

Brad Dean, Scholar and Friend: A Remembrance

Part 3 of "A Remembrance"
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Bradley P. Dean was arguably the most important Thoreau scholar of his generation, a statement I make with regard and respect for other major Thoreau scholars, some of whom are in this room today. Brad Dean was also one of my best friends. It was a bleak January day when, returning from my mother's funeral, I listened to Dave Ganoe's message informing me in subdued tones that Brad had died of a heart attack in Indiana. That sad news was in a sense the conclusion—although I'd prefer to call it the interruption—of a 20-plus-year friendship that began, appropriately, at a Thoreau Society Annual Gathering in the early 1980's. In a casual conversation with Brad and Debra over a picnic supper behind the old Lyceum, I remarked that I had recently won a free Thoreau manuscript—a sliver of paper, really—by finding the source of its four-word inscription. The words, I said, at first looked to be "is a mile off," but that, I confided to Brad, was just a misreading of Henry's penmanship. Indeed, my obsessive search of the entire canon, not with a futuristic computer but line by line with ruler in hand, showed the phrase to be "it a mile off." Thoreau, I explained, may have never uttered the phrase "is a mile off" in his life, at least in ink. Best of all, I said, I was about to publish an article on this discovery. Emphatically, Brad shook his head. "Nope," he said, "you're wrong. It does say 'is a mile off' and it comes from an early lecture draft of 'Life without Principle' where he's talking about the depot being a mile away. Stunned and annoyed by this cock-sure denial, I challenged the denier: "Can you show me?" Half an hour later we stood by the trunk of his car, opened to reveal a portable library by and about Thoreau, and there it was. Geez, I thought, this guy in the railroad engineer's cap is good. He's got all of Thoreau inside his head and his car. I also had the slightly nonplussed sense to realize that he had saved me from a public mistake. I resolved right then to buy him and his nice wife a beer, the first of many drawn for us over the years in the taproom of the Colonial Inn.

As I reflect on that first meeting now, my initial impression was more confirmed than revised by passing time. True, Brad knew "Life without Principle" exceptionally well

because he wrote his brilliant Master's thesis on the evolution of that essay, a long examination published in the distinguished *Studies in the American Renaissance*. On the other hand, Brad did have an enormous amount of Thoreau filed inside his head; and as the years passed and his computer skills multiplied, what little of Thoreau wasn't on the tip of his tongue was generally at his fingertips. Relentlessly fascinated by all things Thoreau, Brad Dean became a textual, historical, literary, cultural, scientific, and philosophical scholar to enable his pursuit. His own interdisciplinarity integrated both Thoreau's varied interests and the additional expertise needed to comprehend Thoreau's life and work. Brad appropriated and, when necessary, invented whatever he needed to proceed, and to appreciate his Swiss Army Knife scholarship requires a kaleidoscope of perspectives seldom found among specialists today.

On more than one occasion, Brad Dean told me that his motto was "Do your work." Several years following our initial meeting, after finishing his Ph.D. courses at the University of Connecticut, Brad joined me at East Carolina University, where he proceeded to do just that. What work it was. What fun to behold. First, the teaching. As an all-but-dissertation lecturer, Brad was assigned four courses of composition and business writing, labor-intensive back-breakers even when skirted around, but which he approached in his usual all-out assault. Wise students benefited from Brad's raised-bar commitment. Some foolish students, who did not share Brad's motto about work, complained of excessive education to administrators, who in turn complained foolishly to Brad, upholding the right to laziness, ignorance, and not too bad of a grade. Never one to suffer fools gladly, or at all if he could help it, Brad set everyone straight. The struggle of these forces of human nature was like a naturalistic novel, iron mill educational determinism on one side against the determination of Bradley P. Dean on the other. I wasn't sure who would technically win, but I was certain that Brad would not let himself lose. He didn't; and when he later left to pursue other lives, it was on his time and terms.

One of Brad's other lives, also lived while based in eastern North Carolina, was that of a consultant to Japanese businesses, a graduate school sideline that grew into Trans Pacific Communications, the firm he (and Debra) started and staffed, spending weeks in Japan teaching business people whose eagerness to study effective English communication was, after ECU, a truly foreign experience to Brad. Could the occasionally brash—and sometimes deliberately boorish—Brad Dean survive in formulaically polite Japan? Perhaps

surprisingly enough, the answer was *absolutely*. Admired for his knowledge and liked for his cowboy candor, Brad was welcomed in part *for* his difference. Not many Thoreau scholars have gone karaoke-ing with Japanese executives in their homeland, but Brad Dean went there and did that to good reviews.

