

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

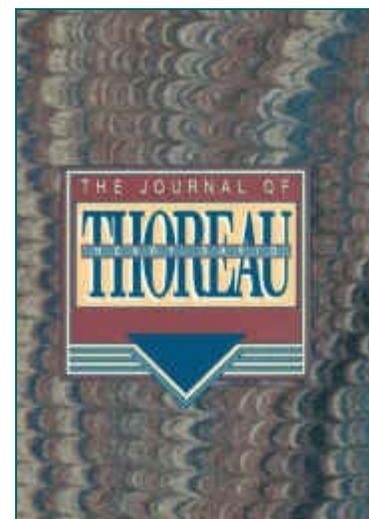


A READER'S JOURNAL

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. 7
by
Henry David Thoreau

Volume 7, September 1854 to October 1855
Published by Peregrine Smith Books/UT in 1984
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2004

Last year's journal did not have a Fall, but this year's will have all of one and part of another. We pick up Henry on September first.



[page 3] Sept. 1. A misty morning followed by a still, cloudy, misty day, through which has fallen a very little rain this forenoon already. Now I notice a few faint *chipping* sparrows, busily picking the seeds of weeds in the garden. Are they the Savannah sparrows? They show no white in tail. Yet I see no yellow on brows. Small feathers on back, centred with black and edged with pale brown (?); inner vanes of wing-quills bay; crown without chestnut; brown dash from angle of mouth backward. Do not the sparrows now commonly begin to feed on seeds of weeds in gardens?

A mundane beginning to an early Fall day and Thoreau is noticing and commenting upon a sparrow. This shows the tenor of his journal with its simplicity of form: he walks about and shares with us the things he notices. We are his constant companion, often his only companion, on his walks through Concord and New England.

What are galls? They are swellings of plant tissue induced by moth caterpillars, beetles, flies, aphids, small wasps, fungi, mites, bacteria, and nematodes. Galls provide baby insects with food and shelter during early developmental stages. Insects lay an egg in the twig of a tree and insert nutrients for the egg to survive upon to maturity. The gall is the protuberance which is created by the insect for its young — an external protective shell for the otherwise unprotected egg of the insect. In this next passage Thoreau compares man to a gall planted in Nature, and Art itself to a gall.

[page 10] In the wood-paths I find a great many of the Castile-soap galls, more or less fresh. Some are saddled on the twigs. They are now dropping from the shrub oaks. Is not Art itself a gall? Nature is stung by God and the seed of man planted in her. The artist changes the direction of Nature and makes her grow according to his idea. If the gall was anticipated when the oak was made, so was the canoe when the birch was made. Genius stings Nature, and she grows according to its idea.

Next we are treated to a description of a sunset through which Thoreau glides like a bird because the sunset above his canoe is reflected in the still water below the prow and he floats as though suspended in mid-air through the middle of a God-created work of art.

[page 20] It was in harmony with this fair evening that we were not walking or riding with dust and noise through it, but moved by a paddle without a jar over the liquid and almost invisible surface, floating directly toward those islands of the blessed which we call clouds in the sunset sky. I thought

of the Indian, who so many similar evenings had paddled up this stream, with what advantage he beheld the twilight sky. So we advanced without dust or sound, by gentle influences, as the twilight gradually faded away. The height of the railroad bridge, already high (more than twenty feet to the top of the rail), was doubled by the reflection, equaling that of a Roman aqueduct, for we could not possibly see where the reflection began, and the piers appeared to rise from the lowest part of the reflection to the rail above, about fifty feet. We floated directly under it, between the piers, as if in mid-air, not being able to distinguish the surface of the water, and looked down more than twenty feet to the reflected flooring through whose intervals we saw the starlit sky. The ghostly piers stretched downward on all sides, and only the angle made by their meeting the real ones betrayed where was the water surface.

He examines green-briar leaves which are becoming spotted and comments that his thoughts are spotted like these leaves. He sees a richness in a leaf where others might see only a defect.

