

On Being Out in the Woods

For six years now I have been maintaining our trail system here at St. Joseph's Abbey and have expanded it from the original seven to the current nine miles. The bulk of these trails are located in the northwest and northeast quadrants of our property which comprises some 2,200 acres of land; 600 of these acres are cultivated fields which we rent out to local farmers. No doubt about it, this is a sizeable chunk of property, especially by New England standards. Typical to our location in central Massachusetts, the land is marked by rolling hills and corresponding deep valleys. Streams, ponds and marsh lands are also in abundance. The highest point is around 1150 feet above sea level (Grace Hill, extreme northern boundary). These trails had been laid out in the mid to late 1960s by one of the monks, Br. John Gore, recently deceased. Since they had fallen into disuse after his death, I decided to rehabilitate them, a formidable task given the overgrowth that had occurred over several years. The first two years were especially difficult, but once the trails had been restored (and two new ones added, each about a mile in length), they became quite easy to maintain. Actually the maintenance period is brief, some three to four weeks...and this consisting chiefly of work in the afternoon. I begin around Labor Day or once the bugs become less bothersome; I never work in the woods during summer, for the combination of mosquitoes, flies, ticks and other pesky creatures make it undesirable. Since the summer is brief in these parts, the trails are best used from the end of August through mid May. The amount of snow is a critical factor as well; less snow means greater ease of walking. A quick maintenance tour is required in early spring to collect fallen branches.

Novices seem to be the ones who walk the trails the most in their eagerness to explore their new home. Older monks don't; not especially because of health, but for a variety of reasons they don't favor getting outdoors. Several factors seem to be at work here. One is that after being in the monastery for some years, the schedule assumes a life of its own, and gradually you fall into a routine. Even though the schedule can be demanding, it provides a comfortable and familiar rhythm to the day. Another reason is that after you've explored the property in your younger years, you find no need to get out and look again. That clump of trees was there when I entered and most likely is still there now.

Apart from this familiarity, being alone in the wood evokes a certain loneliness despite its beauty. Keep in mind that although monks live in community and have daily interactions with each other, their days are filled with large chunks of solitude, of being alone. They do not exit the enclosure except for business or doctor trips, so the place can get familiar real fast. Dealing with this over a life time can be daunting but offers rewards which far surpass the minuses. Finally (and I speak from personal experience of working the trails), there is some mysterious inbuilt resistance in physically bringing yourself from the monastery into the very different atmosphere of the woods. I'm not quite sure where to locate this resistance nor how to articulate it. You'd think that by being in the habit of going out there frequently would make you look forward to return visits. Quite the contrary. However, once you get out there you get a wholly different experience; it makes you wonder how in the world these thoughts arose in the first place. Thus we have two types of reluctance: one getting out there and the other, returning to civilization.

Although the trails were laid out to provide recreational walks some ten to twelve years after the monastery moved here in 1950 from Cumberland, R.I., I don't view them this way but as a job. This doesn't detract from enjoying them, quite the contrary. Regardless of the sometimes fairly strenuous physical work, always I come away refreshed. At the moment I haven't a clue as to the flora or fauna in our area, but at least I can tell a pine from a birch tree and a chickadee from a blue jay. However, that is about to change. Recently I was asked to learn about forestry; more specifically, to work with our forester to manage our wooded property. This opportunity has led me to visit the University of Massachusetts at Amherst as well as other local facilities which assist landowners in managing their land. In my brief exposure thus far, I was struck by the enthusiasm these professionals have towards their work. For them it's more than making a living. They are passionate about their work, a fact which made a deep impression on me and inspired

me to continue in my own interests. As for these foresters, each had an intimate knowledge of Thoreau's **Journal**. In fact, the department head of forestry at the University of Massachusetts said right up front, "Thoreau's **Journal** is our Bible."

Getting back to our monastic woods, the overall impression you get is one of silence. I don't mean the conventional silence you find in Maine or Minnesota, let alone your own favorite personal spot, but one unique to the nature of our monastic property. I'd say that each visitor without exception is struck by the all-pervasive silence and have heard this observation many a time both personally and through other monks. Our property is blessedly immune to the normal hustle and bustle of society despite the occasional plane overhead, lawnmowers or normal maintenance sounds way off in the background. Even these are confined chiefly to the summer months. Extending this insight a bit further, I've heard it said that some visitors could discern a distinction while out hiking or when crossing over into our land. They perceive it smack in the middle of nowhere where the only landmark between the monastery and other property are the customary "no trespassing" signs. Despite my frequent crossings to and from our property out in the woods, I haven't picked this up; perhaps an outsider is more attuned to such distinctions. However, I have often felt that the wildlife living on our property are the more fortunate ones compared with their non-monastic cousins just over the border.

