

Mystery at Walden Pond

Reading:

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travellers I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who have heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.

-- Henry David Thoreau

Sermon:

This is a sermon about ministry and the decision to enter the ministry, and I am glad to offer it to you because I think anyone participating in a congregational community shares in the ministry of that congregation. Since you are then ministers, you can understand someone's motivation to enter this ministry. Not everyone understands. Indeed, people from my former profession ask, "How did you, of all people, decide to become a minister?"

I say: "It's because I care about people and want to help build communities," which is true, but the real truth is more mysterious. It all started one autumn afternoon many years ago, back when I was a private detective.

It had been another boring day at the office. I had my feet on my desk wondering whether one o'clock was too early to take a nip of scotch whiskey, when she came in. She was someone, people would know it when she was approaching, think of little else when she was there, and remember it when she had gone. With green eyes looking deep and liquid into mine, she said, "Mr. Reeves, I need your help." Her voice went down easy like a velvety wine of exquisite vintage.

"My husband," she continued, "the millionaire financier, J. Pierpont Farquarson III, who is fifty years older than me, is missing. Here is his picture. If he is gone from my life, I do not know what I will do." Her eyes welcomed mine like an invitation. Was I guessing, or did she think I might have some role to play in what she might do with the rest of her life?

I started fantasizing about life with Mrs. Farquarson, gazed out the window, saw an old geezer buying carrots at a Korean market across the street, and, before I could stop myself, blurted, "Is that him?"

"It is," she moped. "Darn! Well, here's fifty bucks. Thanks a lot."

She left my office and my life, and I decided, yes, I would begin work on that bottle in my desk. It was cheap and burned the tonsils, but soon I was swimming, when a man walked in, smelling of pine. He said, "I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travellers I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks and what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who have heard the hound, and the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves."

I said, "You talk funny. What's your name?"

"Thoreau," he said and took off his hat. His clothes were rough and worn, but he seemed proud of his station in life.

I said, "I'm good at finding people, too good. Never done the missing animal racket before." I glanced out the window hoping to get lucky, but no animals out on the city street. "Where were they last seen?"

"Around the Concord, Massachusetts, area."

I could see it now, hollering, "Here doggy!" through some New England burg. "This will cost you," I said, "Twenty dollars a day, plus expenses."

Thoreau pulled out a piece of paper. "I have a surplus in my bean crop I could give you, and I can do some carpentry or day labor for you, but I can't pay anything. It has already cost me \$28.12 1/2 to build my house at the pond, and another \$33.87 3/4 for my farming, food, clothing, and incidentals for this year, but I earned 36.78 selling my beans and doing day labor, but I have spent 25.21 3/4 I had saved, so I don't have any money to offer you."

I asked, "What is so important about a hound, a horse, and a dove?"

"They are a dream," he said. "And if one advances confidently in the direction of a dream and endeavors to live the life which one has imagined, one will meet with success unexpected in common hours."

"Hmmpf," I said, thinking of how my dreams of life with Mrs. Farquarson had gone flat. I don't know why, maybe I feared the too many disappointments and not enough dreams could harden me into granite; or maybe this Thoreau had a gleam in his eye I could learn something from, whatever the reason, I agreed, "OK, let's go." I stowed the bottle in my desk, pulled on my coat, and the two of us caught the next train on the old Fitchburg Railway out to Concord.

When we arrived, Thoreau said that his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, would have a room for me, and that I'd find him at Wright's Tavern or out on the common. With that, he strode off along a faint path into the woods. As I watched him, I observed a spring in his step, and a rhythm all his own, like he was marching to the beat of a different drummer.

At the Tavern I asked for a scotch, and said to the bartender, "I'm looking for a friend of Thoreau's, Ralph Waldo Emerson. You know him?"

"Everyone here knows Waldo," he said.

"I'd like to meet him."

"He's around someplace. You can't miss him, funny hat, glasses." I scanned the patrons of the establishment: people drunk, sleeping, brawling, being thrown out a window, people flirting, kissing, dancing, playing music, sliding down banisters, and in the midst of this mayhem, no one stood out.

Finally I yelled, "Where's Waldo?"

Someone pointed to a tall figure outside striding across the village green. I went out to the man and asked, "How are you doing?"

He said, "Crossing a bare common, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."

"Hmm," I said. "Thoreau hired me to help locate a certain hound, bay horse, and turtle dove. My name's Reeves. Ken Reeves. Private Eye."

