



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

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Spirituality · Community · Justice

## Thoreau in Today's America

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Preparing this sermon, I learned I have been mispronouncing Thoreau's name for many years. Growing up, I heard the name pronounced with an emphasis on the second syllable: THOR-OH. But there are passages in the journals of both Thoreau's aunt and his fellow Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott that the correct pronunciation sounds like "thorough" — as in being *thorough* in completing a task. And in Thoreau's hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, school children are taught that, "**Thoreau**" rhymes with "**furrow**" — as in *furrow* your brow.

Thoreau was born in 1817, and died in 1862 at the far too young age of 44. In contrast, his contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson lived to be 78. But despite Thoreau's short life, he left a significant legacy. To name just one example of how the fascination with Thoreau's life and writings continues to grow, just a few years ago — almost 150 years after Thoreau's death — students at my undergraduate *alma mater* Furman University built by hand — as Thoreau himself did — a **replica of Thoreau's cabin as part of a course on his book *Walden***. And even though Thoreau is admired today in many circles, he has also had critics both then and now. According to the introduction to an excellent annotated collection of Thoreau's essays released by Yale University Press, after Thoreau's death, when his literary estate was being settled, the judge said, "Why should any one wish to have a sentence of Henry Thoreau's put in print?" (Cramer xi).

Part of the attraction to Thoreau for many people, including myself, is the romantic ideal of Thoreau's life on Walden Pond, as well as his actions for social justice. Thoreau's life at

Walden was not all carefree play and no work. As Robert Richardson details in his wonderful biography, Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind, while it is true that Thoreau often took a **daily walk of at least four hours** — in his words, “sauntering through the woods and over the hills, absolutely free from all worldly engagements” — **he also spent at least four hours each day indoors, reading and writing**” (ix). On a typical day, he would read and write all morning, leaving for a walk around 2 p.m. (269).

And since we’re in a Unitarian Universalist congregation this morning, before I progress too far, I should pause to address the question of whether it is fair to claim Thoreau as a Unitarian. As many of you likely know, we UUs have a habit of sometimes claiming famous people as UUs if they have attended a single UU service — or even merely expressed a vaguely UU-ish notion. In the case of Thoreau, **his parent were members of First Parish Concord, which today is a thriving 700-member Unitarian Universalist congregation.** Thoreau was baptized there as an infant, and was “catechized” there as a young child.

Keep in mind that today’s UU congregations which were founded in or before the nineteenth century were in Thoreau’s childhood all Christian congregations. **It was the Transcendentalist movement that Thoreau grew up to become a part of — and later the Humanist movement of the early twentieth century — that increasingly widened Unitarian Universalism toward fully embracing both modern science and all the world’s religions.** But in 1817, at the time of Thoreau’s birth, all of that is in the future. Our famous Unitarian ancestor William Ellery Channing would not preach his landmark sermon “Unitarian Christianity” at The First Independent Church of Baltimore until 1819. And the American Unitarian Association was not founded until 1825.

During Thoreau’s childhood, the Unitarian Controversy that started at Harvard in 1805 was slowly playing out. Specifically, when he was ten, there was a schism in his childhood congregation of First Parish Concord between the Unitarians and the Trinitarians. (Similar schisms were happening across New England.) When his mother’s sisters joined the rival congregation, Thoreau’s mother at first resigned her membership at First Parish to join them. But when she “found that her free-thinking religious views were not welcome among the Trinitarians, she returned to the family pew at the Unitarian church,” where she and her husband remained

members for the rest of their lives. Thoreau did not. If you visit First Parish Concord today, they still have the letter in which **Thoreau officially resigned his membership “when, as an adult, he was presented with a tax bill for the support of a minister he did not like.”**

If you are curious, the minister in question is Barzillai Frost, who is the same preacher that Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” famously called out for being a boring preacher. Ouch! It’s rough when history remembers you primarily for being hated on by both Emerson and Thoreau. Maybe I’ll have time one day to preach a sermon on “The Rest of the Story” about Barzillai Frost. I’m told that, “by other accounts, Barzillai Frost was a perfectly adequate minister.”)

