

# Hooks Baited with Darkness

*Scott Russell Sanders*

I first read *Walden* when I was seventeen, the summer before starting college, at the urging of a high school teacher who sensed that my adolescent mind, brimming with questions, would benefit from grappling with a truly radical thinker. Much of the book baffled me. The tone shifted unpredictably from conversational to prophetic, from jokey to stern, from earthy to mystical. I was bewildered by some of the lengthy sentences, which zigzagged among ideas and images, and I was stumped by the cryptic short ones, which seemed to compress whole paragraphs of meaning into a few words. Not yet having made any big decisions about how to lead my life, I couldn't figure out what was troubling this Henry David Thoreau. So what if his neighbors thought he should use his Harvard degree to land a job and a wife, and then proceed to have kids, buy a house, get rich, and distribute alms to the poor? Couldn't he just ignore the scolds and go his own way? Not yet having lost a loved one to accident, illness, or old age, I only dimly understood his brooding about that amoral process we call nature. So what if armies of red ants and black ants slaughtered one another, herons gobbled tadpoles, a dead horse stank up the woods, or a thousand seeds perished for each one that took root? What did all that mayhem and waste have to do with us, the owners of souls aiming at heaven?

At seventeen, still a believer in souls and heaven, I didn't know which parts of the book were supposed to be wise and which parts cranky, so I read it

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2012, is Distinguished Professor of English, Emeritus, at Indiana University. He is also a novelist and essayist. His recent books include *Earth Works: Selected Essays* (2012), *A Conservationist Manifesto* (2009), and *A Private History of Awe* (2006).

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all with an open mind. While missing much, I was sufficiently intrigued by the story of Thoreau's sojourn in the woods and sufficiently engaged by his cocky, inquisitive manner to keep reading. His brashness was evident from the opening paragraphs, where he announces that he will write in the first person, thus breaking one of the cardinal rules of composition I had learned in school, and he places himself at the center of his book without apology: "I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience."<sup>1</sup> As a boy from the back roads of Ohio, untraveled and unsophisticated, wondering what to make of my own narrow experience, I felt Thoreau was speaking to me, an impression confirmed a few lines later: "Perhaps these pages are more particularly addressed to poor students" (2). While I was a good student academically, I was a poor one financially, able to enroll in an Ivy League college that fall only thanks to a full scholarship.

Short of cash, I was long on country skills. My parents and neighbors, all of them frugal, taught me how to hunt, fish, garden, can, fence a pasture, care for livestock, fell trees, fix machines, repair a house, run electrical wiring, and sew on buttons. That summer of my first *Walden* reading I spent as an apprentice carpenter, learning to frame, hang drywall, install trim, and shingle roofs. So I took seriously Thoreau's suggestion that the students at Harvard, instead of paying rent, could have saved money and gained practical knowledge by building their own dormitories. I was fascinated by his detailed account of the cabin construction, from the digging of a cellar hole and the laying up of a chimney to the plastering of walls. Because I enjoyed such work, I understood why he would ask: "Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpen-

ter? What does architecture amount to in the experience of the mass of men? I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building his house" (48). Since I had cobbled together treehouses in the backyard maples, forts in the meadow, and brush huts in the woods, and since I had helped frame homes for strangers, I expected to build my own house one day.

Here was a philosopher with dirt under his fingernails and calluses on his palms. Here was a man famous for his ideas who could say, "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically" (14). The thrifty, resourceful people among whom I grew up prepared me to admire Thoreau's effort to provide some of the necessities of life with his own hands: not only by constructing a cabin, but also by sawing and splitting fallen trees for the stove (from Emerson's woodlot), by hauling water from the pond (still safe to drink in his day), and by hoeing beans (he made it only partway through his seven miles of rows and resolved to plant fewer the following year).

I did not yet appreciate, however, why he took such pains to distinguish between the necessities of life and luxuries, between enough and too much. When I packed for college that summer, everything I owned – clothes, books, towel, toiletries, clock radio, slide rule – fitted into my grandfather's sea trunk, which I could carry on my shoulder. I did not feel encumbered by property. Nor did I feel, with a radio as my only electronic device and without a car, that technology was forcing me to live at a faster and faster pace, and thus I could not grasp why Thoreau fretted about the accelerating influence of railroads, facto-

ries, and telegraph. Likewise, in that limbo between high school and college, without bills to pay or appointments to keep, with no occupations aside from carpentry, reading, meals, and sleep, I felt no need to simplify my life.

