

Sermon "Simply Living Simple" by Rev. Linda Berez
Presented at Lake Country UU Church on March 16, 2007

I'd like to share with you this morning an adaptation of a children's story by D. B. Johnson that was inspired by Thoreau's book *Walden*. It is called "Henry Hikes to Fitchburg." You see, in this story Henry is a bear, and he and his friend decided to go to Fitchburg to see the country.

Henry tells his friend, "I'll walk, it's the fastest way to travel." His friend says, "I'll work until I have the money to buy a ticket to ride the train to Fitchburg. We'll see who gets there first,"

Well, for Henry it's a 30 mile walk, an easy jaunt for him in his day. For his friend, he needs to earn 90 cents to take the train.

As they part company his friend says, "Enjoy your walk." And Henry, walking down the road toward Fitchburg, calls back, "Enjoy your work."

Henry's friend takes on some odd jobs, filling a wood box, sweeping the post office, pulling weeds, painting a fence, moving some bookcases, cleaning out some chicken houses, and earns a dime, a nickel or fifteen cents for each job, and raises the 90 cents.

Henry, on the other hand, begins his journey hopping over rocks in the Sudbury river, carving a walking stick, pressing ferns and flowers he finds on the way into his notebook, climbing a tree, paddling up the Nashua River, finding a honey tree, taking a dip in a pond and eating his way through a blackberry patch.

His friend catches the last train out to Fitchburg using the 90 cents he earned and sits in a tangle of people. When he arrives the sun is setting. Henry walks the last mile through a shortcut he found.

When Henry arrives his friend is sitting in the moonlight and says, "The train was faster." To which Henry replies and smiles, "I know, I stopped for blackberries."

Thoreau says that the cost of a thing is the amount of what I call life which is required to be exchanged for it immediately, or in the long run.

So Henry walked to Fitchburg, while his friend, it might be implied, exchanged a bit of his life working so that he could earn enough money to ride the train there. The question then is who really lived that day, the bear that walked or the bear that worked?

Some say that we fritter away our lives working so that we can have things that maybe we really don't need like the biggest TV, the nicest car, or like me, the newest and fastest computer or other electronic gadget. Somehow having these things makes us feel better about ourselves, but do they really provide us with a feeling of fulfillment?

Thoreau observed our life is frittered away by detail. And he adds, "Simplify, simplify."

If you are familiar with Thoreau and the book *Walden*, you know that he went to what some might consider an extreme to simplify his life, moving to a small house that he built by himself on Walden Pond in Massachusetts, where he lived very simply for two years.

For Thoreau, the simple living on Walden Pond, or hiking to Fitchburg, is about living more deliberately, intentionally, what we might understand from readings by Buddhist monk Thich Naht Hanh, as living mindfully. Or to put it another way, to be present in this very moment. To hike anywhere, one must be present to where you take your next step, carefully considering the direction, the time of day, your surroundings. While working you also need to remain present, but is the work for the work's sake, is it something you do that deeply satisfies you, or is it something you are doing just to get it done so you can go on to something else? To live with intention or mindfully, whether hiking or working, is to live in a way that might lead us toward the possible ends of finding and feeling a sense of purpose in life.

And this was the way for many of Thoreau's colleagues and friends, Unitarians and Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Eliza Peabody, Bronson Alcott. These people and others were a part of the transcendentalist movement which developed around 1836 and was an idealistic philosophical and social movement.

They lifted up thinking that was contrary to the more conventional beliefs of the time that emphasized ways in which an individual's spiritual state could 'transcend' the physical and empirical and could be known by the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions. This is an idea I understand that says, I can know God in here, my heart. It is the idea that God isn't above or outside us but inside us and all of nature.

Emerson and the other Transcendentalists moved away theologically from the other Unitarians of the time because they believed that Unitarianism had become steeped in rationalism, the philosophical idea that knowledge is mostly or wholly derived through reason. Transcendentalism was influenced by romanticism, Platonic thought, and Kantian philosophy; it taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity.

William Ellery Channing, Unitarian minister, was first to articulate and preach what became the basis for Unitarian Christianity in this country. He inspired the transcendentalists by emphasizing the spiritual capacity of the soul and the importance of cultivating the seed of divinity within each individual. And cultivating that seed of divinity, the essence of God, if you will, or the sense of our connection to the mystery of the universe, something greater than ourselves, or the interconnectedness we feel to each other and the world around us. Cultivating that seed of divinity was what the transcendentalists were after.

They cultivated the seed of divinity within themselves through conversations, not just men with men, but women with women, and women and men together; they met and talked and learned. I'm sure there are examples in this community that could be likened to the Transcendentalist club of the 1800's. The Transcendentalists also cultivated the seed of divinity through social action, working for abolition of slavery and women's rights, and for temperance. And they experimented with communal living and getting back to nature and a more natural way of living. George and Sophia Ripley founded a place called Brook Farm, and Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott, founded Fruitlands.

And of course, Thoreau went to Walden Pond. A part of the property that Ralph Waldo Emerson owned at the time, Walden was where Thoreau lived for two years, two months and two days, and out of his time there we are fortunate enough to have his book Walden.

