

## The Fifth Time I Read *Walden*

When I was a child, growing up in Indiana in the 1950s, I was one of six children. My father's closet in the parents' bedroom was off limits to us kids because he kept his single-shot .22-caliber rifle in there, propped on the floor in the corner. My brother and I knew a box of bullets was in his underwear drawer, also off limits, concealed under his socks.

Much to my brother's frustration we didn't know the hiding place of the rifle bolt. Every time my father took us target shooting in the woods behind the house, kneeling while cradling one or the other of us against his chest as he took most of the recoil into his own shoulder, the elusive bolt appeared from his trouser pocket.

Regarding the closet, for my part I was more interested in the shelf above, where my father kept his woolen sweaters. I liked the smell and feel of those sweaters and was vaguely aware they had been knitted by a high-school girlfriend back in Massachusetts where he had grown up.

Even more intriguingly, behind the sweaters were stored his books. By the age of 12 in 1963, when I was able to reach that high, I could name the titles. Three were from the nineteenth century: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*; *Walden, or Life in the Woods* by Henry David Thoreau; and *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. To these were added three books from the twentieth century: *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale, a Methodist minister in New York City, as well as *The Foxes of Harrow* and *The Vixens* by Frank Yerby, an African American novelist from Atlanta who wrote about antebellum life on southern plantations.

I knew my father obtained a new book in 1963 because *Modern Marriage* by Dr. Benjamin Morse arrived in the mail, shortly after a

seventh child, a girl, was born. After catching a glimpse of it when it was unwrapped I could not find the parents' marriage manual at all, but I did notice that packets of condoms joined the ammunition in secrecy below the socks.

These books were my introduction to the genres of memoir, adult fiction including Black authors, and personal self-help. I snuck them down and read them one by one, not in the house but in the trees behind. Thus I had the pleasure of reading about Thoreau's life in the woods while being secluded in the woods.

By the age of 14 during eighth grade, when I was tall enough, I began wearing my father's sweaters to school with his permission. During an accelerated reading program I was assigned to read *Walden*. By that point in time we could have dropped the pretense that I didn't know about his shelf of books and I could have asked to borrow his copy. Nevertheless I bought my own, choosing the 1951 Bramhall House edition with black-and-white illustrations by Henry Bugbee Kane.

Since I was openly reading *Walden* I was finally able to solicit my father's opinion. I asked if he had gained anything of value from it and he emphatically said no, adding that Thoreau was like any other Yankee salesman: "The can opener breaks as soon as the pack peddler is over the hill and out of sight." In other words the reformist, counter-cultural ideas don't work in everyday life.

What was important to my father was the ability to earn money, and he couldn't fault me on that issue. From junior high school into senior high school I worked at a Howard Johnson's restaurant and motor lodge east of Indianapolis on U.S. Highway 40, the National Road. I'm not sure if he approved of my priorities, however. I had played cello in public-school musical ensembles since the fifth grade, and with my first paycheck

from the restaurant I purchased a nylon-string guitar and instruction books in classical technique.

Knowing he had attended the Boston High School of Commerce, which was meant to track boys into careers in business, I ventured that he must have had an unusual English teacher during the 1930s. He explained that he did not buy *Tale of Two Cities*, *Walden*, and *The Autobiography* for school. As I recall he said they had been given to him as part of a Saturday-morning literature course sponsored by the YMCA at the L Street Bathhouse in South Boston, where he was working as a teenage lifeguard.

In the spring of 1967 my father was offered a job by Sylvania Corporation in Waltham, which he accepted. In early summer he drove out from Indiana to Massachusetts to sign the employment contract and look for a house to rent, taking me and my brother with him on that road trip. We arrived in the area after midnight and he rented a motel room in Bedford. In the morning, even before he took us to breakfast or bought a newspaper to scan the real estate ads, my father drove to Walden Pond in Concord and we walked around the periphery.

In those days the pond was managed by Middlesex County and it was in deplorable condition. I was too young and uneducated to understand it was situated in the town's wasteland, with soil too sandy for crop fields. This sort of land was used in colonial times as a commons for gathering wood and stones, as a dump for construction debris, and as a squatting zone for the poorest of the poor.

