

TWO UNCOLLECTED TALKS

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THE USES OF NEW ENGLAND ECSTASY



THE WAR IN VIETNAM, THE FIRST PARISH IN LINCOLN,
ME, AND HENRY THOREAU

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THE USES OF NEW ENGLAND ECSTASY
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Walking into the Star Market in Concord on a rainy day, feeling a little depressed, I stepped on the rubber mat and the door opens in front of me and I remember what Emerson said,

The misery of man appears like childish petulance, when we explore the steady and prodigal provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the heavens.

I reach for the celery and ask myself,

What angels invented these splendid ornaments, these rich conveniences, this ocean of air above, this ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between? this zodiac, this tent of dropping clouds, this striped coat of climates, this fourfold year?

Finishing my shopping at the Star Market, I stop at Vanderhoof's Hardware, and there the rakes and toasters and hammers in the window remind me that the town jail once stood behind the store, the jail where Thoreau spent a single night. And then as I pick up a gallon of paint thinner the words of the essay on "Civil Disobedience" run through my head,

If one HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were . . . to . . . be locked up in the county jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America.

Driving home with the jug of paint thinner and the bags of groceries, I look out through the rainy windshield as I whiz past Walden Pond and wonder with Thoreau whether

. . . on that spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden Walden Pond was already in existence, and even then breaking up in a gentle spring rain accompanied with mist and a southerly wind, and covered with myriads of ducks and geese, which had not heard of the fall

Around the town of Concord the landscape is drenched with words. They sprout up from meadows of amber-colored grass, the rocks of stone walls are spotted with them like lichen, they ooze from white pine trees like sap. Every swamp has something to say. The Milldam is noisy with caustic remarks. The only other town where one is pestered by talkative hills and valleys, where one's sleeve is plucked by garrulous bushes, is Amherst. On Main Street and North Pleasant Street, on country roads within sight of the Holyoke hills, Emily Dickinson keeps up a running flow of spasmodic monologue. A petal falls on the sidewalk and one remembers the early death of some of her friends —

They dropped like Flakes —

They dropped like Stars –
Like Petals from a Rose –
When suddenly across the June
A wind with fingers – goes –

New England is a landscape saturated with words. It is pungent phrases and the ground out of which they came. Snowy Januarys, fragile Aprils, languorous Augusts, spectacular Octobers, drove the pens of the transcendentalists, blotting, them swiftly across the pages of their journals. They wrote indoors, I suppose, but surely they were muttering choice phrases as they walked in the orchard or tended a bean row or ambled down to Mr. Alcott's, promising themselves not to forget some splendid combination of nouns and adjectives until they could unstopper the inkwell at home. "We also can bask in the great morning which rises forever out of the eastern sea," mumbles Mr. Emerson, opening Mr. Alcott's gate, memorizing this new scrap of eloquence, "we can also bask, we can also bask . . ."

They were many-sided, these men of Concord, this woman of Amherst, but it is their earth-related exhilaration that I want to talk about here, the effect of New England woodlots and ponds, river meadows and boulder fields on men and women of such ardent sensibility. The word for it is ecstasy. On the piece a paper emerging from my IBM machine, the word ecstasy looks a little foolish. But there was nothing silly about it when it flowed from the pens of Emerson, Thoreau and Dickinson. Today it is reserved for things sexual, and I believe it is also the name for a new drug. But in mid-nineteenth-century New England it was a commodity suspended in the air. You could breathe it into your lungs on any smoky

afternoon in September, on a damp morning in May, on, one of those brilliant days of low humidity in the summer, or on an amethyst winter evening when the air smelled of snow. It was a commonplace article to be had for nothing. It came down from the sky freely and coated everything with its glittering film. (As someone well acquainted with this substance, I know that nothing sticks like ecstasy, especially to the keys of a typewriter.) Emerson was intoxicated with it, Thoreau was “drunk, drunk, drunk, dead drunk” with it, and of course Emily Dickinson was “Inebriate of Air” and “Debauchee of Dew.”

Philosophically it was immensely significant. No one has explained the importance of this giddy transport better than Thoreau —

I go forth to see the sun set . . . I witness a beauty in the form or coloring of the clouds which addresses itself to my imagination, for which you account scientifically to my understanding, but do not so account to my imagination. It is what it suggests and is the symbol of that I care for, and if, by any trick of science, you rob it of its symbolicalness, you do me no service and explain nothing. I, standing twenty miles off, see a crimson cloud in the horizon. You tell me it is a mass of vapor which absorbs all other rays and reflects the red, but that is nothing to the purpose, for this red vision excites me, stirs my blood, makes my thoughts flow . . . and you have not touched the secret of that influence. If there is not something mystical in your explanation, something unexplainable to the understanding, some elements of mystery, it is quite

insufficient . . . What sort of science is that which enriches the understanding, but robs the imagination? . . .

