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# A Wood for the Unwanted

R. Grayson Ittig



**H**enry David Thoreau famously wrote, “*The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.*” But my father’s desperation was not quiet at all—at least not when he thought no one could hear him.

I, and three others, made up the O’Connor disciples. We were the few who had signed up for an obscure senior year English class, more of a philosophy class really. It was led by an aging teacher with rotting teeth who drove a car that was more rust than solid metal and spent the whole semester talking about Tho-

reau. This was not some city school but a public school in a relatively rural upstate New York village known primarily as the home of Remington Arms, the gun manufacturer.

It was a working-class town of guns, sweat, and dead deer tied to car rooftops. Hence, it was an unusual class for such a town. As you entered class, students looked at you with the blank pity and contempt shown to blood-stained prey. *My God, their faces said, it must be so boring. So useless. Like you.* And perhaps they were right. Useless, yes. John, the blind boy,



Layout by John Adams.  
Photograph by Bhola Shanker Katariya.

Vencat, from India, the sole minority in the school, Monique, an artsy girl from French Canada, and I made a bond out of our uselessness with Mr. O'Connor.

*“Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth”* (Thoreau). Mr. O'Connor asked us to write in our journals what that meant. And I couldn't find any meaning. It was absurd to try to find deep philosophical insight in a mind like mine that could not even understand his own father. But in my defense, how do you understand a person who is one

thing to the outside world and quite another within his own house? How do you take in a person who may be quiet and gentle under a noon sun but rages without bound as soon as the light disappears, thinking his desperation is invisible? But I saw it—and could not understand it. Even my own father was a mystery. What, then, of “truth”?

*“I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as*

*solitude*” (Thoreau). One of Mr. O’Connor’s favorites. He returned to this passage many times. “What do you find when you are alone?” he asked, and I in turn, wanted to ask my father: What did he find when he was alone that led to such rage—his passion against life—where he would plead for death to come? Cursing himself, he asserted over and over how he would be better off dead, screaming it in fact, late at night when he thought no one could hear him.

Did Thoreau think that all people find wholesomeness in being alone? Perhaps, others merely serve as a distraction, as it appeared to be with my father. Being around others

not to hate what you fear. I remember how he would bounce about on his riding mower, hitting all the holes the woodchucks had dug in the backyard. But he never cursed them. He reserved all his cursing for himself. He was happy then, on his mower. I can remember watching his lips move as he talked to himself, but I could not hear him over the roar of the engine. I was glad. He was happy, achieving something by mowing the lawn that he hoped to see his sons play ball on—talking to himself, remembering things. He thought of better days like when he was the only .400 hitter in Mohawk Valley back in the early 1940s before he went to the war.

*But in my defense, how do you understand a person who is one thing to the outside world and quite another within his own house?*

forced him to put up a façade of wholesomeness. He could be funny, charming, and kind. “Always remember people’s names,” he would tell me, “and use them. People like to hear their names.” And he always remembered them. Everyone liked my father. If Thoreau had seen my father when he was alone, he would not call his solitude “companionable.” His wide, dark, empty eyes and voice raged as if he were being buried alive, not wanting the burial to stop with some invisible grave digger, pleading that he dig faster.

*“My enemies are worms, cool days, and most of all woodchucks”* (Thoreau). How I wish my father’s enemies were merely woodchucks. My grandmother, his mother, said once, “Don’t hate your father. He had a head injury. He was never the same when he came back from the war.” But, when you are a boy, it is hard

He was a star high school baseball player—football, too.

He had been a star athlete once, unlike his small, overly bookish son. So different. Sometimes I envied what he had in school, all the trophies and the appeal of women. While I was relegated to an English class of outcasts: the blind boy, the Indian, and the girl for whom English was a second language.

But at what cost? It seemed that his best days were behind him. He would often say, “I have one foot in the grave.” That was when he was sober and the sun was shining. Yet, I remember him reclining on the grass in the summer with his eyes closed and his hands pressed hard against the dirt. He suddenly appeared so peaceful. I asked him, “What’s wrong?”

