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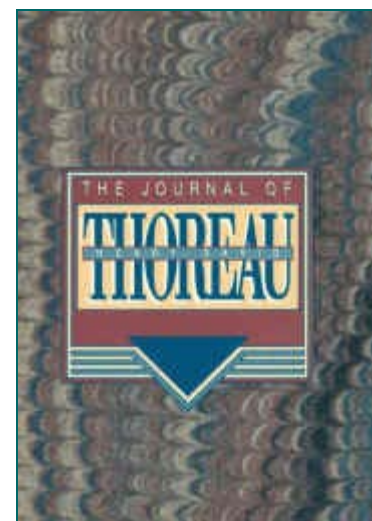


A READER'S JOURNAL

The Journal of Henry David Thoreau, Vol. 13
by
Henry David Thoreau

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2004

*I will miss these daily walks
With the Norseman Thorer
Through the ancient hills and rills
Of Concord town.*



One more year. That is my only thought as I begin this review of Year 13 of Thoreau's Journals. Again this year, 2009, I continued my recently adopted practice of reading these Journals on the very day they were written exactly 149 years ago. The idea to do this came to me after some ten years of reading Thoreau's Journals, but it made great sense to me. I could compare my local environs of New Orleans to that of his New England on the same day, every day of the year which he wrote in his journal. And so I decided and have done again this year, except for the last two weeks of July when I wished to complete my review before the end of the month, as next month will be very busy for me. I began making marginal notes of temperature and weather conditions whenever Thoreau did and this makes a fair comparison of the weather discrepancies between the north temperate zone and the sub-tropical zone of the USA.

After page 13, Thoreau was finished with his talk of John Brown which filled so much of the past two years' Journals. Here is his report of a brief encounter he has on the very first day of this journal with X, whom he later discovers to have been one of John Brown's men on his way to Canada. X told Thoreau, "I know I am insane" and evinced that condition during their time together.

[page 3, 4] X was betrayed by his eyes, which had a glaring film over them and no serene depth into which you could look. Inquired particularly the way to Emerson's and the distance, and when I told him, said he knew it as well as if he saw it. Wished to turn and proceed to his house. Told me one or two things which he asked me not to tell Sandborn. Said, "I know I am insane," — and I knew it too. Also called it "nervous excitement." At length, when I made a certain remark, he said, "I don't know but *you* are Emerson; are you? You look somewhat like him." He said as much two or three times, and added once, "But then Emerson wouldn't lie." Finally put his questions to me, of Fate, etc., etc., as if I *were* Emerson. Getting to the woods, I remarked upon them, and he mentioned my name, but never to the end suspected who his companion was. Then "proceeded to business," — "since the time was short," — and put to me the questions he was going to put to Emerson. His insanity exhibited itself chiefly by his incessant excited talk, scarcely allowing me to interrupt him, but once or twice apologizing for his behavior. What he said was for the most part connected and sensible enough.

During a snowy walk, Thoreau imagines lichens as the handbills of Nature, as Mother Nature walked about with glue or stapler to attach them to

every vacant spot to advertise us of her glorious bounty. I have often taken photos of such colorful extravagancies of Her Grace and have somewhere a shot of bright yellow lichens, but choose for this spot in the review a recent photo I took in the Gulf Shores Park in Orange Beach, Alabama of a red lichen with a touch of yellow moss on its edges.

[page 8] *Dec. 6. P. M. — To Walden and Baker Bridge, in the shallow snow and mizzling rain.*

It is somewhat of a lichen day. The bright-yellow sulphur lichens on the walls of the Walden road look novel, as if I had not seen them for a long time. Do they not require cold as much as moisture to enliven them? What surprising forms and colors! Designed on every natural surface of rock or tree.

Even stones of smaller size which make the walls are so finished, and piled up for what use? How naturally they adorn our works of art! See where the farmer has set up his post-and-rail fences along the road. The sulphur lichen has, as it were, at once leaped to occupy the northern side of each post, as in towns handbills are pasted on all bare surfaces, and the rails are more or less gilded with them as if it had rained gilt. The handbill which nature affixes to the north side of posts and trees and other surfaces. And there are the various shades of green and gray beside.



This was the same day when he took out his "boots of winter" to replace his "shoes of summer." For me, such a day would involve replacing my sandals of summer with my shoes of winter.



[page 18] *Dec. 9. Suddenly cold last night. The river and Fair Haven Pond froze over generally (I see no opening as I walk) last night, though they were only frozen along the edges yesterday. This is unusually sudden.*

How prominent the late or fall flowers are, now withered above the snow, — the goldenrods and asters, Roman wormwood, etc., etc.! These late ones have a sort of life extended into winter, hung with icy jewelry.

