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# Against Solitude: Rethinking Thoreau

*by Camille T. Dungy*

*[Editor's note: Camille T. Dungy delivered the Dana S. Brigham Memorial Keynote Lecture on July 12 at the 2025 Thoreau Society Annual Gathering, and she has graciously adapted the address for inclusion in the* Bulletin*.]*

Figuring out how to approach this talk has not been easy.

You all, I gather, are big fans of Henry David Thoreau. The Thoreau Society is "the largest and oldest organization devoted to an American author" (that's a quote from the Thoreau Society's "About" page). Perhaps I was channeling the often contrarian nature of HDT himself when I realized that, even though I'm about to talk to folks I presume to be among his biggest fans, I won't ignore the compulsion to share my enormous reservations about HDT's legacy.

In the comfort of my own mind, I call him HDT, so I'll be doing so here as well, welcoming you, also, into the comfort of my mind.

I'll quote the Society's webpage again: "The Thoreau Society continues our namesake's struggle to open all eyes to social and environmental injustice, and to end blindness to the consequences of unchecked racism, climate change, and other threats to individual freedom, democratic equality, and social justice in the United States and around the world." *This* is the part of HDT's legacy that I am excited about. The part of his legacy that keeps his work in my own mind. The part of his legacy I want to return to before this meditation is complete.

Camille T. Dungy speaking at the 2025 Annual Gathering / *Photo by Tom Potter*

But I fear that this isn't the part of HDT's legacy the average person most readily thinks about. And that's the problem I want to ponder.

This problem, this question involving HDT and what people think of when they think of Thoreau and his writing, is like the scar that reveals, not the first cut, but a distanced memory of the first cut. Not Thoreau's writing itself, but what people remember about what they remember about his work. These misremembered, or incompletely remembered, versions of the truth have become such fundamental aspects of the American imagination—namely the American environmental imagination but also a particular brand of the American cultural imagination—that it is hard to separate HDT's true legacy from the scarred over version of things.

People think HDT is that guy who lived by himself in the woods for a couple years. Famously isolated. There was a pond that's crowded now with tourists, not isolated anymore at all. He planted beans and ate them. Mice competed for his food. He lived like a hermit. He wrote a lot about the clouds. Right?

## Contents

Oversimplified, yes. But I wager that if I offered this synopsis to five passengers on Boston's Orange line, at least three of them would accept this version of the truth.

I did a word search of *Walden* to be sure I wasn't exaggerating. HDT uses the word "cloud" or "clouds" 22 times. Beans also get mentioned 22 times. "Pond" is used 100 times, that's a lot of mentions of a relatively small body of water. Though, to be fair, occasionally HDT is talking about nearby ponds, not Walden itself, the pond beside which he built his cabin.

But I digress.

I was talking about common perceptions of HDT's most well-known book, *Walden*, and what these perceptions (misperceptions perhaps?) might mean for Henry David Thoreau's legacy.

I had lunch this week with my mother and a friend of hers, women in their 70s and 80s. In answer to her question about what I've been up to recently, I told my mom's friend I'd been working on a talk about Henry David Thoreau. Earlier in our lunch, we'd had a conversation about Percival Everett's novel *James* and what we all thought of Everett's take on Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which we had all re-read after completing Everett's new book.

My mom and her friend are the type of women who are members of multiple book clubs. I'm talking about book clubs that actually *discuss* the books. Neither woman even drinks wine anymore. I tell you this to say that these are *readers*. People who care about the ideas and world views that literature reveals. But when I told her I'd been working on this talk about HDT, my mom's friend said: "Don't we all have a copy of *Walden* sitting somewhere in our house that we haven't touched for decades?"

My own copy of *Walden* has recently been touched quite a lot in preparation for this paper, but I took her point. My mom's friend accepted *Walden* as a classic that was worth keeping in a collection, for show perhaps, and possibly out of a kind of reverence for time-honored tradition. But it wasn't a book she has been inclined to pick up to actually *read*. "I wonder if I've even read it since college?" she said.

I asked her why she thought she hadn't returned to *Walden* and she said, "Too much isolation for me, I think."

It's the isolation that people seem to remember.

