

Seven Generations

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“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.” These words from Thoreau’s Walden provide us with an essential question which, asked often enough, can help us to deepen our lives. What would it mean for you to live deliberately? It’s one of those questions which have no final answer. That’s what makes them essential. That’s why it makes sense to ask them over and over again.

We gathered at the site of Thoreau’s little cabin, standing side-by-side inside the chain which marks where the walls once were. One by one each pilgrim tried to tell what it would mean to him or her to live deliberately. Some talked about their longing to let go of all the worry and ambition so as to live fully in the moment. Others spoke of long-held values that had served to frame and to focus their lives. I told my good companions that for me to live deliberately involves a particular discipline of mind that causes me to pause and maybe even breathe to quell the tendency to blame and so make peace and progress just a bit more likely. After everyone had spoken we walked the path around the pond completely captured by the glory of the autumn leaves reflected in still water. Crossing Walden Road back toward the parking lot we noticed wood smoke curling from the chimney of the replica of Thoreau’s cabin. We peered in through the open door to find Thoreau himself as if reborn and waiting for us.

Richard Smith is an historian who, for the past twelve years, has been playing the role of Thoreau in a wide variety of settings. He is so well-versed in Thoreau’s life and writings that when we engaged him in conversation we felt as though we were with the man himself. I sensed when we were with him that he was among those for whom living deliberately meant mostly living in the moment. “Simplify, simplify, simplify,” he insists in Walden. Though his 1849 essay Resistance to Civil Government, commonly known as “Civil Disobedience” made its way around the world influencing leaders as diverse and powerful as Tolstoy, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, when asked about the place of activism in his life he told us that he saw no purpose in politics. He didn’t vote. He didn’t hope. He didn’t organize. He could not have imagined and would have been unlikely to support, the environmental movement his efforts inspired. Though we now know he was a prophet he saw himself as a naturalist, a teacher and yes, as a recluse.

“What is the past if not unfinished work, swampy, fecund, seductively revisable?” Stephen Dunn’s superbly rendered question rings in our ears. Seductively revisable? Can we really change the past? I think not. But there is a far more subtle implication to the notion that the past can be unfinished work. Those of us familiar with the ways of grief discover that our most significant relationships continue to grow and to change even and especially as we grieve the passing of someone we’ve loved. My mother and I had a difficult, stormy relationship. We were both of us, self-critical to a fault and that critique became the driving force of tensions we

could never quite resolve. We often managed to be kind, sometimes even forgiving, but only since her death have I been able to remove my armor long enough to let her become fully human in my heart; to imagine how often (she) craved love, or felt useless, or yearned for some justice in this world.” Just as the past is “seductively revisable,” the future is profoundly fluid.

Seven generations the old ones say. In some traditions we are asked to temper our actions by considering how we live our lives in light of their effect on those who will be living seven generations after us. Others ask us to live in the present moment with a deep awareness that stretches back three generations and forward three. Three plus three plus now makes seven. The point is that we need to learn to live deliberately. We need to be self-interested enough to care where we come from and collectively to help to determine where we’re going. We need to become a prophetic community.

In the introduction to their new book *A House for Hope: the Promise of Progressive Religion for the 21st Century*, John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker write: *Earth is our habitation—the home that gives us birth and is our final resting place. Building on the liberal theological heritage, which affirms that salvation belongs in this world, how do progressive people of faith regard the earth itself, the reality of death, and the hope for life that is just, abundant and sustainable for all? Given that earth itself is threatened by global warming, and its ecologies damaged by humanity’s failure to establish just and sustainable economic systems, what constitutes a progressive eschatology? Eschatology is the topic in theology that deals with the ultimate ‘end’ of life and of the earth, from the Greek ‘eschaton’, the last or final things. This is where we begin.”*

