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Evolution for Revolutions

For Kathi Anderson, the executive director of the Walden Woods Project and our generous host in the summer of 2025, who placed Thoreau's manuscripts—and every available resource—into my hands for research and translation projects in Iran.

1

Before I thought about learning English or heard the names Thoreau and Emerson, my soul was being prepared to meet them through the works of Persian poets who lived some 800 years earlier: Rumi, Hafez, Saadi and other mystic poets who were always recited by my unschooled parents and grandparents during my childhood. Those were years when Iran and the United States shared close cultural connections. I watched American movies and television series based on works of American writers like Mark Twain, Faulkner, Tennessee Williams among others. Those Persian poets and mystics, far from me in time, and the Americans, far in geography, created a vibrant and colorful life for me. These literary and cultural seeds kept a distant world alive within me. I especially loved *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1983), which portrayed a simple, frontier way of living enriched by personal love and the revival of essential values.

When the 1979 revolution came to Iran, *Little House on the Prairie* was one of many American television series taken off the air by the censorship of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), leaving behind a quiet yearning for the parts of American culture I had come to cherish—a yearning I carried within me for many years, until I finally healed it through literature. Literature has helped me realize that distance does not mean disappearance, and political separation can be bridged by the power of art to reach human depths that politics cannot change.

2

Henry David Thoreau emerged in my life after the revolution. He appeared in the pithy, profound sentences of his that I heard now

and then on my shortwave radio, discovered in books, or even encountered in the example sentences of dictionaries while I was learning English. Those sentences carried such a captivating quality in them that I told myself: other authors write sentences in their books; Thoreau writes books in his sentences.

I eventually found *Walden* (1854) through Soroor and Samira Hosseini, relatives who sent it to me from the United States. *Walden* and Thoreau were not just a continuation of the American films or series of my childhood; rather, they were the threshold to the grand literary world of great American writers and poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson among others. They revived the world I had lost in movies—now in literature.

3

Within the context of American culture and the American Revolution, *Walden* demanded that individuals claim their own independence and personal evolution. It was a fitting vision for a man who believed he lived in a galaxy, not merely beside the small village of Concord: "Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way?" (133). This vision gave a cosmopolitan meaning to *Walden* for me and expanded my understanding of the world in which I lived.

4

In stark contrast, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) was written in the dark shadow of the Russian Revolution, whose aim was not the moral awakening of the individual, but the subordination of the individual to the collective. In this vision, each man is no more than a snowflake in a communist avalanche—an avalanche that dissolves the individual within itself in order to crush capitalism to pulp.

5

In what way could Thoreau inspire his readers in their approach towards revolutions? Did he really favor a revolution in the sense of a sudden upheaval of political, social, and economic systems—or something quieter, more personal, and morally grounded?

6

In "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849), Thoreau writes: "All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable" (67).

Thoreau went to jail for refusing to pay his poll tax while staying at Walden Pond. His defiance here is not born of violence, but of moral conviction. He challenges the legitimacy of law itself, asserting: "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right" (65). In *Walden*, and in his actual life at Walden Pond, revolution begins not in the streets, but in the soul—where conscience outweighs compliance.

7

Ironically, in his later life—when many grow more cautious and conservative—Thoreau writes his fiery essays, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1860) and "The Last Days of John Brown" (1860), in which he goes so far as to defend Captain Brown, a revolutionary figure whose armed uprising resulted in the death of innocent people. Whether unaware of the full extent of the violence or simply unwavering in his moral stance, Thoreau asserts: "No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature" ("Plea" 125).

