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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. 6
by
Henry David Thoreau

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2004

Finished reading this volume of Thoreau's Journals this morning in front of a glowing fire of winter in my hearth as Thoreau walked through the dampening fires of summer in his beloved Concord region. Another year gone, another Thoreau journal completed. A year which

for Thoreau lacked a Fall, beginning in December and ending in August. It began with "Tree Sparrows" and ended with "Smoke in the Air" — as the headers for the first and last pages of this volume informed us of the content of the pages. But fear not, in the next volume, Thoreau will have the larger part of two Falls to share with us.

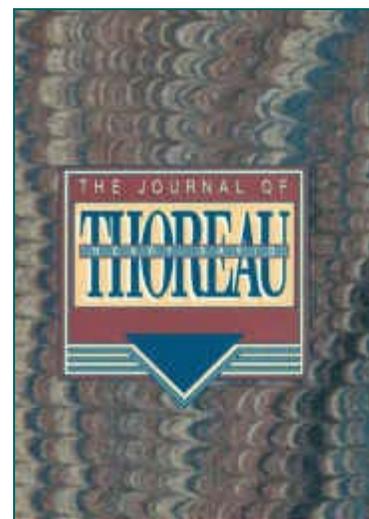
The headers of the odd-numbered pages are a one to four word precis of the contents of the two-pages facing the reader. A random sample of them, one from each month, would be enlightening as to the progress of Thoreau's activities from December through August.

Dec 3, 1853 A Fire in the Snow
Jan 6, 1854 Crime Among the Iroquois
Feb 5, 1854 A Fox's Track
Mar 8, 1854 Ducks on the River
Apr 8, 1854 Sundry Birds and Flowers
May 17, 1854 Oak Galls
Jun 8, 1854 The Great Fringed Orchis
Jul 4, 1854 A Box Tortoise
Aug 9, 1854 "Walden" Published

Actually the last heading was not selected at random. I include it because it reminded me to mention the amount of notice Thoreau gave in his journals to the publication of his most famous work: two words — "Walden" Published.

These journals of Thoreau are like his cenotaph — a sepulcher raised to a man whose remains are buried elsewhere — like the cenotaph of the clam whose beauty would forever remain hidden from sight but for the audacity of a man to raise it from the depths, extract its succulent treasure, and display its shell for every beachcomber to view.

[page 7, 8] **It is a somewhat saddening reflection that the beautiful colors of this shell for want of light cannot be said to exist, until its inhabitant has fallen a prey to the spoiler, and it is thus left a wreck upon the strand. Its beauty then beams forth, and it remains a splendid cenotaph to its departed tenant, symbolical of those radiant realms of light to which the latter has risen. — what glory he has gone to. And, by the way, as long as they remain in "the dark unfathomed caves of ocean," they are not "gems of purest ray serene," though fitted to be, but only when they are tossed up to light.**



The treasures that Thoreau tosses up to light for us to marvel over are rampant. He doesn't merely walk over the ground, he reads it aloud to us as he strides. And occasionally he offers us suggestions for our living.

[page 19] Dec. 16. Friday — Hoar Frost: The elms covered with hoar frost, seen in the east against the morning light, are very beautiful. These days, when the earth is still bare and the weather is so warm as to create much vapor by day, are the best for these frost works.

Would you be well, see that you are attuned to each mood of nature.

Would you be attuned to nature, take a short walk each night with Henry as your guide. Would you be well, listen to his advice about life. For instance, do you work in an office all day in which the routine of work dams up your intellectual and spiritual life so that it may leak out only in the early morning or early evening hours? He explains how much more interesting a painting of a landscape is when it portrays, not the harsh light of high noon, but the more subtle hues of the periods of dawn and twilight "when the imagination is most active, the more hopeful or pensive seasons of the day."

[page 53] Jan. 8. Sunday — Atmosphere in Landscape: Our mood may then possess the whole landscape, or be in harmony with it, as the hue of twilight prevails over the whole scene. Are we more than crepuscular in our intellectual and spiritual life? Have we awakened to broad noon? The morning hope is soon lost in what becomes the routine of the day, and we do not recover ourselves again until we land on the pensive shores of evening, shores which skirt the great western continent of the night. At sunset we look into the west. For centuries our thoughts fish those grand banks that lie before the newfoundland, before our spirits take up their abode in that Hesperian Continent to which these lie in the way.

