

Site Map: [MAIN / A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2 Webpage Printer Ready](#)

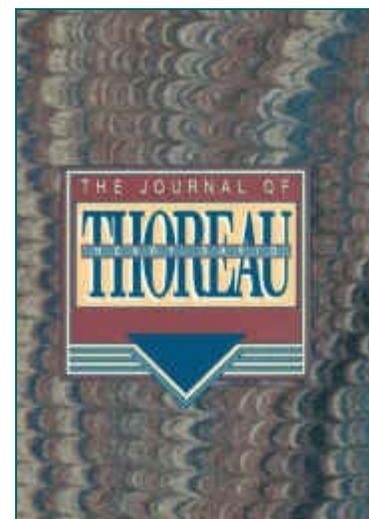


A READER'S JOURNAL

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. 5
by
Henry David Thoreau

Volume 5, March 1853 to November 1853
Published by Peregrine Smith Books/UT in 1984
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2004

In his Introduction to Volume 5, Walter Harding says that 1853 was "a year of boating on Concord's rivers" in his newly acquired rowboat. He also credits Thoreau with a biological innovation:



[page vii] In suggesting that cranberry bogs be flooded in the fall to protect the crops from frost, he anticipated current methods by many years.

These methods are not only used for cranberry plants, but also to protect citrus trees in Florida's groves. Sometimes fruit is actually saved by covering it with water which turns to ice, but keeps the temperature from dropping far below freezing, so that when the temperatures rises, the water drips away and the fruit is still capable of a productive harvest. I believe this is commonly used in strawberry fields in Louisiana and other places. All because someone, namely Thoreau, pursued his free lance job as "reporter of the universe" and this journal is the record of his assignments for most of 1853.

Thoreau knew that his work was that of a scientist of the first rank, but didn't expect that other establishment scientists of his time would understand his work in the same way as he did. Like Groucho Marx did with Friars' Club about a hundred years later, Thoreau felt compelled to turn down an invitation to join a prestigious organization of men in his own general field because he knew it would be folly to attempt to justify his specialized work to them. Groucho's reply was a terse demonstration of his comic genius, "I cannot belong to a club which would have me as a member." Thoreau's reply was a bit more elaborate and specific exactly because he wanted to avoid that very thing which Groucho sought in his reply: humor. One wonders if the later Friar's Club Roasts came about as a result of a sense of humor which Groucho inculcated in the Club by his refusal to join.

[page 4, 5] The secretary of the Association for the Advancement of Science requests me, as he probably has thousands of others, by a printed circular letter from Washington the other day, to fill the blank against certain questions, among which the most important one was what branch of science I was specially interested in, using the term science in the most comprehensive sense possible. Now, though I could state to a select few that department of human inquiry which engages me, and should be rejoiced at an opportunity to do so, I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing-stock of the scientific community to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand. The fact is I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot. Now I think of it, I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist. That would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations.

How absurd that, though I probably stand as near to nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most, yet a true account of my relation to nature should excite their ridicule only! If it had been the secretary of an association of which Plato or Aristotle was the president, I should not have hesitated to describe my studies at once and particularly.

Thoreau walked and rowed through his beloved Concord and everywhere he went he read Nature laid out before him as a book. As someone described him, he found, "books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything." In [Volume 4](#) of his Journal, Thoreau wrote, "Even in so humble a shape as a wood-pile, it contains sermons for us." In this volume, he writes, as he observes how fast Walden is melting from its winter freeze:

[page 28] March 20, 1853: Better [to] learn this strange character which nature speaks to-day than the Sanscrit. Book in the brooks. Saw a large dead water-bug on Walden. I suspect he came out alive.

He notices everything and writes about everything he notices. Here's a circadian example:

[page 55] March 27. Sunday. After a long spell of fair weather, the first April-like rain fell last night. But it is fair again this morning with a cool breeze, which will hardly permit the catkins to open. I miss very much the early willows along the railroad, which have been cut down the past winter to prevent catching fire from the engines and spreading to the woods. And hence my neighbor the switch-man has bean-poles to sell.

