

Where I Lived, and What I Lived For

HENRY DAVID THOREAU



Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was a philosopher, poet, essayist, and naturalist as well as an outspoken social critic. He was born in Concord, Massachusetts, and was educated at Harvard. He worked in a variety of professions, from land surveyor to teacher to pencil maker. Strongly influenced by his neighbor and friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau considered himself a fierce patriot who honored his country and its ideals, if not always its government. He spoke out against the war against Mexico, and slavery—specifically the Fugitive Slave Act—and defended the abolitionist John Brown. He is best known for *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, published in 1854, which is his account of living in a cabin on Walden Pond for two years. This selection is from the second chapter of *Walden*.

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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”¹

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes;² it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evi-

¹The first question and answer in the Westminster Catechism, a statement of religious doctrine that came out of the Protestant Reformation, is “Q: What is the chief end of man? A: To glorify God and enjoy him forever.” — Eds.

²Allusions to the Greek fable of the Myrmidons (ant-people), and to Book III of the *Iliad*, respectively. The *Iliad* draws a parallel between the Trojan War and the mythological war between the cranes and the pygmies. — Eds.

table wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy, made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether *they* do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers,³ and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over, so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometimes get up again.

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. As for *work*, we haven't

any of any consequence. We have the Saint Vitus' dance,⁴ and cannot possibly keep our heads still. If I should only give a few pulls at the parish bell-rope, as for a fire, that is, without setting the bell, there is hardly a man on his farm in the outskirts of Concord, notwithstanding that press of engagements which was his excuse so many times this morning, nor a boy, nor a woman, I might almost say, but would foresake all and follow that sound, not mainly to save property from the flames, but, if we will confess the truth, much more to see it burn, since burn it must, and we, be it known, did not set it on fire — or to see it put out, and have a hand in it, if that is done as handsomely; yes, even if it were the parish church itself. Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, "What's the news?" as if the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels. Some give directions to be waked every half-hour, doubtless for no other purpose; and then, to pay for it, they tell what they have dreamed. After a night's sleep the news is as indispensable as the breakfast. "Pray tell me anything new that has happened to a man anywhere on this globe" — and he reads it over his coffee and rolls, that a man has had his eyes gouged out this morning on the Wachito River; never dreaming the while that he lives in the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and has but the rudiment of an eye himself.

For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life — I wrote this some years ago — that were worth the postage. The penny-post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter — we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all *news*, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure — news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelvemonth, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. As for Spain, for instance, if you know how to throw in Don Carlos and the Infanta, and Don Pedro and Seville and Granada, from time to time in the right proportions — they may have changed the names a little since I saw the papers — and serve up a bullfight when other entertainments fail, it will be true to the letter, and give us as good an idea of the exact state or ruin of things in Spain as the most

⁴A disease that causes the victim to twitch uncontrollably. St. Vitus is the patron saint of dancers. — Eds.

succinct and lucid reports under this head in the newspapers; and as for England, almost the last significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649; and if you have learned the history of her crops for an average year, you never need attend to that thing again, unless your speculations are of a merely pecuniary character. If one may judge who rarely looks into the newspapers, nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts, a French revolution not excepted.

What news! how much more important to know what that is which was never old! "Kieou-pe-yu (great dignitary of the state of Wei) sent a man to Khoung-tseu to know his news. Khoung-tseu caused the messenger to be seated near him, and questioned him in these terms: What is your master doing? The messenger answered with respect: My master desires to diminish the number of his faults, but he cannot come to the end of them. The messenger being gone, the philosopher remarked: What a worthy messenger! What a worthy messenger!" The preacher, instead of vexing the ears of drowsy farmers on their day of rest at the end of the week — for Sunday is the fit conclusion of an ill-spent week, and not the fresh and brave beginning of a new one — with this one other draggle-tail of a sermon, should shout with thundering voice, "Pause! Avast! Why so seeming fast, but deadly slow?"

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundless truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure. I have read in a Hindoo book, that "there was a king's son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father's ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. So soul," continues the Hindoo philosopher, "from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher and then it knows itself to be *Brahme*."⁵ I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that *is* which *appears* to be. If a man should walk through

⁵One of the three main Hindu gods, now spelled *Brahma*. — Eds.

this town and see only the reality, where, think you, would the "Milldam"⁶ go to? If he should give us an account of the realities he beheld there, we should not recognize the place in his description. Look at the meetinghouse, or a courthouse, or a jail, or a shop, or a dwelling-house, and say what that thing really is before a true gaze, and they would all go to pieces in your account of them. Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving then. The poet or the artist never yet had so fair and noble a design but some of his posterity at least could accomplish it.

