

Thoreau's Walden in the Twenty-first Century

Editor's Note: The following brief essays were written by Thoreau scholars, environmental writers, and Thoreau Society members in response to the question "Why should we read Walden in the twenty-first century?"

Suellen Campbell, Colorado State University:

Why read *Walden*? Because it challenges us to live with passion, curiosity, mindfulness. It says to us: Make every hour count. Press your head against the heavens, your feet into the ground, and walk. Eyes wide open! Pay attention! Wake up!

Walden exhorts us to know where we live and what we live for, to front the essential facts of life, to conduct ourselves so that when we come to die, we will not discover that we have not lived. It coaxes us to simplify, to cull what matters from what doesn't, truth from pretense. It calls us at once to the things of the spirit and to the things of this world.

After all these years, this book still offers to us—and to our heavy hearts—a map beyond desperation.

Bradley P. Dean, Editor of Thoreau's *Wild Fruits* and *Faith in a Seed*:

As *Walden* enters its third half century, it strikes me as more relevant than ever. Here, in some of the most dazzlingly beautiful prose in the English language, Thoreau goads and inspires and provokes and encourages us to improve our "outward condition or circumstances in this world" so that we can concentrate on improving our inward condition, which is where each of us most truly lives. The book is a delightful celebration of the virtues of simplicity (plain living) and deliberation (high thinking)—virtues most needful today, in a world that daily, hourly bellows in our ears, befuddles our senses, scrambles our

THE CONCORD SAUNTERER, N.S. Volume 11, 2003

minds, becomes inexorably more complex and troubled. Now more than ever we need the tonic of *Walden*.

But more than a bracing tonic, Thoreau's wonderful book is a celebration of the Grand Fact that each of us is free to journey on life now. Put the tumult aside, read the book, read it carefully, read it again, be refreshed and made whole again beyond confusion. Be reminded of what is really, despite the fuss and fumes and flying feathers of our workaday lives, most important. How many of us, when *we* come to die—for be it remembered, each of us will surely die—how many of us on that day will discover that we had not truly lived?

Thoreau teaches in *Walden* that the universe will always be wider than our conceptions of it, that the world lies all before us as in a dream—and that, to the awakening soul, the dream is real. Such good news is always and forever relevant, is it not?

Bill McKibben, Author of *The End of Nature* and other books and essays on environmental topics:

We should read Thoreau in the 21st century because that's the century he was writing for. Look--the man had exquisitely sensitive antennae. He could pick things up a long way off. As a result, most of his contemporaries thought he was nuts. Consider his whining about all the signs hanging above the stores on Concord's Main Street--they so oppressed him with their demand for getting-and-spending that he stuck to back streets, which is pretty comical when you consider we'd stick them in colonial Williamsburg to depict a bygone era of quaint gentility.

This prescience was the intellectual equivalent of joining the Lincoln Brigades--forget premature anti-fascism, he was a premature anti-infoglut crusader. (Among many other things). Only those of us who live with the 24/7 assault of spam and C-span and Fox News and Clear Channel and Ipod and perfumed magazines can really understand intuitively what he was talking about, sense the complete inability to hear one's own heart amidst the ceaseless chatter. Like a time-delayed explosive, his depth-charge of common sense reverberates in our moment. And all the more important since so few in our own time can really confront our predicament. Thank heaven for old Henry, new again in our moment.

John Hanson Mitchell, author of *Walking to Walden: A Pilgrimage in Search of Place* and other books about nature.

Whatever subject I happen upon in the course of my various researches: Eastern mysticism, botany, Native American studies, politics, philosophy, travel, thoughts on wilderness, on local natural history, on

technology, on religion, and most especially, on the quintessential study of what it means to be associated with a singular place, I never cease to be amazed by the fact that Henry Thoreau has already thought the subject through and summed up whatever it is I am trying to learn about in a few pithy phrases.