My self-delegated work of trail maintainer over several years has led to a desire to know more about our property. Virtually all had been cultivated at one time or another reaching back to the mid to late seventeenth century (Another neat feature about our property is a small cemetery in a remote section which contains seven graves dating from the Revolutionary War. It is bordered by typical stonewalls and can startle you upon coming across it for the first time. Very easy to imagine what it was like back then when contemplating the site). Later as settlers moved westward to Ohio and beyond, gradually the fields became abandoned until much of it reverted (or is still reverting) to its natural state. Actually I'm not sure if we even have what you'd call primeval woods though obviously some trees are very old. Like many other places in New England, we have our share of stonewalls dating back to the mid 1700s or thereabouts. As often as I've seen them, they give you a weird feeling, namely, that the very land on which I am standing had been occupied...not just occupied but cultivated intensely. This feeling is re-enforced when you come across an abandoned foundation (we have four or five) or an orchard that had grown wild. To top it off, sometimes you can trace old paths and breaks in the stonewalls which indicated entrance to a barn or other structure. Such features are quite easy to detect in winter, the best time to go exploring. As for old foundations, In the winter of 2000 when I was laying out a trail on the southeastern part of the monastic property I came across such a foundation complete with a perfectly persevered well. Upon looking at town records, this site turned out to belong to the Hollowell family. Maps just after the Civil War no longer carry the site. It's interesting in that access to a road (Route 31) is over a steep hill which is barely visible. Rut marks helped trace it out.

Judging from contacts with local residents, I believe the sense of history is alive and well here in New England, perhaps more so in smaller towns. This includes not only the Revolutionary War but King Philip's War and Shay's Rebellion. Despite this, it can be a bit difficult to visualize the activity that had gone on several centuries ago because what now qualifies as woods had been pastureland. Then again, the woods which exist here and now are probably different from the ones with which these settlers were familiar. You can extend further back in time to the Indians who had lived countless generations right on this very spot. The only trace (as far as I can tell) is the occasional arrowhead. Although I never cared to look for such objects, you have to do some hardcore imagining to visualize them on the land. Objectively these Indians were flesh and blood people although there's a tendency to consider them barely a step above animals. If the white settlers seem remote, these original occupiers of the lander are completely foreign. Be that as it may, we can continue our projection backwards in time to the last Ice Age when most of this area had achieved its current form. Virtually every hill and lake runs in a north-south direction, a clear

indication of the glaciers' retreat. It almost seems that prior to the last Ice Age this area hadn't existed, a kind of magical cut-off point in time. Furthermore, human history prior to this didn't exist around this area; we tend to think of history as beginning with places like Babylon, Iraq and Egypt. American history by contrast is a blink of the eye. Although the Ice Age is recent geologically speaking, we can continue our backwards journey as far as we want to the formation of continents, the planet all the way to the universe itself.

Such thoughts are bound to arise subconsciously when you're far from the haunts of men not only distance-wise but more important, mentally away from civilization. Perhaps the most striking thing about nature is that it just sits there whole and complete, and we have little or no intimation as to how it arrived at this state. You're almost tempted to think that someone or something has plunked it down behind our backs or when we had our eyes turned. Part and parcel of this strange feeling which lacks rational support is the overall mystery of being when natural objects silently confront you face to face. Then you leave the woods and return home followed by a visit the next day. You can take a mental snap-shot of where you have been in the woods just twenty-four hours ago and wonder deep down if it hasn't picked itself up and moved somewhere else. On the next day just before you make your way back to the place you left, somehow the scenery seems to have moved back in, stealth-like. This happens repeatedly or each time you return to that earlier spot, and you wonder if all the trees, rocks and so forth would get bored just sitting there in all their immovability. Their biological and geological clocks work according to a much slower pace than us humans, so it's not uncommon that we think this way.

There are two chief ways of looking at physical reality applied to living organisms as well as inanimate matter: evolution and creation. Allied to creation is creationism which posits a much more direct relationship between God and physical reality. This view tends to take the biblical account of creation literally. Charles Darwin is famous for his observations garnered from out in the field which led him to conclude that plants and animals had become more complex over an almost inconceivably long period of time. The time is so long that barely a human life span can detect it. Such enormous spans have a direct appeal when you're out in the woods, for as noted above, things out there don't seem to change. On the other hand, the word "creation" intimates "creator" and hence a divine being responsible for what we see about us. Here we have a distinction between physical reality and its cause, two radically different planes. More often than not the latter is perceived classically according to the Newtonian image of a clockmaker. Once he has made his clock and has wound it up, he departs and the clock runs without interference from its maker. Like many other people, I am familiar with the general arguments both positions offer and have read books and articles propounding the virtues of each theory. Still, my acquaintance with the two often evokes more popular presentations or better, caricatures garnered through movies, documentaries and the like.

