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THE UNCOMMON SCHOOL.
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IN THIS ADDRESS CYRIL O. HOULE SPOKE ON AN EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF ADULT EDUCATION, FOCUSING PARTICULARLY ON THE LIFE AND IDEAS OF HENRY D. THOREAU. HE DISCUSSED JOSIAH HOLBROOK, A CONNECTICUT SCHOOLMASTER, AND CREATED AN AMERICAN LYCEUM, NATIONWIDE IN ITS SCOPE, LINKING TOGETHER ALL THOUGHTFUL AND CULTIVATED MEN IN THE CONTINUING PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE. ANOTHER LYCEUM AT CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS CAME INTO BEING IN 1829, AND IN THAT AREA THERE LIVED MANY LITERARY, POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND HUMANITARIAN LEADERS. AS YEARS WENT BY, THE LYCEUM BECAME A SCHEDULED SERIES OF LECTURES AND ENTERTAINMENT. THOREAU, WHO WAS UNHAPPY TO SEE THE LYCEUM LOSING THE INTERACTIN OF FREE MEN, BECAME SECRETARY AND CURATOR OF THE CONCORD LYCEUM. ONE OF HIS CENTRAL CONCERNS WAS THE PROPER RELATIONSHIP OF MEN TO ONE ANOTHER. THOREAU FELT MAN HAD MANY DIFFERENT ASPECTS BUT THE KEY IDEA WAS VOLUNTARY ASSENT. THE LYCEUM WAS A PLACE WHERE THOUGHTFUL MEN COULD MEET TOGETHER TO EDUCATE EACH OTHER AND IT WAS ONE FORM OF TOLERABLE GROUP ASSOCIATION. HOULE CONCLUDED HIS SPEECH BY SAYING THAT CHANCELLOR TOLLEY'S CONCERN FOR ADULT EDUCATION AND HIS INTEREST IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS FOUND A COMMON MEETING PLACE IN THOREAU'S THOUGHTS. THIS ADDRESS WAS DELIVERED BY THE AUTHOR UPON BEING AWARDED THE WILLIAM PEARSON TOLLEY MEDAL FOR DISTINGUISHED LEADERSHIP IN ADULT EDUCATION (SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY, OCTOBER 12, 1966). (SM)

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CYRIL O. HOULE



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THE UNCOMMON SCHOOL



**Address delivered by Professor Cyril O. Houle of the University of
Chicago upon being awarded the William Pearson Tolley Medal for
Distinguished Leadership in Adult Education**

**SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
OCTOBER 12, 1966**

**CITATION ACCOMPANYING THE WILLIAM PEARSON TOLLEY
MEDAL FOR DISTINGUISHED LEADERSHIP IN ADULT EDUCATION**

CYRIL ORVIN HOULE, your uncommon contributions as philosopher, teacher, and innovator have placed you foremost in the field of continuing education. A native of Florida, you received your bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Florida and your doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1940. A faculty member of the Department of Education at Chicago since 1939, you served as dean of the adult education division of the University for eight years before committing yourself to full time graduate teaching and research in 1953.

As dean you were a leader in the creation of programs for adults that were to earn you the respect and admiration of your colleagues. Concurrently you won the imagination of your community and were named by the Junior Chamber of Commerce as Young Man of the Year in Chicago.

You have become known and recognized as international consultant in continuing education. Your advice and wisdom have been sought by government and educational leaders in scores of nations. The Director General of UNESCO invited you to serve on the International Congress for the Advancement of Adult Education.

As a philosopher and critic your writing reflects the depth and breadth of your conception of the emerging field of continuing education. Your books and many articles bear the impress of your unique insight into the nature of education and offer ample evidence of the power of your mind and your rare gift for creative scholarship. But above all you are a teacher and one of tremendous influence.

In an era when our most urgent need is education, your imaginative leadership has been a resource of incalculable value. There are few in the field of continuing education who have not had occasion to seek your counsel.

It is most fitting, therefore, that those whom you have served now honor you and take this occasion to bestow on you the first William Pearson Tolley Medal for Distinguished Leadership in Adult Education.

FREDERICK K. KILIAN
CHAIRMAN, EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

ALEXANDER N. CHARTERS
VICE PRESIDENT FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

October 12, 1966

FOREWORD

William Pearson Tolley, Chancellor of Syracuse University, has expressed consistently a personal and institutional commitment to the education of adults. His interest in the emerging field of continuing education is reflected by his encouragement and support of the Syracuse University program and by his personal participation in adult education activities at the national and international level.

It was to recognize outstanding contributions by national and international leaders in the field that the Board of Trustees of the University established the William Pearson Tolley Medal for Distinguished Leadership in Adult Education.

Professor Cyril O. Houle is the first to receive the Medal for his outstanding achievements in adult education—an area which promises to have one of the most significant developments in the latter part of the twentieth century.

ALEXANDER N. CHARTERS
VICE PRESIDENT
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

THE UNCOMMON SCHOOL

Everyone here must surely know how proud and happy I am to receive the William Pearson Tolley Award. Gratitude is a simple but strong emotion and the best way to express the strength of my feeling is simply to say that I am grateful—realizing as I do that to its many other virtues, the Board of Trustees has now added charity.

The Award is far more than personal. All of us here to-night who devote our careers to adult education have a sense of pride that this great university honors its chancellor by testifying in this significant and enduring way to his deep commitment to our challenging and often baffling field—a commitment which has already brought this institution to the very front rank in the sponsorship of higher adult education.