Joel Myerson, University of South Carolina (Professor Emeritus):

We should read Thoreau in the twenty-first century because he asks us to continually re-evaluate our lives and the demands of contemporary (at any time) society. My favorite quote from Thoreau, in the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*, is "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." Throughout his writings, Thoreau asks us to try and balance our material and spiritual lives, and as we enter an even more materialistic century than the one we just left, such challenges to us are even more important.

Mary E. Pitts, freelance writer and Thoreau Society member:

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do...Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. (Thoreau, *Walden*, 90)

In his two years at Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau conducted his investigation into the proper way and the true meaning of life. The product of those two years, *Walden*, is Thoreau's immortal, living testament to the success of his experiment as well as an exemplary do-it-yourself guide to the simple life.

Walden begins on a pessimistic note, evidenced by Thoreau's almost audible cry in the first chapter, "Economy":

Talk of a divinity in man! Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or night does any divinity stir within him? His highest duty to fodder and water his horses! What is his destiny to him compared with the shipping interests?...How godlike, how immortal, is he? (7)

But it ends on an optimistic one, when he says, in "Conclusion":

Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poor-house...I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace. (328)

What Thoreau learned about life while he lived at Walden and what he tried to impart to his neighbors in Walden, by bragging "as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost" (84) was that a quiet life, a life of simplicity, solitude, and contemplation brings spiritual rewards and the quiet mind of which he writes.

Thoreau's immediate audience in Walden was his townsmen, especially those whose misfortune it was "to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools" (5). His distant audience was those of us living in future generations whose misfortune he would have said it was to have inherited condominiums, automobiles, swimming pools, television sets, and stereos. But his real audience was all of mankind, in any prospective age, whose misfortune he foresaw it would be to inherit the industrial improvements that he would say, as he did regarding the railroad, ride upon us.

Thoreau felt very strongly that:

To be a philosopher is...so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically (14-15)

and he tried to live that type of practical life, particularly in the two years he spent at Walden. In fact, he went there thinking:

It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them...For the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence;

as our skeletons, probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors. (11-12)

He's telling us here that the myriad improvements in living that have occurred throughout the entire existence of man have, for the most part, been outward improvements, meant to indulge the body only, and have had little or no effect upon the soul. Thus, at Walden, he hoped to learn and, in *Walden*, to communicate to his neighbors, all of us, just what a man needs to know and to do in order to live the most fulfilling life possible.

In his desire "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life..." (90), Thoreau often went to extremes, the most obvious of which was his move to Walden. Others included his staunch refusal to acquiesce to societal norms by taking a regular job; his long daily walks through the fields and woods of Concord; and the most important of all, his lifelong study of his own inner life. It was in that constant perusal of his soul, the habitual questioning of himself instead of looking to and depending upon others, that he found the essential facts of life, that he discovered that such things as fancy clothes detract from rather than add to, the quality of a man's life; that no matter how far a man travels, physical travel alone cannot ensure him peace of mind; and that even the richest man in the world cannot buy "one necessary of the soul" (329).

Using the life of the familiar farmer as an example, he tips us off to the dangers of materialism and the complications it can bring to our lives. For instance, when he talks about the farmer and his house, as in, "when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him" (33), he's trying to awaken us to the idea that the acquisition of a house, as well as other material items, takes more of a man's life in terms of time and toil than it's worth, and that it keeps a man from pursuing the real business of life, self-cultivation.

To the same effect, he writes, "The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost" (5), and "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (31).

And when he says,

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; 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 (323)

he's urging us, once we've found ourselves and our own individual ways, to travel along those ways conscientiously, with faith that by doing so we'll also meet with "a success unexpected in common hours."

Thoreau advises us to do all these things. What he does not advise us to do is to go out into the woods or to a pond, as he did, or to desert our families or shirk our responsibilities, as some readers think he did, and does. Rather, he states, "Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made" (326), and

I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account...but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way (71).

