

# MYSTERIES OF THOREAU, UNSOLVED

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from ORION

There is one writer in all literature whose laundry arrangements have been excoriated again and again, and it is not Virginia Woolf, who almost certainly never did her own washing, or James Baldwin, or the rest of the global pantheon. The laundry of the poets remains a closed topic, from the tubercular John Keats (blood-spotted handkerchiefs) to Pablo Neruda (lots of rumpled sheets). Only Henry David Thoreau has been tried in the popular imagination and found wanting for his cleaning arrangements, though the true nature of those arrangements are not so clear.

I got prodded into taking an interest in the laundry of the author of “Civil Disobedience” and “A Few Words in Defense of John Brown” in the course of an unwise exchange. Let me begin again by saying that I actually like Facebook, on which this particular morning I had sent birthday wishes to my Cuban translator and disseminated a booklet about debt resistance. I signed up for Facebook in 2007 to try to keep track of what young Burmese exiles were doing in response to the uprising in that country, and so I use it with fewer blushes than a lot of my friends—and perhaps even my “friends,” since Facebook has provided me with a few thousand souls in that incoherent category.

And really, this is an essay about categories, which I have found such leaky vessels all my life: everything you can say about a category of people—immigrant taxi drivers, say, or puns—has its exceptions, and so the category obscures more than it explains, though it does let people tidy up the complicated world into something simpler. I knew a Franciscan nun who started the great era of civil-disobedience actions

against nuclear weapons at the Nevada Test Site that were to reshape my life so profoundly and lead to the largest mass arrests in American history, but remind me someday to tell you about the crackhead nun on the lam who framed her sex partner as a rapist and car thief. A private eye I know exonerated him, as I intend to do with Thoreau, uncle if not father of civil disobedience, over the question of the laundry.

It's because I bridle at so many categories that I objected to an acquaintance's sweeping generalization on Facebook that Americans don't care about prisoners. Now, more than 2 million of us *are* prisoners in this country, and many millions more are the family members of those in prison or are in the category of poor nonwhite people most often imprisoned, and all these people probably aren't indifferent. In my mild response I mentioned a host of organizations like the Center for Constitutional Rights, which has done a great deal for the prisoners in Guantánamo. I could've mentioned my friend Scott who was a pro-bono lawyer for the Angola Three for a decade or so, or my friend Melody, a criminal defense investigator who did quite a lot for people on death row. They are a minority, but they count.

Having ignored the warning signs of someone looking for people to condemn, I recklessly kept typing: "We were the nation of Thoreau and John Brown and the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society when we were also the nation of slaveowners—and slaves." Which was a way of reiterating my sense that the opposite is also true of almost anything you can say about this vast messy empire of everybody from everywhere that pretends to be a coherent country, this place that is swamps and skyscrapers and mobile homes and Pueblo people in fourteenth-century villages on the Rio Grande. And 2.5 million prisoners. Truth for me has always come in tints and shades and spectrums and never in black and white, and America is a category so big as to be useless, unless you're talking about the government.

The poster replied: "And the nation of Thoreau's sister who came every week to take his dirty laundry." This was apparently supposed to mean that Thoreau was not a noble idealist but a man who let women do the dirty work, even though it had nothing to do with whether or not Thoreau or other Americans cared about prisoners, which is what we were supposed to be talking about. Or maybe it suggested that Thoreau's sister was imprisoned by gender roles and housework. It was also meant to imply that I worshipped false gods. I have heard other versions of this complaint about Thoreau. Quite a lot of people think that Thoreau was pretending to be a hermit in his cabin on Walden Pond

while cheating by going home and visiting people and eating in town and otherwise being convivial and enjoying himself and benefiting from civilization. They think he is a hypocrite.