Of all the work Brad did while residing in North Carolina, the most notable was the completion and publication of his first book. The catalytic *Faith in a Seed* coupled his gleanings of placed and misplaced Thoreau manuscripts with his innovative methods of correlating these scattered, multi-staged leaves to transform a mass of eccentric fragments into a readable version of Thoreau's unfinished tome on the Dispersion of Seeds. And like dispersed seeds themselves, the book proved groundbreaking in its planting and germination. Extremely well reviewed in popular, literary, and scientific journals, it earned Brad a prestigious national environmental award and a trip to the White House. More importantly, it revised our conception of the character and significance of Thoreau's post-*Walden* career—a revision since extended and debated in a generation of books and articles. I remember the day that the production crew from Charles Kuralt's *Sunday Morning* news show arrived in Greenville to film Brad working in his farmhouse office and riding his motorcycle on the ECU campus. I remember also that after the show aired, Brad went from being a mere English department lecturer with problematically high expectations to being the honored deliverer of the department's showpiece endowed annual lecture. His subject was still composition, only this time the text was *Faith in a Seed* and the composers were Henry Thoreau and Bradley P. Dean. I delighted in the reversed circumstances.

Indeed, my family and I delighted in numerous circumstances involving Brad and his family. We shared many an evening with Brad and Debra and David, eating pizza in our kitchen and watching rented movies, discussing Thoreau and enjoying or bemoaning the tide shifts of our lives. When David graduated from high school, we entertained three generations of the family from as far away as Hawai'i on our front porch. It was a fine mix of people and cuisines, and even at the time we knew that such moments don't come often or last for long. On one other special occasion, the day Brad's first book was published, he arrived at our door with a pizza and an inscribed copy in hand. "I'm not ready to try large bodies of water," he said as he gave us the volume. "But if you'll fill up the bath tub, I could maybe walk across it a few times."

In later years, after leaving North Carolina, Brad had quite a few miraculous Thoreauvian moments. Without rehashing his entire vita, I can report that it contains two other notable books, the previously unedited and unpublished Thoreau work *Wild Fruits* and the collection of correspondence between Thoreau and H. G. O. Blake titled *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker*. There are bunches of book chapters, an accumulation of articles, and several monograph-length items including the two-part history of Thoreau's career as a lecturer on which I had the pleasure of collaborating for *Studies in the American Renaissance*. The list of conference presentations, fellowships, and residencies is long. Unlisted but also worth mentioning is Brad's generous mentoring of scholars from this country and abroad—some of them, such as Spain's Antonio Casado da Rocha, here today; others, such as Sweden's Henrik Otterberg, unable to travel but here in spirit. Brad's work for the Thoreau Society includes years of service as Secretary and board member, two stints as editor of the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* totaling eleven years, and numerous presentations at the Annual Gathering including an excellent keynote address. One of his own articles in the *Concord Saunterer* documents his clever discovery of the location of Thoreau's famous bean field, a bit of sleuthing of which he was justifiably proud. Fittingly, in 2002 Brad received the Society's Walter Harding Distinguished Service Award for his many contributions.

In most things an iconoclast, Brad was a true believer in his idol, Henry Thoreau, and his labors in the field struck me as secular worship. On all his projects, Brad worked enthusiastically, relentlessly, against time's ticking clock; unlike the Post Office he did not take weekends and holidays off. Moreover, his friends and colleagues had to adjust to Dean Time because he did not limit his calls to normal working hours—or even normal waking hours. When our phone rang at 1:00 a.m. or 6:00 a.m., there was a good chance Brad had a new idea. And while the end of the conversation was my signal to go back to sleep, Brad would often say, "Well, let me go soak my head in a pot of coffee and get back to work." When Brad Dean died he was doing his biggest work yet, a multi-volume edition of the *Notebooks of Henry D. Thoreau*. And true to the Montana cowboy culture he admired, Brad died with his figurative boots on, at his computer. The Thoreau scholarly enterprise owes him a lot, and it does not flatter the academy that Brad's substantial achievement did not earn him a secure position with good benefits at a quality institution. Indeed, doing his work as an *extra-vagantly* independent scholar and human being may have unfitted him for life inside the academic box. Far from being boxed and set aside, the legacy of Brad Dean is an

expanding universe that, in Thoreau's words, is wider than our views of it. We will be a good while yet seeing the big picture of the puzzle he put together.