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Sacramental Communion with Nature: From Emerson on the Lord's Supper to Thoreau's Transcendental Picnic

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Abstract: For both Emerson and Thoreau, ocular attentiveness was a crucial means of at least disposing the soul toward experiencing moments of otherwise unpredictable, ecstatic encounter with the divine soul of Nature. But the eye alone was not the sole sensory pathway toward receiving such revelations. Especially in later writing, Thoreau focused special attention on eating and drinking as key bodily—yet also spiritual—modes of experiencing communion with the earth. He applied this sacramental understanding to the several processes of obtaining, preparing, and consuming food, but above all to the thankful appreciation of locally gathered, wild fruits and nuts. Such gifts, freely given, presumably invite “us to picnic with Nature,” thereby dramatizing how “man at length stands in such a relation to Nature as the animals which pluck and eat as they go.” Though Emerson never embraced a comparably sacramental vision of Nature, or showed the same interest in gustatory encounter with wildness, one might interpret his attraction toward other diverse and often spiritualized concepts of communion as a compensatory outcome of his ministerial decision in 1832 to cease administering the Christian church's sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Keywords: Emerson; Thoreau; sacrament; communion; Lord's Supper; Nature; Transcendentalism

Ralph Waldo Emerson's ministerial decision in 1832 to cease administration of the Lord's Supper at Second Church, Boston, marked a pivotal moment in his movement from Unitarian Christianity toward the more individualistic tenor of his newfound Transcendental faith. That much has long been recognized. The same ceremonial meal that Puritan divine Edward Taylor had declared “makes me thus a Poet” in colonial New England (Taylor 1960, p. 283) had become for Emerson an empty ritual, a distasteful remnant of that “historical Christianity” whose creedal authority and vocational demands he came to disavow. Moreover, Emerson evidently declined to participate in the Lord's Supper ritual because of, rather than despite, his self-understanding as a *bona fide* religious believer, one fully committed to honoring the primacy of the soul and the practice of “true worship” (Emerson 1983, “The Lord's Supper,” p. 1136).

But how best to explain the passion with which Emerson rejected this ancient ceremonial practice? What implications and consequences followed from his decision? How, despite his disavowal, might he have been looking to preserve—while re-visioning toward his own post-Christian, Transcendental ends—certain principles of “communion” and sacramental worship endemic to Judeo-Christian piety? And how do some of the suppositions mirrored in sacramental communion figure even more pointedly in Henry Thoreau's subsequent expression of a Transcendental, earth-grounded spirituality, an approach figured in surprisingly gustatory rather than exclusively ocular terms of sensate communion with nature? Such are among the questions I intend to address here. Above all, I want to consider how and why eating and drinking, obvious hallmarks of the communion sacrament that remains central to corporate Christian worship, were reconceived to bear Transcendental meaning, especially in the imagination of later Thoreau—with resonance for Whitman and Dickinson as well.

In his sermon essay “The Lord’s Supper,” Emerson argues that the ritual actions Jesus once practiced with his disciples were never meant to be observed in perpetuity. Hence the rite cannot be deemed a mandated form of remembrance. Moreover, he suggests that expressing our religious sentiments through the use of ancient symbolic elements such as bread and wine “is foreign and unsuited to affect us” (Emerson 1983, p. 1137) in latter-day New England.¹

But for Emerson such considerations of technical exegesis and cultural custom were never the heart of the matter. He perceives the crucial objection, founded in turn upon his rejection of “the doctrine of the Trinity,” to be the ordinance’s tendency “to produce confusion in our views of the relation of the soul to God.” (1983, p. 1136). Beyond the history of debate about just how communicants could realize godly presence and remembrance in the Eucharist, celebration of the Lord’s Supper presumes, after all, that worshippers do experience *some* form of communion not only with each other but with God in and through Christ. Yet from the perspective of Emerson’s radical Unitarianism, which understands Christ to be only a moral “Instructor of man” with no unique status of divinity, that presumption looks vain and fallacious. Or as Emerson would declare by 1838, in the definitive rejection of “historical Christianity” set forth in his “Divinity School Address,” that now-antiquated faith tradition “has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus,”² whereas “the soul knows no persons” (1983, p. 81).

