Resilience and Resistance

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Message 1: Into the Wilderness

We are entering a lonely time, a time of wilderness, a breathing space, a time of looking in. It is also a time to steel our resolve, to dream, to plan, to create a vision of the world we wish to live in.

Not unlike the time that Thoreau spent at Walden Pond.

Walden has become an American icon, indeed, a world-wide icon, a place for renewal, for retreat, for creativity and reconnection with the world. A place of possibilities.

You can find any number of Waldens across the planet. Schools have been named for it, city parks, bookstores even.

Often, Walden has been aligned with an idea of wilderness, championed by environmentalists, used as a template for Spartan living, getting yourself off the grid, living a kind of idealized self-sufficient life.

In fact, the actual Walden pond was never this. Even in Thoreau’s day. Walden was remarkably close to town. Just about a mile out. That’s less than from here to the hospital and back. You can walk this in 20 minutes easily. A mile was not longer in Thoreau’s day than it is in ours.

Walden Pond, even then, had been logged off, plowed up, chopped up into private parcels. It was a popular spot for swimming and fishing and picnicking.

Remember, this is 1845 we are talking about, 100 years after George Washington was 10, and more than two centuries after Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. Generations had already altered the landscape.

The land that Thoreau would come to build his cabin on was owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was older, more established, and saw Thoreau as a bit of a protégé.

Thoreau made an agreement with Emerson, and went to the woods to live so sturdily that he might write a book, his first one, which would become “*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*,” an account of a boat trip he took in 1839 with his brother John, who died of tetanus three years later.

During his time at Walden, Thoreau wrote the book about the boat trip as a tribute to his brother, but in the end he could not find a publisher for it. He self-published, sold a few copies, and went into debt.

Writing “*Walden*” was not the original plan. That came later, pulled together from a collection of essays, through eight drafts, and over 10 years after Thoreau first went to Walden Pond.

The themes of Walden – self-reliance, solitude, simplicity, the irony of progress – have defined the icon that Walden Pond has become. Kind of like how religions are created. Castles in the sky built on the foundation of the actual text. But they become something more than the original message.

The references to Wilderness, to Solitude, to the Railroad that cut through the woods just a couple hundred yards away from his house, these are metaphors for Thoreau, much more than simple literal descriptions of his surroundings.

Much has been made of Thoreau’s frequent, even daily, trips back to town during the two years he lived at Walden. Some people scoff at this supposedly self-reliant hermit who regularly enjoyed the home cooking of Emerson’s wife and of his own mother.

But this really misses the point. Walden was, for Thoreau, a writer’s retreat, a place to go to collect his thoughts and embark on an intellectual, maybe even spiritual, journey.

You might have a similar place, a room in the house, a patch of land, maybe you’re your favorite chair. Thoreau had such a spot and he kept it handy. It never was his intent to retreat from life. The legions of back-to-nature hermits that Walden has inspired, right down to Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, have layered in their own ideas and misconceptions.

So along with the misconceptions about Walden, there is an apocryphal story about Thoreau and Emerson that I hate to tell, because just in the telling, it reinforces a myth. It is apocryphal because it probably did not happen. It is made up. But it makes a point.

I’m going to tell it anyway, with this warning, because I like that point. I once thought I might make a t-shirt with a slogan taken from this.

You know that Thoreau spent a night in jail, arrested for failing to pay a poll tax, which he did on purpose in protest of the Mexican American War. The whole thing sparked a polemic that would come to be known as “*Civil Disobedience*,” Thoreau’s maybe second most famous book.

The story goes like this: Thoreau is in jail, and his friend Emerson walks by. He sees Thoreau in jail and exclaims, “Henry, what are you doing in there?!”

To which Thoreau replies, “Waldo, what are you doing out there?!”

Indeed, Waldo, what are we doing out here?

“I went to the woods because I wished to live *deliberately*,” Thoreau says. This was no retreat. Thoreau was not by any stretch an escapist. From the great hermit of Walden Woods we also get the world’s preeminent social activist, inspiration for countless global acts of justice.

Leo Tolstoy stumbled upon a copy of *Civil Disobedience* and considered its implications in his own attempts to improve the situation of the serfs in Czarist Russia.

About the same time, a young Mohandas Gandhi, studying at Oxford, came upon the same essay and reprinted it for wider distribution. Gandhi’s legacy of social action, justice, civil disobedience, and in particular, his doctrine of nonviolence, stem directly from *Civil Disobedience*.

In Denmark, the essay was used as a manual of arms for the resistance movement against the Nazi invasion.

And here in the United States, Upton Sinclair, Norman Thomas, who a candidate of the Socialist Party, and Emma Goldman, anarchist editor, have all been arrested for simply reading from *Civil Disobedience* in public forums.

Decades after emancipation, the civil rights movement continued to rely upon its principles in fighting for equal rights.

The right of conscience drove opposition to the war in Vietnam.

And perhaps no greater example of civil disobedience in action can be afforded than by the work of Martin Luther King.

“I began to think about Thoreau’s essay ‘Civil Disobedience,’” King writes in Montgomery, Ala.

