

Spiritual Soup

By Kurt Venables

Zen and the Art of Yard Work



This past weekend, I was out in the yard putting up a fence. We just got a new puppy, and we need an enclosure in the backyard for him to play in. Samantha (my 5 year old) loves animals, and we just had to get a dog for her. He is much loved and growing fast. Anyway, putting up this fence involved a lot of heavy physical work—digging, mixing concrete, lifting, nailing, especially the digging, as I was hitting a lot of rock. It was a typical hot July day, and with the sun beating down, the sweat was just pouring off of me. The kids and the pup were out in the yard playing. I took a short break and was watching them play when I was struck by one of those Zen moments. Maybe I was experiencing some kind of pain induced euphoria, like a punch drunk prize fighter, but I was suddenly overcome by complete peace and joy. The world seemed to just melt away, my mind grasped a single thought, and I was overcome by a deep sense that I had grasped anew an important truth. That truth is that ***to find complete happiness, we must be true to ourselves; we must simply be ourselves, without any extraneous or negative thoughts and feelings.*** Kids are happy when they are simply playing. The pup was happy simply to play or snooze. Likewise, people don't need lots of material possessions or prestige to be happy. They simply need to do what they were "made" to do. This month's feature is Thoreau's Walden, in which he describes his two years of rustic living at Walden pond. In the second chapter, Where I Lived, & What I

Lived for, Thoreau talks a lot about living deliberately and finding truth. I think that the idea I grasped in my Zen moment, that we must simply be ourselves, without extraneous or negative thoughts and feelings, is what he was talking about.

To understand in more detail what I believe lies behind this idea, first consider that the mind encompasses a duality of reason and emotion. The rational mind uses logic to plan actions. Basic emotional needs drive the rational mind; they provide the goals that rationality aims to achieve. Without emotion, there can be no reason. I believe, and this is what I think Thoreau was saying in Walden, that we need to take time to slow down, step out of the rat race. So many people run from task to task without ever thinking about what's important in life. SUV's and expensive houses really aren't that high on the list of basic emotional needs. With respect to true happiness, these things are essentially irrelevant. Yet this is what people crave most. So what *is* important? Basic physical needs, security, family, friends. However, I believe that the most important emotional need, that the very core of humanity, is goodness. One who's heart is hard and black cannot feel true happiness. Conversely, if our hearts are full of Light, they are also full of joy. In order to achieve true and complete happiness, we must simply "be ourselves"—if we simply

open our hearts, the Light will naturally shine through. This idea is difficult for the rational mind to grasp, and our culture places little value on it. This is unfortunate, but things can change. So let us each renew our realization of this most fundamental and critical truth and count ourselves profoundly blessed. Thoreau puts the situation eloquently in chapter 11, Higher Laws, of *Walden*:

If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal-that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause

momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.

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