April 2019

Two Men and the Simple Life

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From time to time we are all made aware of a basic characteristic of our economy, that it is dedicated to the fabrication of enormous quantities of things. And we as consumers are expected like Faust in the some of the old folk tales to have a magic purse which never runs out of gold pieces. If it do there always trading stamps and disount coupons to help us out. So we do what we can and pile up possessions through hard work and easy payments.

Sometimes we ask ourselves if this is all life is for, if man has no other purpose than to turn clay into wearerever aluminum or water and air into nylon stockings. We have the uneasy suspicion that this materialism which we enjoy - I certainly do - is no answer to man's creative and spiritual needs. But it is difficult to dam up the flow of goods and open a new channel. It is hard to break out of our pattern of living. Well, I want to talk to you about two men who did make the effort to see what more life had to offer, to see what life was like when it is stripped to its essentials. I call my investigation Two Men and the Simple Life, and it goes like this:

"Two Men and the Simple Life"
I hope that what I have to offer you tonight has some entertainment value. I thought that on a hot evening in August, you might be willing to listen to what two unusually articulate men have to say about an important experiment they both tried. They lived the experiment and wrote about it with both humor and conviction. One of them was living one hundred years ago, the other is a man of our own time who is in his middle forties. In this study group, we have spent considerable time in testing foundations. I thought that perhaps tonight we could take a walk out in the yard. I'd like to have my two students in the art of living point out some landmarks in the natural landscape. Please understand that I think it is also important to classify stone and to collect statistical data about its place in foundations. But tonight, I'd like to be neither original nor profound, to just be a vehicle which conveys to you the words of other men which I think are important. That statement should put you all at ease.

The two men are Henry David Thoreau, and E. B. White, and the two books from which I am going to read are Walden and One Man's Meat. I shall make no attempt to analyse these books, nor to discuss the worth of the men relative to each other. They both did something very unusual and I want them to tell you about it. They have, as Frost would say, the gift of gab and all I need to do is to supply a few questions in order to start the conversation going. To me they seem a little like neighbors, not ordinary neighbors to be sure, but men who have lived a little as I have and yet differently, and who have seen and experienced many of the same things but with much greater discernment.
I think in some degree that we can all say the same thing.

The unusual thing that they both did was to break the routine pattern of their life and set about making a new one. They must have had a reason for doing such a crazy thing and they must have been looking for something. Those are the two things I am most interested in. But I'm afraid that Thoreau and White will only partly satisfy yours and my curiosity in the time I'm going to give them. They are not what I would call obvious writers. They don't give themselves away for nothing. Their style is clean simple and mature, it is also highly charged with facts, details and figurative speech and the meanings are often left for the reader to find for himself.

There are two reasons why I'm letting the men speak for themselves. First, it's easier for me, I don't have to write paraphrases of their excellent talk. And second, I have been convinced for a long time that there is too much second hand information in the world. Occasionally I think we should go back to original sources, not as scholars always but on the human level, and the men who have found out whether good or bad something about life, let them speak for themselves. I think it is important to our purpose to notice that both of these men wrote in the first person singular. They did it deliberately. Thoreau says, "When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself on the shores of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again."
I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent. Some have asked what I got to eat; if I did not feel lonesome: if I was not afraid; and the like. Others have been curious to learn what portion of my income I devoted to charitable purposes; and some, who have large families, how many poor children I maintained. I will therefore ask those of my readers who feel no particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book. In most books, the I, or first person is omitted, in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk about myself so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.

White has this to say about his pronoun: "I see that my publishers are announcing that this particular book is in the first person singular, a fact I had hoped to conceal from them by starting a few sentences with another word than I. But since it is in the open, I won't make any bones about it. The first person singular is the only grammatical implement I am able to use without cutting myself. As a matter of fact, this quality in the book is a thing which perhaps gives it some relation to the war. It is a book of, for, and by an individual. In this respect it is anathema to our enemies, who find in individualism the signs of national decay. It is the "I" in a man which Hitler has set out to
destroy. I don't know what he proposes to substitute for it and I don't think he does. Individualism and the first person singular are closely related to freedom, and are what the fight is about. I've always believed that the individual was the thing, not man in the mass. Reformers and planners so often go wrong on this point. A tyrant, on the other hand, knows instinctively that he will get nowhere with his schemes unless he can persuade people to think not as individuals but as a group, or, better yet, not to think at all. ....... Here is a record of an individual pursuing the sort of peaceable and indulgent existence which may not soon again be ours in the same measure. I offer One Man's Meat not with any idea that it is meaty but with the sure knowledge that it is one man - one individual unlimited, with the hope of liberty and justice for all."

There you have what I like about them both, two men standing squarely on their own feet and looking about them as individuals - Henry Thoreau, born in 1817, the son of a small manufacturer, graduate of Harvard, raised in the town of Concord, friend of Emerson, Alcott, and Channing. The prophet whose influence on their lives was acknowledged by Tolstoy, Proust, Yeats, and Gandhi - E. B. White, born 1899, brought up in New York, editor of the New Yorker, a big city man, dealer in sophisticated writing.

These two men, one town-bred and one city-bred suddenly turned their backs on their environment and set out for the land with the energy and zeal of pilgrims. Something happened inside them, some dissatisfaction with the life they had, or some curiosity to try life in another way. But something, anyway, urged them away from the
They were concerned about themselves, about the kind of soil in which men grew. They wanted to find out if they weren't more of life than just a continual round of daily chores. It wasn't an exacting it was a problem in research to find the soil where they, as individuals, not as members of a society where rules and conventions were getting the best of them, could grow best.

