

To Live Deliberately
Sunday, January 25, 2015

When Henry David Thoreau built his cabin at Walden Pond in 1845, he desired solitude. But not complete solitude. He welcomed visitors to the cabin, counting among his few furnishings two chairs. And a couple evenings each week he walked the two miles back to Concord Village to have dinner with his family or at a friend's table. He does refer to those meals obliquely in *Walden*, but doesn't mention how frequent they were, and it's become commonplace to mock him for not being totally solitary during the two years he spent at Walden. Somehow people perceive his insights as lesser if they know he didn't pull them out of sheer silence.

I have to say that I too have made fun of Henry in the past for not living the spiritual life as fully as I thought this icon should, but that was my failing, not his. For our view of the spiritual life and who can live it and how one lives it is too narrow. We think of men and women retreating to monasteries to spend their lives in prayer, of the Buddha leaving his sleeping wife and son, his father, home, and responsibilities to go off into the world to seek enlightenment; of Jesus calling Andrew and Simon to leave their nets, their livelihood, their elderly parents and their wives, to go off and follow him; of the yogi sitting in silent meditation. All of these images show us that the spiritual life can only be found in renunciation of the world and its human pleasures, that when the call comes we must choose one way or the other. And how hard it is to choose that path of enlightenment. I don't want to give up what it takes to make that choice. Do you?

But Thoreau offers another model, one perhaps rooted in the Hindu scriptures he often drew from. That way isn't all or nothing; it's a way of balance. Hindu tradition recognizes different stages of life – the time of being a student when one is exploring the world and choosing a path, the time of being a householder when energies go into family and professional responsibilities, and the time after retirement when children are grown and one can focus more single-mindedly on the spiritual. Though these stages used to be more rigidly delineated, as society has changed, the stages are no longer just determined by age, but are used to recognize that all our lives move back and forth from times of being more inner focused to times of being outer focused.

But also in the Hindu tradition and in Thoreau's model of the spiritual life, there is room for being spiritually focused at all times of life. Again, our definition of spirituality is too narrow if we think otherwise. That model of the spiritual life that shows us people leaving the world and all its ties in order to be spiritual often also shows us only one type of spiritual practice – sometimes called meditation, sometimes called centering prayer. Whatever the name, the goal of this discipline is to remove the

practitioner's mind from the world. Through a mantra or focus on the breath, you attempt to clear the mind from all the distractions which try to occupy it.

But though we don't hear about it often, there are spiritual practices which don't remove us from the world but immerse us in it. This was Thoreau's practice. He didn't go to Walden to sit silently in meditation. He needed the solitude so that he wouldn't be distracted from the world. As he wrote, "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life." I don't want to get too graphic, but those of you who are or have been meat-eaters, picture sucking the marrow from a bone. It's impossible to do that without getting your face smeared and your hands dirty. It is not a practice which removes you from the world.

And Thoreau lived deep by paying attention. He was renowned for finding arrowheads as he walked through the woods because he saw the shape of the stones. He filled his journals with notes and drawings of birds, animals, plants, seeds – all the things he saw. He paid attention.

Each time I've read Walden, I've been puzzled by the first chapter of the book in which he goes into great detail on the cabin he built – he lists each element, down to the nails, where he obtained them, what he paid for them, and how he used them. Wanting to get to the obviously spiritual parts, I've always skimmed that first chapter. But reading it this time for our Transcendentalism discussion tomorrow night, I made myself slow down. For the first time I focused on each item he listed:

- Boards \$8.03 ½, mostly shanty boards.
- Refuse shingles for roof and sides ...\$4
- Laths ... \$1.25
- Two second hand windows with glass ... \$2.43
- One thousand old brick... \$4

And on to a total of \$28.12 ½ spent to build the cabin. Finally on this reading I saw that the spiritual part of the book doesn't begin in Chapter 2 – it's right there in Chapter 1. In that list Thoreau isn't boasting about how cheaply he built the cabin, he showing us how he immersed himself in it, that the building of his cabin at Walden was as much a spiritual practice as anything he did after he moved into it. And he hopes by enumerating the elements to get us to pay attention too, to realize the worth of everything we use. For Thoreau sees a connection between our failure to pay attention and our failure to live wisely. Because we don't pay attention to the small elements, the nails and boards which hold our homes together, the stones which line our paths, the waters of the ponds and lakes, the rice and molasses which sustain our bodies, we use them thoughtlessly. We waste them. And because we don't value them, we think we need more things in our life than we actually do. We consume because we don't value what lies around us.

So how can we learn to live deep in the lives we have? Here are some of my ideas: First, turn off the background noise – the radio, the ipod. If you're listening to music or the news, really listen. If you're cooking or cleaning, walking or driving, focus on the feel of the green peppers as you chop them, on the difference your scrubbing makes to the bathroom counter, on the trees overhead. Look at the car next to you and think about the driver's life. In the supermarket, instead of reading the tabloid headlines really look at the young woman behind the checkout counter or the father trying to manage the basket full of groceries and two tired children. When shoveling snow, marvel at the miracle of the snowflake – no two ever alike, give thanks for this blanket to protect the plants, enjoy the sparkles of the sun and notice the patterns in the snow from water or the feet of birds or animals. Zone in rather than zone out.

Nishcala Joy Devi in her commentary on that first sutra tells a story of taking her 95 year old guru or teacher to the airport. They were running a bit late and rushed to security – fortunately there were no lines. Her teacher put her carry-on bags onto the conveyor belt, but “as she was about to walk through the metal detector, Mataji turned around and walked the other way!”

‘Oh no, what's she up to now!’ I thought, conscious of the seconds ticking away. Oblivious to the movement of time, she had spotted an obviously unhappy security guard, whom I had sped by without noticing. She headed back toward him. Fully five feet tall in shoes, Mataji planted herself directly in front of the towering six-foot-five inch guard. Standing on tiptoes, she reached up and took hold of his necktie. Using both hands as if climbing a rope, she pulled him down so that they were face-to-face. Stunned, he did not resist. I was aghast. What would happen? Would she be arrested? Should I try to stop her?

Mataji let go of his necktie with one hand and place the other behind his head, and then planted a big kiss right on his cheek, complete with a loud smacking sound. Releasing both his tie and him, she turned and walked away. The guard was reeling, a smile of amazement on his face. She then casually walked through the metal detector, and, addressing my obviously surprised look, shrugged and said, ‘He needed that.’

You don't have to kiss a security guard to live deeply, but what might change if you took the time to see the guard whenever you next head to airport security? How could you bring awareness of the heart of love present in both of you into your interaction? How might that awareness change your thoughts, your words, your life? And if more and more of us brought that awareness of the heart of love beating within and among each of us, imagine how it would change our world. This is the way we can “carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look [and so] affect the quality of the day.” This is the way we can live deliberately without going to

Walden or leaving the world. This is the way we can begin to be awake and alive.