

The Transformative Nature of Nature

ASLE

June 23, 2005

Eugene, OR

Dr. Sharon Irish Bevins
Florida Gulf Coast University
Ft. Myers, Florida

In his essays, Thoreau writes of his passion for walking and the consummate importance of walking in his life. These essays began as journal entries, then became a delivered speech, and were revised and expanded. Finally, the essays were published after his death in 1862 (*The Thoreau Reader*, 2005). Thoreau writes: "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature, rather than a member of society (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, p. 59). For those of you that also know Aldo Leopold's work, this sounds very similar to his concept of a land ethic: "In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it" (Leopold, 1949, p. 240).

Today, I'd like to discuss Thoreau's essays on walking and his relationship with nature, comparing these with Mary Oliver's poems. As you may know, Mary Oliver is a Pulitzer Prize winning poet. Both authors creatively describe an intimate relationship with the natural world - Thoreau through his journaling and Oliver through her poetry. Thoreau discussed the art of walking and gives us an historical perspective on the one of the terms used to describe a special kind of walking. For him, walking is his way of communing with nature:

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks. . . people who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going à la Sainte Terre", to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a Sainte-Terrer", a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. . . Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. . . For every walk is a sort of crusade (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, pp. 59-60).

More than walking as a crusade, Thoreau describes how necessary walking is to him. It is necessary to all aspects of health: the physical, emotional, and spiritual health domains:

I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least -- and it is commonly more than that -- sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements. . . . When sometimes I am reminded that the mechanics and shop-keepers stay in their shops not only all the forenoon, but all the afternoon too, sitting with crossed legs, so many of them --as if the legs were made to sit upon, and not to stand or walk upon --I think that they deserve some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, p. 61).

And with the following passage, he further describes walking as an imperative. He simply cannot understand how people do not have the same pull to the natural world as does he. He contemplates how they are different from him in the following excerpt:

I who cannot stay in my chamber for a single day without acquiring some rust. . . and I confess that I am astonished at the power of endurance, to say nothing of the moral insensibility, of my neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day for weeks and months, aye, and years almost together. I know not what matter of stuff they are of. . . . How womankind, who are confined to the house still more than men, *stand* it I do not know; but I have ground to suspect that most of them do not stand it at all (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, pp. 61-62).

No one can see through her eyes of another. However, Oliver, through her poetry, provides us with a lens. She allows us to enter her inhabited world and illuminates a way of describing bonds with our natural world. For her, it is more than just one world, one view – it is “worlds” in its most plural sense.

White Flowers

Last night
in the fields,
I lay down in the darkness
to think about death,
but instead I fell asleep,
as if in a vast and sloping room
filled with those white flowers
that open all summer,
sticky and untidy, in the warm fields.
When I woke
the morning light was just slipping
in front of the stars,
and I was covered
with blossoms.
I don't know
how it happened—
I don't know
if my body went diving down

under the sugary vines
in some sleep-sharpened affinity
with the depths, or whether
that green energy
rose like a wave
and curled over me, claiming me in its husky arms.
I pushed them away, but I didn't rise.
Never in my life had I felt so plush,
or so slippery, or so resplendently empty.
Never in my life
had I felt so near
that porous line
where my own body was done with
and the roots and the stems and the flowers
began (Oliver, 1992, pp. 58-59).

Oliver is transformed into the fabric of nature -- becomes with it and part of it. She writes of "that porous line", the sense of permeability that allows us to move back and forth between us and some other world; that inability to determine where we end and some other world begins. She writes of being "claimed" by that "green energy", being pulled into it; "slippery", she writes, giving us a sense of sliding into that world. The aftermath of the experience is fulfilling; it leaves her "resplendently empty". We are lucky if we know of experiences that leave us both resplendently empty and yet so full; full to the brim with some experience and even satiated, as if she had just made love. There is that almost overwhelming sense of communing. I love that in her poetry she often uses the phrase "I don't know". She doesn't have to understand it to be transformed by it.

Thoreau also believes that we are transformed -- by exposure to the elements of nature and the result is a thickening, a covering over our finer aspects. This is not, in his view, a negative result. He believes, in fact, we are better for it. He writes:

Living much out of doors, in the sun and wind, will no doubt produce a certain roughness of character,—will cause a thicker cuticle to grow over some of the finer qualities of our nature, as on the face and hands, or as severe manual labor robs the hands of some of their delicacy of touch . . . There will be so much the more air and sunshine in our thoughts (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, p. 63).

