THE SPIRITUALITY OF SOLITUDE

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Sunday, February 9, 2025

UCN

Time for All Ages (or) Video Before the Sermon

***"Thoreau at Walden Pond"* –** Harvard University video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GV6nepqzrFc

THE SERMON

[PICTURES AND CAPTION OF EMERSON'S CONCORD HOUSE, AND THOREAU'S RUSTIC CABIN AT WALDEN POND ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREENS]



Ralph Waldo Emerson's House (where Thoreau lived) in Concord, Massachusetts

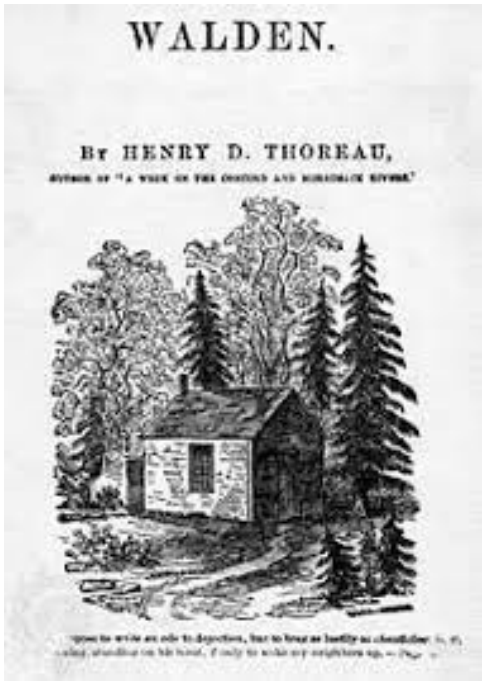


Statue of Thoreau at his cabin on Walden pond (1845-1846)

The Spirituality of Solitude…

The outlines of the story I will tell this morning are no doubt familiar to many of you. Henry David Thoreau…a Harvard-educated Unitarian/Transcendentalist was an active part of (what was then called) the ***"enlightenment intelligencia"*** that had established itself in Concord, Massachusetts (just outside of Boston) after the American revolution…and (for many years) lived a living a charmed and easy life under Ralph Waldo Emerson's roof ***(YOU SEE THE PICTURE OF THAT HOUSE UP ON THE SCREEN)*** for a period of years as a sort of handyman and ***"live-in philosopher"!*** But (as this morning's video pointed out) in the Summer of 1845, he took a bold personal step, and retired to the deeply-wooded shores of crystal-clear Walden Pond (which was about a mile from the town) where he lived a simple/austere life (for more than two years) in a rustic (10 by 15 foot) hut of his own construction. He called this solitary adventure ***"an experiment in essential living."*** As one biographer put it, living alone in his little cabin on the pristine pond, ***"He read, wrote, and made friends of beasts, birds and fish, recording his fascinating woodland life in the book Walden (or "Life in the Woods") published in 1854.***

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF "WALDEN" BOOK IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately…" Henry David Thoreau

In perhaps the most famous quotation from that famous journal, Thoreau explains his purpose of seeking out the **SOLITUDE** of Walden Pond:

I went to the woods because I wished to <u>live deliberately</u>, to front only <u>the essential facts of life</u>, 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. I did not wish to live what was <u>not</u> life, living is so dear; nor

did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms...

So it was primarily **SOLITUDE --** the subject which is my spiritual focus this morning -- which Thoreau (more than anything else) was seeking at Walden. His nearest neighbor was a mile distant, and Thoreau was 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…I love to be alone,"*** he wrote, ***"I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude."*** While he was at Walden, Thoreau ***"would often sit alone (for hours on end) in the doorway of his cabin, and simply watch and listen as the sun moved across the sky and the light and shadows changed almost imperceptibly.***" [Barry Andrews from his book Thoreau as Spiritual Guide]