Sometimes you'll come across attempts at salvaging the Judeo-Christian theory of creation (albeit lamely) by claiming that the language pertaining to a creator are simply metaphors and allegories, no more. Some of the thinking behind this view is that since the folks who formed these scriptures were pre-scientific, they used what was at their disposal, poetry and literature. In this fashion they could give voice to incomprehensible phenomena which they directly traced to a divine creator. From that point on the images stuck and continued right on through the growth of civilization which includes the dominance of science we see nowadays. I believe most modern people feel this way one way or another in their hearts and leaves them a bit uneasy. Nevertheless, it can be a convenient way out, allowing the debate between evolution and creation to slide conveniently out of sight. It also accounts for an acceptable amalgamation of material taken from religion, literature and science.

Regardless of the pros and cons of both theories, you get a sense that somehow they are wanting. Creation has been scoffed at in favor of evolution, yet even the latter is deficient in many ways. Things are

simply too complex to have evolved blindly; then again, perhaps our understanding is limited and can't absorb such immense complexity...and this frustration can apply to both theories. Let's say you have become acquainted with the ideas lying behind evolution and creation. I don't mean through formal scientific training, theological or philosophical studies. Also let's assume that you have absorbed enough from each discipline to have formed an opinion in accord with your particular beliefs (or lack of them). One day you find yourself out in the woods or for that matter, in any natural setting. The same old familiar stuff is there, and subconsciously you may try to figure it out by applying either theory in accord with your fancy. You may wish to vary between the two theories: evolution today and creation tomorrow. Nothing wrong with that. If we're honest with ourselves, we find that an element of superstition creeps in as when darkness begins to fall or if we happen upon a deeply shaded area of pine trees. Looking more closely at this assessment being done in the secret of our hearts, we discover that our ideas are a combination of all three: evolution, creation and superstition. Despite this potpourri, the material world remains there hitting you squarely in the face. On one hand it's peaceful yet on occasion violent. For example, one day I came across a deer carcass and the next day barely nothing was left. Something (or someone!) came out during the night and stole it away. Regardless of any scientific or religious theory or superstition I may have proposed to explain this event, it had nothing to do with the deer's absence on the following day. On occasions like these you look at the nearby trees and rocks, wishing that you could have been transformed into one of them in order to behold what had transpired. They remain the only witnesses to what had happened.

Another insight that strikes you is the ingenuity of people who came up with such a theory as evolution. Scientists (starting with those as far back as the pre-Socratics) summoned enough courage to look at physical reality with an objective, unblinking eye. What makes this even more formidable, they did it in the face of societies with strongly held religious convictions which endowed many physical realities with superstition. That's courageous by any standard. Not that such courage favors science over religion but speaking from our unscientific exposure to nature we get out in the woods, it has to rank among the greatest of all human achievements. Most of these people gained their insights minus the comfort of a classroom or book; they had spent considerable time outdoors making observations first-hand minus the sophisticated tools available today. As for an amateur like myself, I can behold what's out there, take in its beauty and return home to consult reference books about botany, history or whatever. Thus the knowledge we both bring to the woods and take from them in the form of presuppositions is largely conditioned. These presuppositions are entrenched in our mentality, a fact we gradually come to realize while we're out there.

Since I write this living in a monastery planted on a splendid piece of property in central Massachusetts, it's inevitable to bring a religious slant to the woods, and such a position doesn't necessarily favor the theory of creation over evolution. Through the liturgy we're exposed to many statements about God as Creator (obviously there comes to mind the Genesis account). This the background in general, but I have in mind the more poetic expressions we find as in the Psalter. The Divine Office is based upon it, so we're constantly exposed not only to its words but to its deeper sentiments. There God takes a direct involvement in creation. At the same time our modern minds can struggle with all the advancements which have developed since then. So whether we admit it or not, such a milieu can set a conflict going on inside our heads. One part of us would like to accept God as Creator while the other part knows that evolution appears more rooted in reality. Even if we were to opt for one over the other, we are left with that residual thing we call nature. With this ultimate fact in mind we can't help but see a certain conceit in the way either the theory of creation or evolution are presented in some quarters.