Who has not bought a garment off a rack in a department store and wondered what kind of form the tailor used to design the monstrosity. One measurement, a waist or a length of chest, a 42R perhaps for a coat, and you're expected to have this thing fit your body with style and comfort. Truth is, more often than not, it doesn't fit. Thoreau rails against Fashion as if she were a Goddess who lays down requirements for us mere mortals to adhere to, and who knows but what Thoreau is right, even more so in our day than his.

[page 69, 70] Jan. 14 — Notes from Cato: I just had a coat come home from the tailor's. Ah me! Who am I that should wear this coat? It was fitted upon one of the devil's angels about my size. Of what use that measuring of me if he did not measure my character, but only the breadth of my shoulders, as it were a peg to hang it on. This is not the figure that I cut. This is the figure the tailor cuts. That presumptuous and impertinent fashion whispered in his ear, so that he heard no word of mine. As if I had said, "Not my will, O Fashion, but thine be done." We worship not the Parcae, nor the Graces, but Fashion, offspring of Proteus and Vanessa, of Whim and Vanity. She spins and weaves and cuts with the authority of the Fates. Oh, with what delight I could thrust a spear through her vitals or squash her under my heel! Every village might well keep constantly employed a score of knights to rid it of this monster. It changes men into bears or monkeys with a single wave of its wand. The head monkey at Paris, Count D'Orsay, put on the traveler's cap, and now all the monkeys in the world do the same thing. He merely takes the breadth of my shoulders and proceeds to fit the garment to Puck, or some other grotesque devil of his acquaintance to whom he has sold himself.

In this next passage Thoreau reveals that he understands the main function of the winter season for humans is the concentration of thought that it naturally provides us. It is no coincidence that the heart of our academic terms lie in mid-winter.

[page 84, 85] Jan 30, P.M. — The Uses of Winter: The winter, cold and bound out as it is, is thrown to us like a bone to a famishing dog, and we are expected to get the marrow out of it. While the milkmen in the outskirts are milking so many scores of cows before sunrise these winter mornings, it is our task to milk the winter itself. It is true it is like a cow that is dry, and our fingers are numb, and there is none to wake us up. Some desert the field and go into winter quarters in the city. They attend the oratorios, while the only music that we countrymen hear is the squeaking of the snow

under our boots. But the winter was not given to us for no purpose. We must thaw its cold with our genialness. We are tasked to find out and appropriate all the nutriment it yields. If it is a cold and hard season, its fruit, no doubt, is the more concentrated and nutty. It took the cold and bleakness of November to ripen the walnut, but the human brain is the kernel which the winter itself matures. Not till then does its shell come off. The seasons were not made in vain. Because the fruits of the earth are already ripe, we are not to suppose that there is no fruit left for winter to ripen. It is for man the seasons and all their fruits exist. The winter was made to concentrate and harden and mature the kernel of his brain, to give tone and firmness and consistency to his thought. Then is the great harvest of the year, the harvest of thought. All previous harvests are stubble to this, mere fodder and green crop. Now we burn with a purer flame like the stars; our oil is winter-strained. We are islanded in Atlantic and Pacific and Indian Oceans of thought, Bermudas, or Friendly or Spice Islands.

Anyone who truly loves winter would be a countryman, not a city man. And anyone who loves winter will be able to recall a day somewhat like the day Henry recounts below — a perfect winter day:

[page 118] Feb. 12 — *Skating*: To make a perfect winter day like this, you must have a clear, sparkling air, with a sheen from the snow, sufficient cold, little or no wind; and the warmth must come directly from the sun. It must not be a thawing warmth. The tension of nature must not be relaxed. The earth must be resonant if bare, and you hear the lispings tinkle of chickadees from time to time and the unrelenting steel-cold scream of a jay, unmelted, that never flows into a song, a sort of wintry trumpet, screaming cold; hard, tense, frozen music, like the winter sky itself; in the blue livery of winter's band. It is like a flourish of trumpets to the winter sky. There is no hint of incubation in the jay's scream. Like the creak of a cart-wheel. There is no cushion for sounds now. They tear our ears.

And a couple of days later, he recounts hearing the telegraph harp, as he calls the humming of the telegraph lines in the wind, "The telegraph resounds at every post. It is a harp with one string, — the first strain from the American lyre." A month later in March his attention is called to the decayed matter of the earth upon which he treads, "Shall the earth be regarded as a graveyard, a necropolis, merely, and not also as a granary filled with the seeds of life? Is not its fertility increased by this decay? A fertile compost, not exhausted sand."