They mistake him for John Muir, who went alone deep into something that actually resembled the modern idea of wilderness (although it was, of course, indigenous homeland in which Muir alternately patronized and ignored the still-present Native Americans). Then, after his first, second, and several more summers in the Sierra, Muir married well and eventually lived in a grand three-story house in Martinez, California, and ran his father-in-law's big orchard business that paid for it all. Even John Muir is difficult to categorize, since he was gregarious enough to cofound the Sierra Club and complicated enough to labor as a lumberjack and shepherd in the mountains he eventually wished to protect from logging and grazing. None of us is pure, and purity is a dreary pursuit best left to Puritans.

The tiny, well-built cabin at Walden was a laboratory for a prankish investigation of work, money, time, and space by our nation's or empire's trickster-in-chief, as well as a quiet place to write. During his two years there, Thoreau was never far from town, and he was not retreating from anything. He was advancing toward other things. The woods he roamed, before, during, and after his time in the famous shack, contained evidence of Indians; locals doing the various things people do in woods, including gathering wood and hunting; and escaped slaves on the long road north to Canada and freedom. He traveled with some of these slaves, guided them a little, and they guided him in other ways.

Slavery was very much on his mind during the time he lived at Walden Pond. His mother and sisters' organization, the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, met at least once in his cabin (for a celebration of the anniversary of the liberation of slaves in the Indies, shortly after he himself spent a night as a prisoner). This is how *not* a recluse he was: there were meetings in that tiny cabin that engaged with the laws of the nation and the status of strangers far away, and he also went to jail during that time, because he was fiercely opposed to the territorial war against Mexico and to slavery. The threads of empathy and obligation and idealism spun out from those people and those meetings. The Concord abolitionists chose to care about people they had never met; they chose to pit themselves against the most horrific injustices and established laws of their society; and they did it at a time when they were a small minority and the end of slavery was hardly visible on the horizon.

And the laundry? I did a quick online search and found a long parade

of people who pretended to care who did Thoreau's laundry as a way of not having to care about Thoreau. They thought of Thoreau as a balloon and the laundry was their pin. Andrew Boynton in *Forbes* magazine observed in 2007 that his mother did his laundry; a cheesy website noted that he "took his dirty laundry home to mom!"; in 1983, a ponderous gentleman named Joseph Moldenhauer got in early on the accusation that he "brought his mother his dirty laundry"; a blogger complained that "he had someone else do his laundry"; another writer referred offhandedly to the "women who did his laundry."

A writer on an environmental website recently complained, "While philosophizing about self-sufficiency in his solitary shack, he would drop off his laundry at his mother's place back in town"; even Garrison Keillor got involved in the laundry question—"He wrote elegantly about independence and forgot to thank his mom for doing his laundry"; there's even a collection of short stories called *Thoreau's Laundry*, as well as a website that sells a Thoreau laundry bag. Search engines having a genius for incoherent categories, I also learned that Thoreau, New Mexico, a pleasant little town on Interstate 40, has four laundromats.

The standard allegation—the reader will note—is that Thoreau's mother, Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau, did his washing, not his sister, and no one suggests that she had to fetch it first. Besides which, he had two sisters, Sophia and Helen. The sneering follow-up message I got from the person who claimed that Thoreau was a man whose sister did his washing made me feel crummy for a day or so during an otherwise ebullient period of being around people that I love and who love me back. I composed various ripostes in my head. Having grown up with parents who believed deeply in the importance of being right and the merit of facts, I usually have to calm down and back up to realize that there is no such thing as winning an argument in this kind of situation, only escalating. Facebook's verb "friend" is annoying, but its corollary, "unfriend," is occasionally useful.

I decided against unfriending but for simply avoiding the person into whose unfriendly fire I'd strayed. The thing to do was to seek out more convivial company. I had dinner the next night with my friend Thomas, whom I've known almost twenty years and at whose wedding I was best man. A half-Burmese Londoner, he's only been in this hemisphere about five years, and he told me that reading *Walden* recently helped reconcile him to American individualism by exhibiting it as something energetic and eccentric as well as assertive. We began to correspond about Thoreau, and that dialogue deepened what was already a great

friendship. I know two actual Thoreau scholars, one I met in the 1990s in Reno, and another who sought me out via Facebook (before the incident in question) and with whom I'd corresponded a little. I turned to them for more informed opinions on the washing. I wasn't going to argue about it; but I did want to know the truth for my own satisfaction.