During the 1960s the cars of visitors were parked on the shoulder of the highway on both sides of the busy road. The footpath around the pond was badly eroded, and the banks featured discarded appliances, mattress springs, and scrap lumber—partly in the water and partly out. There was a public beach near the highway, right across from a

crowded, unpretentious trailer park, but it was not well maintained. Right next to the trailer park was the Department of Public Works depot and the contemporary dump, recently and euphemistically renamed the Concord Town Landfill.

I could tell my father was distressed. He became more and more visibly agitated during our walk, and he did not speak. This was a mystery to me—why my father considered the book to be precious, and the pond itself even more precious, while still being unable to acknowledge the author favorably. We picked up litter till our pockets were full but could not find a can. For my part, I was so accustomed to images in black-and-white, from Kane's illustrations, that seeing the pond in living color was mesmerizing.

Later in the day my father signed a lease for a house on Glezen Lane in Wayland. Thus I realized I would be spending 11<sup>th</sup> grade at Wayland High School, but I did not know I would be reading *Walden* for the third time, taking notes while on break from my part-time job in the butcher shop at Purity Supreme grocery store in the town center.

Somehow I found time to try out for the football team. Because I was a newcomer and a junior I mostly sat on the bench in the early part of the season, but we did play until February and by the finals I found myself in the starting position at middle linebacker. That year of 1967-68 Wayland won the state championship in Division D, a conference consisting of the smallest schools in the state.

Beyond the fact that we would reside in Wayland, I also could not have predicted I would be taking Lynn Yerby to the prom. Some of the more ambitious members of the class, who intended to be pre-med students in college, wanted to date her because her father, Alonzo Yerby, taught at Harvard University Medical School and was dean of the School of Public Health. But I was pleased to become acquainted because her

father's brother was Frank Yerby. This was a unique experience for her. She was astonished I was familiar with his work and assumed I wanted her to arrange an introduction, but I already knew her uncle was living in self-imposed exile in Spain.

The following summer, while continuing full-time at Purity Supreme, I had my first experience with live theater beyond the school setting. Several friends from Wayland High School undertook *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss, or at least a staged reading of the script for which I read the part of the Marquis de Sade.

The first English-language version of the German play had been presented five years earlier by the Royal Shakespeare Company in London, directed by Peter Brook with music composed by Richard Peaslee. The show had run on Broadway in 1966 at the Martin Beck Theatre and had just been revived in 1967 at the Majestic Theatre. In our production the entire score was played on one portable keyboard.

*Marat/Sade* was my introduction to the concept of a historical play with music, as contrasted with a conventional musical, the songs offering commentary on the social and political setting of the action. The play had been popularized not only by the English film adaptation distributed to American movie theaters by United Artists, but the medley "Marat/Sade" on the album *In My Life* by Judy Collins, which was on the Billboard pop chart in 1967. My parents forbade my younger brothers and sisters from attending the reading.

The following year my father rented a house on Boston Post Road in Weston, the adjoining town, and I took a job as seafood chef at the local Red Coach Grill. That fall I performed the part of the Earl of Warwick in *L'Alouette* or *The Lark*, a tribute to Joan of Arc by French playwright Jean Anouilh, which had had its American premiere at the Plymouth Theater

in Boston in 1955 before transferring to Broadway. Once again the parents prohibited my siblings from seeing the show.

In the spring I danced a ballet pas-de-deux with my sister as a prologue to the musical comedy *Once Upon a Mattress*, which was acceptable because the original had starred Carol Burnett. My parents came to see the show not because I was in it, but because my sister was in it. That spring of 1969 I registered for the draft and finished high school.

During the winter I had started attending Dudley Laufman's contra dances in New Hampshire, playing traditional dance tunes on a wooden, open-holed flute similar to the one Thoreau owned. I was learning to sing folk songs and ballads. I gave up cello and the classical repertoire and shifted to playing steel-string guitar and composing my own original songs, beginning with a plaintive, waltz-time "Song of the Roses." For summer employment I applied for a job at Drumlin Farm Wildlife Sanctuary in nearby Lincoln and was hired to run the wild animal infirmary there.

My theater experience that summer was *Exit the King* by Eugene Ionesco, which had opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1963 and which was currently running at the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway in New York. In this production, put on by friends from Weston High School, I had the role of King Beringer the First.