8

When I discovered *Walden*, I was living in the aftermath of a revolution in my own country. As an eyewitness to a revolution and the bloody wars that followed in its defense, I had seen how young and old fervent revolutionaries wanted death more than life. It was easier and sweeter for them to die for their cause than to live. They saw no cause in living. Thoreau cherished life in *Walden*. In the short passage in which he expresses his goal of going to the woods he uses the word *life* and *live* or *living* ten times:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, . . . 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; . . . 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 drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. (90-91)

Revolutions demand people to sacrifice their lives and die. Evolution wishes people to live and thrive. I discovered Thoreau not in the fire and smoke of Captain Brown's revolt, but in the pure and sacred mirror of Walden Pond water which had itself traveled to me:

> The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges . . . and, floating by Ternate and Tidore and the mouth of the Persian Gulf, melts in the tropic gales of the Indian seas, and is landed in ports of which Alexander only heard the names. (298)

Thoreau knew himself better than he knew anyone else, including Captain Brown, whom he admired passionately in two essays. In *Walden*, he says, "I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well" (3).

"Plea" burns with the fire that another man had kindled. *Walden* breathes the wind that carries the fragrance of an independent, individual poet in his own actual, deliberate life by Walden Pond—something each individual soul must inhale in solitude before any true social evolution, rather than revolution, can begin.

9

Thoreau's *Walden* did not limit my view of American culture, or of life in general, to the isolated life of a hermit in the woods. Through the metaphor of three chairs, Thoreau moves from deliberate solitude to friendship and finally to a society rooted in individual dignity. In his cabin, he attends to the layered dimensions of human life and existence. He writes: "I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society" (140).

To me, these chairs symbolize the dream Thoreau has for the architecture of American culture and the whole human community in general: the recognition of individual life, the formation of friendship, and ultimately the emergence of society—none sacrificed for the other.

In certain moments while reading *Walden*, I feel as if he quietly invites me to sit on the first chair to see through his own eyes: "Could

a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?" (10).

Looking through each other's eyes, while each person preserves their own independent view of the universe, is the beginning of a thriving friendship and a fruitful social life, a Thoreauvian evolution that leads to a deeper and more meaningful revolution, not of politics, but of the soul: a poetical awakening. Politics has separated me in Iran from Thoreau's land in the United States. It is poetry that has reconnected me to the Walden Woods and Thoreau's country.

10

In contrast, Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a defiant testament from Soviet-era literature, reveals a society where the first and second chair—those representing solitude and friendship—have been sacrificed on the altar of collectivism. In the Gulag, privacy is a crime and friendship a risk. With chilling precision, Solzhenitsyn reveals what the guards demand of the prisoners:

> Attention, prisoners. Marching orders must be strictly obeyed. . . . Keep your eyes fixed ahead and your hands behind your backs. A step to right or left is considered an attempt to escape and the escort has orders to shoot without warning. (18)

This is a literary reflection of life under Stalin, made possible by the relative freedom of Khrushchev's thaw. Yet even in its defiance, the book cannot go so far as to express any criticism of the Soviet system itself; its critique remains confined to the brutality of one era, not the ideology that sustained it.

11

In *Walden,* one can ignore orders and move beyond familiar to the point of getting lost—a condition that becomes a symbol of absolute freedom. In a symmetrical contrast to *One Day*'s regimented prisoners' walk, *Walden* offers a scene of quiet human will and individual autonomy. Thoreau, walking home in darkness, is guided not by orders but by free human instinct:

> Sometimes, after coming home thus late in a dark and muggy night, when my feet felt the path which my eyes could not see,

> dreaming and absent-minded all the way, until I was aroused by having to raise my hand to lift the latch, I have not been able to recall a single step of my walk, and I have thought that perhaps my body would find its way home if its master should forsake it, as the hand finds its way to the mouth without assistance. (170)

Thoreau walks in solitude, not surveillance. His path is mapped in his own dreams and imagination, not imposed. His body moves freely, not in rigid formation. Where Ivan Denisovich must suppress every instinct to survive, Thoreau trusts his instincts to guide him into unknown realms of discovery. The contrast is stark: one walk is a march of submission, the other a drift of absolute freedom in a sea of darkness. Thoreau is not even following what his memory is imposing on him. And inside the cabin, where Thoreau moves freely between his chairs, Ivan Denisovich is denied even a stool.

