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Winter was not made in vain

Rich Heffern | Feb. 4, 2010 NCR Today

Henry David Thoreau was America's most serious student of winter. "Inspector of snowstorms," he jotted down on forms under the "occupation" question. This 19th-century writer and philosopher carefully watched the seasons come and go. He wore out shoe leather rambling through the cold seasons in his native New England. He explored winter at every hour of night and day, always alert to hear what was in the wind, to feel the tang and piquancy of the season and boil down some meaning out of the daily circumstances beyond his doorstep. He painstakingly recorded his observations, impressions and thoughts in his journals.

In one journal entry in 1854 he summarized his winter observations:

"The winter, cold and bound out as it is, is thrown to us like a bone to a famishing dog, and we are expected to get the marrow out of it ... We must thaw its cold with our genialness. We are tasked to find out and appropriate all the nutriments it yields. If it is a cold and hard season, its fruit, no doubt, is the more concentrated and nutty ... The seasons were not made in vain."

He maybe took time to warm the tip of his pen in a whale-oil lamp, then added:

"Shall we take refuge in the cities in November? Shall the nut fall green from the tree? Let not the year be disappointed of its crop. I knew a crazy man who walked into an empty pulpit one Sunday and, taking up a hymn book, remarked, 'We have had a good fall for getting in corn and potatoes. Let us sing Winter!' So I say, let us sing winter. What else can we sing, and our voices be in harmony with the seasons?"

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