I observe at mid-afternoon, the air being very quiet and serene, that peculiarly softened western sky, which

perhaps is seen commonly after the first snow has covered the earth. There are many whitish filmy clouds a third of the way to the zenith, generally long and narrow, parallel with the horizon, with indistinct edges, alternating with the blue. And there is just enough *invisible* vapor, perhaps from the snow, to soften the blue, giving it a slight greenish tinge. Thus, methinks, it often happens that as the weather is harder the sky seems softer. It is not a cold, hard, glittering sky, but a warm, soft, filmy one.

In an amazing synchronicity — one I would have no doubt completely missed, had my reading of the Journal not been synchronized with day and month it was written in — it snowed here in New Orleans, at my home on December 11, 2008! The snow event was unbeknownst to me at the time I was reading this next Journal entry because it only began snowing an hour after I had finished reading the entry. In addition, the presence of the snow falling made itself known to me by the sound it made falling on the bamboo leaves a few steps outside of the window to the left of my workstation. I turned to see what was making the sound and it was snow. The snow began to fall about 8:30 am and fell until noon, a most unusual snowfall so early in the season, especially in New Orleans. The gentle susurrus that Thoreau described matched closely the sound I heard as the snow fell on the bamboo leaves.

[page 19, 20] Dec. 11. At 2 P. M. begins to snow, and snows till night. Still, normal storm, large flakes, warm enough, lodging.

See one sheldrake in Walden. As I stand on the' railroad at Walden, at R. W. E.'s crossing, the sound of the snowflakes falling on the dry oak leaves (which hold on) is exactly like a rustling produced by a steady but slight breeze. But there is no wind. It is a gentle and uninterrupted susurrus.

This light snow, which has been falling for an hour, resting on the horizontal spray of the hemlocks, produces the effect of so many crosses, or checker or lattice work.

As a poet myself, I must admit that I love writing poems. Not that I write them every day — no, I write them when some occasion arises (such as the one I wrote [here](#) for Del on our 31st

anniversary) or when the inspiration arises as it did often during my reading of the epic poem, *Eugene Onegin*, written solely in sonnets by Alexander Pushkin. A new poem is an impossibility before it starts, a conundrum while it's being written, and a joy when it is done. It is the ultimate challenge for a puzzle solver: create a completely novel puzzle and then solve it yourself. Thoreau realized this as evinced by this next passage about how every man should love his



work.

[page 20] Dec. 12. P. M. There is a certain Irish woodchopper who, when I come across him at his work in the woods in the winter, never fails to ask me what time it is, as if he were in haste to take his dinner-pail and go home. This is not as it should be. Every man, and the woodchopper among the rest, should love his work as much as the poet does his. All good political arrangements proceed on this supposition. If labor mainly, or to any considerable degree, serves the purpose of a police, to keep men out of mischief, it indicates a rottenness at the foundation of our community.

In this next passage Thoreau talks of what the snow does for animals in the forest. When I lived in New England in the small town of Foxborough, I rode my trail bike into the state forest which was only a few minutes from my house. I found it amazing to trail over new fallen snow and see the long paths of animals which must have crawled over these same paths in other seasons of the year without leaving a trace. But the even blanket of snow began a sensitive surface which recorded their paths in the winter. When Thoreau suggests we need a super-sensitive surface which allows us to record the presence of fairy folk and spirits, I think we have exactly such a super-sensible surface in the human being. This surface is not something we must invent — it is something we already are. We must learn to understand our own capabilities as a full human being and this ability will arrive with that knowledge.

[page 21] Dec. 12. P. M. The snow having come, we see where is the path of the partridge, — his comings and goings from copse to copse, — and now first, as it were, we have the fox for our nightly neighbor, and countless tiny deer mice. So, perchance, if a still finer substance should fall from heaven (iodine ?), something delicate enough to receive the trace of their footsteps, we should see where unsuspected spirits and faery visitors had hourly crossed our steps, had held conventions and transacted their affairs in our midst. No doubt such subtle spirits transact their affairs in our midst, and we may perhaps invent some sufficiently delicate surface to catch the impression of them.

Thoreau amuses me when he notices that the mountains resemble clouds because I live in a flat area which has no mountains within hundreds of miles, but lots of clouds. For myself, I notice that our clouds, especially in the summer time, resemble mountains. These are the clouds I call our "good mountains" — a phrase which is intended to titillate my readers. I grew up in the flat lands and wanted earnestly to live in an area with mountains. I lived for a time in Tennessee between the Cumberland and Smoky Mountains. Later in California I lived between the San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains and I spent time in the high Sierras. Also lived within an hour's drive of the mountains which Thoreau talks of near his beloved Concord. What I came to understand was that the feeling of awe that I feel when looking upon a beautiful mountain in the distance could be transferred to and experienced by me when looking upon a similar shaped cloud on the horizon. Since then my trips to look upon mountains in awe involve but a few steps from my workstation out of doors.