The address given at the award of a medal named for William Pearson Tolley should relate to some theme vital to his life and thought. The most obvious topic would be the university presidency, since he has been head of two major institutions of higher learning for a period of 35 years, more than a third of a century. (Sometimes in the late afternoon it must seem even longer.) But the very longevity which suggests the theme also forbids it. Who would dare to talk on this subject when Dr. Tolley is present, particularly one who is himself nothing more than a president-watcher?

Let us move then to the other central passion of Dr. Tolley's professional career. Beginning with his college days, he has been deeply absorbed by the history of ideas. This was his scholarly specialization and, unlike many university administrators, he has continued to contribute to the literature of his academic field. His major interest has been in the way by which the ideas expressed by an original thinker create a new dimension or a new horizon for those who follow him. Thus one of his early works begins with the words: "Few men have more profoundly influenced the history of western thought than

has Augustine. For more than a thousand years he enjoyed a pre-eminence in philosophy that was shared only by Aristotle and it is he perhaps more than any other one person who is responsible for the doctrinal formulation of Christian beliefs."¹ Later, in *Preface to Philosophy*, a two-volume work which Dr. Tolley edited, he drew from the writings of many creative thinkers those central ideas which would, he hoped, "promote clear and ordered thought about man and his progress, the individual and the good life, society and its problems, the significance of religion, and the nature of reality."² The two works from which these quotations are drawn express both explicitly and implicitly Dr. Tolley's continuing belief that man can comprehend himself and his own thought only if he looks back across the centuries to understand the philosophic conceptions which emerged in earlier societies and have helped to create his own.

This liberating insight which frees us from the prison of the present moment is greatly needed in modern thought about adult education. Most of us in the field focus mainly on tomorrow or, if we must, on today. Around us everywhere are men and women who need to learn and communities and societies which must have the civilizing touch of education if they are not to decline into despair and destruction. For over 25 years, we have not been able to meet the insistent demands made upon us by the people of this nation and of other nations. Little wonder then that most of the things we do have an air of nervous hurry about them. We dare not look over our shoulder lest we discover, in the immortal words of Satchel Paige, that something may be gaining on us.

¹ William Pearson Tolley, *The Idea of God in the Philosophy of St. Augustine* (New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc., 1930), p. vii. Copyright, Harper and Row, Publishers, Incorporated.

² Reprinted with permission of The Macmillan Company from *Preface to Philosophy*, William Pearson Tolley, editor, pp. vi-vii. Copyright The Macmillan Company, 1946.

But we have a tradition and a history, a rich one. Men of earlier ages spoke with clear and compelling force about the ends and means of education as it continues throughout life. By doing so, they created the substructure of our thought and practice. If we knew more about the history of our own ideas, both we ourselves and our activities would gain depth and scope. With this thought, and honoring William Pearson Tolley's lifelong commitment to it, I should like to explore a short but crucial episode in the history of adult education, focusing particularly on the life and ideas of a New Englander whom we shall first see when, on an early autumn morning in 1852, he sat down at his desk in the bare room at the top of his mother's boardinghouse.

I

Whatever else he may have been, the young man was deeply sensitive to nature. He began the entry in his journal that morning by noting: "A warm rain-storm in the night, with wind, and to-day it continues. The first leaves begin to fall; a few yellow ones lie in the road this morning, loosened by the rain and blown off by the wind. The ground in orchards is covered with windfalls; imperfect fruits now fall." (X:323)³

But another kind of imperfect fruit concerned Henry David Thoreau that morning. Plunging forward with the eloquence of deep feeling, he wrote: "We boast that we belong to the Nineteenth Century, and are making the most rapid strides of any nation. But consider how little this village does for its own culture. We have a comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants only, as it were, but, excepting the half-starved Lyceum in the winter, no school for ourselves." (X:323)

He went on writing and we shall eventually consider the rest of what he wrote that morning, but a possibly unfamiliar word in the last sentence catches our attention. To Thoreau, as to many another in the

³ All references to Thoreau's writings are taken from the collected edition published in 1906 by Houghton Mifflin and Company. The Roman numeral designates the volume and the Arabic numeral the page.

gloriously advanced Nineteenth Century, the Lyceum was too familiar to need explanation. Even to-day, most literate men can fetch up out of their memory some kind of association with the term, but unless they are students of cultural history, their perception is likely to be half-formed, speculative, narrowly perceived—or wrong. For Thoreau, the Lyceum was a central element in life itself, helping to shape the very core of his ideas about human association, those ideas which are now transforming the world.

II

The Lyceum was given its nineteenth century meaning by a Connecticut schoolmaster, Josiah Holbrook. He was graduated from Yale in 1810 into a nation already strongly aware of itself and beginning to feel the need for cultural as well as political freedom. Emerson was to declare the independence of American thought in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837, but, twenty years earlier, Holbrook felt the stirrings and restlessness of those cultivated men, often isolated by the wilderness, who looked with distaste at their primitive life almost devoid of intellectual companionship. By 1815, he was travelling about New England giving lectures to groups of people wherever he could find them, usually on geology. He earned his living by selling scientific equipment. If his intellectual endeavors stimulated the demand for his wares, his audiences probably approved; he was acting in the best tradition of the shrewd Yankee trader.

