

## NATURE'S SAGE: THE INFLUENCE OF SACRED INDIAN LITERATURE IN HENRY DAVID THOREAU'S WALDEN

Eric Cowan and Lennis G. Echterling\*

*Abstract: Postmodern "Intersubjective" approaches to psychology and psychotherapy observe that a central "myth" that pervades Western culture is the concept of the mind as an isolated entity. Henry David Thoreau's Walden had a powerful impact on generations of Americans by exploring the intimate relationship between the individual and nature, the embeddedness of self-experience, as well as offering a ringing sermon on living the good life through a vitalized capacity for participation. Unknown to many, Thoreau was deeply influenced by his study of sacred Indian literature, including the Bhagavad Gita and The Upanishads. We explore how Eastern philosophy shaped Thoreau's thought and his experience of nature, and conclude with observations on bringing such Eastern perspectives to a richer, more mindful, and self-reflective way of being in nature and with others.*

When Henry David Thoreau walked into the woods outside Concord, Massachusetts in the spring of 1845, a borrowed axe resting on his shoulder, his purpose was to build himself a simple dwelling by the banks of Walden Pond where he could "transact some private business with the fewest obstacles." That business involved being the "self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms...surveyor, if not of highways, then of forest paths...So many autumn, ay, winter days spent outside the town, trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express! I well-nigh sunk all my capital in it" (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 17).

Nice work, if you can get it, and Thoreau's message is that everyone should. The purpose of this article is to explore his Walden experience as both a literal

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\*Dr. ERIC COWAN, Professor & Psy.D. and Dr. LENNIS G. ECHTERLING, Professor & Ph.D. are both clinical psychologists and psychotherapists in the Department of Graduate Psychology, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA 22807. E-mail: [cowanwe@jmu.edu](mailto:cowanwe@jmu.edu).

excursion back to nature and a metaphorical journey to a fully realized, self-reflective life. For two years, Thoreau lived in the woods by Walden Pond, translating what he called nature's higher laws into a code for living significantly and vitally, sticking to essentials and pairing away superficialities. Thoreau's investment of life capital yielded its best dividend for generations of subsequent readers of *Walden*. The book became a touchstone for generations of future Americans by exploring the transformational potential inherent in a profound relationship between the individual and nature. In doing so, Walden created an image of a man connected to and embedded in a re-enchanted world, and offered a ringing sermon on right living. The purpose of this article is not only to add another voice affirming Thoreau as a literary American sage when writing on the power of a deep and abiding connection to nature, but also to explore how sacred Indian literature illuminated and deepened his experience of nature as enhancing self-awareness and well-being.

Postmodern approaches to psychology and psychotherapy, especially those characterized by the term "intersubjectivity," assert that a central "myth" that pervades Western culture is the concept of the mind as an isolated entity. Seen as a manifestation of Western cultural experience, the myth of the isolated mind symbolizes modern man's growing alienation from nature, from others, and disconnection from one's own subjective experience (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992). Though the concept of the isolated mind did not begin with Sigmund Freud, the idea that the ego, or self, emerges from within the bundle of energies contained within a bag of skin became reified. Freud's maxim "Where Id was Ego shall be," captures the idea of the self as deriving from internal forces seeking to exploit a separate "external" world (Freud, 1917). From the postmodern perspective this image of the mind as self-contained ascribes to individuals a mode of being in which the person exists separately from the world of nature as well as estranged from others. This myth,

...denies the essential immateriality of human experience by portraying subjective life in reified substantialized terms...This alienation, still so pervasive in our time, has much to do with the culture of technocracy and the associated intellectual heritage of mechanism that have dominated thought about human nature in the twentieth century" (Matson, 1964, Barret, 1979; cited in Stolorow & Atwood, 1992).

Thoreau's *Walden* creates the image of a man in deep participation with the natural world, where the boundaries between "self" and "other" are permeable and fluid, and where the essential immateriality of self-experience takes shape in a world made present and re-enchanted through an attitude of radical openness.

