

1842

Charles Dickens arrived in Boston on a visit to America. The patent for a sewing machine was granted to one John Greenough. Massachusetts passed a law reducing the number of hours children under twelve might work in factories to ten a day. The Florida legislature instructed its delegate in Congress to press for a law that would authorize rewards for Indian scalps and for every Indian taken alive. With the signing of the Webster-Ashburton treaty the United States and Great Britain settled the boundaries between Maine and the Canadian provinces. President Tyler continued to veto bills. Through Congressman John Quincy Adams the intransigent citizens of Haverhill petitioned for a peaceful dissolution of the Union. The New York Philharmonic Orchestra gave its first concert. Nathaniel Hawthorne moved to Concord with his bride, his "dove."

The death of John Thoreau in January was a blow that it took Henry years to overcome. It brought him into a community of sorrow with the Emersons, for their little son Waldo died during the same month. Thoreau went on working around the Emerson household, but found plenty of time to write and live his own life too. He had not yet abandoned the writing of verse—a few of his best poems were still to be finished—but he was already concentrating on his prose. There he found ampler scope for his ideas. His prose rhythms and his images became more disciplined and more artful. The *Dial* found space for his first real essay, "Natural History of Massachusetts," as well as for a backlog of his poems. His *Journal* for the year as now in print begins with some thoughts on the bravery of virtue, runs to references to Sir Walter Raleigh and Chaucer, continues principally with a variety of reflections about nature, and ends on Sunday, April 3, with more praise for virtue. The rest of the *Journal* for 1842 has not been published. Thoreau's letters for the year are few, but several are unusually moving.

To MRS. LUCY BROWN

Concord March 2nd 1842.

Dear Friend,

I believe I have nothing new to tell you, for what was news you have learned from other sources. I am much the same person that I was, who should be so much better; yet when I realize what has transpired, and the greatness of the part I am unconsciously acting, I am thrilled, and it seems as if there were now a history to match it.

Soon after John's death I listened to a music-box, and if, at any time, that even had seemed inconsistent with the beauty and harmony of the universe, it was then gently constrained into the placid course of nature by those steady notes, in mild and unoffended tone echoing far and wide under the heavens. But I find these things more strange than sad to me. What right have I to grieve, who have not ceased to wonder?

We feel at first as if some opportunities of kindness and sympathy were lost, but learn afterward that any *pure grief* is ample recompense for all. That is, if we are faithful;—for a spent grief is but sympathy with the soul that disposes events, and is as natural as the resin of Arabian trees. — Only nature has a right to grieve perpetually, for she only is innocent. Soon the ice will melt, and the blackbirds sing along the river which he frequented, as pleasantly as ever. The same everlasting serenity will appear in this face of God, and we will not be sorrowful, if he is not.

We are made happy when reason can discover no occasion for it. The memory of some past moments is more persuasive than the experience of present ones. There have been visions of such breadth and brightness that these motes were invisible in their light.

I do not wish to see John ever again — I mean him who is dead — but that other whom only he would have wished to see, or to be, of whom he was the imperfect representative. For we are not what we are, nor do we treat or esteem each other for such, but for what we are capable of being.

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As for Waldo, he died as the mist rises from the brook, which the sun will soon dart his rays through. Do not the flowers die every autumn? He had not even taken root here. I was not startled to hear that he was dead;—it seemed the most natural event that could happen. His fine organization demanded it, and nature gently yielded its request. It would have been strange if he had lived. Neither will nature manifest any sorrow at his death, but soon the note of the lark will be heard down in the meadow, and fresh dandelions will spring from the old stocks where he plucked them last summer. I have been living ill of late, but am now doing better. How do you live in that Plymouth world, now-a-days?—Please remember me to Mary Russell.—You must not blame me if I do *talk to the clouds*, for I remain

Your Friend,  
Henry D. Thoreau.

*Thoreau's beloved brother John died suddenly of lockjaw on January 11. The death of little Waldo Emerson, Thoreau's favorite, occurred two weeks later on January 27. The shock to Thoreau was profound, and for more than a month he wrote neither letters nor Journal. Mary Russell of Plymouth later became the wife of Thoreau's friend and fellow student at Harvard, Marston Watson. MS., Harvard; a note in longhand across the top of the letter reads "To Mrs. L. C. Brown an invalid, Mrs Emerson's sister."*

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To EMERSON

Concord March 11th 1842

Dear Friend,

I see so many "carvels licht, fast tending throw the sea" to your El Dorado, that I am in haste to plant my flag in season on that distant beach, in the name of God and King Henry. There seems to be no oc-

casation why I who have so little to say to you here at home should take pains to send you any of my silence in a letter—Yet since no correspondence can hope to rise above the level of those homely speechless hours, as no spring ever bursts above the level of the still mountain tarn whence it issued—I will not delay to send a venture. As if I were to send you a piece of the house-sill—or a loose casement rather. Do not neighbors sometimes halloo with good will across a field, who yet never chat over a fence?