12

Darkness is not oppressive, but pregnant with possibilities. It is a threshold to the undiscovered corners of life and the universe waiting to be seen and discovered for the first time. There is a virtue in thus getting lost: "not till we are completely lost, or turned round,–for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost,–do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature" (*Walden* 171).

The Persian poet Rumi had already taught me how to be lost; he says: "Getting lost in getting lost is my religion" ("Ghazal 430").[1]

Religion did not bind Rumi in restrictive fanaticism; it showed him to be lost in the wonders of other worlds. This was how I was lost —and found Thoreau.

In the Soviet Union of Solzhenitsyn's vision, people are surrounded by cold and darkness in a restrictive and blinding sense. There is no way out to being lost. The ice and frost in Siberia separate the prisoners in a gulag from the rest of the world. In Thoreau's world in the Concord woods, the frozen Walden Pond provides the poet with even more roads and paths to many places to go and new landscapes to behold: "When the ponds were firmly frozen, they afforded not only new and shorter routes to many points, but new views from their surfaces of the familiar landscape around them" (*Walden* 271).

Unlike the prisoners in *One Day*, who follow one another in line under close surveillance, Thoreau warns others not to follow his example in life, nor will even he repeat his own way of living. It is true that he considers it a miracle for people to look through each other's eyes, but he never wishes anyone to copy the life of another:

> One young man of my acquaintance, . . . told me that he thought he should live as I did, *if he had the means*. I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. (71)

13

Where Thoreau invites us to sit on his chairs and see through his eyes, Solzhenitsyn forces us to haunt Shukhov's body—to feel the cold seep into his bones, to count every crumb of bread, to measure time not by seasons but by every single day of survival:

> You had to eat with all your mind on the food—like now, nibbling the bread bit by bit, working the crumbs up into a paste with your tongue and sucking it into your cheeks. And how good it tasted—that soggy black bread! (21)

Consider, in contrast, a quiet scene in *Walden* where Thoreau describes eating his own bread in silence:

> I usually carried my dinner of bread and butter, and read the newspaper in which it was wrapped, at noon, sitting amid the green pine boughs which I had cut off, and to my bread was imparted some of their fragrance, for my hands were covered with a thick coat of pitch. (42)

Unlike Solzhenitsyn, Thoreau never brings us all the way down into his own mouth—into the saliva where bread is turned into pulp, every movement of nibbling recorded as he "works the crumbs up into

a paste" with his tongue. Instead, it is through the fragrance of pine on his hands that we realize he is eating—gently, spiritually, reverently.

Here, the act of nourishment is not reduced to survival but elevated into a deep, almost sacred connection—with nature, with solitude, with spirit. The bread is scented with pine. The body lives within the soul, not the other way around. Thoreau is as eloquent in his silence as in his speech.

14

As Oscar Wilde wrote: "In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it" (78).

The contrast between *Walden* and *One Day* reminded me that freedom and tyranny can both become a tragedy—two sides of the same coin—if we are not wise. If Thoreau had gone into detail about the physical act of eating in the Concord woods, he would have fallen into the very animalistic abyss that traps Shukhov in Gulag.

Here literature poses quintessential questions to the human conscience: what would be the difference between living in a relatively free country and living in tyranny, if Thoreau had also gone into similar detail about what pleasures of the flesh in Walden?

Let us ask that same question about everything we do—every bite, every word, every silence—in our daily lives.

Shukhov's black bread is a counted, hoarded ration, as imprisoned as he is. Thoreau did not just bring wheats or oats into his kitchen for food, he helped plants escape domestication, guiding them toward their own wild liberty in nature. About the beans that he cultivates at Walden Pond he says: "They were beans cheerfully returning to their wild and primitive state that I cultivated" (*Walden* 158).

In *One Day*, both the prisoner and his food are captive; in *Walden*, both the mystic and his crop are free. In fact, everyone and everything Thoreau touches is invited to freedom.