[page 21] Dec. 12. P. M. As I talked with the woodchopper who had just cleared the top of Emerson's I got a new view of the mountains over his pile of wood in the foreground. They were very grand in their snowy mantle, which had a slight tinge of purple. But when afterward I looked at them from a higher hill, where there was no woodpile in the foreground, they affected me less. It is now that these mountains, in color as well as form, most resemble the clouds.

Thoreau asks on page 23 about clouds, "Who watches them today?" I do. I love to take photos of clouds which have attractive or beautiful shapes. I think it was in a Thoreau journal where I first encountered the phrase "mackerel cloud" and I set out to find out what such a sky looked like, and then to take photos of one. On August 17, 2008, this beautiful mackerel sky appeared over Timberlane, our home, and I recorded it. Compare the way it looks to what Thoreau



describes in the next passage.

[page 22] Dec. 13. P. M. There is now, at 2.30 P. M., the melon-rind arrangement of the clouds. Really parallel columns of fine mackerel sky, reaching quite across the heavens from west to east, with clear intervals of blue sky, and a fine-grained vapor like spun glass extending in the same direction beneath the former. In half an hour all this mackerel sky is gone.

It seems time for me, dear Reader, to show you one of the plants which Thoreau remarks upon during his walks. This time it is a switch grass whose Latin name is *Panicum virgatum*.

[page 24] Dec. 13. P. M. I walk thus along the riverside, perhaps between the button-bushes and the meadow, where the bleached and withered grass — the *Panicum virgatum* and blue-joint and wool-grass — rustle amid the osiers which have saved them from the scythe.

I have a firewood man, Charlie Graf, who would no doubt profess to having a philosophy of wood if I were to press him on the subject. My philosophy about firewood has evolved over the years to this: "The cheapest wood burns the best." This came after trying various of Charlie's more expensive woods.

[page 29] Dec. 15. Philosophy is a Greek word by good rights, and it stands almost for a Greek thing. Yet some rumor of it has reached the commonest mind. M. Miles, who came to collect his wood bill to-day, said, when I objected to the small size of his wood, that it was necessary to that he had found that wood that was more than four inches in diameter would not dry, and moreover a good deal depended on the manner in which it was corded up in the woods. He piled his high and



tightly. If this were not well done the stakes would spread and the wood lie loosely, and so the rain and snow find their way into it. And he added, "I have handled a good deal of wood, and I think that I understand the *philosophy* of it."

Thoreau has a philosophy of apples, as one can quickly tell in this quotation from page 34. — He tells us, "Apples are thawed now and are very good. Their juice is the best kind of bottled cider that I know. They are all good in this state, and your jaws are the cider-press." I recently noticed the delightful partial fermentation of over-ripe figs when I returned from vacation recently. Thoreau has the advantage of natural refrigeration as well as natural bottling of his own apple cider.

One of the treats of Thoreau's journals is that literally out of the blue, after talking about the yarrow being too full of seed and Stow being a good town for mink, he bursts lyrically into a discussion of the various ages of man *from* his landing into a physical body newly arrived out of spiritual realms as a child *to* his settling into hardened bones as the president of a bank. These passages are scarcely marked except sometimes by the title at the top of the page, such as in this case: "The Divinity of Youth", so one must read the Journal to find them.

[page 35] When a man is young and his constitution and body have not acquired firmness, i. e., before he has arrived at middle age, he is not an assured inhabitant of the earth, and his compensation is that he is not quite earthy, there is something peculiarly tender and divine about him. His sentiments and his weakness, nay, his very sickness and the greater uncertainty of his fate, seem to ally him to a noble race of beings, to whom he in part belongs, or with whom he is in communication. The young man is a demigod; the grown man, alas! is commonly a mere mortal. He is but half here, he knows not the men of this world, the powers that be. They know him not. Prompted by the reminiscence of that other sphere from which he so lately arrived, his actions are unintelligible to his seniors. He bathes in light. He is interesting as a stranger from another sphere. He really thinks and talks about a larger sphere of existence than this world. It takes him forty years to accommodate himself to the carapax of this world. This is the age of poetry. Afterward he may be the president of a bank, and go the way of all flesh. But a man of settled views, whose thoughts are few and hardened like his bones, is truly mortal, and his only resource is to say his prayers.