Consider this statement from the introduction to the version of *Walden* I'm citing today, which is an edition from 1910, with illustrations and introduction by Clifton Johnson. This is a free edition of the book available online, and so frequently used for ease of access and economy:

> It is by his two years' encampment in the Walden woods that Thoreau is best known to the world; for so unusual a proceeding on the part of a man of his education and cultured tastes could not help attracting certain interests. The book which relates how he lived and what he saw during this period has been the most popular of his writings, and will probably continue to be. In none of his [other] books is his genius displayed so characteristically and completely. It was, however, not published until seven years after his experiment as a hermit ended.[1]

It is that final sentence that intrigues me the most. "It was, however, not published until seven years after his experiment as a *hermit* ended." This penultimate word, "hermit," introduces a key element of the question I am pondering today. Why is HDT's isolation such an object of attention and, I would venture to say, adoration, even sometimes deification?

The concept of the solitary man in the woods remains somehow a key to HDT's enduring legacy. Certainly, the man's own language, in the first sentence of the book *Walden*, encourages this perception. "When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only."[2] In many ways, HDT's *Walden* cultivated a particular school of environmental writing that continues to be championed, often to the exclusion of all else. This mode of nature writing demands the writer remain in isolation to "look very closely at their surroundings."[3]

That phrase, "look very closely at their surroundings," comes from my own most recent book, *Soil: The Story of a Black Mother's Garden*, which interrogates this mode of environmental writing, a tradition of writing in-depth and about (seemingly) solitary explorations that we see mirrored in the works of lionized literary figures like John Muir, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and even dear Robert McFarlane. As I was invited here to speak about "Thoreau's Revolutions," it might be interesting enough to stick with the way HDT's *Walden* unleashed a mode of writing about the world that fit perfectly into this then-still-new American nation's interest in the "self-made man." The man *making himself* in the *wilderness*. It's no wonder that so many American readers remember *Walden* as a story of a man finding himself alone in the woods. This is a key and common trope of the American imagination, this idea that the self can be found most thoroughly and truly when the self-seeker searches in a state of isolation. HDT's own words, again, are famously and frequently used as evidence of this very idea:

> 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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.[4]

The idea here becomes a mirror of Jesus's time in the Wilderness. Or the Buddha's, or so many wise men's. Walk out far from the huddled masses and a man might discover truths, attain wisdom, the rest of us lowly ant-like souls will never fully comprehend.

Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817. Happy 208th birthday HDT!!!! That means he was about 28 when he "first took up [his] abode in the woods, that is, began to spend [his] nights as well as days there."[5] He was not married, did not have children. He was something of a unicorn in terms of his ability to isolate himself.

How many of us, in the normal course of our adult lives could pull away from society, family, work, as completely as it seems to many that HDT did during these two years and two months of his life? I'd wager not many. I'll argue that not even HDT could truly accomplish such a feat of isolation.

The irony of my own nature-writing project, *Soil*, was that I intended to spend a full year writing a book wherein I looked very closely at my surroundings and pondered what grew up from the ground around me. But the year I chose for my own Walden-esque experiment was 2020.

Instead of having my daughter's eight school hours every day to wander in long reveries, I found myself as primary caretaker and remote-school supervisor for a nine-year-old girl. Not to mention worrying with intense regularity about the health and safety of my elderly parents and so many other people around the world. My mother's friend said she hadn't returned to *Walden*, because she was suspicious of the degree of isolation she remembered. During the year I had set aside to begin writing *Soil*, I *did* return to *Walden*, and also to several other books that had been written in the vein of its solitary wood-dweller legacy. I found myself frustrated by them, looking to locate some more relatable pathways toward wisdom that *did not* require hermetic isolation.

*Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* [Wanderer above the Sea of Fog], c. 1818, painting by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) / *Wikimedia Commons*

Rethinking the obsession with Thoreau's isolation would go a considerable way towards refreshing HDT's legacy. Among the negative outcomes of the perception of a cultivated isolation in *Walden* is a distrust of *everything* HDT has to say. Consider this email I received recently from a man who'd just finished reading *Soil*:

> I heard and enjoyed your interview on NPR today. I, too, am suspicious of the "nature writer" as isolationist. Thoreau bugs me most, since, if I understand correctly, he spent pretty much every night back in his bed at home, while telling the world that he was ensconced in a Walden wilderness.