The fog of time leaves us in the dark as to whether his neighbor was someone who worked on the railroad as a switch-man and kept the young willows to sell in the spring for bean-poles or whether this was a man who sold "switches" or skinny sticks of wood for various purposes such as bean-poles and was therefore known as the switch-man. Perhaps Thoreau meant the latter and that he recovered the cut poles to add to his stock. This is a problem with reading Thoreau, some of the terms he uses are impossible to easily look up, obscured by the passing of both time and technology. I remember in the middle of the last century that there were clothes pole men who came by and offered us poles to use for holding the clothesline. If you didn't have a clothes pole, the freshly washed white sheets while drying would droop to the ground and get dirty. With the now universal, or nearly so, usage of mechanical dryers, there are no more clothes-pole-men.

In reviews of previous journals, I have mentioned Thoreau's fascination with the MP3 [\(1\)](#) technology of his time, the telegraph harp, so I can't pass up a chance to share at least one passage from this year's Journal with you:

[page 65] March 29, 1853, A bright, sunny, but yet rather breezy and cool afternoon. On the railroad I hear the telegraph. This is the lyre that is as old as the world. I put my ear to the post, and the sound seems to be in the core of the post, directly against my ear. This all of music. The utmost refinements of art, methinks, can go no further. This is one of those days divided against itself, when there is a cool wind but a warm sun, when there is little or no coolness proper to this locality, but it is wafted to us probably from the snow-clad northwest, and hence in sheltered places it is very warm. However, the sun is rapidly prevailing over the wind, and it is already warmer than when I came out.

Thoreau lived in a time when lascivious cutting of trees went unquestioned by everyone except himself. Here is an example. The trees are only young birches, but to Thoreau they are a valuable possession, a vista he observes during his peregrinations and which he cherishes. He even bemoans the loss of the wild flowers which grace the ditches when they are stripped away by a farmer.

[page 108] April 10, 1853. When the farmer cleans out his ditches, I mourn the loss of many a flower which he calls a weed. The main *charm* about the Corner road, just beyond the bridge, to me, has been in the little grove of locusts, sallows, and birches, etc., which has sprung up on the bank as you rise the hill. Yesterday I saw a man who is building a house near by cutting them down.

I asked him if he was going to cut them all. He said he was. I said if I were in his place I would

not have cut them for a hundred dollars, that they were the chief attraction of the place. "Why," said he, "they are nothing but a parcel of prickly bushes and are not worth anything. I'm going to build a new wall here." And so, to ornament the approach to his house, he substitutes a bare, ugly wall for an interesting grove.

Mountains are another favorite of his and in this next passage he considers writing a lecture on the virtues of mountains, which he refers to facetiously as "a sermon on the mount." It sounds more like a "paean on the mount", like an ethereal Julie Andrews singing out through the centuries her praise of the natural world which surrounds us, "The hills are alive with the sound of music."

[page 140, 141] From the hill, I look westward over the landscape. The deciduous woods are in their hoary youth, every expanding bud swaddled with downy webs. From this more eastern hill, with the whole breadth of the river valley on the west, the mountains appear higher still, the width of the blue border is greater, — not mere peaks, or a short and shallow sierra, but a high blue table-land with broad foundations, a deep and solid base or tablet, in proportion to the peaks that rest on it. As you ascend, the near and low hills sink and flatten into the earth; no sky is seen behind them; the distant mountains rise. The truly great are distinguished. Vergers, crests of the waves of earth, which in the highest break at the summit into granitic rocks over which the air beats. A part of their hitherto concealed base is seen blue. You see, not the domes only, but the body, the facade, of these terrene temples. You see that the foundation answers to the superstructure. Moral structures. (The sweet-fern leaves among odors now.) The successive lines of haze which divide the western landscape, deeper and more misty over each intervening valley, are not yet very dense; yet there is a light atmospheric line along the base of the mountains for their whole length, formed by this denser and grosser atmosphere through which we look next the earth, which almost melts them into the atmosphere, like the contact of molten metal with that which is unfused; but their pure, sublimed tops and main body rise, palpable sky-land above it, like the waving signal of the departing who have already left these shores. It will be worth the while to observe carefully the direction and altitude of the mountains from the Cliffs. The value of the mountains in the horizon, — would not that be a good theme for a lecture? The text for a discourse on real values, and permanent; a sermon on the mount. They are stepping-stones to heaven, — as the rider has a horse-block at his gate, — by which to mount when we would commence our pilgrimage to heaven; by which we gradually take our departure from earth, from the time when our youthful eyes first rested on them, — from this bare actual earth, which has so little of the hue of heaven. They make it easier to die and easier to live. They let us off.