While my upbringing enabled me to follow the practical side of what Thoreau called his “experiment” in simple living, my youth prevented me from fully understanding the philosophy that accompanied it.<sup>2</sup> My difficulty had as much to do with his style as with his ideas. I puzzled over his paradoxes: “We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us” (98–99). I resisted his exaggerations: “I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors” (8). Well, I found myself asking, who had taught him to build houses, grow beans, or tie his shoes? If people older than thirty had nothing to teach him, why did he read all those ancient – and presumably elderly – sages from India and China and Greece? I bridled at his boastful claims: “There is a certain class of unbelievers who sometimes ask me such questions as, if I think that I can live on vegetable food alone; and to strike at the root of the matter at once – for the root is faith – I am accustomed to answer such, that I can live on board nails” (69). Really? Would those be the nails he salvaged from the Irishman’s shanty? Would he scrape off the rust before devouring them? Such faith, as he called it, reminded me of certain implausible beliefs I was beginning to question in church.

Thoreau often seemed to hide his meaning in riddles, like a Shakespearean fool wary of offending the king. (I had read *King Lear* at the urging of the same high school teacher.) What did he mean, for instance, by saying “I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the

morning, when nobody calls” (147–148)? Or what did he mean by saying of the men who came to fish in the pond at night that “they plainly fished much more in the Walden Pond of their own natures, and baited their hooks with darkness” (141)? It was far from plain to me. Baiting with worms or crickets, sure. But darkness? Or when he claims, “It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time,” how does he arrive, a few lines later, at his grand conclusion: “Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (186–187)? Getting lost in the woods I could imagine, but I could not see how this might lead to finding one’s place in infinity.

Time and again, *Walden* makes such dizzying leaps from the literal to the symbolic. Consider one further example, from a passage on carpentry, a subject I was less ignorant of than most other things:

I would not be one of those who will foolishly drive a nail into mere lath and plastering; such a deed would keep me awake nights. Give me a hammer, and let me feel for the furring. Do not depend on the putty. Drive a nail home and clinch it so faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction – a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke the Muse. So will help you God, and so only. Every nail driven should be as another rivet in the machine of the universe, you carrying on the work. (358–359)

I knew about lath, plaster, putty, and furring; I knew about the satisfaction of driving a nail home with two or three blows. So I followed this passage easily enough until I came to the Muse and God, and then I scratched my head, wondering how they entered the picture, and wondering even more how a well-driven nail

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and the person who hammered it could be useful to the universe.

Even where the style posed no problems, I often balked at the philosophy. Take the chapter grandly entitled “Higher Laws.” In the opening lines, Thoreau confesses an urge to kill and devour a woodchuck raw, an impulse that stirs him to reflect: “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both” (229). Thus far I stayed with him, for I felt simultaneously the allure of science and girls, of books and basketball, and I was glad to think that both of these instincts deserved respect. But then Thoreau spends several pages elevating “purity” and denigrating everything “primitive rank and savage” about human life, from the eating of meat and the drinking of tea to “sensuality” of every kind, especially the “generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us” (239–240). Lest readers miss the allusion to sex, he goes on to insist that “Chastity is the flowering of man” (240), sounding less like a dissident thinker than like a Scoutmaster or high school nurse. Having begun by claiming to “reverence” the body’s urges, Thoreau ends by declaring, “He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established” (240)—advice that could have come from St. Paul, the chief source of shame in my childhood.

Somewhere between hungering after a woodchuck and repudiating sex, Thoreau provoked me to say no. I could not have fully explained the grounds of my objection, neither at this point in my reading nor at any other point where I disagreed with him, but the fact of my disagreement, and the force of it, was exhilarating. I sensed that to question his philosophy, to test his

ideas and opinions against my own reason and experience, was wholly in keeping with the philosophy itself.

Despite my reservations and confusions, what came through to me from *Walden*, and what most excited me, was Thoreau’s desire to lead a meaningful life. The very title of the second chapter—“Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”—thrilled me. The “where” concerned me less than the “what for.” At seventeen, I imagined that life must have a purpose beyond mere survival and the passing on of genes, beyond piling up money and possessions, beyond auditioning for paradise. But what might that purpose be? How could one discover it? And if life did have a purpose beyond those dictated by religion, economics, or biology, what then? How should one live in light of it?

