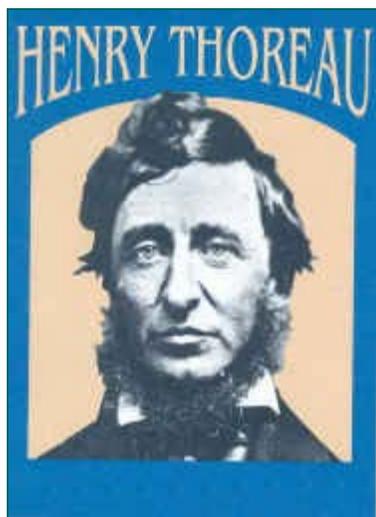


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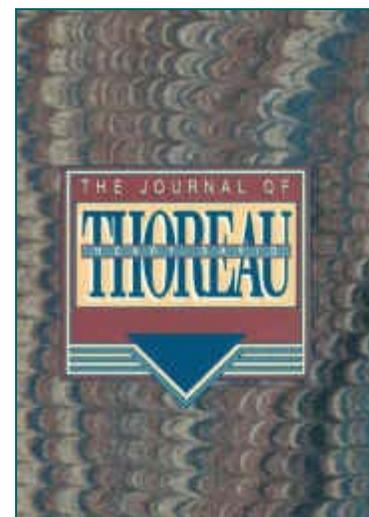


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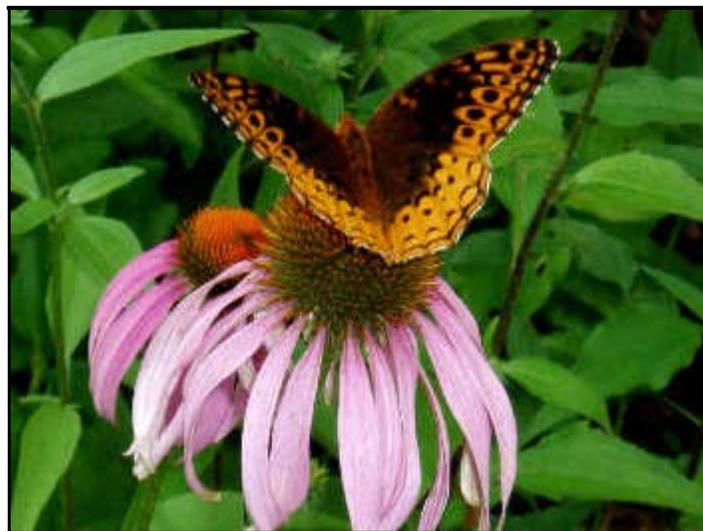
The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. 9
by
Henry David Thoreau

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This book begins with a Violet Rape on August 23 as Henry heads to Walden in the afternoon and notices a bee at work. Actually I don't know for sure it was a violet, but it was certainly a violent rape of a flower by a bee.



[page 15] On the west side of Emerson's Cliff, I notice many *Gerardia pedicularia* out. A bee is hovering about one bush. The flowers are not yet open, and if they were, perhaps he could not enter. He proceeds at once, head downwards, to the base of the tube, extracts the sweet there, and departs. Examining, I find that every flower has a small hole pierced through the tube, commonly through calyx and all, opposite the nectary. This does no hinder its opening. The Rape of the Flower! The bee knew where the sweet lay, and was unscrupulous in his mode of obtaining it. A certain violence tolerated by nature.



One can only muse over the charm at which Thoreau describes such mundane activities as a bee crawling over a flower — he makes it into a miniature drama of nature and presents this short play for us titled the "The Rape of the Flower!"

The above passage also shows the economy of description which Thoreau uses in his journals. The word "out" is ubiquitous. It is shorthand, I suppose, for a plant that is in the budding stage, but is used in other places to refer to blooming plants. If he projects the blooming is two days away, he'll use something like, "lilac two days". It is his naturalist's shorthand way of describing what he collects upon his walks: the status of the animals and plants he observes. The one creature he describes the least is the human being, although it seems to me he referred to his father and his mother several times each in this volume, perhaps for the first time.