One cannot read Thoreau without grasping over and over again his deep love of the land and how he despises the scraping away of hills to make farmland or roads. For surely, he tells us, were we to do that, the "skies would weep over the scars."

[page 141] Whether any picture by a human master hung on our western wall could supply their place. Whether to shovel them away and level them would really smooth the way to the true west. Whether the skies would not weep over their scars. They are valuable to mankind as is the iris of the eye to a man. They are the path of the translated. The undisputed territory between earth and heaven.

Each page of this book has a title on the right-hand page which hints at the theme of the page. On May 12, we find this title: "The Birth of Shade".

[page 149] Shade is being born; the summer is pitching its tent; concealment will soon be afforded to the birds in which to build their nests.

He sees a deep yellow buttercup and wonders if he has a mood to correspond to it. He reports on all the flowers, plants, and trees in his domain as if each one were equally valuable, and who knows but that they are? Weeds, after all, are merely a plant where someone doesn't want a plant.

[page 184] May 23, 1853. Every new flower that opens, no doubt, expresses a new mood of the human mind. Have I any dark or ripe orange-yellow thoughts to correspond. Lupines now for some days, probably about the 19th. Whiteweed will open perhaps to-morrow or next day. For some time dandelions and mouse-ear have been seen gone to seed — autumnal sight. I have not yet seen a white oak fairly in bloom.

When Thoreau encounters rough edges, it is never with plants, but rather it is with people, like the farmer who cleared the grass from his ditch. He mentions here an interaction he had with Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose name rarely appears in the journals so far.

[page 188] May 24, 1853. P. M. Talked, or tried to talk, with R. W. E. Lost my time — nay, almost my identity. He, assuming a false opposition where there was no difference of opinion, talked to the wind — told me what I knew — and I lost my time trying to imagine myself somebody else to oppose him.

Galls are swollen protuberances on plants and tree limbs caused variously by irritation due to viruses, bacteria, or insects such as the gall wasp. Perhaps the irritation experienced by Thoreau from RWE created a psychic gall inside of Thoreau. One can feel the ambivalence he feels towards galls in this next passage. One can only imagine Thoreau as a large white oak decorated with colorful pincushion galls whose seeds were planted into him by the wasps he encounters in his friends and acquaintances. He seems to be talking about the blues musicians of today when he says, "The poet cherishes his chagrins and sets his sighs to music." And no better case for temperance have I ever encountered in literature than the way he ends this next passage.

[page 210] June 1, 1853. The pincushion galls on young white oaks are now among the most beautiful objects in the woods, coarse woolly white to appearance, spotted with bright red or crimson on the exposed side. It is remarkable that a mere gall, which at first we are inclined to regard as something abnormal, should be made so beautiful, as if it were the *flower* of the tree; that a disease, an excrescence, should prove, perchance, the greatest beauty, — as the tear of the pearl. Beautiful scarlet sins they may be. Through our temptations, — aye, and our falls, — our virtues appear. As in many a character, — many a poet, — we see that beauty exhibited in a gall, which was meant to have bloomed in a flower, unchecked. Such, however, is the accomplishment of the world. The poet cherishes his chagrins and sets his sighs to music. This gall is the tree's "Ode to Dejection." How oft it chances that the apparent fruit of a shrub, its apple, is merely a gall or blight! How many men meet with some blast in the moist growing days of their youth, and what should have been a sweet and palatable fruit in them becomes a mere puff and excrescence, ripening no kernel, and they say that they have experienced religion! For the hardening of the seed is the crisis. Their fruit is a gall, a puff, an excrescence, for want of moderation and continence. So many plants never ripen their fruit.