Thoreau believed that to live meant infinitely more than to get up every morning, go to work, come home each evening, have dinner and go to bed. He believed that the material things for which we work our lives away are worthless next to the living we trade off in order to do so. He saw that we grow from within, meet our potentials only through such inner growth, and live fruitless and miserable lives if we don't allow ourselves that growth. And he saw that, if we waste our lives being "employed...laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal" (5), we'll find, when our lives are over, if not before, that we've lived the lives of fools. He did not intend to live such a life.

He lamented that we "honestly think there is no choice left" (8) but to plod our way through life. But he, himself, through his daily, intense self-examination and evaluation of the world around him, had learned that we have many choices in life. Using this knowledge, Thoreau chose his life of simplicity and solitude, though it grated the senses of his townsmen, for the reason that he "did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear" (90).

He knew he could not go the way of the common man, as he considered that way as not living. And when he writes, "It is the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd sodiligently follow" (36), he's proposing that, if we live as everyone else does, particularly if we live a materially-oriented life, we are not living at all, we're just following the leader, living someone else's life.

One of his favorite sayings, especially to his young students, was, "To have some one thing to do, and do it perfectly" (Channing 66). The one thing in his life Thoreau was bent on doing perfectly was living. And that living did not include any purely mundane activities. He illustrates this graphically when he writes:

I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still. (36)

He saw that such chores are not only a waste of time and energy, but also that they have no relation to the true purpose of life, spiritual growth, and he was determined not to squander his life away performing them. Indeed, one of his best-known advices is, "Our life is frittered away by detail...Simplify, simplify" (91).

Thoreau had a very exalted idea of what we are created for and what we are capable of doing. When he says, "man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried" (10), he's both commenting on our failure to be what we are meant to be and daring us to take his advice, break out of our self-imposed limits, and see what we can actually accomplish by so doing. He's challenging the very finiteness of human life, suggesting that if we use all our powers, we, like our Creator, could be Infinite. Thoreau here urges us to take a giant step toward immortality. And he gives us a charming example of what he means in his parable of the artist of Kouroo, in "Conclusion."

This story, which depicts a young man whittling a staff, parallels Thoreau's own life. Just as the artist chose the finest material for his staff, so Thoreau chose what he considered the finest material for the subject of his book, nature. Just as the artist concentrated on creating his product, disregarding all other aspects of life around him, so Thoreau spent his two years at Walden alone, apart from the town, disregarding the society of Concord for the most part. And just as the artist of Kouroo paid no attention to the passing of time in favor of making a perfect product, so Thoreau took no heed of the years flying by and lived the best life and wrote the finest book about that life he could.

As the artist of Kouroo tried to make a perfect product of his staff, so Thoreau tried to make perfect products of both his life and his book. That is what *Walden* is all about, the conscientious and purposeful methods Henry David Thoreau used to conduct his life of simplicity and quality, and to write his book about it.

But nowhere in *Walden* does Thoreau tell us to live our lives as he did his. Rather he tells us to think for ourselves, choose high goals and pursue them tirelessly, simplify our needs, and recognize no limitations, especially that of time. He's trying to wake us up to the infinite possibilities of a life of thoughtful deliberation. As he loved a broad margin to his life, he's encouraging us to widen our horizons. And he's hoping to alert us to the fact that, just as "Birds do not sing in caves" (28), neither do men.

Robert Sattelmeyer, Georgia State University:

“How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book.”

Audacious as he was, Henry Thoreau probably hoped that his own book might cause future readers to date a new era in their lives from reading it, but even he might be surprised at the extent to which well-thumbed and dog-eared copies of *Walden* are carried through life by devoted readers a hundred and fifty years after its publication. I still have mine, a Signet paperback edition, price fifty cents new, purchased in 1962 from the bookstore in my high school in a small town in Indiana. The extent to which it marked an era in my life might be suggested by the fact that, a few years later, when I was in college and writing a senior thesis on *Walden*, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a small house which I rented myself, on the shore of a small lake. And I doubt if a year has gone by during the intervening forty when I have not reread at least parts of it.