15

While guiding enslaved people toward freedom, Thoreau does his best not to interfere with their individual independence and dignity: "One real runaway slave, among the rest, whom I helped to forward toward the northstar" (*Walden* 153).

Of course, the freedom seekers had to escape to Canada, but in one of the most profound moments of *Walden*, Thoreau prefers not to tell the man where precisely to go or to limit his journey only to Canada. He simply shows him the North Star, leaving it to him to use the star in the sky to follow his own journey on earth. Who knows where the North Star would lead him after Canada on his journey towards higher levels of freedom! Thoreau helped the slave to draw the apex of his own triangle in the sky: "The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles!" (10).

16

Solzhenitsyn shows us that the primary aim of tyranny is not simply to kill, but to destroy the individual dignity and intellect below that of animals. In the following scene, Shukhov is not even an animal—for animals, at least, are free to graze or hunt according to their own instinctive understanding of life.

> The thoughts of a prisoner—they're not free either. They kept returning to the same things. A single idea keeps stirring. Would they feel that piece of bread in the mattress? Would he have any luck at the dispensary that evening? (18)

Thoreau's criticism of his people is a sign of the health of his country and culture—a sharp contrast to Solzhenitsyn's portrayal of the plight of his people in the Soviet Union. In *Walden*, thought is free—even for criticism of each and every aspect of life in a relatively free world:

> Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. (6)

The criticism is obviously intended to improve the quantity and quality of the freedom that already exists.

17

In *One Day,* freedom may arrive only in distant dreams. For a brief exceptional moment in *One Day*, nature helps the prisoners to dream of escaping to freedom or at least free their minds. It is when they are speaking about why the moon wanes, as though it has escaped the sky above the gulag. Shukhov refuses to believe the scientific explanation for the moon's disappearance. And when fellow inmates ask what happens to the old moon, he answers: "In our village, folk say God crumbles up the old moon into stars" (22).

Here, for one rare moment, Solzhenitsyn takes the minds of his readers, or maybe inmates, away from the crumbs of Shukhov's reality, and brings them to the shining crumbs of the stars in the sky. In *Walden*, looking at the same stars, Thoreau says: "The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment!" (10).

For Thoreau, those same stars do not belong only to a distant dream; they can also point the way toward freedom. After all, as he reminds us, "[o]ur truest life is when we are in dreams awake" (*A Week* 297). Maybe Thoreau and Solzhenitsyn met, in a way, in their second chairs, across gulags and ponds, and Thoreau was looking at the same stars formed from the crumbled moon in Shukhov's sky.

18

Time and place are both locked in a frozen union in Soviet Siberia. Throughout *One Day* nothing flies or flows in Shukhov's life—not even time. Thoreau envisions time as a living stream:

> Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. (*Walden* 98)

Shukhov's incarceration is not merely spatial; it is temporal. In *One Day*, time is a river frozen upon itself, stagnant and sealed by the system: "The days rolled by in the camp—they were over before you could say 'knife.' But the years, they never rolled by; they never moved by a second" (27).

The single day in the novel is a frozen distillation of more than three thousand similar days of Shukhov's incarceration in the gulag. The reason the novel does not speak of any other day is that they are frozen—unchanging, indistinguishable. When this single monotonous day, on which the whole novel is based, is done, the final sentence reads: "There were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like that in his stretch. From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail. Three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days. The three extra days were for leap years" (63).

19

In *Walden*, years fly like lightning—yet not in haste. Every moment is filled with deliberate contemplation. In one scene, Thoreau describes his quiet observation of a tree struck by lightning, noting its transformation over eight years while making it feel as though only a few days have passed. When he writes, "I passed it again the other day," the reader initially imagines the lightning strike was recent; only in the final three words do we realize that eight long years have elapsed:

> In one heavy thunder shower the lightning struck a large pitch-pine across the pond, making a very conspicuous and perfectly regular spiral groove from top to bottom, an inch or more deep, and four or five inches wide, as you would groove a walking-stick. I passed it again the other day, and was struck with awe on looking up and beholding that mark, now more distinct than ever, where a terrific and resistless bolt came down out of the harmless sky eight years ago. (132-33)

20

One Day condenses ten years into a single day in a single season filled with cold and darkness. For Thoreau all seasons pass through every single day in *Walden*: "The day is an epitome of the year. The night is the winter, the morning and evening are the spring and fall, and the noon is the summer" (301).