Thoreau has his manuscript of *Walden* in Boston and says out of nowhere, between a passage on a woodpecker and a description of willows and alders along a watercourse, "I am sorry to think that you do not get a man's most effective criticism until you provoke him. Severe truth is expressed with some bitterness." (Page 169) One of the most provoking things a writer can do is publish his work, and the most heart-breaking time is after one has sent a proofed manuscript to the printer, because then the reality of its being unchangeable breaks upon one with the sudden force of an unexpected hard slap on the back from an old school chum. Every nuance of phrase seems to beg improvement, a long sentence begs to be divided, an arcane word begs release from the page and relegation to the dictionary, and the cries from the proofed manuscript cannot be stilled until the first copy of the finished printing arrives to assuage the turmoil.

It is one of the joys of publishing as I do directly to the Internet that I can have my cake and eat it, too, that is, I can publish it and continue to edit it. Directly I publish a review, an essay, or a newsletter to the Internet, I hear the cries arise from the text for emendation, for improvement, for parsing, for clarification — they beckon me to give them attention like a houseful of children newly arrived home from school. I must attend them — attend each paragraph, each sentence, each word, and allow them to reveal to me how the meaning they hold matches my intent when I first set them carefully into place. When, as sometimes happens, I read my words after a rest period and am puzzled as to my original intent, I must first recover my intent, sacrifice my prose with a flourish of the delete key, and reform my intent into words with more clarity. Then I can immediately dispatch my newly rewritten sentences into publication over the Internet.

I have the ability to send things off to publish and can edit them immediately as I find a typographical error or a turn of phrase that I like better — even after it's published. This process would have seemed magical to Thoreau in his time

when dots and dashes were the newest and fastest means of communication over the telegraph web of the 19th Century, and publication itself required the text to be typeset by hand into leaden plates for printing, a time-consuming and expensive process.

Here's how Thoreau describes his experiences during the final days before publication of *Walden*.

[page 179] March 31. — *Instinct in Criticism: Weather changes at last to drizzling. In criticizing your writing, trust your fine instinct. There are many things which we come very near questioning, but do not question. When I have sent off my manuscripts to the printer, certain objectionable sentences or expressions are sure to obtrude themselves on my attention with force, though I had not consciously suspected them before. My critical instinct then at once breaks the ice and comes to the surface.*

Thoreau claims to find an advantage in describing his experience of one day on the day following. His description below recalls for me the way a sky looks through the convex mirror on my rear view mirror. I am often amazed how beautiful the sky and landscape behind me looks through the miniature view contained in that mirror — a sky and landscape which, if I stop to look at directly, I can detect no beauty equal to that revealed in my magical landscape mirror. He says about writing on the day following:

[page 207 April 20. P. M. — *Bees and Willow-Blossoms: At this distance it is more ideal, like the landscape seen with the head inverted, or reflections in the water.*

Too often people confuse their ideals of a thing with the reality of the thing. Take supply and demand. There is always a delay between the demand for a thing and the supply of it. Thoreau understood this principle as this next passage reveals.

[page 228] April 29. The ideal of a market is a place where all things are bought and sold. At an agricultural meeting in New York the other day, one said that he had lately heard a man inquiring for spurry seed; he wanted it to sow on drifting sand. His presumption had been that if he wanted it, *i. e.*, if there was a demand, there was a supply to satisfy that demand. He went simply to the shop instead of going to the weed itself. But the supply does not anticipate the demand.

Few have written more eloquently about the paradox of objective observation: it is *always observed subjectively* by someone. Thoreau avers the importance of subjective observation and describes how our projections often lead us to misconstrue another's life.

[page 236, 237] May 6. P. M. — *Observation and Life: There is no such thing as pure objective observation. Your observation, to be interesting, *i. e.* to be significant, must be subjective. The sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some human experience, whether he be poet or philosopher or man of science. The man of most science is the man most alive, whose life is the greatest event. Senses that take cognizance of outward things merely are of no avail. It matters not where or how far you travel, — the farther commonly the worse, — but how much alive you are. If it is possible to conceive of an event outside to humanity, it is not of the slightest significance, though it were the explosion of a planet. Every important worker will report what life there is in him. It makes no odds into what seeming deserts the poet is born. Though all his neighbors pronounce it a Sahara, it will be a paradise to him; for the desert which we see is the result of the barrenness of our experience.*

Thoreau disdained scientists who grabbed hold of the objects of their interest, often killing them in the process. On May 10, he noted, "In Boston yesterday an ornithologist said significantly, 'If you held the bird in your hand — ,' but I would rather hold it in my affections." Thoreau was a true poet as he defined one to be, "The true poet will ever live aloof from society, wild to it, as the finest singer is the wood thrush, a forest bird."

