
Adam M. Sowards

WHEN YOU KNOW THE PRICE OF A HUCKLEBERRY

ADAM M. SOWARDS

Every fall for the past five years, I've found myself circled up with a small group of young people talking about Henry David Thoreau. This is not that unusual for a college professor of literature, history, or environmental studies; it's practically a required ritual since the 1960s when the oddball from Concord surged into the American academy. But I'm luckier than most, because my conversation occurs in central Idaho in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness.

My students and I often sit in a circle beside Big Creek, a major tributary that pours into the wild Middle Fork of the Salmon River seven miles from where we sit. The road nearest to us when we discuss Thoreau is more than thirty trail miles away. We might see deer fording the river during pauses in discussion. If we are especially

lucky, bighorn sheep might knock down some stones while they scramble along Horse Mountain's steep slopes.

In our circle, we don't study *Walden*, which is so big and dense and long for most students, especially those who are more likely to be natural resource majors than students of letters. Besides, our time here is short. We don't read "Walking," a lyceum address turned into an *Atlantic* essay in which Thoreau writes, "In Wildness is the preservation of the world" (239). Such a message certainly would find an accepting audience among these students who have chosen to live within the most remote wilderness in the continental United States for three months, sleeping in wall tents from August to November and studying ecology, wilderness management, leadership, writing, and history, a program at my university known as "Semester in the Wild."

Instead, we read about huckleberries. Thoreau's essay, "Huckleberries," the last of his life, stretches my mind for what it says about property. In a reverie, Thoreau tells a story of his youth when, alone or with childhood friends, he freely scattered over the hills and went "a-berrying" (491). He felt free and adventurous, liberated from the confines of schoolrooms and shops. Such freedom was gone now, he reports. Property stakes had gone up on berrying grounds; the butcher now sold huckleberries from his cart. "Such is the inevitable tendency of our civilization," he laments:

> To reduce huckleberries to a level with beef-steaks—that is to blot out four-fifths of it, or the going a-huckleberrying, and leave only a pudding, that part which is the fittest accompaniment of a beefsteak. (493)

The butcher's marketing achievement diminished the huckleberry's value by removing the town's youth from involvement; they no longer enjoyed the experience of gathering the berries, the bulk of what made them sweet.

> What sort of a country is that where the huckleberry fields are private property?. . . I cannot think of it ever after but as the place where fair and palatable berries are converted into money, where the huckleberry is desecrated. (493)

The parable is clearer than Walden Pond.

In "Huckleberries," Thoreau presents a radical critique about the dangers of commodification of everything . . . almost:

> Most men, it appears to me, do not care for Nature, and would sell their share in all her beauty, for as long as they may live, for a stated and not very large sum. Thank God they cannot yet fly and lay waste the sky as well as the earth. (497)

Today, we've captured the sky, too. My students and I often hear planes buzzing overhead while we consider this line, either backcountry planes close and cacophonous or jet airliners distant and disruptive.

Yet Thoreau offers a partial solution, proposing every town should maintain parks or forests "for higher uses—a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation"(500), and keep at least one bank of the river unpropertied as "a public walk" (497). But my students skim over Thoreau's proposal, consonant with the commonwealth

principles that bolster the public good, perhaps not sufficiently aware of its profound disjunct from the prevailing ethos of New England that supported a thriving market revolution that grasped at everything and priced it.

Instead, students zero in on Thoreau's message about education, which inspires them. Thoreau counters their experience through more than a dozen years of classrooms that squared them up and taught them nothing so much as how to follow directions, but not their hearts. "We are all schoolmasters and our schoolhouse is the universe," writes Thoreau:

> To attend chiefly to the desk or schoolhouse, while we neglect the scenery in which it is placed, is absurd. If we do not look out we shall find our fine schoolhouse standing in a cow yard at last. (500)

My students sit next to me and Big Creek, on cut logs, because they believe Thoreau remains correct a century and a half later. The universe is the classroom; schoolrooms constrain; more can be learned outside. My students take their place in a long procession of naturalists dissatisfied with education as practiced.