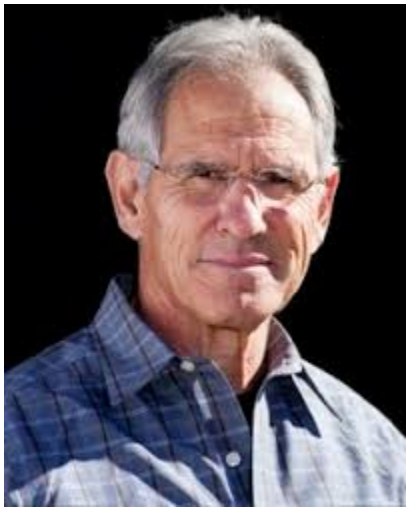
Thoreau went on to describe such mornings thusly:

Sometimes, on a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon…amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling on my west window…I was reminded of the lapse of time…I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.

What Thoreau was seeking (by retreating alone to the solitude of the pond) was to more fully spiritually ***"awaken"*** himself to both the world around him, and the present moment, Sounding every bit the Buddhist on a quest for mindfulness, he wrote: ***"We must live in the present…launch ourselves on every wave…find our eternity in each moment…we must learn to reawaken, and keep ourselves awake, by an infinite expectation of the dawn…only that day dawns to which we are awake."***

[PHOTO AND QUOTE OF JONATHAN KABAT-ZINN ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]

American Buddhist teacher Jonathan Kabat-Zinn observes that



Jonathan Kabat-Zinn:

Thoreau's two years at Walden Pond were, above all else, <u>a personal experiment in mindfulness</u>. He chose to put his life on the line in order to revel in the wonder and simplicity of present moments.

And then Kabat-Zinn reminds us that – almost 200 years later Thoreau's mindfulness practice is available to us all, whether or not we ever ***"retreat to the woods"***:

But you don't have to go out of your way to find <u>somewhere special</u> to practice mindfulness. It is

sufficient to make <u>a little time in your life for stillness</u> [<u>and solitude</u>], and what we call "non-doing" and then tune into your breathing. <u>All of Walden Pond is within your breath</u>.

This miracle of the changing seasons is within your breath;

your parents and your children are within the breath;

your body and your mind are within the breath.

It is the current of life…There are nothing but golden fish in this stream. All we need to see them clearly is the lens of awareness.

[PICTURE OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU AND HIS CABIN IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]



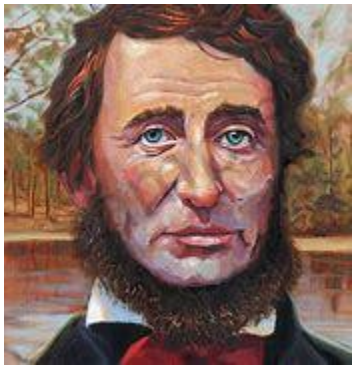
So…Thoreau employed the <u>solitude</u> of Walden Pond to help himself experience <u>soul-satisfying mindfulness and</u>

keen awareness of the world around him…and shared what he discovered with all of us in his journal which remains, to this day, a classic best-seller, still read (importantly) by almost every high school student in America!

[And a quick aside here…if you haven't read this classic recently, I urge you to get a copy (or pull the dusty/old copy off your book shelf!) and read it again, for Thoreau's essential message never gets old…it's a wonderful read!]

But…it is very important to note here that (even though he purposefully built purposeful and abundant solitude around himself while at Walden, Thoreau was **NOT** some sort of a pure hermit (or lonely ascetic) during this period of his life. While living alone those 26 months in the woods, he would regularly venture back into the village of Concord for social contact, supplies and to conduct business matters. He also had a regular stream of visitors out to his little cabin in the woods. As he wrote,

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF THOREAU IS PROJECTED UP ON SCREENS]



HENRY DAVID THOREAU AT WALDEN

"I am naturally no hermit"… [in my little cabin I had three chairs] ***"one for <u>solitude</u>, two for <u>friendship</u>, three for <u>society</u>."***

