

Dipping in Walden's Pond

It was only time I recall not completing an assignment in college. I wrote the paper but I hadn't read the entire book. We were told to read Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* also known as *Life in the Woods*. Busy with Biology and Chemistry classes and lab, I ran short of time, so I read a couple of early chapters, one in the middle and a couple at the end. I got the jist of it and wrote the paper. I don't remember what I wrote, but I vividly remember what the professor scribbled in red ink: "You have excellent understanding of Thoreau!" Below, double circled in red was the grade. A big cursive A.

Fraud! I had put in minimal effort and had gotten the maximum reward. I felt guilty. Did I truly have an excellent understanding of Thoreau or had I fooled the professor? Had I grasped the essence by reading just five scattered chapters? Was that even possible? With so many other assignments pressing, I put this unpleasantness out of my mind, but it pained me like a splinter deep in the skin for years until I finally decided to make it right.

During a week-long family trip to the beach some twenty years later when I had time to read for pleasure (or, as it turns out, to read out of remorse) I checked out *Walden* from the public library. I vowed to read the entire book of essays carefully to clear my conscience. I chose a fully annotated version because I intended to be thorough on this attempt, to atone for the superficiality of my youth, to ponder every word and phrase, to discover why Thoreau is so revered among writers and naturalists, and ultimately to actually *earn* that A.

Twenty years after that beach trip, here's what I remember of my intentional second encounter with Thoreau. Reading *Walden* was almost painful. The version I read was abundantly supplemented with explanatory notes in the margins, which I dutifully read. Page after page, the text and all this minutia became overwhelming. I realized, after serious effort, that if a text needed that much clarification, it was not something I could genuinely admire or enjoy. Yet I trudged on with the reading, trying to rid myself of the guilt that had bothered me all those years. I gave this reading my full attention, and yet the more I read, the more annoyed I became. Monumental mental effort was generating only minimal intellectual reward. After a couple of days, I allowed myself to quit. Unlike back in college, I had plenty of time to finish it, but I very deliberately decided that

reading the rest of that book would have been too much agony. When I closed that book, I felt like I had given a sincere effort to appreciate *Life in the Woods*. Perhaps there was some deep truth to be found in that prose, but those words required too much of me.

Ken Kifer, a Thoreau scholar writes:

“Walden is a difficult book to read for three reasons: First, it was written in an older prose, which uses surgically precise language, extended, allegorical metaphors, long and complex paragraphs and sentences, and vivid, detailed, and insightful descriptions. Thoreau does not hesitate to use metaphors, allusions, understatement, hyperbole, personification, irony, satire, metonymy, synecdoche, and oxymorons, and he can shift from a scientific to a transcendental point of view in mid-sentence. Second, its logic is based on a different understanding of life, quite contrary to what most people would call common sense. Ironically, this logic is based on what most people say they believe. Thoreau, recognizing this, fills Walden with sarcasm, paradoxes, and double entendres. He likes to tease, challenge, and even fool his readers. And third, quite often any words would be inadequate at expressing many of Thoreau's non-verbal insights into truth. Thoreau must use non-literal language to express these notions, and the reader must reach out to understand.”

My father was born in 1930 and grew up on a farm. He worked tobacco as a boy. He laid off rows in the field with a plow pulled by a mule. He took baths in a metal tub in water heated by a wood fire and disposed of his personal waste in an outhouse. Electricity, indoor plumbing, and television didn't appear in the two-bedroom house where he lived with his parents and four siblings until about 1950. His graduating high school classmates consisted of his older brother (who had failed a grade) and five girls. College was never an option, nor an interest. He immediately went to work at the Coca Cola plant. He valued hard productive effort that produced tangible functional results. For a while, he sold life insurance, and then managed a car wash, a laundromat, and an apartment complex for a wealthy man. Eventually they formed a successful business partnership based on chain link fencing.

My father had no interest in art or literature. I was the first in my family to go to college, where I enjoyed theater, English composition, and developed an appreciation for music and art. I wanted to share my expanding world with him. After pleading for some time, I got him to visit an art museum with me. There on the wall was a “mixed media” piece consisting of twine, rusty metal, and scraps of wood and plastic. On an adjacent plaque, beneath “Untitled” was the name of the artist, and a short statement in words that were perplexing to my father. He spent a few seconds eyeing the piece before saying, “I burn stuff like that.” What he saw was not what the creator had envisioned.

What some extoll as profound may have little significance for others. Like my father who dismissed that mixed media work, I conclude that some things are not worth the intellectual effort required to extract meaning or relevance.

For the last twenty years, I have enjoyed wilderness backpacking. I relish solitude in a natural world accessible only by foot with considerable effort. Views of mountains and meadows from a campsite by an alpine lake bring me contentment. I cherish days of isolation, of living with only the essentials. Is that the essence of Life in the Woods? Did I miss something?

My father would take us out on long drives on backcountry roads on Sunday afternoons in October and November when the leaves were turning. He and my mother enjoyed the display of fall color immensely. They would point out this red tree or that orange one or another in yellow. We three kids squirmed in the back seat, unimpressed by what they perceived with wonder and awe. “What’s the big deal?” we muttered. To us, they were nothing more than trees doing what trees do annually.

I sequestered my three children for October Sunday afternoon drives through the country. As a forty-year-old, I enjoyed the spectacular display of fall colors. I could now appreciate what my parents had admired those many years ago. Of course, my kids had no interest in the color of leaves. I realized that maybe it is

good that we do not fully appreciate everything around us from birth. What a pleasure it is to gradually discover novelty among the familiar as we age.

In my youth, I had no appetite for beets, Brussels sprouts, sushi, or gazpacho. Beets and Brussels sprouts were often available on the salad bar and every few years I would sample a small portion. For a long time, I still found them unappealing. One day I ventured to try some beets, they tasted good. Later I tried Brussel sprouts, too, and discovered their unique flavor and texture. I'd been missing out all these years. So it was eventually for asparagus and gazpacho and sushi! My tastes have expanded over the years. Some things I once avoided are now things I seek. However, I've never developed a taste for anchovies despite repeated attempts.

At my age, maybe I should take another dip in Walden's pond. Will it be anchovies or sushi this time?

GR Davis Jr
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