I'm going to pause here and let you all breathe.

I trust that was rough to hear for several reasons. But I want to talk as much about perceptions of *Walden* as a touchstone in the American imagination as about the book *Walden* itself: the stories the culture tells itself about the story HDT told about his two years and two months in the woods near Walden Pond.

Accurate or not, it feels important to consider how and why such misrememberings as the one I just shared arise.

The fact that people distrust HDT's isolation so much as to say he slept at home "every night" is part of what interests me. Of the other dismissals I've heard, the most frequent and the most vitriolic is: *and his mother visited twice a week to pick up and deliver his laundry!*

For more on the truth below the scar of these accusations, I suggest Brent Ranalli's 2021 article in *The Concord Saunterer*, "Laundry!"[6] All I find in *Walden* of HDT's mention of laundry is a moment in the long "Economy" chapter when he writes an account of expenses, "excepting for washing and mending, which for the most part were done out of the house." There is a lot that is ambiguous here. Given how much HDT talks about other people's taste in clothing in this same chapter, I'm curious about the omission of further details about how he gets his own clothes washed. Then again hardly anyone, or any man certainly, would have voluntarily washed his own clothes in those days before the invention of the automatic washing machine. Laundry was a tedious all-day task, consigned in the U.S. to the women of the house or outsourced to marginalized or enslaved women (or to Chinese laborers). How much thought did HDT put to the specifics of laundry? But again, I digress. . . .

Or, maybe it's not so much that I digress as that I want to clarify the point I am sauntering toward.

In considering HDT's legacy, I want to think about why so many people I've talked to are troubled by the fact that *Walden* seems to gloss over mention of his mother's role in his laundry routine, the implication that he benefited from this particular domestic assistance, or the possibility that sometimes he didn't actually sleep out at the pond cabin at all. Why was my correspondent so troubled by the implication that when he wasn't sleeping in his cabin, he was sleeping in a comfortable home? What is it about this play at isolation (or perhaps this *perceived* play at isolation) that annoys certain readers so much?

One of the things I write about in *Soil* is how alienating much of canonical American environmental literature can be *because* of its reliance on this trope of isolation. My daughter and I even made up a song about this common literary construct, a song which I record in *Soil*:

> La la la! Walking through the woods.
> Nobody to think about but me!
> Me me me. Nobody but me!
> All I have to think about is me.[7]

Here's the moment in the book where I describe the genesis of our little song:

> What infuriated me, I told my daughter, was that the audiobook I'd just finished, like so many foundational environmentally focused books, seemed to have no other people in it. The (nearly always white) men and women who claim to be models for how to truly experience the natural world always seemed to do so in solitude. Just one guy—so often a guy—with no evidence of family or anyone to worry about but himself.[8]

Often, in *Walden* particularly, HDT does play into this construct. Only three chairs in his house: "One for solitude, two for friendship, three for society."[9] If you know the rest of this quote, bear with me a spell. I plan to return here. But I pause at this point because my experience talking about Thoreau with people has suggested that people assume HDT fancied himself an isolated hermit living in self-enforced solitude in his cabin in the Concord woods. They think of a "cabin," a small and isolated rustic hut, rather than a "house," which, the scholar Robert Thorson reminds me, is the term preferred by HDT himself. They fasten on the part of HDT brought out in this sentence from the essay "Walking": "If you are prepared to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk."[10] Taken in isolation, as it often is, this quote from the opening of "Walking" suggests a requirement akin to the "La, La La, walking through the woods, nobody to think about but me" mentality about which my daughter and I derisively sang.

My own book repeats the second sentence of an oft quoted passage from the "Solitude" chapter of *Walden*: "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. *To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating*. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude."[11]

But, here's something that interests me: Aside from Clifton Johnson's description of Thoreau in his introduction to *Walden*, a word search of the entire 1910 edition shows only seven instances of the word "hermit."

