

Facts, foundations and castles in the air



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

You may be familiar with these famous lines from Henry David Thoreau's "Walden": "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," "Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?," "If a [person] does not keep pace with their companions, perhaps it is because they hear a different drum-

mer." And then, prescient words for our current days: "Our life is frittered away by detail ...simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" We also might remember why he built a cabin and lived in the woods: he chose to "live deliberately ... to [face] the essential facts of life." He was seeking a return to basics so that he would not come to the end of his life and "discover that I had not lived."

Thoreau never claimed to be a hermit at the pond. He built the one-room cabin with cheap or borrowed supplies and tools and the cabin sat on his friend Emerson's plot of land. He lived close to the town of Concord and the railroad. Peo-

ple came by all the time. He walked home on weekends for a home-cooked meal and to do his laundry. He worked as a handyman. He wrote about solitude, but was rarely solitary (considering the abundant wildlife). Though some would criticize Henry for this, the point of the experiment in simple living was just that: an experiment in simple living – to face the essentials of life, learn from nature, and write what some have called "American scripture."

From that little cabin where he lived for two years, two months and two days, he wrote major portions of his first book, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimack

Rivers." He wrote essays, prepared lectures and scribbled in his journal. And, one of the great works of American literature, "Walden," emerged from those woods.

If you haven't read "Walden" since school, I suggest you read it again. If you've never read it, I envy you – you're in for a treat. Wit and wisdom, "spiritual" insights, keen observations from a young naturalist. The book is packed with stories harvested from one patch of earth and one small New England township. As we know, many environmental-

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ists from John Muir onward have been inspired by Thoreau's little book.

In preparation for teaching a class on Thoreau, I was re-reading "A Week," "Civil Disobedience," his journal, his radical abolitionist writings and "Walden," when I came upon these lines in his conclusion: "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." This is deserving of deeper thought as if sounding the depths of Walden Pond.

Henry was a bit of an idealist. Caught up in the whirlpool of Emerson's circle of Transcendentalists, he was curious to explore the frontiers of truth out and beyond the restrictions of orthodox religion or staid society. His incisive comments on religious faith still hold weight, though he wasn't so much pointing fingers at the institution as pointing outside: "I suppose that what in others is religion, is in me love of nature" (Journal, 1842).

I was reminded of the views of Søren Kierkegaard (a philosopher I studied in college while reading Thoreau). When commenting on First Corinthians 8:1: "Love builds up," Kierkegaard wrote: "To build up without a foundation at all is impossible – it is building in the air ... building air castles" ("Works of Love"). For Kierkegaard, love has to be building on a foundation. But what is the grounding we need?

For the cabin-builder by the pond, faith was not enough of a foundation. Having beliefs, even "cloudy" beliefs, may be fine, but we need to bring it down to earth, to find naturally substantial substances. Nature provides the building material – the mud, rock, sweat and brain – to construct, step by step, brick by brick, mind by mind, a firm foundation beneath our common hopes and dreams.

Musician Don McLean recorded "Castles in the Air" in 1970: "I'm tired of castles in the air, I've got a dream I want the world to share, And castle walls just lead me to despair." Thoreau and Kierkegaard would sing along with that. They knew a well-built house, like a well-built life, rests on true essentials.

We don't need to discard our dreams, or sink into despair. Yet, to build our cabin or castle – to shape our life – we may have to face an essential fact, as Thoreau described: "I might pursue some path, however solitary and narrow and crooked, in which I could walk with love and reverence." This solitary path might not lead to castles or clouds, but may turn out to be "the higher way."

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