place to write, Thoreau was creating an experiment in simple living — not so much to escape society as to demonstrate that it was possible to live frugally — in fact comfortably — if you reconsidered what really mattered. Of course he was a single guy with no dependents and his parents' home was a short walk back into town, where he could work in their pencil manufacturing business, get a hot meal, and take his laundry.

He also helped Lidian Emerson run her household in exchange for meals. He chopped and carried wood for the kitchen, looked after her children, and did a variety of household chores. Lidian's husband, the great Waldo, who was 14 years Henry's senior, was either not capable of looking after the household management or simply too distracted by his own writing and intellectual pursuits to attend to it. Thoreau wanted to hang out with Waldo and the cadre of transcendentalists who came in a steady stream to call on Emerson for conversation. He valued Waldo's critique and attention.

Henry wrote a classic American story of the life of a recluse, but he was as interested in society and how to bring the lessons of nature back into the town as he was in walking in the woods. While it was — and still is — in vogue to escape to the mountains, seashore, and wilds for respite and renewal, and common to hear comments about the return from the paradise of nature to "the real world," Thoreau sought to bring something back from the mountain that would inform life in the village. Both the worlds of wild nature and of society were very "real" to him.

In "A Walk to Wachusett" Thoreau describes a trip to the mountain just north of Worcester, about 20 miles from Concord. In this passage he describes returning home. He writes:

"And now that we have returned to the desultory life of the plain, let us endeavor to import a little of that mountain grandeur into it. We will remember within what walls we lie, and understand that this level life too has its summit, and why from the mountain top the deepest valleys have a tinge of blue; that there is elevation in every hour, as no part of the earth is so low that

the heavens may not be seen from it, and we have only to stand on the summit of our hour to command an uninterrupted horizon.”

Both the mountain and the town were parts of the “real world.” He sought to learn from the experiences of nature something of use to the town, lessons to bring back with him. The boon was his memories of the rich experience and the ways they might inform his day-to-day life.

In response to Emerson’s rather harsh critique of Thoreau’s early published works, Henry spent long hours editing and rewriting in an effort to polish his material. What are presented as journal entries were in fact highly edited and not the sort of jotting that one might make to create a daily record.

His writing wasn’t always clear. He struggled with editing it. The poet Ellery Channing, one of William Ellery Channing’s nephews, and Thoreau’s long-time friend, wrote to Thoreau from New York on March 5, 1845,

“My Dear Thoreau, — The handwriting of your letter is so miserable that I am not sure I have made it out. If I have it, it seems to me you are the same old sixpence you used to be, rather rusty, but a genuine piece. I see nothing for you in this world but that old field I once christened “Briars;” go out upon that, build yourself a hut, and there begin the grand process of devouring yourself alive. I see no alternative, no other hope for you. Eat yourself up; you will eat nobody else, nor anything else. ...”⁴

A few months later, Thoreau built his cabin on Emerson’s woodlot at Walden Pond. The middle school youth in our Coming of Age program visited Walden Pond, saw the cabin site, and swam in the pond where Thoreau bathed on their recent heritage trip to Boston.

The place is one of the sacred sites in American letters and culture, but it is not a spectacular site, this simple woodlot beside a pond with the commuter rail line running along the west side. Crowds come from all over the world to see the

⁴ Ellery Channing letter to Thoreau (at Concord), March 5, 1845. In F. B. Sanborn, ed. *Familiar Letters of Henry David Thoreau*. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1895) p. 144ff.

cabin site and from town to swim. On a pleasant summer day, it's hard to find a parking place anywhere nearby. The same rail line was there in the mid-19th century, and Thoreau earned a bit of spending money by cutting cord wood for the locomotive boilers.

The fact that it is a rather ordinary woodlot serves to remind us that we need not travel to the Grand Canyon (of Arizona *or* Pennsylvania) nor visit the Yosemite Valley or the wild coast of Alaska to experience nature in its glory and wonder. Those spectacular places indeed inspire awe and take our breath away, but if we pay attention to what's right next to us, to the richness of nature in our back yards, we might just as well experience awe and perhaps even epiphany.

Thoreau was a keen observer of nature, and he recorded details about the natural world within walking distance of Walden Pond that are amazing illustrations of his power of observation and attention to detail. His journals note the dates when, for example, the first wild strawberry blossoms appeared, the first berries were ripe, production reached its peak, and the date of the last harvest.

He shipped off specimens of fish and frogs and other critters that he caught near his cabin to biologists with requests for identification and information about the species. His notes represent outstanding observational abilities and attunement to natural history.

Here are a couple of snippets from letters he wrote to his sister Sophia, first in January of 1840, 5½ years before he built the cabin at Walden. The letter was written in Latin and is translated roughly as:

“Dear Sister, — There is a huge snowdrift at the door and the cold inside is intolerable. The sky is coming down, I guess, and covering up the ground. I turn out late in the morning, and go to bed early; there is thick frost on the windows, shutting out the view; and here I write in pain, for fingers and brains are numb.”⁵

⁵ *Familial Letters, op. cit.*, p. 33.

And in May two and a half years later, he wrote from Staten Island, where he had gone to tutor Emerson's nephew and pursue writing:

"Dear Sophia, — I have had a severe cold ever since I came here, and have been confined to the house for the last week with bronchitis, though I am now getting out, I have not seen much in the botanical way. ..."

He suffered from tuberculosis and was frequently ill with bronchitis. The move to Staten Island only lasted a few months before he returned to Concord.

In the letter to Sophia, he notes:

"The woods are now full of a large honeysuckle in full bloom, which differs from ours in being red instead of white, so that at first I did not know its genus. The painted cup is very common in meadows here. Peaches, and especially cherries, seem to grow by all the fences. Things are very forward here compared with Concord. The apricots growing out of doors are already as large as plums. The apple, pear, peach, cherry, and plum trees have shed their blossoms. The whole island is like a garden and affords very fine scenery. ..."