Later in the book, he develops his metaphor of the gall even further for us. Humans become the little worms living inside and nourishing themselves in the gall of Nature stung by God.

[page 349] Saw some green galls on a goldenrod (?) three-quarters of an inch in diameter, shaped like a fruit or an Eastern temple, with two or three little worms inside, completely changing the destiny of the plant, showing the intimate relation between animal and vegetable life. The animal signifies its wishes by a touch, and the plant, instead of going on to blossom and bear its normal fruit, devotes itself to the service of the insect and becomes its cradle and food. It suggests that Nature is a kind of gall, that the Creator stung her and man is the grub she is destined to house and feed. The plant rounds off and paints the gall with as much care and love as its own flower and fruit, admiring it perchance even more.

When the Chernobyl nuclear disaster happened I was working at a local nuclear power plant in South Louisiana. One of the systems under my charge was the radiation monitors. We had a report of an anomalously high radioactive iodine reading in the sump monitors, those that monitor the radiation in the rainfall. I sent a team out to ensure the monitors were all in calibration and they were. Then we remembered that three days earlier, almost halfway around the globe, a nuclear power plant had sent radioactive iodine emissions into the air. We were reading the detritus of the Chernobyl accident which had likely been carried by the jetstream westward across Asia, the Pacific, and half of the North American continent before it arrived in our sumps ready to be identified. What brought this to mind was this next passage in which Thoreau describes detritus arriving on the shore of Norway from a powder mill explosion near Concord.

[page 211, 212] The news of the explosion of the powder-mills was not only carried seaward by the cloud which its smoke made, but more effectually, though more slowly, by the fragments which were floated thither by the river. Melvin yesterday showed me quite a pile of fragments, — some short pieces of large timber, — still black with powder, which he had saved as they were drifting by. Nobody takes the trouble to record all the consequences of such an event. And some, no doubt, were carried down to the Merrimack, and by the Merrimack to the ocean, till perchance they got into the Gulf Stream and were cast up the coast of Norway, covered with barnacles, or who can tell what more distant strand? - still bearing some traces of burnt powder, still capable of telling how and when they were launched, to those who can read their signs.

This next passage reminds me of living with an interstate highway as my backyard neighbor for 11 years. The roar and rush of traffic never ceased. I came to think of it as living by a seashore with waves crashing in the surf, a very similar sound, especially when muffled by walls. For Thoreau the railroad was the interstate highway of his day, and freight cars the normal traffic. In the fog on the top of a hill with freight cars passing below, he imagines an ocean below is causing the tumult. For those who will travel long distances to see a play, but have never climbed to the top of a nearby hill to experience the fog, he has acerbic words. Why journey to see painted scenes of Nature on canvas, when the real thing lies before you at your doorstep?

[page 216] An early freight-train of cars is heard, not seen, rushing through the town beneath it. It resembles nothing so much as the ocean. You can get here the impression which the ocean makes, without ever going to the shore. Men — poor simpletons as they are — will go to a panorama by families, to see a Pilgrim's Progress, perchance, who never yet made progress so far as to the top of such a hill as this at the dawn of a foggy morning. All the fog they know is in their brains.

[page 217] Men will go further and pay more to see a tawdry picture on canvas, a poor painted scene, than to behold the fairest or grandest scene that nature ever displays in their immediate vicinity, though they may have never seen it in their lives.

In Thoreau's time, there were probably no Irishmen in Concord, but there were Indians or memory of Indians, and the Indian temperament when aroused was used as a metaphor for being angry that was later replaced by the phrase "Irish Blood" in more recent decades.

[page 240] There are one or two in the town who probably have Indian blood in their veins, and when they exhibit any unusual irascibility, their neighbors say they have got their Indian blood roused.