***

In the spring of 1938, nearly a decade into the lingering Great Depression, Aldo Leopold, a professor of game management at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, traveled south to Columbia, Missouri, to speak at the university there. He opened his speech with a story of two farmers planting tamaracks, a tree that farmers in Wisconsin had been trying to eliminate for a century. The farmers hoped to restore

My students sit next to me and Big Creek, on cut logs, because they believe Thoreau remains correct a century and a half later. The universe is the classroom; schoolrooms constrain; more can be learned outside. My students take their place in a long procession of naturalists dissatisfied with education as practiced.

wildflowers, an ecological casualty of the thorough-going economic transformation of the Midwest. So atypical was the farmers' behavior, Leopold likened it to a revolt. They devoted a corner of their land to cultivating something wild, because they had learned that a "wholly tamed farm offers not only a slender livelihood but a constricted life." Leopold mused:

> Perhaps they wish for their land what we all wish for our children—not only the chance to make a living, but also a chance to express and develop a rich and varied assortment of inherent capabilities, both wild and tame. (411)

As a father and as one who enjoys the brightening effect of wildflowers, I embrace Leopold's message. Let the wild and the tame within emerge, take form, and flourish.

I first read Leopold as a college student, but I read these words last fall. I sat outside and listened to a tributary to the Clark Fork River in Montana while golden cottonwood leaves crashed to

the ground, reminding me of the earth's rhythms. I was not in designated wilderness—in fact I was only a handful of miles from Interstate 90—but it was wild enough to heighten Leopold's insight. I would soon head back to the wilderness to teach the following week, so my frame of mind took Leopold's idea about children and twisted it into students.

In that context, I saw Leopold arguing that education ought to build skills for a job. But that's only a part, perhaps even the smallest part, of an education. A proper education creates and strengthens the capacity for something richer and more varied than job skills, something long-lasting that nurtures our inherent curiosity to explore the world and answer its questions. By contrast, training for a job, gaining a credential, is a rather singular, focused, and short-term enterprise. Beyond a good livelihood, Leopold called for good lives, punctuated with the wild and the tame alive in our minds and manifest in our actions, pulsing in the world we traverse through tamaracks and bogs, or, in Big Creek country, among the ponderosa pines and creeks spilling down off the ridges where students and I discuss their immediate academic angst and lofty life goals.

Leopold's hope for children—and my own hope for my children and students—was something beyond the oft-lauded marketable skills today's undergraduates are promised to attract them to this university over that one, this major, not that one. We discuss "Huckleberries" not because knowing Thoreau's theories of property will ensure my students a job in real estate but because being immersed in Thoreau's world jars what is comfortable. It builds links across time between our world and his and forces us to think generously when we imagine other places, values, and possibilities. Education builds empathy. Just as land in Wisconsin was worth more than what could be stripped and sold off it, our lives are worth more than our biweekly paychecks.

***

So what did Leopold prescribe? In Missouri, after telling of the farmers planting trees and starting to restore the Wisconsin bogs, Leopold championed natural history as a partial solution. Natural history was no cutting-edge pedagogical method; it was an older tradition needing recovery much like the tamarack.

Natural history, Leopold said in his speech titled "Natural History, the Forgotten Science," combined sport and science, and amateurs could pursue it and become experts. He cited examples including an "Ohio housewife" who studied the song sparrows of her garden so thoroughly that "ornithologists of all nations [sought] her counsel" (412-413). In formal education, though, this sort of careful observation of the natural world had been shouldered aside, an "eviction of outdoor studies" replaced by lab work (413). Leopold did not begrudge the insights found in the laboratory. He thought those proper for experts, those training in zoology for instance, but for the "average citizen" what was needed was "some understanding of the living world" (414). And in university curricula, natural history had lost its place. In speaking of the biology students of his day, Leopold said:

> Instead of being taught to see his native countryside with appreciation and intelligence, he is taught to carve cats. Let him be taught

> both if this is possible, but if one must be omitted let it be the latter. (414)

In Leopold's mind, a purpose of a biological education was "a means of building citizens," a purpose not being met by the existing program (414). Citizenship required students to know the world around them, something natural history prepared them to do. Most importantly, it focused on relationships between species in a place—in a word, ecology. Citizens needed to understand that they were "only a cog in an ecological mechanism," and if they failed to learn that, "then what is education for," Leopold wondered (415). His feel for natural history decentered economics, rote memorization of bones, and lists of species' names, to emphasize instead connectivity, relationships, and the whole outdoors.

It is taking no great leap to extend Leopold's logic about the ecological world to the social one. Democracy thrives when strong threads knit together the world's diversities, what we might call ecological citizenship. Knowing the names of your neighbors means nothing if you have no relationship with them. Recognizing and pursuing only your interests results in a selfish, collapsing world order. The "Semester in the Wild" students invariably learn such lessons from living together, cooking together, backpacking together, mimicking in their way Barry Commoner's First Law of Ecology, "Everything [and everyone] is connected to everything else" (33).

***

Leopold continued to mull a proper education. A few years after his Missouri speech, in 1942, a year amid a terrible global war, he spoke at the 7th North American Wildlife Conference about "The Role of Wildlife in Liberal Education." Leopold then was chair of the University of Wisconsin's Department of Wildlife Management, and if this paper was any indication, he had inherited a curriculum that dissatisfied him. Like a mountain sheared of its predators, wildlife education produced an imbalance: too many experts. Leopold proposed curtailing "sharply the output of professionals" and instead investing in "a serious attempt to tell the whole campus, and thus eventually the whole community, what wildlife conservation is all about" (466). Leopold eased, always, between the social and the ecological, between the professional and the amateur, toward the good of the whole community. One senses that specialization was anathema to him always.

Earlier, Leopold had witnessed the problems of the atomized university where specialties divided and spread apart. "All the sciences and arts are

It is taking no great leap to extend Leopold's logic about the ecological world to the social one. Democracy thrives when strong threads knit together the world's diversities, what we might call ecological citizenship. Knowing the names of your neighbors means nothing if you have no relationship with them. Recognizing and pursuing only your interests results in a selfish, collapsing world order.

taught as if they were separate," Leopold wrote:

> They are separate only in the classroom. Step out on the campus and they are immediately fused. Land ecology is putting sciences and arts together for the purpose of understanding our environment .(467)

Step onto any college campus today and you are bound to hear similar grumbles about silos that separate different branches of knowledge, followed by earnest calls for interdisciplinary research and teaching collaborations. Today's universities are likely no nimbler at changing course than they were in Leopold's time, meaning the science and arts still tend to be taught separately, students and professors unfamiliar with each other.

In his own department, Leopold proposed a different sort of education, one that would result in producing fewer professionals. Focusing on the importance of education for citizenship more than professionalism meant a student in Leopold's department would learn to "see the land, to understand what he sees, and enjoy what he understands" (467).

To see, to understand, to enjoy. Today's university programs seldom include "to enjoy" as part of their mission statements or strategic plans. And "to see" seems far too basic to most committees charged with devising aspirational phrases. Leopold acknowledged that people needed salaries, but he also thought universities should prepare people to "live a life" (466). An education served citizenship and society over salaries, or it should.

To transition toward that sort of education is to not fetishize specialization but to honor the generalist who can synthesize, the one who is aware of the webs that bind things together. By emphasizing natural history as an appropriate preparation for living in a community, Leopold aligned himself with what was widely considered an amateur pursuit. Without the pretense of specialization, there was no need to assert its authority through the typical means of peer-reviewed publications, endowed professorships, or legislative or granting agencies' appropriations. Citizenship, ecological or otherwise, needs no such trappings.