"Tell Mother I think my cold was not wholly owing to imprudence. Perhaps I was being acclimated. ..."⁶

At the time he wrote that, he was not yet quite 26 years old, but obviously already a keen observer of plants. The TB would take his life much too soon, just 18 years later, when he was 44.

But the illness didn't prevent him from nearly daily walks. It was his practice to work at his writing in the mornings and take long walks in the afternoons, exploring the woodlands, hills, ponds, and streams in the area in great detail. He often had a walking companion — Ellery Channing and Edward Hoar were frequent walking buddies.

It may well be that Emerson had passed along to Thoreau his habit of keeping a journal — which for Emerson ran to

⁶ *Familial Letters, op. cit.*, pp. 84-87.

many volumes. He referred to it as his “bank account” upon which he drew extensively to prepare for all sorts of public presentations and as primary source material for his essays.

We can learn about paying attention to nature from Thoreau through his many examples of keen and detailed observation — and descriptions of what he noticed — which show us an extraordinary way of being in ordinary settings. On one level these are simple observations of facts. But on another level, they become rich metaphors for life. Through reflection they offer windows into a way of being that favors richness in simplicity — going deeper into meaning and seeking a rich nuance in the complexity of day-to-day living. “Sucking the marrow out of life” as he wrote, in order to get to the essence of it by paying keen attention.

He climbed Mt. Katahdin in Maine — the end of the present Appalachian Trail, which passes through our town at its midpoint. Listen to Thoreau’s description of Katahdin:

“The tracks of moose, more or less recent, to speak literally covered every square rod on the sides of the mountain. ... [E]verywhere the twigs had been browsed by them, clipt as smoothly as if by a knife. The bark of trees was stript up by them to the height of eight or nine feet, in long narrow strips, an inch wide, still showing the distinct marks of their teeth. ...

“By the side of a cool mountain rill, amid the woods, where the water began to partake of the purity and transparency of the air, we stopped to cook ...”

“The wood was chiefly yellow birch, spruce, fir, mountain ash, or round-wood, as the Maine people call it, and moose wood. ... The cornel, or bunch-berries, were very abundant, as well as Solomon’s seal and moose berries. Blue-berries were distributed along our whole route; and in one place the bushes were drooping with the weight of the fruit, still as fresh as ever. ... Such patches offered a grateful repast, and served to bait the party forward.”⁷

⁷ From “Ktaadn” in *The Maine Woods*.

When we go to Maine each summer, I like to hike the hillside next to salt ponds that are named after Rachel Carson, who summered nearby. It's a rather ordinary wooded hillside, not too unlike the area around Walden Pond. It's damp woods and there are lots and lots and lots of mosquitoes there, so I struggle to balance keeping moving to escape them with stopping to notice.

But the area, simple as it is, is amazingly rich with an understory of flowering plants — belly flowers as a botanist-friend called the ones so close to the ground that you must lie on your belly to see them clearly. The varieties of mushrooms seem never ending, and if you find a spot with that the sun favors, there may well be a handful of ripe blueberries for the picking. If you persist and the bugs don't chase you away first, you'll discover a small hidden pond covered with water lilies.

As you approach the bank of the pond, you'll spook the frogs and they'll jump into the pond just ahead of your arrival. Second growth trees rim the pond with thick lower limbs so that you must duck under them to get a good look at the pond itself. You might hear the far off drone of a lobster boat or the clang of the bell bouy and occasionally you'll hear a truck or car go by on the road, but mostly the sounds of birds, frogs, your own footsteps, those incessant mosquitoes, and the wind blowing through the spruce bows.

There is a certain magic here, and I return every summer to experience it again — and to hunt edible mushrooms (Chanterelles), sometimes with success. If I return with a few for dinner, I feel pleased, and the eating of them will bring me right back to the pond in memory. But even if there are none to be found, the trip is far from spoilt. The hunt is just the excuse to get back into those woods again.

The photographs I bring back with me help me carry those woods home, and through them the woods become more than a simple place for escape — they come back with me as a reminder of the resilience of life itself and of the vulnerability of its manifestations. Is that not miracle enough?

Mystery. Process. Creativity. Wonder. Tragedy. Beauty. Death. Complexity. Birth. Change. Growth. Decay. It's all right there in those few acres — life itself awaiting discovery and notice.

And so I invite you — I charge you — to pay attention to something that might seem ordinary at first. I mean really pay attention as if you were practicing Buddhist contemplation. Use all your senses and slow down — stop even — long enough to really notice details. Notice sounds, smells, tastes, and texture as well as what you see. Then look again. What surprises you? What did you miss noticing before? How are things related? What wonder and meaning are evoked?

Take some photographs or make some sketches or paint or write a rich description in your journal in order to review them later and refill your reserves of wonder and mystery and so that you can bring back the boon. Then when you are back “in the real world” turn to your experience and mine it for how it could inform you life, make it richer, and help you keep your balance.

And don't forget to offer praise and gratitude for the wonders and for your experience of them — and for the senses that make experience possible. Henry would be delighted on his birthday to learn that he had influenced you — that his examples had succeeded in encouraging you to pay attention, to affirm wonder, to apply reason, and to bring home something of use in your day-to-day life.

Contact! Contact! Who are you? Where are you? What are you called to be and to do?

Amen.

Benediction

from “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” in *Walden*
by Henry David Thoreau

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability ... to elevate [our lives] by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but *it is far more glorious* to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. *To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.*

Image: Henry David Thoreau, photo taken in August 1861, published c. 1879. Library of Congress. (public domain).