In this next passage Thoreau takes flight in metaphor after metaphor as he exposes the lining of his "inmost soul".

[page 294] May 23. Tuesday P. M. -- *The Limitations of Nature: The White Mountains, likewise, were*

smooth molehills to my expectation. We *condescend* to climb the crags of earth. It is our weary legs alone that praise them. That forest on whose skirts the red-bird flits is not of earth. I expected a fauna more infinite and various, birds of more dazzling colors and more celestial song. How many springs shall I continue to see the common sucker (*Catostomus Bostoniensis*) floating dead on our river! Will not Nature select her types from a new fount? The vignette of the year. This earth which is spread out like a map around me is but the lining of my inmost soul exposed. In me is the sucker that I see. No wholly extraneous object can compel me to recognize it. I am guilty of suckers. I go about to look at flowers and listen to the birds. There was a time when the beauty and the music were all within, and I sat and listened to my thoughts, and there was a song in them. I sat for hours on rocks and wrestled with the melody which possessed me. I sat and listened by the hour to a positive though faint and distant music, not sung by any bird, nor vibrating any earthly harp. When you walked with a joy which knew not its own origin. When you were an organ of which the world was but one poor broken pipe. I lay long on the rocks, foundered like a harp on the seashore, that knows not how it is dealt with. You sat on the earth as on a raft, listening to music that was not of the earth, but which ruled and arranged it. Man *should be* the harp articulate. When your cords were tense.

This review contains my favorite passages as I read this journal. I wonder, dear Reader: What would be your favorite passages? How will you know unless you read him yourself? This next passage is an example of the best I find in Thoreau. He shapes a mundane experience of a working farmer watching people loafing in a boat into a moral question: Is it better to enjoy nature or to add a dollar to one's heap?

[page 322] *June 1. P. M. -- The Birth of Shadow:* Now I see gentlemen and ladies sitting at anchor in boats on the lakes in the calm afternoons, under parasols, making use of nature, not always accumulating money. The farmer hoeing is wont to look with scorn and pride on a man sitting in a motionless boat a whole half-day, but he does not realize that the object of his own labor is perhaps merely to add another dollar to his heap, nor through what coarseness and inhumanity to his family and servants he often accomplishes this. He has an Irishman or a Canadian working for him by the month; and what, probably, is the lesson that he is teaching him by precept and example? Will it make that laborer more of a man? this earth more like heaven?

Earlier I had included in page headings the one on the "great fringed orchis" — thought you might like to hear Thoreau, one of the rarest flowers of early American naturalists, talk about himself using this beautiful flowering plant as a foil.

[page 337, 338] *June 9. Friday — The Great Fringed Orchis:* Find the [great fringed orchis](#) out apparently two or three days. Two are almost fully out, two or three only budded. A large spike of peculiarly delicate pale-purple flowers growing in the luxuriant and shady swamp amid hellebores, ferns, golden senecios, etc., etc. It is remarkable that this, one of the fairest of all our flowers, should also be one of the rarest, — for the most part not seen at all. I think that no other but myself in Concord annually finds it. That so queenly a flower should annually bloom so rarely and in such withdrawn and secret places as to be rarely seen by man! The village belle never sees this more delicate belle of the swamp. How little relation between our life and its! Most of us never see it or hear of it. The seasons go by to us as if it were not. A beauty reared in the shade of a convent, who has never strayed beyond the convent bell. Only the skunk or owl or other inhabitant of the swamp beholds it. In the damp twilight of the swamp, where it is wet to the feet. How little anxious to display its attractions! It does not pine because man does not admire it. How independent on our race! It lifts its delicate spike amid the hellebore and ferns in the deep shade of the swamp. I am inclined to think of it as a relic of the past as much as

the arrowhead, or the tomahawk I found on the 7th.

[page 360] *June 16. — An Ocean of Fog:* It is eight days since I plucked the great orchis; one is perfectly fresh still in my pitcher. It may be plucked when the spike is only half opened, and will open completely and keep perfectly fresh in a pitcher more than a week. Do I not live in a garden, — in paradise? I can go out each morning before breakfast — I do — and gather these flowers with which to perfume my chamber where I read and write, all day.