***

Even though their traditions remain far apart, Leopold's thinking brings to mind Zen master Shunryu Suzuki. His classic 1970 text, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, opens with this wisdom: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few" (21). Like Leopold, Suzuki points to the limits of expertise, the way ideas and experience narrow when you know the world well in narrow ways. The beginner or the amateur or the generalist enjoys a capacious vision and a freedom to imagine that far exceed the specialist. In urging us to adopt the beginner's mind and see things without preconceptions, Suzuki captured the essential contemplative practice of Buddhism that observes what is present in this moment. Which is also the practice of a good naturalist: being open to the living world unfolding before us, an openness needed if we are to touch wonder and notice its effects on us.

The naturalist Thomas Lowe Fleischner explains this in his essay, "The Mindfulness of Natural History," explicitly adopting the language of mindfulness, a secular offshoot

The beginner or the amateur or the generalist enjoys a capacious vision and a freedom to imagine that far exceed the specialist. In urging us to adopt the beginner's mind and see things without preconceptions, Suzuki captured the essential contemplative practice of Buddhism that observes what is present in this moment. Which is also the practice of a good naturalist: being open to the living world unfolding before us, an openness needed if we are to touch wonder and notice its effects on us.

of Buddhism. "Natural history and mindfulness are two surfaces of the same leaf," Fleischner says, "a seamless merging of attentiveness outward and inward, toward the interwoven realms of nature and psyche" (7). By attending to ourselves in nature, by noticing what is in the world and how we move with it and how it works on us, we pay "heed to beauty, grace, and everyday miracles" and realize "a sense of possibility and coherence that runs deeper and truer than the often illusory commercial, social 'realities' advanced by mainstream contemporary culture" (9).

Fleischner is right to point toward the living world as an object of our attention and worthy of our intimacy. Our immersion in it, as Leopold well knew, is the best way to blunt the transitory and corrosive mindsets that erode the life systems of the planet.

To be sure, both Buddhism and natural history can seem abstruse. Each contains layers of traditions and lineages, complicated classification schemes and practices, making it all seem esoteric and difficult for the uninitiated. But they are both quite simple. Fleischner defines natural history expansively as "a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy" (5). In fact, natural history is simple enough for a child.

***

Rachel Carson, famed biologist and award-winning author, recognized that the proper education in nature began long before college. In July 1956, Carson published a powerful essay in *Woman's Home Companion*. "Help Your Child to Wonder" ostensibly guided parents in getting their children into the outdoors for the "sharing of adventure in the world of nature" (354).

In describing her own time on the Maine coast with her young nephew Roger, Carson shared the simple pleasures found in feeling the texture of shells, watching the moon, and listening to insects buzzing—opening all the senses to the thrumming world around them. What was essential was cultivating what Carson described as "a sense of wonder," a force "so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength" (357). Parents need not be naturalists, amateur or professional, to stoke this innate sense of wonder, what E. O. Wilson dubbed *biophilia*—literally, the love of life—because, Carson explained, "it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*" (357).

I wish I had absorbed this message earlier.

I learned early to value knowing and am still a neophyte practicing feeling. The tomes of geology confound me, the books of plants bemuse me, and the annals of animals bewilder me. I am almost wholly ignorant, unable to distinguish a junco from a chickadee, a pine from a fir until I study, or until someone tells me and then tells me again. Studying stories came easier to me than investigating species, listening to tales of ancestors bore into my mind more easily and more often than attending to local birds and bugs. Latin binomials—*Artemisia tridentata, Crotalus oreganus*—put me off, never having known a gentle teacher. Yet here was Carson, writing almost two decades before my birth, telling me across time, "The lasting pleasures of contact with the natural world are not reserved for such scientists but are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of earth, sea and sky and their amazing life" (363).