Since I'm not a scientist, let's stick with religious sentiments in general (as opposed to particular doctrines) and see if we can narrow them down to the situation at hand. I suggest a look at the Psalter or more specifically, one of the more dramatic psalms (eighteen) which is chock full of striking...almost

wild...images about God and his relationship with the psalmist. The opening verses deal with violent natural phenomena such as earthquakes, lightning and storms, all of which find their direct source in God. Hopefully one doesn't run into the expression of these images while out in the woods! Better to leave them confined to the Bible. Such elemental attributes bestowed upon the divinity are more abundant than human characteristics we tack onto God. They aren't limited to the Psalter but are found in abundance throughout Scripture as a whole. Returning to Psalm Eighteen, we have the human reaction to natural violence in its rawest state, a hands-on contact with the inanimate which many primitive peoples didn't hesitate to designate as gods. The eighteenth century historian, Giambattista Vico, whose most famous work is **The New Science**, had thunder for the starting point for any feeling of religious awe because of all natural phenomena it is "up there" or in a realm transcendent to where humans live. As I said above, if we're honest with ourselves, we aren't that far removed from our ancestors while out in the woods, especially when in a dark or forbidding area (let alone being stuck out there at night). All our knowledge about evolution, chemical compounds and the rest melt away under such circumstances. The same applies to theories about creation: the natural phenomena seem more of diabolical cast.

Although the last paragraph touched upon the more extreme manifestations of natural phenomena, they are generally far and few between. Besides, we're savvy enough to know when not to head for the great outdoors, for example, in unfavorable conditions; if we must, we take the necessary precautions. In this little essay I'm more concerned about that more common reaction to being in the woods which for the most part is a peaceful experience. Another advantage about this area compared to some place like the Rockies is that the woods are tame enough so you can't get lost. All you have to do is walk in a straight line and you'll come to a road or a house. Even though you may be working or hiking in a remote area, one of the best ways to appreciate the woods is to find a nice spot and plop down for an extended period of time. This brings your body (and more importantly, your mind) to a halt which enables you to soak up your surroundings. Some people like Thoreau could get their insights on the hoof or while walking, but even he makes reference to pausing in order to soak in the view. In this quiet position you can think back in time of what the woods looked like x number of years ago—who lived on this particular spot—but you can only go so far. The same applies with scientific analysis. It seems that any such analysis has as its end result wonder or awe at all the stuff around you. The scientific process is more formal and drawn-out, but ultimately the results are the same. I've witnessed this first hand with a volcanologist from Iceland who is well known in his field. Despite their intense work, everyone ends up in the same place at being struck by nature's beauty and power.

There's something irreducible—almost impenetrable—about the character of matter (let alone a more inclusive totality such as an ecosystem) which defies all the scientific analysis in the world. Once we've inspected the last atom, the "stuff" still remains, dense and inscrutable as ever. The dumbness of rocks and trees is what strikes me the most after we've taken in their beauty. Things are just there...heavy...pressing against the much heavier bosom of the earth itself. They don't get up and walk about but can be relied upon to be in the same position tomorrow, next week and God-only-knows how many years into the future. I attribute this insight partly to the monastic context where we pretty much hang around the same piece of property throughout our entire lives. We monks differ slightly from these objects in that we're more mobile. Even birds, insects and mammals don't observe the monastic enclosure! Perhaps we can get a better handle on the heaviness of this "stuff" by taking an alternate approach, in other words, the poetic one. Here we're not so much concerned about the constitution of matter but how natural phenomena reflect our feelings. The past and present experiences in our favorite wooded area become mingled with the ups and downs we experienced back in civilization; the same applies with the occasional violence found in nature which is interspersed with the overall sense of peace. Compared with the analytical approach, a poetic frame of mind makes extensive use of the imagination. Actually the former approximates that heaviness or how things just sit there, but it is a heaviness which is oppressive, not pressing to the earth's bosom. Without flexing our imaginative energies more, we'd end up with a

rather dull appreciation of our environment. I might add that the poetical approach adapts well to our innate terror when out in the woods at night. All the scientific analysis in the world doesn't dispel this feeling, so we're compelled to look elsewhere.

Apart from Henry David Thoreau, people who live in Iceland seem well-suited to relate with nature. There people live close to the elements; only they are radically different from the New England landscape: volcanos, earthquakes and unpredictable violent weather. Icelanders treasure their bleak yet beautiful surroundings like no people I've met elsewhere. What makes their outlook special is the close association virtually every spot has with Iceland's long literary tradition. You can be driving in the middle of nowhere and find signs not only indicating property boundaries but where such-and-such historical figure had lived. Not only that, some signs indicate spots which are non-historical: dwellings of elves, mythic figures and so forth. It's a remarkable sight to see these signposts, and at first glance you wonder who put them there. These indicators of civilization are all the more unusual against the Icelandic landscape which is barren as the Sinai desert, the last place in the world you'd expect an abundance of signposts. Should you become more acquainted with Icelandic culture, you find that the land itself (especially rocks and similar formations) are alive...peopled...by all sorts of characters. The Icelandic mentality is unique in that they make a seamless connection between the land and their literature. That is, they can switch back and forth between the two without giving it a second thought. Sometimes Icelanders can seem superstitious to foreigners, even highly educated ones. For example, they believe in *huldurfolk* or hidden people, kind of like fairies who live in rocks. If you want to test this out for yourself, go out to a place like Krysuvik some fifteen miles southwest of Reykjavik. Here the landscape is at its most barren and twisted due to active volcanic activity. Not a tree nor a shrub in sight, just bleak rocks and strangely formed mountains. Now stay out there for an extended period and see if what the Icelanders say about *huldurfolk* is true or not. Regardless of what you find, you'll discover the close bond between land, history and literature. Try finding that in another culture. Even the rich New England heritage plays second fiddle to the Icelandic one, yet it's the one closest to the sentiments which helped bring this article birth.