If we knew all things thus mechanically merely, should we know anything really?

I have never come across a better account of that strange pestering quantity in the world around us, that thing that will not leave us alone, which has an effect upon us we can't put into words. Fortunately these men, this woman, were empowered with words. Their ecstasy was expressed in a language that was exact and exalted at the same time. It is as though they took us, blind and deaf as we are, and put our hands like Helen Keller's under the water pump. Helen grasped at last the connection between water and word, and we can now see the relation between our bewildered feelings of awe and wonder in the presence of nature, and our daily lives in the ordinary world of weights and measures, of repairing the transmission, of buying groceries in the Star Market, of mending a hole in a sock.

I hearing get who had but ears,

said Thoreau,

And sight, who had but eyes before . . .

Movingly Thoreau describes the onset of these mysterious senses in his childhood –

I think that no experience which I have to-day comes up to, or is comparable with, the experiences of my boyhood . . . Formerly, methought, nature developed as I developed, and grew up with me. My life was ecstasy. In youth, before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction . . . This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. To have such sweet impressions made on us, such ecstasies begotten of the breezes! . . . For years I marched as to a music in comparison with which the military music of the streets is noise and discord. I was daily intoxicated, and yet no man could call me intemperate. With all your science can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?

Emily Dickinson recalls a similar childhood awareness of light in the soul –

It was given to me by the Gods –
When I was a little Girl –
They give us Presents most – you know –
When we are new – and small.
I kept it in my Hand –
I never put it down –
I did not dare to eat – or sleep –
For fear it would be gone –

I heard such words as "Rich" –
When hurrying to school –
From lips at Corners of the Streets –
And wrestled with a smile.
Rich! 'Twas Myself – was rich –
To take the name of Gold –
And Gold to own – in solid Bars –
The Difference – made me bold –

Ecstasy in Concord, ecstasy in Amherst – it was a strange thing to come oozing out of the rocky soil, to rain from the sky like pitchforks upon the hardscrabble ground among all these stiff rural aristocrats! Think of Yankee peddler Alcott, who could rebuild a house or plant an orchard, spouting Orphic sayings as easily as he could hammer together a drying rack for his wife's laundry. Think of Emerson, the dignified sage of Concord, transfixed with a wild poetic delight as he crossed the Milldam, and sober Thoreau, drunk on the song of a wood thrush.

Of course their rapture wasn't for everyone. What good was transcendental ecstasy to Francis Parkman, riding the Oregon Trail, or to Richard Henry Dana, travelling around the Horn before the mast? Henry Thoreau was surprised by the insensitivity of his friend Hosmer, for whom pitching manure was not an ecstatic experience –

Hosmer is overhauling a vast heap of manure in the rear of his barn, turning the ice within it up to the light; yet he asks despairingly what life is for . . .

And Hosmer wasn't the only fellow citizen of Concord who was obtuse. Thoreau often complained that no one else saw what he saw. He alone was "self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms." Emily Dickinson was troubled in the same way —

The Sun went down — no Man looked on —
The Earth and I, alone,
Were present at the Majesty —

Thus for our inheritance of New England ecstasy we are indebted to only a scattering of these rapt geniuses. Fortunately they were supremely able to cast their transports into permanent form. "What if we could daguerreotype our thoughts and feelings!" wondered Thoreau, but of course that is just what he did, in the remarkable prose of his journals and lectures and in *Walden*. It is what Emerson did in his poems and essays, it is what Emily Dickinson did in her poems and letters. Reading them now, looking around us at land and sky, we still find their images superimposed like photographic negatives on the Massachusetts landscape.

Where did it come from, this peculiar afflatus that seemed to descend rather suddenly on the prim towns of Amherst and Concord? In what older pastures did these new shoots take root?

