

On Bradley P. Dean: “Through the Dark Present”

Part 4 of “A Remembrance”
Thoreau Society Annual Gathering
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From this place, I greet Lorna Mack and Brad’s older sister Cindy Miller, who have both also recently entered into that new phase of life called widowhood. Much has been said about Brad’s “broken task,” but I wish to say a word, in the age of divorce, for Brad’s commitment to marriage, as if, to quote George Butterick’s twist on Socrates, “The unexamined wife is not worth leaving”; I like to believe that Brad would have numbered among his successes our thirty-plus years of ongoing argument, in both the good and bad sense, along with his fidelity to Thoreau in an age of diffusion.

Last December, I began setting up an office in the attic of our house in Bloomington. When I finished, I invited Brad up to see it. It was all books and a desk, and not even a lamp on the desk; just sunlight through a skylight to work by. “This is really nice,” he said, wistfully, I thought. It’s only in retrospect that I wonder whether Brad had, at that moment, been thinking of Thoreau working in his attic. Because of the steeply pitched ceiling and old wiring in the attic, Brad had set up his office in the basement of the house instead, his desk looking a little like control central with headset, scanner, digital camera, Cruzer flash-drive, and I-don’t-know-what-else in literal arm’s reach, and his books and filing cabinets lining the remaining walls around him.

Though Brad championed the use of technology for scholarly research, he understood that having an internet connection did not a scholar make—no more than possessing a stethoscope would make someone a doctor. Where’s the challenge, after all, in letting your fingers do the walking? Brad turned scholarship into a great adventure. How many people have seen Thoreau’s actual pencil markings, found a Thoreau letter, or, to me most incredible of all, chanced upon Thoreau’s thumbprint in a book? Is it any wonder, then, that over the years Brad came to understand how Thoreau worked and to “intuit” the movements of his mind?

Like Thoreau, Brad had been born “in the very nick of time”—and Brad would have said, I’m sure, to the most estimable country in all the world. In riding the technological wave, Brad had been uniquely poised to experience firsthand, and to grapple with, the effects of the Information Revolution. Rather than forever changing the way we conceived of space and distance, as the

railroads had in Thoreau's day, the Information Revolution has been changing the way we think about time, and, in particular, our historical consciousness.

"I love the Wild not less than the Good," Thoreau wrote. For a good part of Brad's life, the Wild was as much biological impulse as conceptual framework. This excerpt from a long passage in Thoreau's journal dated 21 April 1852 reflects Brad's affection for the white pine, too:

. . . As we stand by the monument on the Battle-Ground, I see a white pine dimly in the horizon just north of Lee's Hill—at 5:30 p.m., its upright stem and straight horizontal feathered branches, while at the same time I hear a robin sing. Each enhances the other. That tree seems the emblem of my life; it stands for the west, the wild. The sight of it is grateful to me as to a bird whose perch it is to be at the end of a weary flight. I [am] not sure whether the music I hear is most in the robin's song or in its boughs. My wealth should be all in pine-tree shillings. The pine tree that stands on the verge of the clearing, whose boughs point westward; which the villager does not permit to grow on the common or by the road side; which is banished from the village; in whose boughs the crow and the hawk have their nests.

Brad's often exasperating love of extravagance in the Thoreauvian sense made him impatient with constraint in its various forms. During the past few years, however, it is as if he were coming full circle to reverse the key terms in Thoreau's declaration so that it read: "I love the Good not less than the Wild." The piece Brad wrote on clouds in the Fall 2005 issue of the *Bulletin*, I read as being as much about Brad's own struggles as Thoreau's, and through it I begin to understand more fully how Brad kept pace with Thoreau and vice versa through the various stages of his life. At fifty, Brad had finally begun to understand himself to be crossing into middle-age. From this place, he was instinctively turning southwest toward Silverton, Colorado, where at eight he had traveled to hunt in the company of his father and a couple of other men. In his life, this experience was, I believe, the first flame, perhaps a kind of Wordsworthian splendor against which he would measure his own capacity for joy.

