

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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The Whole Thoreau: Contact!

The Onion reported this stunningly cringe-worthy satire called *Man on Cusp of Having Fun Suddenly Remembers Every Single One of His Responsibilities*:

Gaithersburg, Maryland – Local man Marshall Platt, 34, came tantalizingly close to kicking back and having a good time while attending a friend’s barbeque last night before remembering each and every one of his professional and personal obligations, backyard sources confirmed.

While cracking open his second beer as he chatted with friends over a relaxed outdoor meal, Platt was reported seconds away from letting go and enjoying himself when he was suddenly crushed by the full weight of work emails that still needed to be dealt with, looming deadlines, ... [and] an upcoming wedding [for which] he had yet to buy airfare ... because of an unresolved issue with his Southwest Rapid Rewards account....

“‘It’s great to see you guys,’ said [Platt,] who had been teetering on the brink of actually having fun and was now mentally preparing for a presentation ... he had to give on Friday and compiling a list of bills that needed to be paid before the 7th. ‘This is awesome....’

“‘Who made this guac?’ said [Platt,] who almost let himself take pleasure in the beautiful evening with his closest friends ... but suddenly remembered ... a medical bill he thought might now be overdue, and the fact that he needed to do laundry ... tonight.... and that [he’d] been with his girlfriend for over five years and that while everything was going fairly well, he felt overwhelmed by the prospect of marriage and the mounting pressure to propose.... ‘It’s delicious.’

“‘Hey, I have to get going,’ said [Matthew Platt,] who could barely recall anything that anyone at the gathering had said the entire evening. ‘... This was great, though....’”¹

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Chickasaw poet and teacher Linda Hogan writes, “‘Soul loss – called *susto* in contemporary North American Hispanic communities – is what happens when the world around us disappears. It is a common condition in the modern world. *Susto* probably began when the soul was banished from nature, when humanity withdrew from the world, when there was a division into two realms – human and nature, animate and inanimate, sentient and not. This was when the soul first began to slip away and crumble.’”²

Henry David Thoreau, our Unitarian forbear whose two hundredth birthday we celebrate this year, experienced *susto* all around him, and resolved to resist: to live on purpose. Of his sojourn to Walden, he writes, “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.”³ But he did more than withdraw from the world; he was very much in it – even heroically in it. Both are instructive: this Thoreau we know and the Thoreau we don’t know.

Here’s the Thoreau we know, lost in the fog on Maine’s Mt. Katahdin, having the time of his life – having a mystical experience. Passing through an area called the Burnt Lands, he suddenly realizes that he is in a completely wild and unspeakably beautiful place. “This was that Earth of which we had heard,” he wrote, “made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden ... not lawn, nor pasture, ... nor woodland.... It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever.... Man was not to be associated with it.... Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature – daily to come in contact with ... rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! ... Contact! Contact!”⁴

¹ Excerpted from “Man on Cusp Having Fun Suddenly Remembers Every Single One of His Responsibilities,” *The Onion*, News, 5/30/13. Please see local.theonion.com/man-on-cusp-of-having-fun-suddenly-remembers-every-sing-1819575063

² Linda Hogan, “The Great Without” in *The Inner Journey: Views from Native Traditions* (Morning Light Press, 2009)

³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 90

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*

And here he is back in his native Concord – that Thoreau we know: “I come to my solitary woodland walk as the homesick go home...,” he writes. “I thus dispose of the superfluous and see things as they are, grand and beautiful.”⁵

This is the Thoreau who asked, What is enough? and sought to answer that question with his life. *What is enough?* “I wish to know something;” he wrote, “I wish to be made better. I wish to forget, a considerable part of every day, all mean, narrow, trivial men ... and therefore I come out to these solitudes, where the problem of existence is simplified.... I enter some glade in the woods, perchance ... and it is as if I had come to an open window.... It is as if I always met in those places some grand, serene, immortal, infinitely encouraging, though invisible, companion, and walked with him.”⁶

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And then there’s the Thoreau many of us don’t know. This is the Thoreau I revisit for courage and conviction, the Thoreau who was an abolitionist who welcomed fugitive slaves to his cabin on Walden Pond, a conductor on the underground railroad, a citizen who went to jail for refusing to pay taxes because of his opposition to the Mexican-American war and to the Fugitive Slave Act.⁷

A quick history refresher: In 1850,⁸ Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, requiring that all escaped slaves were to be returned to their masters. Citizens who did not comply were liable for a fine of \$1,000 – the equivalent of over \$30,000⁹ today. Thoreau argued that paying taxes to a government that enforced this law made citizens morally responsible for slavery; upstanding meant to commit civil disobedience – a term he coined.