For Emerson, authentic faith came to mean no longer a faith in Christ, but a “faith like Christ’s in the infinitude of man” (1983, “Divinity School Address,” p. 88)—that is, in the divinity of the active soul, now understood as consubstantial with the Over-Soul. He therefore found observance of the Lord’s Supper to be not only irrelevant, uninteresting, and distasteful, but intolerable. The seemingly definitive opening words of the scriptural epigraph from Romans 14: 7 that he chose for his Lord’s Supper sermon—“The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink . . .”—are telling in this regard.

Emerson disdained not only the Lord’s Supper ordinance but also most other traditional, corporate forms of religious ritual. In the spirit of his Puritan ancestry he thus rejected the use of set prayers. He also came to resist offering those effusions of public prayer still expected of clergy even in settings of liberal Unitarian worship.³ Neither, despite his championing of new approaches to belief and worship, would he countenance any attempt to “project and establish a Cultus with new rites and forms” (1983, “Divinity School Address,” p. 91). The newly emergent religion he recommends “must be intellectual,” a faith realized without benefit of outward practices equivalent to the archaic employment of “shawms, or psaltery, or sackbut.” (1983, “Worship,” p. 1076). So it seems altogether fitting that he should by 1839 have shed all conspicuous trappings of his former office of ordained ministry.

Unlike Thoreau, Emerson had little use even for nonChristian applications of a term such as “sacrament.” And yet, looking beyond the sectarian tensions to which Emerson felt subject in his own time, we can discern inherent sympathy for sacramental principles in Emerson’s having affirmed in *Nature* (1836) a syllogistic vision of correspondence between a language of materiality and things spiritual:

1. Words are signs of natural facts.
2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.
3. Nature is the symbol of spirit. (1983, p. 20)

At least the root sense of “sacrament,” via the Latin sense of *sacramentum* as sacred mystery, also happens to coincide with Emerson’s prevailing religious outlook. For that matter, even as Emerson discounted the value of experiencing Eucharistic solidarity with fellow human beings, he demonstrated

¹ Packer (2007) elaborates upon emotive dimensions of the “indifference” Emerson displays toward the Lord’s Supper. “Emerson,” she writes, “makes his boredom with the Lord’s Supper his chief reason for wishing to alter the rite; he elevates distaste into a principle of criticism” (p. 9).

² Bishop (1998) plausibly suggests, in fact, that Emerson as prophet of a new, post-Christian religious dispensation came to understand himself as engaged in something of an agonistic competition with Jesus.

³ Grodzins (2010) suggests how Emerson’s own views on public prayer evolved toward this stage of resistance.

in 1832 a peculiar, sorrowful, apparently desperate desire for communion with his deceased wife, who had died the previous year at the age of nineteen. In his Journal he recorded simply that on 29 March “I visited Ellen’s tomb & opened the coffin” (Emerson 1964, 4: 7).

Moreover, a residual sense of ritualism, though rarely named as such, still suffuses Emerson’s post-Christian writings. In the “Divinity School Address,” for instance, he identifies sermonizing and the observance of Sabbath time as two corporate features of Judeo-Christian tradition he considers worthy of honor and continued practice. Yet for Emerson most of what qualifies in present-day terms as ritual practice, comprising those patterns of spiritual discipline and development meant to nurture the soul, take the form of individualized rather than corporate worship. As Barry M. Andrews points out, such patterns as outlined in the essays and other writings included a regimen of “contemplation, conversation, reading, walking, and plain living,” all of which Emerson believed should contribute to “spiritual practices of self-culture” (Andrews 2017, pp. 8, 11). For both Emerson and Thoreau the rhythm of engaging in daily foot exercise embodied, for example, a ritual practice that in Asian spirituality amounts to walking meditation. Emerson’s essays devoted to titular topics such as “Worship” or “Prayers” illustrate his willingness to draw upon, but also to reconceive in thoroughly Transcendental terms, rituals founded in Christian tradition.

