"We can never have enough of nature."
-Henry David Thoreau

Does walking allow you to think about life on a deeper level? Years before I discovered "walking meditation" or the American transcendentalist movement, I found solace in nature, where walking allowed my mind to be free of other constraints. I was reminded of this during a recent trip to New England, where I explore the trail of transcendentalists (beginning in Concord, Massachusetts at the intersection of Walden and Thoreau Streets), connecting with the natural world both inside and outside in celebration of Henry David Thoreau's bicentennial birthday.

WHO WERE THE TRANSCENDENTALISTS?

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."
-Henry David Thoreau

The transcendentalists believed all living things were bound together and humans were essentially good. Concerned with happiness and making the world a better place, these New England-based writers and philosophers connected deeply with nature and humanity, rebelling against the norms of 19th-century America. "When the individual learns how to listen to the soul, there can be no limit to his goodness and ability to help the larger community," reads the signage at the Fruitlands Museum, regarding the awakening of transcendentalism. Among the leading figures in this movement were Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, each of whom gathered in Concord, the epicenter of American literature in the mid-19th-century. Emerson wrote: "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. . ."

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), born on the Thoreau Farm in Concord, MA. 200 years ago, was a philosopher, environmentalist, and writer who filled his journals with remarkable observations. After graduation from Harvard University in 1837, this third generation Concordian set up his own school in Concord, and then, seeking solitude after his brother's death, moved to the woods for two years, two months, and two days (1845-1847). He lived in a small, simple cabin he built for $28.00.
It was here his reflections about life and mindful existence were captured in his journals, which he locked away in his desk in a cottage he left open. His careful notations on when specific flowers bloomed, other botanical observations, and at what point the pond froze, have become important to modern day scientists studying climate change. Thoreau's writing from living a simple and deliberate life is still a call for everyone to live better lives, with awareness of one's actions and their consequences.

Self-reliance and simplicity were key elements to Thoreau during his time in the woods, when he called trees his friends. "No weather interfered fatally with my walks . . . for I frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech tree, or a yellow-birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines." (Excerpted from *Walden*, published in 1854)

But Thoreau's interest in self-cultivation stretched beyond his ambles in the woods and his journal writing. He read many languages: Latin, Greek, French, German and Italian as well as some Spanish and Portuguese. And his interest in Asian texts led him to translations of works about Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Thoreau learned about Native American culture and language, studying an Abenaki-English dictionary and through his work on exhibit at the Concord Museum, I discover the original, Native American name for the river in Concord was an Algonkian word "Musketaquid," translated as "grass ground river."

Harmonizing with nature and living in the moment were important to Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists, who focused on literary independence, becoming involved in social reform movements, embodying a divine spirituality guided by intuition and imagination through nature and art. Creativity was paramount to these American philosophers and visionary writers of the 19-century who gathered in Concord, Massachusetts from 1830 - 1855, believing we should reach beyond the ordinary, transcending the trappings of society. They were interested in how humans treat one another and shape the world. Concerns which still ring true today.

I ask several people about why Thoreau is so captivating, as his writing continues to speak to many generations. Michael Frederick, Executive Director of the Thoreau Society mentions he was originally drawn to Thoreau's honesty and the director of the Thoreau Farm iterates that Thoreau’s determination to live a "deliberate life," appeals to her. Others comment on Thoreau's ability to paint a literary picture of the natural world with attention to accuracy and details. Concord Museum curator David Wood writes clearly in his well-designed book, An Observant Eye, The Thoreau Collection at the Concord Museum: "Thoreau's name has become almost synonymous with two themes, the love of nature and uncompromising ethical values." Wood explains: "Thoreau believed that the attempt to understand human concerns in the context of nature helped provide guidance for the proper conduct of life. He directed his career as a writer toward making that realization possible for others."