[page 27] Many green-briar leaves are very agreeably thickly spotted now with reddish brown, or fine green on a yellow or green ground, producing a wildly variegated leaf. I have seen nothing more rich. Some of these; curled leaves are five inches wide with a short point. It is a leaf now for poets to sing about, a leaf to inspire poets. Now, while I am gathering grapes, I see them. It excites me to a sort of autumnal madness. They are leaves for Satyrus and Faunus to make their garlands of. My thoughts break out like them, spotted all over, yellow and green and brown. The freckled leaf. Perhaps they should be poison, to be thus spotted. I fancied these brown were blood-red spots, by contrast, but they are not. Now for the ripening year! Even leaves are *beginning* to be ripe.

In this next passage Thoreau comes upon tortoise egg from which a young tortoise is hatching. It was the only one so far of a group of eggs he planted in the ground almost three months earlier. Can it be that the Earth itself is the incubator for these eggs? The thought affects Thoreau deeply.

[page 28, 29] I am affected by the thought that the earth nurses these eggs. They are planted in the earth, and the earth takes care of them; she is genial to them and does not kill them. It suggests a certain vitality and intelligence in the earth, which I had not realized. This mother is not merely inanimate and inorganic. Though the immediate mother turtle abandons her offspring, the earth and sun are kind to them. The old turtle on which the earth rests takes care of them while the other waddles off. Earth was not made poisonous and deadly to them. The earth has some virtue in it; when seeds are put into it, they germinate; when turtles' eggs, they hatch in due time. Though the mother turtle remained and brooded them, it would still nevertheless be the universal world turtle which, through her, cared for them as now. Thus the earth is the mother of all creatures.

One gets the impression that Thoreau believes the Earth is the mother of human beings and his wanderings over her surface is a like child nestling to his mother for warmth, food, and companionship. Like the child Thoreau needs no other companions but his earth-mother — it is she who accompanies him on all of his walks.

In one of his rare moods, Thoreau reflects below on the course of his life and finds nothing wanting. What a refreshing way of living in the world! He enjoys the advantages of obscurity and poverty! This would seem anathema to those masses today who want to be the latest American Idol, to win the Lottery and become filthy rich, to write a best-selling novel and go on the book-signing tours, to be elected to office so even more people will know them, to win an Oscar and have everyone's head turn when one passes, to become famous and be stopped in public and asked for autographs, etc. How will such people, if successful, ever recover the lost winters, springs, summers and falls of their life? In Poe's tale, "The Purloined Letter," the valuable letter was concealed in open sight of the assiduous detectives by obscurity (replacing red seal with black seal) and poverty (the envelope was rumpled and dirtied a bit).

[page 46] Thinking this afternoon of the prospect of my writing lectures and going abroad to read them the next winter, I realized how incomparably great the advantages of obscurity and poverty which I have enjoyed so long (and may still perhaps enjoy). I thought with what more than princely, with what poetical, leisure I had spent my years hitherto, without care or engagement, fancy-free. I

have given myself up to nature; I have lived so many springs and summers and autumns and winters as if I had nothing else to do but *live* them, and imbibe whatever nutriment they had for me; I have spent a couple of years, for instance, with the flowers chiefly, having none other so binding engagement as to observe when they opened; I could have afforded to spend a whole fall observing the changing tints of the foliage. Ah, how I have thriven on solitude and poverty! I cannot overstate this advantage. I do not see how I could have enjoyed it, if the public had been expecting as much of me as there is danger now that they will. If I go abroad lecturing, how shall I ever recover the lost winter?

It has been my vacation, my season of growth and expansion, a prolonged youth.

A couple of months later he travels to Providence, Rhode Island, to give lectures and shares this report on how he felt in the aftermath of giving two lectures. Note in the passage above, his use of the word "abroad" meant leaving his beloved Concord for such distant environs as Rhode Island, hardly an hour's drive by Interstate today.

[page 79, 80] After lecturing twice this winter I feel that I am in danger of cheapening myself by trying to become a successful lecturer, *i. e.*, to interest my audiences. I am disappointed to find that most that I am and value myself for is lost, or worse than lost, on my audience. I fail to get even the attention of the mass. I should suit them better if I suited myself less. I feel that the public demand an average man, — average thoughts and manners, — not originality, nor even absolute excellence. You cannot interest them except as you are like them and sympathize with them. I would rather that my audience come to me than that I should go to them, and so they sifted; *i. e.*, I would rather write books than lectures. That is fine, this coarse. To read to a promiscuous(1) audience who are at your mercy the fine thoughts you solaced yourself with far away is as violent as to fatten geese by cramming, and in this case they do not get fatter.