Rising tensions with my father over the War in Vietnam made me unwelcome at home and I decided to rent a room at a farm in Sudbury. The owner was a widow who needed help with chores around the place. Drumlin Farm was five miles away, close enough to reach by walking in about an hour. Often, if I had worked late at the infirmary, on my way back to my room I'd stop at Walden for an after-dark swim across the pond and back. The grounds were a mess but the water

retained as ever the bracing clarity of a remnant glacial kettle hole, the deepest in the state. Those were cold baths, but they were cleansing.

During my freshman year at Indiana University in Bloomington, 1969-1970, I was invited to an honors curriculum in American Studies, in which 20 undergraduates were taught every course together by full professors who ordinarily dealt only with graduate students. The program was rigorous but I was not intimidated by any of the faculty except Edwin Cady, editor of the new textbook *Literature of the Early Republic*. He was big and bombastic, a former lineman who was academic advisor to the varsity football team. By the time I arrived for the first day of class he somehow knew I had played on a championship football team, which seemed to provide me with some extra credibility.

I had already decided to focus in my college studies on New England Transcendentalism, and Cady was an expert on Ralph Waldo Emerson. During his course I read *Walden* for the fourth time, and I wrote a term paper on one of Thoreau's mystical poems contrasted with one of Emerson's mystical poems—"Smoke" versus "Brahma." On the last day of class, when the papers were returned upside down, I could see the extensive handwritten notes in red ink that filled the entire back pages as well as margins of every student's paper as he or she bowed his or her head to read the comments. My paper was handed back last and I was alarmed because I could see no writing on it at all. Flipping it over I read a single word in red on the top margin: Bravo!

One might think that this encouragement from Cady would have prompted me to redouble my efforts in academia. After all, Thoreau had suggested in "Economy," the introductory chapter of *Walden*, that his book was addressed to poor students in particular. But the ongoing war and demands of the antiwar movement were too much of a distraction. The gaming of the Selective Service Administration was

glaringly obvious, whereby middle-class men could avoid the military by attending college while working-class men, who couldn't afford the tuition and fees, were drafted into combat. The shooting of students by National Guard troops at Kent State University during spring semester that year was a traumatizing tragedy. The invasion of neutral Laos by the South Vietnamese Army, with American air support, prompted mass demonstrations outside the student union building.

The summer of 1970 I again had a job at Drumlin Farm, teaching bird lore to children at the natural history day camp. I stayed at a cooperative house near Porter Square in Cambridge, inhabited by friends from Weston who had also dropped out, or not attempted college at all. I commuted to Lincoln by train.

In this way I again passed by Walden Pond twice a day on my way to and from the nature sanctuary. Being repeatedly reminded of Thoreau's adamant attitude while protesting the War with Mexico, and what he was willing to sacrifice, my conviction was reinforced one evening in Concord when I went to see Jerome Lawrence's new play, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*.

I came home to my single room with a copy of the script, wishing I had written it. I decided to drop out of college to make myself vulnerable to the draft. My intention was to refuse induction and go to prison in protest, as many draftees were doing. But when the lottery was drawn that July, randomly based on date of birth, my number was 268, well above the expected cut-off of 215. So by dumb luck my willingness to forfeit my freedom and be jailed like Thoreau became a moot point.

I returned to the dormitory in Bloomington for sophomore year to find the campus in turmoil. I declared my major subject to be Zoology with a concentration in Ornithology and obtained a work-study job doing field research in the Experimental Forest on the outskirts of town. Every



morning at dawn I stopped by the office to pick up the day's orders from graduate students and faculty who were doing research involving wild birds—how many juncos, cardinals, yellow-shafted flickers, mockingbirds, *et cetera* were needed for lab work that day. These birds I captured with mist nets and placed in paper bags for delivery. Every evening I picked up the paper bags to return the birds to the Experimental Forest.

