

ED MOONEY

REFLECTIONS ON

*LOST INTIMACY*

I've been lucky to have been able to make my living over the years doing what I love to do, teaching curious and exploring minds, staying close to the writings of my curious and exploring mentors, and writing for and with these marvelous mentors.

I've written about the great Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard and the great Montana philosopher Henry Bugbee. Most recently, I'm writing on Henry Thoreau. [Lost Intimacy in American Thought](#) says little about Kierkegaard but I like to think his spirit is akin to that of Thoreau, Henry Bugbee, Henry James, Stanley Cavell, and others who I travel with in this book.

I love the margins of learning and unlearning, the cordial hospitality and heartfelt goodbyes of Thoreau and Cavell and others I've mentioned, but also of Wittgenstein, Emily Dickinson, Simon Critchley, and Basho – writers who read and write and then wonder how words fit with other things, and then go to do otherwise before returning to words (and once again leave them -- for us).

I've taught philosophy and religion for more years than I care to know, starting in 1968 in the Bay Area, where before and after class I descended from my Berkeley home to row an open water scull in choppy salt water. I now just enjoy the fresh water shores in Syracuse, NY, where I love the snow and views of the Finger Lakes – though from there I take frequent excursions to Portland Maine and the islands of Casco Bay, with my wife,

a Kierkegaard scholar; or to an alpine biological research station in Gothic, Colorado to visit grandkids and kids.

Each of the essays in *Lost Intimacy* is composed from an immediate yet lasting impulse to celebrate the impact on my reading and thinking life of a philosopher or writer, and of fragments of their thoughts tendered. Recovering personal philosophy is recovering the transfiguring impacts of writing addressed intimately that may well resonate not just with me, but with an indefinitely large circle of hearers—call it an infinite but intimate universal. Some aspect of the words or sentences of these writers would catch me off-guard, seem to resonate with my deepest interests in ways it was up to me to work out.

My final essay is on Thoreau. I'm happy to report my discovery, or rediscovery, that he is so much more than an endearing trumper and outspoken defender of civil resistance. In an adventure rich beyond my wildest dreams, I've found a subtle and penetrating philosopher who can hold his own, in range and depth, with Schiller or Schopenhauer—and as Cavell had argued in the early 1970s (to little avail), who can converse with Kant and Wittgenstein. This makes a full circle.

Both Bugbee and Cavell learned from and leaned on Thoreau, with whom they worked out their conviction that exposing one's intimacy with place and one's friends and others can be worthy philosophy.

These essays are late appreciations that are tendered to a circle of writers who testify to the intimate side of reflective philosophical life. They deliver works of remarkable accomplishment despite the dispiriting power of professionalization, and despite the deep pressures in philosophy to disown all intimate exposure in pursuit of a broad dispassionate view from the top. I attempt here a measure of appreciation and a gesture of resistance and transformation, a small step down toward recovery of the personal.

I think of philosophy often as necessarily piecemeal, and perhaps especially so when its underlying aim is to follow its own roots, its capacity to attract and entrap and inspire,

which means living with incompleteness, and proceeding at a rather autobiographical, or at least personal level, as the bulk of these essays do. The German Romantics rediscovered the fragment as a vehicle for philosophy, and Wittgenstein patently avoided “grand conclusions” by calling his explorations “remarks,” “investigations,” or “scraps,” taking a cue from Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Scraps*. It’s instructive that the first word in Cavell’s most recent philosophical– autobiographical piece is “Excerpts”—he will not, toward the end of his prolific writing career, give us conclusions.

Philosophy, as it’s lived and written with clarity and passion, can deliver conviction. It delivers through a voice that evokes and preserves, that offers things for our glance and our praise, and that warms the fires of imagination and the heart. I’ve lingered here with writers who show generosity of spirit, love of the world, and the steep cost of lost intimacy with one’s senses; who show us ever-present shadows of affliction, and the importance of language and poetry in expressing a soul; who instill courage and hope and any number of other essential virtues and sensibilities; and who know that personal revelation has a role in showing what philosophy and a better life might be.

Sometimes we learn what we mean and say by listening to others. I’ve had an extraordinary group of readers of *Lost Intimacy in American Thought*, one of whom writes that I “join Stanley Cavell in attempting to undo the repression of voice and of particularity in our intellectual consideration of philosophy and literature” and “resist the de-humanization of the humanities.” That seems right.

And another reader summed up in words better than I could muster, “Few, said Thoreau, truly know how to walk, how to acknowledge the ordinary world as a sacred place. [This book} takes us on a series of walking meditations through the broken and beautiful landscapes of our time: the terror of Kamikaze pilots and 9/11, the nobility of a broken statue, the wonder of birds angling in the sky with the sun on their wings. In the company of writers from Thoreau and Henry James to Stanley Cavell, Henry Bugbee, and Hannah Arendt, [we see] how philosophy becomes poetry, argument becomes prayer, skepticism becomes love, even—especially—in the face of doubt, pain, and suffering. This lyrical,

searching, and intimate book will ask you to change your life. If reality is reborn in our acts of attention, reading it will do just that."

Another reader responds that the book shows that "the world is a place that overflows with meaning in ways that our best philosophers have sought to understand and account for – and to develop a significant philosophical vision of reality is nothing less than a sacred task. Apart from Alphonso Lingis, no one other than Mooney has done so much to bring a lyric voice to contemporary philosophy."

I've learned, and been heartened, by listening to these readers, who, as I do, sense an alternative canon at the heart of philosophy where it dances with poetry, autobiography, and a deep generosity of spirit. Here are lines from Basho and Henry Bugbee that serve as the book's epigraphs.

*a mountain shelter or a hut in the moor become seeds for words,  
a way to become intimate with wind and cloud.  
Listen recklessly.*

—Basho, *Knapsack Notebook*

*[Without] the intimacy of touch, nothing is truly known.  
No intimacy, no revelation.*

—Henry Bugbee, *The Inward Morning*, 130

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