One is in a paragraph where HDT claims, "I think that I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man that comes my way. I am naturally *no hermit*, but might possibly sit out the sturdiest frequenter of the bar-room, if my business called me thither."[12]

One time he uses the word "hermit" to describe Walden Pond itself, a body of water which is isolated with "no visible inlet or outlet."[13]

The other times the word shows up in the book, the hermit described is *actively involved in conversation* with at least one other person. Towards the end of the chapter "Former Inhabitants," HDT writes: "Ah! such discourse we had, hermit and philosopher, and the old settler I have spoken of,—we three,—it expanded and racked my little house."[14] HDT was not alone in the cabin in the woods all the time. He never pretends to be alone in the cabin in the woods all the time. He has an entire chapter of the book called "Visitors," and the visitors aren't only squirrels and phoebes (the birds, not the girls). He says at one point in the "Visitors" chapter: "Many a traveller came out of his way to see me."[15] All this puts me in mind of the fact that early in *Walden* HDT talks a lot about how people can be alone when in company and just as easily they can be in company when alone. Perhaps one of the revolutions of thought HDT inspires is a reevaluation of the very concept of what it means to be alone.

The other place HDT himself uses the word "hermit" in *Walden* is in the opening parts of the chapter called "Brute Neighbors." Here, the narration divides into two parts (perhaps three parts, if I include the introductory narration in this count). The opening narration reads thus: "Sometimes I had a companion in my fishing, who came through the village to my house from the other side of the town, and the catching of the dinner was as much a social exercise as the eating of it."[16] Some readers consider the poet and the hermit in this chapter to be two aspects of HDT, who converse for some time as if each were an embodied being. The self-proclaimed "hermit" aspect of his personality sits in conversation with a part of himself he describes as "the poet."

Perhaps, though, you read the narration as truth, and in fact there is another man who comes to Walden Pond. One common understanding is that this Poet is HDT's dear friend William Ellery Channing. Or, if not Channing, some other of those "many a traveller" who "came out of his way" to see him. Regardless of the interpretation, HDT's hermit is never actually alone. He is always surrounded, not only by the clouds and bean plants and mice and other living beings of the woods around Walden Pond (who HDT imbues with a jovial set of dependably companiable personalities), but also by both imagined and actual *people*. That philosopher at the end of "Former Inhabitants"? That's probably Amos Bronson Alcott. The old settler, that could very well be Ralph Waldo Emerson, the man on whose land HDT built his so-called isolated cabin. Whether or not he is "the poet," his friend William Ellery Channing dropped by the house with some regularity, often occupying one of the two chairs HDT maintained "for friendship."

Photo by Cihan Yüce / *Pexels.com*

I'm not convinced that HDT himself is as fully committed to the idea of so complete an isolation as a certain strain of the American imagination would like to impose upon him. In the sentence in "Walking" that immediately follows HDT's long list of all the human connections a man must forsake, HDT writes, "To come down to my own experience, my companion and I, for I sometimes have a companion . . . ." It seems abundantly clear that this walking companion is another man, not a cloud, or a victual-nibbling mouse.[17]

In that section of *Walden* about only having three chairs, HDT goes on to write, "It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof."[18] I love that specific addition of "*with their bodies*." These aren't people HDT hallucinates in his isolation. Not even the ghosts of the former settlement, about which he also writes. Truth is, a sizable chunk of the essentially spare account of his two years and two months at Walden Pond is dedicated to thinking about the community who had lived on the land before he arrived there. Their ghosts, or memories. But also, HDT wrote often of actual living people who provide a kind of companionship, and often instruction, to him.

Train tracks ran *and still run* not far from the spot where he sited his cabin. This evidence, not just of a human-built environment but a direct expression of commerce and industrialized civilization, is a presence so regular that HDT sets his clock by it: "Regularly at half-past seven, in one part of the summer, after the evening train had gone by, the whippoorwills chanted their vespers for half an hour, sitting on a stump by my door, or upon the ridge pole of the house."[19] The train delights him. "I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me, and I smell the stores which go dispensing their odors all the way from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain," HDT writes.[20]

In her writing about Thoreau's Kalendar, Kristen Case, 2024's Dana S. Brigham lecturer, describes Thoreau's intense focus on time and place and the lives he witnesses as a kind of community building. Case calls this "knowing as neighboring,"[21] and details the intensity of Thoreau's attention to the world around him, attention that could not have been made fully manifest without a *reliance* on HDT's human community.