So Thoreau – while seeking real, sustained solitude -- was not advocating that one (become a Buddhist monk) ***"drop out"*** of society entirely, but rather find ***"<u>a healthy balance</u> between <u>solitude</u> and <u>society</u>… <u>nature</u> and <u>civilization</u>…<u>materialism</u> and <u>a life of voluntary poverty</u>."*** [*Barry Andrews*]

But, what Thoreau is clearly advocating in his ***Walden*** journals is for each of us (as human beings) build **a regular, healthy and INTENTIONAL amount of SOLITUDE**

into our lives, in order the cultivate to the kind of **everyday MINDFULNESS** (**and attentive calm**) that saves us from the jangle and distraction of routine human life. My guess is that (here in suburban Milwaukee) most of us, day-in-and-day-out, do not have nearly enough of the kind of **rich and nurturing solitude** in our lives that Thoreau experienced on Walden Pond…which is why I want to talk about ***"The Spirituality of Solitude"*** this morning.

[PICTURE AND QUOTE OF THOREAU COMES DOWN OFF THE SCREEN]

And what better time – than this quiet mid-winter time of the year here in Wisconsin…when all of nature around us seems to take pause, and invite us to slow our lives down just a bit…and consider our relationship **NOT WITH ALONENESS AND ISOLATION (for who want's that?)** …but with one of life's most precious and essential spiritual commodities – **SOLITUDE?**

[***THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]***

THE DICTIONARY DEFINITION OF SOLITUDE

solitude

[ˈsälə¸t(y)oo̅d]

NOUN

1. the state or situation of being alone.

   "she savored her few hours of freedom and solitude"

   synonyms:

   loneliness · solitariness · remoteness · isolation ·

   seclusion · retirement · withdrawal · purdah · privacy ·

   privateness · peace . peace and quiet ·

   desolation · lonesomeness · sequestration reclusion

Let's begin our reflections by taking a look at the dictionary definition of ***"Solitude"***. ***[SCOTT READS THE DEFINITION]***

You will notice that this matter-of-fact definition of ***"SOLITUDE"*** is essentially spiritually and emotionally

NEUTRAL. It doesn't indicate Whether **SOLITUDE** should be viewed by us as a positive or negative (joyful or melancholy) thing (ALTHOUGH THE EXAMPLE THEY GIVE OF THE WORD'S USAGE IS OF A WOMAN SAVORING HER SOLITUDE.) Solitude (as An English word) simply has to do with the state of human ***"ALONENESS."*** But it seems to me that – as we think more deeply about it -- there are (at least spiritually speaking) **two polar (and opposite) kinds of solitude or "aloneness" (both of which are eluded to in this definition)** :

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

THERE ARE TWO POLAR-OPPOSITE KINDS OF SOLITUDE:

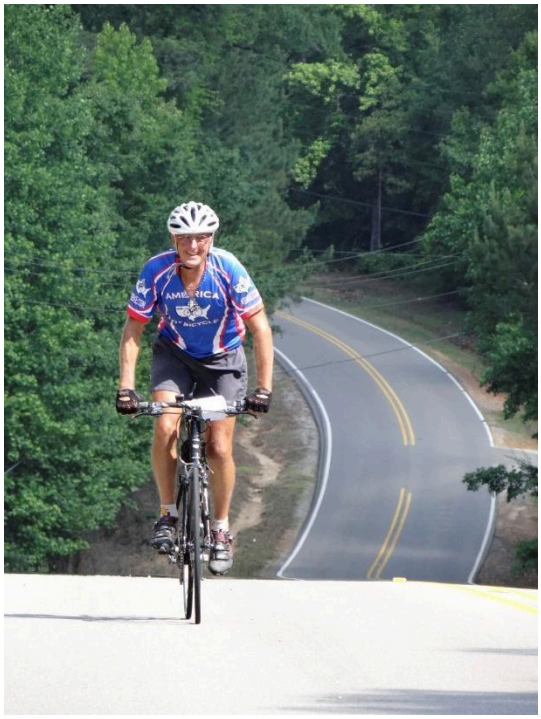
- **Spiritually empty and unsatisfying solitude** – which is boring (or lonely) ***"time alone"*** that is time un-utilized, un-focused, and (ultimately) un-rewarding…and there is..
- **Spiritually full and satisfying solitude –** which is rich (or enlivening) ***"time alone"*** that is utilized, focused and rewarding…time used to deepen the quality and texture of our relationships with the world around us.

