

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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“A Ramble With Henry David Thoreau”

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You've known Henry David Thoreau for a while, haven't you? You've seen his quotable quotes on posters, greeting cards, bumper stickers – even on this order of service. [“Surely joy is the condition of life.”] It is hard to believe that he died before the Civil War was over, because Thoreau seems so current, so thoroughly modern. Generation after generation, Henry David Thoreau is the one we go to. I know that Henry died before even my great-grandfather could have met him, but I have great love for him, and I think of how much he loved the Earth as we turn to celebrate another Summer Solstice. He rambled up and down this country in its youth and we are going to ramble with him in this hopefully not too rambling sermon.

Henry David Thoreau dreamed dreams and walked to his own drumbeat. His contribution to society was mighty, and involved numerous areas of life, which is amazing for someone who only lived to the age of 44, dying of tuberculosis. Admittedly, though, while he often did lend a voice, he did not lead the way as much as the others around him did.

For example, although he wrote “Civil Disobedience”, which would go on to influence Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and though he did spend one night in jail protesting a slave tax, he will not be remembered as a great activist. He was certainly not as influential in changing his society as other Unitarian friends and contemporaries of his were, such as Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller. In some sense, he was less an activist than a writer who inspired activists. We need such writers, don't we? He was an abolitionist, but even the reluctant Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing was more effective in that fight against slavery.

He wrote a whole treasure chest of quotable quotes, but his friend, neighbor, and mentor, the one time minister, Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson, is the one who will be remembered as the great philosopher of Concord. Though Thoreau's journals and books were filled with incredible nature writings and observations about the wild and verdant land he lived in so completely, his contemporary liberal religious writer and friend, Walt Whitman, is probably better remembered for his nature writing than Thoreau is, and it is John Muir who will endure as the great American naturalist.

Thoreau taught, but his buddy Bronson Alcott was the great innovative teacher of Concord. Henry wrote poetry, but his student and friend Unitarian Louisa May Alcott is the truly famous fiction writer from his neighborhood. He played the flute, but no one remembers him as a musician.

So whenever you are feeling that your contribution to the world is only secondary, perhaps a small boost that really helps someone else to do what needs to be done, or is only minor compared to what others have accomplished – (I imagine we all feel this way plenty of times) – remember that you are in good company with Henry David Thoreau. Everything we do that is true, that comes from our heart, is needed and is important.

So, why is Henry David Thoreau so fondly remembered, if he is a secondary player in most of his interests and pursuits? I am not alone in suggesting that what Thoreau is most remembered for is that he lived and sauntered in the woods, having built the famous cabin at Walden Pond. He wrote about the depth of those experiences, and all his ramblings, with such simple joy that everyone has wanted to follow him ever since.

I remember when I first read *Walden*. I was twelve years old, and I was so grateful to have someone say that it was okay to march to the step of a different drummer.

A few years ago I re-read *Walden* with a group from my previous UU congregation, and I wholeheartedly recommend reading that book as a mature adult. Most of us read *Walden* sometime between the ages of 12 and 21, when we take it as the perfect anthem of our youth. Believe me, it also holds up well as the reminder to a person of any age about life lived simply and reflectively and joyously.

Let me tell you a sweet story about Henry David Thoreau and Louisa May Alcott, from a time when he was a young man, and she an eight year old girl. Thoreau was teaching her older sister Anna at the time, but Louy, as she was called then, (who was truly the pattern for her fictional character Jo in *Little Women*), was drawn to Thoreau as though he were the pied piper. In fact, he often led children on adventurous outings into the wild, playing his flute for them.

The first time Louy ever went with him was when Henry gathered the children to go huckleberry picking. They went by wagon, and then walked a woodland path. One of the children was suddenly sad because he'd forgotten his tin. Henry quickly stripped birch bark and made a neat berry box in a flash. As they walked along, he stopped to point out wildflowers and moss; then showed them a toad. He also stopped to write in his notebook, and Louy was beginning to wonder if they'd *ever* pick berries. She was a responsible child, and heavily laden with responsibilities in that poor Alcott family.

Finally they reached the berry patches and Henry exclaimed about the joy of wild fruit – a great gift from nature! Then as the children picked, he played his flute with such sweet music that Louy closed her eyes and dreamed of a bright, beautiful world made of that sound. The responsible child followed the pied piper into the land of sweet nature and melody.

Henry took his students and the neighbor children on Saturday field trips. He told them stories about fairies and Algonquins, and he showed them where to look out for spider webs and how to charm birds. Sometimes the Alcotts were too busy to allow Louy to go on the trips, and sometimes she snuck off anyway to join Henry. When she was eight years old, after following that saunterer for a few months, and listening to his ramblings and music, she wrote her first nature poem. A few years later, she visited Thoreau at Walden Pond, delighting in the Concord woods as the best place for her spiritual life. The Fairies he'd filled her head with became the subject of her first published writing.

She became a great friend of Henry's, and when he died she wrote a poem, "Thoreau's Flute", mourning the loss of "the Genius of the wood." We also heard the letter she wrote about his last days, and another one that Henry's sister wrote. I read those letters at his grave in Concord, a few years ago, and I wept, as though I had known him for years and years, and had lost a great spirit from my own life.

When I came to the cemetery, where also buried nearby are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, and a whole host of other Unitarian luminaries, I had just taken "a ramble in Thoreau country". That is what the interpretive guide is called which a member of my previous congregation and a naturalist, Jose Garcia, had designed and given me, and that I've been using for the readings today. Jose compiled the rambling guide for walking around Walden Pond, and on other nearby trails, while reading great reams of the words of Henry David Thoreau, and a few writings from others about him. I felt suffused with Thoreau's light and spirit as I slipped on the ice and snow that March in the Concord woods. I was mostly alone in the woods – it was very icy – and not much

of that area has changed, so I was seeing what Henry wrote about, and it was magnificent, and simple. I felt I really was rambling with Henry, sauntering in his footsteps.

Henry David Thoreau, like the Unitarians of his day, engaged in spiritual practices that we would find comfortable today. They read, journalled, had deep conversations, and sauntered, which was a way of walking that was not done for one's health, or to get someplace, but was meant for being at one with nature and deepening the soul.

To read Henry's writings is to know how very much he valued his saunters, his rambles, his walks in the woods. He believed that everyone needed such time. Don't you need such time? I believe we do. We wake up when we are in the woods, when we are wild with nature, he believed. Thoreau wrote, "We can never have enough of nature." He declared, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." How prescient of him. In these days of shrinking wilderness, we do well to remember that our world depends upon the preservation of wildness, as we depend upon our communion with nature.

May we walk with Henry's sweet spirit sometimes, and dream the soaring dreams that are cultivated by spending time in solitude and with the wildness of nature. And as Henry David Thoreau asked us to do, let us advance "confidently in the direction" of our dreams, to go ahead and build "castles in the air" and then "to put the foundations under them".

I will close with these words of Henry David Thoreau, from his book *Walden*:

“This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me.”

And finally, this sweet and wild man wrote, so many years ago, “Surely joy is the condition of life.” Thank you, Henry David!