Surely the fertile ingredient in the topsoil of those pastures was something more native than transatlantic borrowings from Goethe or Wordsworth or Coleridge or Kant. Willy-nilly, these people were affected by the old Puritan orthodoxy of the past, whether they knew it or not, even though it was crumbling around them in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The Unitarians were dissenting from the Congregationalists, the

Transcendentalists were drifting away from the Unitarians. Even in pious Congregational Amherst the old certainties were losing ground. Slipping out of common belief were the old doctrines of Original Sin, of Total Depravity, of Christ's Atonement, of the threefold nature of God. The contemplation of an invisible world more precious than the visible one was diminishing in its intensity, and so was the anticipation of a coming Judgment when the graves would be opened and the dead gathered to heaven or hell. Even God was changing his nature. No longer did he observe humankind with such eager yearning, nor take so keen an interest in the cry of every heart, in the prayers rising up like steam from Connecticut and Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

And yet there were elements of the old religion that remained. The very fact that life was to be taken seriously, that mighty questions demanded answers, these fundamental notions were still there. So was the sense that living had meaning, that it was sanctified. The majestic language of the forefathers, the rolling phrases, the glorification of the English tongue, was a habit not easily forgotten. And most importantly the Calvinist requirement for an experience of ecstatic conversion was not lost but transmogrified into transcendental ecstasy, the kind of fervent exhilaration so dear to the hearts of our friends in Amherst and Concord. The old faith had been a strange, primitive, intellectual, complex religion, but it was a passionate one as well. "Draw us with the sweetness of thine odours," pleaded John Winthrop, ". . . Carry us into thy garden, that we may eat and be filled with those pleasures, which the world knows not . . . Make us sick with thy love." Cotton Mather describes the "Sacred Panting" of the soul after the "Glorious Objects of the Invisible World." In

a poem by Anne Bradstreet the beauty of the real world is described with wonder, but only as a paradigm and forecast of the world to come –

If so much excellence abide below;
How excellent is he that dwells on high?

In the poetry of Mistress Bradstreet's successor, Emily Dickinson, the transformation of this earlier sort of rapture into the Emersonian kind of ecstasy is wonderfully clear. She defied the first and achieved the second. In the Amherst of her youth the pressures for old-fashioned Christian conversion must have been overwhelming. Her sister was ready to receive it, her brother, too, acquiesced, and at last even her father gave in, although it was not a simple matter for that upright man to be brought to his knees. Only Emily held out. At Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, where she was enjoying a fine education in chemistry, electricity, physiology, botany, algebra and Euclid, her studies occasionally ground to a halt for intense interludes of religious persuasion. Like the other young women at the school, Emily hoped to reach "the ark of safety," but she found herself unable to respond to "the claims of Christ."

. . . I am not happy & I regret that last term, when that golden opportunity was mine, that I did not give up & become a Christian. It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world . . .

It was hard for her to give up the world! This world, the world of sleigh-rides, candy-pulls, Baldwin apples, Valentines, fawn-colored dresses, bumblebees, butterflies and the noonday sun. Over and over again in her poetry we are told that eternity is here and now, that we can behold it in the spangled hems of the sunlight and hear it in the wind, that the world itself is heaven enough, that we should accept

The Fact that Earth is Heaven —

Whether Heaven is Heaven or not

In her garden, in the orchard, in the view from her bedroom windows, she knew moments of ecstatic beholding. They were mystical experiences very much like the conversion experiences demanded by Amherst's First Church of Christ:

I could not have defined the change —

Conversion of the Mind

Like Sanctifying in the Soul —

Is witnessed — not explained

And each single experience was of lasting significance, just as conversion was. You were changed forever. In this poem about a singing bird the whole world was forever changed —

And then he lifted up his Throat

And squandered such a Note

A Universe that overheard

Is stricken by it yet —

Sixty miles away as the crow flies, Concord too was vibrating to the same note. And yet there are ways in which Emily Dickinson differs from her Concord mentors. In her letters and poems there is a presence seldom found in the work of Emerson and Thoreau, a darkness, a tragic inquisitiveness, a passionate curiosity about the nature of death, a smoldering preoccupation with the instant in which the spark of life goes out and everlasting death begins. There is no such morbidity in the essays of Emerson and the journals of Thoreau, there is little interest in mortality, no mortuary grandeur, no tragic power, even though they were as cruelly dogged by death as was Emily Dickinson. To Emerson evil was merely a privation of good, as darkness was an absence of light. Thoreau mentions death only as an essential part of animal nature, a necessary element in the rude health and vigor of all creation.

But to Emily Dickinson death was overwhelming, it was king. It threatened all she held dear. She was tormented, fascinated, galled by the supreme question of what really happened when life ended. Was death an ecstatic reunion with those who had gone before, or a pit into which one dropped forever? What if the moment of death had no more significance than a fly buzzing on a windowpane?