After the large tree kills due to the standing water in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, I chanced upon this passage about tree kills in Thoreau's Concord. We discovered after the August flood waters covered the roots of our local trees, that the magnolia trees died, but the live oaks did not. Perhaps that's why we can have so many 300-year-old live oaks.

[page 19] *Aug. 25.* The farmers commonly say that the spring floods, being of cold water, do not injure the grass like later ones when the water is warm, but I suspect it is not so much owing to the warmth of the water as to the age and condition of the grass and whatever else is exposed to them. They say that if you let the water rise and stand some time over the roots of the trees in warm weather it will kill them. This, then, may be the value of these occasional freshets in August: they steam and kill the shrubs and trees which had crept into the river meadows, and so keep them open perpetually, which, perchance, the spring floods alone might not do.

Thoreau does take notice of the human being in his writing most often when he gives us a homily on some virtue of life. We could translate "Kansas" into "Iraq" in this next passage and apply it to our own lives today, 150 years hence. Can you live like a tortoise, placid and serene amidst the harrowing events of the world today? Consider the tortoise. . . .

[page 32, 33] *Aug. 28.* June, July, and August, the tortoise eggs are hatching a few inches beneath the surface in sandy fields. You tell of active labors, of works of art, and wars the past summer; meanwhile the tortoise eggs underlie this turmoil. What events have transpired on the lit and airy surface three inches above them! Summer(1) knocked down; Kansas living an age of suspense. Think what is a summer to them! How many worthy men have died and had their funeral sermons preached since I saw the mother turtle bury her eggs here! They contained an undeveloped liquid then, they are now turtles. June, July, and August, — the livelong summer, — what are they with their heats and fevers but sufficient to hatch a tortoise in. Be not in haste; mind your private affairs. Consider the turtle. A whole summer — June, July, and August, — is not too good nor too much to hatch a turtle in. Perchance you have worried yourself, despaired of the world, meditated the end of life, and all things seemed rushing to destruction; but nature has steadily and serenely advanced with a turtle's pace. The young turtle spends its infancy within its shell. It gets experience and learns the ways of the world through that wall. While it rests warily on the edge of its hole, rash schemes are undertaken by men and fail. Has not the tortoise also learned the true value of time? You go to India and back, and the turtle eggs in your field are still unhatched. French empires rise or fall, but the turtle is developed only so fast. What's a summer? Time for a turtle's eggs to hatch. So is the turtle developed, fitted to endure, for he outlives twenty French dynasties. One turtle knows several Napoleons. They have seen no berries, had no cares, yet has not the great world existed for them as much as for you?

This next short passage was a bit of a puzzlement for me. How could "stock in trade" for a tinker be solder? A tinker uses solder to mend tin pots such as teapots, but doesn't sell solder or trade it. It turns out that the items a business trades in are its "stock in trade", and metaphorically, the stuff needed by the business to carry on its activities can also be called their *stock in trade*. Thoreau seems in the next passage's two sentences to consider himself a repairer of society and his literal stock in trade must be the pencil lead he uses when he writes.

[page 37] *Aug. 30.* Our employment generally is tinkering, mending the old worn-out teapot of society. Our stock in trade is solder.

But the next passage sets us aright — it was men in general he referred to as tinkers on the old teapot of society — he has other plans which involve a sauce no money can buy. This seemed ever the goal of Thoreau's life: to enjoy endeavors which no amount wealth could buy. Such as freedom-from- importunate-people, fresh air, long walks in the woods, fresh-picked berries, and wild apples, each one with its unique taste and savor. His genius was literally a spiritual being who directed his "hundred little purposes" and he thanked his genius by sharing those endeavors with us in the pages of his journal. To taste a cranberry is to taste the flavor of your life.

[page 37] Aug. 30.

Better for me, says my genius, to go cranberrying this afternoon for the *Vaccinium Oxycoccus* in Gowing's Swamp, to get but a pocketful and learn its peculiar flavor, aye, and the flavor of Gowing's Swamp and of *life* in New England, than to go consul to Liverpool and get I don't know how many thousand dollars for it, with no such flavor. Many of our days should be spent, not in vain expectations and lying on our oars, but in carrying out deliberately and faithfully the hundred little purposes which every man's genius must have suggested to him. Let not your life



be wholly without an object, though it be only to ascertain the flavor of a cranberry, for it will not be only the quality of an insignificant berry that you will have tasted, but the flavor of your life to that extent, and it will be such a sauce as no wealth can buy.