The sun has just burst through the fog, and I hear blue-birds, song-sparrows, larks, and robins down in the meadow. The other day I walked in the woods, but found myself rather denaturalized by late habits. Yet it is the same nature that Burns and Wordsworth loved the same life that Shakspeare and Milton lived. The wind still roars in the wood, as if nothing had happened out of the course of nature. The sound of the waterfall is not interrupted more than if a feather had fallen.

Nature is not ruffled by the rudest blast—The hurricane only snaps a few twigs in some nook of the forest. The snow attains its average depth each winter, and the chic-adee lisps the same notes. The old laws prevail in spite of pestilence and famine. No genius or virtue so rare & revolutionary appears in town or village, that the pine ceases to exude resin in the wood, or beast or bird lays aside its habits.

How plain that death is only the phenomenon of the individual or class. Nature does not recognize it, she finds her own again under new forms without loss. Yet death is beautiful when seen to be a law, and not an accident—It is as common as life. Men die in Tartary, in Ethiopia—in England—in Wisconsin. And after all what portion of this so serene and living nature can be said to be alive? Do this year's grasses and foliage outnumber all the past.

Every blade in the field—every leaf in the forest—lays down its life in its season as beautifully as it was taken up. It is the pastime of a full quarter of the year. Dead trees—sere leaves—dried grass and herbs—are not these a good part of our life? And what is that pride of our autumnal scenery but the hectic flush—the sallow and cadaverous countenance of vegetation—its painted throes—with the November air for canvas—

When we look over the fields are we not saddened because the particular flowers or grasses will wither— for the law of their death is the law of new life Will not the land be in good heart *because* the crops die

down from year to year? The herbage cheerfully consents to bloom, and wither, and give place to a new.

So it is with the human plant. We are partial and selfish when we lament the death of the individual, unless our plaint be a paean to the departed soul, and a sigh as the wind sighs over the fields, which no shrub interprets into its private grief.

One might as well go into mourning for every sere leaf—but the more innocent and wiser soul will snuff a fragrance in the gales of autumn, and congratulate Nature upon her health.

After I have imagined thus much will not the Gods feel under obligation to make me realize something as good

I have just read some good verse by the old Scotch poet John Belenden—

“The fynest gold or silver that we se,  
May nocht be wrocht to our utilitie,  
Bot flammis keen & bitter violence;  
The more distress, the more intelligence.  
Quhay sailis lang in hie prosperitie,  
Ar sone oureset be stormis without defence.”

From your friend  
Henry D. Thoreau

*Emerson had gone to New York—not Philadelphia, as Sanborn states in his Scribner's Magazine version of the letter (XVII, March 1895, 352–53)—to deliver a series of lectures when Thoreau wrote this first extant letter to him. MS., Berg.*

To ISAIAH T. WILLIAMS

Concord March 14th 1842

Dear Williams,

I meant to write to you before but John's death and my own sickness, with other circumstances, prevented. John died of the lock-jaw, as you know, Jan. 11th I have been confined to my chamber for a month with a prolonged shock of the same disorder—from close attention to, and sympathy with him, which I learn is not without precedent. Mr. Emerson too has lost his oldest child, Waldo, by scarlet fever, a boy of rare promise, who in the expectation of many was to be one of the lights of his generation.

John was sick but three days from the slightest apparent cause—an insignificant cut on his finger, which gave him no pain, and was more than a week old—but nature does not ask for such causes as man expects—when she is ready there will be cause enough. I mean simply that perhaps we never assign the sufficient cause for anything—though it undoubtedly exists. He was perfectly calm, ever pleasant while reason lasted, and gleams of the same serenity and playfulness shone through his delirium to the last. But I will not disturb his memory. If you knew him, I could not add to your knowledge, and if you did not know him, as I think you could not, it is now too late, and no eulogy of mine would suffice—For my own part I feel that I could not have done without this experience.

What you express with regard to the effect of time on our youthful feelings—which indeed is the theme of universal elegy—reminds me of some verses of Byron—quite rare to find in him, and of his best I think. Probably you remember them.