He took me to a comfortable manse in the village, and we sat by the fire. I asked, "You know anything of the whereabouts of these animals?"

"I know they are out there," he mused.

"Where should I start looking?"

"I can't tell you. Truly speaking it is not instruction but provocation I can give

another soul,” he said. “Trust yourself. Avoid the well-worn path. Refuse the good models, even those held sacred in the imagination of society. Obey thyself.”

“Hmm,” I said.

The next morning I began tramping through the woods. I wear out my shoe leather on pavement, so this wilderness was new to me. I thought, where would a dog, a horse, and a bird be? Had they been taken by someone? There was no ransom note. Were they just wandering confused in the forest? If so, my wandering confused might find them only to join the ranks of the lost. Were they hiding intentionally, finding some perverse pleasure baffling these dotty Concord types? If so, they could be watching me now and stifling giggles.

After a day of wandering, I found no animals except, I saw some little gray birds flitting through the trees and watched some ducks or something swimming and diving in a lake. In the distance I heard the thunk of an ax.

I came upon a tiny cabin near a pond. I sat and rested. The autumn air was cooling. Up walked Thoreau. “Good day, Mr. Reeves. Would you like to join me for dinner? I make a bread of rye and Indian corn meal.”

He baked them over a fire, and the loaves were surprisingly good. We discussed the search. He had been looking too, so had Emerson. No results.

I said, “OK, Thoreau, spill the beans.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, “I forgot, let’s have some of my beans. When I began gardening I was determined to know beans, and I have.”

“What I mean,” I said, “is you’ve been keeping hidden some of the facts. First off, why are you living here in this cabin?”

“I went to the woods,” he said, “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. 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.”

“Hmm.” I thought, with all his wacko ideas he ought to write a book. I asked, “Where do the animals fit in? Have they been kidnapped? Are you being extorted? Or are they just dumb animals who have wandered off with the wrong crowd?” He kept

shaking his head. “OK, Thoreau, is there any reason these animals might want to avoid you?”

At this point other clients would have broken down crying, or pulled out a .45. Thoreau just gazed out onto the pond like it had the answers. I thought, it’s a nice pond, but something’s missing, and it’s not just a dog, a horse, and a bird. Grown men out alone in the woods, and sure the woods are lovely, dark, and deep, but something does not add up.

Days continued with searching. I might see Thoreau at his house, Emerson at his, but never bumped into them in the woods. Weeks went by, the leaves dropping, trees now bare, air turning cold. No sign of the animals.

I stayed with Emerson at nights. Sometimes he had a group over, called themselves, Transcendentalists. I would hang around; you never know where a clue is going to turn up. But what a crew: Margaret Fuller, Orestes Brownson, Bronson Alcott, talking about philosophers: Kant and Locke, and of Goethe. They kept trying to figure out ways to improve society. Emerson saw improvement happening with a sentiment of moral virtue experienced when one is aware of the infinite relations in nature and of one’s belonging to these relationships.

They asked me what I thought might improve society. I said, “My society would be improved by the addition of one green-eyed Mrs. Farquarson III.” After that they left me alone. But I kept thinking about infinite relations, and not just with Mrs. Farquarson. Emerson might have an idea there.

The next evening in Thoreau’s cabin, sitting by his fire, after a cloudy frustrating day, I said, “Henry, how about if the two of us search together?”

He looked alarmed. His eyes darted around the room like those of a perjuring witness finally squirming. He said, “I know of but one or two with whom I can afford to walk... I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time... On the other hand, I think I love society as much as most and am ready to fasten myself like a blood-sucker to any full-blooded man that comes my way. Yes, tomorrow let’s look together.”

Imagine my delight at having a blood-sucker fastened on. But this was a tough case and required more infinite relations than currently existed.

It snowed that night. Next morning we set out, taking no particular course, still eschewing the well-worn path. Thoreau, an optimist, said that the snow would make tracking easier. It was light and powdery, cleaner than city snow, clinging to branches and pine needles. Thoreau identified the chickadees for me. A few came down and

pecked at his clothes, so seedy, I suspect the birds found nourishment. But by afternoon we were cold and discouraged when Thoreau spotted a track in the snow. We peered at this single horse print, one print alone in the snow. “How...?” I asked.