Let me – if I might -- give a couple of quick simple example from my own life that will hopefully make this distinction clear.

[PAUSE…]

Every morning of my life – almost without exception – I arise <u>at least an hour and a half</u> before my ***"night owl"*** husband does…giving me <u>a precious chunk of solitude and aloneness</u> with which to begin the day. Now…as much as I generally enjoy my spouse's company, I must tell you that this solitude I have first thing in the morning is a precious commodity in my life that I treasure and savour. I spend much of this quiet time reading the morning papers without interruption or distraction…although I also frequently like to just pause and look up (in the morning stillness) and stare around the room and outside the windows to see how my world is doing. **These hours -- when Collins remains conked out in bed -- liberate and empower me to spend some <u>quality time alone with myself</u> (and my world)…a most precious commodity!**

[PICTURE OF SCOTT CYCLING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]



[PAUSE...]

And then (as a second example) there is my (*almost always solitary*) spiritual practice of cycling!...another precious time and place where I personally find soul-satisfying solitude (and mindfulness). Almost every day, I ***"visit the Walden Pond in my heart"*** when I am out (by myself) riding my bike – whether it is out in the Wisconsin countryside or on the Oakleaf Trail in Milwaukee. As many of you know, almost every weekday, I commute 20 miles up in the morning (and

then 20 miles back in the evening) from my home in Milwaukee….spending a total of something like two-and-a-half hours a day out on a bike by myself…enjoying the solitude of pedaling through my world alone…even though (in good weather especially) there are often lots of people around me. Cycling gives me **SPACIOUS SOUL-TIME** to ***"commune with myself"*** and find ***"life saving peace and calm"*** amidst the busyness of my days. Even though I am pedaling furiously, **THE SOLITUDE OF CYCLING** feeds and calms my soul in ways that allow me to return to the duties of my day (AND MY WORK HERE) with energy and purpose.

Perhaps some of you experience **the same rich solitude of being** when you go for a walk by yourself – whether it is in a park, on the beach, or through your familiar neighborhood. Or listening to classical music (or reading a book) in your favorite living room chair as the sun streams through your windows… …or playing word games at the kitchen table. Solitude (of a spiritual or enriching sort) does not require the absolute tranquility (and natural beauty) of a ***"Walden Pond,"*** just a

purposeful heart and mind ready to deeply "go into itself" to see what treasures it can find there.

[PAUSE…]

Writer Dean Griffiths wisely points out that there is a huge (and important) difference between:

- **Empty and meaningless alone-time** -- which is **loneliness** and
- **Rich and robust alone-time** -- which is **solitude**

[THE FOLLOWING TEXT IS PROJECTED ON THREE SEPARATE, SEQUENTIAL SLIDES AS SCOTT READS THEM ALOUD]

[SLIDE ONE]

Loneliness is a negative state, marked by a sense of isolation. One feels that something is missing. It is possible to be with people and still feel lonely – perhaps the most bitter form of loneliness.

[SLIDE TWO]

Solitude is the state of being alone without being lonely. It's being comfortable within your own skin; becoming

intimate with our own minds; laying claim to that power that flows through us when we accept and express our true self. It is a positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself. Solitude is desirable, a state of being alone where you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company.

Griffiths then goes on to point out:

[SLIDE THREE]

Solitude isn't about avoiding being with other people, its about [the positive choice of] being with yourself. Solitude is a place where the creative mind can happily and eagerly express itself because when you're able to disengage from the demands of other people and the world around you, you suddenly free up the mental space to focus on those things that have been seeking your attention for so long.

There is a famous story about 19th Century Unitarian Minister William Ellery Channing.

