'Infinite Expectation' and Thoreau

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By WILLIAM PACKARD

Henry David Thoreau was born 150 years ago today, on July 12, 1817. And before he died in 1862, this earnest surveyor, botanist and handyman from Concord, Mass., established himself as one of the outstanding pioneer spirits of our American heritage.

It may be helpful in considering Thoreau to think first of what is meant by this "American heritage." Certainly it doesn't mean a lot of fixed opinions handed down from one generation to another. It would appear to have more to do with the freedom of controversy, the conflict of opposing attitudes and ideas—a spirit of protest and debate, and sometimes even an overthrowing of traditional and accepted values. Involving an honest search for original experience, this heritage also insists on the liberty of mind and conscience that can make such a search possible.

Thoreau stands foremost among those Americans who insist on this liberty of conscience. He has been called "the cosmic Yankee," combining a mystical grasp of certain universal truths with a shrewd, eccentric practicality.

In his most influential essay, "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau stuns the reader by suddenly proclaiming his complete independence from any state or institution:

"Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined."

But how, we might be inclined to ask, do you expect to do any good in this world if you go and resign from your own society? Thoreau replies: "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad."

In that case, we then say, you had better get a number of other people on your side, you should be busy rallying a great many neighbors to this radical position of yours, perhaps passing around petitions for everyone to sign. Thoreau, however, is content to hold his position alone: "Any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already."

Well, we may argue, have you no sense of the fitness of things, have you no respect for the law? And Thoreau replies: "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right."

But, we continue, this sort of thing only stirs up trouble, and it may lead to bloodshed. And here Thoreau is ready with his most telling retort:

"Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now."

Thoreau was willing to pay the price for these remarkable views—he didn't deceive himself that he could get away with anything in this world, and at one time he was sent to jail for refusing to pay the poll tax. But no matter what penalty he faced from his words or actions, there was still a fierce determination to "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."

While living in Concord, Thoreau had been in close association with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the transcendentalist ideas of self-reliance and a return to nature. And in 1845, at the age of 28, Thoreau went off by himself to live at Walden Pond. The plot of land cost him $8.08, and his food cost 27¢ a week. There, in the freedom and privacy of nature, he was able to put his principles of independence to the test; and the result was "Walden," surely one of the most impressive documents of individual liberty ever written.

In "Walden," Thoreau is pessimistic about daily trade and its effect on the moral climate of mankind—"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." His own prescription for finding a right relationship with the world is stoical insofar as it depends on an inner attitude, a certain disposition of the will:

"We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep."

This attitude explains his own choice of voluntary withdrawal from the world: "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."

Perhaps the most disquieting thing about Thoreau is his sincerity, the awful sense that this man means everything he is saying. At times it takes the form of a rough shucking of all social hypocrisies so that he can grasp hold of some hidden kernel of reality, and then it takes the form of gentle sarcasm, a mocking laughter at the way the rest of us lead—or are led through—our lives.

But most rewarding about Thoreau is his enthusiasm for the truth, and his record of the courage of the individual conscience flying in the face of an entire world that it considers to be going the wrong way. His uniquely personal form of moral protest is a timeless achievement, in the same spirit as our Declaration of Independence and exerting a profound influence on thinkers and reformers from Tolstoy to Gandhi to Martin Luther King. An astonishing variety of men have responded to Thoreau's example of uncompromising honesty and to his firm conviction that life without principle is not worth living.

Thoreau's vision is one of the finest legacies of the American heritage, and his expectation remains authentic. As he puts it in the final sentence of "Walden":

"There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."