The first acquaintance, Professor Michael Branch at the University of Nevada, Reno, was tired of hearing about the laundry: "The problem with explaining how much work the guy did is that you end up defending the wrong cause. I've stepped into this bear trap before." He listed some of the kinds of labor the shaggy Transcendentalist performed, including teaching, surveying, and running his family's pencil factory. But, he cautioned, "once you make this case, you've accidentally blessed the idea that paying attention to the world, studying botany, and writing a shitload of amazing prose isn't real work. Better to just say he never did a damned thing except write the century's best book and leave it at that. Lazy fucker."

Do we care who did the chores in any other creative household on earth? Did Dante ever take out the slops? Do we love housework that much? Or do we hate it that much? This fixation on the laundry is related to the larger question of whether artists should be good people as well as good artists, and probably the short answer is that everyone should be a good person, but a lot of artists were only good artists (and quite a lot more were only bad artists). Whether or not they were good people, the good artists gave us something. Pablo Picasso was sometimes not very nice to his lady friends, but he could paint. I was friends with the artist and filmmaker Bruce Conner for a quarter century, and his unreasonable insistence on perfection made his work brilliant and his company exacting and sometimes terrifying.

It wasn't as though if he hadn't made those seminal films and assemblages he would've been an uncomplicated good guy; it's not as though he was giving to art what he should have given to life; he was putting out what he had, and it was a huge and lasting gift on this impure earth, even if it came from an imperfect man. Thoreau was a moralist, a person who wrote about what we should do, whether how to walk or how to fight the government about slavery, and a moralist holds himself up to a higher standard: does he, so to speak, walk his talk? Or so moralists are always tested, but their premises are right or not independent of whether or not they live up to them. Martin Luther King Jr. was right about racism and injustice whether or not he led a blameless life. Dig

ging into his dirty laundry doesn't undo those realities, though the FBI tried to blackmail and undermine him that way.

The second scholar I wrote to was also a Michael, Michael Sims, who is working on a book about the young Thoreau, and he was well primed for the question. "Thoreau did visit the village almost every day, and see his parents, and do chores around the house for them," he wrote. "While he was at Walden, they were in a house he helped build the year before he moved to the cabin—he and his father mainly—so he had considerable goodwill in the bank. During his entire adult life, he paid rent while at his parents' boarding house, and paid it faithfully, with records sometimes kept on the backs of poems or other writings. He worked in the garden, helped keep the house in good repair, provided foods from his own garden, and so on.

"People did drop by the cabin to bring him food sometimes, but people dropped by each other's houses with food all the time. It was the most common gift. He brought other people food, especially melons. (He was legendary for his talent in raising a vast array of melons.) I don't know if I have an actual record of the family doing his laundry, but I'll check as I go through some of that over the next month. But I would bet they did sometimes do his laundry. He was quite emotionally dependent upon his family, especially his mother, but he also contributed constantly. When his brother died young, Henry helped take up the slack in financial help. When his father died, Henry became not only the man of the house but the major force in the pencil business (which he had already almost revolutionized with his analysis of better ways to make pencils). So I think what I'm trying to say is that even at Walden he was very much a part of the family in every way."

After looking into the laundry question, I opened *Walden* again and examined the section where he does his accounts, which, as the historian Richard White points out, were a sort of parody of nineteenth-century preoccupations with efficiency and profitability, with the pettiness of keeping score and the souls of bookkeepers. He mentions "washing and mending, which for the most part were done out of the house, and their bills have not yet been received." It's not clear if that's out of his own cabin or his mother's house, during the Walden era, but it suggests that maybe his washing was done by strangers in a commercial transaction, or that maybe he thought that the question of who did the laundry was amusing and made an indecipherable joke about a bill his family wasn't really going to send.