Henry was a solitary figure who enjoyed being alone at home and on his walks. Ellery Channing was a friend of his who sometimes accompanied him on his walks and excursions by boat. Channing's presence is marked by the notation: C. It is fitting that he paraphrases Channing's famous line(2), "If my bark sinks, 'tis to another sea" in this long passage about the difficulties one encounters in a world of people who never seem to be alone and who cannot fathom how someone would prefer to be alone than with them. He would rather fill his boat with mud and sit on its gunwales than have some earthy man in his boat with him.

[page 46] Aug. 31. **There sits one by the shore who wishes to go with me, but I cannot think of it. I must be fancy-free. There is no such mote in the sky as a man who is not perfectly transparent to you, — who has any opacity. I would rather attend to him earnestly for half an hour, on shore or elsewhere, and then dismiss him. He thinks I could merely take him into my boat and then not mind him. He does not realize that I should by the same act take him into my mind, where there is no room for him, and my bark would surely founder in such a voyage as I was contemplating. I know very well that I should never reach that expansion of the river I have in my mind, with him aboard with his broad terrene qualities. He would sink my bark (not to another sea) and never know it. I could better carry a heaped load of meadow mud and sit on the thole-pins. There would be more room for me, and I should reach that expansion of the river**

nevertheless.

But Thoreau is not done with his discourse on being alone. He seems to enjoy the company of those like Channing who can sail the empyrean realm of thoughts with him, but disdains those terrene fellows with dirt under their nails who would talk about pigs and plows. He says this to us, "I could better afford to take him into bed with me, for then I might, perhaps, abandon him in my dreams", rather as an aside and then addresses the man on the shore directly in his thoughts. Thoreau spells out clearly for us the feeling we have when a companion becomes an interference to our thoughts. Our thoughts cannot take flight when another person has us in their sights and grabs hold of our mind thereby. Even if they walk a mile or two behind us, our thoughts will be ever skewed by their tardy presence. If you have never disdained company with someone because you dreaded in advance the locking down of your thoughts in their company, then these passages may leave you unaffected, so skip over them.

[page 47] Aug. 31. Ah! you are a heavy fellow, but I am well disposed. If you could go without going, then you might go. There's the captain's stateroom, empty to be sure, and you say you could go in the steerage. I know very well that only your baggage would be dropped in the steerage, while you would settle right down into that other snug recess. Why, I am going, not staying. I have come on purpose to sail, to paddle away from such as you, and you have waylaid me at the shore. You have chosen to make your assault at the moment of embarkation. Why, if I thought you were steadily gazing after me a mile off, I could not endure it. It is because I trust that I shall ere long depart from your thoughts, and so you from mine, that I am encouraged to set sail at all. I make haste to put several meanders and some hills between us. This Company is obliged to make a distinction between dead freight and passengers. I will take almost any amount of freight for you cheerfully, — anything, my dear sir, but yourself.

Those who ask to accompany another do so at their own peril, especially with the likes of Thoreau. He compares the intrusion such a person may make upon his mind to the forcing of one's self into a car which is already full. Why he would rather carry a barrel of pork than accompany such a person because the pork only causes his back to ache, not his mind.

[page 47, 48] Aug. 31. Some are so inconsiderate as to ask to walk or sail with me regularly every day — I have known such — and think that, because there will be six inches or a foot between our bodies, we shall not interfere! These things are settled by fate. The good ship sails when she is ready. For freight or passage apply to — ?? Ask my friend where. What is getting into a man's carriage when it is full, compared with putting your foot in his mouth and popping right into his mind without considering whether it is occupied or not? If I remember aright, it was only on condition *that you were asked*, that you were to go with a man one mile or twain. Suppose a man asks, not you to go with him, but to go with you! Often, I would rather undertake to shoulder a barrel of pork and carry it a mile than take into my company a man. It would not be so heavy a weight upon my mind. I could put it down and only feel my *back* ache for it.