“I remembered how, as a college student, I had been moved when I first read this work. I became convinced that what we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, ‘We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system.’”

Here we are, 150 years after Thoreau died, 50 years since the assassination of Martin Luther King, and still we struggle with issues of race and oppression in this nation. We, as a culture, continue to engage in dehumanizing massive segments of our people. We continue to imperialize, at home and abroad. We cooperate, or not, with the system.

Thoreau’s troubles remain our troubles. His questions are our questions. As we seek meaning in our lives, as we find renewal, retreat, creativity and reconnection, may we, with Thoreau, be awakened, may we answer the call, “What are you doing out there?”

Message 2: Resilience and Resistance

I’m paranoid. Like in the old days. Keep it low, keep it hid. There is a cop behind me. Sees my out-of-state plates. And a helicopter over the road ahead. Weird. Definitely not a crop duster at this time of year. And then Dann’s GPS tells us we’re a mile south of where we should have turned left toward camp. What’s going on? I can’t turn around and I’m almost panicked, heading into oblivion. Thinking about Selma and James Reeb. Just another Unitarian minister given up to the Man. Run off the road by a big white pickup with duals on the back. Left to freeze in the ditch like the car we would see in a few miles, buried in the snow up to its antenna.

We are driving south on a two-lane through the winter moonscape of North Dakota, to Oceti Sakowin camp, because Hwy. 1806, the direct route from Mandan, has been closed for months now for no other reason than to make it harder for the Water Protectors camped there to get supplies.

Winter is full on, 25 below zero a day or two ago, and I’ve got a load of contraband – firewood and toilet paper – aiding and abetting the civil disobedience of the camp.

We had just come from a demonstration outside the Morton County Courthouse, where 11 defendants were about to face trial for not doing what police told them to do a few months ago. I am sure I am about to get pulled over now for a similar fate when the sign for Hwy. 24 appears, the left turn I need. I signal, brake, turn the corner, and the cop drives on south.

I breathe out for a moment, but it is another 20 minutes before I finally let go of my freak-out as we come over the hill to see Oceti Sakowin sprawled out ahead of us.

“Wow, that’s impressive,” Dann says. “I can see why the sheriff’s department called for help. There’s no way they could handle something like this.”

It is awesome, amazing, inspired. Barracks tents and teepees and high-tech backpacking gear and yurts and geodesic domes and shacks thrown up with plywood and haybales, it is a small city on the plain north of the Missouri River. It is Woodstock with a purpose.

The Water Protectors are mostly Native Americans, many of them from Standing Rock Reservation which lies just south of the river, with strong numbers of brothers and sisters of other tribes, other lands, other colors, other beliefs and backgrounds.

They’re dug in to protest the construction of a massive oil pipeline underneath a reservoir on the Missouri River. The pipeline threatens the watershed for hundreds of miles around, and would violate lands that the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota have held sacred for centuries.

Oceti Sakowin lies north of the river on disputed land – land now claimed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers but which the Lakota say is theirs, under the Forth Laramie treaty of 1851. Just south of the river is Rosebud camp, which lies on reservation land. To the north, over the hill, is the bridge that has been the flash point for most of the conflict. It is where protestors allegedly burned a couple of cars a few months ago, and where the sheriff’s department and a private security firm -- strongmen for the drilling company – have let loose dogs and rubber bullets and water cannons on the Protectors.

We pass by the first road into camp, the exit, and turn in to the second entrance, where a glorious line of flags parades down into the village. The flags bear the names and symbols of all the tribes and nations who stand with Standing Rock. We stop at the guard shack and two men emerge. We ask for directions to the Interfaith yurt and one of the men laughs. “There’s a lot of yurts here.” “But you can drive around if you want.”

We pull down flag road like it’s ticker tape, past a big frame building under construction. We learn later it is to be a common kitchen for the camp, consolidating the impromptu kitchens that have popped up as the crowds have grown.

The camp is in scale-down mode, pulling in for winter, aware that it will take resources to sustain its presence. There were 10,000 people here just a few weeks ago for an Interfaith Day of Prayer. Now, new arrivals are discouraged, and those who are on the edge of not being able to survive in harsh conditions are being transitioned out, housed temporarily in the Community Center back in Cannonball, on the reservation, until they can find rides back to Bismarck and then on to wherever they call home.

Still there are five kitchens operating. And who knows how many Protectors dug in. No one is keeping an actual count.

We wander aimlessly, instantly aware of how vast the camp is and how daunting is our task of finding the yurt, and next to it, Johnny and Jeff’s tent, where we are to deliver the wood. I reconnoiter, and check my phone for the rough map of camp that Karen has emailed me.

We are too far in, I think, so we turn around and head south, through roads between the shelters that meander over the floodplain by a random baroque design. In and around, back over the same way we just had been, maybe missing something, when finally I see a sign that says “Legal.”

That’s the yurt!

A legal team has taken over the shelter because it’s fully winterized and hospitable for desk work. We get out and sure enough, on the other side of the structure is the big yellow “Standing on the Side of Love” banner I had been looking for.