He was, after all, the man who warned us against enterprises that required new clothes, often wore shabby ones, and was certainly not very concerned about having clean ones. He never married and did little to make work for women and did quite a bit of dirty work himself, including shoveling manure—of which he wrote, “Great thoughts hal- low any labor. To-day I earned seventy five cents heaving manure out of a pen, and made a good bargain of it.” He worked quite hard, often for his sisters’ benefit, though he also played around with the idea of work, appointing himself inspector of snowstorms and proposing that his employment could be watching the seasons, which he did with such precision, describing what bloomed when and which bird species ar- rived on what date in his corner of Massachusetts, that his journals have been used to chart climate change in the present. We call that work, which was also so clearly a pleasure for him, science.

Intermittently, throughout his adult life, he was also struggling with tuberculosis, the disease that killed his older sister, Helen, in 1849 and sometimes sapped his strength long before it killed him in 1862. At the time of his death, he was lying in bed downstairs in a parlor with his younger sister Sophia at his side. Though we talk so much about the twenty-six months he dwelt at Walden Pond, he spent most of the rest of the forty-five years of his life at home with his family, as an intimate and essential part of what appears to have been an exceptionally loving group.

Labor was divided up by gender in those days, but it’s hard to argue that women always had the worst of it in an era when men did the heavy work on farms and often the dirtiest and most physically de- manding work around the house (in those days of outhouses, wood chopping, shoveling ashes and coal, handling horses and livestock, butchering, water pumping, and other largely bygone chores). Every- one worked around the home, until they became so affluent no one worked beyond the symbolic femininity of needlework. In between those two poles was a plethora of families who had hired help with the housework. I don’t think women were particularly subjugated by do- mestic work in the centuries before housewives in the modern sense existed, though gender roles themselves deprived them of agency, voice, and rights. Thoreau’s sisters resisted and maybe overcame them without their brother’s aid.

Thoreau’s mother ran a boardinghouse and yet another writer on Thoreau, Robert Sullivan, points out that, like a lot of nineteenth- century households, they had help—and that the Transcendentalists

were uncomfortable with the hierarchy of servants and employers (Emerson tried having the maid sit at the dinner table with the family, but the cook refused to do so). Perhaps Thoreau, his mother, and his sisters all had their washing done by the same servant, or servants, who Sullivan suggests were likely to be recent Irish immigrants. Ireland's Catholics, fleeing the potato famine and British brutality, had started to arrive in the 1840s, and a torrent of desperate Irish would pour into this country for several decades; I am descended from some of them, and my orphaned Irish-American grandmother used to attribute her excellent figure to doing the washing (by hand, on a washboard) for the family that raised her. In his journal entry for June 9, 1853, Thoreau expresses sympathy for an Irish maid named Mary who told him she quit her position on a dairy farm because she was supposed to do the washing for twenty-two people, including ten men with two pairs of dirty overalls apiece.

The project of liberation is neverending, most urgent at its most literal but increasingly complex as it becomes metaphysical. Only free people can care about slaves or prisoners and do something about slavery and prisons, which is why the project of liberating yourself is not necessarily selfish (as long as you don't go down that endless solitary path marked After I'm Perfect I'll Do Something for Others, but stay on the boulevard marked My Freedom Is for Your Liberation Which I Must Also Attend to Now). On October 13, 2012, a few weeks after the unpleasant interchange about prisoners and laundry, I went to San Quentin State Prison to hear the prisoners read.

