

# SPEAKING DIRECTLY TO ME

by Bob McDiarmid



*Henry David Thoreau's tombstone - in Author's Ridge in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts*

I had a friend query on me about my Thoreau-isms and my fascination with Thoreau. Here is my response about why he is featured so prominently in my online presence and day-to-day life. I talked about my trip to Walden Pond in 1998 and how upon returning from that trip - I reread Walden and Civil Disobedience - and discovered something I hadn't realized when reading Thoreau in high school and college.

When re-reading these works while handling cancer and a rather difficult period in my life - I realized that Thoreau was talking directly to me, the mythic Thoreau, the hermit of Walden Pond, the echo of Emerson, the isolated and lonely figure from America's rural past vanished from view. In his place stood a writer of immense humanity, vitality and humor.

I realized that all my life I'd been told I had great (if not sometimes, overwhelming) intensity.

You can't experience Thoreau without revealing a historic man of terrific intensity. I became aware of this through his passionate insistence on seeing — a "habit of attention" he once said he possessed to such a degree that it fatigued his senses. We all look at the same things, but some see more than others. "A single gentle rain," Thoreau observes in his chapter on spring, "makes the grass many shades greener."

In his writings, and in Walden above all, Thoreau forged a thought-out way of life, a philosophy that insists that the individual turn not to the state, not to the gods, not to society, or even to history for a guide to life, but to nature and the self. But this turn to nature and the self should not be confused with selfishness. It is not the final destination but only the starting point of the examined life. Thoreau's social side is everywhere in Walden. "I had more visitors while I lived in the woods," he says in the chapter "Visitors," "than at any other period of my life."

In reflecting and meditating on Thoreau's place in my life - as I begin yet another life transition into my forties - I realize that there isn't a part of my personality or life direction that this 1998 epiphany hasn't altered or in some cases heightened or focused.

Thoreau's Walden speaks to our modern condition because it is mostly right about the big things. Open the book anywhere: One should beware of all enterprises that require new clothes. A person is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone. Morning does bring back the heroic ages. The Universe is wider than our views of it. Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads. The sun is but a morning star.

One hundred fifty years after its publication, Walden also remains a practical, usable manual on how to lead a good, just life. It offers readers an ethical view of life that begins in self-rule and ends in public and social commitment to the next generation. Gandhi picked this idea up from Thoreau, among others, and he put it with admirable pith and sinew. "[Real home rule] is self-rule or self-control.... If man will only realize that it is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust, no man's tyranny will enslave him," Gandhi wrote in Indian Home Rule. At its core, Walden is about the project of personal freedom, self-emancipation, which is where all pursuits of freedom must start.

It occurs to me that Thoreau and Walden sent me off on my own project of personal freedom. and that project is still evolving, growing and sending out. One of my favorite thought circles in Thoreau is in the conclusion of Walden. He talks about Sir John Franklin - - the ill fated explorer. Franklin not only never found the Northwest Passage, he never returned to England. His wife sent out expedition after expedition to find him.

"Is Franklin the only man who is lost, that his wife should be so earnest to find him?" Thoreau asks in the conclusion of Walden. Then he gives us his final bit of advice. "Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans. Explore your own higher latitudes." That task is just as hard now as it was in 1854, and Henry Thoreau is still one of the best guides around.

I am looking into new year to find the next latitude - to find the next red clay path to walk down. I have some pretty firm ideas - and once I glimpse into them, I doubt they'll let me go.

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