On page 69, Thoreau tells us that "*Potentilla Norvegica* seems to have some sound seed in its closed heads." Here is a photo of the flower with its five petals fully opened.

Suddenly Thoreau unfolds for us more thought about the life of man. My own father is almost 92 and he speaks rarely, causing me to wonder what thoughts he thinks. I suspect he spends his time reveling in his many wonderful hunting and fishing trips with his brothers, Ray and Purpy, his son, David, and his many friends from work over the years. My thought is at variance with Thoreau's — I suspect that when the body and the brain is infirm or senile, the mind takes over and soars because it is no longer encumbered by the body, like a butterfly which has left its earthen chrysalis behind to plow the fields of heaven with its wings.



[page 69, 70] A man may be old and infirm. What, then, are the thoughts he thinks?

what the life he lives? They and it are, like himself, infirm. But a man may be young, athletic, active, beautiful. Then, too, his thoughts may be like his person. They will wander in a living beautiful world. If you are well, then how brave you are! How you hope! You are conversant with joy! A man thinks as well through his legs and arms as his brain. We exaggerate the importance and exclusiveness of the headquarters. Do you suppose they were a race of consumptives and dyspeptics who invented Grecian mythology and poetry? The poet's words are, "You would almost say the body thought!" I quite say it. I trust we have a good body then.

But Thoreau has his point and inspired the poet in me to thrust a few lines into the ground to see how they might sprout and bear fruit. These lines were written on page 70, January 3, 2009.

**The body talks
what the body thinks.**

**The man talks
what his body thinks.**

**Thoreau talks
what his body thinks**

**Thoreau walks
what his body wills.**

**Thoreau shows
his wildness**

**When he turns
off the road.**

The last line was inspired by this Jan. 3 passage on page 71, "The most we saw, on the pond and after, was a peculiar track amid the men and dog tracks, which we took to be a fox-track, for he trailed his feet, leaving a mark, in a peculiar manner, and showed his wildness by his turning off the road." How many off-road vehicles, bright-shiny SUVs (Sport Utility Vehicles) have you seen, dear Reader? And how many of these have you seen which actually showed signs of having been driven off-road? Seems like the wildness which drove the owners to buy the expensive four-wheeled vehicles was not matched by a wildness in which they actually turned off the road, doesn't it?

Here's another passage which reminds me of my long trail rides through the forest in Foxborough, Massachusetts, speeding between trees on narrow paths, up and down rocky inclines, bouncing along over the tops of closely spaced rocks nearing the granite quarry, and at times getting lost, but always finding the path ended in some new vista at a road which offered me a quick way home if I wished, and mostly I didn't. In trail riding the path is the destination.

[page 76, 77] Jan. 5. P. M. - Via Turnpike to Smith's and back by Great Road.

How much the snow reveals! I see where the downy woodpecker has worked lately by the chips of bark and rotten wood scattered over the snow, though I rarely see him in the winter. Once to-day, however, I hear his sharp voice, even like a woodchuck's. Also I have occasionally seen where (probably) a flock of goldfinches in the morning had settled on a hemlock's top, by the snow strewn with scales, literally blackened or darkened with them for a rod. And now, about the hill in front of Smith's, I see where the quails have run along the roadside, and can count the number of the bevy better than if I saw them. Are they not peculiar in this, as compared with partridges, — that they run in company, while at this season I see but [one] or two partridges together?

Recently I wrote in a review that *all perception is projection* — a bit of exaggeration to make the following point: perception begins with projection. — What you already know about the world drives your manner of perception, sets the controls on your perception, moves you to look in a certain direction, leads

you to focus on certain objects. Thoreau covers this subject by saying "a man receives only what he is ready to perceive", "every man thus *tracks himself* through life."

[page 77, 78] Jan. 5. P. M. A man receives only what he is ready to receive, whether physically or intellectually or morally, as animals conceive at certain seasons their kind only. We hear and apprehend only what we already half know. If there is something which does not concern me, which is out of my line, which by experience or by genius my attention is not drawn to, however novel and remarkable it may be, if it is spoken, we hear it not, if it is written, we read it not, or if we read it, it does not detain us. Every man thus *tracks himself* through life, in all his hearing and reading and observation and traveling. His observations make a chain. The phenomenon or fact that cannot in any wise be linked with the rest which he has observed, he does not observe. By and by we may be ready to receive what we cannot receive now. I find, for example, in Aristotle some thing about the spawning, etc., of the pout and perch, because I know something about it already and have my attention aroused; but I do not discover till very late that he has made other equally important observations on the spawning of other fishes, because I am not interested in those fishes.

