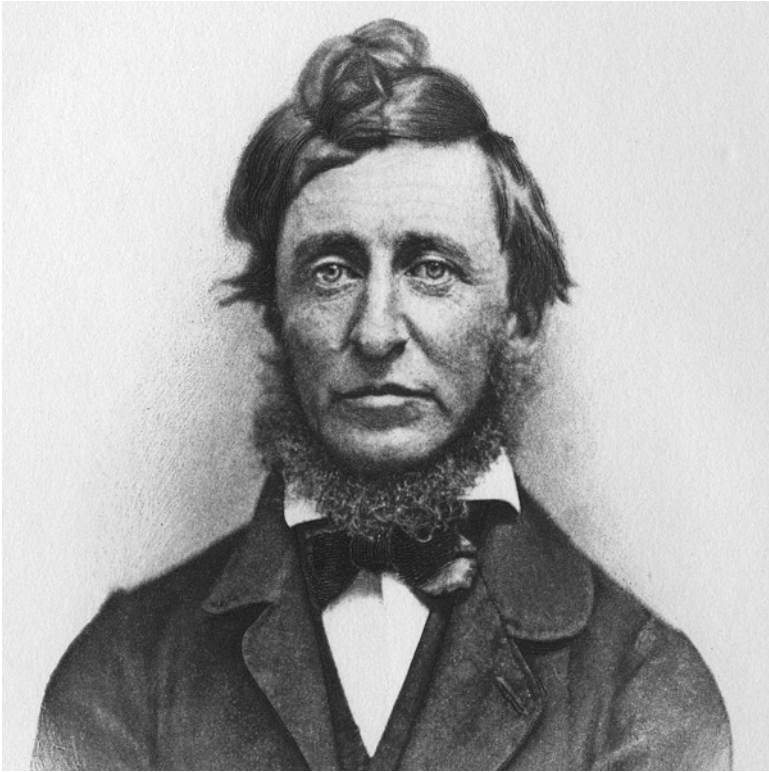


Henry David Thoreau

Living Deliberately



An American original who lived life according to his ideals, Henry David Thoreau openly questioned the norms of society and stood up for a life of peace and simplicity. Amid the materialism of the industrial revolution and the violence of war and slavery, his was one of only a few brave voices speaking up for nature, nonviolence, and individual freedom. Although relatively uncelebrated in his own time, Thoreau was a true pioneer of deliberate living.

Henry David Thoreau was born in the small town of Concord, Massachusetts, U.S., in 1817, as he asserted, “in the most favored spot on earth—and just in the nick of time, too.” It was just prior to the transcendental movement, an idealistic system of thought that originated near Concord and promoted such ideals as strength of character, courage, self-confidence, and independence of mind.

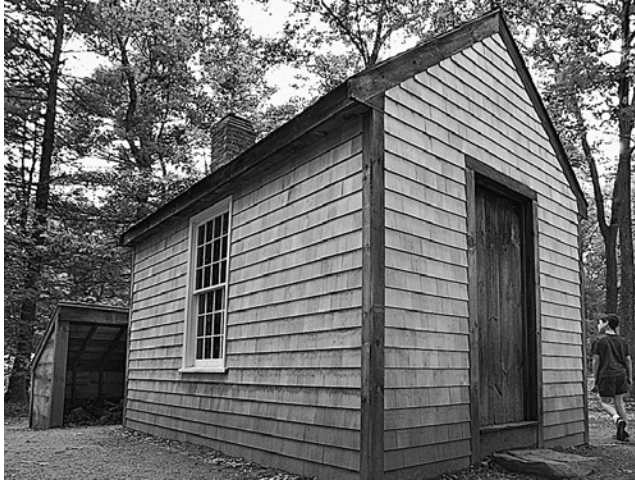
The son of a quiet pencil maker and his vivacious wife, an antislavery campaigner, young Thoreau was a serious child. He loved to spend countless hours exploring the woods around Concord. From his first glimpse of Walden Pond and its quiet beauty, he immediately dreamed of living there. Little did he know that one day his dream would come true and his documentation of that reality would become a classic of American literature.

But first, Thoreau had to trade his beloved woods for the stone halls of academia. At just sixteen years of age, he entered Harvard University and showed early signs of his independent nature, wearing a green coat “because the authorities required a black one.” After graduating from Harvard, he returned to Concord and took a teaching job, only to resign two weeks later because he had been ordered to administer corporal punishment to his students—an order he refused to obey.

Considered a loner by some people, Thoreau was close to a few confidants including his brother, John. Thoreau’s first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, commemorated a boating expedition with John and was written during the time for which Thoreau is most famous—his living on the shores of Walden Pond.

Thoreau’s time at Walden Pond was an experiment in simple, natural living. On land owned by his friend, transcendentalist writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau built his laboratory, a 10- by 15-foot cabin. Using mostly salvaged material, he completed the cabin in 1845 and moved in, fittingly, on July 4,

Independence Day. In his own declaration of independence, Thoreau said, “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.”



A replica of Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond.