No one’s home at the yurt, so we check the tent behind. There is a sliding plywood door built into the side. We knock, there’s rustling, and the door opens.

“Hi we’re looking for Jeff and Johnny’s tent,” I say.

“This is Jeff,” says the man at the door, introducing a tall, quiet man in his 50s or 60s maybe, who welcomes us in, then brightens visibly when we tell him we have wood.

The four of us unload, with at least a third of the cord going directly inside. Two stoves are burning and by the time we finish, it is warm and smoky inside.

Jeff invites us in, pulls out a wooden chair.

“Best chair in the house,” he says.

I offer it to Dann. Jeff digs around for another and comes up with a plastic folding chair. I sit. They offer us coffee and chewable vitamins. I want to ask questions, I want to hear where these men came from, what brings them here, what motivates them. But I’m aware of my intrusion. So I go slow.

Jeff has been here since August, he says. He’s from Pine Ridge, a reservation in South Dakota. But he’s been on Colorado, working, until he heard of the camp here.

“I had to come,” he says.

The other man is his nephew, in from Hawaii. We learn the nephew claims a kind of dual heritage – Hawaiian native and Alaskan First Nations. Jeff sits while his nephew cleans off the makeshift table and begins boiling water for coffee.

Jeff is here in support of his brothers and sisters, he tell us. He will be here until the end, Karen has told us. These guys are the hard-cores. Jeff’s here in protest, he says, but not just that.

“I believe in prayer,” he says. “I’ve seen it do miraculous things.”

He’s here in prayer. All day.

We are still waiting for coffee when the door opens again and in comes two women and a tall man with braids. He is ebullient, laughing, strong contrast to the quietude of Jeff, charging around the tent, grabbing chairs for the women. He has a sheaf of papers in his hand. I ask if he is Johnny and he says yes.

“Can we help you guys with something,” he asks and I tell him we’ve brought wood.

“Oh, you’re THOSE guys, he says. “Thank you. We were down to an hour’s worth of wood last night and I thought ‘this is going to get interesting.’ Thank you.”

Jeff’s nephew is still working on coffee. He has three cups set up ready to go, when in come three more men. Johnny is giving them grief, chiding one of them for always wanting to be in charge. The man grins. Dann is making conversation, asks if there is anything else they need here at camp.

“A four-wheel drive,” the grinning man says.

“You just want to drive it around and think you’re important,” Johnny jokes.

We learn about the consolidated kitchen, and about plans to bring in a huge tank of water. They will have to keep it inside someplace warm to keep it from freezing. They’re thinking that common kitchen building will work. We learn that the string of Christmas lights that illuminate the tent are run by a wind turbine outside. Next to it is a bank of solar panels. The Protectors need propane, too. And more wood.

As the crowd in the tent grows, we say our goodbyes and leave without coffee. We spend a while up on “Media Hill,” where news crews have dug in, taking pictures and surveying the camp. I work at capturing the grandeur of Flag Road with my cell phone camera and never quite get there. They roar like prayer flags on Annapurna in this North Dakota wind.

We stop at the Community Center on our way back, offer up a seat in the pickup for anyone wanting a ride back to Bismarck, but everyone there is happy to stay put for now. The woman at the table set up at the entrance offers us coffee, which we happily accept.

The buzz words on the Unitarian Universalist ministers’ blogs and posts these days have been all about communities of resilience and resistance. I like the alliteration.

But until now I’ve not been so moved by the slogan. I am, we are, still a community of comfort, a community of privilege, I think. I indulge my paranoid fantasies about being part of the counterculture, part of the Resistance. But I am no James Reeb. Not even Mockingjay. I’m just a farm boy from Wisconsin with a load of firewood.

These folks, though, these Water Protectors, they are indeed a community of Resilience and Resistance. They stand for something, something larger than their own lives. Especially since this godawful election. I am deeply worried about what happens to them after the inauguration. For now, the Army Corps of Engineers has denied Energy Partners a permit to drill under the reservoir. It was a huge victory. Whether it lasts is anyone’s guess. The company will likely take this to court. Trump is unlikely to come to the defense of the Water Protectors. I fear the rubber bullets and water cannons will come again, and maybe worse. But for now, winter alone demands resilience and resistance. It is a brutal season that we are in. But we have survived seasons like this before. We have survived on prayer and firewood, on the stories and laughter of our brothers and sisters, on strong shelter set against the storm.

I am home now, 800 miles from Standing Rock. The wood that my brother-in-law, Dann, and I hauled will last maybe a couple of weeks. There will be more needed that I do not have. What I can give I myself often suspect. But it is what is asked for. It is what my friend Karen Van Fossan, minister at the Bismarck Mandan Unitarian Universalist Church calls for every day. It is what Jeff says he’s here for. It is the stuff of miracles. It is prayer. So I will pray for them. I will pray for them to be warm and safe. I will pray that the Corps of Engineers holds to its decision. I will pray that this brutal season ends. I will pray for resilience and resistance. And that finally we learn to live in peace.

Closing Words

Once again, Thoreau:

“After a still winter night, I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what – how – when – where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on *her* lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward!”