**PLACES TO VISIT**

**The Thoreau Farm** or Minott House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places is open for tours and specially scheduled writers workshops on the weekends. It is also available for writing retreats during the week in the room where Thoreau was born. The sparsely furnished, simple building presents an educational slant, asking important questions. "What has shaped who you are? How have you developed your sense of self and how do you fit into the world? Where do your personal philosophy and values come from? What do you live for?"
**Walden Pond** is a designated National Historic Landmark on 335 acres of protected land, where a variety of trails lead to the site of Thoreau's cabin, marked by a set of stone pillars. To get a feeling of how the cabin (a mile-and-a-half from Concord) felt, visit the replica cabin near the Walden Pond Visitors Center. Rangers inform travelers about the life of Thoreau, encapsulating his time in the woods, where simplicity was his mantra. At the state-of-the-art interpretive Walden Pond Visitors Center designed with green technology, there is a focus on Thoreau through the seasons, with quotes from his significant book, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. But it is also where I catch a glimpse of the music Thoreau enjoyed playing on his flute: "Poor Tom Bowling."

**Concord Museum** (which is home to the largest collection of Thoreau objects) is currently showing, *This Ever New Self: Thoreau and His Journal* (September 29 - January 21). This new exhibit showcasing Thoreau's journals is co-curated together with the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City. The juxtaposition of his journals with field notes, letters, and artifacts (pencils from his family business, spyglass (paired with his writing about observing birds), walking stick (doubling as a yardstick to measure the depth of snow), and boxwood flute with ivory endcap (inscribed with the names of Henry and John Thoreau), along with interesting commentary, brings the exhibition to life. Coordinated ancillary events complement the show through the end of the year.

At the museum, I learn Thoreau kept journals throughout his adult life and particularly enjoy the highlighted extraction of what is in Thoreau's last journal (1861). It includes listening to sparrows in March, counting the rings in a spruce plank, musing over the flexibility of a cat's body, and studying the history of local berries. The show is successful in creating a portrait of Thoreau as a neighbor, student, reader, writer, observer, and thinker. But more than the visceral reaction of viewing any particular item, this exhibit at the Concord Museum leaves me inspired by the poetic, yet accurate, detailed writing of Henry David Thoreau, a practical philosopher, who lived an exemplary life.

The Concord Museum does not restrict itself to examining and preserving the past. In an exhibit displayed earlier in this Thoreau bicentennial year, master photographer Abelardo Morell presented large format works in a show titled, *Walden: Four Views*. In his piece, "Walden: Pond/Tent Camera Image" he captures what looks like a painterly view utilizing a tent camera, creating a new take on a familiar sight/site. Morell's responses to Thoreau's writings about Walden are not just about external places, but internal musings offering viewers new perspectives. The photographer explains: "Thoreau was such a precise observer of his physical world that I believe his genius is made up of equal parts looking and thinking and that's why Walden has remained both a place and an idea until now." Morell's ability to find worlds within worlds is something fresh, which I imagine Thoreau would have appreciated. It asks the viewer to dig deeper, beyond a superficial glimpse, and also sends me off to consider other contemporary takes on Thoreau and Transcendentalism.

**CONTEMPORARY TAKES ON THE TRANSCENDENTALIST MOVEMENT**

I find the literary history interesting, but am most impacted by the contemporary expressions of art related to transcendentalism. Outside the **Old Manse** (Ralph Waldo Emerson's grandfather's house, when he was a minister in the late 1700s and later a gathering place for writers, philosophers, and social reformers in the 19th century), I view a captivating piece of theater. Nature: A Walking Play, involves the audience in the production, following the performers on the wooded grounds to different sites for each scene, re-connecting with the natural world while learning about the writings and friendship of the characters through an innovative performance. The accomplished cast is an
impressive ensemble led by actors portraying Ralph Waldo Emerson (Tyson Forbes, a direct descendent of Ralph Waldo Emerson) and Henry David Thoreau (Michael Wieser). Beyond the well-written script, the evocative musical accompaniment, skillful choreography, and simple but effective stage sets add to this most memorable outlook on significant American historic and literary figures with material which is still very relevant today. To learn more visit, http://www.tigerlion.org/nature/index.php