San Quentin was even more prisonlike than I'd imagined, with a patchwork of intimidating architectural styles: some crenelations like a medieval fortress, guard towers, sheer walls, razor-wire coils, warning signs, and entrance via steel gates that actually did slam shut with an echoing clang. We, the mostly female, mostly white audience for the reading, had been sent a long list of colors we were not allowed to wear: blue of course, but so many other colors that finally only black and purple and pink and patterns seemed safe for sure, so we looked as though we were going to a funeral or a punk concert. The prisoners were wearing various shades of blue, work boots or running shoes, and some jewelry. One had a Santa beard, one had dreadlocks, and the Latino murderer had a sharp pompadour and thick mustache. Only one of them looked young.

They read in the Catholic chapel, which was cold, low slung, made of cinder blocks, with a pure white crucified Jesus on the wall and



grillwork visible through the fake stained glass. A lot of the stories were moving; some were unsettling, particularly the ones in which old men and convoluted senses of causality (as evidenced by the passive verbs used to describe killing a friend) lived on and women seemed more like possessions than fellow human beings. The category of maximum-security prisoner did not describe the range of these men, I was most touched by Troy Williams's straightforward account of weeping when he told his daughter, via telephone, that his parole had been denied. He was fearful of being seen to cry in a tough place like prison, but someone reached out to him, and he found a little bit more humanity than he expected.

"What kind of a prison have I put my child in?" he asked himself, expanding the idea of prison to include the way she was tied to his fate and locked out of his life. My friend Moriah had brought me to the event; she had been there the year before and was moved not just by what she heard but by the fact that the small cluster of strangers from outside was about the most significant audience these guys were going to get. She had heard about it because her daughter was in school with a girl who lived in the same household as Zoe Mullery, the creative writing teacher who had for six years or more come once a week to work with these men. One of the men wrote in his biography in the handbook we all received, "I picked up a book and was able to depart the brutal confines of the penitentiary, as well as the margins of my depressed mind. Reading became an escape without my actually escaping."

Zoe later told me that she had once looked at the history of the word *free* and it might interest me. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *free* has the same Indo-European root as the Sanscrit word *priya*, which means "beloved" or "dear." If you think of etymology as a family tree, the dictionary says that most descendants of that ancient ancestor describe affection, and only the Germanic and Celtic branches describe liberty. The scholars say that the word may hark back to an era when a household consisted of the free people who were members of the extended family and the unfree ones who were slaves and servants. Family members had more rights than slaves and servants, so even though "free" in the United States is often seen as meaning one who has no ties, it was once the other way around. Which is another way of saying that freedom has less to do with that Lynyrd Skynyrd sense of the word (in which we don't care about prisoners or anyone else) and more to do with the idea of agency.

It doesn't actually matter who did Thoreau's washing, though I re-

mained curious to see if we knew who that might be. We don't. But we do know quite a lot about the Thoreau family's values. The second Thoreau scholar, Michael Sims, had sent me an excellent essay by Sandra Harbert Petrulionis about the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society that the writer's mother and sisters belonged to, along with Mrs. Emerson, and after the laundry issue was raised on Facebook, I read it again. "The influence they brought to bear on some of America's most noted antislavery speakers and writers had a pronounced and far-reaching impact," Petrulionis declares. "Thanks directly to eight women, six of whom lived in his home, Henry Thoreau had long been exposed to the most radical antislavery positions during his formative young-adult years."

The women seemed to find a kind of liberation for themselves in this movement for the liberation of others; they were able to act independently of husbands and fathers, to take public stands, to become political beings in a new way. The women's suffrage movement, the first feminist movement, grew directly out of the abolition movement: they went to liberate someone else and found that they too were not free. Thoreau's mother and sisters were more radical than he was initially; they even publicly supported the "disunion" position that would have had the North secede from the slave South long before the South actually seceded from the North. The Thoreau women were also participants in the Underground Railroad, and Henry David sometimes walked or drove the fugitives northward toward freedom. These Americans cared about prisoners enough to risk their own lives and liberty on their behalf.