Here I quote a snippet of Case's lecture. She says that, by the end of HDT's life, in the years when tuberculosis confined him to his room, not near Walden Pond, but again in town:

> He was turning, or returning, not only to the seasonal patterns of rain and snowfall, the depth and shallowness of the river, but also, in new ways, to the human beings around him, from a posture of self-reliance to one of dependence on others: his sister, who would become his amanuensis, his writing hand, and his friend Channing, who would become his out-of-doors eyes.[22]

Case argues in this talk, quite convincingly, that illness and time shifted HDT's attitudes toward solitude, compelling him to overtly engage with the community around him.

I won't argue with Case's assessment. But I will add that it seems to me that community was *always* right there for him, not particularly hidden at all.

Perhaps the cocky young man who writes in the opening pages of *Walden* that "the old have no very important advice to give the young" might have believed at some level that he could in fact survive entirely on his own.[23] But in that same passage of the "Economy" chapter HDT also writes, "We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests."[24] And one thing that is clearly proven from HDT's long experiment at Walden Pond is that he could not, and did not, live alone.

What he does often do in *Walden* is to sublimate these attachments. Emerson is never named Emerson. Alcott is "the philosopher." People are less individuals than tropes or avatars, symbols of their better selves. The individuals become representatives of the collective, with their individual features washed out. Just as two years and two months contract into something more like a calendar year, the individual details of much of this incredibly detailed book are often blurred.

And so it *is* true that in at least one instance HDT did not sleep in his cabin by Walden Pond. Though he was not at home asleep that night. Rather, in July of 1846 he spent a night in the Concord jail for having refused to pay his taxes. In *Walden* and also in his writing beyond *Walden*, HDT conveys his intense connection to a world beyond his own nose. We learn about his abolitionist convictions, his refusal to pay taxes that supported the Mexican-American War. HDT is troubled by wealth and comfort built off the labor and suffering of enslaved Black people. He once wrote: "The United States have a coffle of four millions of slaves. They are determined to keep them in this condition; and Massachusetts is one of the confederated overseers to prevent their escape."[25] HDT refused to accept that the distance between Massachusetts and the slave-holding states absolved the citizenry of Massachusetts, himself included, of a culpability for the crimes of slavery. He articulated the connection between the Mexican-American War and its attempted landgrab and the expansion of the institution of slavery. He was bailed out of jail by a friend in the community—scholars now believe it was his aunt Maria who paid his poll tax, though HDT didn't know the source of this assistance—but while in jail, HDT made friends with prisoners who had more experience there. In "Civil Disobedience," HDT's portrayal of these habitual jailbirds is startlingly and conscientiously humane. Furthermore, HDT makes clear that he would not have had adequate sustenance but for the help he received from a fellow prisoner. Similarly, the amount of space he gives in *Walden* to the inhabitants of the former Black settlement near his Walden Pond cabin suggests his awareness of the connection between those human lives and his own. Case after case proves that HDT wasn't isolated. Certainly not in his imagination, and not in fact either.

In the chapter of *Walden* called "Sounds," he writes: "I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or *the noise of some traveler's wagon* on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time."[26] HDT understands himself, his place in time, his place in the *world*, in relation to the community of living beings, including human beings, *in their bodies*, around him. He makes clear in *Walden* that he couldn't even have built his little house without the ax he borrowed from a friend.

