"Faith in a Seed" • Rev. Erika Hewitt
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"I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit." ~ Henry David Thoreau

Reading: "To Live Deliberately" by Henry David Thoreau

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, to discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life,...to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it....

Sermon: "Faith in a Seed"

Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts in 1817; he lived most of his life in Concord, and it was in his Concord home that he died. A full fifteen years younger than Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau was "neither son nor brother but something of each;" the relationship between the two men was "close, changeable, and beset with difficulties."[1] But from Thoreau's perch in Concord, and especially on the banks of Walden Pond, he lived out his Transcendentalist manifesto: "to live deep...to live deliberately." In his short lifetime, Thoreau set to paper some of the most important and best-loved observations of nature.

We forget, though; when we read Thoreau's idyllic rhapsodies about "living deep," and his years of living intimately among birds, woodchucks, and chestnut stands, we forget that he and his Transcendentalist peers had a radically different view of life, and of the natural world, than their fellow citizens.

This fall, we're using four Sundays to delve more deeply into this branch of our Unitarian history. Last week, I described how Ralph Waldo Emerson used his standing as a former Unitarian minister to become the *de facto* figurehead of Transcendentalism. The opening salvo of Emerson's Harvard Divinity School address, in July of 1838, revealed something about the Transcendentalists' relationship with nature: in choosing not to situate his address in a Biblical context, Emerson's his first paragraph signaled to those gathered that Nature was the new Scripture:

> In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to

> the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily.

From this moment forward, Transcendentalism was marked by its devotion to, and its reverence for, the natural world.

I say this was a "radical" departure from their culture because in the first half of the 1800s, when our country was still young, most people viewed the natural world as either wilderness or frontier. Nineteenth-century Americans had inherited the colonial view of Nature as wilderness that was both threatening and needing to be tamed. In early American writing, it wasn't uncommon "for the wilderness to be referred to as a 'desert'...writers were most often speaking of the lush green wildness of the mid-Atlantic and New England states when they used this term! Nature was unpredictable, irrational, and vaguely feminine...[with] little value in itself...."[2] As the country expanded, Americans spoke of the *frontier*, "which translates as opportunity...a blank slate available to anyone with the guts, willpower, and means to [make it ones property]."[3]

(During Thoreau and Emerson's lifetime, white Americans and Europeans continued to pursue and tame nature's "blank slate" through encroachment on Native land and its peoples. In 1838 – when Thoreau was 21 and the year that Emerson delivered his Harvard Divinity School address – the Cherokee Nation was forced to undertake the horrific "Trail of Tears," relocating them from Georgia to Oklahoma, to make room for more white settlers. The year after Thoreau died, in 1845, the term "manifest destiny" was coined to describe the belief that the United States was destined to expand from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific Ocean. All of these are fitting reminders on this, the day before "Columbus Day" – or, for those of us who choose not to glorify the conquest of the Americas – Indigenous Peoples Day.)

For Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, the natural world was neither threatening nor a "*tabula rasa* commodity."[4] Nature was a gift, a revelation, a web of interconnection.

The Transcendentalists insisted – far ahead of their time – that "we are linked to all things living and dead,"[5] but Thoreau and Emerson each viewed Nature according to his own whim and fancy. Emerson summed it up best when he noted in his journal[6] that Thoreau found nature more interesting than people, while Emerson himself felt that nature "must always combine with man."[7]

From his young adulthood, Emerson had felt moved to praise by nature's beauty;[8] he came to believe that human beings "should be 'the minister and interpreter of nature.'"[9] In 1833, while on a tour of Europe, Emerson was inspired by the collections at natural history museums; in the King's Garden in Paris,[10] he was intoxicated by observing the

interconnections and relationships between shells, minerals, fish, snakes, and mammals. "The Universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever," he noted dreamily, and promptly declared himself a naturalist. Emerson found an irrevocable connection, however, between the natural world and the human mind. "Natural history by itself has no value," he wrote, "But marry it to human history, and it is poetry."[11]

Thoreau, on the other hand, approached the natural world through a more scientific lens: the meticulous observations that he recorded in his journals. Thoreau "knew Concord's forests like the back of his hand,"[12] and loved to go hiking into them just like Emerson did. But just as the two men viewed nature differently, so too did their hikes take on unique tenor. Nathaniel Hawthorne once noted that Emerson "found no better way of spending the Sabbath than to ramble in the woods." One Sunday as he walked through the Sleepy Hollow cemetery, Emerson encountered Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller, and told them there were Muses in the woods that day, and whispers to be heard in the breezes.[13]

Thoreau didn't go rambling to hear the Muses and the whispers on the breeze – he did so to watch Nature unfold on her own terms, and to find solitude. He wrote this in his journal on January 7, 1857:

> There is nothing so sanative, so poetic, as a walk in the woods and fields…Nothing so inspires me, and excites such serene and profitable thought…This cold and solitude are friends of mine…I get away a mile or two from the town, into the stillness and solitude of nature, with rocks, trees, weeds, snow about me…This stillness, solitude, wildness of nature is a kind of thoroughwort or boneset to my intellect. This is what I go out to seek. It is as if I always mot in those places some grand, serene, immortal, infinitely encouraging, though invisible companion, and walked with him.

"As a Transcendentalist," notes Barbara Kingsolver (herself a biologist), "Thoreau understood that the scientist and the science are inseparable."[14] His nature journals aren't just descriptive and poetic; they also reveal Henry's penetrating mind, and his trust that – with patience and reasoning – Nature's riddles could be solved. "I went forth on the afternoon of October 17th," he cheerfully reports in one journal, "expressly to ascertain how chestnuts are propagated."