But Rev. Frost had the unfortunate luck of having two particularly exacting critics — Emerson and Thoreau — who are among the spiritual ancestors of what we sometimes call “free-range UUs”: people who are tangentially associated with — or influenced by — Unitarian Universalism, but who are not active members of a UU congregation. **Thoreau was known to attend Unitarian services periodically whenever there was someone preaching whom he liked.** And, “The Transcendentalists with whom he associated were almost all Unitarians, and most of them were ministers or former ministers.” Thoreau was also buried at his childhood Unitarian congregation of First Parish Concord. The minister at the time (not poor Rev. Frost, who was no longer there) “read selections from the Bible and offered a prayer.” Emerson, himself a former Unitarian minister, delivered the eulogy.

But now, in reflecting on Thoreau’s many associations with Unitarianism, we’ve arrived at the end of his life too early. So allow me to turn back to the clock to his college days at Harvard. Almost 200 years ago when Thoreau was a student at Harvard College from 1833 to 1837, that school was a strikingly different institution from the renowned Harvard University of today. At that time, there were fewer than 500 students enrolled...and only a handful of buildings: **“With unpaved streets and pigs in sties behind University Hall, the place had a distinctly rural atmosphere...and Boston was still a city of only seventy-five thousand people.... Harvard was a modest place in those days, and it was intensely local”** (9). Interestingly, there was an early encounter between Emerson and Thoreau at Harvard when

Thoreau happened to be one of the students assigned to have Emerson examine his rhetoric. But neither seems to have particularly impressed the other at the time (19).

In 1837, Thoreau graduated Harvard at age twenty, and landed a prized job as a teacher. He didn't even last two weeks. In his defense, **the precipitating factor was his supervisor reprimanding him for not beating his students with a cane to discipline them** (5). But Thoreau resigning from this well-paying, prominent teaching position was a financial blow to Thoreau's family, who did not have a lot of money (18, 35).

However, this post-college period was auspicious in other ways. Emerson's breakthrough essay "Nature" had been published a few months earlier in the spring of 1836, and that fall, his friendship with Emerson began to deepen. Of particular note, Emerson was the one who encouraged Thoreau to start journaling, which he did in October 1837 (7). His journals grew to more than a million words, and you can buy them today in an impressive 8-volume set from Princeton University Press (341-342). **These journals "began as a conventional record of ideas, grew into a writer's notebook, and eventually became the principal imaginative work of his career."**

But as most writers will confess, good writing is hard work, and a craft that improves with time and effort. In that vein, Thoreau had many early failures and struggles in his early aspirations to be a published author (47). Those of you who remember my sermon from a few years ago about Margaret Fuller — the other of the big "Transcendentalist Three" in addition to Emerson and Thoreau — may recall that through her position at the *The Dial*, an influential magazine that published many Transcendentalists, Fuller became the twenty-three-year-old Henry David Thoreau's first editor. Although she accepted one of the first poems he submitted for publication, she also wrote a **rejection letter that, "she hoped to publish the essay eventually, but while it was 'rich in thoughts,' in its present form those thoughts 'seem to me so out of their natural order, that I cannot read it through without pain'"** (Marshall 159).

Adding insult to injury, less than a month earlier, Thoreau's marriage proposal to Ellen Sewell, the daughter of a Unitarian minister, had been rejected (Richardson 85). But perhaps that was for the best, as he became content in many ways as a lifelong bachelor (268-269). If you're

curious, yes, **there is unconfirmed speculation that Thoreau was gay**, but that's complicated to fully address because we're talking about the pre-Freudian, mid-19th century.