One struggle I've noticed with regards to being out in the woods is an inherent reluctance to actually get out there. Over the years I had picked this up from quite a few people, so it isn't a personal hunch. This disinclination disappears, however, as soon as you've overcome your hesitancy and find yourself in the woods. Why this is so remains a mystery. Perhaps it has something to do with our preference for human relationships even if they are hectic or strained. They keep us occupied by taking away attention from ourselves or that innate loneliness I mentioned earlier. Now that you've made the effort and are in the woods, you wonder how you had entertained such thoughts in the first place. If the choice were up to you, you'd rather stay out there and not return to society. Both human relationships and being in the woods point to loneliness but each in their peculiar ways. Despite sound human relationships we may enjoy, rarely if ever do they fulfil in a total fashion, always creating a desire for more. Then you manage to breakaway—even if it's with a bit of self-imposed violence—and get outdoors away from people. Now you're alone with yourself and that heaviness of creation. If you're feeling down, not only can nature reflect this dejection but intensify it. Here's the real source of that reluctance to be out in nature. The plus side, however, is that our return to society finds our relationships refreshed and renewed. Should we stay with this reluctance to get outdoors and see that it's temporary, something new comes to birth. Loneliness gradually transforms itself into solitude, and we find these heavy, inanimate things endowed with a presence almost as meaningful as real people. The first thing we can deduce—and this is the bottom line—is that they'll never let us down. If you want proof-positive of our interaction with inanimate objects, consider how you react with real people upon returning home from the woods. Your relationships have improved without you putting in effort, a fact people are quick to point out. The source of this renewal has been celebrated and idealized. Nevertheless, it remains hard to pin down.

Thus we come to the almost magical power of the inanimate, the irreducible elements of nature. As I said

earlier, these elements just sit there regardless of our intervention and remain impervious to all the analysis we bring to bear upon them. For example, it may be fun to switch places and consider yourself as rock. Most likely in its long existence this rock saw all sorts of human activities (including mine while I'm positioned by it) as well as interactions between animals...mastodons and sabertooth tigers not excepted. I think this "sitting" of stuff we find in the woods has a lot to teach, being representative of life's transitory character. It may furnish a clue as to what I'm trying to get at in this essay, the option we have of being a resident or a pilgrim on this planet.

A resident is a person who has decided to make a specific place home, more or less definitively, and to become defined by this location. The particular place I chose differs from other locations. We may like its beauty and climate, two of the most obvious factors that contribute to our decision. Settling on a particular place endows our lives with a much needed stability and enables us to focus more on what's more important in life. It's more difficult to do this when moving around. Stability thereby prevents us from becoming superficial and restless. It has its challenges as well. You have to dig deeper within yourself in order to come up with new insights, a task familiar to monks. In the last paragraph I spoke of a rock whose very nature elicits stability, yet by reason of its stability—very long lasting compared with other animate stuff—it beholds the ebb and flow of less stable creatures. Not that a rock is endowed with perception but is symbolic of greater solidity which borders on the eternal. Following rocks, boulders and the like we may posit trees. They are animate yet their development is imperceptible compared with us mere mortals. The advantage of trees over rocks is that in addition to being alive, they are rooted in the ground. Their roots are invisible to us, yet being out among them we are conscious of their stable presence.

The other alternative is that of a pilgrim who stresses the transitory nature of reality regardless of how enduring or stable certain aspects of it appear to our eyes. Even though I just compared a rock's hardness with other animate or inanimate things, there's a similarity (despite the apparent paradox) between it and the nature of a pilgrim. Somewhere along the line a pilgrim got into his or her head an insight similar to Ecclesiastes who intuited the "vanity" of creation. Not an exactly accurate term, but one applied to the more stable elements about us which applies to the human realm: the rise and fall of generations, night and day and rivers falling to the sea. Early on the Preacher says "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it" [1.8]. Obviously nature lacks "weariness," this word being reflective of a human view which isn't necessarily pessimistic. It appears relevant to a recognition of patterns which follow the general outline of birth, life and death which constantly repeat themselves. We know from experience that people make allusions to life's fleetingness which slant more to the negative. Not necessarily so while out in the woods. Actually this sentiment can make you feel at home, yet another paradox.