That fall I was elected to the Student Senate and I asked to be assigned to the Environmental Affairs Committee. The president of the student body was a member of the Black Panther Party who had recently led a militant rent strike in Indianapolis. The vice-president was the Marxist son of a steelworker in Gary. The Secretary was from Porter in the same area, the daughter of a Marxist historian at the Northwest campus of Indiana University. These officers dismissed the environmental committee as bourgeois and irrelevant. They regarded with disdain my particular interests such as nineteenth-century poetry and the inexplicable migratory abilities of songbirds. My term in student government was a crash course in Marxism, striving to overcome my *naïveté*.

Nevertheless, because I was known to Professor Cady I was appointed to an ad-hoc group, the Committee on Institutional Racism. Certain Black football players had complained of racial discrimination and the student government was determined to investigate. I was directed to make an appointment with Cady, faculty liaison to the Athletic Department, and demand an explanation.

Cady arrived for our meeting with a lineman, a guard as I recall, from the football team. He began with sarcasm: "Committee on Institutional Racism? That's a neutral name for an investigative task force, isn't it?" I

replied respectfully that I had not established the initiative, I was merely serving it on behalf of all students.

But the guard, who was a white man, did most of the talking. It was the sort of conversation one never forgets. He began by saying that a man is a bullet. Emotion provides the gunpowder while rationality is the projectile, spinning down the rifle barrel toward a target. He asserted that the players' complaints were providing plenty of powder but I was shooting blanks, implying that the committee was motivated by a sense of grievance but I was being unreasonable, with no plausible evidence. I asked him, if that was our metaphor, who is holding the gun and who is choosing the target?

He asked skeptically if I even owned a gun. I replied that as a boy I practiced shooting a rifle with my father and I expected to inherit it in due course. But I also said I agreed with those who maintain that children should learn to fish and hunt when young but then give it up as they become more mature. I was paraphrasing from the chapter "Higher Laws" in *Walden* and went on to recite a passage verbatim: "During the last years that I carried a gun my excuse was that I was studying ornithology, and sought only new or rare birds. But I confess that I am now inclined to think that there is a finer way of studying ornithology than this. It requires so much closer attention to the habits of the birds that, if for that reason only, I have been willing to omit the gun."

Cady knew I was quoting Thoreau from memory but the football player did not. Seeing the baffled expression on the face of his guard Cady laughed uproariously and promised me he would look into the matter. That was the last time I saw him, for despite my immunity from the draft I did drop out again after that fall semester and returned to Massachusetts. Because I was still not welcome at home I decided to

move into the Weston Town Forest near my parent's house. I spent the months of February and March camping in the snow while I built a lean-to against a large boulder. I carried a bag of mortar dust from town as mud for a stone fireplace but I had a fire only after dark, to conceal the smoke.

The town forest in Weston is contiguous with the town forests in surrounding towns. Although I was in a wealthy suburb, or perhaps because I was in a wealthy suburb, I could roam beyond Weston into Wayland, Lincoln, Concord, Carlisle, Acton, and Sudbury, crossing the occasional road or following railroad tracks for a quick traverse but mostly staying in the woods. I was pleased when Lynn Yerby came to visit me for a supper of brown rice with carrots. I was able to escort her from her house in Wayland and back entirely on footpaths through the woods, even after dark.

As the weather improved I was happy with my circumstances and went on long hitchhiking forays throughout New England. Nevertheless at the end of the summer I returned to Bloomington. I eventually established myself as a dance caller and singer in southern Indiana, following the example of my role model, Dudley Laufman, but adapting it to the Ohio River Valley. *Walden* became less and less pertinent to my endeavors, but I always kept my Bramhall House copy on the bookshelf in plain sight.

In 1975 I returned to Concord for a visit and to Walden for a nighttime swim. To my consternation I found an iron gate at the entrance, with a sturdy padlock securing a new fence. I remember saying to myself, as I headed for the railroad tracks, that whoever would try to lock the public out of the Walden did not understand the pond, nor the public. As I expected, the portion of fence nearest the tracks had already been opened with bolt cutters and rolled back.

The next day I learned that Walden Woods had been acquired from the Middlesex Commissioners by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management. The prior year, before the acquisition, a consultant named Richard Gardiner had published a *Walden Pond Restoration Study* recommending that the landfill be capped, that the owners of the trailers should gradually be bought out, and that a pay-to-park lot should be built limited to 350 spaces so utilization of the pond could be limited to about 1,000 persons maximum at any one time. After the parking lot was complete, any cars parked along the roadside should be ticketed and towed. Further, the grounds should be fenced and the gate locked every day at sunset.