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or breakfast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry—determined to make a day of it. Why should we knock under and go with the stream? Let us not be upset and overwhelmed in that terrible rapid and whirlpool called a dinner, situated in the meridian shallows. Weather this danger and you are safe, for the rest of the way is downhill. With unrelaxed nerves, with morning vigor, sail by it, looking another way, tied to the mast like Ulysses. If the engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains. If the bell rings, why should we run? We will consider what kind of music they are like. Let us settle ourselves and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion⁷ which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d'appui*,⁸ below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamppost safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter,⁹ and feel its sweet edge dividing you

⁶Concord's business center.—Eds.

⁷The flow of water against a shore.—Eds.

⁸French, "foundation."—Eds.

⁹Also known as a *scimeter* or *scimitar*, a curved bladed sword traditionally used in the Middle East.—Eds.

through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.

Time is but the stream I go afishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts, so by the divining-rod and thin rising vapors, I judge; and here I will begin to mine.

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Questions for Discussion

1. What is Henry David Thoreau calling for early in paragraph 2 when he writes, "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"?
2. Thoreau writes, "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us" (para. 2). Consider an electronic device (such as a laptop computer, a smartphone, a tablet, or an MP3 player). What would Thoreau say about it? Has this device helped to simplify our lives, or has it had a negative impact on them?
3. What does Thoreau mean when he says, "As for *work*, we haven't any of any consequence" (para. 3)? What is his definition of *work*?
4. How do you interpret this assertion: "Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundless truths, while reality is fabulous" (para. 6)? Use that as a topic sentence, and develop it with examples from your own experience.
5. Do you think Thoreau's advice and sentiments in this essay are meant as recommendations for living one's entire life or as suggestions for periodically reflecting on life's true meaning? Is he suggesting isolation as a lifestyle?
6. In today's terms, how would you characterize Thoreau's politics? Is he very conservative or very progressive? Is he somewhere in between?

Questions on Rhetoric and Style

1. In the first paragraph, how does Thoreau use antitheses to describe his purpose in going to live in the woods?

2. Paragraph 2 opens with a simile and continues its lengthy development with more similes and an extended metaphor. Identify these and explain their effect.
3. Throughout the text, Thoreau uses repetition, particularly parallel structure. Identify three or four examples and analyze their effect. Try to find ones that illustrate different effects.
4. Thoreau opens paragraph 3 with a rhetorical question. How effectively does the rest of the paragraph answer it—or does he intend to “answer” the question?
5. What does Thoreau mean by the phrase “starved before we are hungry” in the second sentences of paragraph 3? What other examples of paradox do you find in this excerpt from *Walden*?
6. Compare the probable rhetorical effect of paragraph 4 at the time it was written with its effect today.
7. What is the purpose of the parable in paragraph 5? In telling this story, what assumptions does Thoreau make about his audience?
8. In paragraph 6, Thoreau sets forth a series of “if . . . then” statements to support his opening sentence. Explain the deductive logic in at least one of these statements, specifying the major and minor premises and conclusion. Note that the assumption may be unexpressed.
9. What is the meaning of the allusion to Ulysses in paragraph 7?
10. In what ways do the ideas Thoreau presents in paragraph 6 become the foundation for the beliefs he expresses in paragraph 7? For instance, how do the ideas explained in paragraph 6 lead to his exhortation, “If the engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains”?
11. Sometimes, even the slightest stylistic feature can work effectively as a rhetorical strategy. What is the effect of the alliterative phrase “freshet and frost and fire” in paragraph 7?
12. In the concluding paragraph, Thoreau develops two metaphors regarding time and the intellect. What are they? What is their effect?

Suggestions for Writing

1. In paragraph 5, Thoreau writes, “What news! how much more important to know what that is which was never old!” Write an essay in which you evaluate Thoreau’s own writing according to this thought. Consider how this essay appeals to two audiences: Thoreau’s contemporaries and today’s readers.
2. In this essay, Thoreau extols the virtues of individualism and self-sufficiency. Discuss how living according to these virtues can jeopardize the community; consider specific circumstances when such jeopardy might occur.
3. Write a response to Thoreau, telling him how modern technology has influenced how we communicate. Acknowledge how he did or did not anticipate our modern condition.
4. Using the reflective style of Thoreau, write your own philosophical essay entitled “Where I Live, and What I Live For” (note present tense).