In 1826, he reinforced that tradition by moving into what, even to-day, seems like large-scale enterprise. His travels had convinced him that all over the Eastern seaboard men hungered for learning. In the towns and villages which at best were seaports but could usually be reached only by long journeys on muddy or dusty rut roads, there were squires and parsons and schoolmasters and lawyers and doctors and town clerks who had had some exposure to culture and whose intellectual life was not yet quite dead. But while these men existed, they were not clustered in any meaningful way. Holbrook therefore proposed the creation of a network of groups, each to be locally organized, but all to come together in state and national federations. These groups would

read and discuss, they would hear local or imported lecturers, and they would debate such crucial issues as the proper development of the common schools.

What should these groups be called? Why not start with what, to classically educated men, would seem the grand example? Aristotle used for his classroom the shaded walks of a field called the Lyceum because it was near a temple of Apollo Lyceius. Perhaps the idea that every American hamlet should become a new Athens might not have been suggested by a more self-conscious or less patriotic man or one whose defensiveness had not been aroused by European sneers at American lack of culture. Whatever his motive, Holbrook confidently announced his plan to create an American Lyceum, nation-wide in scope, linking together all thoughtful and cultivated men in the continuing pursuit of knowledge.

If there were those who smiled at his pretentiousness, they did not do so long. He had correctly assessed the temper of the times, and his energy and organizing ability proved equal to the task he set for himself. In less than ten years, 3,500 local lyceums had been organized in sixteen state associations, with annual national meetings. In 1840, the super-structure collapsed and the lyceums became wholly local, but their number probably continued to grow. Their influence depended to be sure on the strength of their local leadership. Aristotles are in short supply, even in Massachusetts, one of whose citizens later observed that there were not ten men in Boston equal to Shakespeare.

Whatever may have happened in individual lyceums, their national influence was great. A nation with 3,500 or more local groups devoted to culture and made up essentially of the leaders of the community is very different from a nation which does not have such a resource, not merely in the intellectual life afforded to individuals but also in the opportunity provided to hear about and to discuss social issues. The significance of the lyceums in building the American system of free public education has been carefully documented and their value in other areas of social life may have been almost as important.

The lyceums were a great success as instruments of mass culture but they also aided the creation of high culture. In each generation, perhaps, there can be only a few outstanding men and women, but their number is almost certainly augmented by the existence of a sensitive and appreciative audience. The lyceums gave this kind of a hearing (and also a livelihood) to such literary and intellectual leaders of the first half of the nineteenth century as Daniel Webster, Henry Ward Beecher, Horace Greeley, Louis Agassiz, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Wendell Phillips.

The most famous was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Late in life, his attitude grew equivocal. In his journal in 1865, he noted: " 'Twas tedious, the squalor and obstructions of travel; the advantage of their offers at Chicago made it necessary to go; in short, this dragging of a decorous old gentleman out of home and out of position to this juvenile career was tantamount to this, —'I'll bet you fifty dollars a day that you will not leave your library, and wade and ride and run and suffer all manner of indignities and stand up for an hour each night reading in a hall'; and I answered, 'I'll bet I will.' I do it and win the \$900."⁴ But he knew that the months he spent each year lecturing to lyceums brought him more than money. He had the opportunity before thoughtful audiences to clarify his views and to shape and reshape their expression before they took their final form in his great essays.

III

The Lyceum at Concord, Massachusetts, came into being early in 1829. At Thanksgiving services in 1828, the Reverend Doctor Ezra Ripley gave notice of a meeting "to take into consideration the expediency of forming a Lyceum in Concord" and, on December 3, "a large and respectable meeting of citizens of Concord was convened."⁵ There was unanimous agreement that a lyceum would be

⁴ Bliss Perry, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926), p. 310.

⁵ The Concord Lyceum Records are kept in the Concord Free Public Library and have provided the sources for the information in this section.

desirable, a committee of distinguished citizens was formed, and a constitution was presented and discussed at three subsequent sessions and ratified on January 7. The rapidity of movement and the number of meetings during the Christmas season suggest that the people of Concord had either great enthusiasm or a lack of other things to do. Perhaps the lack created the enthusiasm.

In the Concord Free Public Library, the original draft of the Constitution still exists, set forth in the fine clear handwriting (but with the uncertain punctuation) of Lemuel Shattuck, recording secretary. It starts out with a flourish: "We the subscribers, desirous of our own improvement in Knowledge, the advancement of Popular Education, and the diffusion of useful information throughout the community generally; and believing that these objects can be more certainly, easily, and fully accomplished by united, than by individual exertions; agree to associate under the name of the *Concord Lyceum*." Thus begins the record of an institution which, despite occasional interludes and stormy episodes, endured for more than ninety years, with, to be sure, a certain turnover in membership.

From the beginning, the Concord Lyceum's greatest asset was the fact that in and around the town and in nearby Boston, there lived many of the literary, political, religious, and humanitarian leaders of the time. There was a richness of talent ready at hand which perhaps no other lyceum in a town of comparable size could command, then or now. To the lectures were added debates, often on the same evenings, dealing with such issues as whether it is ever proper to offer forcible resistance. On this particular topic, Thoreau and his brother John took the affirmative and Bronson Alcott the negative, but, though the subject was carried over to the second week, the question was never put to the vote, perhaps because the feelings of the audience were too intense.

The Lyceum did not live forever on a high intellectual plane. Occasionally music was introduced into its program, at least so far as a concert by the town band could be called music. On the evening of

November 18, 1842, there was a discussion as to whether the meetings should be given a more social character. On this point the minutes read: "Drs Alcott and Jarvis advocated the plan and thought such a change would the better promote the object of the Lyceum—but Dr. Tewksbury thought it was detracting somewhat from the dignity of the association to 'introduce soft talk and courting times . . . into our meetings. The question was finally referred to the directors." The minutes of the subsequent meetings suggest that those worthies listened to Dr. Tewksbury, not to his opponents.