Above all, of course, Emerson extolled training and exercise in ocular attentiveness, in right seeing, as the most promising pathway toward communion with the all-encompassing soul of Nature.⁴ Auditory sense impressions likewise fed the Transcendental imagination—especially for Thoreau. Thoreau displays in the “Sounds” chapter of *Walden* and in numerous journal entries his acute awareness of soundscapes and the music of nature, the variegated texture of that harmony compounded of human and nonhuman elements. Emerson, too, considered the ear, with its access to “sky-born music” (as in the poem titled “Music”) to be divinely attuned. Yet doubtless the eye, rather than ear, remained his primary channel of sensory insight.

And while such tastes of ecstasy as Emerson described could never be engineered on demand, one could learn through apt spiritual practice to cultivate a receptivity toward receiving them, much as the “preparatory theology” of Emerson’s Puritan forebears aimed to bridge the gap between conversion by pure grace and the duties of devotion. A tutored eye, capable of rendering the world transparent, could at least enlarge the soul’s capacity to respond to graced moments of revelatory in-sight, such as those to which Emerson testified personally in *Nature* (1836). The rite of encounter thus enacted marks a loving communion not with Christ, with God in Christ, or with one’s fellow mortals, but with an impersonal Nature writ large.⁵ Having declined to partake physically of Lord’s Supper bread even as he echoes the Lord’s Prayer, Emerson would now affirm rhapsodically yet metaphorically in a journal entry for 1843 that “The Sky is the daily bread of the eyes” (Emerson 1970, 8: 403).

Occasionally, but rarely, Emerson’s imaginative discourse does call to mind the idea of ingesting actual food and drink. In “The Poet”, for example, he considers why bards presumably love to imbibe inspirational substances such as “mead, narcotics, coffee, tea, opium”—even endeavoring, as Emily Dickinson likewise imagined, to become “tipsy with water” (Emerson 1983, p. 461; Dickinson 1960, pp. 98–99). But for Emerson it is ordinarily the sensate faculty of in-sight—i.e., that which is *seen* beneath Nature’s surfaces, not eaten or tasted or drunk—that best serves to advance “our communication with the infinite” (Emerson 1983, “The Method of Nature,” p. 116).

By contrast, while ocular themes and imagery likewise figure prominently in *Walden* and other of Henry Thoreau’s writings, the ecology of food gathering and consumption assume a pivotal role in this Transcendentalist’s spirituality and literary imagination in a way never displayed by his

⁴ In Emerson’s case the figurative implications of seeing, as well as the writer’s struggle with his own eyesight problems, have received a good deal of critical notice—as in Richardson (1995), or most recently in Thomas 2017.

⁵ Friesner (2017) points out, however (pp. 9–10), that despite the religious sense and impulse of love that Emerson continued to attribute to Nature, his conception of “nature,” shading into what today is more apt to be termed “environment,” varied somewhat throughout his career.

former mentor. Neither does Thoreau hesitate to describe alimentary rituals, along with other acts, as “sacraments”—though in far from exclusively Christian terms. (Gatta 2004, pp. 130 and 264n11). So he accords this title to the ritualized housecleaning, feasting, dancing, and ancient rites of purification once practiced in Mexico and “some savage nations.” “I have scarcely heard of a truer sacrament,” he notes, “that is, as the dictionary defines it, ‘outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace’, than this, and I have no doubt that they were originally inspired directly from heaven to do thus, though they have no biblical record of the revelation” (Thoreau 1971, pp. 68–69).

He similarly perceives his own practice of daily bathing in the pond to be “a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did” (Thoreau 1971, p. 88). A journal entry for 1848 confirms this point: “I find that I conciliate the gods by some sacrament as bathing—or abstemiousness in diet—or rising early . . . These are my sacraments” (Thoreau 1990, 3: 4). In a letter to Harrison Blake he mentions yet another ritual practice, affirming that “rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the *yoga* faithfully” (Thoreau 2004, p. 50).

In *Walden* Thoreau highlights the ritually methodical purpose of his labor throughout the several stages of constructing his house beside the pond. He thus incorporates this materially productive activity into his spiritual practice. For Thoreau to build deliberately contributes to his larger project of living deliberately. By constructing his own dwelling place, he effectually fulfills Emerson’s declaration in *Nature* that “Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world, and beyond its world a heaven” (Emerson 1983, p. 48).