His description of A. D. Foss, "once a Baptist minister in Hopkinton, N. H." will seem eerily familiar to many of you who have conversed with such a person in your own life. Someone who under the guise of graciousness or kindness would "rub you continually with the greasy cheeks of their kindness." Who will "not keep their distance, but cuddle up and lie spoon-fashion with you, no matter how hot the weather nor

how narrow the bed." His skewering of Foss goes on and on in a tone that was probably not acceptable in polite conversation in Thoreau's time or in this time either, given my wife's protests for me to stop about halfway through as I read her the next passage. Note that "bowels" has the dictionary meaning, figuratively speaking, of "the seat of tender emotions."

[page 264, 265] I was awfully pestered with his benignity; feared I should get greased all over with it past restoration; tried to keep some starch in my clothes. He wrote a book called "A Kiss for a Blow," and he behaved as if there were no alternative between these, or as if I had given him a blow. I would have preferred the blow, but he was bent on giving me the kiss, when there was neither quarrel nor agreement between us. I wanted that he should straighten his back, smooth out those ogling wrinkles of benignity about his eyes, and, with a healthy reserve, pronounce something in a downright manner. It was difficult to keep clear of his slimy benignity, with which he sought to cover you before he swallowed you and took you fairly into his bowels. It would have been far worse than the fate of Jonah. I do not wish to get any nearer to a man's bowels than usual. They lick you as a cow her calf. They would fain wrap you about with their bowels. -- addressed me as "Henry" within one minute from the time I first laid eyes on him, and when I spoke, he said with drawling, sultry sympathy, "Henry, I know all you would say; I understand you perfectly; you need not explain anything to me;" I and to another, "I am going to dive into Henry's inmost depths." I said, "I trust you will not strike your head against the bottom." He could tell in a dark room, with his eyes blinded and in perfect stillness, if there was one there whom he loved. One of the most attractive things about the flowers is their beautiful reserve. The truly beautiful and noble puts its lover, as it were, at an infinite distance, while it attracts him more strongly than ever. I do not like the men who come so near me with their bowels. It is the most disagreeable kind of snare to be caught in. Men's bowels are far more slimy than their brains. They must be ascetics indeed who approach you by this side. What a relief to have heard the ring of one healthy reserved tone! With such a forgiving disposition, as if he were all the while forgiving you for existing. Considering our condition or *habit* of soul, maybe corpulent and asthmatic, — maybe dying of atrophy, with all our bones sticking out, — is it kindness to embrace a man? They lay their sweaty hand on your shoulder, or your knee, to magnetize you.

Next Thoreau turns his ire against the Iron Horse who lays waste to forests for his fodder and empties ponds to satisfy his thirst. One can only note the ambivalence in Thoreau's attitude towards progress, he loves the sound of the freight cars passing in the fog, but hates the deforestation and tapping of the water sources that were necessary for steam engines to roll. It is easy to notice how the metaphor of the Trojan horse works better than "Moore of Moore Hall", which seems to be referring to "the bravest young knight in the land", a famous dragon-killer, a phrase which required me to do a Google search of the internet to locate a meaning for.

[Page 266, 267] Now the trunks of trees on the bottom and the old log canoe are gone, the dark surrounding woods are gone, and the villagers, who scarcely know how it lies, instead of going to the pond to bathe or drink, are thinking to bring its water to the village in a pipe, to form a reservoir as high as the roofs of the houses, to wash their dishes and be their scullion, — which should be more sacred than the Ganges, — to earn their Walden by the turning of a cock or drawing of a plug, as they draw cider from a cask. The Boiling Spring is turned into a tank for the Iron Horse to drink at, and the Walden woods have been cut and dried for his fodder. That devilish Iron Horse, whose ear rending whinner is heard throughout the town, has defiled the Boiling Spring with his feet and drunk it up, and browsed off all the wood around the pond. He has got a taste for berries even, and with unnatural appetite he robs the country babies of milk, with the breath of his nostrils polluting the air. That Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, insidiously introduced by mercenary Greeks. With the scream of a hawk he

beats the bush for men, the man-harrier, and carries them to his infernal home by thousands for his progeny. Where is the country's champion, the Moore of Moore Hall, to meet him at the Deep Cut and throw a victorious and avenging lance against this bloated pest?