As in every enduring human organization (and particularly one based solely on local initiative), the Lyceum had its moments both of tedium and of excitement. Some evenings it could find no lecturers or scheduled speakers failed to appear. There were perennial problems in getting members to serve as officers and curators and secretaries. Gaps in the minutes suggest either delinquent secretaries or a moribund Lyceum. But there were also occasions of high drama. Here, for example, is the sparse and rigidly decorous account of the meeting of March 5, 1845:

After the lecture Mr. Saml. Barrett moved that the curators be requested to invite Mr Wendell Phillips to deliver a lecture on Slavery before the Lyceum on Wednesday of the ensuing week. Which motion after discussion was adopted by a vote of 21 to 15 as declared by the President.

After the declaration of the vote two of the Curators Messrs Frost and Keyes resigned their office of curators.

It was then moved to adjourn sine die, which motion was submitted to the Lyceum by the President & declared to be a vote. Which vote was immediately doubted, but without calling for the contrary minded or in any way settling the vote, the President left the chair.

After calling for the Vice Presidents, Col Wm. Whiting took the chair. On motion, Col Whiting was chosen President pro tem. The Lyceum then proceeded to fill the vacancies made by the resignation of Messrs Frost & Keyes. Thereupon Messrs Ralph W Emerson Saml. Barrett & David H. Thoreau were chosen curators by ballot.

On the following Wednesday evening, the Lyceum listened to a lecture by Wendell Phillips. His subject was Slavery.

Thoreau called the Concord Lyceum "half-starved" and so it seems to have been. Its original constitution called for annual dues of two dollars for those living in "the centre school district in Concord" and one dollar for those living outside the district. A later hand has crossed out these figures and written in "one dollar" and "50 cts." Committees were occasionally appointed to collect funds for the further support of the Lyceum. In 1839, the program included seven successive lectures by Emerson, at the last of which, Thoreau records in the minutes, "Mr. Frost made some remarks on the favor conferred on us by gratuitous lecturers."

But, as Van Wyck Brooks has pointed out, "On evenings when the moon shone, the thrifty Concord folk turned out the streetlamps,"⁶ and such folk could buy a great deal for little cash. As Thoreau (admittedly a close man with a dollar) put it: "How much might be done for Concord with \$100! I myself have once provided a select course of twenty-five lectures for a winter, together with rent, fuel, and lights, with that sum; which was no inconsiderable benefit to every inhabitant."⁷

As the years went by, the depth of local involvement in the Lyceum's program gradually diminished and it turned into a scheduled series of hired lectures and entertainment. As it did so, it found money to support its activities. In the Curator's Report for 1878-79, it was noted that "Not only is the Lyceum enjoying financial prosperity, and, therefore, the ability to procure the best talent in the lecture field, but, from an intellectual point of view, it is believed that the people of our town have gained new vigor of thought with the increased

⁶ Van Wyck Brooks, *The Flowering of New England, 1815-1865* (2nd ed.; E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1937), p. 259.

⁷ Quoted in: F. B. Sanborn, *The Life of Henry David Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 316.

vitality of this institution, and will insist upon keeping this platform fearlessly free and independent of every narrowing influence. In this way only can the Lyceum continue to influence the community for good as it has already done for fifty years.”⁸

Thoreau, with his usual perversity, might not have been happy to see such prosperity. For, by its fiftieth year, the Lyceum, though rich, had lost its chief resource: the continuing interaction of a group of men who were deeply concerned with their own education and felt a personal responsibility for it. What had formerly been provided freely by free men must now be paid for.

IV

In his youth, Henry David Thoreau did not seem a likely future prospect as a Lyceum member or indeed as one much given to human companionship of any sort. When he was a student at the Concord Academy, he participated for about two years in an Academic Debating Society along with eighteen other boys, aged eleven to thirteen. This dedicated group had a constitution and by-laws and its successive secretaries left a record which is careful though misspelled. In it, Thoreau is mentioned only three times, always with disfavor. On November 5, 1829, for example, there was entered in the minutes an item which suggests a good deal not only about Thoreau but also about the high moral attitude of the youthful secretary:

The discussion of the question selected for debate next followed, “Is a good memory preferable to a good understanding in order to be a distinguished scholar at school?” E. Wright Aff. H. Thoreau Neg. The affirmative disputant, through negligence, had prepared nothing for debate, and the negative, not much more. Accordingly, no other member speaking, the President decided in the Neg. His decision was confirmed by a majority of four. Such a debate, if it may be called so, as we have had this evening, I hope never again will be witnessed in this house,

⁸ Cited by Alvah H. Low, “The Concord Lyceum,” *Old-Time New England*, L, No. 2 (October-December, 1959), p. 41.

or recorded in this book. It is not only a waste of time, but of paper to record such proceedings of wood and oil.⁹

Nor was Thoreau very much more responsive to society in his college days. One of his classmates at Harvard recalled him as he had been there:

He was cold and unimpressible. The touch of his hand was moist and indifferent, as if he had taken up something when he saw your hand coming, and caught your grasp upon it. How the prominent gray-blue eyes seemed to rove down the path, just in advance of his feet, as his grave Indian stride carried him down to University Hall! He did not care for people; his classmates seemed very remote. . . . we remember him as looking very much like some Egyptian sculptures of faces, large-featured, but brooding, immobile, fixed in a mystic egoism. Yet his eyes were sometimes searching as if he had dropped, or expected to find, something. In fact his eyes seldom left the ground, even in his most earnest conversations with you.¹⁰

Those who knew him then could not have been greatly surprised at his later career, with its strong tone of negativeness and isolation; his refusal to pay his taxes, his night in jail, and his sojourn at Walden Pond. But that consistent picture is marred, superficially at least, by his devotion to the Concord Lyceum.