Evidently, though, Emerson after 1832 never expected to discover heavenly nurture for his soul—his “daily bread”—in any digestible form of matter. Thoreau manifests a more visceral relish for food-mediated communion. In *Walden*, for example, his allusions to bread and other nutriment often combine a literal application with metaphoric overtones. He takes pains to describe not only what he ate but also how he obtained and prepared it. Such description, following from the title of his second chapter, he regards as integral to testifying “how I lived” at Walden. So in chapters such as “Economy,” “The Bean-Field,” and “Higher Laws,” he supplies a detailed account of his dietary regimen, identifying foodstuffs he variously obtained through small-scale agriculture, by gathering wild fruit and nuts, or by market trade. Literalizing the process of obtaining his daily bread, he even describes the recipes he ended up following in the course of having “made a study of the ancient and indispensable art of bread-making, consulting such authorities as offered” (Thoreau 1971, p. 62). Yet beyond this literal plane of attention, as he later wrote to Harrison Blake, he clearly perceives that “As a preacher, I should be prompted to tell men, not so much how to get their wheat-bread cheaper, as of the bread of life compared to which *that* is bran.” “Let a man only taste those loaves,” Thoreau adds, “and he becomes a skillful economist at once” (Thoreau 2004, p. 125).

In “The Bean-Field,” Thoreau goes so far as to attribute mythical and sacramental meaning to the homely practice of hoeing beans—despite his reluctance to consume that legume himself. Of course his labor with beans and other crops serves the practical end of supporting his livelihood. But he values still more its capacity to engage him in several sorts of communion: with nature’s soil, insofar as beans “attached me to the earth” (Thoreau 1971, p. 155); with both First and Second Nature at once, insofar as the ground he works becomes “the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields”; and with the ancient world’s understanding of husbandry as “a sacred art” (pp. 158, 165). In the “Higher Laws” chapter, especially, he also probes the ways in which problematic questions about the ethics of obtaining and consuming food—including the relative merits of carnivorous vs. vegetarian regimens—bear critically on one’s need to combine respect for our animal nature and primal “wildness” with aspiration toward “a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life” (p. 210). Though human animals are bound to feed upon Nature, how might they do so without denying part of their own complex nature, or the worth of other animals? In “Higher Laws” it is that core question which gives rise to Thoreau’s somewhat tortured musings on the ethics of hunting and fishing.

Thoreau displays a distinctively revealing, often surprising linkage between food and faith in later writings describing his gathering and feeding on wild fruits and nuts. This turn toward

close scrutiny of botanical particularities, toward a preoccupation with solidly factual dimensions of natural history is evidenced in essays such as “Wild Apples: The History of the Apple Tree” or the unpublished “Huckleberries.” Granting that “it takes a savage or wild taste to appreciate a wild fruit,” and “vigorous and healthy senses” to savor the flavor of wild apples (Thoreau 1980, “Wild Apples,” p. 201), he nonetheless favors the tang of undomesticated produce. And he reasons that “*our* wild apple is wild only like myself, perchance, who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock” (p. 189). As the exacting editorial work of Bradley P. Dean now helps us appreciate, two of Thoreau’s late unfinished works—his manuscripts concerning “The Dispersion of Seeds” (now published in the volume titled *Faith in a Seed*) and “Wild Fruits”—particularly reveal what Dean, too, regarded as “Thoreau’s sacramental vision of nature—a vision compelling in part because it grew out of an approach to the natural world at once scientific and mystical” (Thoreau 2000, *Wild Fruits*, p. ix).