In a usage that has long since passed into disuse, Thoreau uses the verb "improve" in its transitive sense of "making the best use of" in this sentence on page 278: "The farmer has improved the dry weather to burn his meadow." I have mentioned this old usage before, but this is a worthy example of it, as it will strike the modern ear as an error of grammar, for how can someone "improve the dry weather"? By making it rain? No, if one would read it that way, one would completely misunderstand Thoreau's point that the farmer was making the best use of the dry weather to clear his meadow by burning it.

Thoreau gives us a discourse on the growth of a man through a youth of hunting and fishing to a maturity as a naturalist. Most men would only spend time at Walden Pond if engaged in angling for fish. Henry, however, had bigger fish to fry. He angled for the Pond itself. He got it hooked so strongly to his line, he took up residence there for several years and wrote a book about it.

[page 304, 305] Such is oftenest the young man's introduction to the forest and wild. He goes thither at first as a hunter and fisher, until at last the naturalist or poet distinguishes that which attracted him and leaves the gun and fishing-rod behind. The mass of men are still and always young in this respect. I have been surprised to observe that the only obvious employment which ever to my knowledge detained at Walden Pond for a whole half-day, unless it was in the way of business, any of my " fellow-citizens," whether fathers or children of the town, with just one exception, was fishing. They might go there a thousand times, perchance, before the sediment of fishing would sink to the bottom and leave their purpose pure, — before they began to angle for the pond itself. Thus, even in civilized society, the embryo man (speaking intellectually) passes through the hunter stage of development. They did not think they were lucky or well paid for their time unless they got a long string of fish, though they had the opportunity of seeing the pond all the while. They measured their success by the length of a string of fish. The Governor faintly remembers the pond, for he went a-fishing there when he was a boy, but now he is too old and dignified to go a-fishing, and so he knows it no longer. If the Legislature regards it, it is chiefly to regulate the number of hooks to be used in fishing there; but they know nothing about the hook of hooks.

Thoreau, while not a fisherman, would have made an excellent one as this next story reveals. He watched a pickerel take a minnow and move it around until it is head first into its mouth before deigning to eat it. He suggests that fish lures and bait be arranged to take advantage of this habit of the pickerel. (Page 307)

Since this year consisted of a lot of rowing in his new boat, I would be remiss to omit a passage from his boating experiences. Here's one I liked which took place on my birthday, exactly 83 years before I was born.

[page 319] July 20. To Nawshawtuct at moonrise with Sophia, by boat.

Moon apparently full yesterday. A low mist incrusts the meadow, — not so perceptible when we are on the water. Now we row through a thin low mist about as high as one's head, now we come to a place where there is no mist on the river or meadow, apparently where a slight wind stirs. The gentle susurrus from the leaves of the trees on shore is very enlivening, as if Nature were freshening, awakening to some enterprise. There is but little wind, but its sound, incessantly stirring the leaves at a little distance along the shore, heard not seen, is very inspiring. It is like an everlasting dawn or awakening of nature to some great purpose.

On August 9, 1853 he writes, "How fatally the season is advanced toward the fall!" and the book margin

splits up and hyphenates the word "season" thusly: "sea-son" which suggested to me this marginalia on page 363:

**Sea Son
A Sea Son under Sail
Advancing toward the Fall.**

Thoreau eats all kinds of berries on his peregrinations, many I have never heard of, such as melanchier berries — or bilberries, as in this next passage. The metaphor of Nature, within which he finds himself, helps him to know himself within. And helps us to know him.

[page 364] I prefer the large blue, with a bloom on them, and slightly acid ones. I taste and am strengthened. This is the season of small fruits. I trust, too, that I am maturing some small fruit as palatable in these months, which will communicate my flavor to my kind.

As we read Thoreau we taste his berries: large blue ones, slightly acid ones, all small fruit which strengthen us as we receive our nutrition. Thoreau is nothing if not a Sea Son of small fruit, and each of these 14 Journals contain enough of them for a lifetime of nourishment.