“I was just feeling the sun and the beauty

of the grass and the cool breeze,” he replied.

“*Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads*” (Thoreau). There was a moment as he lay in the grass when he, like Thoreau, could look into the unmoving waters of his pond. And see what Thoreau saw.

He had other such moments. There were the poems of Robert Service. There were his history books, many of which were about World War II. There were the times when his eyes would light up as he told jokes to friends. There were the visits to his parents. There were the times when he would read to me as a young child before going to bed. Often, it was “The Raven” by Edgar Allen Poe:

Ghastly, grim, and ancient raven  
wandering from the Nightly shore—  
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the  
Night’s Plutonian shore!

Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.”

My father was kind then. At peace with himself—if only for a time. But there was that bird on the bust above his door.

“*A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone*” (Thoreau).

Other than his car, his lawn, his books, and his war trophies, my father was not a materialistic man. Though he did often speak of his fear of fire, everything we had could be lost, such as family photographs, some 100 years old, heirlooms of great, great grandparents, laboriously acquired fine furniture. “How terrible,” he would say. Just imagine.

He seemed haunted about what could go wrong. Often, he spoke of what happened in Germany—how advanced the Germans were culturally and intellectually prior to Nazism and how it could happen here. He spoke of how evil the regime was in its treatment of the Jews. When one of my brothers

married a Jewish girl, he fretted about how dangerous it was. “What happened in Germany could happen here,” he would say. He wasn’t anti-Semitic, but he was remarkable at finding scenarios to worry about. He even hoarded currency back when pennies were actually made of copper and nickels actually contained nickel because he thought that hyper-inflation would occur just as it had in Germany prior to the war.

“Wheelbarrows of cash,” he said, “just to buy a loaf of bread.” He was in the combat infantry under Patton. A machine gun man. He told of how at the end of the war, his lieutenant asked him to fire on German soldiers as they retreated into a forest, but he shot above their heads. “They were boys and old men. What was the point in killing any more people when the war was about to end?”

Then, methought, the air grew denser,  
perfumed from an unseen censer  
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls  
tinkled on the tufted floor.

“Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee

Respite—respite and nepenthe, from thy memories of Lenore;

Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe  
and forget this lost Lenore!”

Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.” (Poe)

He had provided a respite and nepenthe towards them in sparing them a bullet. They would not need to forget a wound, nor their families would not need to mourn a loss. But what did he save for himself that day? And for those who did catch a bullet—perhaps one of his own from an earlier time?

My father was not given to prayer. While he was superintendent of Sunday schools

for a time, he preferred to teach from the Old Testament, like the Proverbs, or directly from the words of Jesus. He once read the words of Jesus to a group of children and teenagers before they went off to their respective classes:

*But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.* (Matt. 5.39–40)

On the way home, he said, “I don’t really believe in turning the other cheek. If someone hits you, hit back even harder. Don’t let anyone push you around.”

He would say prayers as a ritual in church. A tribute to tradition and to appease old women who believed in it at the church. But he secretly thought that when you die, you

Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!

Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!” (Poe)

Poe had his raven which threatened his loneliness and Thoreau had his visitors that soon wore a path to his newly constructed cabin’s door. My father had only himself to intrude upon his solitude.

When the sun set, and the night came, and he could find no other distractions. The screaming tempest began. An internal dialogue of ferocity that emerged from himself, enveloped himself, and buried himself. Self-loathing and a pleading for death. Spoken in the basement, near a furnace—but where a child, and then a teenager, could hear—through the vents and heating ducts.

As he got older, he spent more and more

***Poe had his raven which threatened his loneliness and Thoreau had his visitors that soon wore a path to his newly constructed cabin’s door. My father had only himself to intrude upon his solitude.***

just melt into the earth. He did not believe in an afterlife. He told me this once as we were canoeing on black, quiet waters, fragrant with hemlock.

He had neither the narcotics of religion nor nepenthe, the drug of forgetting. Perhaps he didn’t believe in Homer’s writings—that the ancients had this potion to induce forgetfulness of pain or sorrow.