### I. Into the Woods...The Yankee Yogi

"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 can to die, discover that I had not lived.... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life..." (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 80). One of the most captivating qualities of *Walden's* vividly written message is its tone of numinous awe, a unique and anti-orthodox religious sensibility springing from Thoreau's deep communion with nature. As E. B. White wrote in his essay *A Slight Sound at Evening*, *Walden* "rings with the power of positive adoration, it contains religious feelings without religious images...Even its pantheistic note is so pure as to be noncorrupting" (White, 1979: 235).

Thoreau was a new and vibrantly authentic voice in American letters. What White understood as Thoreau's pantheistic and adoring tone clearly did not derive from the prevailing New England Protestant ethos of his time: that of humanity and nature as imperfect, in need of salvation, and God in His heaven. Rather, the origins of Thoreau's cosmology were far to the East where the boundaries between people and gods, and God and nature, were more porous. Pervasive in *Walden*, and only acknowledged in passing by most of his commentators, is Thoreau's appreciation and reverence for the sacred literature of India.

Thoreau, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others in the Transcendental movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century American letters had read and been deeply influenced by the concepts of divinity and the cosmos expressed in sacred Indian literature, including *The Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* (Versluis, 2001). Thoreau first had access to these books, as well as Buddhist texts and commentary, primarily from Emerson's library and from the library at Harvard, where he had been a student. He studied them deeply and they provided him not only with validation of his contemplative predilections but also with a new language with which to communicate what he found in his inner world.

"In the morning," Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, "I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhag-vat Geeta, since whose

composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial...The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges" (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 264).

Spiritual treatises, composed between about 800 and 400 B.C., *The Upanishads*, which translates to "The Lessons," gave eloquent expression to the essential theme that everything—all nature, including human beings—is infused with a spirit of divinity, expressive of a creative energy that is not far and inaccessible, but just under the surface: "Nearest to all things," Thoreau wrote, "is that power which fashions their being" (Ibid.: 119). And Thoreau's *Walden* expressed a conviction that, since this divine creative impulse is immanent in all nature, deep participation and union with the natural world puts a person in accord with this life sustaining power. Living close to nature provides an essential experience of being. Living intimately with processes of the natural world attunes a person to his or her own true nature.

Thoreau, along with other "Transcendental" writers, (sometimes referred to as the "Boston Brahmins") valued direct and immediate experience over traditional religious doctrine and received truths. Like the Humanistic therapies that would eventually follow and reify the idea, they esteemed sensitivity to, and trust in, one's own inner intimations, especially when cultivated in what Emerson referred to as the "cathedral of nature" (Emerson, 1834/1995). Part of the uniqueness of *Walden* is Thoreau's deft synthesis of the soaring universal themes of Indian sacred literature with his particular and intimate impressions of nature on the banks of Walden Pond.

With Thoreau, the inward looking and contemplative mystical tradition of the East is translated through a Yankee psyche that has rejected the popular religious doctrines of his own culture and is independent of any obligation to embrace any constraining practices of another. Unfettered by dogmas imposed by religious leaders or customs made obligatory by social sanctions, Thoreau's primary reverence was for the spirit he sensed moving in a natural landscape that was still relatively unspoiled.

In *Walden*, Thoreau joyfully recounted how living deeply with nature attuned him to his own deepest self, and the transcendental writers would have agreed with Carl Jung's later observations that religion can often get in the way of one having a spiritual experience (Jung, 1989). For Thoreau, "spiritual" meant being fully awake and responsive to the flow of life contained in the present moment, especially as seen in nature, and in this sense, he advised that one need not look

beyond one's own purview, both physically and psychologically, for guidance on how to live fully and deeply. Although he maintained contact with the nearby town of Concord, like a sage of the East, Thoreau also retreated to the forest to cultivate his solitude. In marked contrast to the New England Protestant ethic of his time and place that portrayed nature in conflict with the spirit, Thoreau wrote of their fundamental oneness. "I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good" (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 187).