Months later, in February, the paragraph below about lecturing appears, stuck between a comments on a house in Conantum and on some dead honey-bees Thoreau found in the snow.

[page 197] Many will complain of my lectures that they are transcendental. "Can't understand them." "Would you have us return to the savage state?" etc., etc. A criticism true enough, it may be, from their point of view. But the fact is, the earnest lecturer can speak only to his like, and the adapting of himself to his audience is a mere compliment which he pays them. If you wish to know how I think, you must endeavor to put yourself in my place. If you wish me to speak as if I were you, that is another affair.

October for Thoreau was a gossamer month.

[page 66] Oct. 26, 1854. P. M. — To Conantum.

As warm as summer. Cannot wear a thick coat. Sit with windows open. I see considerable gossamer on the causeway and elsewhere. Is it the tree sparrow whose jingles I hear? As the weather grows cooler and the woods more silent, I attend to the cheerful notes of chickadees on their sunny sides. Apple trees are generally bare, as well as bass, ash, elm, maple.

[page 490] Oct. 26, 1855. P. M. — Up river.

A fine Indian-summer afternoon. There is much gossamer on the button-bushes, now bare of leaves, and on the sere meadow-grass, looking toward the sun, in countless parallel lines, like the ropes which connect the masts of a vessel.

In November he relates the famous story of Captain Kidd's treasure.

[page 69, 70] Passing the mouth of John Hosmer's hollow near the river, was hailed by him and Anthony Wright, sitting there, to come and see where they had dug for money. There was a hole six feet square and as many deep, and the sand was heaped about over a rod square. Hosmer said that

it was dug two or three weeks before, that three men came in a chaise and dug it in the night. They were seen about there by day. Somebody dug near there in June, and then they covered up the hole again. He said they had been digging thereabouts from time to time for a hundred years. I asked him why. He said that Dr. Lee, who lived where Joe Barrett did, told him that old Mr. Wood, who lived in a house very near his (Hosmer's), told him that, one night in Captain Kidd's day, three pirates came to his house with a pair of old-fashioned deer-skin breeches, both legs full of coin, and asked leave to bury it in his cellar. He was afraid, and refused them. They then asked for some earthen pots and shovels and a lanthorn, which he let them have. A woman in the house followed the pirates at a distance down the next hollow on the south, and saw them go along the meadow-side and turn up this hollow, and then, being alone and afraid, she returned. Soon after the men returned with the tools and an old-fashioned hat full of the coin (holding about a quart), which they gave to Wood. He, being afraid, buried it in his cellar, but afterward, becoming a poor man, dug it up and used it. A bailiff made some inquiry hereabouts after the pirates.

Hosmer said that one thing which confirmed the diggers in their belief was the fact that when he was a little boy, plowing one day with his father on the hillside, they found three old-fashioned bottles bottom upward but empty under the plow. Somebody consulted Moll Pitcher, who directed to dig at a certain distance from an apple tree on a line with the bottles, and then they would find the treasure.

Like the anonymous diggers for Captain Kidd's treasure in Thoreau's day, we dig into Thoreau's journal, but unlike the diggers of old, we come up with valuable coins on every page we turn to in these journals.

I watch many glorious days go past outside my windows as I write. The days flutter by like the days in the movie "The Time Machine", as I type upon these well-worn keys at my desk. The L has disappeared and the K, N, and C are likewise fading, but I barely notice the keys anymore than I can stop and notice the beautiful day passing by outside.

[page 80] Winter has come unnoticed by me, I have been so busy writing. This is the life most lead in respect to Nature. How different from my habitual one! It is hasty, coarse, and trivial, as if you were a spindle in a factory. The other is leisurely, fine, and glorious, like a flower. In the first case you are merely getting your living; in the second you live as you go along. You travel only on roads of the proper grade without jar or running off the track, and sweep round the hills by beautiful curves.

