

Part two, Thoreau's practice of sacred disobedience



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

The great naturalist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt, had a profound influence on Thoreau. As Andrea Wulf explains in "The Invention of Nature," Humboldt's major work, "Cosmos" (1845) was, "a book about the universe that never once mentioned the word 'God.'" Nevertheless, "Thoreau followed Humboldt's belief in the 'deep-seated bond' that united knowledge and poetry. Humboldt allowed Thoreau to weave together science and imagination, the particular and the whole, the factual and the wonderful."

Could it be that Henry Thoreau, the practical naturalist and poetic park ranger, borrowed common "sacred terminology" to express his delight in the cosmos, the wonders of the natural universe, in the same sense many scientists and naturalists often do? Many of our best nature writers draw familiar words from poetry, religion and culture to express the marvels they discover. We reach for the "deepest" words we know to speak the "highest" emotions we feel.

A common misinterpretation of se-

mantics leads many to presume that when Thoreau (along with Muir, Burroughs and other Thoreauvian authors) writes of "divinity," "spirit," "religion" or "God" that he is speaking from a traditional religious framework. Yet, seen from the "higher view" Thoreau points to, the source of truth is always further, up at the spring bubbling above the lake (belief) or pond (creed) we mistake for the destination. The image Henry gives us (in "Civil Disobedience") is one of "pilgrimage" – another borrowed term – that encourages a constant, consistent search for what is beyond any one pond, lake, river or ocean. The seeker ultimately seeks Nature itself.

Henry's "love of nature" is his religion, as well as his science, his philosophy. In our day, he might jot in his journal: "What others call the sacred journey or spirituality path, I call a love of nature." Could we say that his "pilgrimage" deeper into his own natural world including his sauntering mind, was in some way his "spiritual path" beyond spirituality itself? No doubt Henry would be amused by that puzzling contradiction.

Puzzles abound on the trail of truth. Maybe we could call Henry a "Truthist" or simply a Freethinking Naturalist. Whatever we call him, I don't think it's helpful to open the book of his mind and read him as a "spiritual guide." Not only

does this miss the man, it ignores the revolutionary nature of his naturalistic view of a world filled with wonders to survey, explore and enjoy for our brief saunter in the sunlight.

As generations of students have asked when opening "Walden" for the first time: Why did he go there? What was he seeking at the pond? A "spiritual experience"? Not as I see it. He intentionally went to the woods "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach" ("Walden," "Where I Lived and What I Lived For"). He sought to learn from life, from the woods, from facing his humanity in the context of nature. Why call that a "spiritual" endeavor? It was the human quest for self-understanding rooted in a more expansive understanding of the radically natural world.

If anyone goes to Thoreau for "spiritual instruction," as his friend Harrison Blake did, they are likely to find him literally all over the map since, for the secular saunterer, the open-air temple of nature, like his little house in the woods, presents us with "the essential facts" of life and living. There is no revelation, no appeal to a super-natural. Yes, Henry refers to "God" now and then, but this is not a divinity as people usually think of one. The wild (call it "divinity" if we choose) is embedded in our nature and

being obedient to that wildness might be the closest thing to a way of life—what some call a "spiritual practice."

"In Wildness is the preservation of the World," he exclaims, and "out of such a wilderness comes the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey" ("Walking"). In other words, the Disobedient One, the prophetic heretic, emerges from the wild places, the edges of our cultures and communities, bringing good news for the outsiders, the excluded (which is bad news for the orthodox insiders).

As an example, all we need to do is recall Thoreau's own work as an abolitionist among a whole array of disobedient reformers from Garrison and Douglass to Mott and Emerson himself.

In April 1850, Thoreau writes to his friend Harrison Blake: "Let God alone if need be ... When I am just turning away and leaving him alone, [then] I discover that God is." Then, almost as an apology or afterthought: "I say, God. I am not sure that that is the name. You will know whom I mean."

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