Even early in his life, big things had been expected from Henry. He had studied at Harvard and his family was not without means. However, both before and after his retreat to the woods, he seemed content to take on only occasional employment teaching or working as a surveyor of the surrounding countryside, preferring to have time instead of wealth. He occasionally worked for his family's pencil-making business and developed a superior pencil by refining the quality of lead used, an innovation that friends thought he could patent and use to make his fortune. Thoreau rejected the expectations of those around him that would lead to a lucrative career and material success in favor of subtler gratifications. "If the day and night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal—that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself." (Ibid.: 193). As in other portions of *Walden*, Thoreau's celebration of the daily wonders of nature is infused with spiritual references to immortality and to blessing oneself.

This delicate quality of Thoreau's awe was clearly not of the thunderclap of God's voice booming from above variety. It had little in common with the archetypal image of the apostle Paul, struck to his knees on the road to Damascus. Rather, it spoke to a sense of delight, of unity with the unfolding miracle of his environment, in hearing strains of eternal music in the laughing call of a woodpecker echoing through the pines. He affirmed through his loving participation with the natural world that the God that one seeks dwells within all that surrounds one. In *Walden*, there is no dualistic split between matter and spirit. One must be open to the flow between the inner world of thoughts, feelings and sensations and the perpetual instilling in which they take their form in immediate and mutual participation. This divinity is always at hand:

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us (Thoreau, 1992).

For Thoreau, then, the other world was not some far off, distant realm elsewhere from the Earth, but here and now—if only a person would wake up to it, deeply encounter it with all one's senses, and participate in it fully as one of its many forms. His was not a philosophy of exile, of being cast out and longing to return to the garden. Thoreau was already in the garden, literally and figuratively. In the Garden of Eden myth, God walks in the cool evening, present and available, man and woman do not seem aware of their differences and are unashamed, the world is not broken into good and evil, light and dark, pain and joy, and all nature is whole and unified. That changes quickly with the introduction of sin into the story; the world shatters and God becomes transcendent and difficult to reach.

In the philosophy of *The Upanishads*, however, there is no fall from grace. Nature is never corrupted and the appearance of opposites in the broken up world of qualities and attributes are regarded as merely manifestations or masks of one divine creative impulse. The sage can see through the masks to the reality in which all apparent contradictions vanish. Thoreau loved this idea and even managed to locate Walden Pond itself in the birth of creation before the mythological shattering of the world into pairs of opposites, of the dualism between good and evil:

Perhaps on that Spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden, Walden Pond was already in existence, and even then breaking up (from winter ice) in a gentle spring rain accompanied with mist and a southerly wind and covered with myriads of ducks and geese, which had not heard of the fall...and had obtained a patent of heaven to be the only Walden Pond in the world and a distiller of celestial dews (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 277).

Thoreau alerted us that in joining him at Walden Pond, we are entering a mythological as well as physical space. Charmingly, he had some proprietary

interest in it being the “only Walden Pond” (Ibid.: 277), the prototype, which is to say that it is all ponds everywhere, precipitated locally because he looks out on it with eyes that see the universal in the particular. That this idea expresses the intent of Eastern contemplative traditions of “enlightenment” through a transformation of consciousness is no accident. Thoreau knew all about these ideas, but in Walden gave them a uniquely American voice. The sense of immediacy, of being mindfully present, of hallowing the ordinary and apparent, (nature is never trivial) is Thoreau's constant theme and sermon. Nature is the great communicator of all such mysteries and always does the metaphorical work when Thoreau wishes, like a great teacher, to point the way without resort to being explicit.

“In any weather,” he wrote, “at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand at the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line” (Ibid.: 15). *The Upanishads* may not have said, as Thoreau did, that to pierce the illusion of outward appearances, apprehending the oneness of all being behind visible forms, is to go “a-fishing” in eternity, but the intent is the same. “Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains” (Ibid.: 87). Thoreau reels us in with such accessible images into non-dual concepts that are mostly unfamiliar in the inheritance of cultural memes that shape Western consciousness.

