

## SOLITUDE IS NO FUN IF YOU'RE ALONE!

By Fred Hobbs

By all accounts the famous Walden Pond in Massachusetts was, and still is, a pleasant place to visit and maybe have a quick swim. The pond is noted primarily, though, for the two-year residency there of philosopher/author/poet Henry David Thoreau.

In 1845, Thoreau decided to get away from it all and hunker down by the pond and observe, if not necessarily enjoy, the simple life alone. He was not a hermit, though, becoming a very public figure through his writings and lectures. He can be classed as an activist, advocating for environmentalism long before the modern day movement led by what today's critics call "the tree huggers." Thoreau was an avid abolitionist attacking the Fugitive Slave Law of the day.

Some historical accounts label Thoreau as an anarchist. He believed in civil disobedience for righteous causes (as he saw them, anyway.) He was noted as a tax resister, an opponent of development and for his declaration "that government is best which governs not at all." There is evidence that he backed off of that extreme view once by writing: "I ask for, not at once no government, but at once for better government."

All of the beliefs that constituted Thoreau's character and lifestyle are secondary to the message contained in this quote: "I have never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude." How sad is that. Not being around in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, none of us are able to have known Henry in person, to shake his hand or ask him: "how's the weather at the pond today? Are the fish biting?"

He may well have replied: "Get lost, I'm *pondering*."

Of course, everyone needs a bit of "alone time" mixed in with socializing. Naughty young ones need "time out." Couples benefit from moments of individual reflection, especially after a domestic squabble. Generally, solitude is valuable when dealing with a dilemma or trying to solve a puzzle. Reading is a pleasure that may be enjoyed alone.

But, to praise solitude as an over-arching virtue? No way. As the Barbra Streisand song reminds us, "people need people." Thoreau would have benefited from the observation of French novelist and playwright Honore Balzac: "Solitude is fine, but you need someone to tell that solitude is fine."

Presumably, Henry David Thoreau was familiar with a Greek philosopher who had a decidedly different take on solitude than his latter-day American counterpart. Aristotle wrote: "Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god."

Nothing is so sad as solitude thrust upon a person who doesn't want it, such as loss of a loved one or simply the loss of love. American musical icon Duke Ellington wrote a tune which reflects that heart-breaking feeling. For this article one must rely solely on the poignancy of the lyrics by Eddie DeLange and Irving Mills:

In my solitude, I sit in my chair, filled with despair  
There's no one so sad, with gloom everywhere  
I sit and stare, I know I'll go mad.  
In my solitude, I'm afraid. Dear Lord above, send me back my love.  
The famous melody is titled simply: "Solitude".