**Fruitlands Museum**, located a half-hour west of Concord in Harvard, Massachusetts (not to be confused with the location of the University in Cambridge) was conceived of as a utopian experiment in 1843 with hope that the fruits of the land could sustain their small community. Today it is a museum on over 200-acres with a series of buildings housing an interesting and eclectic collection of objects not only from the Transcendentalists (in the original red farmhouse where 10-year old Louisa May Alcott wrote her journal), but also the Shakers (boxes, baskets, chairs and spinning wheels in a building moved from the Harvard Shaker village). Native American art and objects (New England Rock Art, arrowheads found in Concord by Thoreau, and *mokuk* or traditional birch bark containers), and Hudson River school paintings complete the treasured holdings. This collection by museum founder Clara Endicott Sears (a pioneer in historic preservation, who built her summer estate here) is displayed with atypical museum signage. The Native American galleries feature different perspectives to elucidate the objects: an anthropological view next to an Indian activist explanation, as well as a curatorial description, making the exhibit richer.

The Fruitlands Museum is not only rooted in the past, but looks forward with contemporary artists as they relate to the original intent of the community. Examples of this are works by painter Jonathan Gitelson ("Star Chart") and 2017 Artist-in-Residence Greg Lookerse, an interdisciplinary artist interested in the concept of journeying through writers inspired by place. His sculptural artwork may literally begin with a book he has read. Removing novels and essays from their shelves, he deconstructs them, folding, or gluing the pages, transforming them as he breathes new life into the works while connecting with their content. This is the case with his latest piece at the Fruitlands Museum, "Partial Cross Section," where gluing together pages from over one-hundred books which resonated with him (Gulliver’s Travels, works by Thoreau, Emerson, and Annie Dillard) takes the form of a cross-section of an old tree. The carefully constructed, layered piece may appear simple, but it is filled with depth. His original and inventive work is a welcome contemporary musing on transcendentalism and a highlight on my transcendental trail explorations.

"The world is but a canvas to our imagination."

-Henry David Thoreau
RESOURCES

Stay
Hawthorne Inn – recommended breakfast
http://www.hawthorneinnconcord.com
Located on Concord's historic mile, this well-designed B&B with a tasty, homemade breakfast offers a perfect location to explore the history and literature intertwined with the town. The comfortable property dates from the 1860s, but the feel is contemporary with textured wall coverings and colorful accents, while still paying homage to the natural world and the transcendentalists who have inspired the welcoming innkeepers.

Dine
Inn at Hastings Park – recommended dinner
http://www.innathastingspark.com
The memorable Artistry on the Green restaurant at the Inn at Hastings Park, a Relais & Chateaux boutique luxury hotel in historic Lexington, Massachusetts offers a fine dining experience with superb service. With an eye on environmental responsibility, they source locally harvested products, sometimes in surprising but delicious combinations, such as the pickled peaches and creme salad, five spice duck cooked in a variety of ways, and a mouth-watering, apple-infused dessert, leaving you wishing for the recipe.

Fruitlands Cafe – recommended lunch
http://www.fruitlands.org/visit.caf%C3%A9

Visit
Concord Museum
http://www.concordmuseum.org

Fruitlands Museum
http://www.fruitlands.org

Old Manse

Thoreau Farm
http://thoreaufarm.org

Walden Pond State Reservation
https://www.mass.gov/locations/walden-pond-state-reservation

Walden Pond Visitors Center
https://www.thoreausociety.org/news-article/walden-pond-visitor-center

AUTHOR

Iris Brooks—a long time contributor to the World & I—has enjoyed exploring the natural world on all of the continents, writing about ancient cedar forests on the southern islands of Japan, photographing sand in the Sahara, and making films with partner Jon H. Davis about ice music in Norway and the rainforest in Borneo. Learn more about the collaborative work of Brooks and Davis at the Northern Lights Studio website, http://www.nlscreativemedia.com

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