In my effort to improve the usage of the fine verb "improve" I continue to share my collection of passages from Thoreau where he uses the verb in sense of *make the best of*.

[page 15] His pond was completely dry, — more than he ever knew, — and is still mostly so. The muddy bottom is exposed high and dry, half a dozen rods wide, and half covered with great drying yellow and white lily pads and stems. He improves the opportunity to skim off the fertile deposit for his compost heap.

[page 111] A fine snow had just begun to fall, so we made haste to improve the skating before it was too late. Our skates made tracks often nearly an inch broad in the slight snow which soon covered the ice.

[page 145] Make haste to improve the skating in the afternoon, although it is beginning to snow, and the [ice] is soon covered half an inch.

[page 280] At the first Conantum Cliff I am surprised to see how much the columbine leaves have grown in a sheltered cleft; also the cinquefoil, dandelion (?), yarrow (?), sorrel, saxifrage, etc., etc. They seem to improve the least warmer ray to advance themselves, and they hold all they get.

Ever hear of a snow compass? Doubt the Boy Scout Handbook has it in the chapter on pathfinding, but it

would certainly be effective for someone who left their GPS at home.

[page 124] The snow still adheres conspicuously to the northwest sides of the stems of trees quite up to their summits, with a remarkably sharp edge in that direction, — in a horizontal section like this: [RJM: sketch of a triangular chevron] It would be about as good as a compass to steer by in a cloudy day or by night.

One can only marvel and the prospect of plenty which filled New England's waters and streams in the mid-1600s. Oysters so big, you had to divide them before you put one in your mouth. Thoreau is sharing from William Wood's "New England's Prospect." One wonders if the increase of navigation of the Charles and Mistick Rivers was worth the loss of the oysters.

[page 136, 137] "Alewives... in the latter end of April come up to the fresh rivers to spawn, in such multitudes as is almost incredible, pressing up in such shallow waters as will scarce permit them to swim, having likewise such longing desire after the fresh water ponds, that no beatings with poles, or forcive agitations by other devices, will cause them to return to the sea, till they have cast their spawn."

"The Oysters be great ones in form of a shoe-horn, some be a foot long; these breed on certain banks that are bare every spring tide. This fish without the shell is so big, that it must admit of a division before you can well get it into your mouth." For lobsters, "their plenty makes them little esteemed and seldom eaten." Speaks of " a great oyster bank" in the middle of Back Bay, just off the true mouth of the Charles, and of another in the Mistick. These obstructed the navigation of both rivers. *Vide* book of facts.

And below Thoreau offers a little history of Harvard in which he says that it was started with the help of a lottery. With this revelation Thoreau proceeds to excoriate the state of Maryland for having a lottery which he reviles as the "devil's work." He seems to raise the spectre that both the State and the Church are not on the side of morality, notwithstanding that they would like each new generation to believe that they are. Thus said, I think it best to leave you to your own interpretation of his full intention. Here is the passage.

[page 150, 151] One is educated to believe, and would rejoice if the rising generation should find no occasion to doubt, that the State and the Church are on the side of morality, that the voice of the people is the voice of God. Harvard College was partly built by a lottery. My father tells me he bought a ticket in it. Perhaps she thus laid the foundation of her Divinity School. Thus she teaches by example. New England is flooded with the "Official Schemes of the Maryland State Lotteries," and in this that State is no less unprincipled than in her slaveholding. Maryland, and every fool who buys a ticket of her, is bound straight to the bottomless pit. The State of Maryland is a moral fungus. Her offense is rank; it smells to heaven. Knowing that she is doing the devil's work, and that her customers are ashamed to be known as such, she advertises, as in the case of private diseases, that "the strictest confidence will be observed." "Consolidated" Deviltry!

This next passage comes as a balm to anyone who, like me, loves the sound of rain and welcomes the boon the rain brings to garden. It is mid-February and Thoreau is dreaming of Spring.