But I would not urge this course on anyone else, having long passed the age when my advice could be trusted. To read *Walden* the way one should, that is as deliberately and reservedly as it was written, is finally an intensely personal experience that depends on having the great good fortune to come across it at the right time. Except on very rare occasions, I find, one's attempts to make devotees out of friends or students are liable to disappointment. That we should read *Walden* in the twenty-first century I have no doubt, for, as Thoreau says, it may still do good service to him (or her) whom it fits. And on the score of cultural literacy, of course, it remains one of a dozen or so works of American literature that any educated person should know, if only to hold one's own in the cocktail party of life and to understand the occasional cartoon in the *New Yorker*.

Walden is an easier book to love than to like. Students assigned to read it often find its language bafflingly complex and allusive, its tone preachy, its concerns apparently remote from theirs; they give up, disappointed not to find in it what they expected, a warm and fuzzy, vaguely environmental encomium on doing one's own thing. The only promise that they seem to agree that Thoreau delivers is his demand to “give me a sentence that no intelligence can understand.” Good teachers can overcome much of this initial resistance, of course, but to really read *Walden* according to the standards that matter, the ones Thoreau outlines in “Reading,” requires a commitment that goes beyond what it takes to get an A.

Because it is at its highest pitch a book about changing one's life, *Walden* ought to be read chiefly by those who need it, and there is no telling,

really, who makes up that audience. It depends on when the egg is ready to hatch from the table. We might try leaving copies in youth hostels, airports, dentists' waiting rooms, the back seats of taxis, or wherever people might be leading lives of quiet desperation. But finally, as Thoreau knew, only that day dawns to which we are awake.

Jay Vogelsong, writer and Thoreau Society member:

I enjoy reading Henry Thoreau's writings not just because I am interested in his politics and philosophy, his love of nature or even the beauty of his language. I like Thoreau primarily because of his honesty and straightforwardness. And I love him as a dear friend because reading his works has encouraged me, over and over, to be honest myself.

In *Walden*, Thoreau turns to the theme of honesty and truthfulness again and again. He writes about himself and his neighbors because that's what he knows. He encourages his readers to examine their assumptions and give up their prejudices. He tells us not to trust what we've been told. He warns us we shouldn't judge by appearances because the truth is stranger than fiction. He claims simplifying our material lives is the result of being truthful, and the means by which we can set out on the search for truth ourselves. He challenges us to stay awake and be observant. He shares with us how rich his honest and observant life was. And he maintains that there's always more to learn, and that learning, especially learning about yourself, is the greatest adventure.

Thoreau lived in a time of "industrial progress" at the expense of the poor, of "manifest destiny" at the expense of the Indians, of "white supremacy" at the expense of the blacks and of "cultural development" at the expense of the natural world. In other words, he lived in an age of any number of lies, half-truths and rationalizations, and had the courage to challenge their assumptional foundations one after another. Even if our century had a completely different set of problems, Henry Thoreau's life would be a model for what people can and should do, if they want to be honest themselves.

Laura Dassow Walls, Lafayette College:

Why should we read Thoreau in the twenty-first century?

I can think of three reasons. First, at the dawn of the twenty-first century we have inherited the "two cultures" divide that separates science from the arts and humanities. Students are tracked into one side or the other of this division, which has the effect of severing the arts and humanities from the particulars of natural, physical reality and the sciences from shared human meaning. Today voices from all sides are seeking ways of rebuilding a rich network of connections between art and science, science and values, nature and

culture. Thoreau wrote at a time when the divide was taking its modern shape, and he tried to develop a convincing alternative, a literature that grew out of a deeply informed study of nature, and a science that produced plausible, practical results and yet could be expressed as a form of poetry. Thoreau's writings all of them, but particularly the less-well-known writings that followed *Walden* offer to the twenty-first century a vision in which science and literature reinforce each other, each leading to and becoming the other.

