

IDEAS

Thoreau's cellphone

If the Concord writer had owned one, would we have 'Walden' today?

By **Stephen O'Connor** Updated July 26, 2024, 3:00 a.m.



AI-GENERATED IMAGE BY HEATHER HOPP-BRUCE/GLOBE STAFF

Henry David Thoreau rose with the winter sun for his morning excursion. He set out along the old Indian paths winding their way through the woods, made newly visible by the light snow that had fallen overnight. He paused to savor the light breeze that stirred the snow-laden pines and filigreed branches of the hardwoods. A stillness and serenity that for some reason recalled Wordsworth's famous poem "Intimations of Immortality" fell across his mind. He closed his eyes and breathed the cold air. He drew a notebook

from his pocket and began to write: *Our thoughts are with those among the dead into whose sphere we are rising, or who are now rising into our own —*

A sound like the delicate tinkle of a single bell broke the silence. Henry frowned and closed the notebook. He pulled his smartphone from his pocket. It was a text from Ralph Waldo: “Henry, that video I posted of you playing the flute in a canoe on Walden has 367 likes!”

Henry slid his notebook back into his pocket. It was really too cold to take off his gloves and text, so he pressed the little microphone and recorded a message: “That is curious. I thought the tune was rather lugubrious. Indeed, it’s called, ‘By the Sad Sea Waves.’ I will call you later. Where are you?”

Three dots shimmered on the screen. Finally, Henry read, “Where’s Waldo? Very funny. Call me. We’ll have tea at Alcott’s.”

He pressed the record button again. “Please, not at Alcott’s. All those little women running around get on my nerves. Anyway, talk later. Busy this morning.”

Henry stuffed his cellphone back into one pocket and pulled the notebook out of another. “Let me see. Where was I?” He reread what he had just written and began to scribble, *Thus the departed may be nearer to us than when they were present. At death —*

The phone chimed once more. “Ralph!” he cried in frustration. He ignored the notification. After a moment, he began to write again. — *our friends and relatives either draw nearer to us, and are found out, or depart farther from us and are —*

PING.

“Argh!” He stuffed the notebook under his arm and pulled out the phone. Ralph had texted: “Busy? You? What does that mean? You’re *walking*? LOL.”

Just then the phone rang, desecrating the silence of the snowy wood. “Oh, ye gods, I must take this!” Henry exclaimed. It was Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. She had published his essay “Civil Disobedience” in her transcendentalist journal, called — oh, what was it called, Aesthetic Pages or some such pretentiousness. He pressed a button. “Betsy, can I call you back later? I’m just — ”

“Quickly, Henry, I was just wondering if you had seen my remarks on Twitter concerning Hawthorne’s new and very strange book. Ellery Channing thought I may have been harsh on Nathaniel, but — ”

“I will certainly read your remarks later, but I am out of the house at present, and — ”

“Henry, as you know, Aesthetic Papers is now defunct.”

“Yes, I was sorry to — ”

“We must improve our marketing. I was looking at your website — lovely photos of the woods, of course, and the quaint little cabin you lived in out at the pond for two years — ”

“Two years and two months — ” Henry interjected.

“Yes, but you need to create some excitement. Maybe giveaways of copies of ‘A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.’ Create a contest. Name that shrub. Offer new content. Video clips of your lectures.”

“Well, thank you for the advice — ”

“And I’m sorry to say — I mean, I understand the unity of all creation and your transcendental pantheism, but your posts on Facebook are not drawing in readers. Henry! *Nobody cares* about the *Sassafras albidum* and its yellow green flowers in spring, or the *Quercus coccinea* and their glossy green leaves, or the spring salamander in some mosquito-infested swamp! You know what Walt Whitman is posting? Lads and maidens

disporting under waterfalls and wading through rushing brooks while he recites drafts of some erotic poem about the ‘body electric.’”

“Well, that is rather suggestive. You can hardly expect me to — ”

“Walt has 170,000 followers!”

Somewhat taken aback, Henry protested, “Betsy, I’m simply documenting the miracle of life in this place, which my neighbors — ”

“Fine, it’s a miracle! But do we need to read descriptions of the canoe birch in all four seasons? Now, you’re *fantastic* as an anarchist! ‘That government is best that governs not at all!’ Great stuff! See, you lost a golden opportunity when you spent that night in jail. Could you not have asked that jailer, Sam Staples, to get a video of you in the cell with the town drunk or whoever it was? Our magazine and your essay might have gotten a million more clicks and we’d still be in business.”

“Listen, Betsy, I’m standing here on this freezing hill — ” He was beginning to feel that all he would get out of this morning was a cold.

“Try to post something more engaging, Henry, I don’t know, the mating dance of the great blue heron or something, with a link to your website, and do you have a LinkedIn profile?”

“Goodbye, Betsy.”

Henry took a few deep breaths and tried to regain his composure, sinking back into the stillness of the present, concentrating on how he loved the homely colors of Nature in this season, her strong, wholesome browns, her sober and primeval grays, her celestial blue, her vivacious green, her pure cold snowy —

PING.

“Oh my God!” he cried.

He almost turned the damned device off, but maybe the message was from some organization offering him a chance to deliver a lecture for real money? He looked. Alas, it was a reminder about his dentist appointment in Concord. He took off a glove and blew into his hand, then tapped Y to confirm.

Henry's head now hung low and thus he did not notice the hoary redpoll that flitted across his path. His footfalls in the virgin snow felt, somehow, heavier.

Disclaimer: *Henry Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody did not actually have cellphones or social media accounts, and probably did not have these conversations, either. Some of Henry's thoughts are taken from his journal from 1850 and 1856.*

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