In this next passage Thoreau presents us a "remember the future(3)" example when he shares how some plant will appear in his thoughts and then show up in his outside world.

[page 54] Sept. 2. Or some rare plant which for some reason has occupied a strangely prominent place in my thoughts for some time will present itself. My expectation ripens to discovery. I am prepared for strange things.

The best definition I have ever heard for "weed" is "a plant where you don't want one." But Thoreau as a naturalist naturally has an biological definition: "Weeds are uncultivated herbaceous plants which do not bear handsome flowers." (Page 59)

Having recently returned from Europe, I would have to agree with Thoreau in his statements about wandering around Asia and Europe. At least with cow-watching we will not be intruded upon by some strident-voiced European woman speaking rough English describing the cows over a loudspeaker blasting into our ears.

[page 104] Oct. 5. It is well to find your employment and amusement in simple and homely things. These wear best and yield most. I think I would rather watch the motions of these cows in their pasture for a day, which I now see all headed one way and slowly advancing, — watch them and project their course carefully on a chart, and report all their behavior faithfully, — than to wander to Europe or Asia and watch other motions there; for it is only ourselves that we report in either case, and perchance we shall report a more restless and worthless self in the latter case than in the first.

Times have changed. In Thoreau's day, change was made to within half a penny and pins were used when coins were not available. Beaton was a Scotchman and a peddler and thought to be the most honest man in Concord. He is the store keeper spoken of in this next passage.

[page 109] Oct. 11. When a child was sent to his store and he could not make change with half a penny he would stick a row of pins in the child's sleeve, enough to make all square.

He speaks plainly when he says "the theme is nothing, the life is everything." Themes are designed by men and they are fixed, abstract concepts, dead concepts, full of artifice, but lacking living beings.

[page 121] Oct. 18. Men commonly exaggerate the theme. Some themes they think are significant and others insignificant. I feel that my life is very homely, my pleasures very cheap. Joy and sorrow, success and failure, grandeur and meanness, and indeed most words in the English language do not mean for me what they do for my neighbors. I see that my neighbors look with compassion on me, that they think it is a mean and unfortunate destiny which makes me to walk in these fields and woods so much and sail on this river alone. But so long as I find here the only real elysium, I cannot hesitate in my choice. My work is writing, and I do not hesitate, though I know that no subject is too trivial for me, tried by ordinary standards; for, ye fools, the theme is nothing, the life is everything. All that interests the reader is the depth and intensity of the life excited. We touch our subject but by a point which has no breadth, but the pyramid of our experience, or our interest in it, rests on us by a broader or narrower base. That is, man is all in all, Nature nothing, but as she draws him out and reflects him. Give me simple, cheap, and homely themes.

Thoreau loves the shrub oak and finds resonance with its qualities. He sees it as a metaphor for himself during the winter time. He states that a sense of want is a prayer and all prayers are answered. To my mind no one has ever spoken so passionately about a shrub oak ever before or since. And strangely enough, in the pages following this one, he says, "I love to go through a patch of shrub oak in a bee-line, where you tear your clothes and put your eyes out." Later on page 192, he is singing the praises of the shrub oak again and notes that its branches are "wholesome to the touch, though rough; not producing any festering sores, only honest scratches and rents." He says that the pine tree has been sung of, but not his beloved shrub oak, and endeavors to correct this perceived wrong on many pages of this year's journal. On page 207 for example, he says, "I should not be ashamed to have the shrub oak for my coat of arms."

[page 146] Dec. 1. Emblem of my winter condition. I love and could embrace the shrub oak with its scanty garment of leaves rising above the snow, lowly whispering to me, akin to winter thoughts, and sunsets, and to all virtue. Covert which the hare and the partridge seek, and I too seek. What cousin of mine is the shrub oak? How can any man suffer long? For a sense of want is a prayer, and all prayers are answered. Rigid as iron, clean as the atmosphere, hardy as virtue, innocent and sweet as a maiden is the shrub

oak. In proportion as I know and love it, I am natural and sound as a partridge. I felt a positive yearning toward one bush this afternoon. There was a match found for me at last. I fell in love with a shrub oak. Tenacious of its leaves, which shrivel not but retain a certain wintry life in them, firm shields, painted in fast colors a rich brown. The deer mouse, too, knows the shrub oak and has its hole in the snow by the shrub oak's stem.