Some of his contemporaries thought Thoreau was wasting his Harvard education by not pursuing a typical career. But Thoreau wanted nothing to do with a typical career because, to him, it was a trap. It locked people into working their lives away in jobs that they did not enjoy, that did not contribute to the true betterment of humanity, and that plundered the environment, only to get money to buy things they did not really need and that did not bring them lasting joy. In short, Thoreau believed that people were so engrossed in making a living that they did not live, and he observed, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” To Thoreau, this was a tragic waste of time, natural resources, and human potential. Through simple living, Thoreau hypothesized that people could break out of this trap and thereby enjoy greater freedom and happiness.

At age twenty-eight, Thoreau tested this hypothesis at Walden Pond, launching each day with an invigorating bath in the pond,

followed by work in his garden—the vegetables feeding him and providing income to cover his low expenses. Afternoons left the so-called “bachelor of nature” free to walk in the woods and intently study the environment for at least four hours every day, and to write, talk with visitors, or simply bask in the glory of the forest. If some people saw Thoreau’s lifestyle as antisocial, it was only because he found so much of ordinary conversation to be nothing more than superficial gossip. He preferred meaningful conversation with thinking individuals or solitude and reflection. Thus, loneliness was a stranger to Thoreau as he relished his outwardly simple, inwardly rich life, declaring, “I love my fate to the very core and rind.”

Thoreau’s serenity was interrupted one day when, while in town on an errand, he was suddenly apprehended and jailed. His crime? Refusing to pay the poll tax. His motive? Declining to support a government that was permitting the holding of slaves and was waging war with Mexico. His defense? He could not stand to trace the path of his dollar “till it buys a man, or a musket to shoot one with.” The prisoner accepted his punishment willingly and when his friend Emerson asked, “Henry, why are you here?” Thoreau replied, “Why are you *not* here?” After spending one night in jail and learning that his mother and aunts had paid his bond without his consent, he was released and calmly went about finishing his errand before returning to his cabin.

After two years, two months, and two days, Thoreau felt his experiment at Walden Pond was complete and left to report his major findings: “that to maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely,” and, “that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

Eager to share his findings with society, Thoreau moved back to Concord and began giving lectures and writing essays. His

book *Walden* shared details about his life in the woods and insights about life in general. In writing *Walden*, the intent of the naturalist/philosopher was this, “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as [a rooster] in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.” *Walden* extolled the joyful freedom of simple, conscious living, and urged readers to “Simplify, simplify.”

Although he was an enthusiastic fan of individuality, Thoreau also cared about his fellow citizens and participated in important public discourse. One of his most influential essays, “Civil Disobedience,” criticized oppressive government and praised personal freedom. As Thoreau explained, civil disobedience is the act of protesting an injustice by openly disobeying an unjust law and willingly accepting the consequences. In this essay, which later had a profound impact on nonviolent leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., Thoreau proclaimed, “I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward.”

Personally practicing civil disobedience, Thoreau continued protesting war and slavery by again refusing to pay poll tax for the next six years. He explained, “What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.” When an escaped slave, Anthony Burns, was captured and returned to his owner by the state of Massachusetts, Thoreau was outraged. Slavery violated what Thoreau felt was the most cherished human right, the right to individual freedom. He promptly gave a lecture, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” announcing, “I have lived the last month ... with a sense of suffering a vast and indefinite loss. I did not know at first what ailed me. At last it occurred to me that what I had lost was a country” Lamenting his government’s unjust policies, Thoreau also felt he had lost his most precious treasure—the serenity he felt in nature. Not one to sink in the quicksand of despair, though, Thoreau took action by

denouncing slavery in additional lectures and essays and personally assisting escaped slaves.

One winter Thoreau caught a severe cold that developed into bronchitis, and then tuberculosis. Thoreau accepted his fate with equanimity. It had come time for him to die and he was content, knowing that he had made the most of his life and had truly lived. Loving the earth so dearly, he remarked that he would gladly be buried in it. On a lovely spring morning in 1862, in the company of his mother and sister, Thoreau, just forty-four years old, after enjoying the fragrance of a bouquet of hyacinths, faded away.

Thoreau had once said, “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness” It is fitting, then, that at Thoreau’s funeral his coffin was sprinkled with forest sprigs and wildflowers and, reflecting his belief in simplicity, his grave was marked by a simple stone bearing only his name and date of death. So concluded the short life of this one-of-a-kind man, whose heartfelt wish for humanity is as relevant today as it was during his lifetime—that individuals enjoy their own versions of the good life, living simply and consciously, respecting nature and their fellow human beings, and following the deepest yearnings of their hearts. Through living deliberately, Henry David Thoreau conducted what has been called “one of the great and lasting experiments in life and thought of the whole of human experience.”



A view of Walden Pond.

The Words of Henry David Thoreau

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

“Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?”

“It is never too late to give up our prejudices.”

“I am convinced, that if all men were to live as simply as I then did, thieving and robbery would be unknown. These take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough.”

“Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it.”

“There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.”

“The fate of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls—the worst man is as strong as the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning.”