. . . and then it was

There interposed a Fly —

With Blue — uncertain stumbling Buzz —

Between the light — and me —

And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

I have a private theory that explains why a vulnerable young woman of intense intellectual sensitivity might have been particularly troubled by the thought of death in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Perhaps it was partly Charles Darwin's fault. We know that she was familiar with the shock wave that unsettled the established churches of the world when *The origin of Species* was published in 1859. Jokingly she sums it up in a letter, ". . . we thought Darwin had thrown 'the Redeemer' away." But it was no joke. In a time when dread diseases ran amok without prevention or cure, when there was no Salk vaccine, no cure for tuberculosis, no penicillin, no public hygiene against typhoid, no understanding of childbed fever, when every family lost infants, children, young men and women, the inferences and doubts inspired by Darwinism must have been terrible indeed. Charles Darwin himself was aware of the ruthlessness of his conclusions: "What a book a devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horribly cruel works of nature!" In one of his letters he admits, "It's like confessing to a murder."

"Murder" was not too strong a word for a death without hope of immortality, for a disaster that dropped one's loved ones into the pit of nothingness. Emily Dickinson cried in anguish, ". . . is there more? More than Love and Death? Then tell me it's [*sic*] name!"

But of course it is this tragic side to her poetry, this preoccupation with death, with final things, that brings her so forcefully into our own time. Her poems of loss and death seem to prefigure twentieth-century themes of alienation and mortality. She seems to us, often, a true

contemporary. We grasp at the majestic panic, the lofty melancholy, the solemn foreboding, the serene contemplation of everlasting calm, and let the ecstasy go. The ecstasy is charming, we admit — all that bizarre rapture! — but it is the tragic lines we choose for our doctoral dissertations.

But this sorting out, this separation, seems to me a mistake. New England ecstasy is still a solid fact. It is still raining ecstatic cats and dogs over Flint's Pond, over Heywood' Meadow, over Becky Stow's swamp, over the oak tree at the Homestead and the umbrella magnolias at the Evergreens. Ecstasy still hawks its wares at every rural crossing. The sunset still stirs our blood as it did Henry Thoreau's.

The trouble is, we're embarrassed to talk about it. As writers we aren't accustomed to writing about it. We don't know what to do with it. What can you do with a thousand square yards of ecstasy, high-quality fabric, a hundred threads to the inch? Do you just stand there, cross-eyed with rapture? Or sit in lotus position with closed eyes? Too often, I think, we merely blink and turn away, murmuring, "Sunset? What sunset? I don't see any sunset."

The transcendentalists were more practical about ecstasy. They had a thrifty use for it. They knew what to do with handfuls of rapture. It provided moral lessons. "Listen to every zephyr for some reproof," warned Thoreau. "Nature thunders to man," promised Emerson, "the laws of right and wrong." It was a sublime concept, worthy of his clerical forefathers —

. . .the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, of one mind; and that one mind is everywhere active, in

each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool; and whatever opposes that will is everywhere balked and baffled, because things are made so, and not otherwise.

In other words, it was merely a matter of going with the stream of things rather than fighting against the current. Correct behavior was like stroking a dog's back in the right direction rather than roughing up the fur the wrong way. Emerson believed in a simple sort of compensating justice in which the whole earth conspired. A vicious life was punished by cosmic failure, by repudiation, even by a vicious physiognomy, while before a good man nature opened all doors and poured out a cornucopia of rich reward.

Alas for Emerson's serene sense of astral propriety! It doesn't play in Amherst or Concord. It doesn't play in Peoria. It certainly doesn't play in Washington, D.C. If there is one thing this century understands, it is the falseness of that world view. If we are to draw lessons from nature, they will not be comforting ones. Instead we remember Darwin's bitter remark about a nature that is "clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel." The lesson is of tooth and claw, or of clever devices for attracting the opposite sex. This alone, we fear, is the natural will, the one mind that is everywhere active, the mind we do not balk or baffle. This is the savage direction of the hair on the dog's back. In a world where entire populations are laid waste by blind chance, by carelessness in high places, by blank ignorance, by scientific methods of destruction, perhaps Emerson was more right than he knew.

But he was right, too, about ecstasy. Here we are, then, with our unhappy consciousness of all kinds of disagreeable evil on all sides, but

with our equal awareness of the beauty of the world. If the one is real, so is the other. They are both true. From the most distant galaxy to the spinning electrons in your thumb, existence is charged with breathtaking wonder, but there is also terror in the very heart of things. The duplicity is everlastingly bewildering.

