

1844

The Whigs nominated Henry Clay. The Democrats nominated James Polk, and the news was carried to Washington by Morse's telegraph. The chief issue was the annexation of Texas. Polk favored it and won. William Miller, founder of the Millerite sect, set October 23 as the day the world would end; the Millerites crowded the hilltops in their white robes and waited. Succeeding Joseph Smith, who had been murdered in the jail in Carthage, Illinois, Brigham Young was elected president of the Mormon Church. In the House of Representatives old John Quincy Adams carried the repeal of the gag rule against discussions of slavery. A hairdresser's fashion note during the year stated: "A most irresistible coiffure is a wreath of periwinkles with pendant sprigs of flowers mingled with the curls at each side of the face or if the hair is worn in bands the wreath may be most becoming, arranged around the head with small bunches of flowers and leaves hanging from the coil at the back."

Thoreau, now back from New York, made pencils. Thereby he gained a living, but the trouble was—as he told Emerson in March—that he could do only one thing at a time. If he made pencils during the day, he could not help making them at night when he was supposed to be studying and writing. He lent his father a hand in the construction of the "Texas House." He accidentally helped to set a fire that burned off a hundred acres or more of Concord woodlots and got him cursed for it, on and off, for many years. In summer he went on a walking trip through the Hoosacs and Catskills with his good if highly eccentric friend Ellery Channing. The *Journal* for '44, like the one for '43, is missing; Thoreau's letters for this period are few. Not one is extant for the first six months. The main correspondence is with the young Transcendentalist Isaac Hecker. All in all, Thoreau left little in the way of written record for the year. It was a year of preparation that looked forward to the classic sojourn at Walden Pond.

From ISAAC HECKER

Henry Thoreau

It was not altogether the circumstance of our immediate physical nearness, tho this may [have] been the consequence of a higher affinity, that inspired us to commune with each other. This I am fully sensible since our separation [*sic*]. Oftentimes we observe ourselves to be passive or cooperative agents of profounder principles than we at the time ever dream of.

I have been stimulated to write to you at this present moment on account of a certain project which I have formed in which your influence has no slight share I imagine in forming. It is to work our passage to Europe, and to walk, work, and beg, if needs be, as far when there as we are inclined to do. We wish to see how it looks. And to court difficulties, for we feel an unknown depth of untried virgin strength which we know of no better way at the present time to call into activity and so dispose of. We desire to go without purse or staff, depending upon the all embracing love of God, Humanity, and the spark of courage imprisoned in us. Have we the will we have the strong arms, and hands, to work with, and sound feet to stand upon, and walk with. The heavens shall be our vaulted roof, and the green Earth beneath our bed, and for all other furniture purposes. These are free and may be so used. What can hinder us from going but our bodies, and shall they do it. We can as well deposit them there as here. Let us take a walk over the fairest portions of the planet Earth and make it ours by seeing them. Let us see what the genius and stupidity of our honored fore fathers have heaped up. We wish to kneel at their shrines and embrace their spirits and kiss the ground which they have hallowed with their presence. We shall prove the dollar is not almighty and the impossible moonshine. The wide world is before us beckoning us to come let us accept and embrace it. Reality shall be our antagonist and our lives if sold not at a good bargain for a certainty.

How does the idea strike you? I prefer at least to go this way before going farther in the woods. The past let us take with us. We reverence,

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we love it, but forget not that our eyes are in our face set to the beautiful unimagined future. Let us be Janus faced with a beard and beardless face. Will you accept this invitation? Let me know what your impressions are. As soon as it is your pleasure.

Remember me to your kind family. Tomorrow I take the first step towards becoming a *visible* member of the Roman Catholic Church.

If you and your good family do not become greater sinners I shall claim you all as good catholics, for she claims all baptized infants; all innocent children of every religious denomination; and all grown up Christians who have preserved their baptismal innocence, though they make no outward profession of the Catholic faith; are yet claimed as her children by the Roman Catholic Church.

Yours Very Truly
Isaac Hecker

N. Y. Thursday July 31. /44

A good deal had happened to Hecker since the previous December when Charles Lane mentioned him in a note to Thoreau. Hecker had come to Concord in April in order to study Latin and Greek under a schoolmaster friend of his and Emerson's, George Partridge Bradford. He had roomed at the Thoreau house at a cost of seventy-five cents a week. There he had found Mrs. Thoreau motherly and Henry learned and stimulating. Hecker had gone back to New York in June, his religious problem settled in his mind, to join the Catholic Church. MS., Huntington.

TO ISAAC HECKER

Concord Aug. 14th 44

Friend Hecker,

I am glad to hear your voice from that populous city and the more so for the tenor of its discourse. I have but just returned from a pedestrian excursion, some what similar to that you propose, *parvis componere magna*, to the Catskill mountains, over the principal moun-

tains of this state, subsisting mainly on bread and berries, and slumbering on the mountain tops. As usually happens, I now feel a slight sense of dissipation. Still I am strongly tempted by your proposal and experience a decided schism between my outward and inward tendencies. Your method of travelling especially—to *live* along the road—citizens of the world, without haste or petty plans—I have often proposed this to my dreams, and still do— But the fact is, I cannot so decidedly postpone exploring the *Farther Indies*, which are to be reached you know by other routs and other methods of travel. I mean that I constantly return from every external enterprise with disgust to fresh faith in a kind of Brahminical Artesian, Inner Temple, life. All my experience, as yours probably, proves only this reality.