"With a categorical thoroughness akin to Darwin's," Kingsolver explains,[15] "Thoreau intended to prove his conviction – which was still in dispute at the time – that new plants …grow always and only from seeds" (if not from roots and cuttings), rather than springing up spontaneously. Thoreau was firm on this point, thanks to his hours and hours spent in the woods. "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed," he noted in his journal. "Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

By 1860, near the end of his life, Thoreau had gotten his hands on a copy of a new book

called *On the Origin of Species*, by Charles Darwin, and was clearly "influenced by Darwin's theory of natural selection and adaptation."[16] Under that influence, "Thoreau's writings…clearly anticipate issues in plant population biology and coevolution that did not become fully articulated in evolutionary ecology until the early 1970s."[17] Imagine what he might have written had he not died at the young age of forty-four.

This, like many aspects of Transcendentalism, is our religious ancestry. This is the spiritual legacy that each of us has chosen. Whether we were drawn to Unitarian Universalism because of an already deep awe for the world, or whether we have invited our religious faith to shape that awe within us, we Unitarian Universalists behold the world around with a combination of reverence and reason.

It's not just an exaggeration or a stereotype, then, to say that Unitarian Universalists have a different relationship with nature than people of other faiths. It's rare, I can assure you, to find other religious denominations that embody this love for nature, this curiosity that embraces and protects. To prove it, I share with you A Tale of Two Trees.

The first tree in my Tale is an abstract one: I was in my last semester of seminary course work, and I had registered for a theology class. It met a 8:30 a.m. – not a good time for me – but I thought there might be some good interfaith dialogue since the class was being taught by a professor from the Dominican seminary.

At one of the first class meetings, the professor lectured about images of God: those Biblical metaphors, some poetic, some disturbing, for the Holy. Suddenly my ears perked up. "God can be a shepherd," he said, "or take the human form of Jesus. We can speak of God as a potter, or as a King. But we could never say that God is a *tree*," he chuckled. "The Bible doesn't offer that metaphor, so it's just not possible to compare God to a tree."

My intellectual mind could fully understand, and respect, the importance of Biblical authority. My soul, however, couldn't bridge the gap. There are days, for me, when trees are the only place I do find God, or wonder, or transcendence. Of *course* God can be a tree.

The second tree in my Tale is more concrete; it's a eucalyptus tree in Santa Barbara that towers over a Protestant church near my house – it's one of the tallest trees in the area – and I've been visiting it weekly for a couple of years now. Sometimes I walk past the tree as many as four times a week, and each time I do I stop to pat its trunk with both of my palms, craning my neck way, way up to look at its canopy. If there's no one watching, I

say hello. Out loud. It's only polite – the tree is a friend.

Last spring, when I was at an interfaith clergy luncheon, I found myself seated next to the minister of the church where "my" tree lives. As we ate, I told her, "I admire how well you do outreach with your church buses, and your campus is beautiful. But what I really love," I dropped my voice conspiratorially, "is that tree outside of your sanctuary."

She wrinkled her brow. "What tree?"

"You know," I prodded, "that *enormous* eucalyptus tree outside of your sanctuary?"

She was shaking her head, confused.

"It's really, *really* tall? And has a beautiful, smooth trunk..." I trailed off. Clearly, my colleague had no idea what I was talking about, and the more I waxed poetic about the tree, the crazier she was going to think I was. That was fine with me. People shook their heads at Henry, too; they clucked their tongues about Emerson and his "Muses" in the woods. I'm in good company.

There's a final parallel between us and our Transcendentalist forebears that we need to mention.

Before he contemplated chestnut propagation, before he caught a bad cold counting tree rings and tuberculosis took his life, Thoreau went to the woods to live. As you know, he built his cabin on Walden Pond so that he could "learn what life has to teach, and not, when [he] came to die, discover that [he had] not lived."

But Henry *didn't* stay there, in his cabin, forever. A little over two years after he' had moved to Walden, Thoreau says, "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one."

I suspect, as does Robert Fulghum,[18] that there's another reason Thoreau left the woods. "He didn't go very far [to Walden] and wasn't gone very long...Thoreau walked the two miles into Concord almost every day, and he welcomed visitors at the pond. Henry was lonely. That's why he finally moved back to town."

Remember that, the next time you hear someone claim that they don't go to church because Sunday is their morning to hike, or the next time someone asks you why you go to church: Henry David Thoreau, the architect of solitude, was lonely.

This is the poignant postscript to Henry's rambles in the woods and the wonder that Emerson found in seashells: as lovely as Nature is, as much peace as we find there, it is to each other that we return; it's in the members of this human companions that we find our ultimate home.

May your heart hold great wonder for Nature, may you find there beauty and comfort; and may your rambles always bring you back to us, your religious community.

Endnotes

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1. Richardson, p. 281.
2. Meg Brulatour, on "American Transcendentalism Web." See www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/ideas/nature.html.
3. Brulatour.
4. Brulatour.
5. Robert D. Richardson, Jr.'s introduction to *Faith in a Seed*, p. 17.
6. On September 1, 1850.
7. In *In the Eye of the Hurricane* by Philip Hallie, p. 122. This thought was offered first by Bacon, with whom Emerson agreed.
8. See *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* by Robert D. Richardson, Jr., p. 122.
9. Baker, pp. 29-30.
10. Richardson, pp. 139+
11. In *Emerson among the Eccentrics* by Carlos Baker, pp. 30-31.
12. In *Faith in a Seed*, foreword??? page xvi.
13. Carlos Baker, in *Emerson among the Eccentrics*, p. 518.
14. In "The Forest in the Seeds," in *High Tide in Tucson*, p. 239.
15. Kingsolver, p. 237-8.
16. Gary Paul Nabham's Foreword to *Faith in a Seed*, p. xiv.
17. P. xiv.
18. "Solitude" by Robert Fulghum, in *What on Earth Have I Done?*, p. 6.