

An Art That One Can Live In
December 19th, 2021
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North Universalist Chapel

If I were young again, I'd pay attention
To that little-known dimension
A sense of endless time
It's just like water
It slips right through our fingers
But the memory of it lingers
Like a rich, red wine
In those days, we were singles and we lived days one by one
Now, we hardly see them, they don't walk, they run
But I've got plenty left to set my sight on
Don't wait up, leave the light on, I'll be home soon

—Chris Smither

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Welcome, dreamers and seekers of spirit, so bold or so bashful in the quest. Welcome, wanderers and worshipers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the darkness and the light. Keep wide mine arms of spirit and keep hopeful this good heart to the open and to the broken ones, blissfully imperfect just like me, blessed and beloved, caring and compassionate, held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is so good to be together." Today is Sunday, December 19th and the title of this morning's reflection, as COVID is surging once again is *An Art That One Can Live In*. It is a reflection on the possibility of a beautiful economy.

I don't know a whole lot about economics. I never really studied it in school. It was a huge deal class during my college days. It was almost a required course but even back then, I didn't talk about it much...even though I know it affects me deeply. It affects us all so powerfully...and I want to know more about it..

Years ago, I made an accidental habit of running into Joseph Bragdon, on the street or at the coffee shop down the way. He lives right here in town. He's always talking about the economy, always reading the latest issue of The Economist, that magazine. It was his discipline, his practice...and I was jealous because my practice is musical and disruptive in coffee shops. I can't bring my practice into the café like he can. It would be weird to practice guitar—heavy metal, of course—around so many mochas and breakfast burritos with bacon. Plus, they pipe music in already, so my practice is too disruptive...but not Joe's. So I was jealous and I wanted to let him know about it.

Don't worry. I haven't say anything. I've kept my feelings to myself...mostly. Sometimes, I would share them indirectly. I'd interrupt him with a silly question, something like, "How are the Red Sox doing these days, man?" as if he were reading a

copy of Sports Illustrated magazine. He'd laugh and, sometimes, we would end up in conversation for a little while. He's delightful. Smart. He told me about a book that he was writing. It's called *Economies that Mimic Life*. It's about the emergent wisdom...it's about new ways of thinking about economics. William Moornaw had wonderful things to say about it. In his review of Joseph's work, he said,

What a nice surprise to learn of your book, which brings some sanity to the outmoded economic model that is always on life support at the expense of someone else's life. You appear to have cracked the code of what actually is a functional economy—one that serves society rather than the other way around.

William Moornaw teaches at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. If I could go back to college, I would take his class just for fun. If I were young again, I'd pay attention...because there is always so much more to learn.

It's good to study emergent wisdom, the new ways of thinking about things. It's good to read different books. It's good to listen to different music. It's good to watch movies that are outside of one's bailiwick every now and again. For me, that movie is *The Devil Wears Prada*. I love this film. A young woman—a journalist, a storyteller—comes of age by way of high fashion. It's the perfect movie in a way because fashion is so watchable!

The best passage in the film is when this young woman, Andrea, is at her breaking point. She utterly hates her job but she doesn't want to quit. She hates the pressure. She hates the pretense. She hates the people half of the time. She really hates her boss—Miranda Priestly, the woman they call the Devil-lady—but something's wrong. Andrea was externalizing everything. She was not yet looking within. She was using the wrong tool for the wrong job and she didn't know it yet. She turned to Nigel—a co-worker, an artist at the magazine. Andrea was complaining about her boss:

She hates me, Nigel. I don't know what else I can do because if I do something right, it's unacknowledged. [Miranda] doesn't even say, 'thank you.' But if I do something wrong, she is vicious! [It's just that I would like] a little credit for the fact that I am killing myself trying.

Nigel was spectacularly unmoved. Responded quickly, he said, "Andy, be serious. You're not trying. You're whining!" Nigel wanted Andy to 'wake up,' to suddenly become consciously aware of her surroundings.

Andy had taken a short-term job at *Runway*, a high-end fashion magazine. Unfortunately, she didn't understand the nature of the world that she had entered. She did not respect that world. She only judged it, spending down the currency that we call time in life unwisely. Andy was missing the miracle that was unfolding before her eyes. Nigel admonished her,

Don't you know that you are working at the place that published some of the greatest artists of the century? Halston, Lagerfeld, de la Renta... And what they did... What they created was greater than art...because you live your life in it.

For Nigel, high fashion is the active art that we live our lives within. That thought is a powerful analogy.

Rev. John Cummins is one of my favorite elder colleagues. He served in the Twin Cities for many years. He was very fond of raising a beautiful question: “How shall we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives?” This was not a question about the outer beauty of high fashion. It was is a question about the inner beauty of economics.