He also worries that his everyday life will intrude too much on his natural realm. He finds it hard to forgive himself for not quickly acclimating to the sense of place in which he finds himself:

Of course it is no use to direct our steps to the woods, if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit . . . What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods? (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, pp. 64-65).

He feels an imperative to walk, to explore, to become one with the natural world. He feels the pull strongly as does Oliver. He writes:

. . . I know that something akin to the migratory instinct in birds and quadrupeds . . . that something like the furor which affects the domestic cattle in the spring, and which is referred to a worm in their tails, affects both nations and individuals, either perennially or from time to time (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, p. 70).

And, the following:

For I believe that climate does thus react on man, --as there is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences? Or is it unimportant how many foggy days there are in his life? I trust that we shall be more imaginative; that our thoughts will be clearer, fresher, and more ethereal, as our sky, --our understanding more comprehensive and broader, like our plains, --our intellect generally on a grander scale, like our thunder and lightning, our rivers and mountains and forests, --and our hearts shall even correspond in breadth and depth and grandeur to our inland seas (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, p. 73).

How then again does this transformation occur for Oliver? Listen to her words, her heightened sensitivity in the following poem:

Sleeping in the Forest

I thought the earth
remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging
her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds. I slept
as never before, a stone
on the riverbed, nothing
between me and the white fire of the stars
but my thoughts, and they floated
light as moths among the branches
of the perfect trees. All night
I heard the small kingdoms breathing
around me, the insects, and the birds
who do their work in the darkness. All night
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling
with a luminous doom. By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better (Oliver, 1992, p. 181).

Here is the spirit-altering event again, a “vanishing into something better”, somehow being transformed by the experience. Oliver never seems to remain untouched by her interactions with the natural world; they are indeed for her truly transformational. What does she leave of herself there? Is it symbiotic or is the flow only unidirectional? One always gets the sense she is always learning from her interactions and that there is reciprocity in the experience.

How do these ideas compare with those of Thoreau? Are Oliver’s expressions akin to Thoreau’s? In much of Oliver’s work, she alludes to a kind of rebirth through her relationship with the natural world. Thoreau provides us with a corresponding sentiment in this passage:

When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place—a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow of Nature. The wildwood covers the virgin mould, and the same soil is good for men and for trees (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, p. 78).

He also laments the fact that no one is writing about and for nature. He cannot find the literature that he seeks and he informs the reader of his search:

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him . . . whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring . . . to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature. I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild. Approached from this side, the best poetry is tame. I do not know where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, pp. 80-81).

Certainly, Oliver has written intensely and profoundly in a manner that likely would have pleased Thoreau. What would it have been like to have the two of them meet? What might they have written together? Thoreau writes of “a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun. Man cannot *know* in any higher sense than this” (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, p. 86). He writes about his own insightful and magical experiences. He offers us a window through which we can witness and behold a light—a light he has never seen before but realizes that he and others might see again and again. He is stirring in his eloquence:

I was walking in a meadow the source of a small brook, when the sun at last, just before setting, after a cold, gray day, reached a clear stratum in the horizon, and the softest, brightest morning sun-light fell on the dry grass and on the stems of the trees . . . It was such a light as we could not have imagined a moment before, and the air also was so warm and serene that nothing was wanting to make a paradise of that meadow. When we reflected that this was not a solitary

phenomenon, never to happen again, but that it would happen forever and ever, an infinite number of evenings, and cheer and reassure the latest that walked there, it was more glorious still . . . We walked in so pure and bright a light, gliding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it . . . and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman, driving us home at evening (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, pp. 91-92).

Thus, he concludes his reflections on walking. Walking is both an experiential process and its own objective. It provides a purpose, gives him sustenance, and finally, a type of salvation:

So we saunter toward the Holy Land; till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank side in autumn (Thoreau, in Rossi, 2002, p. 92).

I'd like to end this by reading part of a poem by Oliver, entitled *The Summer Day*. For me, it encompasses the significance that having an articulated sense of place brings to us all. I'll read you just the last part:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I've been doing all day.
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it that you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life (Oliver, 1992, p. 94)?

References

Lenat, R. *The Thoreau Reader*. Retrieved June 20, 2005, from <http://eserver.org/thoreau/>

Leopold, A. (1949). *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Oliver, M. (1992) *New and Selected Poems*. Boston, MA: Beacon.

Thoreau, H. D. (2002). Walking. In W. Rossi (Ed.), *Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press. (Original work published in 1862).