

THOREAU AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

Thoreau and his fellow Transcendentalists felt they were writing modern-day scripture to promote what they termed 'self culture,' the cultivation of the soul. First and foremost, Walden is a book about spiritual renewal and reformation. . . .

—from *Thoreau as Spiritual Guide*

"Andrews is a knowledgeable and articulate advocate for the continuing religious relevance of the New England Transcendentalists, and his study guide on Thoreau's *Walden* will be a valuable resource to contemporary Unitarian Universalists. As Andrews shows us, disciplined spiritual practice was a crucial component of the Transcendentalist ethos. Thoreau's experiment at the pond can serve as a guide for readers today."

—David M. Robinson, Distinguished Professor of American Literature, Oregon State University and
Author of *The Unitarians and the Universalists*

A fresh reading of *Walden* as a meditative companion, a teaching tool and guide to personal growth. Discussion questions included for group or personal use.

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Boston, MA 02108
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THOREAU AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE — ANDREWS — SKINNER HOUSE BOOKS

Thoreau AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE

*A Companion to Walden
for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion*



BARRY M. ANDREWS

SOCIETY AND SOLITUDE



"I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society."

READING "SOLITUDE" AND "VISITORS"



Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes in different all times and places. The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses. For the most part we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make our occasions. They are, in fact, the cause of our distraction. Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman whom we have hired, . . . but the workman whose work we are. —HDT

Chapter Summary of "Solitude"

One has the impression, from the opening words of this chapter, that Thoreau has settled into life at Walden Pond and has come to feel at one with his surroundings. "I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself," he writes; "all of the elements are unusually congenial to me." At all events, he has lived there long enough

that visitors have begun to seek him out, leaving flowers and other mementos as calling cards.

In spite of the occasional visitor, he enjoys a great deal of solitude in his forest retreat. His nearest neighbor is a mile distant and Thoreau is, by his own reckoning, the sole inhabitant of the Walden woods. "I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself." In spite of his isolation, he was at home in nature and seldom "felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude." Some of his most pleasant hours were those spent indoors during lengthy rainstorms or on long winter evenings "in which many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves."

In solitude he felt most connected to his spiritual roots:

What do we most want to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction. This will vary with different natures, but this is the place where a wise man will dig his cellar.

Thoreau finds solitude wholesome and society, even with the best, to be wearisome and dissipating. "I love to be alone," he writes, "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." Society is commonly too superficial. Mostly we have nothing of value to share. Perhaps if we spent more time with our thoughts we have something worth communicating.

Thoreau compares his own solitude with that of nature, including that of the loon, the sun, and Walden Pond itself. He alludes to visits he has had from the spirits of Pan, the Greek god of all the inhabitants of the countryside, and Mother Nature, in communion with which he feels part and parcel of the earth and the elemental forces of nature: "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?"

In another of many references to the mornings, which for Thoreau is always a metaphor for spiritual awakening, he says that "the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented" is nothing other than "a

draught of undiluted morning air." Solitude seems to be a necessary condition for the imbibing of this particular elixir.

Chapter Summary of "Visitors"

This chapter is paired with the previous one in treating the dichotomy of solitude and society. Thoreau is actually seeking a balance between the needs and demands of both. Contrary to what readers might conclude from the chapter on solitude, Thoreau says that he loves society "as much as most," and that he is "naturally no hermit." He had three chairs in his house, he writes: "one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society." He suggests by this that a balanced life entails the use, by turns, of all three.

The fact is, Thoreau had many visitors to his cabin, curious, no doubt, about his experiment in simple living and the conditions of his existence at Walden Pond. On at least one occasion he seems to have had twenty-five or thirty at the same time. Yet, for all the numbers in such a confined space, he is aware of the distance that people naturally put between themselves. Indeed, he feels that there needs to be a "considerable neutral ground" in even the best of relationships. Furthermore, the discussion of expansive thoughts requires ample room. As Thoreau himself puts it: "if we speak reservedly and thoughtfully, we want to be farther apart."

He does feel that he met some of his visitors under more favorable circumstances at Walden Pond than elsewhere, partly, no doubt, because of the natural surroundings, but also because, at that distance from town, fewer came to see him on trivial business.



For a full day and two nights I have been alone . . . And it seemed to me, separated from my own species, that I was nearer to others . . . I felt a kind of impersonal kinship with them and a joy in that kinship. Beauty of earth and sea and air meant more to me. I was in harmony with it, melted into the universe, lost in it, as one is lost in a canticle of praise, swelling from an unknown crowd in a cathedral . . .

Yes, I felt closer to my fellow men too, even in my solitude. For it is not physical solitude that actually separates one from other men, not physical isolation, but spiritual isolation. It is not the desert island nor the stony wilderness that cuts you from the people you love. It is the wilderness in the mind, the desert wastes in the heart through which one wanders lost and a stranger. When one is a stranger to oneself then one is estranged from others, too. If one is out of touch with oneself, then one cannot touch others. How often in a large city, shaking hands with my friends, I have felt the wilderness stretching between us. Both of us were wandering in arid wastes, having lost the springs that nourished us—or having found them dry. Only when one is connected to one's own core is one connected to others... And for me, the core, the inner spring can best be refound through solitude.

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea*

Questions for Discussion

- Thoreau relished the solitude he encountered at Walden Pond. How do you find solitude in your life? Have you ever experienced sustained periods of it? What did that feel like?
- Thoreau says that through solitude he felt in communion with the earth and the forces of nature. Have you had such an experience yourself? Can you describe it?
- There are those who argue that Thoreau is unrealistic because his cultivation of the “eternal moments” precluded human relations and thus he isn’t a reliable guru for our times. In their view Thoreau wished to be an island to himself. Do you agree or disagree? Is this your understanding of Thoreau’s message?
- Buddhist priest Thich Nhat Hanh says, “We are so busy we hardly have time to look at the people we love, even in our own household, and to look at ourselves. Society is organized in a way that even when we have some leisure time, we don’t know how to use it to get back in touch with ourselves.... We are not

used to being with ourselves, and we act as if we don’t like ourselves and are trying to escape from ourselves.” Do you agree? How do you use your leisure time? How do you get back in touch with yourself?

- Like Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson was also concerned with striking a balance between solitude and society. In his essay on “Society and Solitude,” Emerson writes the following: “Here again, as so often, nature delights to put us between extreme antagonisms, and our safety is in the skill with which we keep the diagonal line. Solitude is impractical and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy. These wonderful horses need to be driven by fine hands. We require such a solitude as shall hold us to its revelations when we are in the street and in palaces.” Does this make sense to you? How do you strike such a balance in your own life?

- In *Gift from the Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh makes the following comment: “If one sets aside time for a business engagement, a trip to the hairdresser, a social engagement, or a shopping expedition, that time is accepted as inviolable. But if one says: I cannot come because that is my hour to be alone, one is considered rude, egotistical or strange. What a commentary on our civilization, when being alone is considered suspect; when one has to apologize for it, make excuses, hide the fact that one practices it—like a secret vice!” Do you feel guilty for seeking solitude? Do you give up time for yourself because of other obligations?

Additional Resources

- Buchholz, Ester Schaler, *The Call of Solitude: Alonetime in a World of Attachment*, Simon and Schuster, 1997.
- Campbell, Eileen, ed., *Silence and Solitude: Inspirations for Meditation and Spiritual Growth*, HarperCollins, 1994.