In *The Upanishads*, the concepts of creation, nature, divinity, and the spirit life of humans are quite different than the cosmos communicated by the Near East Jewish-Christian-Islamic tradition. In the dominant Christian tradition that surrounded Thoreau in nineteenth century New England, God is wholly transcendent, apart, and over nature. In the West, religion and religious practice, as the mythologist Joseph Campbell (2003) observed, serves as the method by which the individual can have a *relationship* to an otherwise inaccessible and transcendent creator. This God is not *identified* with his physical creation but, rather, rules over it. This concept of the cosmos informs, in turn, the idea of “man over nature,” with the implication that nature is something to be dominated and controlled. Taken to its logical extreme, a de-sanctified nature may be exploited without giving offense to the order of the universe.

Thoreau was dismissive of the concept of a mediated relationship to remote divinity, for it could not express his joyful participation with the creative, spirited,

and playful impulse of life to which he was attuned. And when authentic religious awe and spontaneous praise were missing from the form of conventional religious systems he saw around him, Thoreau could be scathing and liked to upset the apple cart, if not the tables of the temple money lenders: "Our manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints. Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring Him forever... There is nowhere recorded a simple an irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life, and memorable praise of God" (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 69).

The divinity Thoreau found in *The Upanishads* spoke to his sense of a divine presence that is near, vital, and alive. This divinity was not remote from nature, but rather, apparent and accessible through everything—through everything but not, ultimately the thing itself. The "pantheistic tone" commented upon by White that is prevalent in Walden's descriptions of nature derived from a view of divinity described in *The Upanishads* as both transcendent, over all, but also immanent. All things, all forms, rise out of the pervasive and creative forces that animate existence. In this system, one must be able to hold the paradox between the two attitudes, transcendent and immanent, in order to express a truth and experience that which cannot be communicated by either concept alone. That is, in the immanent the divinity is all, and wholly present and available, accessible as each seed, plant, flash of lightening, sunset or, in *Walden*, woodchuck (Thoreau contemplated eating one). However, spilt the seed which contains the tree, said *The Upanishads*, and you will not find the tree therein. The form of the salt disappears from view when it dissolves in water, but a taste will reveal that it pervades all the fluid.

The immanent divinity celebrated in *Walden* is that each discrete thing is an expression of the universal creative force that pervades all, each part of nature is infused, overflowing, with the creative energy that gives rise to it. God is both over and in nature. Nature is sacred.

For a week I heard the circling, groping clangor of some solitary goose in the foggy mornings, seeking its companion, and still peopling the woods with the sound of a larger life than they could sustain. (Thoreau, 1992).

All through *Walden* rang the sentiment that nature contains a life larger than it can itself sustain, a life that overflows and communicates to senses refined enough to apprehend its wonders. And in apprehending these wonders, we

become part of them, and closer to our own innermost nature. According to *The Upanishads*, the world is the broken up expression of the One to those who can see it. "He is Brahman, the spirit supreme...Concerning whom it is said: He is seen in nature in the wonder of a flash of lightening. He comes to the soul in a flash of vision" (*The Upanishads*, 1965: 53). And in *Walden*, we find the following: "Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are" (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 119).

Thoreau had made his breakthrough. In the language of the Bhagavad Gita, he saw all nature as an expression of a consciousness that exists in various levels in nature and pervades all forms. Not only nature, but also each person is identified with divinity, and Thoreau had no qualms about admonishing his readers to wake up to that awareness. The big mystic realization of *The Upanishads* is to truly know, to experience, that the god one seeks is oneself. Not, of course, the puny personality of the individual ego, but the Self (Atman) that is identified with the ground of being from which it arises. This Self is the channel, the hollow reed through which blows the celestial music that Thoreau said he heard sweeping over the hills. This realization is expressed in *The Upanishads* as the statement: "Thou art That"—you are a manifestation of the indestructible force that gives rise to all things; divine.

As a reframing of the creation myth that dominates Western cosmology, we might say from the Upanishadic perspective that the universe precipitated consciousness—the capacity to look out upon itself through our own eyes. It is an understatement to say that this would have been a foreign concept to most of Thoreau's neighbors, with the exception of his "Transcendentalist" friends. Indeed, many would have considered it blasphemous to identify oneself with divinity, especially one divorced from comforting anthropomorphic attributes. But Thoreau certainly read and embraced the concepts expressed in the following in *The Upanishads*, and it echoes throughout *Walden*: "I will now speak to you of the mystery of the eternal Brahman...the Spirit of Light, who in truth is called Immortal. All the worlds rest on that Spirit...There is one Ruler, the Spirit that is in all things, who transforms his own form into many" (*The Upanishads*, 1965: 49).

