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Thoreau, Darwin and nature's book



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Not long ago I asked a neighbor why he was the only one in his family to leave the faith. With a smile he casually replied, "Books."

I understood exactly what he meant. Reading sure changed my views on things. The wider our reading, the more viewpoints we are exposed to and the better able we are to weigh our choices and make our own informed decisions.

On a recent evening I came to the end of a thought-provoking book. It's called "The Book That Changed America," by Randall Fuller. It tells the story of the first copy of "On the Origin of Species" to arrive in America.

A small group of thinkers gathered in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1860 to pass around Charles Darwin's revolutionary book, and it had a profound effect on their lives. Each was active in abolition, and the new book inspired their radical work. You could say their thinking "evolved."

Henry Thoreau was one of that Concord circle. As this great nature essayist was born 200 years ago this month (July 12, 1817), I was especially interested in his response to "Origin."

As Fuller puts it: "Darwin's portrait of a teeming, pulsating natural world deeply resonated with Thoreau. [The book] revealed nature as process, as continual becoming. ... Reading the 'Origin,' Thoreau discovered someone else who understood nature as he did: abounding and vibrant, each niche

swarming, each [space] filled with life, each living thing a small part of constant change."

Thoreau was only a bit over 40 when he found this amazing book, and he could barely put it down. The impact was not so much the theory of natural selection but the wonderful affirmation of life's great diversity.

Darwin himself was delighted to find evidence that "all the forms of life, ancient and recent, make together one grand system: for all are connected by generation."

Thoreau must have shared that delight because, like Darwin, his study of nature affirmed the words at the conclusion of "Origin": "There is grandeur in this view of life ... from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

It strikes me as strange, and frankly irritating, that Darwin and his theories are met with such fearful resistance even today. Though Darwin himself believed in a creative force of some kind, he was not at all against religion or trying to remove God from the story of Life.

Yet he was willing to go where the facts would take him. If those facts cause people to question or alter their inherited beliefs, so be it.

As Fuller points out, Darwin left theology to study nature, just as Emerson did. That doesn't mean they didn't have any faith — they were just more interested in reasonable explanations of the way the world works rather than theories of how another world may work.

Fuller explains that for Thoreau,



COURTESY OF NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY
Henry David Thoreau sat for this daguerreotype by Benjamin D. Maxham on June 18, 1856, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

"The world ... is rich with mystery — just not the kind that religious tradition has led people to expect and rely upon."

We may have to "abandon old faiths and old patterns of belief ... while searching for knowledge and insight."

Thoreau died in 1862 at the young age of 44. Even in his last months, he was, in Fuller's words, on a "pilgrimage to know the world." He incessantly jotted notes in his journal, keeping track of his own tracks through nature's classroom.

On his 200th birthday I think Henry deserves to be honored for his writing,

but mostly for his independent mind. He should be remembered, like Darwin, as an honest explorer.

I suggest re-reading "Walden" or selections from his "Journal" or his essays on "Walking" or "Civil Disobedience," keeping in mind this young thinker was not just "in his head" — he was a scientist, an activist and a flute player.

When visiting the Old Manse — the Emerson and Hawthorne home in Concord — a few years ago, a docent led us through the house into the room where Emerson wrote his first book, "Nature" (1836). She pointed to the small collapsible desk on one wall and said it was believed that Thoreau built it.

As we were leaving I noticed the wooden support holding the desktop was about to slip down, which I imagined would shatter the old desk. I asked the docent and she said no one was supposed to touch things, but she gave me permission to readjust the support to secure the desk.

When I did this I felt I was not only doing a small part to preserve the historical significance of that small desk; I was touching something Thoreau had touched.

Then again, whenever we touch nature, Thoreau (and Darwin) are pretty close by.

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