Nuts! Nuts to New York. Nuts to the country. Nuts to the cab drivers and newsboys. Nuts to everyone. Even to the squirrels.

[page 147] Dec. 1. I have seen more chestnuts in the streets of New York than anywhere else this year, large and plump ones, roasting in the street, roasting and popping on the steps of banks and exchanges. Was surprised to see that the citizens made as much of the nuts of the wild-wood as the squirrels. Not only the country boys, all New York goes a-nutting. Chestnuts for cabmen and newsboys, for not only are squirrels to be fed.

He read Whitman and had these comments to make on the appearance of sensuality in his poems.

[page 149] Dec. 2. As for the sensuality in Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," I do not so much wish that it was not written, as that men and women were so pure that they could read it without harm.

"I still live" were the famous last words of Daniel Webster and for a time they were etched on razors made by Wade&Butcher of Sheffield, we learn in the footnote on page 151. Thoreau commented on the last words of a dying man which were "All right" this way: "Brave, prophetic words to go out of the world with! good as 'I still live,' but on no razors."

Thoreau, if he lived today, would not be seen sporting bumper stickers which say, "I'd rather be skiing" or playing golf or at the beach, etc. He was quite happy to be where he was, in Concord, and never wandered from there for very long. One must understand "estimable" in the sense of "esteem-able" or worthy of esteem. And those who would say that, "Well, he should be glad since Concord is such a nice place to live" quite miss the point. The point is to consider where you live as the most estimable place in the world and to consider this time to be the best time possible!

[page 160] Dec. 5. I have never got over my surprise that I should have been born into the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time, too.

He calls winter that "grand old poem" which has come back without "any connivance" of his on page 167. Back before he knew it.

[page 168] Dec. 7. The winters come now as fast as snowflakes. It is wonderful that old men do not lose their reckoning. It was summer, and now again it is winter. Nature loves this rhyme so well that she never tires of repeating it. So sweet and wholesome is the winter, so simple and moderate, so satisfactory and perfect, that her children will never weary of it. What a poem! an epic in blank verse, enriched with a million tinkling rhymes. It is solid beauty. It has been subjected to the vicissitudes of millions of years of the gods, and not a single superfluous ornament remains. The severest and coldest of the immortal critics have shot their arrows at and pruned it till it cannot be amended.

Thoreau waxes lyrical at times, such as when he describes a sunset as pretty as a picture and set into a gilded frame.

[page 173] Dec. 9. The sun is set, and over the valley, which looks like an outlet of Walden toward Fair Haven, I see a burnished bar of cloud stretched low and level, as if it were the bar over that passageway to Elysium, the last column in the train of the sun. When I get as far as my bean-field, the reflected white in the winter horizon of this

perfectly cloudless sky is being condensed at the horizon's edge, and its hue deepening into a dun golden, against which the tops of the trees — pines and elms — are seen with beautiful distinctness, and a slight blush begins to suffuse the eastern horizon, and so the picture of the day is done and set in a gilded frame.

But he immediately turns his attention to his work, his books, as well as the woodchopper's work during winter's short days.

[page 173] Dec. 9. Such is a winter eve. Now for a merry fire, some old poet's pages, or else serene philosophy, or even a healthy book of travels, to last far into the night, eked out perhaps with the walnuts which we gathered in November.

The worker who would accomplish much these short days must shear a dusky slice off both ends of the night. The chopper must work as long as he can see, often returning home by moonlight, and set out for the woods again by candle-light.

One can suppose from this next passage that water horehound is the source of the flavoring for horehound candy which one can find in various candy stores even today. This is apparently a candy treat for his Christmas Eve even though he gives no mention of the holiday, and walks abroad the next day without mention of any human companionship, only that of the empty Conantum House, a swamp, Lee's Cliff, and Mr. Wheeler's shaggy gray terrier.

[page 197] Dec. 24. I do not take snuff. In my winter walks, I stoop and bruise between my thumb and fingers the dry whorls of the lycopus, or water horehound, just rising above the snow, stripping them off, and smell that. That is as near as I come to the Spice Islands. That is my smelling-bottle, my ointment.