Part of the beauty in *Walden* is that Thoreau could translate these grand ideas into personal vignettes, to relate their particulars through an individual experience. Things and events that might ordinarily be passed over as

commonplace or banal become charged with significance because they are seen in their revelatory aspect:

This was an airy and unplastered cabin fit to entertain a traveling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 75).

Thoreau had read the Vedas well, for he never tried to resolve the paradox that communicates the mystery—both it, and not it—both infusing nature and transcending nature. Nor is he hesitant, contrary to the ethos of his culture, to identify his own ecstatic delight with knowing himself “to be Brahme.” In his book *A Week on the Merrimack River*, Thoreau even seemed to wonder whether the river would rise and fall if he were not there to witness it (1849/1989). One might surmise that Thoreau must have been in the grip of some ecstatic delusion or that it is a statement of extreme narcissism or grandiosity. However, it is the opposite. Thoreau was well aware that when he spoke with this voice he was performing what in *The Upanishads* would be considered a yogic realization: identifying himself not with his individual ego or “self,” but as a “Self” (Atman), a local expression of the One—Thou art That.

Nature manifests in myriad forms of time and place, but Thoreau articulates the essential intent of the contemplative traditions: a breakthrough in consciousness in which one is merged with the great unity and where observed and observer are one. There is no barrier between Thoreau and the river.

In a letter to his friend H. G. O. Blake, Thoreau wrote about his meditations and the influence of his readings of *The Upanishads*:

Free in this world as the birds in the air, disengaged from every kind of chains, those who practice yoga gather in Brahma the certain fruits of their works. Depend upon it that, rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the yoga faithfully. The yogi, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation; he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things.... To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogi (Miller, 1986: 60).

Even he, indeed. However, for Thoreau, hearing the poem of creation in nature and knowing oneself to be “Brahme” are not the full expressions of the human potential. He did not renounce the world, although in his quest for simplicity and

purity he did take on some of the austere habits of the mendicant. Rather, in true American fashion, his yogic realization was the beginning of a call to action. He urged us to not be too moral, lest we cheat ourselves of much life, but rather to aim above morality; to not be simply good, but “good for something.” *Walden* is full of sermon and admonitions for right living, all of which amount to the “cultivation of a few cubic feet of flesh,” to live authentically and deliberately, dismissing, one might say almost distaining, the outward and illusory show of trivial things to honor the significance of life. For, when one realizes that he is the god that he is seeking, how can he or she be deluded into giving unworthy things attention? Rather, we must learn to “reawaken” and to keep ourselves awake. To affect the quality of the day is the highest of arts and every person is tasked to make of life, even in its ordinary details, worthy of the contemplation of his or her “most elevated and critical hour.”

## II. *Walden's* Waves of Influence Across Time

Thoreau did not ease his austere standards one bit for us, though few of us are made of as stern stuff as he. In *Walden* Thoreau devoted a whole chapter to his cultivation of his bean field, which is actually a meditation on how to be fully present to one's actions, no matter how humble or mundane. He wondered whether he had cultivated beans or if beans had cultivated him. And although Thoreau left his cabin in the woods next to Walden Pond after two years, in *Walden* he distilled the essential spirit of his time there, and it is striking that a person can walk into the woods for the sake of one's own contemplation, conducting some “private business,” and by doing so influence the course of history. In that light it is notable that although Emerson loved him and greatly admired his character and genius, he thought Thoreau, given his great gifts, a bit of an underachiever.

Had his genius been only contemplative, he had been fitted to his life, but with his energy and practical ability he seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans! (Emerson, 1862: 5).