It is one of my joys as a writer to live amidst a paradise — a garden which I can see through the sliding glass doors surrounding my workspace and into which I can walk and pick flowers to bring back into the room with me as I read and write all day.

These next two short quotes from Thoreau sent me into a reverie which I would like to share with you. First the quotes:

[page 374] I felt as if in a strange country, — a pleasing sense of strangeness and distance.

[page 382] The spring now seems far behind, yet I do not remember the interval. I feel as if some broad invisible lethean gulf lay behind, between this and spring.

What a strange, new land I live in — this world of the future — I never dreamed of this as a young red-haired, freckled-face boy on Avenue F. in Westwego. I write and the world stands still — or it flows past me in harmonious progression like ducks across the back of the 1950s Pontchartrain Beach Shooting Gallery.

I lean back to read and a Muse grabs my hand and pushes it across the page — and once more I am reading — only this time it is my words I am reading. Somehow I have gotten out of the way and some deep part of me is pouring forth words upon the page — to my amazement, my amusement — and I am powerless to stop it or start it.

"I feel as if in a strange country. — a pleasing sense of strangeness and distance." The Spring of my youth now seems far behind — yet I do not remember the interval. Like Thoreau, I feel as if some broad invisible lethean gulf lay behind *this me* and the me of my Spring.

This next passage illustrates how Thoreau improved his walks occasionally by walking past a murmuring bass tree whose sweet sururrus of the bees reminded him of a waterfall, distant rolling railroad cars, or humming factory looms.

[page 404] We have very few bass trees in Concord, but walk near them at this season and they will



be betrayed, though several rods off, by the wonderful susurrus of the bees, etc., which their flowers attract. It is worth going a long way to hear. I was warned that I was passing one in two instances on the river, -- the only two I passed, — by this remarkable sound. At a little distance [it] is like the sound of a waterfall or of the cars; close at hand like a factory full of looms. They were chiefly humblebees, and the great globose tree was all alive with them. I heard the murmur distinctly fifteen rods off. You will know if you pass within a few rods of a bass tree at this season in any part of the town, by this loud murmur, like a waterfall, which proceeds from it.

The transitive verb "improve" in the sense of "make the best of" has fallen into disuse today in the literary sense that Thoreau used to great effect in his prose. In this next passage, he *improves* the dry season to walk through ditches and sloughs that would ordinarily be under water.

[page 464] Walking may be a science, so far as the direction of a walk is concerned. I go again to the Great Meadows, to improve this remarkably dry season and walk where in ordinary times I cannot go. There is, no doubt, a particular season of the year when each place may be visited with most profit and pleasure, and it may be worth the while to consider what that season is in each case.

Think of all the huge threshing machines invented since Thoreau's time when the wooden handled flail with a blade was standard equipment, and now think of the improvement in the tools of the lecturer. The lecturer today must still thresh the lecture by hand "at evening by lamplight" letting the yellow corn fall while blowing away the chaff.

[page 486, 487] Aug 29. P.M. — *The Lecturer's Threshing*: Early for several mornings I have heard the sound of a flail. It leads me to ask if I have spent as industrious a spring and summer as the farmer, and gathered as rich a crop of experience. If so, the sound of my flail will be heard by those who have ears to hear, separating the kernel from the chaff all the fall and winter, and a sound no less cheering it will be. If the drought has destroyed the corn, let not all harvests fail. Have you commenced to thresh your grain? The lecturer must commence his threshing as early as August, that his fine flour may be ready for his winter customers. The fall rains will make full springs and raise his streams sufficiently to grind his grist. We shall hear the sound of his flail all the fall, early and late. It is made of tougher material than hickory, and tied together with resolution stronger than an eel-skin. For him there is no husking-bee, but he does it all alone and by hand, at evening by lamplight, with the barn door shut and only the pile of husks behind him for warmth. For him, too, I fear there is no patent cornsheller, but he does his work by hand, ear by ear, on the edge of a shovel over a bushel, on his hearth, and after he takes up a handful of the yellow grain and lets it fall again, while he blows out the chaff; and he goes to bed happy when his measure is full.

After each long walk alongside Thoreau we nod off to sleep happy. With this volume we have improved our night-time hours abed for 492 pages and our measure is full.

