

## "Simplicity, Simplicity, Simplicity!"

### Henry David Thoreau



**Imagine this:** Although you are Harvard educated, you decide at the age of twenty-seven, to build a small house with your own hands in the woods where you can study nature and not get caught up in the materialistic pressures of the world around you. Your aim is not to escape civilization but to simplify it. At the time, people criticize your simple way of life, but you have always been an independent thinker, and you continue to live your own life the way you want to.

Your name is Henry David Thoreau, and you champion the independence of the human spirit over materialism and social conformity. Through your writ-

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

—Henry David Thoreau  
(1817–1862)



ings, you become one of the most influential figures in American thought and literature.

Thoreau was born July 12, 1817, at his grandmother's unpainted farmhouse near Concord, Massachusetts, the third of four children. His father, following the family tradition, was a shopkeeper, but he had failed in business and by the time Thoreau was born, the family was very poor even by the standards of 1817.

Thoreau was baptized David Henry Thoreau and was so called until he chose to reverse his given names when he was twenty as an expression of his independence.

While Thoreau's father was quiet and studious, his mother was friendly, outgoing, and had a generous heart. Despite her own family's financial problems, she always found a way to help those poorer than herself and everyone was welcome in her home. She was also known to speak her mind on the social and political issues of the day, particularly on such subjects as slavery to which she was strongly opposed.

Thoreau enjoyed growing up in Concord where he could spend his time outdoors enjoying nature. He prepared for Harvard at the Concord Academy which offered courses in Latin, Greek, and French, and he entered Harvard at sixteen where he was primarily interested in the classics.

His years at Harvard opened him to a world of books, and he was deeply influenced by writers such as Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau and Emerson became good friends, and it was probably Emerson who suggested that Thoreau keep a journal which became the heart of his work.

He graduated from Harvard in 1837 and was not a particularly outstanding student because of his independent ways. After his graduation, he returned to Concord and did begin keeping a journal to record his thoughts and ideas.

In the fall of 1838 he and his brother John opened a private school of their own. There would be no physical punishment, which was quite commonplace back then, and their students would learn by doing.

Thoreau offered languages and science and John taught English and mathematics. There were always plenty of field trips, which included trips to the local businesses, such as the newspaper and the gunsmith shop, as well as the usual nature trips.

The school's reputation was so high that there was usually a waiting list, but in 1841 Thoreau had to close the school when his brother became ill and could no longer teach.

Thoreau had always been interested in living a simple life, away from the intense pressures of a competitive society. Above all, he wanted to live his own kind of life. He believed that a person might live differently from his neighbors because he heard a "different drummer." If so, "let him step to the music which he hears," Thoreau wrote, "however measured or far away."

There was a pond near Concord named Walden, and this was one of his favorite places to just sit and think. In 1845 when he was in his late twenties, he built a little house on one of Walden's shores, a place where he could be alone. The house was very simple: it had one room, one table, one bed, and three chairs.

To Thoreau, nature was like a living being, and he wanted to do more than just enjoy its beauty. He wanted to get so close to it that he became one with it.

One entire morning he lay on his stomach and watched a war between red and black ants. And, once, a mouse ran up his sleeve as he sat outside eating, and he fed it some cheese. Then he watched while it nibbled and cleaned its face with its paws.

## They Stood Alone!

Thoreau had another important reason for going to live at Walden. He wanted to prove something to himself and to other people as well that someone could live very, very simply.

He was sure that most people were not happy but lived lives of "quiet desperation." He felt that people worked hard to own things and then when they finally did, they were still not satisfied. And then taking care of the things they had earned was often more trouble than it was worth. He once said, "It's never clear if the man owns the house or the house owns the man."

That's why Thoreau's house was simple and his food was plain. Living so simply left him free to do what he really wanted to do: to see and learn and think and write.

One of his mottos was, "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" When people traveled to California to find gold, he wrote, "Look for it within yourself."

And when someone praised Harvard College for teaching "all the branches of knowledge," he simply answered, "Yes, all the *branches* but none of the *roots*."

New clothes were not important to him, and one of his favorite expressions was, "Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts."

Once, while still living at Walden, he was even jailed briefly for refusing to pay a tax. At the time, the United States was waging what Thoreau felt was an unjust war against Mexico. This, along with his opposition to slavery, led him to refuse to support the government with his tax money.

He also hated how Native Americans were being treated by the white man, and he called the popular practice of removing Indians from their lands our very own Holocaust.

In 1849 he published his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, and the same year he also published his most famous short essay, "Civil Disobedience."

His most famous book, *Walden*, was published in 1854 and tells why he went to Walden, what he did there, and what he believed life's purposes to be. Although *Walden* wasn't recognized as a masterpiece and one of the great American classics of nonfiction until after his death, it has never gone out of print and it has appeared in more than 150 different editions, often selling in the hundreds of thousands of copies.

Despite the emphasis in *Walden* on solitude, Thoreau was not a hermit but a man deeply involved with family, friends, and the world around him.

He had many friends including the novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne and the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. Friends were important to him, and he once wrote, "Friends are kind to each other's dreams."

He left his Walden house after two years because his life had become too routine. He felt he had other lives to live and had spent enough time on that one.<sup>16</sup>

In his early forties, his health began to fail, and while he could still move about, he took one final walk to Walden by the quiet water that he loved.

When he died on May 6, 1862, at age forty-four from tuberculosis, Concord lost its most distinguished son, and the nation lost a man and writer unique in any age.

But that was not the end of his story. Many years after his death he achieved an eminent place as one of the most influential writers in the world.

It was after his death that much of what he wrote influenced national leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi in India and Martin Luther King Jr. in America. Mahatma Gandhi took from Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" the philosophy of passive resistance which led to India's freedom.

Thoreau's messages were those of harmony with nature,

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simplicity of living, and civil liberty, and his quest for personal integrity was an ongoing journey which lasted his entire life.

Much of what concerned Thoreau in his time still is true today. Many people are still unhappy and are still trying to figure out how best to live their lives. This is why people still read a book called *Walden* and why they still remember a man named Henry David Thoreau.