What would the average person say when seeing a crow pecking at cow or horse dung in the road? Likely something indelicate, perhaps, "Look, crows eat shit." Not Thoreau — he sees the seeds in the dung which provide nourishment.

[page 78, 79] Jan. 7. I find myself drawn toward this softened snow, even that which is stained with dung in the road, as to a friend. I see where some crow has pecked at the now thawing dung here. How provident is Nature, who permits a few kernels of grain to pass undigested through the entrails of the ox, for the food of the crow and dove, etc. !

When the severe weather of December has passed, a mild day of 48 degrees seems like Spring. It always amazed how warm winter days in New England could seem when the wind abated and the Sun was shining, even when temperatures were in the 20s or 30s. Every day for Thoreau is a new adventure, especially a springlike day in January. Join him on his walk for a moment . . .

[page 81] Jan. 8. After December all weather that is not wintry is springlike. How changed are our feelings and thoughts by this more genial sky!

When I get to the railroad I listen from time to time to hear some sound out of the distance which will express this mood of Nature. The cock and the hen, that pheasant which we have domesticated, are perhaps the most sensitive to atmospheric changes of any domestic animals. You cannot listen a moment such a day as this but you will hear, from far or near, the clarion of the cock celebrating this new season, yielding to the influence of the south wind, or the darling note of the hen dreaming of eggs that are to be. These are the sounds that fill the air, and no hum of insects. They are affected like voyagers on approaching the land. We discover a new world every time that we see the earth again after it has been covered for a season with snow.

After twelve plus years of reading his Journal Thoreau finally offers a definition of what he calls a "fair day". Amazing to me, he does not mean a clear sky but always includes slightly overcast skies or any day in which precipitation is not expected from the looks of the sky. While reading his Journal one can enjoy living again in a time when people depended on their own senses for weather reports, not some talking head standing in front of an animated screen.

[page 106, 107] Jan. 25. In keeping a journal of one's walks and thoughts it seems to be worth the while to record those phenomena which are most interesting to us at the time. Such is the weather. It makes a material difference whether it is foul or fair, affecting surely our mood and thoughts. Then there are various degrees and kinds of foulness and

fairness. It may be cloudless, or there may be sailing clouds which threaten no storm, or it may be partially overcast. On the other hand it may rain, or snow, or hail, with various degrees of intensity. It may be a transient thunder-storm, or a shower, or a flurry of snow, or it may be a prolonged storm of rain or snow. Or the sky may be overcast or rain-threatening. So with regard to temperature. It may be warm or cold. Above 40° is warm for winter. One day, at 38 even, I walk dry and it is good sleighing; the next day it may have risen to 48, and the snow is rapidly changed to slosh. It may be calm or windy. The finest winter day is a cold but clear and glittering one. There is a remarkable life in the air then, and birds and other creatures appear to feel it, to be excited and invigorated by it. Also warm and melting days in winter are inspiring, though less characteristic.

I will call the weather fair, if it does not threaten rain or snow or hail; foul, if it rains or snows or hails, or is so overcast that we expect one or the other from hour to hour. To-day it is fair, though the sky is slightly overcast, but there are sailing clouds in the southwest.

In this next passage Thoreau helps us to appreciate all the creatures who make use of the apple tree and how much a latecomer the White Man was in his enjoyment of the succulent apple, whether raw, in cider or in the All-American Apple Pie.

[page 112, 113] Jan. 26. Not only the Indian, but many wild birds and quadrupeds and insects, welcomed the apple tree to these shores. As it grew apace, the bluebird, robin, cherry-bird, kingbird, and many more came with a rush and built their nests in it, and so became orchard-birds.

The woodpecker found such a savory morsel under its bark that he perforated it in a ring quite round the tree, a thing he had never done before. It did not take the partridge long to find out how sweet its buds were, and every winter day she flew and still flies from the wood to pluck them, much to the farmer's sorrow. The rabbit too was not slow to learn the taste of its twigs and bark. The owl crept into the first one that became hollow, and fairly hooted with delight, finding it just the place for him. He settled down into it, and has remained there ever since. The lackey caterpillar saddled her eggs on the very first twig that was formed, and it has since divided her affections with the wild cherry; and the canker-worm also in a measure abandoned the elm to feed on it. And when the fruit was ripe, the squirrel half carried, half rolled, it to his hole, and even the musquash crept up the bank and greedily devoured it; and when it was frozen and thawed, the crow and jay did not disdain to peck it. And the beautiful wood duck, having made up her mind to stay a while longer with us, has concluded that there is no better place for her too.