Thoreau was a surveyor and took that work from time to time for a few days or so, but after finishing a plan of a farm for someone, he would put away his surveying tools and return to his beloved Nature where he can converse with the "sane snow" again.

[page 205] Jan. 4. After spending four or five days surveying and drawing a plan incessantly, I especially feel the necessity of putting myself in communication with nature again, to recover my tone, to withdraw out of the wearying and unprofitable world of affairs. The things I have been doing have but a fleeting and accidental importance, however much men are immersed in them, and yield very little valuable fruit. I would fain have been wading through the woods and fields and conversing with the sane snow. Having waded in the very shallowest stream of time, I would now bathe my temples in eternity. I wish again to participate in the serenity of nature, to share the happiness of the river and the woods. I thus from time to time break off my connection with eternal truths and go with the shallow stream of human affairs, grinding at the mill of the Philistines; but when my task is done, with never-failing confidence I devote myself to the infinite again. It would be sweet to deal with men more, I can imagine, but where dwell they? Not in the fields which I traverse.

Thoreau swung back and forth between the rough life of human affairs to the smooth life of Nature, and he never kept it a secret that he loved Nature the best. He recalls a dream⁽⁴⁾ of his early youth about Rough and Smooth and it seemed to foretell the life he was later to lead. One can see it above in his conversing with sane snow after dealing with un-sane affairs of people.

[page 210, 211] Jan. 7. There, in that Well Meadow Field, perhaps, I feel in my element again, as when a fish is put back into the water. I wash off all my chagrins. All things go smoothly as the axle of the universe. I can remember that when I was very young I used to have a dream night after night, over and over again, which might have been named Rough and Smooth. All existence, all satisfaction and dissatisfaction, all event was

symbolized in this way. Now I seemed to be lying and tossing, perchance, on a horrible, a fatal rough surface, which must soon, indeed, put an end to, my existence, though even in the dream I knew it to be the symbol merely of my misery; and then again, suddenly, I was lying on a delicious smooth surface, as of a summer sea, as of gossamer or down or softest plush, and life was such a luxury to live. My waking experience *always* has been and is such an alternate Rough and Smooth. In other words it is Insanity and Sanity.

Thoreau lets on in the first sentence that he feels a failure when in the company of men, which could account for his penchant for solitude. Again his beloved shrub oak, whose rustle of leaves gains mention here with a reverence the majority of men would reserve for the sound of a loved one's voice.

[page 246] Feb. 8. In the society of many men, or in the midst of what is called success, I find my life of no account, and my spirits rapidly fall. I would rather be the barrenest pasture lying fallow than cursed with the compliments of kings, than be the sulphurous and accursed desert where Babylon once stood. But when I have only a rustling oak leaf, or the faint metallic cheep of a tree sparrow, for variety in my winter walk, my life becomes continent and sweet as the kernel of a nut. I would rather hear a single shrub oak leaf at the end of a wintry glade rustle of its own accord at my approach, than receive a shipload of stars and garters from the strange kings and peoples of the earth.

He concentrates the essence of his life by solitude and simplicity, what other people callously call poverty.

[page 246, 247] Feb. 8. By poverty, *i. e.*, simplicity of life and fewness or incidents, I am solidified and crystallized, as a vapor or liquid by cold. It is a singular concentration of strength and energy and flavor. Chastity is perpetual acquaintance with the All. My diffuse and vaporous life becomes as the frost leaves and spiculæ radiant as gems on the weeds and stubble in a winter morning. You think that I am impoverishing myself by withdrawing from men, but in my solitude I have woven for myself a silken web or *chrysalis*, and, nymph-like, shall ere long burst forth a more perfect creature, fitted for a higher society. By simplicity, commonly called poverty, my life is concentrated and so becomes organized, or a *cosmos*, which before was inorganic and lumpish.

"Travelers are at home anywhere but where he was born and bred," Thoreau says on page 251. He considered traveling a defeat or a rout caused by a lack of valor, rather than a source of pride.

[page 252] Feb. 10. I read the story of one voyageress round the world, who, it seemed to me, having started, had no other object but to get home again, only she took the longest way around.