I was haunted by such questions, yet my friends never spoke of them, and the adults I knew seemed to have resigned themselves to one or another conventional answer. So it was heartening to find Thoreau asking these very questions, in a passage I would later discover to be among the most celebrated in the book:

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. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.” (97)

Behind the bravado, I could hear his longing to find a true path, a way of spending his time and talents that would be worthy of the precious, fleeting gift of life. I shared that longing, as I shared his wariness about otherworldly philosophies. I did not recognize the source of his quotation in the last line – the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which opens with the declaration that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” – but I had heard such pieties often, in sermons that discounted the value of life here and now except as preparation for life hereafter. What appealed to me most deeply in that first reading of *Walden* was Thoreau’s determination to observe and enjoy the marvels of Earth, to be fully awake and alive, right here, right now.

Today, fifty years and many rereadings later, *Walden* is quite a different book for me: less bewildering, since I have made my share of difficult choices and suffered my share of losses, and also more challenging, since I have come to recognize more clearly my own limitations as well as those of the book.

Although I have renovated the old house in which my wife and I reared our children, and in which we now entertain our grandchildren, I realize, at age sixty-seven, I will never build a house from scratch. Although I remain cautious about technology – agreeing with Thoreau that many of our inventions merely offer “improved means to an unimproved end” (55) – my life depends on electricity and petroleum and the devices they power, as

well as on the global networks that supply them. I try to minimize my possessions, giving away whatever I don’t use, yet I keep acquiring new ones, which must be paid for, stored, insured, cleaned, repaired, and eventually replaced, thus demonstrating the truth of Thoreau’s dictum that “the cost of a thing is the amount of . . . life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (32). I would rather not think about money, yet I spend hours keeping track of its coming and going, mainly to satisfy the IRS, merchants, and banks. As a husband, father, and now a grandfather, as a teacher for the past four decades, and as a citizen engaged in numerous causes, I bear responsibilities that I could not have imagined at the age of seventeen. No matter how I strive to simplify my life, it remains stubbornly complex. In short, I have failed to become the unencumbered, self-reliant, perpetually awake person I had envisioned in my youth.

Neither, I discovered, was Thoreau as unencumbered as he appeared to be on my first reading of *Walden*. During his sojourn in the woods, he frequently visited the village, saw friends, ate meals with his family, helped in the family pencil business, earned money from surveying and other jobs, carried on correspondence, gave lectures, and took trips. He revealed only part of himself on the page, which is all that even the most personal book can do. On the other hand, he presented far more of his thoughts and observations than actually occurred during the twenty-six months he spent living in the woods. The chronicle of his experiment at Walden Pond draws on material recorded in his journal from a period beginning years before and extending years after his time at the cabin. As a result, many passages in the book seem overstuffed, as if he felt compelled to include every anecdote, aphorism, witticism,

image, and insight that had ever come to him concerning a given topic. Having worked with many young writers in my classes, and having once been a young writer myself, I recognize this tendency to excess as a common sign of ambition. Better overdo it than leave out something valuable.<sup>3</sup> I am more tolerant now of this and other stylistic quirks in *Walden*. The bluster and bragging are more than compensated for by the vigor and candor. For every showy allusion to classical literature or mythology, there is a burst of gritty American vernacular. For every willful obscurity in the prose, there are a dozen brilliant clarities.

While I am less inclined to quarrel with the style of *Walden*, I am more inclined to question some of the postures and opinions of the brash narrator. Thoreau's portrait of a solitary, self-sufficient life in the woods now appears to me as excessively, if unconsciously, male. His radical individualism, however necessary in his day as a bulwark against demands for conformity from church and society, now appears too narrow, rejecting as it does all responsibility of the self toward others. His opposition of spirit and flesh strikes me today as an expression of the dualism at the root of our ecological crisis, a dualism that sets mind against matter, culture against wildness. Thus our patron saint of environmentalism can declare: "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome" (241). Recognizing such misgivings does not diminish my appreciation for the book's many strengths, or my gratitude for all that it has taught me.