Second, Thoreau offers an ecological view of humanity and nature together that is still fresh, novel, and untried. 20th century institutions assumed that nature was most valuable in its purest forms, and sadly devalued the environments in which ordinary human beings live and work. Thoreau, by contrast, sought ways to integrate humanity as a part of nature, and nature as inseparable from human experience. He lived not in a pristine wilderness but on the outskirts of Boston, on land that had been cut over, farmed, and abused for generations. His ability to see beauty in that land to make it stand, symbolically, for the principle of wild nature can help twenty-first century generations to recover the desperately abused land they will inherit from us, and to see in it beauty, hope, regeneration.

Third and finally, by seeing beauty in the everyday environment of a Boston suburb, Thoreau shows readers of the twenty-first century that beauty is not merely an escape from pain and ugliness but a call to social justice. Thoreau could see the sublime in the advanced technology of his day, the railroad, but he also saw that sublimity spoiled by the injustice of the social arrangements it created and enforced. When the ugliness of slavery spoiled his walks in the woods, he experienced that not as a call to escape more deeply but as a call to face the injustice that so ruined the face of nature: he took to the lecture platform and became an anti-slavery activist. Thoreau's very aliveness to the sensual, material beauty of the world sharpened his outrage when he saw its splendor violated, physically or morally. The twenty-first century will need Thoreau's outrage, Thoreau's passion for justice, for as our already limited resources give out and force a restructuring of society, it will be a time of deep inequity across the nation and the globe.

Thoreau warned that the "evil days" were approaching. Indeed, we are, alas, approaching a dark time, and we will need someone who shows us how to see beauty where it is not obvious, and to model beauty's call to justice. Thoreau can tell the twenty-first century that all peoples have the right to blue sky and singing or soaring birds, to toads that dream, trees that hide gems in their crowns, and clear waters that reflect another world than the one that sizzles and boils inside our sophisticated, superheated, and overmediated twenty-first century brains.

Edward O. Wilson

Henry David Thoreau was thought by many in his own time, and many in our own, to be an eccentric who escaped from the mainstream of real life in order to dream. He was the opposite of that. He understood intuitively what we now know in more concrete and objective terms, that humanity is a biological species and thus exquisitely adapted to the natural world that cradled us. Thoreau was the scientific observer and lyrical expositor who hit upon the power of this conjunction between science and the humanities. He was the first great nature writer, whose knowledge of the living world, based on experience, was refined and projected as poetry. Nature writing is one of the major innovations of American literature. Its pantheon also includes John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson.

Together they say to us that humanity co-evolved with the rest of life on this particular planet; other worlds are not in our genes. It is a delusion that people can flourish apart from the living world. We might do so physically, like animals in a feed lot, but not spiritually, not to the full extent for which our brains are designed. I believe in his nineteenth-century way that is what Thoreau meant when he said: in wildness is preservation of the world.

Into nature people travel in search of new life and wonder, and from nature they return to the parts of the earth that have been humanized and made physically secure. Nature, and especially that part saved as wilderness, settles peace on the soul because it needs no help; it is beyond human contrivance. Millions of years old, it is incorruptible by itself but can be destroyed. It is also a metaphor of unlimited opportunity, rising from the tribal memory of a time when humanity spread across the world, valley to valley, island to island, godstruck, firm in the belief that virgin land went on forever beyond the horizon. That is very much an American dream, to which Thoreau significantly contributed, and one we will be wise to keep alive by the preservation of our wild heritage, not just for the garter snakes, salamanders and wildflowers that share our planet, but for ourselves.

Editor's Note: The above comments by Edward O. Wilson first appeared in slightly different form as the foreword to Material Faith: Henry David Thoreau on Science, edited by Laura Dassow Walls and published by The Thoreau Society (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999). They are reprinted here by the author's permission.