The Day We Didn’t Read Thoreau: A Story from The Walden Project - New York

by Andy Webster

We never did end up reading Thoreau that day. If you’ve heard of The Walden Project, you know that this is rare for us. On a normal day, the participants in our group—two teachers and thirteen teenagers—walk a half-mile through the woods to our outdoor “classroom,” which consists of a ring of mismatched rustic benches, lawn furniture, and an old ski lift chair all encircling a fire pit. This is our Walden. Once everyone has arrived and we’ve built a fire, we begin most days by reading a passage from Thoreau, then discussing his ideas and how they relate to our modern world. The conversation is usually a lively and meandering philosophical debate, regularly spanning topics ranging from psychology to current events, economics, literature, pop-culture, ethics, and much more. The high school students are earning college credit from Finger Lakes Community College as they take time away from high school to spend a year in the woods exploring the same fundamental questions that guided Thoreau’s sojourn to Walden Pond: What is my relationship to myself?, What is my relationship to society?, and What is my relationship to nature?

The Walden Project was started in 2000 by Matt Schlein, a visionary teacher from Vergennes Union High School in Vermont. In contrast to conventional education, which prioritizes efficiency, standardization, and competition, The Walden Project was meant to celebrate nonconformity and provide space for students to deeply connect with nature, with their sense of purpose in life, and with each other. In 2017, I asked Matt if I could start a second Walden Project based at the RMSC Cumming Nature Center in Naples, New York, and he agreed. As I write this now, we are nearing the end of our fourth year.

Most mornings, the students get dropped off at a parking area next to the trail, and then we all walk up the hill together. But on this cold February day, I asked everyone to meet at the Nature Center across the street to borrow snowshoes. This being the day after a big storm, we needed to break trail through deep snow. By this point in the winter, one gets weary from the cold weather, the long nights, and the general challenges that come from living in a small community where it feels like everyone knows your business. When you are out in the woods with the same fifteen people, day after day, huddled around a campfire, just about everyone has days when they wish they could be a bit more anonymous, laying low in the back of the classroom. February seems to be the most difficult month of the Walden year.

In warmer weather, the walk uphill through the woods is not very strenuous and most students can get to our site in less than ten minutes, but in the deep snow it can be exhausting. On a normal day, when we arrive at the site the woods will quickly fill with the sounds of axes splitting firewood, the chopping of vegetables for soup, and the rhythmic call and response of teenagers messing around together, playfully teasing each other and joking about movies and memes. (I am finally at an age where I don’t get most of their pop culture references, but I still love the sound of kids being goofy.) But on this day, when we finally arrived the mood was heavier than normal. We all needed some time to catch our breath. I could tell by the look on some of their faces that many were thinking wistfully about what school used to feel like when they sat in a warm classroom passively watching a video playing on a Smartboard screen, with modern conveniences like indoor plumbing nearby. The students started on their morning chores, slower than usual.

The fire was prepared, but not yet lit, when something changed. Without any remark or announcement, everyone gradually stopped what they were doing and their attention shifted to the birds. Something about them was . . . different.

The chickadees, nuthatches, and tufted titmice were encircling us much closer and more curiously than we’d ever seen before. They were behind us, beside us, above us, all around. We happened to have a small bag of birdseed which we were going to use to fill a feeder nearby. One student grabbed a handful, then crouched down with her hand outstretched. We all sat quietly watching her. There was a strong feeling of anticipation as we continued to wait. The look on her face had been pure hope, but then changed suddenly to a wide-eyed gasp and involuntary laughter that she could barely contain as the first little bird landed on her hand. No one said a word, but excited looks were exchanged around the circle as if to say, you saw that, right?! Moments later, the bag had been passed around and every student was sitting with an outstretched hand covered in sunflower seeds and corn kernels.

Fifteen of us sat in complete silence around an unlit campfire for over an hour, watching tiny birds land on us one by one. Some of us took out our cell phones to capture close-up photos of the chickadees on our hands, but there wasn’t a single person
who was even tempted to play a video game or start scrolling on social media. At that moment, the woods felt magical and alive, just as they did when we were kids.

