



Pondering with Walden

My friendship with a frog.
By Mary McComsey

The comforting brush of warm air that stroked my nose during a February thaw here in eastern Pennsylvania woke up my Spring fever. I grabbed seed catalogs and lovingly fingered the pages, as if I could feel the cool smoothness of green leaves through the paper. I sniffed deeply of the ink, willing a hint of jasmine to waft from the binding. I ordered my beans, lettuce, tomatoes, cukes, and some multicolored carrots. Then I waited with eager anticipation for the seeds to arrive.

Meanwhile it was time for the annual pond cleaning. I use the word “pond” loosely because our plastic, preformed basin is little more than a glorified flowerpot. It measures only about five feet by four feet and is barely 20 inches deep. It does have a bit of a waterfall—a five-inch drop counts, right? Anyway, it counts for me and for my husband, David, who got roped into gardening when he retired.

But not as a pond cleaner. Pond cleaning requires a love for foul-smelling muck. It is a difficult appreciation to acquire, but for the true devotee, that swampy smell of rotting debris is an earthy harbinger of Spring. Once the pond water is drained down, the goldfish temporarily relocated, and the lilies repotted, it is time for muck raking.

About seven years ago, a few green frogs took up residence in our little pond when a housing development down the street destroyed their neighborhood. They overwinter in the muddy bottom until the temperature rises, and then they hop out onto the grass and warm their still-stiff bodies in the sun. They watch me clean house with a knowing eye, understanding from past experience that I mean no harm. Indeed, they sit right next to me as I scoop, wipe, and scrub. Their wide, round eyes give me a quizzical stare, as if to say, “Go ahead and tidy up if you must. We’ll wait.”



One fine Spring afternoon, as I returned from a trip to the bog garden where I dump the murky sludge, I saw to my horror that a three-foot-long garter snake had grabbed one of my frog friends by the hind leg and

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY P. SAVAGE

wouldn't let go! Have you ever heard a frog scream? It's a horrible sound. I had earlier formed a grudging understanding with the snake that if she didn't bother me, I wouldn't bother her—but I'd forgotten to include my amphibian friends in the deal.

Full disclosure: I have a deep-seated fear of snakes. Deep. But my little buddy was in trouble, so with no conscious thought, I reached down, grabbed the snake by the tail, and shouted, "Oh, no, you don't!" The startled serpent dropped the frog and I dropped

the snake. The snake slithered off, and the frog leapt frantically into some nearby boxwoods. I figured he couldn't be hurt too badly if he could book it away like that.

Soon the pond was clean, and the fish and frogs settled down to their peaceful lives in their mini-habitat. Spring slid into summer. One day I went out to sit on the old wooden bench by the pond to enjoy our little oasis. To my surprise, one of the frogs had usurped my seat. He was sitting in perfect, absolute

stillness—not wary and alert, not scouting out a meal or a mate, just sitting. I approached slowly and gently sat down next to him. He didn't stir a jot, but his eyes, as frogs' eyes do, whispered, "You're welcome to join me, but just be quiet and chill." I did.

I noticed that he had a small white scar on his back leg, and I realized with a start that he was the same fellow I had rescued from the snake! Maybe that is why he was so accommodating. Maybe he remembered, too! Frogs, I discovered, do not say thank you for kindnesses rendered; they simply allow your presence in their space. We sat quietly for about half an hour, and I whispered a short, "See you later," and walked away.

The next afternoon, sure enough, the same frog was back in the same spot on the bench. I walked right up and sat next to him, and, of course, he made no objection. I said little. I told him I was sorry about the snake thing and glad that he had healed so well. He listened, and his eyes told me it was all good. Frogs don't hold resentment, either; they just accept that things happen and move on.

These afternoon visits continued for days in the same way

until I realized that we had formed a rather intimate acquaintance and that, if this were to continue, I would have to give my little friend a name. He saw no need for this, but did not object when I told him, "I am going to call you Walden." I told him all about Henry David Thoreau and his time spent in the woods alone with nature and his thoughts. Walden understood. I think he liked the idea of Thoreau.

The entire summer passed this way. Walden went about his frog business. He croaked sonnets to attract females. He garnered a mate and produced a large family with her—several dozen eggs, many of which hatched into young tadpoles. He guarded his brood from predators. He traveled about the neighbors' yards when rainy days created a watery highway for day trips. He always returned each afternoon, though, in time to take his bench seat and ponder whatever it is that frogs ponder while sitting near the water's edge. Could that be how ponds got their name?

Sometimes Walden would sit with my husband. David enjoyed the humorous incongruity of sharing a bench with a frog. But Walden and I had bonded. We had a connection—a connection born of our tether, the two ends of a garter snake. When Fall came and it got too chilly for bench sitting, Walden disappeared into the water. Without his scar showing, I found it hard to pick him out from his friends. By Winter, everyone had settled to the bottom for their months' long sleep. I tucked them in by crisscrossing a bunch of sticks over the water's surface so visiting herons couldn't grab easy pickings. I plugged in an electric heater to keep everyone from freezing solid. Then I went inside for my own Winter hibernation, waiting for that kiss of warm breeze and the seed catalogs to stir the first thoughts of Spring.



never saw Walden after that. Perhaps he went on to bigger ponds and grander things. I like to imagine he did. But I will always have the memories of that Summer and Walden and me on our bench in the warm sunshine of a lazy afternoon. And I keep on the wall of the bathroom (near water, of course) a framed photo of him, just sitting on that bench and pondering. ❖