For he was a loyal and devoted mainstay of the organization throughout his mature life. If, when he returned from Harvard, his first act was to "sign off" from the church, his second was to join the Lyceum. Soon he was elected Secretary and Curator and at first wrote out full minutes in an elegant shaded script signed, with a flourish, "Henry D. Thoreau, Secretary." (Within a year, his minutes for a meeting were reduced to five or six words and signed "H.D.T. Secy.") Off and

⁹ Dorothy Nyren, "The Concord Academic Debating Society," *Thoreau in Our Season*, edited by John H. Hicks (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), pp. 94-95.

¹⁰ Quoted in: J. Brooks Atkinson, *Henry Thoreau, The Cosmic Yankee* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1927), pp. 15-16.

on for the next ten years he served as an officer of the Concord Lyceum, and, in the course of his career he spoke before it twenty times. He attended whenever he was in Concord, even when living at Walden, and when he was away he pined for its meetings.

It introduced him to the only intellectual career open to him. He earned his living first by reducing his wants and then by supplying them through his work as handy man, pencil maker, and land surveyor. He could not seem to make his ideas provide him with a livelihood. "New England," he said, "would rather have his surveys than his thought."¹¹ A formal academic career was repugnant to him; when Emerson said that they taught most branches of learning at Harvard, Thoreau said, "Yes, indeed, all the branches and none of the roots."¹² Nor could he get money from his writing. "Only *The Ladies' Companion* pays," he wrote, "but I could not write anything companionable." (VI: 107-108) But lecturing did offer an avenue for his thoughts and at least a modest payment—the latter not from the Concord Lyceum but from its sister organizations in other communities.

So throughout his career he announced himself as a lecturer and only rarely declined any opportunity to speak. In his journal, he recorded his thoughts and ideas and observations, his conversations with townspeople and with hunters and trappers, the anecdotes they told him, and, most of all, the constantly changing face of nature. Sometimes he professed to find his speaking engagements an interruption to this process of self-education. "For some years past," he wrote in 1857, "I have partially offered myself as a lecturer; have been advertised as such several years. Yet I have had but two or three invitations to lecture in a year, and some years none at all. I congratulate myself on having been permitted to stay at home thus, I am so much richer for it. I do not see what I should have got of much value, but money,

¹¹ Henry Seidel Canby, *Thoreau* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 306.

¹² Quoted in: John Albee, *Remembrances of Emerson* (New York: Robert G. Cooke, 1901), p. 22.

by going about, but I do see what I should have lost. It seems to me that I have a longer and more liberal lease of life thus." (XV: 214) "The lecturer gets fifty dollars a night; but what becomes of his winter?" (VI: 303) Such disdainful observations as these are common in his writing, but since they were often stimulated by his lack of invitations, they bear the pungent taste of sour grapes.

The truth seems to have been that he was highly variable as a lecturer. In the right mood, particularly when he spoke on nature and when he allowed free play to his aphoristic wit, he delighted his audiences. When he breathed fire against slavery and in defense of John Brown, he stirred his hearers to action, for or against him. But most of the time he was too transcendental. Unconventional or obscure though his ideas might be, his only aim was to express them, and, if he had a hundred different ideas to express in a paper, he set them down one after the other with either sketchy connections between them or none at all. One sees an audience sitting before him, observing his peculiar personality, looking at the top of his head as he bent it forward over his manuscript, hearing his dry voice, with no effort at rhetoric, read a series of unrelated observations most of which were so odd and unfamiliar that they could not be comprehended and some of which were so sarcastic and irritating that they could only be resented. He recorded his own attitude in his journal: "Preaching? Lecturing? Who are ye that ask for these things? What do ye want to hear, ye puling infants? A trumpet-sound that would train you up to mankind, or a nurse's lullaby?" (XVII: 324) This viewpoint must almost certainly have been transmitted to his audiences. Little wonder why so few of them wanted to hear him.

To those who did, later generations have had cause to be grateful. The raw experience which Thoreau recorded in his journal might never have taken any shape at all if he had not had an audience ready at hand at the Concord Lyceum and in other similar groups who were willing to hear him. Thoreau was explicit on this point. He said: "From all points of the compass, from the earth beneath and the heavens above, have come these inspirations and been entered duly

in the order of their arrival in the journal. Thereafter, when the time arrived, they were winnowed into lectures, and again, in due time, from lectures into essays." (VII: 413)¹³ Lectures and audiences might be irritants—but some irritants produce pearls.

The lyceums were not merely means of employment or stimuli to writing. When he left the church, his written declaration said "Know all men by these presents that I Henry Thoreau do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined."¹⁴ But unsociable though he might seem, one of his central preoccupations throughout his life was the proper relationship of men to one another. His first lecture at the Concord Lyceum was not on Solitude. It was on Society.