He encounters the gossamer veil again and is yet befuddled as to its nature, whether it is animal or vegetable, and suspects it is perhaps a mold or a scum. Here are two passages where he describes it.

[page 268] Feb. 18. Sometimes, to my surprise, it was an extremely thin, but close-woven, perhaps air-tight veil, of the same color but still thinner than the thinnest tissue paper or membrane, in patches one to three feet in diameter, resting lightly on the stubble, which supports it in the form of little tents.

[page 269] Feb. 18. Thus it lasts, conspicuous many rods off. I think there must be a square mile of this, at least, in Concord. It is after a very warm, muggy, but fair night, the last snow going off and the thermometer at 50 degrees. Thinnest, frailest, gossamers veils dropped from above on the stubble, as if the fairies had dropped their veils or handkerchiefs after a midnight revel, rejoicing at the melting of the snow.

He does visit friends, but he expects to enjoy himself and not be disturbed by whatever is disturbing them. These are rare friends when one find one whose presence brings ever joy.

[page 277, 278] Feb. 22. I visit my friend for joy, not for disturbance. If my coming hinders him in the least conceivable degree, I will exert myself to the utmost to stay away, I will get the Titans to help me stand aloof, I will labor night and day to construct a rampart between us. If my coming casts but the shadow of a shadow before it, I will retreat swifter than the wind and more untrackable. I will be gone irrevocably, if possible, before he fears that I am coming.

Of ministers Thoreau has little use. He sees them in spheres as circumcised as a wine cask. He compares their lot to that of an African slave and expects that the freedom of the one form of forced servitude will soon follow the other.

[page 284] Feb. 28. When you spoke of sphere-music he thought only of a thumping on his cask. If he doesn't know something that nobody else does, that nobody told him, then he's a telltale. What great interval is there between him who is caught in Africa and made a plantation slave of in the South, and him who is caught in New England and made a Unitarian minister of?

In course of time they will abolish the one form of servitude, and, not long after, the other. I do not see the necessity for a man's getting into a hogshead and so narrowing his sphere, nor for his putting his head into a halter. Here's a man who can't butter his own bread, and he has just combined with a thousand like him to make a dipped toast for all eternity!

As for society, Thoreau will have none of it, and even the talk of those in society galls him.

[page 307] Mar. 27. Men talk to me about society as if I had none and they had some, as if it were only to be got by going to the sociable or to Boston.

Compliments and flattery oftenest excite my contempt by the pretension they imply, for who is he that assumes to flatter me? To compliment often implies an assumption of superiority in the complimenter. It is, in fact, a subtle detraction.

For fisherman, Thoreau offers some practical advice about how to keep minnows alive without requiring some battery operated aerator. With the fad of using granite for kitchen tops, finding a square foot of granite should be rather easy. Back in Foxborough, Massachusetts where I lived for a time in the 1970s it would have simply required a trip to the abandoned granite quarry to find a suitable piece lying around.

[page 308, 309] Mar. 28. A Mr. Parkhurst of Carlisle assures him that though minnows put into a half-hogshead of water will die in forty-eight hours unless you change the water, if you put with it a piece of granite a foot square they will live all winter, and that he keeps his minnows in this way.

On page 344, Thoreau speaks of his father and what his father says reminds me of something my father might have said to me: "Father says he saw a boy with a snapping turtle yesterday." My father would have likely added: "I offered him a couple of bucks for it, and took it home and made a turtle sauce piquante."

Here are some quotable one-liners from Thoreau:

[page 344] Apr. 25. Let men tread gently through nature.

[page 350] May 1. Is a house but a gall on the face of the earth, a nidus which some insect has provided for its young?

[page 450] June 21. That solitude was sweet to me as a flower. . . . I drank it in, the medicine for which I had pined . . .

This next passage requires that one read the phrase "improve the least opportunity to be sick" as "make the best of the least opportunity to be sick." This usage of the verb "improve" in the sense of "make the best of" has fallen to disuse since Thoreau's time, which is a shame since the one word expresses what it else requires four words. One would improve the English language were one to restore "improve" to its earlier usage. As for the content of what he reports, I can only add, Amen!