This past year, sitting on the grass beside Pioneer Creek just 500 feet from where it spills into Big Creek, class was interrupted by a bird darting over our heads and then rising toward the flank of Horse Mountain, circling and hovering over Cliff Creek opposite us. "A golden eagle." "No, it's a turkey vulture." "I didn't see any red." "Who has binoculars?" No one, it turned out.

While the bird was riding the wind, circling before the cliff, at just enough distance to confound us and our bare eyes, I awaited confirmation from my students whose knowledge on this—and so many other natural historical details—exceeded my own. Waiting for the definitive name, I missed the lesson. I failed to recognize the greater value of the moment lay in the circling, the effortless gliding against the blue sky. Identifying the species can happen, Carson pointed out, "without ever once having caught a breath-taking glimpse of the wonder of life." What matters most in education is noticing the wonder.

***

As a college professor, I aspire to teach in a way that prompts students to see the world anew, just as my college education changed how I saw the world's contours. And just as my continued teaching here in the wilderness transforms how I understand teaching and learning, nature and culture, relationships and citizenship.

When we hike up the endless mountains, I wonder about students' wonder. When we circle the campfire, I am curious about their curiosity. We all now teach in the era of standardized testing, in the age of metrics and rubrics meant to measure student learning, intended to hold teachers accountable to accrediting bodies, policymakers, and an often hostile public. But how do you count curiosity? How do you weigh wonder?

While the bird was riding the wind, circling before the cliff, at just enough distance to confound us and our bare eyes, I awaited confirmation from my students whose knowledge on this—and so many other natural historical details—exceeded my own. Waiting for the definitive name, I missed the lesson. I failed to recognize the greater value of the moment lay in the circling, the effortless gliding against the blue sky.

Things are easily counted when we commodify them, including a bachelor's degree. Many of my students count the dollars they pay for a single class session on campus. We know how much, on average, a college education pays off, a fact routinely paraded out to parents and 17-year-olds who are on the fence about whether college is worth it. (Over the course of a working life, it's one million dollars more than a high school degree.) But counting it like this reduces and miscalculates education.

When you know the price of the huckleberry, you lose the sweetness.

Works Cited

Carson, Rachel. "Help Your Child to Wonder." *Silent Spring & Other Writings on the Environment*, edited by Sandra Steingraber, Library of America, 2018, pp. 354-64.

Commoner, Barry. *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1971.

Fleischner, Thomas Lowe. "The Mindfulness of Natural History." *The Way of Natural History*, edited by Thomas Lowe Fleischner, Trinity University Press, 2011, pp. 3-15.

Leopold, Aldo. "Natural History, the Forgotten Science." *A Sand County Almanac & Other Writings on Ecology and Conservation*, edited by Curt Meine, Library of America, 2013, pp. 411-15.

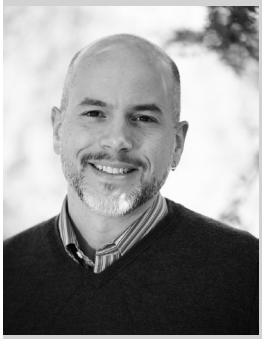
---. "The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education." *A Sand County Almanac,* pp. 466-70.

Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Weatherhill, 1970.

Wilson, Edward O. *Biophilia*. Harvard University Press, 1984.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Huckleberries." *Collected Essays and Poems*, edited by Elizabeth Hall Witherell, Library of America, 2001, pp. 468-501.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." *Collected Essays and Poems*, edited by Elizabeth Hall Witherell, Library of America, 2001, pp. 225-55.



Adam M. Sowards (Ph.D., Arizona State University) is an environmental historian, writer, and a professor at the University of Idaho. He is the author or editor of several books, most recently *An Open Pit Visible from the Moon: The Wilderness Act and the Fight to Protect Miners Ridge and the Public Interest* (2020). His shorter work has appeared in *High Country News*, *Zócalo Public Square*, *Montana Mouthful*, and other publications.