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The Importance of the Untold Stories & Accessibility in Our Favorite Natural Places

"There is nothing so American as our national parks.... The fundamental idea behind the parks...is that the country belongs to the people, that it is in process of making for the enrichment of the lives of all of us" (nps.gov). This quote by President Roosevelt perfectly sums up the rose-colored glasses we all wear when considering our beloved National Parks, natural spaces, and our land as a whole. We are taught from a young age that the patriotism associated with National Parks is what makes the natural beauties accessible and open for all, but the second you decide to look past the messages given by the people who run these areas, you might start to have some questions.

Imagine your favorite National Park, nature reservation, or just favorite natural place. I challenge you now, for one minute, to take off the rose-colored glasses. Consider who you see in this space? Are they able-bodied, of a certain race, or doing a certain activity? Now think about who you *don't* see. When we have the privilege of access, we don't often stop to question who doesn't have it? How does our access impact the natural space we are in? How did we get access to a land that wasn't ours to begin with? When we have the privilege to learn stories about the natural space we are getting to enjoy, we don't often stop to question who is telling us these stories? Whose stories are missing? Whose stories were erased by these one's, by ours?

The questions I unearthed were endless, and I quickly had a small existential crisis at the realization that a lot of what I had been taught about our land and our history isn't anywhere close to the whole story. The scale of this national shortcoming is overwhelming. Where do we even begin to try to literally dig up the stories we have buried so deep beneath the ground just to build our own on top of them? How do we bring justice to the people who saw their land stripped away and placed on a figurative pedestal for only others to enjoy? We deem these parks the most American thing you can find, an example of land open for all. Yet, when 26% of Americans have physical disabilities and these spaces are not designed for them, and when close to 40% of our population are people of color but less than 1/4 of visitors yearly to National Parks identify as people of color, we have no right to claim that our natural spaces are open and accessible for all.

The problem of untold stories and accessibility occur over a large scale and all over our country, but I couldn't possibly tackle it all in one project. I had to find a case study, a place that I knew well and could challenge my own experiences at and knowledge about. There was no better place than Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts.

The history of Walden, the people who lived there, and how the reservation became what we know today is one that a lot of people know parts of well. Walden Pond was formed thousands of years ago by a receding glacier that left a kettle pond in its path. The pond, truly more the size of a lake, has no inlet or outlet streams that feed and drain it. This creates a unique ecosystem, but it also means that the negative effects of humans and our changing climate are more detrimental than in normal spring fed ponds. The woods surrounding the pond are known as Walden Woods and cover about 2680 acres. The areas of Concord and Lincoln were inhabited by a variety of Native Americans before the English arrived in the early 1600's. Upon the arrival of colonizers, the Natives were quickly pushed from their land, and lots were killed by fighting and disease brought by the Europeans. Concord is where the American Revolution started and

was a town that was swept into the creation of our nation. Over the years after the war, Walden Pond saw lots of changes from land for those exiled from Concord to live in, an escape to write one of the most infamous works of our country, to a recreation area beloved by many.

Even as I write this, it feels wrong to be giving any sort of history lesson knowing how much I am missing even after I have done this project. This project has taught me that even my own memories and experiences at a place have been shaped by the rose-colored glasses I grew up in. I was born and raised in Concord, MA, a five-minute drive from where Henry David Thoreau coveted his famous two years. Growing up with Walden in my backyard gave me a very different experience than those who come as tourists, but the places that I learned about its history are one and the same. Countless trips to the Concord Museum and Walden Pond itself throughout my elementary school years shaped my knowledge solely around Thoreau and “his Walden”. Until I started this project, I never knew about the freed slaves and Irish outcasts stories and some of the terrible ecosystem failures occurring currently. Why? Why do we erase histories to curate something in the way we want it to be? Why do we, as humans, love nature so hard that we kill it in the midst of trying to enjoy it?

I was able to revisit Walden while doing my research, and boy, was it revealing to see the pond through a new lens. As I walked down the trail that I had trekked so many times before, it suddenly dawned on me that there was no way that anyone in a wheelchair could get down the hill I was able to just walk down. I then continued down a path that was inaccessible from any other place than that inaccessible beach, and all I could think about was how my grandparents used to love coming to walk here, but no longer can because the trails are too hard despite it being a relatively level area. I stopped at Thoreau’s cabin, and then I quickly moved on to what the DCR deemed their new “Universal Access Trail”. Turns out it was just a loose gravel path that ran along the outskirts of the area monitored by DCR before turning and running about ten feet from the road for the last quarter mile. All of that was bad enough, but what makes it even worse is that the whole trail was behind hills that blocked the view of the pond. How can we say that we’re creating a “Universal Access Trail” when it accesses nothing? That when we do *finally* consider the experiences of those who might not be able to do what we do, we somehow still throw them to the side and provide an experience unequal to ours.