Thoreau found the sensory appeal of wild fruit and nuts capable of fostering transcendental communion not only as tasted but also through their sight and smell. In a journal entry for 16 July 1845, for example, he relates how an apple he had kept in his pocket seemed to him redolent of design from the gods

that men should feed divinely, like themselves, on their own nectar & ambrosia. They have so painted this fruit, and freighted it with such a fragrance that it satisfies much more than an animal appetite. Grapes peaches berries nuts &c are likewise provided for those who will sit at their sideboard. I have felt, when partaking of this inspiring diet, that my appetite was an indifferent consideration—that eating became a sacrament—a method of communion—an ecstatic exercise a mingling of bloods and sitting at the communion table of the world. And so have not only quenched my thirst at the spring but the health of the universe. (Thoreau 1984, 2: 165)

Another salient passage, appearing in the “Black Huckleberry” section of *Wild Fruits*, highlights the reasoning behind Thoreau’s strong preference for local food sources gathered directly from the field and in the raw:

Man at length stands in such a relation to Nature as the animals which pluck and eat as they go. The fields and hills are a table constantly spread. Diet drinks, cordials, wines of all kinds and qualities are bottled up in the skins of countless berries for the refreshment of animals, and they quaff them at every turn. They seem offered to us not so much for food as for sociality, inviting us to a picnic with Nature. We pluck and eat in remembrance of her. It is a sort of sacrament, a communion—the *not* forbidden fruits, which no serpent tempts us to eat. Slight and innocent savors which relate us to Nature, make us her guests, and entitle us to her regard and protection. (Thoreau 2000, p. 52)

As Jeffrey Bilbro has observed, feasting on berries, nuts, melons, wild apples, and other fruits thus enabled Thoreau to experience a quite palpable, symbiotic communion with the rest of animal nature, countless members of which also “use plants for their own needs while enabling these plants to flourish.” Bilbro perceptively notes as well how Thoreau’s explanation of “this sacramental, Edenic ecology” is modelled upon an “economy or oikos of enjoyment” (Bilbro 2015, pp. 58–59). If the lesser catechism, as cited both in *Walden* and in a late journal entry claimed that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever,” Emerson had likewise posed that searching rhetorical question in *Nature*: “Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe” (1983, p. 7). Thoreau considered such enjoyment to be aptly epitomized by the prospect of savoring such wild fruit as is offered on Nature’s “table constantly spread.” For “The value of these wild fruits,” he wrote, “is not in the mere possession or eating of them. The very derivation of the word ‘fruit’ would suggest this. It is from the Latin *fructus*, meaning ‘that which is used or enjoyed’” (Thoreau 1993, *Faith in a Seed*, p. 180; also cited by Bilbro).

Thoreau often writes about wild fruit in a way reminiscent of that which, in familiar Christian terms, would be described as God's free grace. "As long as berries are free to all comers," he insists, "they are beautiful, though they may be few and small" (Thoreau 2000, p. 58). And what, after all, contributes more readily to our enjoying "a simple and wholesome relation to nature" than what we are gifted to receive as "the spontaneous fruit of our pastures" (p. 59)?

Especially noteworthy in the key passage above is the language Thoreau uses to describe that peculiar communion with Nature which wild fruit can realize in us: "We pluck and eat in remembrance of her." To begin with, "pluck and eat" sounds like an audaciously playful, joyous echo of St. Matthew's gospel account of Jesus' Last Supper—"Take, eat; this is my body" (Matthew, 26: 26)—just as Congregationalism's venerable communion table had by now devolved into a "picnic with nature." But the New Testament allusion here to eating "in remembrance" (Luke, 22: 15) strikes me as even more telling. Consistent with its original Greek and classically Eucharistic sense of *anamnesis*, Thoreau's usage here implies that the communion thus effected sacramentally involves not solely the memory of some past event but a *making present once more* of our primal, integral relation to Nature. In a comparable way, the Jewish Seder calls for participants not simply to recall but to re-enact existentially the ancient story of God's liberation of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt.