One cluster of his ideas has exploded in the twentieth century like a time bomb. On this point, hear three witnesses:

Gandhi: I read *Walden* first in Johannesburg in South Africa in 1906 and his ideas influenced me greatly. I adopted some of them and recommended the study of Thoreau to all my friends who were helping me in the cause of Indian independence. Why, I actually took the name of my movement from Thoreau's essay, "On the duty of Civil Disobedience", written about eighty years ago.¹⁵

Martin Buber: It is now nearly sixty years since I first got to know Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience." I read it with the strong feeling that here was something that concerned me directly. . . . He addressed his reader within the very sphere of this situation common to both of them in such a way that the reader not only discovered why Thoreau acted as he did at that time but also that the reader—assuming him of course to be honest and dispassionate—would have to act in just

¹³ Walter Roy Harding presents a fascinating account of this process in "The Lectures of Henry David Thoreau," (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of English, University of North Carolina, 1947).

¹⁴ Quoted in: Leon Bazalgette, *Henry Thoreau* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1924), p. 70.

¹⁵ Quoted by: George Hendrick, "Influence of Thoreau & Emerson on Gandhi's Satyagraha," *Gandhi Marg*, III, No. 3 (July, 1959), p. 166.

such a way whenever the proper occasion arose, provided he was seriously engaged in fulfilling his existence as a human person.¹⁶

Martin Luther King: During my early college days I read Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience for the first time. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I re-read the work several times. I became convinced then that non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. No other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau. As a result of his writings and personal witness we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest.¹⁷

Creative protest. This is what the honorable man must do to fulfil his existence as a human person whenever he is in the presence of a powerful government alien to truth as he sees it. But one who takes solitude and civil disobedience to be Thoreau's only approach to life drastically over-simplifies. He spent but two of his forty-five years at Walden; even there, as his friend, Prudence Ward, said, "He has many visitors, whom he receives with pleasure & does his best to entertain. We talk of passing the day with him soon."¹⁸ His celebrated stay in jail lasted only one night; he had a roommate and, if we may believe Thoreau's account, they spent virtually all of that night in conversation. We must see beyond the foreshortenings of history to discover the breadth of his thought on the role of man in society. When we do we shall find that both the source and the expression of that thought may be found in the Concord Lyceum.

V

Thoreau is an almost ideal central figure for a literary cult. He was so many different people simultaneously that he can be read in as many different ways as anyone might wish. In fact, the conventional way of writing about him is to begin by saying that there are three

¹⁶ Letter dated October 15, 1962, from Jerusalem. *Thoreau in Our Season op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁷ "A Legacy of Creative Protest," *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸ Quoted in: Canby, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

Thoreaus or five Thoreaus (choose your number as you will!), and then expounding on each of them. Every analyst is safe, for there are as many Thoreaus as you want to count, and somewhere you can find a quotation from him that will confirm whatever you believe him to have been.

Today the various and contradictory aspects of his thought attract a surprising range of people. He is quoted constantly not merely in literary quarterlies and *avant garde* journals but also in popular periodicals, in the daily press, and, though the mind reels at the prospect, in the fashionable and sophisticated magazines. He could not write anything companionable but his writings have found many companions. In Thoreau's funeral oration, Emerson said, "No college ever offered him a diploma, or a professor's chair; no academy made him its corresponding secretary, its discoverer, or even its member. Perhaps these learned bodies feared the satire of his presence."¹⁹ But now in academic and literary circles we discover a minor Thoreau industry. A modern scholar has called him "austere, vituperative, provincial, misanthropic, shrewd, caustic, didactic, suspicious, ill-balanced, idealistic, expectant, eager, full of compassion, tender, patient, serene, and reverent."²⁰ How can you fail, with such a man, to find your own distinctive handle?

To tell the truth, it is getting hard. "Scholars," said Thoreau, "are wont to sell their birthright for a mess of learning." (I: 98) Modern scholars have turned the pages of his writings over and over to find the ultimate key to unlock Thoreau; as a result the answers grow increasingly abstruse. Visions denied to many of us are granted to some analysts. One modern authority, for example, has concluded that "Thoreau's hatred for the state was an extension of his Oedipal hatred for his father and of his occasional dislike (the other side of the coin of love) of his dominating mother." The same author argues

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1898), p. 440.

²⁰ Atkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

that "at the unconscious level Thoreau ended his life of his own accord. He was convinced that he had to die chiefly because John Brown and his father had died. He had to expiate his intolerably increasing load of guilt. Christian contrition was not for him but leaving life represented ample expiation." This authority does, however, note "I agree with the past biographers that on the conscious level [Thoreau] died of tuberculosis."²¹

For the present, the conscious level must suffice. Any attempt completely to "explain" Thoreau is certain to diminish both him and the explainer. Thoreau left us his ideas, not his personal problems. Gandhi, Buber, and King were deeply influenced by what he said about the way to attack an unjust state, not why he said it. It will be useful to follow their example as we turn away from his antagonistic and rebellious views to inquire into his more positive conception of the values of society.

The key idea is voluntary assent. ("I Henry Thoreau do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined.") The first requisite for the individual is to know himself, to be aware of his own potentialities, to be all of a piece whatever that piece might be. One did not need to be intellectual to win his admiration. He wrote often of Therien, the wood-chopper. Of Minott he said that he "is, perhaps, the most poetical farmer—who most realizes to me the poetry of the farmer's life—that I know. He does nothing with haste and drudgery, but as if he loved it. He makes the most of his labor, and takes infinite satisfaction in every part of it." (IX: 41)

But of most people he was less tolerant. "He described some of his Concord neighbors as 'newly shingled and clapboarded,' but if you knock no one is at home."²² When people said that John Brown had

²¹ Carl Bode, "The Half-Hidden Thoreau," *The University of Massachusetts Press, op. cit.*, p. 112, 114.