“That’s the way they are,” he answered. I leaned over for a close look and sniffed for a trace of the cold iron of the shoe. We walked in widening circles around the track, but that was it. One track. The idea that they knew we were looking and were toying with us grew in my mind, but I detected no motive for malice. Were they playing a practical joke?

That night I told the Transcendentalists what had happened. I suggested we all pair off and look. I said it would improve society.

The next day Margaret Fuller and Emerson found a single dog print, and Brownson and Bronson felt a little dust of snow fall on them from a hemlock tree and saw a bird flying away. Thoreau joined us that night as we compared notes. The energy in the room was high. Thoreau was saying, “Together we are...” when a dog howled. Everyone hushed. It howled again, the bay of a hound. We rushed out into the night. The moon was big. We strained our eyes. It howled again.

Some wanted to go look now, others wanted to wait till morning. They began to debate. A bunch of philosophers and individualists, everyone thinking independently, how can they agree? They turned to me, “What do you advise?”

“I advise we discuss it inside, I’m colder than a Chicago corpse.”

We went in, and the debate raged on: motion, amendment, amendment to the amendment, friendly amendment, motion to table, point of order, call the question. We discussed it all night, and by dawn it was a moot point.

But the next day we combed through the woods calling to each other. We found more tracks, five hoofprints in a row, and from across the pond heard a whinny, and some dog tracks, and more dusting of snow. That night spirits were high, and I suggested we include the rest of the town. “When there are more looking, everyone would enjoy the camaraderie, and we would all benefit from their extra eyes.”

With this suggestion Emerson’s living room grew hushed. People’s eyes danced around like Thoreau’s when I had suggested the two of us search together. One said, “But they are different from us.” Another said, “We won’t have the same intimacy.” A third asked, “What will it cost?” They seemed afraid. So I backed off, but after more days of searching together and coming up with nothing, welcoming the rest of Concord sounded better.

We pooled some money, went to the Tavern, and announced a round of drinks on the Transcendentalists. I stood on a chair and described the search for the hound, the bay horse, and the turtle dove that Thoreau had lost. I said, "We have found clues, but the animals seem to be eluding us. We want to invite you to join the search."

A rheumy-eyed old man spoke up, "I've seen tracks, heard the hound and the tramp of the horse, even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud. But no one's ever asked me to join them and help look."

“We’re asking now,” I said.

“Well...” his rheumy eyes got rheumier, “what are we going to call ourselves?”

A list of names came forth: “The Sceptics and Searchers,” “The Free Thoreaus,” “The Walden Pond-er-ers.” In the midst of it all I called out, “We are a team. Let’s just be, ‘The Team.’ Gimme a T for Thoreau.” “T!” “Gimme an E for Emerson.” “E!” “Gimme an A for Alcott.” “A!” “Gimme an M for Many people, all of us here.”

I don’t understand what happened next, but as the community was cheering “M!”, the door burst open and a bay horse trotted up to Thoreau and nudged him with his nose. A hound ran in behind him wagging his tail and jumping up on everyone, and a bird flew in and flitted around the room, and then a second flew in, and someone yelled, “Two turtle doves!” As horse, dog, and doves greeted everyone, I knew that something had happened, but I didn’t know what, and was standing uncharacteristically dumbfounded, when I saw the horse gaze at me with a knowing eye and wink.

Emerson invited me to stay on through Christmas. Everyone was so joyful, I agreed. The T.E.A.M. celebrated in the tavern and sang carols. Emerson looked at the gathering and said, “Behold, such infinite relations, such a oneness, and I’ve learned something: that oneness is not just in nature. People can create a oneness.” For once I understood him.

When we worked together the animals appeared, but solving one mystery raised others. What had really happened? Was there something magical about our infinite relatedness, about forming a team, that worked in this case? How did the animals know to appear the moment we formed a team? Where had they been hiding? Maybe they were just waiting for Christmas. And where had that second dove come from? I suspected avian hanky panky and that something new would be hatching come spring.

Finally, as I walked to take the Fitchburg Railway home, people were cheering, “Gimme a T!” horse and dog were running, and doves flying, and I dreaded my dreary office. So, as you know, I went to study for the ministry. Being ministers yourselves, maybe you can understand why, but how do I explain it to the cops and crooks and dames of my former profession that life and teams and elusive dreams are more wondrous and mysterious than I had guessed, and that I wanted to be on a team pursuing them?

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