Thoreau, who had long since "signed off" from any formal affiliation with the church, having been troubled in the process with less inner conflict than Emerson by training and lineage was bound to have felt, apparently felt no hesitation about appropriating traditional Christian ideas toward construction of his own religious worldview. Like Emerson, Thoreau never displays a yearning to share formally in the Lord's Supper. But neither, in expressing the "communion" principle that characterized his natural theology, did he feel reluctance to exploit its figurative potential. It is intriguing to see how Emily Dickinson's imagination could trace a similar path, as evidenced in two closing stanzas of her poetic evocation of Indian summer:

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
 Oh Last Communion in the Haze—
 Permit a child to join.
 Thy sacred emblems to partake—
 Thy consecrated bread to take
 And thine immortal wine! (Dickinson 1960, p. 61)

For both Emerson and Thoreau, the only form of sacred communion ordinarily worth pursuing was that realized through individual rather than communal forms of engagement. It usually marked or enacted the soul's integral association with Nature, rather than with other human beings. One commentator suggests, in fact, that "Thoreau's practice of solitary communion with nature remains Transcendentalism's most widely acknowledged legacy" (Newman 2010, p. 177).

By contrast Whitman, whose attenuated Quaker heritage and upbringing afforded no taste of churchly communion, nonetheless expresses in his poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" an all-embracing communion with humanity and the material world that qualifies as sacramental. The poet who in "Song of Myself" comes upon the scene not only "breeding" but, like Jesus, "eating drinking" rather than fasting, reflects a neo-Transcendentalist spirituality typically embodied in tactile and gustatory rather than Emersonian ocular imagery (Gatta 1985). Granted, too, documents affiliated with Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and other social experiments of the period do advance sympathy for corporate rather than solitary economic and spiritual enterprises. But such impulses remained a decidedly recessive rather than dominant strain of the Transcendental imagination, particularly for Emerson and Thoreau. And while Emerson considered all overt ritualism to be suspect, Thoreau invested faith in rituals conducted almost exclusively by the solitary self. He regarded wild fruit, or any sharing in the Spirit's bread of life, as best enjoyed alone.

From the standpoint of classic Christianity, and for those of us who continue to value membership in a faith community, such a shift from sacramental solidarity with others to private spirituality does reflect an appreciable loss. And it is a shift whose impact continues to be felt in contemporary EuroAmerican culture. The work of historian Mark Stoll reminds us that few of America's leading advocates of environmental reform after 1900—or, for that matter, since the time of Emerson's Divinity School pronouncement—continued to practice anything resembling “historical Christianity” (Stoll 2015, pp. 2, 268, 275). Curiously, though, the unapsed, seriously Christian disposition of three of the nation's most iconic living environmentalists—Wendell Berry, Al Gore, and Bill McKibben—belies usual suppositions about the uniform, inevitable erosion of corporate faith among proponents of green culture. At the close of a fairly early Wendell Berry essay, for example, one finds articulated a vision that is ecologically oriented but also inspired by a seriously invested Christian sacramentalism. And Berry frames his statement in corporate terms, as indicated by his reliance on collective rather than individual first-person pronouns:

That is not to suggest that we can live harmlessly, or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want. (Berry 1981, p. 281)

Both Emerson and Thoreau did, however, seek communion with broader human fellowship in at least one noteworthy respect. Both display in their writing an acute sense of audience. The language of Emerson's essays is a case in point. Though much of this discourse demands a good deal of readers, Emerson the essayist never ceased to exploit the training in dialogical rhetoric he had gleaned from years of preaching and lecturing. Any number of his essayistic lines thus qualify as memorable because of their hortatory hold upon readers. Consider again, for example, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” or “Trust thyself, every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Occasionally, too, Emerson strikes a note of collaborative familiarity that can touch and startle readers both in his day and ours, as in that penetrating overture to “Experience”: “Where do we find ourselves?” (1983, p. 471). And in the “American Scholar,” he shows solicitude for compatriots whose moral deficiency he attributes not to sin but to sleep-walking torpor. You have only to “Wake them,” he exhorts those he fancies serving in turn as Transcendental sentinels, “and they shall quit the false good and leap to the true and leave governments to clerks and desks” (1983, pp. 66–67).

From the very start of *Walden*, in a manner distinct from his largely self-absorbed journaling, Thoreau likewise trumpets his self-appointed mission to be heard by others, as in the work's epigraphic prelude where he proposes to “brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.” From the opening pages, too, he insists on writing from the standpoint of an “I, or first person,” not so much by dint of self-fulfillment as to address more pointedly those “poor students” likely to benefit from his instruction. Indeed every writer, he maintains, owes it to humanity to supply “some such account” of personal experience “as he would send to his kindred from a distant land.”