Another unlikely metaphor he applies to himself is the plant known as poke.

[page 393] Poke stems are now ripe. I walked through a beautiful grove of them, six or seven feet high, on the side of Lee's Cliff, where they have ripened early. Their stems are a deep, rich purple with a bloom, contrasting with the clear green leaves. Every part but the leaves is a brilliant purple (lake (?) -purple) (*sic*); or, more strictly speaking, the racemes without the berries are a brilliant lake-red with crimson flame-like reflections. Hence the *lacca*. Its cylindrical racemes of berries of various hues from green to dark purple, six or seven inches long, are drooping on all sides, beautiful both with and without berries, all afire with ripeness. Its stalks, thus full of purple wine, are one of the fruits of autumn. It excites me to behold it. What a success is it!! What maturity it arrives [at], ripening from leaf to root! May I mature as perfectly, root and branch, as the poke! Its stems are more beautiful than most flowers.

Given that Thoreau was taken away from us at the tender age of forty-four, he may be said to have ripened early, the way the poke does, root and branch, leaf to root, with stalks full of purple wine that flow within the pages of his Journals and books, "all afire with ripeness."

Like the poke he endeavored to live each season fully as it passed, and encourages us in turn to do the same. We live in culture which can provide fresh fruit and produce from fall to us in spring and vice-versa, so it requires some discipline, some thought, to buy produce from the local environs which are ensured of being of the current season, but it is yet possible to do so and follow his advice. Since his advice is of the nature of a litany, let's arrange with bullets as such and call it: *Litany to Nature*.

[page 394, 395] August 23, 1853: *Litany to Nature*

- **Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each. Let them be your only diet drink and botanical medicines. In August live on berries, not dried meats and pemmican, as if you were on shipboard making your way through a waste ocean, or in a northern desert.**
- **Be blown on by all the winds.**
- **Open all your pores and bathe in an the tides of Nature, in all her streams and oceans, at all seasons. Miasma and infection are from within, not without. The invalid, brought to the brink of the grave by an unnatural life, instead of imbibing**

only the great influence that Nature is, drinks only the tea made of a particular herb, while he still continues his unnatural life, — saves at the spile and wastes at the bung. He does not love Nature or his life, and so sickens and dies, and no doctor can cure him.

- **Grow green with spring, yellow and ripe with autumn.**
- **Drink of each season's influence as a vial, a true panacea of all remedies mixed for your especial use. The vials of summer never made a man sick, but those which he stored in his cellar.**
- **Drink the wines, not of your bottling, but Nature's bottling; not kept in goat-skins or pig-skins, but the skins of a myriad fair berries. Let Nature do your bottling and your pickling and preserving.**
- **For all Nature is doing her best each moment to make us well. She exists for no other end. Do not resist her. With the least inclination to be well, we should not be sick. Men have discovered — or think they have discovered — the salutariness of a few wild things only, and not of all nature. Why, "nature" is but another name for health, and the seasons are but different states of health. Some men think that they are not well in spring, or summer, or autumn, or winter; it is only because they [RJM: the seasons] are not *well in* them.**

If Thoreau ever ate too much, he felt it in his body as a discordant sound emerging from a badly constructed violin or viol.

[page 424] It occurred to me when I awoke this morning, feeling regret for intemperance of the day before in eating fruit, which had dulled my sensibilities, that man was to be treated as a musical instrument, and if any viol was to be made of sound timber and kept well tuned always, it was he, so that when the bow of events is drawn across him he may vibrate and resound in perfect harmony. A sensitive soul will be continually trying its strings to see if they are in tune. A man's body must be rasped down exactly to a shaving. It is of far more importance than the wood of a Cremona violin.

Anyone who's ever moved knows that the movers use the smallest box of all for books because they are about the densest of any household items loaded into boxes. So when Thoreau received a load of unsold books from his publisher and had to carry them upstairs, his writings took on a substantiality he comments upon in this next passage. Notice his acerbic swipe at his publisher who managed only the first half of his job as Thoreau apparently saw it: he had the books bound but didn't sell them.