HDT's own writing towards the end of his life suggests that he presumes his readers know how entangled humans are with each other, but he fears we don't readily understand how connected we could be with the greater-than-human world. Therefore, his focus shifts away from people and towards the natural setting that was such a part of the normalized backdrop of his Concord experience as to be overlooked. This part of the living world demanded forthright attention, a champion. He wanted to extend and expand on the work about Nature by his famous friend Emerson, and also Alcott and Channing. Consider these lines from "Walking":

> I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute Freedom and Wildness, as contrasted with a Freedom and Culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization; the minister, and the school-committee, and every one of you will take care of that.[27]

The irony is that HDT's books and the tradition they spawned have come to be so synonymous with the "wish" to speak "a word for Nature" that the part about "man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature" has been subsumed. HDT says he lives alone in a small house in the woods, and that must mean he has forsaken all other human connection. As if to live wholly as a hermit in nature or wholly in the swirl of society are the only options. But HDT lived a self-described "border life" (his term from the end of "Walking").[28]

I am coming close to the end of my time, but I don't want to end without returning to a point I made early on. Here I repeat a quote from the Thoreau Society's webpage: "The Thoreau Society continues our namesake's struggle to open all eyes to social and environmental injustice, and to end blindness to the consequences of unchecked racism, climate change, and other threats to individual freedom, democratic equality, and social justice in the United States and around the world."

Here was my own prompt for today's talk: "We hope Camille . . . could discuss "Thoreau's revolution."

What makes HDT's writing revolutionary?

It occurs to me that it is the very contrarian nature of his work that offers the revolutionary thinking. In writing about efforts to go about life in solitude, HDT makes clear how impossible, and fundamentally undesirable, such a quest truly is. That seems to be one of the fundamental lessons of this American experiment as well. There can be no such thing as a self-made man. None of us can or should go it alone. It's not possible, or even practical. If we fans of HDT's writing are to continue to do a service to his work from this, his 208th birthday, and beyond, perhaps one of the things we need to press more clearly into the American imagination is just how isolated HDT was not: how many people—*in their bodies*—HDT brought with him to the Walden Woods.

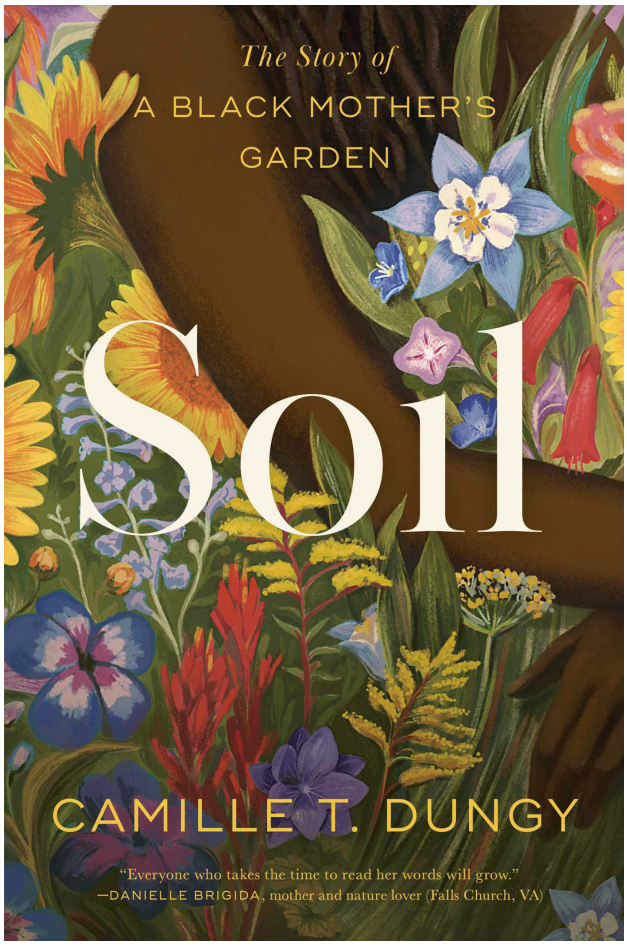
I'll close with a brief passage from *Soil*, and a celebration of the fact that, after all these years, I think HDT and I would enjoy each other's company. Maybe I could be one of those travelers who stops inside his cabin for a spell.

> *Upheaval* is a word rooted in the soil. It suggests the act of turning up the earth to make room for sowing. After upheaval, new life is revealed. Earthworms. Millipedes. The sow bug's name isn't so much about the piglike look

of the insect as it is about the fact that the upturning of earth that comes with sowing and planting tends to bring sow bugs to light.