Thoreau's urge to communicate with readers surfaces even in those late, unfinished works of his in which he directs attention beyond himself toward botanical description and analysis. In composing the *Dispersion of Seeds* manuscript, for example, it mattered greatly to him that readers comprehend and embrace the vision of evolutionary ecology defined by his close study of how plant species developed and were distributed. Within and beneath this scientific naturalist's program of observation blended with testimony from learned authorities, Thoreau manifests a passion to share this vision with others.

Accordingly, his script on *The Dispersion of Seeds* is peppered with hortatory bids toward his putative audience, including locutions such as “you will often see” this, “you would be surprised to see” that, or “I would ask those who still maintain this theory” to weigh carefully the following. Thoreau takes pains not only to explain in detail just how individual plant species are distributed,

but also to convince readers in the wake of Darwin's discoveries that the planet's splendid array of life forms results not from special, spontaneously generated acts of creation but from long-sustained, transmutative interaction among existing species and their environment. Above all, he means to impress upon readers his abiding faith in the processes carried forward by seeds, his vision of "the very earth itself" as "a granary and a seminary so that to some minds its surface is regarded as the cuticle of one great living creature" (Thoreau 1993, p. 151).

In the third chapter of *Walden*, "Reading," Thoreau witnesses personally to the notion that one can experience vitalizing communion with others, even those long dead, through reading as well as writing. He particularly recommends taking to heart the words of sacred texts, preferably as recorded in their original tongue. How better to imbibe the spirit of sages and prophets long deceased than by reading, marking, and inwardly digesting their testimony? The earnest seeker, he supposes, will be better served by such exercise than by sitting in church fellowship: "Let him humbly commune with Zoroaster then, and through the liberalizing influence of all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself, and let 'our church' go by the board" (Thoreau 1971, p. 108).

Reaching beyond the bounds of mortality, Thoreau doubtless presumed he had himself communed with "all the worthies." Many would eventually count him, too, among this pantheon of worthies. For generations following the author's death, those inspired by reading and thereby encountering the deathless spirit of Thoreau have sensed a prescient meaning in the rhetorical question he had posed toward the close of his "Reading" chapter: "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book" (ibid., p. 107). Brad Dean, the indefatigable editor of Thoreau's late unfinished works, represents one such devotee among multitudes, someone whose reading and spiritual communion with Thoreau surpassed scholarly duty to qualify as life-changing. "In each of our lives," Dean confessed in his Foreword to *Faith in a Seed*, "there is a time, and often a person, that sets us on our trajectory." So during a period of vocational doubt and interior crisis, having previously discovered *Walden* back in high school, Dean secluded himself in a cabin, devoting himself there to the regimen of a "morning reading ritual" in Thoreau's journals. As a result, "somehow, in some way, Thoreau altered my life then, for my course as field biologist and writer finally emerged out of those months of doubt and difficulty" (Thoreau-Dean, p. xi).

And it is through Dean's labors, in turn, that the taste of wild things Thoreau intended to share with readers through these writings could at last be disseminated among "poor students" in our own day. It took more than a century for this germination to occur. Some readers of *Faith in a Seed*, weighing that poignant irony, may also realize that Dean himself suffered an untimely death in 1993, at the age of 51, in the same year his edition came to print. On a personal note, recalling how I once sat as a faculty member on the graduate school committee to which Brad Dean first submitted his editorial work on *The Dispersion of Seeds* manuscripts as part of his Ph.D. dissertation, and having heard him expound on what the project meant to him, I become all the more aware of how literary interchanges of this sort represent yet another form of sacramental remembrance and communion beyond the grave.

Thoreau, more overtly than Emerson, revered the prospect of dining on those wild fruits constantly spread across Nature's picnic ground as a sacrament, a feast he deemed better than anything offered in church. For both Transcendentalists, though, spirited writing borne of the poet's communion with "Logos, or Word" (Emerson 1983, "The Poet," p. 239) represented another matchless source of soul food, the sustaining equivalent of intoxicating wine and the bread of life.

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