Some ministers find themselves saying the same things again and again. I’m not complaining about ministers. On the contrary. I find this statement rather beautiful. I find myself outgrowing my quest for novelty and importance. I am more deeply drawn to the essence of technique—how to play a particularly challenging passage of music, how to dance so that the skirt swings most beautifully, how to swing the ax so that the firewood splits as it should. I am no longer thrilled by invention. I’m more deeply drawn to art of making better that which already is. A poet writes,

i had a vision once of a tower
here on the shoulder of this mountain
and i became a wildman with at hammer
and a dream
but don’t be overly impressed
with men who build towers
there are any number of journeymen
carpenters
and stonemasons
that can tell you how to do it

the building part is easy
it’s the living that comes hard

with some simple instruction
anyone can hand a door
but if you know the art
of oiling hinges

teach me

Henry David Thoreau didn’t build a tower. He built an art that he could live in and so can we. We start with a simple question: “How shall we clothe in truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives?”

Quoting from the writing of Henry David Thoreau...

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and I earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

Walden begins this way—Walden, the book that was written by Thoreau in 1854. The book is quoted religiously...and far more famously than we will experience this morning. The more famous quotations are familiar to us. They have become a part of our culture.

1. [Most] men lead lives of quiet desperation.
2. There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to ne who is striking at the root and, this one, almost like a Zen koan, almost like a philosophical puzzle for the mind,
3. I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship and three for society.

Henry David Thoreau went to the woods with a purpose...and so did I, when I started learning about him. Strange man, right? To retreat from society—from its business, from its swelter, from all of its cumbersome, burdensome trail and tribulations... He really did retreat, you know—within limits, of course. He still took advantage of his proximity to society on occasion. He wasn't terribly strict about it...not by any means. He was disciplined but not absolute. He was on a mission and he was clear about it. He was absolutely clear...clear in what has become, perhaps, his most famous quote:

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.

He was an excellent student of life. He studied the process of his living right down to the penny. This isn't figurative. It is literally true.

Many were curious. Some didn't care. Some admired him. Some thought he was stupid or crazy or lost. But something about Henry David Thoreau was utterly captivating. He led a life that captured the American imagination...and continues to. We still love this quotation—the one that I am quoting to let you know that I won't be quoting it—because it captures something within us even now. It captures the hope, the deep-seeded belief that we have the power to control our fate, that we are possessed of the ability to reflect on and truly discover the meaning of the life that is ours to live.

It's just so romantic. It's too romantic for me now. I'm over it. The austerity, the solitude, the connection with nature and with God... I just do have the energy to suck marrow, shave close and reduce life to its lowest terms. I like hanging out with people too much...and besides, there are many ways of drilling down to the bone, many more ways than the ones that we have made famous by way of our attention.

There are less flashy ways of benefitting from solitude and retreat. One can come upon the deeper meanings in life in more communal ways—by walking through an early winter morning with your neighbor and a playful dog, by gathering around outdoor bonfires at Christmastime...one can even find God by balancing one's checkbook. I'm not kidding. There are many ways of coming to understand the nature of our lives.

Henry David Thoreau chose the way that worked for him. And like I said, some thought he was stupid or crazy or lost and some didn't care. But many were curious and many still are today. I have been curious about the romantic side of Thoreau for most of my life. I have been going to Walden Pond for most of my life. I started going in college. Walden Pond was only 10 or 15 miles away. I walked through the woods and crouched down by the water and witnessed a little miracle. The earth didn't move beneath my feet or anything but something really earth-like moved in me...and time stopped moving but I did not.

My nickname back in high school was Leo the Duck. [] Don't ask. The reason why is more silly than embarrassing but I won't go into it right now. Anyway, ever since, I've a deep connection to ducks. And I left a deep connection that first day at Walden Pond. I connected rather deeply to the world most average duck...and years later, I wrote a song about that connection. I wrote:

This feels like that same place
I think we've been here before
When you had lightning on your feet
And I wore a deep, blue band around my arm
Do you remember me?
I went walking yesterday
I was finding me a way to fly...

Those words were written about my out-of-time connection with this average duck.

This might sound surprising but it can take a while to really and truly connect with an average duck. There are proud and shy, lacking in certain social skills, just like you and me. So, there I was, crouched down in early autumn, at Walden Pond somewhere, with the average duck and the stoppage of time and the little miracle and everything...and nothing happened...nothing eventful anyway. I was annoying my friends, the ones who had come with me that time. You see, time had stopped for me but not for any of the people I was with. I could hear them calling out to me. We were distant from one another but sound travels well over water. I hear them calling but I didn't want to call back and shatter the moment. I didn't want to leave them hanging either. So, I was caught. I knew that I had to return to them. I didn't want them to worry on my behalf...but I didn't to leave.