Attentiveness to what is transitory—and that includes virtually everything!—does not make a person with a pilgrim mentality gloomy. Far from it. Adopting such a stance differs from person to person, although the common denominator is that it started off negative yet evolved into an insight with staying power. Some of the factors involved can be a life-threatening experience, disappointments or a physical or mental handicap. One is thus set apart from normal social intercourse, often against one's will, for everyone wants to be liked and accepted. These negative experiences are initially painful but with time point to realities which many people oversee. Obviously the most common one is a confrontation with death either in one's own life or in that of someone else. Like Ecclesiastes, you know more than just theoretically that you had a beginning and will have an end. The question remains, is the intervening time period "vain" or otherwise?

Focus upon that which evanescent, especially as it pertains to yourself and all your aspirations, makes you look in places outside the normal channels of society. The first channel that springs to mind is the great outdoors, traditionally the refuge of outcasts and other undesirables. That's pushing it, but it at least has

the merit of setting an extreme boundary. On the other hand, nature has assumed a greater role with the onset of human development and poses new threats to the environment. Thus in fairly recent times nature has turned from something hostile to requiring protection. I mention this briefly because despite all the paeans to nature we hear about (some with a political slant), for most of the human race's existence nature had been inimical and rarely benign. Only cleared and cultivated areas were considered hospitable to human life. Still this note of caution doesn't detract from appreciating what we can learn out in the woods.

The pilgrim mentality prefers being alone over the company of people. It would be more accurate to say that such a person prefers to be with like-minded folks even if they are few and far between. This group shouldn't be allied with nature lovers, although they aren't excluded. Being a pilgrim has a religious connotation which doesn't have to ascribe to a particular system of belief. Above all else and beyond all else pilgrims share that "vanity" outlook I noted with regard to the author of Ecclesiastes. "Vanity" is best perceived in human interactions and most of the activity in which people engage. If you find yourself within these interactions—and that's our normal sphere—getting outdoors makes a break with them. It's the first step and one that can be surprisingly difficult, a fact to which I had already alluded. In other words, you go from a stable environment to one that's at best indifferent to your presence.

A word closely aligned to pilgrim is "saunterer" or one who likes to stroll. The dictionary definition (it says "origin unknown") means to walk in a slow, relaxed manner without hurry or effort. Fine enough, but it's worth incorporating a fuller definition which Thoreau embellishes a bit at the beginning his essay **Walking**:

"I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks—who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived "from idle people who roved about the country, in the Middle Ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going a la Sainte Terre," to the Holy Land, till the children exclaimed, "There goes a Sainte-Terrer," a Saunterer, a Holy-Lander. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds; but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. One, however, would derive the word from *sans terre* without land or a home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. or this is the secret of successful sauntering. e who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea. ut I prefer the first, which, indeed, is the most probable derivation. or every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels."

This is a great quote in that it combines Thoreau's unique religious sense, one lying outside the normal expressions, to which his entire life gave witness. Except for several longer journeys, he rarely if ever strayed far from his beloved Concord. Even by the standards of that time the Concord woods were tame which gives a certain appeal to the surroundings where I live, not far from Thoreau's stomping grounds: wild enough but close to civilization. In its own way this environment is more complex compared with "wild" areas such as the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. As for central New England, recently a teacher of forestry at University of Massachusetts in Amherst told me that foresters prefer this neck of the woods because it "isn't uniform." That is to say, out West generally you have one or two types of trees that extend for miles. Kind of bland. Here there are five different mini-ecosystems which converge. Then add this to the cultivation that had gone on since Colonial times, and you have a special environment made all the more unique by reason of its relative compactness. No small wonder that well-traveled visitors remark on its similarity to England. Add the multitude of English names to cities, towns and villages, and the similarity is even greater.

The woods are indifferent in that out there you can do virtually anything you want or those things you normally don't do in the company of people: sing, cry, yell, curse or whatever. The rocks and trees don't respond but turn a deaf ear. Once you accept this deafness gradually you see that it has much more to offer than at first glance. And by this I don't mean from the scientific point of view; it's helpful but not a requisite for pushing deeper. Anything heavy—and that includes the stuff of which nature is composed—just sits there all the while pressing to the earth. It's all inanimate (I leave out wildlife here) as far as we're concerned. Such inanimation, if you will, is both attracts and repels. Attracts in that it's a welcome change from the hustle and bustle of human affairs. Repels in that it remains completely disinterested to our responses and is reflective of our innate loneliness.