“ No more, no more! Oh never more on me  
 “ The freshness of the heart can fall like  
     dew  
 “ Which out of all the lovely things we see,  
 “ Extracts emotions beautiful and new,  
 “ Hived in our bosoms like the bag o' the bee,  
 “ Think'st thou the honey with these objects  
     grew

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“ Alas! 'Twas not in them, but in thy power,  
 “ To double even the sweetness of a flower.  
 “ No more, no more! Oh! never more, my heart!  
 “ Cans't thou be my sole world, my universe  
 “ Once all in all, but now a thing apart,  
 “ Thou canst not be my blessing, or my curse;  
 “ The illusion's gone forever—”

It would be well if we could add new years to our lives as innocently as the fish adds new layers to its shell—no less beautiful than the old. And I believe we may if we will replace the vigor and elasticity of youth with faithfulness in later years.

When I consider the universe I am still the youngest born. We do not *grow* old we *rust* old. Let us not consent to be old, but to die (live?) rather. Is Truth old? or Virtue—or Faith? If we possess them they will be our *elixir vitæ* and fount of Youth. It is at least good to remember our innocence; what we regret is not quite lost— Earth sends no sweeter strain to Heaven than this plaint. Could we not grieve perpetually, and by our grief discourage time's encroachments? All our sin too shall be welcome for such is the material of Wisdom, and through her is our redemption to come.

'Tis true, as you say, “Man's ends are shaped for him,” but who ever dared confess the extent of his free agency? Though I am weak, I am strong too. If God shapes my ends—he shapes me also—and his means are always equal to his ends. His work does not lack this completeness, that the creature consents. *I* am my destiny. Was I ever in that straight that it was not sweet to do right? And then for this free agency I would not be free of God certainly—I would only have freedom to defer to him He has not made us solitary agents. He has not made us to do without him Though we must “abide our destiny,” will not he abide it with us? So do the stars and the flowers. My destiny is now arrived—is now arriving. I believe that what I call my circumstances will be a very true history of myself—for God's works are complete both within and without—and shall I not be content with his success? I welcome my fate for it is not trivial nor whimsical. Is there not a soul in circumstances?—and the disposition of the soul to circumstances—is not that the crowning

circumstance of all? But after all it is *intra*-stances, or how it stands within me that I am concerned about. Moreover circumstances are past, but I am to come, that is to say, they are results of me—but I have not yet arrived at my result.

All impulse, too, is primarily from within The soul which does shape the world is within and central.

I must confess I am apt to consider the trades and professions so many traps which the Devil sets to catch men in—and good luck he has too, if one may judge. But did it ever occur that a man came to want, or the almshouse from consulting his higher instincts? All great good is very present and urgent, and need not be postponed. What did Homer—and Socrates—and Christ and Shakspeare & Fox? Did they have to compound for their leisure, or steal their hours? What a curse would civilization be if it thus ate into the substance of the soul— Who would choose rather the simple grandeur of savage life for the solid leisure it affords? But need we sell our birthright for a mess of pottage? Let us trust that we shall be fed as the sparrows are.

“Grass and earth to sit on, water to wash the feet, and fourthly, affectionate speech are at no time deficient in the mansions of the good”

You may be interested to learn that Mr. Alcott is going to England in April.

That you may find in Law the profession you love, and the means of spiritual culture, is the wish of your friend

Henry D. Thoreau.

*The impact of John's death upon Thoreau is well indicated by the account of his "sympathetic lockjaw" in this letter. The quotation from Byron is from Don Juan, Canto the First, CCXIV, CCXV. MS., Berg, copy in H. G. O. Blake's hand; previously unpublished.*

From ISAIAH T. WILLIAMS

Buffalo June. 23, 1842—

Dear Thoreau

I have not written you for a long time—but I am not going to apologize for of course you only wish to hear when & what I wish to write The poor thoughts that have occupied my busy little mind since I last wrote you have been many & often had I seen you should I have inflicted upon your ear the sad narration of them, or at least some of them—& I donot know why I should withhold any of them they were sent by a power above me, at the beck & bidding of another did they come & go— I know that men have but little to do with the affairs of this world—still I feel a responsibility to myself for all things that befall me in life—though to no other. To live this life well I feel a strong desire. I also feel a presentiment that I shall fail in part—if not totally fail to do so. I donot know what it is to live well—or how to do it if I did—between idid and idea I swing like a pendulum—I know 'tis weakness, yet such I am—But I must not disgust you by talking too much of myself. & I know it is not well to afflict myself with my own image. Still it is prety much all I know— the source of most I have ever learned. Perhaps this has been my fault— I have often repented & as often sinned again— What a succession of falls is life! I wonder if that is the object of it—& this that we may know how to stand when it is past—I donot suppose it is of any use to speculate about life—we know but little of it & if it were well for us to know it would be taught us. & I am coming more & more every day to the settled practicable belief that the true mode of life is to live & do from moment to moment the duty or labor before us with no questions about its fitness or end and no thought for the morrow. I sometimes think further—that it is also best to be of men & like them while with them—to love what they love be interested in what they are interested—share their hopes & joys their dejection & sorrows—seek the ends & have the objects of pursuit that they have take their fortunes in life as I must in death & when the curtain shall have fallen—have to think my fortune & fate is & has ever been that of my race—I fear it will be a hard one if it is, but “such is the sovereign doom & such the will of Jove” Of one thing I am certain—My race have an indisputable claim upon my best— all the services I am able to render while I live