“Be that word our sign in parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting—

“Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!

time in the basement. Some would joke of the uncle they had who screamed in the attic, but it wasn’t a joke for me. I had a real father who really did scream. The only difference was that he was in the basement.

What I best remember about high school was the sixth sense that boys and girls teetering on adulthood had. They could smell pathology like sharks can allegedly smell blood—from miles away. And they swarmed.

On the outside, my life appeared ideal, even enviable. We had one of the nicer homes in the village, built by my grandfa-

ther, a large white colonial surrounded by white birch trees and a splendid garden. My mother was an expert gardener. My parents were the only college graduates in our neighborhood, and our house was unique in that it was full of books. However, it was simply another shade of the middle class. My mother was the only wife in our neighborhood who worked. In those days, a man with a trade or a job at Remington Arms could support his whole family with a pleasant life that included snowmobiles, a nice home, and even a camp on an Adirondack lake.

My mother was not as social as my father, or as well liked. My father's suicidal, self-directed rage and my mother's depression were unknown to all but to my grandparents and me who only saw isolated incidents. My older brothers had left the home before it reached its worst. My mother said very little, but I remember her staring out the windows, completely still, and crying without a sound.

Teenagers can smell dysfunction and weakness. I was singled out by bullying and ostracization. While I was a long-distance runner and a tennis player, I did not play the popular team sports. Too small for football, I was not part of the sectional champion football team or champion baseball team. Instead of Bud, my elementary school nickname, I was called Spud—slang for testicle. I was myopic from an early age, read a lot, had thick glasses, and a distance runner's diminutive frame. That made me invisible to girls, unless the rare girl was also on the fringe. The cheerleading types would look at me, if at all, with pure disdain. However, one girl, Kim, whose mother was hospitalized for a severe psychiatric disorder, deeming her un-

able to care for her children for several years, took a liking to me. But I had no social skills to reciprocate, being painfully shy. How she could have known we were so similar, I have no idea. But I can say, for better or worse, there is a sixth sense at that age—a vestige of childhood. An animalistic, primeval grasp on the invisible.

Walking the hallways, I faced a gauntlet of disparaging remarks. It was not without coincidence that Mr. O'Connor's class was a gathering place for the unwanted. We all came to this wood to find solitude and peace; a transparent surface to see ourselves, with all our scars, reflected back without judgment.

The Jesus loves you pen was an incident that occurred a year before Mr. O'Connor had put a different spin on my ostracism. To find "truth," so valuable to Mr. Thoreau, beyond money or fame, I had become a religious fanatic. It was not "truth" I sought, but rather a narcotic. What could be a solace to suffering? Jesus had said, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). What my father dismissed about our church, that Christianity really did offer eternal life and meaning, I eagerly accepted. The root of my father's despair, and my mother's depression, I thought was not being a true believer. The profound anxiety, the purposelessness, and the sorrow that colored my home life was an illusion if I only had faith. By the time I was 16, I had already read half of the 40 volume Barclay Biblical commentary library. Written by a 19th century Scottish theologian, it held all the answers from an evangelical Christian perspective. How Jesus was the answer to all of man's suffering, redemption from sin, and a path to everlasting life and bliss.

My father began to worry about me— not because of my religious fanaticism, but because I was not dating. Rather, I would go out late on weekend nights to the local, rural Russian monastery where there were no artificial lights and photograph star trails using 15 or 20-minute exposures. “Why aren’t you dating? What is wrong with you?” Or, as a member of the Conservative Party, he worried that I was so dismissive of money. When I said I could not see finding a job where making money was the primary objective because “Jesus shared everything and gave it to the poor,” he became concerned I was a communist. In short, he worried that I could be a woman, pursuing an anti-capitalist ideology, which in truth, I

window where her desk was. I saw she had been writing a letter to a girlfriend in which she described, with academic detachment, how the man she went on a date with had gone up her shirt for the first time. Given her indifference, even tacit approval, I could anticipate that the next letter would be about a venture in the opposite direction. I realized that my dream of being the first and convincing her to follow the “right path” may not materialize.