What does it mean for writers, here and now, the double nature of reality? To me it means grasping at it by both handles. In the last fifty years we have paid devoted attention to the clumsy, the wasteful, the blundering, the low, the horribly cruel. We have set aside the images of majesty, the awe, the sublimity. We have ignored it, distrusted it. And yet on any morning we can pluck it out of the air like a ball, on any afternoon we can bring it down out of the sky like a kite on a string. As Walt Whitman knew, we can pick it up any day at all off the street

I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is
sign'd by God's name . . .

As writers we must pick them up, those letters, we must bring down the kite, catch the ball, exploit the awe we feel, employ it artistically, exult in it. The real world to which the artist must ever return is brimming with it, choked with it, engorged with it. It is ample and abundant and almost forgotten.

And it has a use, after all. At this moment in history it has a desperately important practical utility. Ecstasy has a geopolitical value. If it is true, as I have suggested, that nature is half one color and half another, like a tapir that is half terrible and half beautiful, then at this moment in our political existence the tragic half threatens to overwhelm and destroy

the other. We seem carelessly disposed to endanger the survival of the planet. If ever the news should go abroad that the earth is too good a thing to run such a risk, it is now. Our old-fashioned ecstasy at the wonder of the world should be made known. We must draw attention to the stripes of zebras, the spring tassels of maple trees, the brightness of dandelions. Let us be unashamedly rhapsodic about the world and angry about the dangerous fix it is in, and then let us sit down and write books.

THE WAR IN VIETNAM, THE FIRST PARISH IN LINCOLN,
ME, AND HENRY THOREAU
(ca. 1980s)

THE WAR IN VIETNAM, THE FIRST PARISH IN LINCOLN,
ME, AND HENRY THOREAU

The boy in the front of the church was a member of the Resistance. He had a beard like Noah's or Jeremiah's. His girlfriend in the back pew was wearing granny glasses. It was too early in local history for beards and granny glasses. None of us who were members of the church were used to them yet. I winced for the bearded boy and the girl in the back pew, because I wanted them to persuade the others.

"I am your son," proclaimed the boy. (Silent protest from the entire chamber: "You're no son of mine.") "You made me what I am. People like you in my own home town. You read me the Bible when I was a little boy. You told us what Jesus said. So now you can't wash your hands of what I've done. I did it because of what you told me."

We were all there, all together, the whole body of the church, trying to prepare ourselves to vote in a day or two on the subject of something called Sanctuary. It looks strange now, and remote, and off, and queer, that such a peculiar question should ever have arisen in that dignified little building with the classical pediment over the pulpit and the Ionic columns outside and the simple white steeple.

I was a member of the lay governing board then, the Prudential Committee. Our collective prudence had been called into question by a young woman in the New England Resistance. The subject had come up on the agenda one evening after we had taken care of other ordinary matters like Sunday School problems and church suppers and annual spring canvass. With his usual amiable thoughtfulness the minister read

the letter aloud. We were all surprised by it and mildly titillated. None of us at that moment, sitting there in the dusty Sunday School room, surrounded by doughy model Jerusalem-type houses and crayon maps of the holy land but of course no pictures of Jesus before Pilate or the crucifixion—none of us saw the crack open up in the asphalt tile on the floor under our feet. The letter requested us, in the event such a case should come up, to take into the church building a serviceman who might be absent without leave until such a time as he might be arrested by the authorities. We would be expected to house him and feed him and allow him to make a public utterance of his reasons for running away from the service.

The minister wanted to do it. He was obviously perishing to do it. But he wanted the church members to make the decision. Some members of the committee wanted to put a stop to the matter then and there. The First Parish would become a circus, they said. We would all be made fools of. Others said the matter was too important for us to decide. It ought to be brought to the whole church for a vote.

Just settling that one issue, whether or not to bring the matter before the whole body of the church, took a long time. I forget how long. We met again and again. The gap in the floor widened. It was suddenly a chasm. But at last the Prudential Committee threw its prudence to the four winds, and voted to let everyone else consider the matter in full meeting assembled.

The volcano had erupted. The entire church membership flew up into the air and came down on the two sides of the chasm. There were emotion-charged meetings, patriotic speeches, wise heads brought in from outside to caution or persuade, and at last a vote. Someone, presented with

this frightful choice, had thought up a compromise to get everybody off the hook, everybody who was opposed to the idea or just timid about it. We would appoint a study committee.