²² Canby, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

thrown his life away, Thoreau asked which way they had thrown theirs.²³ And he asked of every lecturer a "simple and sincere account of his own life . . . some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land,—and if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me." (VII: 484)

The search to find oneself must be an active one. "How vain it is," he said, "to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live." (VIII: 404) For him at least, solitude and contemplation were one way to stand up. But, he went on, "there may be a lyceum in the evening, and there is a book-shop and library in the village, and five times a day I can be whirled to Boston within an hour."²⁴ You must put yourself in the proper frame of mind or you will miss what you would otherwise discover. "We find only the world we look for." (XV: 466) "From the brook in which one lover of nature has never during all his lifetime detected anything larger than a minnow, another extracts a trout that weighs three pounds . . . Though you roam the woods all your days, you never will see by chance what he sees who goes on purpose to see it." (XIV: 192) One begins to understand though not quite to believe Clifton Fadiman's remark that Thoreau could "get more out of ten minutes with a chickadee than most men could get out of a night with Cleopatra."²⁵

One way for a man to find himself is to let his mind interact with that of another. Thoreau's journals and letters are filled with disquisitions on friendship, reverberations of the rise and fall of his own friendships, and accounts of particular meetings. Perhaps the most typical and the most poignant passage is in a manuscript in the Huntington Library: "I had a friend, I wrote a book, I asked my friend's criticism, I never got but praise for what was good in it. My friend be-

²³ Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

²⁴ Quoted in: Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1958), p. 306.

²⁵ Joseph Wood Krutch, *Henry David Thoreau*, "The American Men of Letters Series." Copyright, 1948, by William Sloane Associates, Inc., New York.

came estranged from me and then I got blame for all that was bad. So I got at last the criticism which I wanted. While my friend was my friend he flattered me, but I never heard the truth from him but when he became my enemy he shot it to me on a poisoned arrow."²⁶ Some people, he thought, have nothing to say to us even from the beginning. "We occasionally meet an individual of a character and disposition so entirely the reverse of our own that we wonder if he can indeed be another man like ourselves. . . . Such was the old English gentleman whom I met with to-day . . . Though I peered in at his eyes I could not discern myself reflected therein. The chief wonder was how we could ever arrive at so fair-seeming an intercourse upon so small ground of sympathy." (VII: 48)

It is the depth of communication that matters, not its range. With some people, not many, one can go very deep indeed, and Thoreau's writings have numerous accounts of his conversations. Here is one: "Just spent a couple of hours . . . with Miss Mary Emerson . . . The wittiest and most vivacious woman that I know, certainly that woman among my acquaintance whom it is most profitable to meet, the least frivolous, who will most surely provoke to good conversation and the expression of what is in you. She is singular, among women at least, in being really and perseveringly interested to know what thinkers think. She relates herself surely to the intellectual where she goes. It is perhaps her greatest praise and peculiarity that she . . . gives her companion occasion to utter his best thought. In spite of her own biases, she can entertain a large thought with hospitality, and is not prevented by any intellectuality in it, . . . I never talked with any other woman who I thought accompanied me so far in describing a poetic experience." (IX: 113-114)

And so it begins to be clear why, as Thoreau thought beyond friendship to social institutions, the Lyceum appeared to be the fairest form of all. It was a place where thoughtful men could meet together to

²⁶ Unpublished journal entry in the Huntington Library. HM 13182.

educate each other and where the variety of thought would itself be an inspiration. As Thoreau said: "It is not in vain that the mind turns aside this way or that: follow its leading, apply it whither it inclines to go. Probe the universe in a myriad points. Be avaricious of these impulses. Nature makes a thousand acorns to get one oak. He is a wise man and experienced who has taken many views, to whom stones and plants and animals, and a myriad objects have each suggested something, contributed something."²⁷

The depth of Thoreau's appreciation of the Lyceum is best highlighted by his contempt for other human associations. The icy disdain for government which he expressed in "Of Civil Disobedience" was carried over into other forms of companionship or organization. Here are some observations culled from his writings: "Blessed are the young for they do not read the President's Message." (VI: 379) "Once at a tea-table, forgetting where I was, I whistled—whereupon the company would not be convinced that it was not meant for a hint that their conversation was frivolous. I thought that their suspicion was the best proof that it was so."²⁸ "I hate museums, there is nothing so weighs upon the spirits. They are catacombs of nature. They are preserved death."²⁹ "Lectured in [the] basement (vestry) of the . . . church, and I trust helped to undermine it." (XV: 188) "What are time and space to Christianity, eighteen hundred years, and a new world?—that the humble life of a Jewish peasant should have force to make a New York bishop so bigoted." (I: 67)

His deepest scorn was reserved for those people who set themselves up to improve their fellow men. "God does not sympathize with the popular movements," he said. (VII: 315) Ten years later, in his mother's boardinghouse, he had this encounter: "Here have been

²⁷ Quoted in: William Ellery Channing, *Thoreau the Poet-Naturalist* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902), p. 86.

²⁸ Quoted in: Perry Miller, *Consciousness in Concord* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), p. 118.