Within the reservation an ambitious program of habitat restoration had been undertaken. The public beach remained, with floats to denote where swimming was allowed, but the concrete swimming dock and bath-house changing rooms had been removed. The junk had been hauled away. The banks had been planted with sapling trees to stabilize the soil and reduce erosion, and the walking path had been lined with snow-fence to prevent the public from clambering down to the water on one side or entering the trees on the other. The state was taking control through social engineering, and I was left with feelings of ambivalence.

I did not relocate from Indiana to live in Massachusetts again until 1985, when I accepted a job as a funding officer with the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, eventually becoming director of humanities programs. This agency was closely associated with the Democratic Governor, Michael Dukakis, as well as the Democratic President of the State Senate, Billy Bulger. It was generously funded, employing a total staff of sixty.

When the Republican Bill Weld was elected governor in 1990, however, the agency was an immediate target for budget cuts. During the next fiscal year I survived a forced merger with the Arts Lottery Council to form the Massachusetts Cultural Council, being appointed Director of Support for Individuals. The next year I was also appointed Director of Public Art. By 1992, when the staffing allotment was down to six, I volunteered to be unemployed.

During my seven years in state government I had worked closely with staff of a quasi-public funding agency, the Massachusetts Committee on the Humanities (now MassHumanities), as well as various state agencies including the Department of Environmental Management (now the Department of Conservation and Recreation). In this context I served on an interagency task force to consider the future interpretation of Walden Pond as a state park. I had not before imagined that I might one day coordinate funding to begin the reclamation of the pond as a public resource and develop themes of public education.

Despite this aspect of my work I didn't take time to read *Walden* again until I was laid off. This was the fifth time, and I read it carefully, also re-reading Walter Harding's *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (1965). To this biography I added Robert Richardson's more recent *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (1988). This fifth reading was unlike the previous ones, because I especially needed the guidance in my personal life.

Those who know my deep interest in Henry David Thoreau sometimes suppose I must identify with him, but this is not the case. He was deliberate, methodical, patient. My personality is much more like that of his friend William Ellery Channing—enthusiastic but erratic and unfocused. In reviewing Channing's poetry for *Graham Magazine* in 1843, Edgar Allen Poe wrote, "It may be said in his favor that nobody ever heard of him."

Nevertheless, in 1992, facing the need to be self-employed and devote myself to songwriting and performing, I put everything I had learned about theater and music, as well as everything I had learned from Thoreau's ideas, into composing *Songs from Walden Pond*. Pianist Jacqueline Schwab and I worked up a recital version of the songs interspersed with spoken recitations; we performed the piece extensively in the northeast from Maine to Maryland.

At a meeting at the Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, Massachusetts, the director asked me, if I could present any theatrical production in the auditorium, what would I want to do? The facility had been built in 1975 by Scottish Rite Freemasons but at that time in 1993 the director was trying to transform it from an archival library for the Masonic fraternity into a museum and performance facility dedicated to the history of voluntary associations in the United States, much more welcoming to the local community.

Without hesitation I replied I would stage *Songs from Walden Pond* with a single actor, two contemporary dancers, and an ensemble of five instruments evocative of the 1840s: piano, cello, horn, hand percussion, and flute. The performance piece would be complete with costumes, hand props, stage props including a bed, a writing desk, and a floating rowboat moored to the lip of the stage. We would use the theatrical lighting grid and the sound system.

The director asked what the production would cost if he contributed space, technical crew, and box office services and I estimated \$4,800 dollars. "Can you guarantee that?" "Yes," I assured him, suddenly realizing I could have asked for five times that amount. He extended his hand, saying "Done deal. How about October?" My first call was to Grey Larsen, asking if he would be interested in scoring the arrangements and conducting the ensemble.

[I could leave the essay at that and go on to comment on the individual tracks, or I conclude with the latest controversy: Swimming across the pond is prohibited by DCR, free swimmers are now subject to arrest and fine.]

[And/or the latest amenity: DCR has widened the ancient foot path to accommodate those using wheelchairs, the trail leveled and smoothed to 6-8 feet wide all around the pond. Walden in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!]