The committee studied the matter for a year. They were a good committee. When they were finished with their deliberations they called another meeting of the whole body of the church and recommend that we say yes to the question of whether or not to provide Sanctuary if called upon. The vote was Aye by a small majority. But of course by that time the whole issue was academic. By that time we knew we would never be called upon.

And of course on the night of the earlier vote, a whole year back, it was a crushing defeat for those who had wanted the church to make a public stand against the war in Vietnam. The church as an institution had said no. Some of us felt it was up to us as individuals to say yes. There was a meeting of the likeminded from the town as a whole, not just from the church, to talk the matter over.

The upshot was the formation of an organization know as The Fellowship of Conscience. The name sounds strange to me now, and self-righteous. But we were deadly serious and very much concerned, and we felt that the church had utterly failed to live up to its own pious proclamations, to the idea of the New Testament, to the common conscience of us all.

Our avowed purpose in forming The Fellowship of Conscience was to house resisters and runaways from the army in our own houses, publicly, acting together as a quasi-religious organization. We thought briefly of calling ourselves a new church. But the minister of the parish was one of our number, and he was loyal to the entire church membership,

and loved them and forgave them and hoped still to persuade them. We certainly didn't want to part him from his flock. So we didn't call ourselves a church.

And then we were told by a sympathetic lawyer among us that our fine name would not protect us from prosecution as individuals: five years in prison and a ten-thousand dollar fine. We would certainly be tried and probably convicted and jailed for housing draft resisters or AWOLs. Was that what we really wanted to do?

Henry Thoreau would have said, why not? Some of us said, why not? I remember thinking of myself making fine statements to the newspapers, being photographed going in and out of the courtroom, being patient! brave! in jail! helping other prisoners less fortunate than myself! valiant! heroic! SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER GOES TO JAIL! But on the other hand I couldn't help but realize what a pain in the neck it would be for my husband and family if they had to get along without me and pay giant legal fees on an annual income of no dollars, which is what we were sliding down to then.

Therefore we gave up the notion of publicly housing draft resisters and deserters. What we did privately was up to each one of us, and the statute of limitations has not yet run out on whatever acts of civil disobedience we committed as individuals. Publicly our organization supported draft resisters by attending their trials, taking ads in local papers, doing draft counseling, and giving money to some other organizations which were working so faithfully and steadily against the War-makers and in support of young men who had been presented with such harsh and evil choices. It was a time of strong feeling, and there was a great sense of *esprit de corps*, an urgency to do something to stop the

madness of the war. And separately and together we all felt watched – watched and listened to, whether we actually were or not.

All of that is over now. It looks farther and farther back in the past, and stranger and stranger. Little has changed of all that we protested, but for the most part we have stopped protesting (with the exception of the cautioning lawyer among us, who plods bravely on, working hard in political action, trying to move his sluggish neighbors to encourage new candidates, correct the political system, make things better little by little). Except for that one political season when all of us drove our heads against the blind windowless wall of Nixon's campaign for re-election, we have become more and more passive. The spirit is gone. For the most part we just sit back and watch the war-makers destroy themselves. We hated them, and we watch their embarrassment with a sense of vengeance. But we just sit there and watch.

The whole episode in the church reminds me of Henry Thoreau's essay on "Civil Disobedience," and of the injustice he was protesting, and of his night in jail. And the chasm that opened up beneath our feet, between neighbor and neighbor, between each of us and his own past, that still separates us from others by a crevasse requiring a lot of rope and climbing spikes to get across – this cleavage that changed us all – reminds me of the change Thoreau saw on Concord Common:

When I came out of prison . . . I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common, such as he observed who went in a youth and emerged a tottering and gray-headed man; and yet a change had to my eyes come over the scene, the town, and State, and country, – greater than any

that mere time could effect. I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived . . . were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions; that, after all, they . . . hoped, by a certain outward observance and a few prayers, and by walking in a particular straight though useless path from time to time, to save their souls. This may be to judge my neighbors harshly . . .

Our minister reached retirement age and left the church, honored with farewell ceremonies but never quite forgiven. A young man took his place in the pulpit. My last act as a member of the Prudential Committee was to urge them to change the committee's name, and they did. Now the Parish Committee and the church are doing a lot of fine things like prisoner rehabilitation and prison reform. But my husband and I no longer go to church. The reasons why we gave up on a membership that had lasted over twenty years are not entirely clear to us. All we feel sure of it that on Sunday mornings (to talk like Thoreau) it seems more important to gather our own huckleberries in our pails.