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF CHANNING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREENS]



The Rev. William Ellery Channing:

"I have a previous appointment with myself"

It seems that one early evening, he was strolling home across the Boston Common when one of his friends came upon him and (after some pleasant conversation) invited Channing to his home for dinner. Channing is said to have simply replied, ***"Oh, thank you very much for the lovely invitation, but <u>I have a previous appointment with myself</u>."***

[THE FOLLOWING QUOTE GOES UP ON THE SCREEN]

Mateo Sol:

There is an important difference between:

1) LONLINESS (which is empty, unfulfilling, and life-robbing) and

2) ALONENESS (which can be rich and robust, and life-enhancing)

Another writer on this subject, Mateo Sol, draws a similar distinction between:

- Empty/unfulfilling **LONELINESS** (which he calls life-robbing) and…
- rich/robust ALONENESS OR **SOLITUDE** (which he calls life-enhancing)**.**

I quote him:

Loneliness and aloneness are completely different [from one another].

Loneliness occurs when we haven't accepted our natural aloneness in life. Instead, we are still desperately trying to fill that fear of being existentially alone with external distractions and comforts.

Aloneness, unlike loneliness, is chosen…it can be described as the beautiful [solitary] feeling of being alone without being lonely. Aloneness brings the marvelous constructive state of engagement with

yourself, where in you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company. Aloneness helps us practice introspection and reflecting inside ourselves to discover our true natures…it feeds us from a well of inner wealth. Without aloneness (the virtue of solitude) it would be virtually impossible to find internal peace, direction, insight, and interpersonal harmony.

[PAUSE…]

Alright…so all of this is by way of my affirming this morning that there is **a profound spiritual benefit** (for all of us) not to simply ***"being alone"*** but to intentionally structuring **REAL, NURTURING, RICH "SOLITUDE-TIME"** into your daily routines.

Now…there is a whole spate of recent studies which show that we Americans are increasingly spending more and more ***"time alone with ourselves."*** Even before the Covid 19 pandemic (which – of public health necessity -- forced increased amounts of isolation and aloneness on the entire population for almost 2 years) Americans have been spending more and more time alone. As one study put it "***Activities that Americans once did mostly outside their homes – leisure, education, eating and drinking,***

exercise, work and religion – have shifted to increasingly take place at home…"

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF SOLITARY GUY IN FRONT OF HIS COMPUTER GOES UP ON THE SCREEN]



Americans are spending more and more time alone at home…often in front of glowing computer screens

And another write observes**: *Americans are spending more and more time alone. Some are lonely. But many people—young men in particular—are actively choosing to spend much of their time in isolation, in front of screens. That proclivity is having a profound effect on individual well-being and on American's "civic and psychic identity," my colleague Derek Thompson calls this time "our anti-social century."***

So it is crucial that we understand the SPIRITUAL (AND HEALTH) difference between:

1) time randomly spent ISOLATED AND ALONE
2) time spent IN PURPOSEFUL SOLITUDE

So, I pray you, dear friends, in the coming days and years – make a ***"contract"*** with yourself to **PLAN AND STRUCTURE SOME <u>REAL/PURPOSEFUL</u> SOLITUDE** into your life. Make room not for **empty aloneness (or thoughtless time in front of a glowing computer screen_**…but for **rich, full, satisfying solitude**…solitude that opens the door to a deeper self, and full awareness of this most beautiful world…that is always there for us to be blessed by.

Whether you do so by walking quietly alone through your neighborhood (first thing in the morning or last thing before bed)…or getting on a bike and taking in the sights and sounds of the outside world…or sitting in your favorite living room chair after dinner and listening to classical music…or reading poetry alone with yourself in bed…or spending part of the afternoon strolling quietly by yourself in some nearby woods…**set time aside with**

yourself for the SWEET AND HEALING SOLITUDE that invites you to go deeper with yourself, and everything that is around you. Day-in-and-day-out, choose to visit (if but for short moments) "The Walden Pond" that is always there close to your heart. Trust me…The trip will bless and calm you.

Amen.