To understand better about why Thoreau and the other people of his time did what they did, my colleague, the Rev. Barry Andrews, puts it this way:

To savor every moment as it passes is the highest of the arts. Even for those who live it fully, there is only so much life in a lifetime. We must make the most of what we have. If there is eternal life it is not immortality or heaven, but awareness of eternity in this time and this place. "We must live in the present," Thoreau insisted, "launch ourselves on every wave, find our eternity in each moment."

Of course, awake or asleep, we shall one day die. The difference between a life well lived and one ill spent has everything to do with taking advantage of the multitude of possibilities that exist in each moment. But if we are asleep – distracted, stressed-out, devoid of feeling – we cannot realize any of these possibilities. We are dying to wake up, to be fully alert and alive in the present, knowing, as Thoreau said, "Only that day dawns to which we are awake."

At Lake Country UU Church, where I serve, a book group has been reading Eckhart Tolle's book, A New Earth – Awakening To Your Life's Purpose. I bring this up because while I wrote and prepared this sermon I was also reading Tolle's book. I find it intriguing that so many people are being influenced today by the writings of Tolle, who in fact I believe is rewriting Emerson and Thoreau. Both have the same message: "Awaken your conscious to the day, only that day dawns to which we are awake." Today, as it was back in the 19th century, we as humans are looking to live our lives more fully, to cultivating that seed of divinity within us. I know that it's something I desire for myself.

Having the biggest TV, the shiniest car, the fastest computer, the best whatever, makes us feel good for only a moment. One of life's biggest challenges is to find a way to live a life worth living for more than a moment, to find meaning and purpose, and to do this it seems that many of the greatest philosophers throughout the ages say that we must find ways to live more intentionally, more purposefully and more aware.

As Thoreau says, we need to simplify, to live less in distraction, less stressed out or to say it this way, to live with less clutter, to find ways to simply live more simply.

Like a garden, your soul, your self, needs to be cared for, tended, nourished, readied for the seeds. And a farmer knows that you can't just spread the seeds and hope they grow, you have to water and care for the new life. A great crop will grow if it's tended to properly.

We need to find ways to tend to our souls, to grow our seed of divinity.

So, you're saying to yourself about now: Yeah, sure. How can I simplify my life when I have two or three kids, 2 dogs, 6 cats and a full time job? I have kids to take to music lessons, swim meets, soccer games. I have a full house to clean, laundry to do, groceries to buy and meals to cook for an entire family. All of this takes time, energy and doesn't always seem to allow for cultivating that seed.

Sure, maybe none of us have the luxury or the desire to build a cabin and live on Walden Pond, walk to Racine or spend hours and hours in conversation with other UU's, even if we wish we could.

To me, simply living simply isn't about giving everything up, selling all of my possessions or giving them away. It's not about walking away from my job or from my family. For me, it's about finding balance, figuring out what I really need in my life so that I can truly live without neglecting the things I need to do because I have a responsibility to them or to others.

It's about finding a way to become more aware of the life that I'm living, to be more mindful of what I am doing and why I'm doing it, to be more deliberate in my actions. And in doing this I will hopefully find ways toward a more satisfied and meaningful life.

I think finding balance starts by first taking a look at your life and deciding what is most important. Family, friends and, I hope your church community. Consider what or who really feeds you in a spiritual sense. What touches you here? What brings you great joy? Where or when in your life do you feel the most alive?

Next, look at some of the things that you enjoy doing the most, those things that when you are doing them you find yourself lost in them so that you lose track of time, become so engrossed in them that everything else becomes background noise.

Some might call taking time to grow that seed of divinity a spiritual practice, which is taking time to get in touch with that spiritual part of yourself. For some this may seem difficult. Sitting and meditating isn't for everyone, or perhaps spending time reading religious literature or journaling isn't your cup of tea. Yet, there are ways that everyday activities can become a part of a spiritual practice and they don't take a lot of effort but can add depth and meaning to your life.

For example, we all have to eat. So sitting around the table eating a meal with the family might become a way of really living, really connecting with each other and within ourselves. With everyone's schedule though, it might be hard to find time to really get together each evening. So instead of beating yourself up because you can't all be together every single night of the week, maybe try to find a time once a week, make it an appointment on everyone's calendar. Sit down together. The time together can be made more spiritual by being more deliberate, more intentional when you all sit down to eat. Some of you out there may do some of these things already. You might take time to give thanks to those who have helped to make the meal possible.

Maybe some of you set an extra plate for those who can't be with you. Or you eat without the distraction of the TV or radio, being mindful of the taste of the food, the texture, where the food came from. I like to take time to remember those people in my lives who might be in need or who are struggling. I find ways to intentionally keep those closest and dearest to me in my thoughts always.

In all of this, what I hope you can come away with is the idea that it is possible to find ways to live lives of more meaning. That life wells up from inside us; it's not something we can buy or possess, no matter how many TV commercials tell us that by buying the biggest TV we will have it all. To simply live is just that, to live simply, with less distraction and with more intention, to become aware of the lives that we are living and to live them, to laugh, to cry and to sing, to rejoice in this one precious life that we have: To simply live. Amen.