Thoreau lived in the Concord woods for two years of which every day was itself a whole year. Rich as his days were, Thoreau did not wish to repeat his life. At the end of "Spring," which before the "Conclusion," can be considered the end of Thoreau's report of his life in

the woods, he writes: "Thus was my first year's life in the woods completed; and the second year was similar to it. I finally left Walden September 6th, 1847" (319).

21

In the United States, literature shaped the political establishment. In the Soviet Union, it was the party and the political establishment that shaped literature in what was called Socialist Realism. This fundamental difference is evident in how each author engages with authority. In *Walden*, Thoreau explicitly expresses his open opposition both in words and action against the very authority of the state in the United States and its official laws.

One Day is nothing but the details of an ordinary prison life in Gulag. The author does not move beyond the prison to examine the system that sets the foundations of this brutal incarceration. Even in the freedom that Khrushchev claimed he had given to the Russian people, Solzhenitsyn does not dare to speak a word in criticism of the system behind his plight.

22

In *Walden*, Thoreau explicitly expresses his open opposition both in words and action against the very authority of the state in the United States and its official laws: "I did not pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the state which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle at the door of its senate-house" (171).

But even after this harsh political expression, he is not put in jail for more than a single night, after which he continues to live more freely in a world bigger than the United States, larger than the American continent, even the whole earth: "This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way?" (133)

23

Far from offering protest or criticism—at any level or in any form—Solzhenitsyn's protagonist goes to sleep fully content:

> He'd had many strokes of luck that day: they hadn't put him in the cells; they hadn't sent his squad to the settlement; he'd swiped a bowl of kasha at dinner; the squad leader had fixed the rates well; he'd built a wall and enjoyed doing it; he'd smuggled that bit of hacksaw blade through; he'd earned a favor from Tsezar that evening; he'd bought that tobacco. And he hadn't fallen ill. He'd got over it. (63)

24

One Day ends in resignation and sleep. Thoreau called it "quiet desperation" in *Walden* and showed us how it can harm the human soul even in a relatively free world in a different form but with the same meaning: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (8).

In contrast to Solzhenitsyn, Thoreau dreams of a never-ending journey of wakeful dreams toward new shores where fate carries both author and his readers:

> I have spent many an hour, when I was younger, floating over its surface as the zephyr willed, having paddled my boat to the middle, and lying on my back across the seats, in a summer forenoon, dreaming awake, until I was aroused by the boat touching the sand, and I arose to see what shore my fates had impelled me to. (*Walden* 191)

And while Thoreau drifts in dreams toward unknown shores in his Milky Way, Alyosha, the priest in *One Day*, chooses to be in prison and tells Shukhov not even to pray for his freedom: "Why do you want freedom? In freedom your last grain of faith will be choked with weeds. . . . Here you have time to think about your soul" (61).

25

Ironically, while the prisoners are resigned in the gulag, Thoreau continues to criticize the country and culture he considers relatively free. The reason is that feeling and expressing pain is a sign of a healthy, functioning social nervous system. Thoreau's open opposition to the state is not ingratitude—it is evidence of his culture's move toward a better society. In the gulag, gratitude is survival. In *Walden*, criticism is a sign of liberty. A culture's ability to feel pain—through its writers, thinkers, and citizens—is not a weakness but a sign of general vitality. In this

light, Thoreau's critique functions as a culture's healthy immune response, while Shukhov's contented silence reflects a spirit numbed by systemic trauma.

26

In *Walden*, Thoreau washes the illusion of perfection off himself and says: "I never dreamed of any enormity greater than I have committed. I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself" (78).

