

## Building with a Borrowed Axe

Matthew E. Johnson

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*“The trouble with the academic imitator is not that he depends upon traditions, but that the latter have not entered into his mind; into the structures of his own ways of seeing and making.”*  
-- John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 277

Overwhelmed by the clamor of the newly industrialized American life, Henry David Thoreau retreated to simple quill and quiet in a cabin on the banks of Walden Pond with nothing but a borrowed axe on Independence Day, July 4, 1845 (*Walden*, 70). Thoreau, like many other 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans, fought to find his feet on the unfamiliar industrial ground. He lamented the passing of real work, and with it real satisfaction, seeing hidden in the eyes of Americans a quiet desperation. “A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed under what are called the games and amusements of mankind,” says Thoreau. “There is no play in them, for this comes after work” (18). Thoreau and many others at the time, felt a deep sense that something *real* was being lost or covered over by culture and technology.

This desperation drove Thoreau into the woods to find consolation in the “bravery of minks and muskrats” (18). Learning to depend only on the work of his own hands and the company of his own thoughts was, for Thoreau, a process of self-discovery, self-mastery, and self-reliance. For two and a half years, Thoreau lived in a cabin built with his own two hands and an axe his neighbour lent him. The ambitious solitude of Thoreau’s project is admirable and puts to shame many of our sustainability efforts and our meager attempts to make things from scratch and “off the grid.”

And yet Henry David Thoreau built with a borrowed axe. “It is difficult to begin without borrowing,” he admits (40).

I think Thoreau represents an essential dynamic in culture, one that seems always present and necessary at some level. In every generation, there are always those in Western society who feel that something important is being lost or covered over. Whether we label them “hippy” or “emo” or “hipster” or whatever else, each of these movements represents people who are dissatisfied with the pressure to conform to the cultural status quo that dictates what individuality ought to look like. These movements, just like the American transcendentalists, can illuminate oppressive structures hidden in culture, and we would do well to pay attention to them rather than dismiss them outright.

However, we should also acknowledge that it is all too easy to forget that our individuality does not emerge out of nothing. No matter how self-reliant we think we are, we can’t get around the fact that we begin by borrowing. Each of us was each born into a culture, a language, and a tradition, and we cannot select our identities prior to our immersion in these. We can resist the pressures of the culture we find ourselves in. But even so, we can’t get around the fact that we are acting in response to something that already exists. Our identities are always anchored in one way or another, for better or worse, to the communities we find ourselves already in. In these

communities, we are inescapably bound to one another, creating and changing each other through how we interact.

The point here is a Heideggerian one. We owe the core of who we are to the world into which we were born. We were thrown into a way of life from the moment we opened our eyes, a way that orients us in the world and gives us a certain fluency in our being-in-the-world. We learn a language that allows us to express our innovative ideas, and it's impossible to have any individuality and freedom of self-expression unless we are already indebted to the culture into which we are born and raised. Unless we have borrowed an axe, so to speak, we cannot begin building our individuality.

The deep desire for self-reliance that was made explicit in the American transcendentalists like Thoreau is still with us today, I think, in the way *authenticity* is so highly valued. It represents a legitimate concern that we be keenly aware and critical of the sorts of pressures that society exerts on us and the ambient noise that subtly shapes the way we think. At the same time, though, this desire for self-reliance grows out of a certain way of thinking about individuality that locates our individual uniqueness and our core selves somewhere deep inside ourselves, closed off from the world and from others. Coming to terms with our belonging to one another and to the culture into which we were born allows us to cultivate who we want to be in an authentic way that moves from simple self-reliance to other-reliance, to an ontology of dependence.

So it seems to me that the search for authenticity, or its fetishization according to some, is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as it contributes to a self-aware critique of the culture that shapes us, built on an ontology of dependence rather than the blind pursuit of self-reliant novelty. Authentic individuality, built with a borrowed axe, makes way for a new kind of self-reliance that is not just about our inner selves and is inseparable from our dependence upon one another.