On page 116 Thoreau mentions in passing that he was born in a house alongside Two-Boulder Hill, a fact that I had not encountered before. Thoreau rebelled against rules; he knew when he would be a fool to follow an unfair rule, such as paying his Poll Tax. The passage below contains a ditty he penned in his Journal some 150 years ago. Since prepositions such as "up" and "with" are particles, I am reminded of Winston Churchill, who famously said about ending a sentence with a particle, "That is an absurdity up with which I will not put!" — linking two particles together in the *middle* of a sentence which would normally appear at the *end* of the sentence as "put up with" and sounding thereby blatantly horrible, thus proving his point. Winston would have agreed earnestly with Henry's more polite statement of the same point.

[page 125] February 3, 1860. When I read some of the rules for speaking and writing the English language correctly, — as that a sentence must never end with a particle, — and perceive how implicitly even the learned obey it, I think —

Any fool can make a rule

And every fool will mind it.

The process of information has become so technology-based today, that many people assume if you say you are informed about something, that you got the information from someone else, a TV, a computer, or a cell phone. But Thoreau knew how to inform himself and he describes the process in this next passage. His description is very similar to the in-forming process used by Father Brown in solving his mysteries(1). Thoreau placed his body into positions to recreate the track left and found himself walking like his friend George — his in-formation came from *forming* himself *in* George's body as he walked.

[page 127, 128] Feb. 5 P. M. And to-day, seeing a peculiar very long track of a man in the snow, who has been along up the river this morning, I guessed that it was George Melvin, because it was accompanied by a hound's track. There was a thin snow on the ice, and I observed that he not only furrowed the snow for a foot before he completed his step, but that the (toe) of his track was always indefinite, as if his boot had been worn out and prolonged at the toe. I noticed that I and my companion made a clear and distinct track at the toe, but when I experimented, and tried to make a track like this by not lifting my feet but gliding and partly scuffing along, I found myself walking just like Melvin, and that perfectly convinced me that it was he.

As a scientist myself, it has taken me many years to be able to understand the point Thoreau makes so succinctly below. Scientific names are the filtered eyeglasses scientists put on which make them effectually blind to phenomena not already described in their books and reference manuals.

[page 141] Feb. 12. Whatever aid is to be derived from the use of a scientific term, we can never begin to see anything as it is so long as we remember the scientific term which always our ignorance has imposed on it. Natural objects and phenomena are in this sense forever wild and unnamed by us.

Have you ever walked upon an icy pond? No doubt many of you have, but join Thoreau for a walk on his icy pond and your future walks may be enhanced by thought of the sky as your footstool.

[page 141] Feb. 12. You have seen those purple fortunate isles in the sunset heavens, and that green and amber sky between them. Would you believe that you could ever walk amid those isles? You can on many a winter evening. I have done so a hundred times. The ice is a solid crystalline sky under our feet. . . . Not only the earth but the heavens are made our footstool. That is what the phenomenon of ice means. The earth is annually inverted and we walk upon the sky. The ice reflects the blue of the sky. The waters become solid and make a sky below. The clouds grow heavy and fall to earth, and we walk on them. We live and walk on solidified fluids.

We have such a habit of looking away that we see not what is around us. How few are aware that in winter, when the earth is covered with snow and ice, the phenomenon of the sunset sky is double! The one is on the earth around us, the other in the horizon. These snow-clad hills answer to the rosy isles in the west. The winter is coming when I shall walk the sky. The ice is a solid sky on which we walk. It is the inverted year. There is an annual light in the darkness of the winter night. The shadows are blue, as the sky is forever blue. In winter we are purified and translated. The earth does not absorb our thoughts. It becomes a Valhalla.

Who has not contended with the stupidity of people? Especially today when it is impolite to refer to anyone as stupid. It seems today that the more stupid a person is, the more the adjective to describe obscures that obvious fact. This practice seems to be a modern form of stupidity unknown in Thoreau's time when one could call someone stupid if they were.



[page 145]

Feb. 13.

Always you have to contend with the stupidity of men. It is like a stiff soil, a hard-pan. If you go deeper than usual, you are sure to meet with a pan made harder even by the superficial cultivation. The stupid you have always with you. Men are more obedient at first to words than ideas. They mind names

more than things. Read to them a lecture on "Education," naming that subject, and they will think that they have heard something important, but call it "Transcendentalism," and they will think it moonshine. Or halve your lecture, and put a psalm at the beginning and a prayer at the end of it and read it from a pulpit, and they will pronounce it good without thinking.

Writing is like farming, the more you plant the more seed you have to plant for next year. Like plants generate seeds, so does thinking breed more thinking. Retire from writing? One would have to first retire from thinking.

