

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THIS MOMENT
The Spiritual Message of Henry David Thoreau
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Henry David Thoreau is known for many things. He was by turns a schoolteacher, a pencil maker, a surveyor, and a handyman. He was also an advocate of simple living, civil disobedience, and environmental preservation in addition to being a naturalist and a writer. I believe that the thread on which all the beads of his many-faceted life are strung is his idiosyncratic and unconventional religious faith.

As for describing his religious views, we should perhaps heed his own admonition: "What is religion?" he once asked. "That which is never spoken," he said. What we can say, I believe, is that his religious views were experiential and nature-centered. God, for him, was immanent rather than transcendent. He was, if anything, a nature mystic and a pantheist. He was born and raised in a Unitarian family but, like a lot of young people today, he ceased church-going when he went off to college.

Thoreau's god was in the woods, not in a church. "I feel that I draw nearest to understanding the great secret of my life in my closest intercourse with nature," he said. "I suppose that what in other men is religion is in me love of nature." His nature mysticism was coupled with an all-embracing religious cosmopolitanism. He sought and found wisdom in many religious and philosophical traditions. His interest in these went beyond mere curiosity. He mined them for spiritual truths.

To talk about his religion is also difficult for the fact that the word “religion” is so often associated with creeds, rites, and institutions. These Thoreau had little use for. He was put off by the hypocrisy and absolutism of sectarian religion. “I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another,” he wrote. “I have no sympathy with the bigotry and ignorance which make transient and partial and puerile distinctions between one man’s faith or form of faith and another’s,—as Christian and heathen. I pray to be delivered from narrowness, partiality, exaggeration, bigotry. To the philosopher all sects, all nations, are alike. I like Brahma, Hari, Buddha, the Great Spirit, as well as God.”

For these reasons, I think it’s more appropriate to speak of Thoreau’s spirituality than his religion. The word “spirituality” has shortcomings, too. Lacking the trappings of religion, spirituality seems vague and is given to different interpretations. His spirituality was devoid of doctrines or formulas or philosophical propositions. It had primarily to do with transcendent experiences triggered by his encounters with the natural world. “To watch for, describe all the divine features which I detect in Nature,” he wrote; “My profession is to be always on the alert to find God in nature—to know his lurking places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas, in nature.”

He often referred to these experiences as ecstasies, or what we might call mystic states, such as this one described in his journal:

In youth, before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction; both its weariness

and its refreshment were sweet to me. This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. To have such sweet impressions made on us—such ecstasies begotten of the breezes!

I can remember how I was astonished. I said to myself—I said to others—There comes into my mind or soul an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion and [I] have had naught to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by superior powers.... I was daily intoxicated and yet no man could call me intemperate. With all your science can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?

This passage reveals a central paradox of the spiritual life. Ecstatic experiences are noetic, philosopher William James tells us. They give knowledge of hidden truths and of life lived on a higher plane. However, as the vision fades, the mystic is left to wonder, as Thoreau did, how and whence it is “that light comes into the soul?” How do we command what is essentially spontaneous? Granted that these experiences are fleeting and at the same time central to our religious life and spiritual well-being, how, if at all, do we recapture them? Given that they are most likely to occur when the will is in abeyance, how is it possible to summon them?

As the frequency of these mystic states diminished, he was drawn to the idea that he might, through a certain kind of regimen, put himself in a receptive frame of mind and thereby increase the odds that such experiences might recur. His spiritual practice was in keeping with what was then termed “self-culture,” or the cultivation of the soul. “*The art of life!*,” he called it. “Was there anything

memorable written upon it? By what disciplines to secure the most life—with what care to watch our thoughts.” The disciplines he practiced and described in *Walden* and elsewhere include leisure, self-reliance, reading, contemplation, solitude, conversation, sauntering in nature, simple living, and keeping a journal. By such practices we may, even today, attempt “to secure the most life.”

Another paradox of the spiritual life has to do with what his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson called the dilemma of double consciousness. On the one hand, we are caught up in the affairs of the everyday world, with all of its distractions and demands. On the other hand, we are from time to time aware of a world within this hectic outer world that remains calm and centered while everything else goes spinning about. How to reconcile these two forms of consciousness is another of the fundamental challenges of the spiritual life; that is, how to find *nirvana* in *samsara*, eternity in the fleeting moment. It is to live fully in the present, or as Thoreau put it in another passage from his journal:

Nothing must be postponed. Take time by the forelock. Now or never! You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island opportunities and look toward another land. There is no other land; there is no other life but this, or the like of this.... Take any other course, and life will be a succession of regrets.