[page 459, 460] October 27, 1853. For a year or two past, my *publisher*, falsely so called, has been writing from time to time to ask what disposition should be made of the copies of "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers" still on hand, and at last suggesting that he had use for the room they occupied in his cellar. So I had them all sent to me here, and they have arrived to-day by express, filling the man's wagon, — 706 copies out of an edition of 1000 which I bought of Munroe four years ago and have been ever since paying for, and have not quite paid for yet. The wares are sent to me at last, and I have an opportunity to examine my purchase. They are something more substantial than fame, as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs to a place similar to that to which they trace their origin. Of the remaining two hundred and ninety and odd, seventy-five were given away, the rest sold. I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. Is it not *well* that the author should behold the fruits of his labor? My works are piled up on one side of my chamber half as high as my head, my *opera omnia*. This is authorship; these are the work of my brain. There was just one piece of good luck in the venture. The unbound were tied up by the printer four years ago in stout paper wrappers, and inscribed,

H. D. Thoreau's

Concord River
50 cops.

So Munroe had only to cross out "River" and write "Mass." and deliver them to the expressman at once. I can see now what I write for, the result of my labors.

Nevertheless, in spite of this result, sitting beside the inert mass of my works, I take up my pen to-night to record what thought or experience I may have had, with as much satisfaction as ever. Indeed, I believe that this result is more inspiring and better for me than if a thousand had bought my wares. It affects my privacy less and leaves me freer!

And this next passage is quintessential Thoreau, "A Gossamer Day". It was called to my attention by my good friend and New England naturalist, Kevin Dann, who is probably traipsing along the shores of [Lewis Creek](#) as I type these words. He is working on a book about Thoreau currently and has been through the entire set of 14 Journals several times.

[page 465, 466] October 31, 1853. I slowly discover that this is a gossamer day. I first see the fine lines stretching from one weed or grass stem or rush to another, sometimes seven or eight feet distant, horizontally and only four or five inches above the water. When I look further, I find that they are everywhere and on everything, sometimes forming conspicuous fine white gossamer webs on the heads of grasses, or suggesting an Indian bat.

They are so abundant that they seem to have been suddenly produced in the atmosphere by some chemistry, — spun out of air, — I know not for what purpose. I remember that in Kirby and Spence it is not allowed that the spider can walk on the water to carry his web across from rush to rush, but here I see myriads of spiders on the water, making some kind of progress, and one at least with a line attached to him. True they do not appear to walk well, but they stand up high and dry on the tips of their toes, and are blown along quite fast. They are of various sizes and colors, though mostly a greenish-brown or else black; some very small. These gossamer lines are not visible unless between you and the sun. We pass some black willows, now of course quite leafless, and when they are between us and the sun they are so completely covered with these fine cobwebs or lines, mainly parallel to one another, that they make one solid woof, a misty woof, against the sun. They are not drawn taut, but curved downward in the middle, like the rigging of vessels, — the ropes which stretch from mast to mast, -- as if the fleets of a thousand Lilliputian nations were collected one behind another under bare poles. But when we have floated a few feet further, and thrown the willow out of the sun's range, not a thread can be seen on it.

Now a metaphor for the life of man using the month October.

[page 502] November 14, 1853. October answers to that period in the life of man when he is no longer dependent on his transient moods, when all his experience ripens into wisdom, but every root, branch, leaf of him glows with maturity. What he has been and done in his spring and summer appears. He bears his fruit.

Considering that Thoreau's Journals proceeded all the way into his forty-third year, 1861, the year before he died, one can easily say that those last fifteen years of his life was his October. He died in May of tuberculosis after contracting a cold while counting the growth rings on a tree. On the tree that was Thoreau we count these fourteen Journal volumes as his growth rings, but unlike the growth rings of a tree which expand during the verdure of summer and shrink during the austere months of winter, his Journals are flush and ample in every month of the year.

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. MP3 is the name of recent technology which provides take-along music in a small electronic

package.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

~~~~~