Before the Walden Project, the teacher in me would have been tempted to lead a discussion about the chickadees, trying to find the “lesson” in what we could learn from the birds. Now, a few years in, I know better. When we have an authentic experience like this, there’s nothing that needs to be said to validate the value of the learning. (And, of course, to try to connect an experience like this to a learning standard would have been absolutely profane. Some learning cannot be measured by a test!)

I believe the most important thing I can do as a teacher sometimes is to just be present, allowing the experience to be whatever it needs to be for each person. After over an hour, one of the students broke the silence, expressing with an admirable
amount of vulnerability: “I was really struggling coming up the hill this morning, and it felt like the chickadees were our reward for that hike.”

It was almost noon when we finally lit the fire and began heating the Dutch oven full of vegetable soup. The original plan had been to read and discuss a passage from “Civil Disobedience,” but even after lunch we never got around to reading Thoreau or Jeffrey Cramer’s footnotes that day.

As our campfire circle came back to its usual energy and volume, several thoughts popped into my head. First, I was reminded of a passage from the “Visitors” chapter of Walden in which Thoreau wrote of his Canadian friend, Alek Therien: “as he sat on a log to eat his dinner the chickadees would sometimes come round and alight on his arm and peck at the potato in his fingers; and he said that he ‘liked to have the little fellers about him.’” I am guessing that what we had experienced that morning was probably just what Thoreau and Emerson were trying to convey when they were writing about their own walks through Walden Woods: a transcendental rapture that defies being captured by words. That day we weren’t reading about Thoreau’s experience, we were actually feeling the sensation of it. I like to imagine moments when Thoreau and Emerson were walking together and something beautiful made them gasp in wonder.

As an avid book collector for four decades, he put together a magnificent collection of books and papers by and about Thoreau, which included many unique and rare items—including a Thoreau manuscript letter, a previously unpublished Emerson manuscript letter, and a previously uncollected memorial piece about Margaret Fuller, among other treasures. One particular item of note is a copy of Henry Colman’s 1837 The Times: A Discourse Delivered in the Hollis Street Church in a rare presentation copy given by Thoreau to an unidentified recipient. Colman’s book was never previously identified as a work with which Thoreau was familiar, and it could have influenced his ideas on resistance to civil government.

The second thought was about the fact that in both Vermont and New York, The Walden Project is attempting to further Thoreau’s “experiment.” In his own words, Thoreau said that the methodology of this experiment was “to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.” In this tiny program nestled in the Finger Lakes of New York, Thoreau’s research continues, and on one snowy February morning we discovered that, though the march uphill through the snow can be mean and exhausting, if you show up in the woods and you are open to the possibility of a chickadee landing on your finger, sometimes life is indeed sublime.

• Andy Webster is the Lead Teacher at The Walden Project - New York. He lives on a small organic farm in the town of Naples with his wife and their four children.

Notes
2. Thoreau, Walden, 91.

The Robert J. Galvin Collection at the Walden Woods Project’s Thoreau Institute Library

by Jeffrey S. Cramer

“For as long as I can remember,” Bob Galvin (1938-2020) said, “I have loved books. I grew up in a house with books . . . . When Emily Dickinson wrote, ‘There is no Frigate like a book / to take us Lands away,’ she could have been talking to me.” Spoken like a true bibliophile.

Bob was well-known to many Thoreau Society members. He was a life-member of the Society, serving ten years on the board, four as its vice president, and serving on the Society’s investment committee. His license plate read THORO. His boat was named Concordiensis.

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The Robert J. Galvin Collection is now part of the Walden Woods Project’s Collections at the Thoreau Institute Library. While the Walden Woods Project is preparing a catalog of items in the Collection, please read more about Bob Galvin and take a look at a few highlights here: https://www.walden.org/collection/the-robert-j-galvin-collection/.

For more information about the Walden Woods Project and its collections, including the collections of the Thoreau Society, the Ralph Waldo Emerson Society, and now the Margaret Fuller Society as well, go to www.walden.org.

• Jeffrey S. Cramer is Curator of Collections for the Walden Woods Project.