Regardless, it was Thoreau's relative independence which gave him the freedom at age twenty-eight to build a cabin on Walden Pond, where he lived for two years. **Walden Pond is more accurately described as a sixty-one acre lake: "a walk of nearly a mile and three-quarters around the shoreline"** (148). Emerson had bought approximately 15 acres near Walden Pond the year before, which gave Thoreau the opportunity for his experiment in self-reliance—while also revealing that "self-reliance" is often much more interdependent and relational than is often admitted (149). "Thoreau was well aware that what he was doing was not braving wilderness, but simulating its conditions in a sort of symbolic or laboratory experiment." In his words, he viewed **"it to be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life though in the midst of an outward civilization"** (153). And in many ways, **Thoreau's cabin was as much a "headquarters" as a "hermitage."** At one point in 1846, for example, "He stood host, at the cabin, to the antislavery society's annual meeting in commemoration of West Indian Emancipation, a pointed reminder that there was still no American Emancipation to be celebrated" (179).

Overall, his two years and two months at a self-built cabin on Walden Pond was astoundingly fruitful:

he produced more writing of higher quality over a greater range of subjects while he was living at Walden than at any other period of his life. In twenty-six months he wrote two complete drafts of *A Week*, a complete draft of *Walden*, [two lectures], and the first third of his book *The Maine Woods*. This is an amazing output; the fundamental shape and substance of two books and a good part of a third. . . . **Thoreau managed to bring to publication only two united and sustained book-length pieces during his lifetime. Both were essentially shaped during the years at Walden Pond.** (154)

If you are curious to read more of Thoreau, much of *Walden* is very much worth revisiting. Or if you want to start with an essay, "Walking" is arguably the one most quintessentially Thoreauvian (224).

Part of Thoreau's legacy for us today is the ways in which Walden was an intentional alternative to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. **Whereas Smith wanted individuals to become increasingly specialized to boost the speed of production, Thoreau saw all the ways that Smith's "division of labor" created what Marx called "alienated labor," workers as mere cogs in the machine of industrialization.** Thoreau also questioned the wisdom of building an economy based on an ever-increasing demand for production and consumption. Instead, in Chapter 2 of Walden, he advised: "**Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!** I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail" (168).

And on this day after the Women's March on Washington, I should also mention that at age twenty-nine, during his time at Walden, Thoreau spent the night in jail for nonpayment of a poll tax to protest the ways tax dollars were being used to support slavery and unjust wars (Richard 175). His resulting essay "**Civil Disobedience**" **has been an inspiration to many people for seeking to follow one's conscience against the pressures to conform to the present status quo of society** (178).

That being said, I should be clear that Thoreau is no defender of big government liberalism. After all, the opening line of "Civil Disobedience" is "**I heartily accept the motto, 'That government is best which governs least'.... That government is best which governs not at all'; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have**" (Cramer 145). If he were alive today, Thoreau would, if anything, have been much more likely to attend a local Women's March on Concord. He would encourage us to focus on reforming our own lives and the life of our local community. I both agree with the importance of localism and think that Thoreau is not always our best guide to systemic social change.

As I draw toward my conclusion, it is also important to say that Thoreau's death, although it came too soon, is also in many ways inspiring. As Alan Hodder explores in his book, Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness, Thoreau had health issues at a number of points, and in December 1860 developed a severe cold, which worsened into bronchitis, and eventually led to his death from pulmonary tuberculosis in May 1862. But by all accounts, **he maintained a remarkable equanimity, "good humor and self-possession" until the end.** Two beautiful stories from that

time include: “When Thoreau’s Calvinistic aunt felt obliged to ask, ‘**Henry have you made your peace with God?**’ the unruffled Thoreau mildly replied, ‘**I did not know we had ever quarreled.**’” And near the end, when a friend asked how he felt about death, Thoreau replied, “**One world at a time**” (Hodder 302-305).

For now, though, I’ll conclude not with Thoreau’s death but with his a reminder of how he lived. He wrote in *Walden*:

**I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately**, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. **I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life**, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or **if it were sublime, to know it by experience.**