

**First Unitarian Church of Wilmington**  
**“Pay Attention!” by Rev. Pamela Wat, Senior Minister**  
**November 10, 2019**

**“To Live Deliberately” by Henry David Thoreau**

Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear, nor do I wish to practice resignation, unless it is quite necessary. I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, I want to cut a broad swath, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. If it proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; Or if it is sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.

**“Pay Attention!” by Rev. Pamela Wat**

Our story today was a story about a bear named Henry who lives in a cabin out in the woods and who is writing a book. In this congregation with so many long-time Unitarian Universalists, I suspect there must be at least a few of you who know which famous Unitarian this Henry bear character is in real life.

Yes! Henry David Thoreau who famously went out into the woods because he wished “to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life... to learn what life has to teach, and not, when [he came] to die, discover that [he had] not lived.”

Henry David Thoreau (both the man and the bear) were dedicated to their “work.” But the “work” was not so much the writing part, but the paying attention part. For two years and two months, Thoreau lived in a small one-room cabin out at Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, paying attention to nature and to people, to “learn what life has to teach”, to “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life”, and *then secondarily* to write about it.

I remember when I first encountered “Walden” I was in high school learning about the Transcendentalists. In my mind, when Thoreau lived at Walden, he had retreated into the middle of nowhere and lived in isolation for those two years. But the truth is (as our story illustrated today), he was within walking distance to the center of Concord. Downtown Concord is the same distance to Walden Pond as this church is to Brandywine Creek State Park.

So imagine it—you have built a cabin out at Brandywine Creek State Park and you are living there for two years and two days paying attention to nature and writing your

thoughts. Let's face it—people are out there all the time. Hikers, birders, people who have packed a lunch, disc golfers, high school cross country runners, etc. If you lived out there, I bet you could even order in pizza from your phone, or call an Uber to take you to the mall.

And so when Thoreau was out at Walden, people were there all the time. Sometimes to see him, some just out for a stroll in the woods, and others just passing through. He encountered families, businessmen on their day off, people wanting to chit chat.

In his book *Walden*, Thoreau writes honestly about his judgments of various visitors. The “restless committed men, whose time was all taken up in getting a living or keeping it; ministers who spoke of God as if they enjoyed a monopoly on the subject,” the snooping housewife who somehow came to know that his “sheets were not as clean as hers.”

He says, “The old and infirm and the timid, of whatever age or sex, thought most of sickness, and sudden accident and death; to them life seemed full of danger.”

He spoke of men who overstayed their welcome and who talked on and on. He wrote, “men who did not know when their visit had terminated, though I went about my business again, answering them from greater and greater remoteness.” (p143)

But it isn't all bad. He wrote of more welcome visitors to the cabin. “Children come a-berrying, railroad men taking a Sunday morning walk in clean shirts, fisherman and hunters, poets and philosophers, in short, all honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom's sake, and really left the village behind.” (p145)

Thoreau says that in his cabin he kept one chair for solitude, two chairs for company, and three chairs for society. More than that could visit, but they'd have to stand.

It makes me wonder what version of me might show up to Thoreau's cabin and what he, in all his attentiveness might see of me while I am there. He might write in his journal, “a woman named Pam was here scrolling through Facebook on her phone and complaining about how the democrats were handling the impeachment process. I tried to show her how the light reflects so beautifully on the pond, but she just kept trying to show me sarcastic Facebook memes.”

Henry David Thoreau did not go out into the woods simply to get away from people. If he did, he didn't get very far. In addition to encountering businessmen and families taking a walk, Thoreau had visitors who were in deep need. People who are

debilitatingly lonely, people who were poor and needing food. Enslaved people who were constantly listening for dogs and men trying to hunt them down as they made their way north.

Two years ago at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, the annual Ware Lecture was given by Bryan Stevenson, who is an attorney (and Delawarean) and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. He talked about his work with people who are poor, who are wrongly condemned, and who are trapped in the criminal justice system. And he said that one of the things that changed his life was getting to know people on death row. He said that our lives can be changed simply by getting to know people we wouldn't otherwise know and he urged us to "get proximate" to people so that we can pay attention to their story. There is a way in which, Thoreau, living out in his cabin in the woods, actually got more proximate to people who needed his attention.

As I read *Walden* I am aware that spending two years and two days out in the woods did not make Thoreau perfect. It did not bring him constant happiness or help him shake off his grumpiness. It didn't even bring him great professional success. Although it is a widely popular book now, it was not so in his lifetime. Upon leaving Walden he stayed with the Emerson family a bit before moving into his parents' home and working at his family's pencil factory. But he continued to walk in the woods every day and continued to journal, and he became a conductor for the underground railroad. And so, he was extraordinarily successful and his work was undeniably important.

I think that is true (as well) for Thoreau's friends who were part of this group of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Unitarians and Transcendentalists practicing the art of paying attention.

In our story today, Henry the bear encounters these friends: William Ellery Channing urges Henry to go fishing with him (Channing is considered the "father of American Unitarianism" and an instigator of transcendentalist thought), Frederick Hosmer (hymn writer whose hymn, "Forward Through the Ages", was an anthem of the Social Gospel movement—an early social justice movement of religious people), Ralph Waldo Emerson (Unitarian minister and influential writer), Amos Bronson and Abby May Alcott (parents of Louisa May Alcott and he was an educator who was also a 19<sup>th</sup> century vegan before "vegan" was a word), Nathaniel Hawthorne and his wife Sophia Peabody (both writers, he famously writing "The Scarlet Letter"). This group of people were fierce abolitionists, feminists, and advocates for children.

