DISRESPECTING WALDEN

I saw some graffiti yesterday that nearly took my breath away. Gravity-defying stacks of stone are desecrating the memorial cairn that marks the site of Henry David Thoreau's house at Walden Pond. They rise like slender mushrooms more than 3 feet high from this otherwise broad mound of glacier-tumbled stones. Why?

That's what I asked my professor colleagues. Like me, they knew it was spontaneous natural art, but nothing more. So I put the question to 30 first-year college students on a class field trip for "Walden and the American Landscape," an honors course at the University of Connecticut. They demurred, perhaps because it was pouring rain. So, when I got home I searched the Internet for an answer, finding one at a website loaded with New Age spirituality, Zen-Buddhist commercialism and astrology.

Apparently, each stone is a mindful act of engagement with nature. Each is a physical prayer of intention that will supposedly merge with the prayers of previously placed stones, thereby empowering us all.

Thoreau would not have approved, either of this mushy thinking or the phallic-looking stacks. "I love better to see stones left in place," he wrote in Walden. "One piece of good sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon."

The artists who created the stone mushrooms were probably nice people trying to communicate with the earthly spirit of Thoreau at this lovely pond-side place. Nevertheless, their lithic graffiti should be leveled.

The impulse for graffiti is perfectly natural. It's not a problem when it doesn't degrade the public landscape or deface property belonging to someone else. The names of two lovers carved with a penknife in the bark of a tree is a nice thought, though the wound might provide access to some tree-killing insect. Ancient petroglyphs scratched through desert varnish on a sandstone cliff are priceless artifacts today, though they may have offended someone at the time.

Gang symbols spray-painted on building facades accomplish one thing while destroying another. One person's art is another's profanity.

This is certainly true at the house site cairn. The story begins when Ralph Waldo Emerson bought a wood lot on the north side of Walden Pond. This gave his protege a place to build a respectable "house" no bigger than a garden shed, which he occupied for more than two years beginning on July 4, 1845. Two years after Thoreau moved out, the house was moved to the other side of Concord, used to store grain then salvaged for material.

The scars of its former foundation healed as the reputation of Walden grew. Admirers began to make pilgrimages to what had become an important historic site. One of them, Bronson Alcott (the father of author Louisa May) began a tradition of dropping a stone at the house site in memorial. Over time, the pile grew into a broad mound more than a dozen feet in diameter and a few feet high. Though Thoreau would have thought the memorial cairn unnecessary, he would certainly have approved of its construction technique, which is gravity-obeying "Simplicity. Simplicity. Simplicity!"

My colleagues and our students know this, which is why we thought the seven stone mushrooms disturbing. After debating whether to knock them down, we decided to let them stand because the
property is owned and managed by someone else, in this case the state of Massachusetts. We had no more right to knock them down as the artists had to build them up.

Even if the managers of Walden Pond State Reservation decide to leave the mushrooms standing, they will still have to repair the damage caused by the landscape artists. The southern edge of the cairn was torn up by someone searching for those rare stones that would balance well, meaning those with flatter, rougher edges. In fulfilling their goal of making mindful prayers, the artists were defacing what the historian Barksdale Maynard has called "an international shrine."

Sadly, Thoreau's cairn is not the only historic place being destroyed by New Age spiritual impulse. Abandoned stone walls across New England are being plucked for their stone to make stacks. This is destructive as well.