Accent upon the inanimate is what gave birth to this little essay in the first place. It represents an alternative to a world where everyone is seeking meaning through deeper human relationships, sometimes to the point of obsession. Whenever an absorbing trend like this takes hold, it's fun to look at the opposite which I place under the label of inanimation. Often opposites work like this. You get a better picture of what's proper to us humans by situating ourselves in a different context which in our case is the inanimate world. Like the famous "dark matter" of which cosmologists speak, the inanimate world comprises 99.99% of the stuff out there. This doesn't detract from that .01% (the human domain) but enhances it. Since there's so much inanimate material, perhaps we can learn to appreciate it on its own terms and then see where human consciousness fits in. As for fitting in physically speaking, we're composed of inanimate matter.

As in another essay (On Magic, also on this Home Page), I attempted to demonstrate the positive role a magical outlook has on life while staying away from the conventional sense of the term which smacks of manipulation. We're all familiar with sorcerers, magicians, wizards, witches and the like. They transform the ordinary into the extraordinary and are symbolic of a deep-seated human desire to utilize the material world for one end or the other. Apart from the motivations involved, such wizardry points to the infinite value of the inanimate world, of how what appears mundane can suddenly become so marvelous. However, the first step is coming to grips with matter-in-the-raw and to appreciate its value. This can be daunting because matter is impervious to us humans; it cares less of our projections. Perhaps this is part of that reluctance I mentioned earlier of physically dragging ourselves out to the woods. I, along with that .01% of consciousness, can feel pretty lonely when confronted with inanimation.

Our innate loneliness is an important factor that comes into play with regards to our disinclination of dragging ourselves out to the woods. It is rooted in human relationships, especially failed or incomplete ones. By this I don't mean the more extreme manifestations but those which afflict most people and give a sense of incompleteness. As a friend had noted while I was composing this essay, when you're lonely, you don't have distractions because you're too taken up with what's eating at you. Little time is available for more noble pursuits, and we project our lack of distractions into everything that comes our way. If you continue along in this mode...more or less as we all do...it creates a way of comporting yourself which spills over into other activities. Here is the essence of that hesitancy of moving from this incomplete yet familiar environment into one quite different, the woods. Thoreau is an archetypical example of someone who never got bored in nature. Somewhere in his **Journal** he says "Go out before sunrise and don't return (home) until after sunset." Once we make the effort, we're fine. Looking back on our familiar way of life with its incomplete relationships we discover that not only have they been left squarely "back there" but are transformed upon our return home. The transformation may not be complete, but it has gotten under way pretty much without our effort. Thus the real dread (this could be a strong word but one not wholly off the mark) of getting outdoors is largely fear of transference...almost as though the temporal gap of actually walking into the woods from home were the real barrier. More accurately, it's our resolution to physically transfer our bodies from here over to there that's decisive.

What is it about the bare-bones nature of inanimation that both attracts and repels? The attraction isn't difficult to comprehend, for it's grounded in an appreciation for natural beauty in all its forms. Then there's the repulsion or our response to nature's sometimes violent moods which here in central New England are few and far between. Yes, we have the occasional hurricane, tornado and blizzard, but not terribly often. As I had said above, the woods here are relatively tame compared to out West. Still that mindless character is all-pervasive and may include tame or shy mammals. These creatures, along with the larger inanimate character of nature, have been used for inspiration whether it be for poetry, songs, books or religious insights. Nature is therefore the raw datum from which we draw all our inspiration. More importantly, all this stuff imparts a definite *presence*. I italicize that word because it's important. Not that it relates to us like another human being but reveals itself without any disguise. The idea of a presence obviously suggests an idea we get from animate beings, but in the case of natural objects presence consists in their heaviness.

I'd say the best way to enter the presence of inanimate objects is by finding a comfortable spot and settling down there for a prolonged period of time, depending upon your inclination. I mentioned this already but wish to link sitting more closely with the notion of inanimation. Both are immovable which represent our human efforts at clearing our minds. This, in turn, gets you in tune with the environment as a whole. Once you overcome the barrier of getting outdoors, the surroundings quickly absorb your "dumb" presence (for you're sitting in the woods, stone or tree-like), and soon you become one with it. Many details which previously went unnoticed come to you whether they be sounds, light or movement of animals and birds. Never you'd pick them up while walking or even pausing for a bit. It takes real effort at settling down over an extended period of time (True to a certain extent. I give a little caveat in that on several occasions I had sat out in the woods for less than fifteen minutes. During that short interval deer came quite close, not to mention birds. This seems to indicate that the popular stories about St. Francis and his close relationship with animals have some basis. Actually it doesn't take that long to get into such a stable mode; the presence of animals is an indicator of this). Then you may recall ideas which predisposed you to view the environment in a given way...in other words, filters. For purposes applicable to this essay, let's say two chief ones are theories about creation and evolution, already introduced.