[page 186] All day a steady, warm, imprisoning rain carrying off the snow, not unmusical on my roof. It is a rare time for the student and reader who cannot go abroad in the afternoon, provided he can keep awake, for we are wont to be drowsy as cats in such weather. Without, it is not walking but wading. It is so long since I have heard it that the steady, soaking, rushing sound of the rain on the shingles is musical. The fire needs no replenishing, and we save our fuel. It seems like a distant forerunner of spring. It is because I am allied to the elements that the sound of the rain is thus soothing to me. The sound soaks into my spirit, as the water into the earth, reminding me of the season

when snow and ice will be no more, when the earth will be thawed and drink up the rain as fast as it falls.

Here is a unique form of writer's block which affected Thoreau during some cold, clear weather — his ink froze.

[page 215] My ink has frozen, and plants, etc., have frozen in the house, though the thermometer had not indicated nearly so great a cold as before.

One cannot help but chuckle at Thoreau's efforts to call down a flock of geese, unless one has already done equally silly things in a duck blind already.

[page 258] Trying the other day to imitate the honking of geese, I found myself flapping my sides with my elbows, as with wings, and uttering something like the syllables *mow-ack* with a nasal twang and twist in my head; and I produced their not so perfectly in the opinion of the hearers that I thought I might possibly draw a flock down.

In April Thoreau invites us as his blind companions aboard his boat on the Assabet and describes to us what he is looking at.

[page 287] *April 6.* It clears up at 8 P. M. warm and pleasant, leaving flitting clouds and a little wind, and I go up the Assabet in my boat. The blackbirds have now begun to frequent the water's edge in the meadow, the ice being sufficiently out. The April waters, smooth and commonly high, before many flowers (none yet) or any leafing, while the landscape is still russet and frogs are just awakening, is *[sic]* peculiar. It began yesterday. A very few white maple stamens stand out already loosely enough to blow in the wind, and some alder catkins look almost ready to shed pollen. On the hillsides I smell the dried leaves and hear a few flies buzzing over them. The banks of the river are alive with song sparrows and tree sparrows. They now sing in advance of vegetation, as the flowers will blossom, — those slight tinkling, twittering sounds called the singing of birds; they have come to enliven the bare twigs before the buds show any signs of starting. I see a large wood tortoise just crawled out upon the bank, with three oval, low, bug-like leeches on its sternum.

If one keeps a weather-eye out, one is likely at any turn of page to discover the origin of common expressions in our brim-full English language, such as the origin of the name of the structure on the top of a ship's mast we call the "crow's nest." As Thoreau describes his climb, it is exactly as if he were shinnying up a ship's mast to its tiptop.

[page 362] Climbed to two crows' nests, — or maybe on of them a squirrel's, — in Hubbard's Grove. Do they not sometimes use a squirrel's nest for a foundation? A ruby-crested wren is apparently attracted and eyes me. It is wrenching and fatiguing, as well as dirty, work to climb a tall pine with nothing, or maybe only dead twigs and stubs, to hold by. You must proceed with great deliberation and see well where you put your hands and your feet.

Or one can spot statement which boggles the mind such as this one:

[page 432] The fishermen sell lobsters fresh for two cents a piece.

Or catch a glimpse of Daddy Dudley "a-mouldering in his grave."

[page 494] When I was surveying for Legross, as we went to our work in the morning, we passed by the Dudley family tomb, and Legross remarked to me, all in good faith. "Wouldn't you like to see old Daddy Dudley? He lies in there. I'll get the keys if you'd

like. I sometimes go in and look at him."

Thoreau gave no hint that he took up Legross on his offer, but later on the same day he writes about a white oak leaf which has been left in skeletal form by some insect.

[page 495] How much beauty in decay! I pick up a white oak leaf, dry and stiff, but yet mingled red and green, October-like, whose pulpy part some insect has eaten beneath, exposing the delicate network of its veins. It is very beautiful held up to the light, — such work as only an insect eye could perform. Yet, perchance, to the vegetable kingdom such a revelation of ribs is as repulsive as the skeleton in the animal kingdom. In each case it is some little gourmand, working for another end, that reveals the wonders of nature. There are countless oak leaves in the this condition now, and also with a submarginal line of network exposed.

Thoreau quotes Bellow as saying that "Americans have attained to bad luxuries, but have no comforts." Even though the price of lobsters has risen 500 times since Thoreau's day and no one would casually open a tomb to look at a corpse these days, that statement of Bellow's is as true today as it was then.

