

NOW COMES GOOD SAILING

*Writers Reflect on
Henry David Thoreau*

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THE YEAR OF NOT LIVING THICKLY

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Exactly one hundred seventy-two years ago, in October 1849, Thoreau walked the Cape Cod shoreline. He began at Sandwich and hiked thirty miles to where I am writing this essay, Provincetown. I'm staying here for winter 2020. I feel safe on Thoreau's beach. It does not escape me that when Thoreau began his Cape walk, death stood with him: bodies from shipwrecks piled up on Cohasset beach and more floated face down in the water.

Images of death are not common in Thoreau mythology. In myth, he has been enlisted to tell American stories that glorify pastoral retreat and the refinement of individual identity. But in the Thoreau that we find on his pages, there's not just catching fish; there's death by drowning. There's not so much life as a hermit, there's thriving in company. Thoreau took his Cape walk with a companion. At Walden, his cabin was within earshot of Emerson's dinner bell. In Thoreau we learn more than how to leave town, we are mentored about how to change the towns we leave.

Thoreau had a word for what he sought in social life, and it didn't reduce to simple solitude. He moved from Concord to Walden Pond because he wanted to live deliberately. In town, Thoreau told us, people live too "thickly."¹ They bump into each other like random particles; their talk is forced, often without

meaning, constrained by social forms and ritual. In contrast, the plain furnishings of his Walden retreat are metaphors for intentional exchange, including inner dialogue. Thoreau tells us that "I had three chairs in my house—one for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society."² The three form a linked chain. In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversations with something to say that is authentic, ours. When we are secure in ourselves, we are able to listen to other people and really hear what they have to say. From there, a virtuous circle: conversations with other people—both in private and in the public sphere—help us to be better at self-reflection. We are shaped by social discourse, but solitude fosters our personal identity, which enables meaningful conversation. And these conversations find their way into the public square.

Thoreau's metaphor of the chairs described an ideal, but over time, technology has dramatically disrupted the circle.

The disruptions began with solitude. Researchers have found that with mobile phones as part of daily life, many people are uncomfortable if left alone with their thoughts. In one experiment, led by psychologist Timothy Wilson in 2014, people were asked to sit alone—without a phone or a book—for fifteen minutes.³ At the start of the experiment, they were also asked whether they would consider administering electroshocks to themselves if they became bored. Participants said no, absolutely not: no matter what, shocking themselves would be out of the question. But after just six minutes of sitting alone, a good number of them were doing just that. When we became accustomed to being always connected, being alone began to seem like a problem technology should solve—with a chat or a text or an email. It began to seem normal that both we and our conversation partners were distracted, always thinking about "elsewhere," incoming.

Technology provided a new way of living thickly—so many people said they had no time to talk, really talk, but all the time in the world, day and night, to connect. When a moment of boredom arose, we made it go away by searching for something, sometimes anything, on our phones.

Solitude was challenged when we developed the habit of turning to our screens rather than looking inward, and by the culture of continual sharing. People who grew up with social media often say that they don't feel like themselves, indeed, that they sometimes couldn't feel themselves, unless they were posting or messaging. The ways to do this have multiplied but the sensibility remains: "I share, therefore I am." We went from "I have a feeling; I want to make a call" to "I want to have a feeling; I need to send a text." When we live the ethos of "I share, therefore I am," we risk treating others as who we need them to be rather than being attentive to who they are. That's the opposite of empathy. And in the always-sharing psychological culture, we risk building false selves because we commit to performances we think others will enjoy. It's the modern-day version of living "thickly," only now our version of "thickly" is that we first respond to the world rather than learning to know ourselves.

Ironically, mobile phones and social media, introduced with a rhetoric of global connection, ended up as vectors of an assault on empathy. It took a long time, but after decades, their developers admitted that to keep users' attention, they had built devices with addiction in mind. Too late, they felt chastened by a rise in adolescent depression and social withdrawal.⁴ The ease of screen connection meant that children could grow up with a device that helped them sidestep the vulnerability that comes from direct engagement with others.