Here is something I find interesting: I never saw myself as an animal so much as when I hunched on all fours to labor with my girl. Or when I nursed her, my daughter's newborn suckling frenzy more feral than anything I ever held so close. I was a mammal mother. A female beast. Since then, I have not fully returned to the independent person I believed I was before.

A family of blue jays nests in a yard behind our house and wings through our airspace most days, flashing their brilliant feathers. In the pandemic-shaded September of 2020, there were also many hundred thousand acres of wildfire burning close by. On one of the smokiest days, when the skies looked like *The Day After* we practiced for in the nuclear-threatened 1980s of my childhood, the blue jays flashed across our yard looking quite plain. I had to point the birds out to my daughter, who did not recognize them. Untrue to the name by which we've come to know them, the birds we saw looked only white and gray. The jays' feathers carry no blue pigment. Our eyes trick us into seeing that shade when light reflects off the birds. On that red/orange day, when the light was so altered, we had to train ourselves to see the birds anew. Maybe this is what it means for me—for this Black woman, this mother, the subdivision dweller with a little yard she tends—to say I write about the wide wild world. Maybe it is just a matter of figuring out what can be seen in this light.




The word eco derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning "house." In the context of the word ecology, we understand that house to mean the space of nonhuman living entities and their environments. In turn, environment suggests a natural world that is larger than and separate from the human. The world of bluebells and beavers and buttercups, not broadband and blogs and the capital-B BlackBerry. The environment is outside the door.

In nineteenth- and twentieth-century environmental literature, the environment is often synonymous with the wild. "A state of nature not tamed or domesticated," according to the dictionary on my desk, "an uncultivated uninhabited region." A space far, far outside the door. This division assigns some "natural condition" kept at a remove from the spaces humans inhabit. But I want what is inside my doors to be part of this conversation. I don't want to separate my life from other lives on the planet.

Ecological thought, conservationist thought, the thoughts of the gardener [*and, I add here, the cabin-dweller at Walden*]—these should foster nurturing and collaborative relationships with other life-forms, including both humans and those we've long called wild. This planet is home to us all. All who live in this house are family. What folly to separate the urgent life will of the hollyhock outside my door from the other lives, the family, I hold dear. My life demands a radically domestic ecological thought.[29]

Thank you!

• **Camille T. Dungy** is University Distinguished Professor at Colorado State University, and author and editor of ten books, most recently *Soil: The Story of a Black Mother's Garden*.

**Notes:**

1. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, illustrated by Clifton Johnson (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1910), xviii.
2. Thoreau, *Walden*, 1.
3. Camille Dungy, *Soil: The Story of a Black Mother's Garden* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024), 63.
4. Thoreau, *Walden*, 118.
5. Thoreau, *Walden*, 109-10.
6. Brent Ranalli, "Laundry!," *The Concord Saunterer* 29 (2021), 1-23.
7. Dungy, *Soil*, 55.
8. Dungy, *Soil*, 66.
9. Thoreau, *Walden*, 184.
10. Henry D. Thoreau, "Walking," *Excursions*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2007), 186.
11. Thoreau, *Walden*, 178 (emphasis added).
12. Thoreau, *Walden*, 184 (emphasis added).
13. Thoreau, *Walden*, 258.
14. Thoreau, *Walden*, 357.
15. Thoreau, *Walden*, 198.
16. Thoreau, *Walden*, 296.
17. Thoreau, "Walking," 186.
18. Thoreau, *Walden*, 184.
19. Thoreau, *Walden*, 163.
20. Thoreau, *Walden*, 157.
21. Kristen Case, "Knowing as Neighboring: Approaching Thoreau's Kalendar," *The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 2, no. 1 (March, 2014): 107-129.
22. Kristen Case, "Thoreau's Threshold: Temporal Imagination as Public Good (A Circle in Six Leaps)," *Thoreau Society Bulletin* 327 (Winter 2025), 6.
23. Thoreau, *Walden*, 9.

24. Thoreau, *Walden*, 11.
25. Henry D. Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 130.
26. Thoreau, *Walden*, 147 (emphasis added).
27. Thoreau, "Walking," 185.
28. Thoreau, "Walking," 217.
29. Dungy, *Soil*, 128.