Thoreau tells us of the things, and especially the people, he takes comfort in and with.

[page 503] I enjoy more drinking water at a clear spring than out of a goblet at a gentleman's table. I like best the bread which I have baked, the garment which I have made, the shelter which I have constructed, the fuel which I have gathered.

It is always a recommendation to me to know that a man has ever been poor, has been regularly born into this world, knows the language. I require to be assured of certain philosophers that they have once been barefooted, footsore, have eaten a crust because they had nothing better, and know what sweetness resides in it.

I have met with some barren accomplished gentlemen who seemed to have been to school all their lives and never had a vacation to live in. Oh, if they could only have been stolen by the Gypsies! and carried far beyond the reach of their guardians! They had better have died in infancy and been buried under the leaves, their lips besmeared with blackberries, and Cock Robin for their sexton.

If you, dear Reader, would dare to think that Thoreau did not live a long and full life, by his standards, you would only have to read the last sentence of the above paragraph to be disabused of such a notion. For it seems that Thoreau lived all of his forty-five years with his lips smeared with blackberries, drinking water from a clear spring, eating the best of bread he baked, ensconced snugly in a shelter he built, and warmed by fuel he gathered himself.

[page 519, 520] I sometimes think that I must go off to some wilderness where I can have a better opportunity to play life, — can find more suitable materials to build my house with, and enjoy the pleasure of collecting my fuel in the forest. I have more taste for the wild sports of hunting, fishing, wigwam-building, making garments of skins, and collecting wood wherever you find it, than for butchering, farming, carpentry, working in a factory, or going to a wood market.

Who else but Thoreau can you turn to who can describe to you the difference in flavor between an apple eaten at your desk compared to one "eaten in the wind" of outdoors?

[page 520, 521] I try one of the wild apples in my desk. It is remarkable that the wild apples which I praise as so spirited and racy when eaten in the fields and woods, when brought into the house have a harsh and crabbed taste. As shells and pebbles must be beheld on the seashore, so these October fruits must be tasted in a bracing walk amid the somewhat bracing airs of late October. To appreciate their wild and sharp flavors, it seems necessary that you be breathing the sharp October or November air. The outdoor

air and exercise which the walker gets give a different tone to his palate, and he craves a fruit which the sedentary would call harsh and crabbed even. The palate rejects a wild apple eaten in the house — so of haws and acorns — and demands a tamed one, for here you miss that October air which is the wine it is eaten with. I frequently pluck wild apples of so rich and spicy a flavor that I wonder all orchardists do not get a scion from them, but when I have brought home my pockets full, and taste them in the house, they are unexpectedly harsh, crude things. They must be eaten in the fields, when your system is all aglow with exercise, the frosty weather nips your fingers (in November), the wind rattles the bare boughs and rustles the leaves, and the jay is heard screaming around.

So there is one thought for the field, another for the house. I would have my thoughts, like wild apples, to be food for walkers, and will not warrant them to be palatable if tasted in the house.

To appreciate the flavor of those wild apples requires vigorous and healthy senses, papillæ firm and erect on the tongue and palate, not easily tamed and flattened. Some of those apples might be labeled, "To be eaten in the wind."

Just as with wild apples, Thoreau's writings must be eaten in the wind — to be read while you are out-of-doors in your mind, sipping of the wine of the October air, when your system is all aglow with exercise, the frosty weather nipping your fingers, and the wind rattling through the bare boughs and rustling the leaves while the Blue Jays are screaming in the air.

In an age where warning labels glare at one from automobile visors and baby carriages, surely the next publisher of these amazing fourteen volumes of Thoreau's Journals will have the good sense to place this label in bold print on the cover of each book:

WARNING: TO BE READ IN THE WIND

~~~~~ footnotes ~~~~~

Footnote 1. *Promiscuous* has as secondary meanings: 2. *mixed together in a disorderly fashion.* 3 of *different kinds mingled confusedly together.* 4. *Not restricted to a particular person, kind etc.* [Ref: *Cassel's Concise Dictionary*] With these meanings one can understand better Thoreau's use of "sifted" and "That is fine, this coarse." in this passage. [Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

