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# Thoreau as Liberation Thinker

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# Thoreau as Liberation Thinker

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, here is the article's first paragraph:

Henry David Thoreau's claim to be "a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher" took an unexpected turn for me. Spending much time with *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (my dissertation addresses the idea of religion found between its covers), I encountered a "liberation thinker" resisting the limitations of American culture while honoring the natural world and indigenous peoples. Thoreau's epigraph reveals how he wants the muse of his dead brother to inspire him, but the book also discloses how he wants the muse of indigenous peoples to inspire and improve American culture. Impressively, he esteems nature as more than a symbol pointing to a distant divinity as he experiences its inherent sacredness. Natural creation is at once our house and being; we are immersed in and part of its continuous regenerative processes, which suggests familial bonds of sacredness uniting humans and nonhumans. Thoreau offers an alternative to social structures and outlooks that devalue human and nonhuman existence.

## **Disciplines**

Philosophy

## **Comments**

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## Thoreau as Liberation Thinker

Robert Michael Ruehl

Henry David Thoreau's claim to be "a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher" took an unexpected turn for me. Spending much time with *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (my dissertation addresses the idea of religion found between its covers), I encountered a "liberation thinker" resisting the limitations of American culture while honoring the natural world and indigenous peoples. Thoreau's epigraph reveals how he wants the muse of his dead brother to inspire him, but the book also discloses how he wants the muse of indigenous peoples to inspire and improve American culture. Impressively, he esteems nature as more than a symbol pointing to a distant divinity as he experiences its inherent sacredness. Natural creation is at once our house and being; we are immersed in and part of its continuous regenerative processes, which suggests familial bonds of sacredness uniting humans and nonhumans. Thoreau offers an alternative to social structures and outlooks that devalue human and nonhuman existence.

The most evident aspect of his liberation thinking is his emphasis on emplacement; he does not give us disembodied thought. Instead, Thoreau's ideas arise from embodied contact with his environs. He tells us who he is and who he can become through intimate relations with geography and local history. Self and body arise in a local setting. Through establishing roots, paradoxically, Thoreau frees himself to explore his surroundings: Being grounded sets him free. Through meditatively engaging his locality, its history, and the natural world, Thoreau is more prepared to dig deeper, and this leads him to the insight that all injustice in the region is temporary. Chattel slavery, indigenous massacres, and environmental degradation are temporal phenomena new to the North American region, so the great truth is that injustice is impermanent. It is not predestined and can thus be undermined. This complex weave of local embeddedness and awareness of suppressed possibilities is the starting point for Thoreau as a liberation thinker.

Inspiringly, Thoreau asks not only what the larger natural world and his local history have to say, but he also listens patiently to what Native Americans and wildlife communicate. He becomes a careful listener to those whom society devalues. He wants to hear the fish cry as they face extinction because of the dams. He is attentive to the history of the Natives in the region and their displacement. They have stories to tell, stories not written in American history books. This is where I encounter Thoreau's courage. Against all those who deeply revered gold, commerce, technology, and Western history, Thoreau turns to alternative sources for wisdom. The fish tell their own history of struggle, as do Natives. Honoring the atrocities around him, Thoreau knows that his existence is nurtured by America's violence. Such an acknowledgment is rare today! Few seem willing to acknowledge the atrocities generating and sustaining one's identity, comforts, and paychecks. His passion for listening sympathetically to the downtrodden and realizing the violent history nurturing his own identity forms the second part of Thoreau as a liberation thinker.

Behind this is an impressive outlook concerning existence. In *A Week*, everything is flowing. Coursing waters represent Thoreau's understanding of the world. Ideas are flowing, the Earth's surface is

flowing, and all life has its own ebbs and flows. This prompts him to resist attempts to solidify, constrain, or suppress the freshness of life and creation. His ontology of flows leads to a practice of cultivating "uncommon sense." What he calls "common sense" (what we today call general opinion) is inimical because it erects dams (barriers restricting the free flows of existence), so Thoreau counters this by devaluing civilization and domestication while honoring wildness and an undomesticated life. What we take to be a "foundation" is really shifting and transforming below our feet. Instead, he honors liminality where what is "certain" begins to fade imperceptibly into the unexpected, the uncertain, and the impossible. Instead of leaving readers content with the possible and the habitual, Thoreau reorients readers to that which is beyond our knowledge, awareness, and expectations. Thoreau's liberation thinking makes us more comfortable with the unexpected, the liminal, and the impossible. Once we dismantle the dams constraining the flows of existence, thought, and becoming, we begin to see more clearly how the impossible is possible and the marginalized are important. Thoreau's liberation thinking is a revolution in values, perceptions, and expectations.

Over 160 years have passed since Thoreau wrote *A Week*, yet American society still has much to learn from him. The final aspect of his liberation thinking surpasses his willingness to transgress the confines of dominant culture, to sympathetically bond with the excluded, and to prophetically urge fellow citizens to change their behaviors and ideas. Ultimately what I find exceptional in Thoreau's first book is his non-anthropocentric framework. While making the natural world sacred and while respecting wildlife as part of our larger family, Thoreau urges us to challenge the common sense of human-animal dualisms that allow us to constrain nonhuman beings in inhospitable environments and to maltreat them while satisfying our insatiable appetites for their flesh. There is no doubt that Thoreau understood the practical necessity of needing food—and at times the pragmatic need for nonhuman flesh, but he did not see nonhuman beings as inferior; he believed they deserved equal respect as part of our extended family. The environment, wildlife, and human persons exist within the same natural, creative processes; these underlying processes of creation and re-creation deserve equal reverence in humans and nonhumans.

I am convinced that Thoreau is important today as a liberation thinker because of his high esteem for indigenous communities and the natural world, because he saw how both had wisdom to share with and to guide white society, and because *A Week* ultimately offers a non-anthropocentric posture advocating egalitarian reverence for wildlife.

• **Robert Michael Ruehl** completed his PhD work in the Department of Religion at Syracuse University. His interests include American Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, political and liberation theology, and the overlap of religion with environmental issues and indigenous sovereignty.

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**I**t is a great art to saunter.

-Henry David Thoreau,

April 26, 1841. *Journal*, vol. 1., p. 304 November 8, 1857

as quoted in his *Journal*, Vol. I, p. 304

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