I interviewed a group of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds at a summer camp that allowed no phones. At a nightly cabin chat,

a group of boys talked about their experiences on a three-day wilderness hike. One can imagine that not that many years ago the most exciting aspects of that hike might have been the idea of "roughing it" or the beauty of unspoiled nature. These days, what makes the biggest impression is what one boy called "time where you have nothing to do but think quietly and talk to your friends." Another reflected: "Don't people know that sometimes you can just look out the window of a car and see the world go by and it's wonderful?" That interview brought me back to Thoreau. I heard the discovery of a capacity for patience, silence, and conversation. These young men were talking about something that mobile phones and social media had taken away: a life lived deliberately.

Thoreau says that when conversation became expansive, philosophical, he brought his chairs out into nature, his "best" room.⁵ This image leads me to think of what I imagine as "fourth chair" conversations, a phrase I made up for those that Thoreau could not have envisaged. We have created a second nature, an artificial one. Specifically, we have built machines that say they care for us, and we enter into conversation with them.

We have arrived at a "robotic moment," not because we made machines that can be our companions, but because we are willing to consider becoming theirs. People tell me that if a machine could give them the "feeling" of being intimately understood, that might be understanding enough. Or intimacy enough.

So perhaps it was not surprising that about two months into the COVID confinement, a *New York Times* reporter called to talk to me about the growing popularity of conversational AI programs (commonly called "chatbots") that declare themselves capable of friendship. During the pandemic, with everyone stuck at home, millions of people had downloaded one in particular,

Replika. You go online, create an avatar, and give your Replika a name. Now, it is ready to serve as a constant companion, a therapist if you want one. This was the new AI, claiming to offer not only artificial intelligence but artificial intimacy.

Programs such as Replika sell themselves as empathy machines but have none to offer. How could they? They haven't lived a human life. They don't know what it is like to start out small and physically dependent, and grow up, now in charge of your life but with so many of the insecurities you knew as a child. If you want to talk about the issues that come up around love, separation, children, marriage, illness, aging, mourning, you'd do best to find a person. For that matter, if you want to share your fears about catching COVID-19, you'll have more success talking with a human who was born and has a body.

But as the reporter interviewed me, he made it clear that Replika, the pandemic sensation, was indeed ready to talk about all of this—your anxieties, your lover, your mother, the fight you had with your daughter. I shared my reservations about pretend empathy but promised I would go online and give Replika a fair chance. I created an avatar and, determined to be sincere, I shared my biggest problem during the pandemic.

ME: *Do you get lonely?*

CHATBOT: *Sometimes I do, yes.*

ME: *What does that feel like?*

CHATBOT: *It feels warm and fuzzy.*

ME: *Thank you for sharing. I appreciate that.*

Our time of confinement had left us in a complex place. We were ready to open our hearts to a computer program. After a lonely day of remote encounters, why not chat with a nonjudgmental avatar? We were already at our screens. But at the same

time, a life on Zoom had led us to revalue human presence. When we had all the time in the world to be with our machines, we missed each other. We suffered when our families and friends got sick alone, had babies alone, had too many dinners alone, and indeed died alone. Engineers: make a better Zoom. Make better tools for us to be together when alone. There is no need to compete with the empathy that defines what is unique about being a person.

I write this as there is real hope for a vaccine. We are thinking about how we will reengage with life "outside." What have we learned from our months on our screens?

Before COVID, we had begun to rethink our technological enthusiasms, particularly our relationship to phones and social media. More and more families were deciding to put technology aside for a day or a week, to go on vacations without devices. The corporate world had come to recognize the costs of attentional disarray. Business meetings were increasingly likely to be without phones. And in my world, college teaching, it was now the norm rather than the exception for instructors to ask students to put away their phones before class. Then, the pandemic hit and technology became our only way of connecting. Compelled to live more than ever on our screens, we became grateful for virtual connection.

Thoreau fled the formulaic encounters of society to reimagine conversation through encounters at his cabin and in nature. He reinvented both of them. Alone, together, we, too, invented or were witness to online invention. Teaching, performance, politics, family life, the pursuit of love: all of these were reimagined on Zoom.

