

A Literary Pilgrimage With Diaper Bag

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ON a recent Saturday morning, in an uncharacteristic impulse to complicate my life by venturing somewhere rather than simplify it by staying at home, I decided to coax my family into our station wagon for a visit to Walden Pond. It's not far from where we live, and lately I have been rereading Henry David Thoreau's "Walden," which is what gave me the idea of escaping my quiet desperation at facing laundry and the dishes to reflect instead on Nature, self-reliance and the beauty of solitude. Or at least go for a drive.

Just around this time of year a century and a half ago, Thoreau, similarly disgusted with the tyranny of ordinary housekeeping, borrowed an axe and hiked down to the woods around Walden in Concord, Mass., to build himself a one-room cabin, then sat down and wrote about it. He lived alone there for two years and two months, simply and wisely, eating mostly rye and cornmeal, potatoes and rice, washing everything down with spring water.

It was a luxuriously austere life, rich in frugality. Eight months of food cost him \$8.74, as he will tell you himself in his chapter on "Economy." Birds, ants and woodchucks were his neighbors; for news, he listened to wind through the trees, hooting owls and the freight train whistle. When he felt restless, he opened his door and lost himself in the woods.

Ah, to be Henry Thoreau for a month, a week, an afternoon! To live deliberately in a nice, quiet hut, confronting only the essential facts of life, which would not include car payments, answering-machine messages or a single product featuring Barney.

Inspired by these iconoclastic thoughts, I began gathering sweaters, coats, hats and boots together for a sojourn in the woods in muddy April, while issuing the first of several warnings required by my offspring, ages 2 and three months, before we hazard any journey, near or far. I also needed to pack snacks (apple juice in no-spill sippy cups, raisins, peanut butter crackers, bananas, granola bars), as well as a blankie, a binky, several diapers, diaper wipes, an emergency

change of clothes for the younger and a stuffed elephant. All essentials.

The dog had to be leashed and dragged away from exploring her animal nature in the trash can. By the time I'd answered the phone twice, located my husband's keys and wallet, changed two unphilosophical children, dressed them and strapped them into their car seats, the sun was high in the everlasting blue sky and everyone wanted lunch. As Thoreau noted in approximately these words, and as any traveler will corroborate: She who goes alone can start today; but she who travels with her family must wait till they are ready, and it may be a long time before they get off.

But despite a morning frittered away by detail, there we were in the car at last, hurtling along Route 2 toward Concord, obeying higher laws by ignoring the speed limit. Everywhere the bud was on the tree, the robin on the wing, the snow melting in black drifts along the road. Soon enough we were turning onto Route 126, where Walden Pond lies, glinting as transcendently blue as it did in 1845. "God's Drop," Thoreau had wanted to rechristen the lake, an unexpectedly prescient name given the landfill that sprawls on the hillside across the street, circled by a couple of fat seagulls.

At 62 acres, Walden Pond is not especially large, nor is it any longer particularly pristine, even forgetting about the landfill. The pond's eastern shore is now a public beach, presided over by a bunkerlike bathhouse. In the summer herds of small children plunge, shrieking, in and out of the water, differently invigorated than Thoreau was by his dips, but invigorated still. The ice cream truck rings its bell; mothers scold their youngsters. Cigarette smoke wafts here and there, mingling with the scent of coconut oil from sunbathers crowding the sand. So much for solitude. Yet Walden remains a lovely lap of water, surrounded by woods; "a mirror which no stone can crack," Thoreau described it somewhere, "earth's eye." With maybe a cataract or two.

Times change, of course, and progress has its costs. Almost 60 years ago E. B. White, another literary hero of mine, likewise traveled to Walden Pond to catch a hint of the philosopher's life there. Instead of sleeping in a cabin, however, he spent a night at the Colonial Inn in Concord, a building once owned by the Thoreau family; for this

privilege he paid \$4.25, including his meals. Not much from our perspective, but Thoreau would have been appalled.

These days \$4.25 wouldn't cover a Belgian waffle at the Colonial Inn, now an upscale hostelry advertising "cozy country charm" along with fax service and telephones with data ports. As we drove along, I recalled White's assessment of Walden as "a document of increasing pertinence; each year it seems to gain a little headway, as the world loses ground."

We pulled into the Walden Pond State Reservation parking lot, itself worth visiting for its reproduction of Thoreau's shingled cabin near the ticket booth, an edifice meant to provide the visitor with a sense of where he lived and what he lived for. It was closed just then; while my husband searched for a parking place, I hurried over and peered through one of the cabin's two windows to behold people peering in through the other.

Inside, the cabin boasts historical furnishings, including a wooden chair, a table, a narrow pallet and, during my visit, a plastic wastebasket and a tub of driveway sealer. Not much cozy country charm, but faithful to the spirit of Thoreau, whose idea of domestic decor was a lamp and a molasses jug. A statue of the philosopher himself stands a few feet from the cabin door, arm outstretched, gazing meditatively into his bronze palm, where an admirer has placed a candy wrapper.

It was my intention to lead my family partway around the pond to view the actual site of Thoreau's house, staked out by four granite markers. I have stopped there several times on earlier expeditions, ruminated for a few minutes, then added a stone to the nearby rock pile, as people do who want to pay material homage. E. B. White has a stone in there somewhere, too, although it was a very small pile when he made his contribution.

I'm not sure Thoreau would care for this commemorative heap, or for the eager pilgrims who come poking around his sacred haunts in sneakers and baseball hats, exclaiming over leaf-clogged coves and bullfrogs and scrubby oak trees, quoting lines from his book, hoping to recognize a place they've never been. Most depart somewhat

disappointed. But then this is the inevitable curse of visiting a literary shrine: It is never what it was to you before you saw it for yourself.

Perhaps instinctively understanding this paradox, my family refused to get out of the car once established in a parking space. Both little girls were weeping and my husband wore a stoical aspect. "Go on ahead," he said, shouting to be heard. "You take a walk."

Alone?

I hesitated, something Thoreau would not have done, nor E. B. White for that matter. My babies cried louder. The dog began to bark. Would Walden have been written if Thoreau had been a family man?

For an answer, a single robin sang out from a pine branch overhead. Imperceptibly the air grew cooler; the mud looked very deep. In the distance, Walden glimmered, shimmered, more a mirage than ever.

"We'll try again soon," my husband promised, as we pulled back onto the road. The humming tires soothed our children -- a vibration of the universal lyre? -- and just as we passed Dairy Joy, they fell asleep. In the sudden hush, I could hear myself think, which is the closest I've come to the philosopher's life in quite a while.

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