A young abolitionist named Daniel Conway describes one such encounter, on July 27, 1853, thus: "In the morning I found the Thoreaus agitated by the arrival of a colored fugitive from Virginia, who had come to their door at daybreak. Thoreau took me to a room where his excellent sister, Sophia, was ministering to the fugitive. . . . I observed the tender and lowly devotion of Thoreau to the African. He now and then drew near to the trembling man, and with a cheerful voice bade him feel at home, and have no fear that any power should again wrong him. The whole day he mounted guard over the fugitive, for it was a slave-hunting time. But the guard had no weapon, and probably there was no such thing in the house. The next day the fugitive was got off to Canada, and I enjoyed my first walk with Thoreau."

In this vignette, brother and sister are collaborators in a project of liberation, and by this time, more than fifteen years after the founding

of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, Thoreau was wholeheartedly recruited to the cause. A year later Thoreau wrote, "I endeavor in vain to observe Nature—my thoughts involuntarily go plotting against the state—I trust that all just men will conspire." Many just women already had. And so in my reply to Sims, I said, "Reading that superb piece you sent a month or so ago deepened my sense that his abolitionist mother and sisters were political powerhouses in whose wake he swam. My position now is that the Thoreau women took in the filthy laundry of the whole nation, stained with slavery, and pressured Thoreau and Emerson to hang it out in public, as they obediently did."

This is the washing that really mattered in Concord in the 1840s, the washing that affected not only the prisoners of slavery, but the fate of a nation and the literature of the century. Thoreau's writing helped twentieth-century liberators—Gandhi and King the most famous among them—chart their courses; he helps us chart our own as well, while also helping us measure climate change and giving us the pleasures of his incomparable prose. His cabin at Walden was ten by fifteen feet, less than twice the size of a solitary-confinement cell at California's supermax Pelican Bay State Prison, though being confined to a space and retiring to it whenever you wish are far more different than night and day. In a sense Thoreau is still at work, and so are his sisters, or at least the fruit of Helen and Sophia Thoreau's work to end slavery is still with us, along with their brother's liberatory writings. Though there are other kinds of slavery still waiting to be ended, including much of what happens in our modern prison system.

Continuing my reply to Sims, I wrote, "Thoreau's relationship to his sisters reminds me a little of mine to my brother, who is a great activist and a great carpenter and builder, a support and ally to me in every possible way, and someone for whom I often cook and sometimes assist in other practical ways. (Of course in this version the sister is the socially inept writer person and the brother the more engaged activist who leads his sibling into the fray.)"

My brother David actually built me a home at one point. In that home in which he sometimes stayed and often ate (and usually did the dishes after he ate), we held political meetings as well as family gatherings. In it, as before and since, I helped him with activist publications because for almost all our adult life he has been a political organizer who seems to end up volunteering for publications. We've been through three books of his that way, and each of these projects for which I am an informal editor has drawn me deeper into political engagement

David cares about prisoners and has worked on their behalf many times, most recently Bradley Manning. Sometimes I've joined him. He has often been arrested, spent time in jails from Georgia to Ontario, and is named after our grandfather, who was named after Thomas Davis, the Irish revolutionary and poet.

He has provided astute critiques of my writing and ideas, and without him I might be lost in the clouds, stuck in an ivory tower, or at least less often called into the streets. Though I am the writer, he taught me a word when we were building the home that was mine for a while. The word is *sister*, which is a verb in the construction industry, as in "to sister a beam." This means to set another plank alongside a beam and fasten the two together to create a stronger structure. It is the most fundamental image of the kind of relationship Thoreau had with his sisters and I with my brother: we reinforce each other.

It is what we are here to do, and to raise melons and build houses and write books and to free anyone who might possibly need freeing, including ourselves and the meanings of our lives in all their uncategorizable complexity. By this I don't mean freedom only in that sense that many Americans sometimes intend it, the sense in which we are free from each other. I mean freed to be with each other and to strengthen each other, as only free people can.

*Nominated by Orion, Jane Hirshfield*