
On Wednesday, I'll be celebrating Thoreau's bicentennial birthday along with hundreds of other devotees in Concord. That party is only one small part of a truly international moment to celebrate a legacy that keeps on giving.

Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, then a mainstream middle-America town. He lived his life deliberately, rather than passively, making it happen, rather than letting it happen. He spoke truth to power, being jailed in the process. He lived as simply and boldly as his circumstances permitted, and kept free from the material distractions. He defended the rights of the trampled, especially: the slaves, who he helped guide north on the underground railroad; an impoverished recent immigrant, who he helped sponsor; and the Native Americans, who fascinated him. He was a genuine American patriot, though critical of rank-and-file military ways.

He was a loving family man, albeit with no wife or children of his own, having been unlucky in love. He gave back to the community that nurtured him, sharing his skills as a land surveyor and consulting scientist. He became a polymath genius who made extraordinary contributions to literature, political reform and natural science. He experienced, appreciated, investigated and preserved the natural world in all of its manifestations - one of which was human nature - becoming the prophet of America's environmental consciousness. He was a spiritual seeker baptized and eulogized in the Unitarian church, but received his potent religious experiences alone at the oracle of nature.

He left us too early, dying a lingering, but stoic death of tuberculosis at 44.

On the day of his funeral, children were let out of school so they could attend. They sent him off by decorating his casket with wildflowers.

Yes, Thoreau could be bristly, dogmatic, dreamy and intellectually snobbish. But no one's perfect. Though born a male of European descent in a patriarchal society, he did what he could to level the playing field for different genders, races, ethnic groups and religions. Though his writing is challenging when taken in great gulps, it's an absolute delight when savored in sentences. "Certainly no American," wrote Joyce Carol Oates, "has ever written more beautiful, vigorous, supple prose."


In his honor, the U.S. Postal Service issued a new stamp earlier this year. Only then did I realize that I've been a devotee of Thoreau for exactly half a century.

My story begins sometime near July 12, 1967, when I saw an unusual postage stamp of a man with a distorted, somewhat sad face. The price was 5 cents, the artist was Leonard Baskin, and the print
run 111.85 million. Before the close of my college years in 1973, I had become enthralled enough to paint (acrylic on canvas) a Thoreauvian image inspired by a quote from his famed essay "Civil Disobedience."

This year, the Postal Service issued its second Thoreau stamp to celebrate his birthday bicentennial. The price was 49 cents, the artist, Sam Weber, and the print run 11 million. This time the stamp is in color, his last name is handwritten in cursive, and the face has a mellow, enigmatic countenance.

The juxtaposition of these two stamps, issued 50 years apart, conveys our nation's continuing pride in this great American.