The question is not whether we are—or even can be—perfect. The point is whether, in everything we do in life, we are moving toward perfection or decay. Thoreau says: "What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate. Self-emancipation even in the West Indian provinces of the fancy and imagination,–what Wilberforce is there to bring that about?" (7-8)

When I read these words from Thoreau, I recognized a lesson I had already learned from Rumi many years ago in a poem with an almost identical thought:

> O friend, you are your thought—
> the rest of you is but bone and blood.
> If your thought is a rose, you are a rose garden;
> if it is a thorn, you are fuel for the fire. (*Masnavi-i* 2.9)

27

In Persian literature, the same tension between captivity and awakening appears in one of Rumi's parables, where a caged parrot discovers that the key to her freedom lies not in breaking the bars around her, but in the transformation of her understanding of her identity and life.

28

In one of Rumi's stories, there was a merchant who kept a beautiful parrot in a cage. As the merchant decided to travel to India, he asked all his servants, and the parrot, what souvenirs they wished him to bring back for them. The parrot requested the merchant to describe her conditions in the cage to the free Indian parrots saying, "Is it just for you, as my friends, to fly freely in the forests while you are aware that I am imprisoned in a cage?" (*Masnavi-i* 1.84).

When the merchant relays the message to the wild parrots in the Indian forests, one of them trembles and falls dead. Shocked and sorrowful by the parrot's death, and regretful for having conveyed the message, the merchant returned home and reluctantly shared his sorrows with his own parrot. Upon hearing it, his parrot too collapsed in her cage, adding to the merchant's sorrow and regrets. The grief-stricken merchant opened the cage and gently lifted her lifeless body—only to see that she suddenly fluttered to a high branch and was free.

The parrot finally told the surprised merchant that by trembling and falling off the tree, the Indian parrot taught her that the roots of her imprisonment rested in her own opinion of herself and in the way she presented herself to her captor.

29

Thoreau echoes the same truth in a different tongue: "Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate" (7). Rumi says the enemy is inside:

> O kings! We killed the enemy without
> But the worst enemy remains within. (*Masnavi-i* 1.76).

30

In Rumi's poetry, death is never final; it marks a profound transformation into the beginning of a higher form of life. Just as soil dies into the form of a plant, plants into animals, and animals into humanity, each death is a passage into a richer life. For Rumi, every death is, in truth, a new birth.

Thoreau distills all this into a single sentence in "Resistance to Civil Government": "So is all change for the better, like birth and death which convulse the body" (74).

This is Thoreau's and Rumi's revolution: one in which the snowflake dominates the avalanche, and the drop devours the ocean. As Rumi famously said: "You are not a drop in an ocean. You are an ocean in a drop."

31

Our poets discover themselves as they sit in their first solitary chairs and write. In the second chair, they meet and share their inspirations. And at last, they gather the world together into a society of strong and informed individuals in the third chair.

All these years, I have watched Thoreau's third chair. It waits—not for a frivolous visitor, but for a silence that understands. I have sat in it, and I have stood beside it. I have watched it from across oceans.

These literary stars in our cultures help build a bridge across the abyss between American literature and my own life at a time of separation. This essay is a testament to the truth that distance does not mean disappearance—at least not for me. In a world divided for so many into "us" and "them," Rumi, then Thoreau, and finally Solzhenitsyn taught me that we are all "us." They help us to know each other, for we can love one another only to the extent that we understand one another.

I am grateful to my dervish grandfather and to the Rumi of my childhood, who first brought me into the world of literature—a literary world where the moon shatters into stars over Shukhov's village, where Thoreau plucks one to guide seekers toward freedom, and where Rumi reminds me that before we reach for the North Star, we must first die to ourselves, severing the soul from whatever—or whoever—keeps it caged, and enter a higher life.

Notes

[1] Translations are my own. Versions of the original texts, in Farsi, are listed in the Works Cited.

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