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TownTalk

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Living the spiritual truths of Thoreau

If literary historians in this country were to cast ballots for the most significant and enduring writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, who knows who they would come up with in poetry, though for popularity among the unwashed masses it would likely be a tossup between Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Frost. Mark Twain, who's been getting a great deal of attention of late, would be tapped for fiction. If Henry David Thoreau were not chosen for nonfiction, I would assert that he ought to be.

After I had read most of Jaime L. Prieto Jr.'s text in his recently released book, "The Joy of Compassionate Connecting: The Way of Christ through Nonviolent Communication," I became aware that he was presenting readers with a thoughtful, thorough and deeply felt interpretation of the strata of relationships between the biblical Christ and the contemporary seeker of the meanings of his message.

Prieto's four epigraphs are from the books of Matthew and John. He extends a metaphor about the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden by the symbolic representation of these abstract values: truth, honesty, grace and empathy. Deeper connections among human beings are discovered by the pursuit of such "Heart Needs and Values" as survival, protection, meaning, autonomy, interdependence, honesty, well-being, empathy,

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regeneration, transcendence and love.

His primary purposes in writing this book are best understood by what he has said in his epilogue. He reveals there that he is a communications engineer and a Star Trek fan, and he has high hopes for the values of his book for his readers:

"I am convinced that Nonviolent Communication is the root enabling technology that facilitates the co-creation of the universal translator in this world. The only difference is that instead of computers doing the translation, human beings willing to practice this discipline of love in conversation do it. Mastery of this discipline enables us to see things that were previously hidden, to be present in situations that were previously difficult, and to relate to people we previously considered enemies. My hope is that it would facilitate a mutual understanding of the heart among Muslims, Jews, and Christians — allowing us to find much to celebrate in our common ancestry from Abraham, to value and respect our unique traditions, and to open up

the possibility for collaboration in finding ways to reform our societies in service of our common humanity, in service of God."

Jaime Prieto is candid about several intimate relationships in his life, especially being aware of the legacy of an abusive, erratic father and the hopes he has for shaping his son Alex's character. And then there is the surprising awareness of an influential teacher in his life, Walter Klarner, whom I had helped educate at the College of Emporia in the late 1960s and who, like me, is now "emeritus" from his institution of higher education.

In his acknowledgments early on in "The Joy of Compassionate Connecting," Prieto praised Walt Klarner as the Composition II teacher who "contributed to shifting my attitude toward writing so writing became enjoyable."

Prieto is not the only contemporary writer sensitive to the spiritual truths to be discovered in Henry David Thoreau's account of his living for two years, two months, and two days in a small cabin he had built for himself.

Professor Sherry Turkle, founder and director at MIT of the "Initiative on Technology and Self," has pointed out in her most recent book, "Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other," that there be monsters lurking in our personal domain of technology-based cyberspace, chief among

them being the stark, harsh sense of loss and the hopeless spiral of an increasing loneliness.

Turkle finds both in 20th-century psychologist Erik Erikson as well as in "Walden" a call for stillness. She has found that "... we are living in a culture where we're really not sure what kind of attention we owe each other." Both adolescents and adults have a great fear of losing their iPhones, not being "connected" in our "always on, always connected culture."

As with many other philosophers, sociologists and psychologists of this era, she also believes that we need "to give students a place for . . . stillness" and "to pay attention to something other than your immediate needs."

What Thoreau offers in "Walden" is fellowship and opportunity

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

What an enduring mantra! It echoes and rings down the ages, since Thoreau first wrote it down and published it in 1854. And indeed yes: we also have to keep workin' on it.

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A true moment of serendipity

Happy Groundhog Day! Let's hope that "Punxatawney Phil" keeps so busy chucking wood that he forgets to search for his shadow. To begin today's column, two epigraphs:

■ *"The view after 70 is breathtaking. What is lacking is someone, anyone, of the older generation to whom you can turn when you want to satisfy your curiosity about some detail of the landscape of the past. There is no longer any older generation. You have become it, while your mind was mostly on other matters."*

— William Maxwell, "The Man in the Moon"

■ *"Forgetfulness is the shadow that lies across the path of all old men."*

— William Maxwell, "A fable begotten of an echo of a line of verse by W. B. Yeats"

The line of verse from Yeats that Mr. Maxwell may well have had in mind occurs in *Sailing to Byzantium*: "That is no country for old men." There is much more in this poem about bearing well, even nobly, the frailties of aging.

