

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American writer and leading proponent of transcendentalism. He was also a seasoned, common sense critic of government and insisted on living a free and simple life.

He was born on July 12, 1817, in Concord, Massachusetts. He attended Harvard from 1833 to 1837. He had a great fascination with the natural world.

In 1845, when he was 27 years old, Thoreau went to live at Walden Pond outside of Concord, Massachusetts in Walden Park State Reservation. A year earlier, in 1844, he had accidentally set fire to a large portion of the Concord woods. He became known around town as the “woods burner.” He returned to the woods to see what nature could teach him. He stayed two years, in a modest cabin he built on a cove. He supported himself by seeking surveying jobs and growing up vegetables. He had as neighbors freed slaves, immigrant workers and other people living on the margin of society.

He kept a journal of his thoughts and observations that he published in his work: “Walden. A Life in the Woods.” It took him nine years and seven drafts to perfect it and sold it for \$1 a copy when it was first published. Thoreau’s thoughts flow from one subject to the other throughout this book. The contents include the following essays: Walden, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Cape Cod, The Allegash and East Branch, Walking, Civil Disobedience, Slavery in Massachusetts, A Plea for Captain John Brown and Life Without Principle. The perspective presented in his 732 pages appeals to writers, poets, philosophers and anyone who values their thoughts more than material possessions. The book inspired a new kind of awareness about the environment and our relationship to it, and started the conservation, preservation and environmentalist movements.

WALDEN;
OR,
LIFE IN THE WOODS.

By HENRY D. THOREAU,
AUTHOR OF "A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS."



I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up. — Page 22.

BOSTON:
TICKNOR AND FIELDS.
M DCCC LXX.

Figure 1. Walden; on, Life in the Woods.

He was hardly a hermit and had many visitors. He lived on a wooded lot owned by another leading conservationist: Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau admired Emerson's essay, "Nature," which preached that each person should find a relationship with the natural world.

His essay, Civil Disobedience, seems to have been born during a time Thoreau had to stay in a prison because he refused to pay a poll tax. This essay is said to have later influenced the Mahatma Gandhi in India and the civil-rights movement led by Martin Luther King in the USA.

He is famous for his words which are frequently quoted:

"A good book is the plectrum with which our else silent lyres are struck."

"What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?"

"Be not merely good, be good for something."

"Things do not change; we change."

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer."

"Be true to your work, your word, and your friend."

"A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone."

"Cultivate the habit of early rising. It is unwise to keep the head long on a level with the feet."

“How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.”

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

GOVERNMENT IS BEST WHICH GOVERNS LEAST

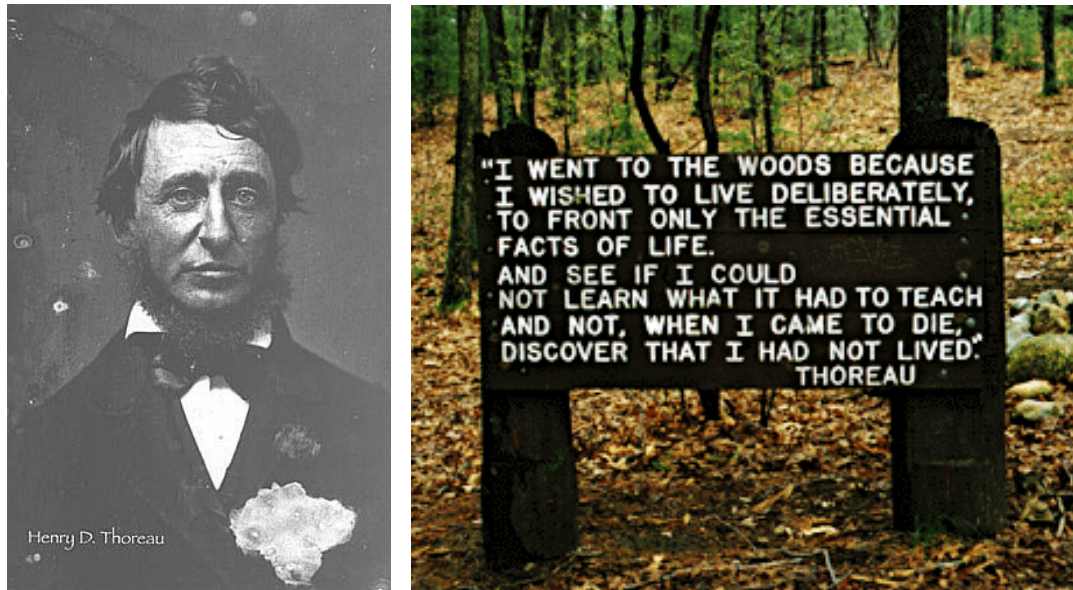


Figure 2. Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and his words at Walden Pond.

Henry David Thoreau

“I heartily accept the motto, “That government is best which governs least;” and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe “That government is best which governs not at all;” and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people

themselves. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient, by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of india-rubber, would never manage to bounce over obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But government in which the majorities rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for the law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? Or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power? Visit the Navy Yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make, or such as it can make

a man with its black arts — a mere shadow and reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing, and already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniment, though it may be, —

*“Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O’er the grave where our hero was buried.”*

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others — as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders — serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God. A very few — as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men — serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. A wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be “clay,” and “stop a hole to keep the wind away,” but leave that office to his dust at least: —

*“I am too high-born to be propertied,
To be a second at control,
Or useful serving-man and instrument
To any sovereign state throughout the world.”*

He who gives himself entirely to his fellow men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist.

How does it become a man to behave toward the American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also.

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution of ‘75. If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them. All machines have their friction; and possibly this does enough good to counter-balance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about

it. But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is that fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.”