The bears of this story are all real characters who, like many of us (in this time and place), were looking around society, and noticing corruption and greed. They became wary of institutions and systems that become self-serving over time and that privilege some people over others. They critiqued religious systems that had a kind of

fundamentalist focus on otherworldly things (like a vengeful God or a preoccupation with the rules of salvation) or, on the other side of the pendulum, critiqued people who were too “intellectual”, staying in their heads and avoiding their hearts and unable to see the mysteries and beauty of life. Instead these Transcendentalists sought a balance inviting one another to reflect on their own inner wisdom and the wisdom inherent in nature.

In the fall of 1837 (some years before Thoreau had any thoughts of retreating to Walden Pond), Ralph Waldo Emerson forever changed the life of his friend Henry David Thoreau with a simple question, “Do you keep a journal?”

Thoreau, had recently graduated in the top half of his class at Harvard. The country was in an economic depression and Thoreau went to work at his family pencil factory, and on Emerson’s urging, Thoreau started journaling. Eight years later, he got permission to use a piece of Emerson’s land off of Walden Pond, built there a small cabin and lived for the next two years paying attention and writing about it.

Mary Oliver wrote that "attention is the beginning of devotion." If attention is the beginning of devotion, then we might want to be deliberate about where we turn our attention, because where we turn our attention, becomes that to which we devote our lives. And we do not want to end up at the end of our lives only to learn that we devoted our lives in the wrong direction. To learn at the end of life that we have not lived, because as Thoreau reminds us, “living is so dear.”

Living is so dear. Don’t we know it? In the last several weeks this congregation has lost beloveds to death. Joe Sandberg. Hetty Francke. Alma Steinmetz. Ahna Sue Pressly Polss. The thing about death is that it makes us confront how fleeting life can feel. How it can seem to end in such an instant, just when we were starting to get the hang of it.

With death so much in the air, I have been reflecting a lot on my years as a hospice chaplain. The first year I was a hospice chaplain (sixteen years ago), I met a lot of hospice patients who were veterans. As a Gen Xer, I felt very removed from experiences of war. They would name battles they were in or medals they had received and I didn’t know what they were talking about.

And many of these veterans told me that they had never before talked about the war (in any meaningful way), but here we were. They were in their final weeks or days of their life and finally choosing to talk about the trauma and the violence. Choosing to speak out loud about the pain of war and about losing so many friends all at once, finally talking about the guilt of surviving, and the guilt of killing. And so often they would tell me a story from the war, and then end on the same heartbreaking question, “Chaplain, will God forgive me?”

And something I had to learn was not to answer those kinds of theological questions, but I really want to. I want to give someone that quick reassurance (and sometimes I still

forget and say, “yes, yes, God will forgive you”). But what I’ve learned is that when someone asks me, “Will God forgive me”, what they are really saying, “I feel really bad about something.” And when I pay attention to what that person really needs to talk about, I notice it is not whether there is some God who dispenses forgiveness, but about why they feel bad and about regret and pain and ultimately healing and recovery (which, they may find, includes God’s forgiveness).

My job as a chaplain and minister is to help you turn your attention toward your inner wisdom. And so when you ask me a theological question, the best response I have might have is, “tell me what you believe” or “tell me why you are asking this question.”

When you ask me whether you will see your loved one in some kind of afterlife (which is the theological question), what I hope to ask you in return is “what is your life like now, without them?” and to listen to your loneliness or regret or anger, to listen for your longing for this person who is gone, so that you can access your inner wisdom (which, you may find, includes a belief in an afterlife).

“Attention is the beginning of devotion.” And our Unitarian Transcendentalist ancestors suggest that we not devote so much attention to otherworldly ideas (like will God make me feel better about this) *and* not to devote so much attention to intellectual ideas (like trying to prove there is no God).

To the biggest questions of life, like “does God forgive me” or “will I see my beloved after death” there are no adequate theological answers and there are no adequate intellectual answers, but instead we respond by paying attention *and* we invite the questioner to pay attention—to pay attention to where they are in their lives, to what they need, and how God is working in and around them.

We might take them out into the woods. We might sit by a pond or a garden. We might travel through time and conjure memories—happy and sad, profound and mundane.

We might notice the bird that settles on a nearby branch as one speaks of grief and longing. We might notice how, as one becomes preoccupied with illness or infirmity, that the wind kicks up and carries in the fresh smell of pine. Or how regret or worry can be interrupted by rising early and seeing the sun rise through the trees, or listening to the sounds of nature waking up for yet another precious day of living.

Going out into the woods, Thoreau paid attention to people he knew (fellow Transcendentalists, and others from Concord) and he paid attention to people he didn’t now (people who were hungry and needing a bit to eat, enslaved people seeking freedom), and he might have shared some food or directed them north to safety, but at his best, I like to believe he paid attention.

Is there any more important work in our lives than paying attention to all that is calling us back to life? And using that attention to call others back with us?

Thoreau wrote, "I took a walk in the woods and came out taller than the trees."

And then he went on to make pencils, to help enslaved people find freedom, to continue to walk in the woods every day, and to write about all of it.

May we be so bold.