Risking charges of treason, Thoreau’s mother, Cynthia, founded the Concord Abolitionist Committee and became the town’s most active stationmaster on the Underground Railroad, helping enslaved people flee to Canada.¹⁰ In the two-plus years he lived at Walden Pond, Thoreau hosted the

⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, January 7, 1857

⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, January 7, 1857 (but only in some sources!)

⁷ On July 24th or 25th, 18846, Sam Staples, the local tax collector, asked Thoreau to pay six years of delinquent taxes. Thoreau refused, and spent the night in jail; he was bailed out by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

⁸ September 18, 1850

⁹ \$30,136.04

¹⁰ Please see womenhistoryblog.com/2016/03/underground-railroad-at-wayside.html

annual festival of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, where the speakers included Lewis Hayden, who had escaped slavery in Kentucky.

Thoreau sheltered fugitive slaves at his cabin by day and brought them to safe houses in town at night. In 1854, he wrote an essay called *Slavery in Massachusetts*, based on a speech he gave on July 4th, condemning the North for its unwillingness to rise against the South and secure freedom for all people. The following year, Thoreau brought African American social reformer and abolitionist Frederick Douglass to speak at the Concord Lyceum.

Between October 16th and 18th, 1859, abolitionist John Brown led an armed slave revolt by taking over a United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. On November 1st, Thoreau defied the forces of law and order and the pleas of [so-called] respectable friends by delivering a defense of John Brown to 2,500 people [here] in Boston. “The reason why Frederick Douglass is not here,” he began, “is the reason why I am.”

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Reviewing Laura Dassow Wall’s new Thoreau memoir for *The Nation*, Jedediah Purdy writes, “Ice cut from Walden [Pond] ... was shipped to India for refrigeration, and as cultural compensation for this early example of globalization, [Thoreau] received the Bhagavad Gita, [the great Hindu epic,] which he saw as full of thoughts as clear as Walden’s water. Hoeing weeds from his bean field, Thoreau knocked his blade against buried arrowheads and thought of the first inhabitants of the place, still remembered in the soil. Listening to the Concord militia drill during the Mexican-American War and reading about the Fugitive Slave Act, he realized that he could not separate himself from the crimes of his country, however much he would have liked to do just that. And so the [naturalist and writer], who modeled himself on what he took to be the Hindu ideal of the renunciate holy man, became an activist because he could not help being a citizen, and because as a citizen he could not help being implicated in his country’s intolerable wrongs.” Thoreau concluded that nothing could be seen whole if it were viewed in isolation from everything else.¹¹

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Three times a week, as high school seniors in Concord, a class devoted to the Concord Authors follows our intrepid teacher, Dr. Marilyn Nicosen, out to

¹¹ See Jedediah Purdy, “A Radical for All Seasons: The Surprising Persistence of Henry David Thoreau” in *The Atlantic*, June 1, 2017 at thenation.com/article/Thoreau-radical-seasons/

Walden Pond. She marches us through the woods and around the pond and sometimes into the water, tracking Thoreau with his book as our guide.

Many years later, following extensive back surgery, an elderly Dr. Nicosen sets as her rehab goal a walk around Walden Pond. We head out on a cold morning in the early spring, only to find the path to Thoreau's Cove underwater. I step ahead of her to survey the rough boards that have been laid across the worst of the flooding, then turn around to face her. My teacher is undaunted. She reaches out to take both my hands. I back onto the first board; she follows; and in slow motion, we salsa our way through the flood. Her face is a study in concentration. Yet teaching still, she looks up at me for a moment. "Contact!" she says. "Contact!"

It was Dr. Nicosen's last time around the pond. Perhaps a year later, as I sat at her bedside, she reminded me that Thoreau, at the end of his life, was asked by his aunt if he had made his peace with G*d. He responded, "I did not know that we had ever quarreled." Dr. Nicosen slid her arms across the coverlet toward me, and once again, I took her hands in mine. "Contact!" she said. "Contact!"

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Beloved spiritual companions, poor Marshall Platt was undone at a barbeque, torn between uplifting joy and the crushing weight of responsibility. Henry David Thoreau invites us to another way of life.

May we remember that nothing can be seen whole
when viewed in isolation from everything else.

May we be activists
because as citizens we are implicated in our country's intolerable wrongs.

Let's be present and accounted for
– No to *susto* – soul loss –
and Yes to courage and conviction.

And may we talk of mysteries.
It is as if we always walk with some grand, serene, immortal,
infinitely encouraging, though invisible, companion.

Contact! Contact!