I won’t stand for this anymore. So, I took to designing a fully accessible trail that ran next to the pond and would give every visitor a chance to experience Walden as Thoreau did, as the Natives did, as the African Americans who sought refuge here did: moving through nature, moving with nature, being with nature. This solution comes in the form of a boardwalk. The boardwalk is wider than the minimum required by the ADA at seven feet. This means that those who require mobility devices will be able to travel with a buddy, and the hard wood provides a stable surface for those who need it to walk on.

The boardwalk will be placed on the existing heart trail, which runs all the way around the pond, but the boardwalk will get you to Thoreau’s cabin and loop back to the Visitor Center by the Universal Accessibility Trail. Not only will this trail design allow for countless more people to be able to experience all that Walden Pond has to offer, but it is one of the simplest ways to start to help the soil and the earth around the pond. By simply lifting everyone off the trail, the amount of erosion occurring every year will greatly decrease. The plants and tree roots that grow around and through the trail will have freedom again. Everyone deserves to have access to nature. Everyone deserves to learn about the amazing history of our natural places while accessing those places. This new trail will do just that.

The problem centered around the untold and lost stories of Walden Pond was a harder one to tackle. I quickly learned that some people just didn't want to tell any other story other than Thoreau's. After learning more about Thoreau and his life outside of Walden, he had immense respect for the Native people of New England; Our omission of them from his story and the story of Walden might have him rolling in the grave. It took lots and lots of digging to finally find some of the information I was looking for, but I knew I wanted to tell the stories of the Native Americans, the freed African American slaves who lived at Walden, the outcasts who called it home, the reality of Thoreau's work and life there, and finally the sad state of the diminishing ecosystem we love so much.

After a previous project centered around interpretative education, I thought the best way to tell the stories was through well, a story. Then why not put this story into a storywalk along the new designed loop so that anyone who visited the pond and walked the trail could learn a little along the way. I knew I wouldn't be able to find a picture book that told the stories I wanted, so I made my own. The 40-page story takes you through the *whole* history of Walden Pond, starting all the way back at its creation. I have worked in activities along the story to keep younger audiences interested and to further emphasize the stories they might not have heard before. It felt important to end the story on where we stand now. I highlight plants that no longer live at Walden and ways that anyone can help protect this beautiful place. This storywalk also needs to feel intentional and strong. The stands will be sturdy and permanent, sending the message that the stories are here to stay.

In our culture, we tend to shy away from telling parts of our history that we are ashamed of or when we hurt others. I wanted to acknowledge that sometimes reading about these types of stories is hard, but that all the feelings they bring up and all the questions they make you ask is exactly why I wanted to do this. We intake information and stories often from only one side without question, but what happens when we do question? When we start to wonder if there is more that we're missing?

Walden Pond is only 61 acres. That is .00008 the size of Yosemite National Park. Take that in for second. It took me sixteen weeks to do only a shallow dive into what we don't learn and are lacking at Walden Pond. Imagine how many stories are left untold, how many people are forced to sit on the sidelines of nature, how much history we have lost, how much damage we are doing to the parks and places that are thousands of times larger than Walden. What an injustice to the beauty of nature and to the beauty of those who lived here before us.

I can't be the only one to take on this fight. I hope to continue to work on projects like this; One's that get me thinking in ways I never would've and questioning the status quo that we all just roll with each day. It's scary. I won't deny that. It took a lot to look in the eyes of people who lived Thoreau and who taught me about the writers who shaped our town and tell them "You are missing something". Fighting for the stories we have worked so hard to bury as a culture takes a lot of strength. I hope this project can inspire that strength into others too.

I also want to start a change in the design community. A change that sees people without access like we have to nature put first. A change that allows us to design at the forefront for those who might not have the same abilities as us. We can continue to love our land to death while wearing our rose-colored glasses, or we can take them off and start to see it all clearly. We can start to see the truth that every single one of us is a part of this beautiful world and so many who have come before us have shaped it into what it is today. Those stories that don't get told and those people who can't experience nature the same deserve to give love too.

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