²⁹ HM 13182

three ultra-reformers, lecturers on Slavery, Temperance, the Church, etc., . . . They addressed each other constantly by their Christian names, and rubbed you continually with the greasy cheeks of their kindness. They would not keep their distance, but cuddle up and lie spoon-fashion with you, . . . _____ addressed me as 'Henry' within one minute from the time I first laid eyes on him, and when I spoke, he said with drawling, sultry sympathy, 'Henry, I know all you would say; I understand you perfectly; you need not explain anything to me;' and to another, 'I am going to dive into Henry's inmost depths.' I said, 'I trust you will not strike your head against the bottom.' " (XI: 263-265)

How different from these associations was the Lyceum and how gratefully he received it. From it, he thought, "a new era will be dated to New England, as from . . . Greece." (I: 102) For him, it represented the one form of group association which was tolerable. All of the others, he said, were mere "idling down on the plane at the base of the mountain instead of climbing steadily to its top. Of course you will be glad of all the society you can get to go up with. . . . It is not that we love to be alone, but that we love to soar, and when we do soar, the company grows thinner and thinner till there is none at all. . . . We are not the less to aim at the summits, though the multitude does not ascend them. Use all the society that will abet you." (VI: 281) For Thoreau, that society was the Lyceum, the direct face-to-face human group where each man brought his thoughts, perfected as best he could, and presented them for the scrutiny of his townsmen, so that they might go up the mountain together, as high as any of them could reach.

One need not agree with Thoreau's strictures against other forms of human association to join in his admiration for this one. As the name of the Lyceum itself suggests, the idea that cultured and independent men might independently seek to develop their culture is an old belief, and a reading of history shows that it is a pervasive one. Every civilized age has its societies, circles, clubs, and academies, its colloquia, atheneums, and lyceums, its fraternities, associations, and

assemblies, and its unions, leagues, and federations. The origins of these groups are diverse; usually at the beginning there is a strong leader or a party of congenial spirits or both. The groups usually succeed—but only for a limited time. After a few years, the members exhaust each other's ingenuity or patience. But a few groups do manage to find within themselves the resources to permit them to continue indefinitely, generation after generation, thereby being supported not merely by learning and companionship but also by tradition.

The values of these continuing associations are many. The individual member acquires a wider relationship with both men and ideas. The angular edges of his thought are smoothed by their clash against contradictory ideas. The mind is kept more active and alive by being forced to submit its deliberations to the scrutiny of a kindly but critical company. New frontiers of knowledge are explored and the long reflections of a lifetime are distilled for the benefit of those who can profit from them. Men of ability or genius are challenged to perfect their talents and find in the group the raw material of new ideas to refine and develop in solitude. Society as a whole is also the gainer, for such groups preserve and nourish among the leaders of the community those broad and humane values which are the finest fruits of civilization.

Is this all there should be? Man, his friends, a cluster of colleagues to stimulate his thought and other groups which he voluntarily joins? For Thoreau, yes, this is all there should be. A wife, children, the acceptance without choice of church, neighborhood, community, nation, the world? For Thoreau, no—not, at least, as part of a system of thought. Can one really build a total conception of society out of his few essential ingredients? Perhaps, but not many people have tried to do so.

But man does not live by system alone. He turns in need to the idea which will help him and to the writer who most clearly and brilliantly expresses that idea. In Africa, in Asia, in the American South, the

thought of Thoreau on civil disobedience today gives strength, resoluteness, and coherence to those who feel themselves oppressed by unjust states. Such men would have rebelled anyway, for such is their nature, but perhaps in a less reasoned, more violent way if they had not been guided by the words of that strange man of Concord, who, Emerson said, was "a person not accounted for by anything in his antecedents, his birth, his education, or his way of life."³⁰

VI

William Pearson Tolley's concern for adult education and his interest in the history of the ideas expressed by creative thinkers find a common meetingplace in the thoughts of Henry David Thoreau. It would be as impossible to build a complete social system out of lyceums as it would to construct a political life based only on civil disobedience. Taken strictly as an idea, though, and not as the nucleus of a complete social system, Thoreau's positive conception might prove to be as fertile as his negative one. In the modern adult educational movement, the casual, spontaneous, and often transitory circles which have always existed are being amplified and extended to serve all men and to strengthen all society. Let us hear the young man out then as, on that autumn morning in 1852, he wrote the words that, polished and revised in his lectures, finally emerged in his masterpiece, *Walden*: "We have a comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants only; but excepting the half-starved Lyceum in the winter, . . . no school for ourselves. . . . It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women. It is time that villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure—if they are, indeed so well off—to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives. Shall the world be confined to one Paris or one Oxford forever? Cannot students be boarded here and get a liberal education under the skies of Concord? . . . This town has spent seventeen thousand dollars on a Town-House, thank fortune or politics, but

³⁰ Quoted in: F. B. Sanborn, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

probably it will not spend so much on living wit, the true meat to put into that shell, in a hundred years. The one hundred and twenty-five dollars annually subscribed for a Lyceum in the winter is better spent than any other equal sum raised in the town. . . . let the village . . . not stop short at a pedagogue, a parson, a sexton, a parish library, and three selectmen, because our Pilgrim forefathers got through a cold winter once on a bleak rock with these. To act collectively is according to the spirit of our institutions; . . . New England can hire all the wise men in the world to come and teach her, and board them round the while, and not be provincial at all. That is the *uncommon* school we want. Instead of noblemen, let us have noble villages of men. If it is necessary, omit one bridge over the river, go round a little there, and throw one arch at least over the darker gulf of ignorance which surrounds us." (II: 120-22)

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