It is interesting that there was an era when specialization was in an early stage, and the people were living a step above the nomad, but still primitive. Where, in an age where specialization is taken for granted, was the value of a farm a strong concern for the future, or of a farm a strong concern for the future, or of a farm a strong concern for the future?
Neither understood their long, Perhaps they didn't need to
they wanted a chance to see if
there wasn't more to life, or
accomplished in themselves, then
they were getting.
their present enterprise into a greatly different manner of living. Before asking them why they went, let's see where they went.

Thoreau says: page 110, then 42 & 43

White went to a farm in Maine which had belonged to his grandfather. He describes it in these words pp 42 & 43.

And here is a paragraph showing White, the farmer as a going concern pp 74 Wednesday.

It may be obvious to you why these two professing individualists went respectively to Walden Pond and the Salt Water farm. But I think I should like to have them answer that question in their own words. Thoreau at least is explicit when he says: pp 114-115, 117. And he emphasizes the aim to be kept in mind by these words pp 108.

White gives us no such positive statements, perhaps he was not such a fierce hunter of the simple life, but the implication of this anecdote is plain, I think. pp 1.

He may describe the touchstone on which he wished to set his fundamental butt in this paragraph: "How are you going to keep from getting provincial?" asked one of our friends quite solemnly. It was such a sudden question, I couldn't think of any answer, so just let it go. But afterward I wondered how my friend, on his part, was going to keep from getting metropolitan.

But if he had as definite a reason as Thoreau he doesn't give it outright. Since he is a master of the oblique reference let me read you a few pages from the chapter called A Shepherd's Life to show you, by inference why he came to the farm: pp 189-190 and 192-193.
The problem to me was, did they find a different life than the one they left. Or was it the same thing all over again. Did either of them for example find simplicity, peace, faith, the right soil in which individuals can flourish? What did they find anyway, what have they to say about it themselves? Well, they found different things, you'd expect that. They certainly don't sound as if they found defeat - it would be hard to find two other books with so much of the bounce and zest for living. No, they never give up the search. Apparently they made enough progress the keep them encouraged. I suspect they found more satisfaction than they expected.

Thoreau for example found delight in solitude. "I find it wholesome," he says, "to be alone the greater part of the time." I love to be alone. I have never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." But he was never dependent on the society of people. He would as soon do without them. Or, as he said, "Give me a good Indian."

As for simplicity, listen to him on the subject of furniture! pp 59-60-61

In contrast to Thoreau's love of solitude, White finds a great deal of pleasure and instruction in a New England town meeting pp 126-138

One thing they share enthusiastically, a liking for their own statistics, as if they could prove by figure's what their lives added up to. I think, in these days of the C P A and its retreat before the scowls of our business men, we should
see what it cost Thoreau to live at Walden. Here are his own budget results. pp 82-85 & 95

This appreciation of their own figuring is about the only thing they share in mathematics. White's expenses soar like a hawk above Thoreau's woodchuck economy. Here is White complaining to Henry Wallace about the farm income and backing it up with his own experience.

elbow room

Thoreau found the ***xxx*** to follow the bent of his genius, which he said was a crooked one. He liked to get at things thru the back door, thru talking in opposites, Beware, he said, of doing good. "If I knew for certain that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life." And again he said, "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad and if I repent of anything it is very likely to be my good behavior.... One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels."

He found time to look hard and bitterly at the ***xxx*** materialism which, he found, infecting the spirits of men "The mass of men," he reflects, "lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country and console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats.... it is characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things." And he explains in detail what he means pp 30-31

Mr. White finds his right to be an individual threatened from another source. ***xxx*** By this apparently innocent example, he poses one of the most important problems of our
Thoreau continually labors to instruct us, to point out the true ends for which we live. From his little house on the shore of Walden Pond he points an accusing finger at the poor in spirit, the laggard, the man satisfied with the second best. He found time for reading and the mere abstract word "reading" makes him raise his voice in stern admonition pp 133-134 (this is a note for teachers to remember)
White is also a rebel, though he illustrates his spirit by an example which also shows how expensive it is for society to permit the individual to act as he wills.

pp 127-128

Thoreau never gives up his exhortations to the individual to stiffen his backbone and to be his own man. Poverty of means or circumstances never daunt him, you can always use your resources to better advantage than you do...pp 133-134

White is less the teacher, more the humanist; "While the old wars rage and new ones hang like hawks above the world, we, the unholy innocents, study the bulb catalog and order one dozen paper-white Grandiflora Narcissus (60 cents) to be grown in a bowl of pebbles. To the list which my wife made out I have added one large root of bleeding heart, to remind us daily of dead Christians and living Jews."

Still, I asked the question of myself, what did these men really find, or did they find anything that satisfied them, anything that was a clue at least to what they were looking for. No one who has read Walden can doubt that Thoreau did, lessons for us on the growth of the individual on the enrichment of the inner life, on the discarding of useless wealth, the stifling of the spirit by possessions are on almost every page. But I wondered if I could find anywhere his record of what the Walden Pond, that was the image in his mind, meant to him. The Walden Pond near Concord was only a reflection of some thing he had in his mind.
As near as I can come to it in Walden, this is what Thoreau meant us to know, first, "It is never too late to give up our prejudices." Next, "I should say rather, Set about being good." And last this sermon with its use of symbolism at the end: pp101-102-103

It seems to me that White comes out somewhere near the sameplace. He, too, speaks in symbol but he finds the living word in his neighbor Dameron pp 124-125-126

That, my friends, is what the simple life does for you. You'll never learn to be a collectivist living in the country. The question is, I suppose, since we can't all live at Walden Pond or Salt Water farm, how far will our society permit our individualism to go?