—I will not withhold from them the pittance due from me— With this thought before me I have endeavoured to join in the reforms of the day—I make Temperance speeches, such as they are—at any rate the best I can—I go to Sabbath School & talk to & endeavour to instruct the children what I can— & where-ever I see an opportunity to do any thing for others I have a kind of general design to lend my aid—though not to interfere with my duties to myself. Whether I am taking the best course to benefit myself & others— that is the question— Yet if I do as well I know— & know as well as I can I shall never accuse myself. After all I am not wholly satisfied with myself or with this view of things I fear there is something beyond & higher I ought to know & seek— Is it given to man in this state of existence to be satisfied? Is not this very dissatisfaction but the breathing of an immortal nature that whispers of eternal progress? Shall not hope change this very dissatisfaction into the highest fruition? Say to me in reply what these desultory thoughts suggest to your mind— & as my sheet is nearly full I will say a few words more & fold & forward it for your perusal.

Your letter of March 14 gave me much pleasure though I need not say that I sympathize with you most deeply in the loss you sustain by the death of your brother— I knew him but little—yet I thought I had never met with a more flowing generous spirit— It was not fitted for a cold & hard hearted world like this— in such a nature do I see a strong assurance of a better existence when this is over. Ever will his name float down my memory untainted by those folies & crimes. I am forced to associate with those of so many of my race. And Mr Emerson—how did he endure the loss of his child? It was a cruel stroke—did his philosophy come to his aid as does the Christian Faith to administer consolation to the bereaved? I wish to know what were his feelings, for the consolations that a christian faith offers the bereaved & afflicted is one of its strongest holds upon my credulity. If there is consolation from his philosophy in trials like those—it will do much toward settling my belief—I wish to know minutely on this point. I think much on Death & sometimes doubt if my early impressions upon that subject are ever effaced—The fear of it occasions a thousand folies—I feel it is unmanly—but yet “that undiscovered country” Who shall tell us whether to fear—or desire it?

As to myself—I am less homesick than at first though I am not satisfied with the west, nor quite with my profession. Perhaps I ought to be

[1842]

I often think my feelings foolish. Do you think engaged in the practice of law the best way of spending ones life? Let me hear from you soon. I will not be so remiss in my future correspondence—

Yours  
I. T. Williams

MS., Berg; copy in H. G. O. Blake's hand; previously unpublished.

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From JAMES RICHARDSON, JR.

Friend Thoreau

I have been desirous of sending to some of my mystic brethren— some selections from certain writings of mine, that wrote themselves, when “I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day.” Some of these are so utterly and entirely out of all my rational faculties, that I can't put *any* meaning in them; others I read over, and learn a great deal from. This, I send you, seems to be a sort of Allegory—When you return it, will you be so kind as to tell me all that it means, as there are some parts of it I do not fully understand myself—I have a grateful remembrance of the moments I saw you in. Mr Emerson too I have less awe of, and more love for, than formerly His presence has always to me something infinite as well as divine about it. Mrs Emerson I am very desirous of knowing. Your family give my love to—

James Richardson jr

December 9 Dy College Cam.

*Richardson, a classmate of Thoreau, after trying his hand at school teaching returned to Cambridge to attend the Divinity School, from which he graduated in 1845. His selections that accompanied the letter have disappeared; they were probably returned to him by Thoreau. There is no clue to their specific contents. Richardson attended the*

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF THOREAU

*Divinity School for three years: he might have written this letter during any one of them, but his addressing it in care of Emerson suggests that he wrote it while Thoreau was in the Emerson household. Thoreau started working for Emerson in April 1841 and continued for the greater part of the next two years. In May 1843 he left Concord for Staten Island to tutor William Emerson's boy. This letter probably belongs, then, to 1842, the only year that in its final month saw both Richardson at Harvard and Thoreau at Emerson's. MS., Morgan; previously unpublished.*