Yet, now it is in the mirror of Thoreau's prose and thought that we most desire to see ourselves reflected and, although his genius was "only contemplative," it is Thoreau's being "good for something" that has exerted enormous influence in the world. In *The Upanishads*, acts of contemplation and deliberate choice accrue into waves of influence that move across time. When Thoreau refused to pay a tax that supported slavery and violent American military action in Mexico, he was arrested and spent a night in jail before friends, without his blessing, paid the tax on his behalf. He refused the next year and they paid it again. Out of this experience came his essay "Civil Disobedience" (Rosenwald, 2006). Remaining true to one's own spirit in the society of others was the fruit of contemplation that Thoreau brought with him out of the woods.

Thoreau wrote that through his love of the *Bhagavad Gita* that the sacred waters of the Ganges fed Walden Pond, but there was a return tributary as well, for Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged Thoreau's *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience* as influential in his ideas of non-violent resistance, as did Martin Luther King. The great conservationist John Muir acknowledged his debt to Thoreau's vision of nature as a divine poem, and infused his own writings with the theme that wilderness is sacred. *Walden* became a classic of American literature, still inspiring artists and contemporary writers like E. B. White, Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and poets like Wendell Berry.

### III. *Walden* as a Wellspring for Well-Being

In particular, *Walden* endures as a touchstone for anyone in the process of evaluating his or her life and asking the question: Am I living significantly? In this sense, it is not too romantic a notion that Thoreau fits the Buddhist model of the "Bodhisattva," one who, after achieving great realization, does not just abandon the world for the bliss of ultimate union, but rather returns from the forest to the world of others to share what was realized in contemplation. At the same time, Thoreau offered a sage's perspective on being detached from one's works and thoughts that would sound familiar to any student of mindfulness meditation: "By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent" (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 120).

In May of 1862, at the age of 44, Thoreau lay dying. A few years before, his chronic tuberculosis had become aggravated by bronchitis contracted while he

was out counting the rings of tree stumps during a late evening rainstorm, which somehow seems an appropriate and fitting cause of his death. Knowing the end was near, his Aunt Louisa inquired whether he had made his peace with God. Thoreau replied, "I did not know that we had ever quarreled." His friends were struck by the serenity with which he welcomed death. His last words were, "Now comes good sailing."

Emerson, in his eulogy, remarked that Thoreau was not an easy companion because he had little patience for the trivial social conventions that lubricate polite conversation: "In any circumstance, it interested all bystanders to know what part Henry would take, and what he would say; and he did not disappoint expectation, but used an original judgment on each emergency" (Emerson, 1862: 1). One can imagine Thoreau, looking steely-eyed, in silence, after someone has offered an utterly conventional and inconsequential remark, or invited him to some social amusement, "as if you could 'kill time' without injuring eternity," he would be thinking.

Nevertheless, *Walden* asserted that to live as "deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails," is also to participate honestly in the present moment with one's fellow human beings (Thoreau, 1854/1992: 86). For Thoreau, nature expresses pure being; it has no superficialities, it both mirrors and is divine and is therefore the model for what is essential for significance in human relations; to be in true participation, cutting through convention and manners. Because nature is never superficial, Thoreau thought, neither should be human intercourse. Indeed, the one complaint Thoreau had about his hand-hewn house was that it was not large enough to contain the expansiveness of shared thought and the greatness of the conversation when he welcomed visitors. "I would gladly tell all I know, and never paint 'No Admittance' on my gate" (Ibid.: 15). In the century and a half since raising those humble walls, he has welcomed millions.

At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed, and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature (Ibid.: 281).

Today, therapists are beginning to realize how the myth of the isolated mind shapes a cultural narrative that estranges persons from each other, and that "We can never have enough of nature." They have rediscovered the psychological and spiritual benefits of immersion in the natural world and now prescribe this

experience to reduce anxiety, alleviate stress, and promote personal well-being (Dolgin, 2014, Keniger, et al., 2013, Maller, 2009). However, *Walden* is both an eloquent ode and a soulful prayer to nature, a mingling of the waters of the Ganges and Walden Pond—and brings into harmony insights into the human condition that both the East and West have offered. It reminds us that going into the woods can be much more than merely a refreshing hike or a relaxing excursion to savor the wonders of the natural world—it can be a mindful journey into the eternal mystery of the present and into the sacred, eternal depths of the self that is one with nature.

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