Time was moving again and the miracle was waning. My healthy sense of baseline anxiety presented itself. So, I got ready to reconnect with my friends. I made my peace with the duck and I got up to leave and just then, the average duck puffed up its chest and opened out its arm, as if in salutation...not to me but to the miracle connection that we had shared, the time-out-of-time moment that was free of urgency. And on the inmost part of its wings (as if at the tender of the arm below

the bicep) were the most beautiful, most brilliant, blue feathers that I had ever seen at that point in my life.

My friends that day were impatient. It was harder for them to be in the here and in the now. It was hard for them to slow down enough to enjoy the moment at hand. They were always racing into the next one, crashing into the future rather than letting it gently unfold...crashing forward, as if they all had lightning on their feet.

I'm different. It's easier for me to commune with ducks and still waters. It's easy for me to sit quietly enough to see their salutation, brilliant and beautifully blue. I was raised to rumble like slow-thunder over mountains. They were raised to flash at a moment's notice, to strike without warning and burn away. They are different from me. We're opposites and we go together.

In Walden, in the chapter called Economy, Thoreau talks about where he lived, the house near the waters of Walden...the one that he had built with his own hands. I kept track to the penny. I counted each nut. He counted each and every bolt. And he wrote about it in this chapter called Economy. He wrote,

The exact cost of my house, paying the usual price for such materials I used, but not counting the work, all of which was done by myself, was as follows; and I give the details because very few are able to tell exactly what their houses cost, and fewer still, if any, the separate cost of the various materials which composed them:—

Boards	\$8 03 ¹ / ₂ , mostly shanty boards
Refuse shingles for roof and sides	4 00
Laths	1 25
Two second-hand windows with glass	2 43
One thousand old brick	4 00
Two casks of lime	2 40 (that was high)
Hair	0 31
Mantle-tree iron	0 15
Nails	3 90
Hinges and screws	0 14
Latch	0 10
Chalk	0 01
Transportation back)	1 40 (I carried a good part on my
In all	\$28 12 ¹ / ₂

I know what you're thinking: 'How could anyone, even a wealthy person, be able to pay for a house that costs almost \$30!!'

It's truly crazy. He was incredibly frugal...and it was a different time. If Thoreau were building the same house today...by Silver Lake, let's say, and not by Walden Pond...and if he didn't have to pay for property, he would be spending only \$931. It was just one simple room. It was a tiny house. But could you imagine that?

The national average for a tiny house today is \$45,000! It's fascinating to think about the economy, especially now.

I learned in economic news last week that the world's billionaires are seeing their net worth increasing dramatically during the pandemic—by more than \$3.6 trillion in 2020 alone. I learned that in the same period of time, 100 million more people were pushed into poverty. As Cornel West reminded us fifteen years before Occupy Wall Street in 2011, that...

...the top 20% are doing very well. The top 1% [is] euphoric. But 80% of fellow citizens are fearful of downward mobility, dealing with stagnation and declining wages... More and more Americans see that the top 1% of the population owns 48% of the [wealth]. The top 10% own 86% of the wealth. The top 20% own 94% of the wealth. They say, "How can 80% [of the people] struggle over 6% of the resources without being at each other's throats? It's a dangerous situation. [end quote]

Cornel West said these words in 1996. Things have become more challenging over the last twenty-five years, not less.

Questions like those of the Rev. John Cummins and Dr. Cornel West are like slow-thunder and lightning. Taken together, they prompt deep reflection on the functional economy—the one that serves society rather than the other way around. And I think of my friend Joseph Bragdon and his book, *Economies that Mimic Life*. I think about sustainable prosperity.

In the last two years, 100 million people have been pushed into poverty. I wonder if those were some of the folks who rushed the gates in Washington last January...rallying for revolution...searching for something brilliant and blue and beautiful to wear? I wonder if this is what Mark Meadows is so afraid to say.

"How do we clothe is truth and beauty the moments that make up our lives?" How can our economy become an art that we can live within...for to see the beautiful in ourselves and one another. In his Gospel, Matthew writes,

Look at the flowers of the field, how they grow. They neither labor nor spin; and yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his splendor was not arrayed like any one of them. So if God so clothes the wild grass which lives for today and tomorrow is burned, shall He not much more clothe you, [oh] faithless ones?

Do you believe that Matthew was talking about our shoes? When we are going on an arduous journey, it's best to dress wisely. It's wise to practice arts that we can live and can thrive within. Prada did it with red shoe elegance and so can we. And in the dance of life, we'll wear our hiking boots and our high-heel shoes. They are so different. So opposite and they go together. Lightning, thunder and the rain.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.