In *Walden*, Thoreau observes that most people seem to lead lives of quiet desperation, as though they actually preferred their way of life to any other and thinking they have no alternative. Their lives are frittered away by detail and consumed with worry. Not satisfied with securing the necessities of life, they

reach for the luxuries as well. However, he did not propose to “write an ode to dejection,” he said, “but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.” For him the morning is a metaphor for spiritual renewal and awakening. “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake,” he insisted, “not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn.”

He elaborated on what he called the “rooster’s philosophy” in his late essay, “Walking,” where he wrote:

Above all we cannot afford not to live in the present. He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past. Unless our philosophy hears the cock crow in every barn-yard within our horizon, it is belated. That sound commonly reminds us that we are growing rusty and antique in our employments and habits of thought. [The rooster’s] philosophy comes down to a more recent time than ours. There is something suggested by it not in Plato nor the New Testament. It is a newer testament—the Gospel according to this moment.

By his own admission, Thoreau had no interest in recruiting followers, admonishing his readers to find and follow their own spiritual path instead. He insisted that people make hard choices, no doubt easier for him since he wasn’t as enmeshed in relationships and commitments as most of us are. He never married, lived at home with his parents, and did odd jobs for a living. He could be difficult and exasperating, both for his friends and his readers.

The question is whether or not his message has relevance for us today. Has society become so consumption-oriented, education so utilitarian, science so materialistic, and every-day life so consumed with social media and to-do lists that we ignore entirely the prompting of the spirit? Is seeking ecstasies in the woods a frivolous pursuit in light of the serious problems we face, including homelessness, poverty, discrimination, and racism? Was Thoreau's living at Walden Pond a selfish retreat from society, or did he have something to teach us about how we might elevate our lives and improve the lives of others with a due appreciation of the importance of solitude, nature, and self-reliance?

The issues Thoreau addressed in his writing and in his life are perennial and universal in human experience—*anxiety, alienation, prejudice, and a lack of meaning and purpose in life.* In response to these, he continues to challenge us to live a life that is deliberately chosen rather than one laid out for us by others, or simply fallen into and tolerated by force of habit. Today we are still living in the aftermath of a world-wide pandemic which has taken the lives of millions of people. At the same time, climate change is contributing to a dangerous combination of rising sea levels, drought, wildfires, and weather-related disasters. The nation continues to struggle with economic and racial injustice and on-going threats to democracy. We are also faced with the depletion of natural resources, species extinction, and mountains of waste due to unconstrained growth.

In light of such challenges, it might seem that any advice from Thoreau is ineffectual, and that comparing our world to his is unwarranted. In fact, there has never been a period in our history without suffering, struggle, and hardship, his

included. To some of his readers withdrawing to the pond seems more like an escape than an answer. But his retreat to Walden Pond was strategic. It was not simply to get away and absolve himself of responsibility for the nation's problems. It was to disengage from conformity and complicity, to break the hold of an unhealthy and unjust social order on its citizens, and to rethink his position. In the process, he discovered for himself—and demonstrated for others—the importance of action from principle, simple living, and environmental sustainability.

Nor was he simply chasing after rainbows and fleeting ecstasies. In moments of heightened awareness, he discerned the difference between the ideal world and the actual one, between what is truly essential and what is merely superficial. What he learned from his experience—so eloquently expressed in *Walden*—was that “if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.... If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” He encourages us not merely to dream of a better world, but to create one.

Finally, Thoreau instructs us in the art of life. For him, philosophy was not a matter of subtle thoughts and abstract propositions, it was a way of living. As such, it had much in common with ancient philosophies in India, China, Greece, and elsewhere. They were developed in response to the problems of human existence, including heartache, anger, despair, and loss. They counseled adherents to seek solace in nature, balance in life, and harmony with the universe. By means of

spiritual exercises, followers were taught to distinguish between what contributes to human flourishing and what inhibits it. Thoreau offers his readers a similar philosophy, “the Gospel according to this moment,” no less worthwhile than those of more ancient vintage. The disciplines he recommends are not only congenial to today’s spiritual seekers, they are also beneficial and rewarding.

In the concluding chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau relates the story of a bug which came out of a table that stood in a farmer’s home for sixty years, hatched from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier. From this incident he draws an important lesson:

Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society ... may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society’s most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last.

Like that beautiful bug, Thoreau’s wisdom has been buried under the dead weight of a society that prioritizes social conformity, conservative politics, and the exploitation of people and the natural world. Perchance this will be the summer that brings forth his beautiful and winged thoughts at last.