[page 145] *Feb. 13.* The Scripture rule, "Unto him that hath shall be given," is true of composition. The more you have thought and written on a given theme, the more you can still write. Thought breeds thought. It grows under your hands.

It seems that, about in the middle of its length, the Concord River damaged the meadow grass that it ran through. When a Mr. Heard was called to testify about the problem, he said of the Concord River, "it is dammed at both ends and cursed in the middle." (Page

149)

The musquash or muskrats of Thoreau's time were known for undermining the bank of river meadows, leading to them being shot to stop their destruction more than to acquire their furs. The South American cousins of



the muskrat, the nutria, now transplanted some 60 years to Louisiana, are causing a similar damage to drainage canal banks, and there is currently a bounty on them amounting to \$5 a tail(2). (Page 181)

Below we learn the common chickweed's Latin name is *Stellaria media*.

[page 208] March 22. Vegetation fairly begins, — conferva and mosses, grass and carex, etc. — and gradually many early herbaceous plants start, and noticed radical leaves; *Stellaria media* and shepherd's purse bloom; . . .

"Where is the tree from which fruit falls in mind's basket?" was a statement by Jane Roberts which stuck in my mind back in 1980 or so. It was my first hint as to the source of original thoughts in the realm of the spiritual world. In this next passage, Thoreau makes a very similar claim, that ripe fruit or thoughts come from the spiritual realm (universal mind).

[page 238] April 1. The fruit a thinker bears is sentences, — statements or opinions. He seeks to affirm something as true. I am surprised that my affirmations or utterances come to me ready-made, — not fore-thought, — so that I occasionally awake in the night simply to let fall ripe a statement which I had never consciously considered before, and as surprising and novel and agreeable to me as anything can be. As if we



only thought by sympathy with the universal mind, which thought while we were asleep. There is such a necessity to make a definite statement that our minds at length do it without our consciousness, just as we carry our food to our mouths. This occurred to me last night, but I was so surprised by the fact which I have just endeavored

to report that I have entirely forgotten what the particular observation was.

Moore tells Thoreau of his men, digging sand in a hollow, who uncovered a bunch of torpid snakes, which they proceeded to measure by laying them end to end on the ground and they totaled several hundred feet. (Page 254) If this were done in the Halls of Congress, no doubt the torpid snakes would fill the space between the Washington Monument and Lincoln Monument.

[page 255] April 22. The early luzula is almost in bloom; makes a show, with its budded head and its purplish and downy, silky leaves, on the warm margin of Clamshell Bank.

After Hurricane Gustav rushed through our area in 2008, I found a baby gray squirrel which had fallen out of its nest and was able to take a photo before moving it from the street to the base of the Louisiana cypress tree it had obviously fallen out of — to where its mother might take care of it.

[page 258] April 25. Mr. Stewart tells me that he has found a gray squirrel's nest up the Assabet, in a maple tree. I resolve that I too will find it. I do not know within less than a quarter of a mile where to look, nor whether it is in a hollow tree, or in a nest of leaves. I examine

the shore first and find where he landed. I then examine the maples in that neighborhood to see what one has been climbed. I soon find one the bark of which has been lately rubbed by the boots of a climber, and, looking up, see a nest. It was a



large nest made of maple twigs, with a center of leaves, lined with finer, about twenty feet from the ground, against the leading stem of a large red maple. I noticed no particular entrance. When I put in my hand from above and felt the young, they uttered a dull croak-like squeak, and one clung fast to my hand when I took it out through the leaves and twigs with which it was covered. It was yet blind, and could not have been many days old, yet it instinctively clung to my hand with its little claws, as if it knew that there was danger of its falling from a height to the ground which it never saw. The idea of clinging was strongly planted in it. There was quite a depth of loose sticks, maple twigs, piled on the top of the nest. No wonder that they become skillful climbers who are born high above the ground and begin their lives in a tree, having first of all to descend to reach the earth. They are cradled in a tree-top, in but a loose basket, in helpless infancy, and there slumber when their mother is away. No wonder that they are never made dizzy by high climbing, that were born in the top of a tree, and learn to cling fast to the tree before their eyes are open.

In an old movie, I noticed an Irish mother rock her baby boy in a wooden cradle with a bottom like a boat. She would take him to the water's edge and allow him to float on the water where the rippling waves would rock him. No doubt this boy would yearn to be a sailor so that each day and night he would be rocked in the arms of the sea.

[page 277] May 5. Bluets have spotted the fields for two or three days mingled with the reddish luzula, as in Conant's field north of Holden Wood toward the brook. They fill the air with a sweet and innocent fragrance at a few rods' distance.

Thoreau loves to report on the unique forest sounds, such as the first rustling of leaves in the Spring.