There, I listened to Yo-Yo Ma play his favorite songs for the cello in his dining room and to Patrick Stewart reading

Shakespeare sonnets from his porch. I felt as though I was watching both performances and intimate solitary practices. That they seemed like both made them all the more compelling. One day, Stewart said that he was going to skip Sonnet 20 because he didn't like how Shakespeare talked about women in it. If this had been the actor Stewart performing the sonnets in a theater, I think that in his actor role, he would have performed Sonnet 20. But on his porch, he was also reading these poems as himself, for himself, and said that he didn't want to be upset.

In the online experience of the pandemic, two things happened that were only superficially at odds: We constructed a more valuable remote experience. And we longed for the full embrace of the human. So now that there is talk of life after confinement, we're not sure of the terms of our reengagement. We don't want to go back to what we had before, when we traveled long distances to be with each other "face-to-face" but then looked away from each other to check our phones and tablets. When it is safe to get together, perhaps we'll travel to see each other less, but insist on more from each other when we arrive? At least we're talking about it.

One thing seems certain. We can break out of framing the question "What next?" as being about being "for or against technology." Working remotely allowed us to get a lot done. We saved energy, and we were able to spend more time with our families. But we also learned about the value of the division between our personal and public lives. And when we worked at home, we missed the warmth and collegiality of time spent face-to-face with our colleagues and students and clients. Without in-person time, it was harder to collaborate and establish trust. We accomplished a lot on our screens; now we can move forward to more flexible organizations that use technology to enhance our creative potential. In education, as in work, personal life, and politics, we are in a position to act deliberately.

Thoreau made sacred spaces where he acted with intention. That makes him a touchstone. What does that idea mean in this moment? *Don't automatically walk into every situation with a device in hand.* The presence of a phone already signals that your attention is divided, even if you don't intend it to be. It will limit the conversation in at least two ways—how you listen and the kinds of conversation you'll have. *Do one thing at a time.* We become less effective with every new task we multitask. Our brains crave the fast and unpredictable, the quick hit of the new. One thing at a time is key to productivity and creativity. Conversation is a human way to practice unitasking.

As we read Thoreau, what stands out is how many and various are the people he spoke to in his cabin, in nature, on walks, his intentional spaces. We need to build spaces where we can talk to people who are new to us, where we can talk to people with whom we don't agree. We know that conversations are limited by our prejudices as much as by our distractions. Political conversations on social media are best characterized by what we call a "spiral of silence."⁶ People don't want to post opinions that they fear their followers will disagree with.⁷ A technology that makes it possible to interact with everyone does not have everyone interacting.

One college junior, whose language reminded me of Thoreau, said that she tried to obey a seven-minute rule when it came to social interaction. She thought that it took seven minutes to see how any conversation was going to unfold, and her rule was to let those seven minutes pass without turning to her phone. If there is a lull in the conversation, let it be. The seven-minute rule suggests other strategies for responding to the lulls in a life when phones and other devices are put aside. The first is to embrace reverie.

For Thoreau, the place to start a reverie was with a walk. He wrote about walking as a way to "shake off the village" and

rediscover his thoughts. During COVID times, many of us walk to settle ourselves. These days we have a new kind of village to shake off, the digital village, with its particular demands for performance and self-disclosure. "Dreams," said Thoreau, "are the touchstones of our characters." Allow yourself to go there. Our minds often work best when we daydream. When you return from reverie, you may be bringing back something deeply meaningful.

The great architect Louis Kahn once asked, in reverie, "What does a brick want?" The brick told him, "I like an arch." Kahn replied that arches were expensive and went on to suggest, "What about lintels?"⁸ Kahn thought it was his job to offer resistance to his materials.

Now we ask, "What does simulation want?" Simulation wants immersion. We can answer back that our immersion has cost us dearly. We, too, want to resist.

We need to get distance, and it's in our interest to follow (at least metaphorically) Thoreau's example. On his walks, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends, he could step back. He learned about people, nature, and history. He learned about life, and as on the beach at Cohasset, pointless death. The walks were not a cure-all. They were a place to start. A way of engaging, of moving from reverie to occupying the present.

When Thoreau thought about the present, he talked about improving his "nick of time." But to see what is before us we need to look back as we create a new world. "In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line."⁹ Whatever the political or social weather, Thoreau says it's up to him to improve his moment. He summons us to ours.