[page 379] May 26. I have noticed that notional nervous invalids, who report to the community the exact condition of their heads and stomachs every morning, as if they alone were blessed or cursed with these parts; who are old betties and quiddles, if men; who can't eat their breakfasts when they are ready, but play with their spoons, and hanker after an ice-cream at irregular hours; who go more than half-way to meet any invalidity, and go to bed to be sick on the slightest occasion, in the middle of the brightest forenoon, — improve the least opportunity to be sick; — I observe that such are self-indulgent persons, without any regular and absorbing employment. They are nice, discriminating, experienced in all that relates to bodily sensations. They come to you stroking their wens, manipulating their ulcers, and expect you to do the same for them. Their religion and humanity stick. They spend the day manipulating their bodies and doing no work; can never get their nails clean.

Have you ever noticed that in a sea adventure it is always the captain who is the star of the show? Horatio Hornblower or Captain Kidd or Jean Lafitte, it is always the head of the lot. Sailors on a ship brag of their exploits but none of them unless they captain the ship are as free as Thoreau in his tiny boat on the Concord River.

[page 390] May 29. The seaboard swarms with adventurous and rowdy fellows, but how unaccountably they train and are held in check! They are as likely to be policemen as anything. It exhausts their wits and energy merely to get their living, and they can do no more. The Americans are very busy and adventurous sailors, but all in somebody's employ, — as hired men. I have not heard of one setting out in his own bark, if only to run down our own coast on a voyage of adventure or observations, on his own account.

Here is a passage about Thoreau's mother.

[page 410] June 8. Mother was saying to-day that she bought no new clothes for John until he went away into a store, but made them of his father's old clothes, which made me say that country boys could get enough cloth for their clothes by robbing the scarecrows. So little it need cost to live.

Why would any one pour oil on troubled waters, I often wondered. It was supposed to calm the waters, but how could oil reduce high waves to a calm? Thoreau, who was skeptical about this also, discovered that the oil was useful to clear up the water so that the bottom could be seen when one was nearing shallow waters or trying to spot clams on the bottom. It was to improve visibility, not reduce the height of waves that they used the oil. Even a few drops could do the trick. When the oil thinned out to within a half-wavelength of light, the glare would disappear because the light from the sky would penetrate into the water rather than be reflected upwards.

[page 444, 445] June 20. Speaking of the effect of oil on water, this man said that a boat's crew came ashore safely from their vessel on the Bay Side of Truro some time ago in a storm, when the wind blowed square on to the land, only by heaving over oil. The spectators did not think they would reach the shore without being upset. When I expressed some doubt over the efficacy of this, he observed in the presence of Small and others, "We always take a bottle of oil when looking for sea clams, and, pouring out a few drops, can look down six or seven feet."

In a year's time I have followed Thoreau through a year's time in his life. It is a meditation to walk with

Thoreau. He never intrudes upon on my own thinking, but augments and enhances it. He is a good companion for me — just like a companion he would choose for himself. If he sees me getting into a boat, he will not invite himself, but wave me Bon Voyage, for he knows that my journey is not his journey, and knows that I value my solitude as much as he. But if I open his book, he unfolds for me, line by line page by page and will patiently wait for my next visit after I close the pages of his journal — like a faithful friend of whom his own friend Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "We will part as though we parted not, and meet as though we met not." Adieu, dear friend, till we meet again in another volume, another year, another walk in the woods, another sunset to behold, another bee-line through the shrub oak glen, another baptism in the andromeda swamp. Adieu.

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

Footnote 1. Apparently a reference to the caning of Senator Charles Sumner after a violent antislavery speech about Kansas by Rep. Preston Brooks who entered the US Senate chambers after the session to whip the Senator with a light cane used for whipping dogs.

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

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**Footnote 2.** To read Channing's whole poem "A Poet's Hope", see <http://www.doyletics.com/digest068.htm>

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

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Footnote 3. See [Matherne's Rule#36](#): Remember the future. It hums in the present.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 3.](#)

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**Footnote 4.** Professor Kevin Dann, a natural historian and biographer of Thoreau, called this dream to my attention on September 20, 2001.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 4.](#)

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