This, however, did not undermine my determination to not become my father: A Janus with one face to the world which smiled to all he met and another face, twisting in misery and secret, condemning his own life and the utter futility of it all. I needed a life free of

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was, in my own way.

With one exception, the same Monique who was in Mr. O’Connor’s class had been with me in English class a year before. She called me “the Bible salesman.” She was not a believer. I would imagine that someday I would save her soul by convincing her to follow Jesus. And then we would marry and, having saved herself for me, we would both enter marriage virgins. In fact, she would be so grateful that I got her soul into paradise, we would have great sex all our lives, including oral sex which I was particularly curious about. But one day, she asked for a bathroom pass and, as we were given writing time, I went over by the

ambiguity and compromise. A purity—an impossible purity. One with no doorway to enter.

Jesus loves you. I had a pen with this written on it. I carried it to every class. It was in Mr. Dailey’s English class, an Irishman with a brogue. But he was out one day, and a student teacher was in, a failed geologist, tall and thin and unmarried. Oil companies hadn’t wanted him. He stumbled through an Emily Dickinson poem, ending with the lines, “The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind—” But instead, he misread, “The truth must frazzle gra-dully or every man be find.”

At that moment, Jake Kennedy, a solid tall football linebacker, several inches taller than me, turned back towards me, and



said, “Spud, what a wuss. You have a Jesus LOOOOVVVVVESSS you pen. WUSS—”

Something snapped. The night before, my father had been up particularly late screaming in the basement, which carried through the metal ductwork to my bedroom. Perhaps it was lack of sleep, but more likely it was an accumulation.

All the girls in the class gathered along the walls, some screaming, others with looks of horror. Several desks were knocked over. Jake Kennedy sprawled on the floor with blood gushing from his nose. In a moment, I had picked him up, pushed him through several desks, and threw him on the floor near the blackboard.

“You are dead!” he said, looking up at me.

“If you make fun of my Jesus loves you pen again,” I yelled uncharacteristically fierce, “I will stick it up your ass.”

The substitute teacher in his southern drawl, wearing his second-hand, flannel shirt, gasped, “Bless me, bless me.... Let’s all get along now. Let’s all get along now.” He had a strange twist to his mouth as if he was a puppet being handled by a poor master.

Looking back on it, that event could have led to an expulsion from school or even a misdemeanor charge. It could have changed my life by making me ineligible for an ROTC scholarship. But the substitute teacher didn’t want to elevate the violent episode, as he probably didn’t want it known that a brawl had broken out in a classroom under his watch over a Jesus loves you pen. It would make an odd report.

After that, the bullying died down and the comments in the hallways lessened, people looked at me differently. “He never smiles,” one cheerleader said. The deri-

sion for being different turned into certain anxiety about me and my “difference.”

Because the scrumage happened so quickly and not everyone heard Jake Kennedy’s comment to me, it was thought by some that I was so unstable that a bad reading of an Emily Dickinson poem would cause me to enter a psychotic rage. This misinterpretation only fed my image as something of a rabid cat, small but crazy, which in turn led people to fear me a bit, as something unpredictable and thus leave me alone. I did not try to clear it up. They were saying to one another, “Be careful what you say to him—he might try to stick a Jesus loves you pen up your ass.”

I didn’t realize how I was perceived until years later, when I showed up for the ten-year high school reunion. The same cheerleader said, “Oh my God! I never expected to see you here—I thought you would be dead of a drug overdose by now.” That was the last time I went to a reunion.

What changed was not just how others had perceived me, but how I perceived myself. Having tried so hard to be different from my father, I realized that I was shaped out of the same stained and torn fabric. What he was and what he had become spilled into me, and tore at me. Studying the Bible, praying to Jesus, turning the other cheek, had not shielded me from the desperation and woundedness that he felt, nor the violence he was capable of. That moment showed me that I, too, could have killed someone in an uncontrolled fury. And I, too, began to lose hope.

*“We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us even in our soundest sleep” (Thoreau).*