When I compare my current reading of *Walden* with impressions from that first reading, I am reminded of Italo Calvino's remark that books read in youth can be "formative, in the sense that they give a form to future experiences, providing models, terms of comparison, schemes for classification, scales of value, exemplars of

beauty. . . . If we reread the book at a mature age, we are likely to rediscover these constants, which by this time are part of our inner mechanisms, but whose origins we have long forgotten."<sup>4</sup> My experience differs from Calvino's description only in that I have not forgotten the source of those "inner mechanisms." The example of Thoreau's life and the challenge of his thought remain potent influences for me, as they have been potent influences for generations of readers.

Of all his writings, *Walden* has had the broadest impact, moving countless people to seek a way of life that is close to nature, materially simple, purposeful, and reflective. His vision has been transmitted and transmuted through a lineage of American writers, from John Muir and Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson to Wendell Berry and Terry Tempest Williams and Bill McKibben, all of them striving to harmonize human behavior with the constraints and patterns of our planetary home. We are far from achieving such a harmony – as witness climate disruption, for example, or the accelerated extinction of species – but we would be farther still without the questioning and imagining Thoreau inspired. We have him to thank, as much as anyone, for the shift in consciousness that led to the creation of America's national parks, designated wilderness areas, and laws aimed at protecting air and water and soil. We still need his cautionary, curmudgeonly voice, because in our day the craving for more – more stuff, more money, more power – no longer merely enslaves individuals; it degrades the conditions for life on Earth.

Great books read us as surely as we read them, revealing, by the aspects of our character and personal history they illuminate, who we are. Today when I revisit *Walden* it is usually in the company of my students, whose reactions remind me of my own

early bafflement, resistance, and exhilaration. When they protest, as they often do, that they have no taste for Thoreau's experiment in simple living, I draw their attention to his disclaimer: "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" (75). Finding out and pursuing one's own way, while learning all one can about the ways that others have found, is the essential task not merely of education but of life.

Thoreau continued his search after moving from the cabin back into town, a search that would lead to his public denunciation of slavery, to inventions that improved the making of pencils and the refining of graphite, to meticulous natural history studies, to research on Native Americans, to essays and journals and travel accounts that would fill a shelf of books published after his death. Wanting my students to bear in mind that ongoing life, beyond the confines of *Walden*, I draw their attention to another passage, this one from the final chapter: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves" (351). What he sought for himself and urged for his readers was the freedom to keep thinking, keep experimenting, keep striking out afresh.

We commonly imagine Thoreau outdoors, chasing loons on the pond, watching frozen mud thaw, identifying wildflowers, plucking wild fruits. But those excursions were informed and interpreted

during countless hours he spent indoors, reading and writing. The chapter of *Walden* called "Reading" is a hymn to books, as eloquent as any of his tributes to nature. "Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations," he declares, recommending to us not just any books, but the great ones, the classics, those "we have to stand on tip-toe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to" (110, 112). Such effort, he promises, will be abundantly repaid:

There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book. The book exists for us perchance which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered. These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life. (115 – 116)

Besieged as we are by advertisements and the cult of consumerism, racing to keep up with our gadgets, rushing from one sensation to the next, we need more than ever to ask the questions posed in *Walden*: What is life for? What are the necessities of a good life? How much is enough? Do we own our devices or do they own us? What is our place in nature? How do we balance individual freedom with social responsibility? How should we spend our days? Whether or not *Walden* speaks to your condition, I tell my students, there are other books that will do so, giving voice to what you have felt but have not been able to say, asking your deepest questions, stirring you to more intense life.

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- <sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), 2. Originally published in 1854 under the title *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Thoreau's most famous book has gone through many editions. Cramer's edition, with an introduction by Denis Donoghue, is the most authoritative currently available; it has the additional virtue of being inexpensive and well suited to classroom use. All subsequent quotations from *Walden* will be taken from this edition, and the page numbers will be shown within parentheses following the quotation. All italics within quotations are in the original.
- <sup>2</sup> The words *experiment*, *experiments*, and *experimentalists* appear seventeen times in *Walden*, a sign of Thoreau's respect for the methods and prestige of science. By calling his stay at Walden Pond an experiment, he may also have wished to present it as a one-man alternative to the communal experiments – most of them, like Brook Farm and Fruitlands, short-lived – that were springing up across the United States and Europe in the 1840s and 1850s.
- <sup>3</sup> Such an encyclopedic ambition has resulted in many a bloated, shapeless tome, of course, but it also gave us *Moby-Dick* and *Leaves of Grass*, which were published, respectively, three years before and one year after *Walden*.
- <sup>4</sup> Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 127.