Part one: Thoreau's practice of sacred disobedience

Highland Views
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Guest columnist

In honor of the 175th anniversary of Henry David Thoreau moving into his tiny home by Walden Pond (July 4, 1845), this two-part column considers his views of religion and what I call his "sacred disobedience."

In a Journal entry from October 1842, Thoreau wrote: "I suppose that what in others is religion, is in me love of nature." In another entry, dated August 1858, he made this dumbfounding statement: "What is religion? That which is never spoken." He seemed to feel that the most extraordinary experiences cannot be communicated, or at least we should be skeptical about putting the ineffable into words.

What does this mean for religious experience, for scriptures, creeds, theology or institutions of faith themselves? How can we even talk about amazement (the "spiritual") if it is beyond words, never spoken?

Some who read Thoreau's work from a faith perspective, who may have the popular image of the monastic "Walden hermit" in mind, have a tendency to both romanticize and spiritualize the man. Barry Andrews' book, "Thoreau as Spiritual Guide," offers a "faith-based" view, inviting the reader to "walk through Walden again and find its soul while expanding your own." One website (transcendentalistspirituality.com) claims that Walden offers "a process of spiritual awakening and rebirth." In their opinion, Walden is "a spiritual classic" and "a guidebook to the spiritual life."

These viewpoints are understandable. Thoreau can leave the impression that his footprints around the pond invite others to step in and imitate his life. I've placed a stone at the site of his cabin, and a cone on his gravestone as well. I know the desire of a devotee, the sense of making a pilgrimage to his shrine.

Yet, Emerson was right: "Envy is ignorance; imitation is suicide" ("Self-Reliance"). Those who find a more complex individual in the pages of "A Week," "Walden" and other writings, find someone who readily rejected imitators or followers. Readers, yes. Disciples, no. He was a student of language, an amateur philosopher, a radical abolitionist, professional surveyor and sauntering naturalist. Rather than a guru or saint, we are presented with a person of reason and freethinking with dirt under his fingernails and mud on his shoes, a flawed human being who left more questions about religion, faith and God than answer-books or guidebooks. Henry's writings reflect a wide-ranging thinker who was disobedient to unjust governments but also resistant to unwise religious institutions, skeptical when they hand out trail-maps to their own pond of spirituality.

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As Thoreau sharpened his perspectives, he sharpened his pencil, stabbing the semantics and jabbing the jargon that divide the world into spiritual and non-spiritual. He intended his lectures to have a similar effect: "Lectured in basement of the orthodox church, and I trust helped to undermine it" (Journal, December, 1856).

For those who turn to Thoreau for spiritual guidance (often reducing his extensive writings to greeting card quotes), I would suggest several questions should be asked: What does "spiritual" mean? Did Thoreau see himself as a spiritual person with a spiritual message? What about his "sacred disobedience"?

The late Robert Richardson, in "Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind," explains that, right out of Harvard, Thoreau was already showing a "certain disdainful impatience with institutional religion, particularly Christianity." Yet, Henry was drawn to the more organic—or secular—elements of religion. Indeed, "his feelings toward the natural world frequently compelled him to use sacred terminology." Richardson goes on to say, "From the beginning, Thoreau's writing was marked by an intense interest in the wonders, not of the invisible, but of the visible world."

In her excellent biography, "Henry David Thoreau: A Life," Laura Walls describes the view of some in Concord, including Emerson: "Thoreau was providing a real service to the town; indeed, every town needed someone like Thoreau, a practical naturalist on a par with the village doctor or lawyer, who could be provided with microscope and telescope and who in turn would answer questions [about local nature] —rather like a park ranger."

In 1853, Thoreau became a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington, D.C. He saw himself as a kind of poetic scientist while also "a mystic—a transcendentalist—and a natural philosopher to boot" (Journal, March 1853).

How could someone be a mystic and a scientist at the same time? What did he mean by "mystic"? Like a "spiritual practice," the mystical can mean an experience of something beyond or behind observable reality, or, an expedient word for what Richardson calls "an intense interest in the wonders"—just as identifying as a "Transcendentalist" did not refer to a personal ecstatic encounter or enlightenment but a rational contemplation of ever-widening circles of truth.

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