In Bloomington, Brad soon discovered the incredible resources available to him as a Research Associate at Indiana University and was once again engaged full tilt in the work that he loved best: tracking Thoreau. In this latest adventure, which was an extension of his work on the *Notebooks*, Brad was coming to see Thoreau for the scholar that he was. A true hunter is always seeking himself, and I believe that for Brad, this recognition served to confirm his choice to be a scholar who worked at a tangent to the Academy, and to write and edit texts for a general audience rather than a scholarly one. In this, I think of Plato's allegory of the cave: Brad had, through

enormous effort and sacrifice, made his way out to the light, but rather than stay there, he willingly returned to the cave. He wanted to serve the man whose thoughts had first wakened him to the spectral world of ideas.

Though Brad and I met in high school, we courted through letters over a period of about eight months. There is, for me, then, a kind of “aw(e)ful” symmetry, one that Brad would have appreciated, in the fact that the last book he published was Thoreau’s letters to H. G. O. Blake. And it pleases me that in the clouds article I mentioned earlier, Brad sees Thoreau’s identity as a poet as the constant one underlying Thoreau’s shift from critic to naturalist. Thoreau’s journal entry dated 21 April 1852 again provides an emblem that reflects Brad’s thinking:

On the east side of Ponkawtasset I hear a robin singing cheerily from some perch in the wood, in the midst of the rain, where the scenery is now wild and dreary. His song a singular antagonism and offset to the storm. As if Nature said, “Have faith, these *two* things I can do.” It sings with power, like a bird with great faith that sees the bright future through the dark present, to reassure the race of man, like one to whom many talents were given and who will improve its talents. They sing not their despair. It is a pure, immortal melody.

Here it is not the cock crow at dawn but the humble robin’s song, sung for its own sake on a rainy afternoon, that he attends to.

In the early days after Brad’s death, the thought that he could finally rest was a balm against my own unfathomable sense of loss. He had worked ceaselessly on Thoreau’s behalf for so many years. It took a conversation with Brad’s sister Cindy recently to lift my spirits a little above the merciful waterline of disbelief that bears one across shocks to the heart/mind and to the spirit. Of her own late husband, whom she ministered to through long illness, she said, “He’s free, he’s free.” How could I not be cheered by her joy and conviction? Those words echoed words from an old spiritual Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in his “I Have a Dream” speech, which Brad had been reading for the class he was teaching the very week he died: “Free at last.”

And yet, how reconcile that with this little passage Brad wrote in the spring of 2003, after he had walked around MacDowell Reservoir in New Hampshire:

The hand of my body so closely fit with the glove of this world that I had no fear of the chafe of age and death, and the heart of my soul pumped the warm, moist joy of blood through the veins of my hand. I inhabited my body with inexpressible delight.

The moon, I keep telling myself, and not the finger pointing, but I cannot shake the feeling that the incarnation is nothing short of miraculous. Like Thoreau, Brad had a poet's soul that found expression by other means. Poetry exists in the space between matter and spirit, presence and absence; it is nothing, black marks on a page, until we give ourselves, body and soul, over to it and sing it into being. The mystery of poetry is how it enables us to use language to get beyond language and all its distinctions; to momentarily inhabit the self with its contradictory impulses so completely, that it is possible to merge with the Other, the "Not-Me."

In *touching* Thoreau's manuscripts, in *holding* the very books Thoreau read, in literally walking where Thoreau walked, Brad had experienced Thoreau not as an historical figure, but as a real presence through whose eyes he could sometimes see—and thereby act to shape his own life. "My life," he might say with Thoreau, "has been the poem I never writ, / But I could not both live and utter it."

Since I am a poet, and not a Thoreauvian, I will conclude with two poems I would have you remember Brad by. The first is by William Butler Yeats:

A COAT

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

This is Section 52, the final section, of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself":

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.