A holy, mundane essence: Lessons of confinement

by Kay Lynn Northcutt in the March 21, 2012 issue

A replica of Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond.

Living with a chronic illness is much like Henry David Thoreau's experiment on Walden Pond: life is pared down to essentials. The difference is that Thoreau chose the constitutive limits of Walden Pond as part of an experiment in "living essentially," while my confinement is unbidden.

The spiritual practice of Lent is nothing less than an invitation to live essentially, whether one is healthy or chronically ill. Lent, with its introspection and sparseness, aims at stripping life down to its holy, mundane essence so that bits of heaven on earth might be discovered: without and within. For those whose physical limitations constrict them to the footpath of home, Lent's discipline is a familiar one.

The freedom to choose—so central to Thoreau's experiment—is typically among the first liberties eliminated by chronic disease. My limitations began with difficulty swallowing and escalated into the slurring of words, fatigued neck flexors and breathlessness. My vocation as a homiletics professor relied upon the strength to speak, but by noon each day I felt as if my muscles had been peeled from my bones: the effort to speak a word or to smile at a student felt Herculean. Little by little, the grid upon which I lived shrank to that of a postage stamp.

That was over two years ago, approximately the length of Thoreau's experiment at Walden Pond. Unlike Thoreau, I cannot walk away from this way of life. My spiritual practice of living essentially will be that of a lifetime. Lent has come to stay, and living essentially has become my liturgy of hours.

Flannery O'Connor wrote that illness had taught her more "than any trip abroad." Her letters record a daily rhythm of visits from eccentric friends as well as the activities of the chicken yard and her peacocks. Those of us circumscribed by hearth and home cannot help smiling at this kindred spirit. The pulse of life rests upon rare, cherished visits from friends and the mundane delights of Earth and its creatures.

Those, and the daily visit from the postal carrier. There is surely no greater gift to a postage stamp-sized life than a letter from a beloved one, whose words conjure up the active life in all its dimensions.

It is a slow, ancient practice, letter writing. Letter writing might prove the finest of Lenten disciplines. Words are a common bond for those of us living on the margin. I can linger over the words for weeks, smiling as I trace with my fingertips the handwritten manuscript of loved ones. For those on the margins, words are the bread of life. We write, speaking out of our unique, self-created daily rituals and rhythms. We read, imbibing others' lives like food.

One of my goddaughters prefers receiving letters in the mail over more rapid forms of communication. "What would you like from me this year?" I ask as she begins another school year. "Letters!" she immediately responds.

Like O'Connor, Emily Dickinson (whose marginalization was that of choice rather than circumstance) detailed news regarding her family's chickens in letters. Dickinson's letters are newsy and filled with the mundane—a contrast with her poems, which are parables in living essentially, capturing the holy in the ordinary. She manages to compress even a prairie into seven words: "one clover, and a bee. And revery." Dickinson chose a life of enclosure in which words (and the New England landscape) proved her most cherished companions.

I, too, strain to express the mundane bittersweetness of a life negotiated from the margins.

This fall I did not fail to notice a single leaf's coloration or passing. Late afternoons found me alone in the backyard underneath my mighty oak tree, the west sun on my

back, paying attention to the hymning of the cicadas, noting the date the last surviving choir member folded up his legs for winter. I marked the final evening the robin sang her twilight song for me before heading south and observed a day of mourning when the last hummingbird disappeared.

One day I ran my sprinkler at full tilt for the thirsty monarchs as they made their way through Tulsa, migrating to Mexico, astonished by the parameters of the intercontinental journey. Envying the strength belied in their fragile wings, I whispered benediction over their pilgrimage.

Solitude, though silent, is not without voice. Solitude is the master architect of living essentially, especially when an entire day is spent pinned to one's bed, with no visitors penned into the schedule. Solitude provides moment-by-moment instruction on how to spend such days well. Nature becomes that day's caller: sparrows squabbling in the abelia bushes outside my bedroom window, a spider indus-triously spinning its web between screen and window. Perhaps the best company is that of the sun, whose rays move in slow arcs across the backyard, until finally setting in the west window of my bedroom. Better than any movie—it never stops playing—and each day is different in angle, degree and light.

But for each day of solitude's consolations, there are other days in which the pilgrimage is not to the garden but to the phlebotomist or the neurologist or the hospital. The most vexing aspect of my Walden experience of essential living is one overlooked by the healthy Mr. Thoreau—the humbling dependence upon others for every aspect of my well-being. He did not know the need for others when one's own strength and velocity are emptied. It's been three years since I've been able to run an errand, explore a bookstore or drive myself to the doctor.

Paradoxically, living essentially depends upon others, which may be the most difficult Lenten discipline of all; it strips away the false sense of independence to which we are so very prone. From the vantage point of my illness, Jesus' preferential option for refugees, prisoners, orphans, chronically ill, widows and children never ceases to amaze me.

Yet Thoreau's delight in the freedom of his experiment resonates fully with me. The greatest surprise of my enclosure has been the freedom within a constricted life. I am the author. It is mine to write. My task is as simple and complicated as merely choosing what has come to me unbidden and unchosen. My new vocation is that of

loving extravagantly the shreds of life that are wondrously left to me.

Surely that is Lent's gift year after year when the imposition of ashes re-inscribes upon our souls the tender and hard work of fiercely loving what is essential.

In Anne Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces,* the central character, Athos, seeks to "make necessary what is beautiful, and to make beautiful what is necessary." This is the work of living essentially. This is what Lent calls us to do—whether from the margins of disability or from the able-bodied active life. We are to make necessary what is beautiful and to make beautiful what is necessary, so that we might make what Karl Rahner calls a resounding "yes to life."