Both theories have sparked a lot of controversy well into our current era. Despite the overwhelming evidence for evolution, there are plenty of people favoring creation (and a creator). Not all are fundamentalists. To the adherents of creation theories we may include philosophical arguments related to theology, many of which are adopted by the Catholic Church. Still, both theories (they seem to be the only two out there with credence minus an occasional bogus "seeding" theory from another planet) are deficient. They play into two different sides of our imaginative faculty which may be labeled as analytical and poetic. This slight switch in emphasis, helpful to smooth down the sharp edges of each theory, gets closer to one resolution I presented above, adopting the life of a resident or a pilgrim.

If you live here on earth permanently (call it your home) you are interested in your ancestors and engage in research as to where they came from. This serves to root you within a particular spot on the earth. On the other hand, if you feel the earth is not home but a bit alien, you're not so much interested in your past but in your future or where your real home lies. To a resident such expectations seem unreal and without basis. Perhaps this is where the two are really at odds with each other. A pilgrim resides for a day or two in any given spot, then moves on. Since he or she looks at the surroundings somewhat like a tourist, there's no real interest "in the locals" except in a cursory fashion. This detachment enables a pilgrim to be more objective, even poetic, in that nothing rooted detracts from enjoying a particular spot. Although I believe this stance is more akin to the creation camp, really it isn't. When in the woods, a pilgrim doesn't subscribe automatically the stuff out there to a divine source. Granted that such a person may be more inclined to this end, but he or she looks towards the future as very different from the current one proper to residents. If pressed to describe this future dwelling, a pilgrim would be at a loss. In contrast, a resident upon the

earth has the advantage of clearly defined parameters against which the latter seem, well, kind of flaky. It gets worse when this nebulous “home” is tied in with some divinity.

So make your pick. I wish not to advocate creation over evolution or visa versa. That’s not my role. I’m not educated sufficiently to make a proper choice yet offer some reflections which center around the controversies between them. When I set out to jot down thoughts I originally entitled this essay “On Creation.” As I proceeded and spent some time out in the woods with a local forester (tagging along to learn from him), I decided to adopt the current title. “On Creation” suggests a Creator and therefore a religious stance. It would contrast with an alternate title, “On Evolution,” traditionally inimical to creation. By switching back and forth between accompanying my forester friend, trail work on our monastic property and writing, I came up with these reflections and offer them for what they are worth.

A person can head off into the woods and bring his or her own preconceptions which in this case is either creation (and hence positing a divine origin) or evolution which implies survival of the fittest. You don’t hang around out there saying either “This was created by God” or “This tree evolved from a primordial slime mold,” or at least do so explicitly. Regardless of your choice, the dumbness of the woods—and this word is used deliberately and positively—is impervious to our personal preferences. As an alternative to creation and/or evolution I decided to adopt the stance of viewing natural phenomena either as a resident or a pilgrim. Not that they correspond to creation and evolution, but seem well suited to how we actually perceive nature. Granted that a pilgrim mentality has religious overtones; it still doesn’t imply adoption of any theory related to creation. You can still wander around out there while subscribing to evolution and remain a Thoreauian saunterer. Should you choose looking at the woods as a resident, you have more or less assumed the position that this place (earth) is your real home, perhaps in the ultimate sense. There’s no place else to go. We came from the earth, are walking around on it for a while, and then return to it. Even this viewpoint can be taken as religious. However, a resident’s view is circumscribed to the stuff at hand. It is at home in the woods just like a rock, tree or deer is at home and looks no further.

At the same time both a pilgrim and resident mentality have a lot in common from the monastic vantage point. For example, these 2,200 acres of land are a monk’s circumscribed world, the place where he dwells. Since an individual monk doesn’t own the land (the community as a whole does), he cannot lay claim to the land as strictly his own. I’ve heard it said that a monk acts as a custodian of the patrimony handed down to him and his confreres. Thus most of life which is spent on this acreage tends to share the outlook of a pilgrim. It’s a paradox, this monastic combination of pilgrim and resident, one which neatly gets us beyond viewing the woods as created or evolved. Down the centuries monks have been renowned for cultivation of the land. So here they are, these pilgrims in one place who accentuate looking forward to their “heavenly homeland” while at the same time excel like the Shakers at the maintenance of their earthly patrimony. This combination gets us beyond the historical controversy between the theories of creation and evolution or of choosing between the obvious scientific evidence and theological principles applied to nature. A monk may never solve the prickly issue that divides a lot of people. That’s not his job. However, he can look at our common human mortality and say once it’s done, the choice is up to each individual. Really, this is as far as any theorizing about the woods can go. Like Thoreau, you might as well enjoy them as a saunterer.