Fundamentalist religion has given eschatology a bad name. Images of the Rapture or of that heavenly brothel, to which only martyrs of the faith may gain admittance, make one want to ignore if not to actively oppose this study of end things. Why not simply live in the moment and take joy in it? The trouble is that when progressives turn away reactionaries will always have their say. When we keep silent we forfeit the field to the forces of prejudice and exclusion. I tell you without active opposition, without articulate, prophetic voices calling for a far more loving, far more just new world we will have less and less reason to hope.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride adorned for her bridegroom. And I heard a loud voice from above saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with us. God will dwell with us, and we shall be God’s people. God will be with us. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” These words from the 21st chapter of the Book of Revelation point to a new way of being, a new way of being human, a new way of being human together. It points to the possibility that we might yet become the Beloved Community, the New Jerusalem beyond division and disparity. You and I must not stand down when duty calls. And duty, dear friends, calls us now to set aside our cynicism and to be restored by hope.

Rebecca Parker writes: *“Our hope need not be that New Jerusalem will descend from on high, into the smoking ruins of an earth destroyed by self-fulfilling prophecies of violence. Even less need our hope be that a righteous few will be raptured to another world. Nor do we need to look only to the future, laboring to serve an idealized version of what could be. Our hope can be that from the heart of this world paradise will arise. It will arise from the seeds of Eden sown*

everywhere, from the life that is within us and around us in our communities and culture; from the gifts of our resistance, compassion and creativity; and from the very stones crying out their praise for the presence of God who is here, now, already wiping the tears from our eyes."

Ask yourself then, what would it require, what would it mean for me to live deliberately? Ask it over and over again. Ask it now, today, three days before Election Day when, we the people have our say as we renew the honored ritual which still might further freedom. Ask it every morning when you settle in to pray. Ask it in "the splinters of the thunderbolt." Ask it though you know our "needs and nature" make it awfully hard for us to change. We have choices to make friends. May we make them mindful of that good great cloud of witnesses who watch and of the many generations who await what wisdom and new vision we might yet summon in their interest and in our own.

May it be so and amen.

Our Parents

Our parents died at least twice,
the second time when we forgot their stories,
or couldn't imagine how often they craved love,
or felt useless, or yearned for some justice
in this world. In their graves, our parents' need
for us is pure, they're lost without us.
Their honeymoon in Havana does or does not
exist. That late August in the Catskills-
we can decide to make them happy.

What is the past if not unfinished work,
swampy, fecund, seductively revisable?
One of us has spent his life developing respect
for the weakness of words, the other for what
Must be held on to; there may be a chance for us.

We try to say what happened in that first house
where we were, like most children, the only
needy people on earth. We remember
what we were forbidden, who got the biggest slice.
Our parents, meanwhile, must have wanted something
back from us. We know what it is, don't we?
We've been alive long enough.

Stephen Dunn

The Beaks of Eagles

An eagle's nest on the head of an old redwood on one of the
precipice-footed ridges
Above Ventana Creek, that jagged country which nothing but
a falling meteor will ever plow; no horseman
Will ever ride there, no hunter cross this ridge but the winged ones,
no one will steal the eggs from this fortress.
The she-eagle is old, her mate was shot long ago, she is now mated with a son of hers.
When the lightning blasted her nest she built it again on the same tree,
in the splinters of the thunderbolt.
The she-eagle is older than I; she was here when the fires of eighty-five raged on these
ridges,
She was lately fledged and dared not hunt ahead of them but ate scorched meat. The
world has changed in her time;
Humanity had multiplied, but not here; our hopes and thoughts and customs have
changed, our powers are enlarged,
Our powers and our follies have become fantastic,
The unstable animal never has been changed so rapidly. The motor and the plane and the great
war have gone over us,
And Lenin has lived and Jehovah died: while the mother-eagle
Hunts her same hills, crying the same beautiful and lonely cry and is never tired; dreams the
same dreams,
And hears at night the rock-slides rattle and thunder in throats of these living mountains.
It is good for us
To try all changes, progress and corruption, powers, peace and anguish, not to go down the
dinosaur's way
Until all our capacities have been explored; and it is good for us
To know that our needs and nature are no more changed in fact
In ten thousand years than the beaks of eagles.

Robinson Jeffers