Last week I brought to your attention my adventures of searching for books, buying them and then usually passing them on to relatives or friends.

Today will appear another illustration in my life of something quite serendipitous, "serendipity" being defined in my *American Heritage College Dictionary* as "[T]he faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident."

It seems, in spite of my expressed desire in last week's column not to add to my stack of personally-owned tomes, that stack has recently begun to be

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enhanced by a couple of frisky media distribution agents. Each gives me a substantial "prompt" about the value and timeliness of current publications, hoping that I might make favorable comments about them in this column or on my blog, "Getting a Better Grip on Speaking and Writing."

The book that arrived first from Ascot Media, "The Joy of Compassionate Connecting: The Way of Christ through Nonviolent Communication," by Jaime L. Prieto Jr., was shortly followed by Dr. Pat Love's and Dr. Jon Carlson's "Never Be Lonely Again: The Way Out of Emptiness, Isolation, and a Life Unfulfilled."

Prieto's probing of the empathetic values of "nonviolent communication" owes much to the intellectual and spiritual influence of famed psychologist Marshall Rosenberg.

Dr. Rosenberg is the guiding force behind the "Nonviolent Communication" movement, which has taken him to 60 countries to offer training. In 2006 he was given the "Bridge of Peace Nonviolent Award." Is a Nobel Peace Prize to be in the offing?

What is referred to often as the "Second Life" movement is also of some relevance to the bigger picture. The creating

through electronic media of "virtual reality" and a new trunk on which to spread the limbs of human culture suggests to many Christians and their leaders a dangerous trend. "Life" in a world undiscovered by the typical and customary explorers of the physical cosmos would seem to offer all manner of temptations and addictions. E.T. craved and sought to "phone home," no doubt, but at least this alien had a human family for education, protection and nurture.

For a compelling series of insights into the interplay between human biology and technology, no one that I know of offers a more insightful and valuable study than MIT professor Sherry Turkle, who is the founder and director at MIT of the "Initiative on Technology and Self."

Professor Turkle's third book in a trilogy about this sweeping topic is due out.

Keep in mind that Turkle may be a member both of the Litterati and the Digerati, but not of the Glitterati.

Two tidbits: she is hell on PowerPoint (a curriculum based on the "Great Books" is preferred) and "multitasking" (all students in her classes must turn off or check in electronic media devices). And she is also deeply concerned about American education in kindergarten through 12th grade. More perhaps in a week or two.

I dipped my bait in the water — about a "serendipity" that touched on me — quite a few words ago. So let us for the time being end this paean of suffering, this angst about loneliness, and reflect upon the restorative power of a recalled remembrance.

A few days after his book ("The Joy of Compassionate Connecting") appeared in my mailbox, I began my second tour of the themes and parables enriching Jaime L. Prieto Jr.'s most interesting book. I casually glanced through the couple of pages of acknowledgments.

At the end of the second paragraph I came across a sentence that not only caught my attention, it stirred up overlaid memories long neglected, if not forgotten: "Special thanks to my Composition II teacher, Walter Klarner, who contributed to shifting my attitude so writing became enjoyable."

After some Googling and a query to Jaime Prieto about this matter, I did confirm that this was the same Walter E. Klarner who graduated from the English Department at the College of Emporia, which I chaired from 1968 to 1970, who became an instructor of English at Johnson County Community College and who managed arrangements for me to visit that campus in the guise of a consultant. Which I did.

Klarner is now "emeritus" at JCCC and active in community affairs from his home base in Mission, Kan. I have his address and will make sure that he gets a copy of this column. Prieto and I will continue workin' to deepen and strengthen our relationship. We may use Thoreau's Walden as our guide. Why? Why not?

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