Channing wonders how I can resist your invitation, I, a single man—unfettered—and so do I. Why—there are Roncesvalles, the cape de Finisterre, and the three kings of Cologne; Rome, Athens, & the rest—to be visited in serene untemporal hours—and all history to revive in one's memory as he went by the way with splendors too bright for this world— I know how it is. But is not here too Roncesvalles with greater lustre? Unfortunately it may prove dull and desultory weather enough here, but better trivial days with faith than the fairest ones lighted by sunshine alone. Perchance my wanderjahre has not arrived. But you cannot wait for that. I hope you will find a companion who will enter as heartily into your schemes as I should have done.

I remember you, as it were, with the whole Catholic church at your skirts— And the other day for a moment I think I understood your relation to that body, but the thought was gone again in a twinkling, as when a dry leaf falls from its stem over our heads, but instantly lost in the rustling mass at our feet.

I am really sorry that the Genius will not let me go with you, but I trust that it will conduct to other adventures, and so if nothing prevents we will compare notes at last.

Yrs &c
Henry D. Thoreau.

Thoreau's walking tour of the Berkshires and the Catskills with Ellery Channing is recounted in the chapter called "Tuesday" in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. MS., Huntington.

From ISAAC HECKER

I know not but that I shall receive an answer to the letter I sent you a fortnight ago before you will receive this one, however as the idea of making an indefinite pedestrian tour on the other side of the Atlantic has in all possible ways increased in my imagination and given me a desire to add a few more words on the project I will do it in the hope of stimulating you to a decision. How the thought has struck you I know not, its impracticability or impossibility in the judgment of others would not I feel assured deter you in any way from the undertaking, it would rather be a stimulus to the purpose I think in you as it is in me. 'Tis impossible; Sir, therefore we do it. The conceivable is possible, it is in harmony with the inconceivable. we should act. Our true life is in the can-not, to do what we can do is to do nothing, is death. Silence is much more respectable than repetition. The idea of making such a tour I have opened to one or two who I thought might throw some light on the subject. I asked the opinion of the Catholic Bishop [John McCloskey] who has travelled considerable in Europe but I find that in every man there are certain things within him which are beyond the ken & counsel of others. The age is so effeminate that it is too timid to give heroic counsel. It neither will enter the kingdom of heaven or have others to do so. I feel, and believe you feel so too, that to doubt the ability to realize such a thought is only worthy of a smile & pity. We feel ourself mean in conceiving such a feasible [*sic*] thing and would keep it silent. This is not sufficient self abandonment for our being, scarce enough to affect it. To die is easy, scarce worth a thought, but to be and live is an inconceivable greatness. It would be folly to sit still and starve from mere emptiness, but to leave behind the casement in battling for some hidden idea is an attitude beyond conception a monument more durable than the chisel can sculptor. I imagine us walking among the past and present greatness of our ancestors (for the present in fact the present of the old world to us is ancient) doing reverence to their remaining glory. If tho I am inclined to bow more lowly to the spiritual hero than the exhibition of great physical strength still not all of that primitive heroic blood of our forefathers has been lost before it reached our veins. We feel it exult some times as tho it were cased in steel and the huge broad axe of Co[e]ur de Lion seems glitter[i]ng before us and we awake in another world as in a dream. I know of no

other person but you that would be induced to go on such an excursion. The idea and yourself were almost instantaneous. If needs be for a few dollars we can get across the ocean. The ocean, if but to cross this being like being it were not unprofitable. The Bishop thought it might be done with a certain amount of funds to depend on. If this makes it practicable for others to us it will be but sport. It is useless for me to speak thus to you for if there are reasons for your not going they are others than these.

You will inform me how you are inclined as soon as practicable. Half inclined I sometimes feel to go alone if I cannot get your company. I do not know now what could have directed my steps to Concord other than this. May it prove so. It is only the fear of death makes us reason of impossibilities. We shall possess all if we but abandon ourselves.

Yours sincerely
Isaac—

NY. Aug 15— 44
To Henry Thoreau.

On Friday, August 2, 1844, Hecker was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. Anxious to be on his way and not aware that Thoreau was vacationing, Hecker repeats his invitation. MS., Huntington.

To ISAAC HECKER

I improve the occasion of my mother's sending to acknowledge the receipt of your stirring letter. You have probably received mine by this time. I thank you for not anticipating any vulgar objections on my part— *Far* travel, very *far* travel, or travail, comes near to the worth of staying at home— Who knows whence his education is to come! Perhaps I may drag my anchor at length, or rather, when the *winds* which blow *over* the deep fill my sails, may stand away for distant ports—for now I seem to have a firm *ground* anchorage, though the harbor is low-shored enough, and the traffic with the natives inconsiderable—I may be away to Singapor by the next tide.

I like well the ring of your last maxim—"It is only the fear of death makes us reason of impossibilities"—and but for fear death itself is an impossibility.

Believe me I can hardly let it end so. If you do not go soon let me hear from you again.

Yrs in great haste

Henry D. Thoreau

It is clear that this letter was written not long after August 15. Hecker added to the manuscript: "The proposition made to Thoreau was to take nothing with us, work our passage across the Atlantic, and so through England France, Germany and Italy. I. T. H." Within a year Hecker had gone abroad and joined the order of the Redemptorist Fathers at St. Trond in Belgium. Thus the brief acquaintance came to an end. MS., Huntington.

To JAMES MUNROE & CO.

Concord Oct 14th

James Munroe & Co,

Please to send me a dozen copies of Mr. Emerson's Address by the bearer—

Yrs respectfully
Henry D. Thoreau.

This note is probably a request for copies of Emerson's Address . . . on the Anniversary of the Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies (Boston: James Munroe, 1844). When Emerson delivered the address in Concord August 1, the local church authorities refused him the use of their buildings. Thoreau secured the old Concord courthouse for him and rang the bell to gather a crowd. MS., Boston Public Library, previously unpublished. The date supplied by the Boston Public Library, 1844, is confirmed by the reference to Emerson's Address.