[page 299] May 17. Standing in the meadow near the early aspen at the island, I hear the first fluttering of leaves, — a peculiar sound, at first unaccountable to me. The breeze causes the now fully expanded aspen leaves there to rustle with a pattering sound, striking on one another. It is much like a gentle surge breaking on a shore, or the rippling of waves. This is the first softer music which the wind draws from the forest, the woods generally being comparatively bare and just bursting into leaf. It was delicious to behold that dark mass and hear that soft rippling sound.

Below is another example of how people lived more in connection with Nature. The sawmill depends on water power to saw the logs, so the sawyers do not work an 8 to 5 workday, but will work through the night if that is when the river water is high enough to give them good sawing.

[page 325, 326] June 2. Hear the sound of Barrett's sawmill, at first like a drum, then like a train of cars. The water has been raised a little by the rain after a long drought, and so he is obliged to saw by night, in order to finish his job before the sun steals it away from him again.

When I was
in elementary
school, boys
would bring
small red-
eared slider
turtles they
had caught in
the canals
around
Westwego.
They would
sell these to
kids who
wanted them.
I considered
doing this to
earn money
but it
required a
long pole
with a net on
it and I
couldn't buy



such a tool.
Once or
twice, some
boy brought a
small squirrel

that he had raised as a pet. And one day, a small bat was carried in by some boy. Carrying any of these things to a school yard today would be treated as if it were a loaded pistol, so enured people have become to the idea that every wild animal carries some horrible disease and is not to be touched. Some of my grandchildren feel this way about fruits and vegetables: if they don't come from the supermarket they won't eat them. The more packaging surrounding them, the safer they think it is apparently. They would not pick blackberries from my large blackberry vine and even when offered one by their Grandfather refused to even put it their mouths as if it were some forbidden fruit. In this next passage, Thoreau comes upon a sleeping New York bat and holds it gently in his hands. How different things were back then.

[page 342, 343] June 10. There is much handsome interrupted fern in the Painted-Cup Meadow, and near the top of one of the clumps we noticed something like a large cocoon, the color of the rusty cinnamon fern wool. It was a red bat, the New York bat, so called. It hung suspended, head directly downward, with its little sharp claws or hooks caught through one of the divisions at the base of one of the pinnæ, above the fructification. It was a delicate rusty brown in color, very like the wool of the cinnamon fern, with the whiter bare spaces seen through it early in the season. I thought at first glance it was a broad brown cocoon, then that it was the plump body of a monstrous emperor moth. It was rusty or reddish brown, white or hoary within or beneath the tips, with a white apparently triangular spot beneath, about the insertion of the wings. Its wings were very compactly folded up, the principal bones (darker-reddish) lying flat along the under side of its body, and a hook on each meeting its opposite under the chin of the creature. It did not look like fur, but more like the plush of the ripe cat-tail head, though more loose, — all trembling in the wind and with the pulsations of the animal. I broke off the top of the fern and let the bat lie on its back in my hand. I held it and turned it about for ten or fifteen minutes, but it did not awake. Once or twice it opened its eyes a little, and even it

raised its head, opened its mouth, but soon drowsily dropped its head and fell asleep again. Its ears were rounded and nearly bare. It was more attentive to sounds than to motions. Finally, by shaking it, and especially by hissing or whistling, I thoroughly awakened it, and it fluttered off twenty or thirty rods to the woods. I cannot but think that its instinct taught it to cling to the interrupted fern, since it might readily be mistaken for a mass of its fruit.

Here he evokes for us a sound, this time of the nighthawk.

[page 406, 407] July 17. The nighthawk's ripping sound, heard overhead these days, reminds us that the sky is, as it were, a roof, and that our world is limited on that side, it being reflected as from a roof back to earth. It does not suggest an infinite depth in the sky, but a nearness to the earth, as of a low roof echoing back its sounds.

As I close this review, I look back on the months between December and July during which I have joined Thoreau as an unseen companion as he walked, sailed, skated, and rode through his beloved Concord. With him I have switched from winter boots to summer shoes. I have held a brownish-red sleeping bat in my hands. I have watched bream build their nests in a stream. I have listened sanguinely as a hunter described the various hawks he killed for sport. I have walked on the ice at sunset among snowy islands at my feet. And I was all the time, like Thoreau, making notes on my journeys which I have just enjoyed sharing with you. God willing, join me in about 18 months or so when I will complete my travels with Thoreau as I finish the final volume, Volume 14, of Thoreau's Journals.

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

Footnote 1. See my [The Innocence of Father Brown](#) review.

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

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**Footnote 2.** See my story and poem about four little nutrias in the middle of the road. [Click Here!](#)

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

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