# The Thoreau Society Awards, 2025

*by John Kucich*

The following awards were presented at the 2025 Annual Gathering:

The **Thoreau Society Distinguished Service Award** recognizes substantial dedication to the Thoreau Society and/or its mission. This year, there were two recipients of this award.

Beginning in 2017, **Rebecca Kneale Gould** served two terms on the Society's Board of Directors, where she brought a patient spaciousness to every discussion. As chair of the Publications Committee, Rebecca was an eloquent advocate for the extraordinary work of the editors of the *TSB* and *Concord Saunterer*. As a scholar of religious studies and environment, Rebecca has been a leading consultant to the forthcoming Ken Burns / Ewers Brothers film on Thoreau, and she has published significant essays treating Thoreau's spirituality, including "The Whiteness of *Walden*: Reading Thoreau with Attention to Black Lives." Her book on spirituality and back-to-the-land practices, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America*, also includes readings of Thoreau, and she has published widely on religion, nature, and various spiritual-ecological traditions.

At Middlebury College, Rebecca co-directs the Environmental Studies Focus in Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment. She invites students to consider our nation's idea of nature alongside our history of racism and to read Thoreau with full attention to his whiteness and his privilege. Rebecca is especially skilled at asking hard questions and then providing answers at once honest, inclusive, and graceful—even when the edges of a topic are jagged. She serves as Senior Research Advisor for The BTS Center, a community organization that fosters "Spiritual Leadership for a Climate-Changed World." At their home in Vermont, Rebecca and her spouse tend a small community of rescue sheep, whom she counts among Earth's best spiritual teachers and guides.

**Jacqueline Kluft** first heard about Henry David Thoreau in a classroom near Philadelphia, where her English teacher, Mrs. Wagner, pointed to the windows and exclaimed, "There's your Walden!," where all the students could see was the flat, gray, asphalt roof of the building next door. Jacqui was not impressed. She was, however, thinking of a life in nature. Her father taught her to pay attention to the world around her, turned her on to bird watching, and brought a wood turtle home for her to raise.

Jacqui went on to study biology in college and graduate school. In 2014, while working at a state park along the Massachusetts coastline, she learned of an interpreter opening at Walden Pond State Reservation and attended a program there to check it out. The presenter was Robert Thorson, whose interweaving of Thoreau's legacy with the science of the place reignited the faint spark from her high school English class.

For eleven years now, Jacqui has been a key member of the interpretive staff at Walden Pond. She can answer just about any question you have about either Henry or the Pond: about the glacial features of the terrain, about the plants and animals you might see on a walk, about Henry's time there, and yes, about his laundry. Jacqui can also be found at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge leading the Phenology Team and the Bird Study Team, training citizen scientists. The former team won the National Phenology Network PhenoChampions Award for 2024. Thoreau wrote, "We can never have enough of nature." This is Jacqui.

The **Walter Harding Distinguished Achievement Award** recognizes significant scholarly achievement or other exceptional accomplishment that furthers the mission of the Thoreau Society. This year there were two recipients of this award.

Growing up in Massachusetts, **Ron Hoag** visited Walden to fish for stocked trout. Thereafter, at Middlebury College, he got hooked on Thoreau thanks to Reginald Cook, the fourteenth president of the Thoreau Society. Later, at UNC-Chapel Hill, Ron's dissertation on Thoreau was the last directed by Lewis Leary, the eighth president of the Society. Ron joined the Thoreau Society in 1979, serving on its board for a total of 22 years, including a term as its fortieth president.

For more than 35 years, Ron taught and published on Thoreau and other American authors at East Carolina University. With friend and coauthor Brad Dean, he published two keystone essays as a book-length survey of all Thoreau lectures before and after *Walden*; he also published a later solo essay considering Thoreau and Concord in the context of the lyceum lecture circuit. His 1982 account of the sublime in "Ktaadn"—a study expanded in 2021—remains the dominant interpretation in this field. From 1993 to 1999 he edited the first seven issues of the "New Series" of the Society's *Concord Saunterer*, in the book-length form in which we know it today.