

“Life in the Senses”

(from *Walden Contemporaneous*)

by Norman Weeks

Let us consider the person and mind of Henry Thoreau.

First of all, Henry Thoreau was a very sensuous person.

That might seem an incongruous characterization of a New Englander born into Puritan and Calvinist culture. Nonetheless, not only did Henry cultivate each sense to exquisite refinement, but he coalesced them all, until his entire body became one most sensitive sense. “*The whole body is one sense,*” he proclaimed, surely about himself.

The evidence for his sensuousness is in his many vivid transcriptions of what he saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and felt. Much of the content of what he wrote is description of simple sense-experience.

Comparing what Henry recorded to my own similar experiences, I sometimes get the daunting impression that what I saw in flat black-and-white, as it were, Henry saw in color and depth, what I heard muffled he heard keenly, what I may have vaguely got a whiff of he inhaled deeply, what I ate distracted he smacked and savored, what I touched while wearing gloves he fondled with bare fingers.

In the “Spring” chapter of *Walden*, Henry wrote about pond water temperatures. He reported the thermometer readings, —what an instrument told him, quantifying the differences—, but he also remarked how he who wades in shallow water feels through his toes the warmer water in the two or three inches along the shore compared to the colder water a bit farther out. The tips of the toes are tenfold as sensitive as the tip of the thermometer. If you really want to know about water temperatures, Henry continued, go swimming. You will sense through your whole body the warmer water at the surface compared to the deeps. (Of course, to learn by the sensory method, you have to be willing to sometimes suffer some physical discomfort.)

That was the way Henry knew Walden Pond, not by reading about it, but by swimming naked in it.

That is not to say that Henry was unread. Far from it; he was one of the better read men of his time. But reading was for winter days, when, the ice covering Walden, it was impossible to go swimming.

It should be obvious that I'm not talking about any Neronian sensuality here. It is the sensorily deprived, rather than the sensorily satisfied, who fall into the perversions of the senses. No, there is no moral objection to Henry's baths in Nature, his swimming naked in Walden. In fact, he did it to purify himself, to cleanse off the dirt of the land.

Henry said that no one knew the taste of the berry except the one who had plucked it fresh from the vine. (He never tasted the wax or petroleum derivatives with which our supermarket fruit is coated and preserved, nor did he have to remember to remove the sticker from the fruit before he ate it.)

Our world, everything in it, was ripe for plucking by the senses. Sense-experience in itself was a pleasurable human enjoyment; no Puritan scruples bothered Henry on that account. (*"We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life."*)

Beyond pleasure, the senses enabled direct learning, the swimming rather than reading. Most important of all, life itself is in the senses. If we are to live, we must live in the senses.

Living in the senses seems childish, especially coming from a Harvard educated man. Fortunately, his education did not seduce Henry into intellection-as-life. He kept the good sense and good senses of his boyhood.

To Henry, the senses were the pleasure-of-life, the true learning, the experience of life itself. So crucial to his consciousness were his senses that he rigorously protected them against any muddling. *"I would fain keep sober always,"* he resolved.

Instead of liquor and tobacco, Henry found his intoxication in a full swallow of fresh water or a deep draft of early morning air, —a quaint notion to those of us who suspect even bottled water and worry over the ozone advisory.

As with dulling the senses, so with stimulating them artificially. Henry could dispense with even coffee.

To continue on the subject of the senses as the means to learning: "He was alive from top to toe with curiosity," his friend Ellery Channing said about Henry.

Henry's sensuousness, childlike though it was, was not childish in mere self-indulgence. Henry was not the boy who, finishing the chocolate cake and ice cream, immediately pops a piece of candy into his mouth. No, the senses are perceptive; they are the means to experience the world-as-it-is. Emerson had written that "The reliance on simple perception constitutes genius and heroism." Henry Thoreau was the genius and hero of perception.

What was there to be perceived? *“The solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact!”* Henry burst forth in Dionysiac enthusiasm.

“Be it life or death we crave only reality.” I’m not sure whether my contemporaries would agree with him on that, but reality is certainly what Henry wanted. Reality was his passion. Henry was ravenous for reality.

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