

## THE MATURE AMERICAN

A PROFILE OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU  
1817-1862  
Based Upon His Own Words

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I have repeatedly known young men of sensibility converted in a moment to the belief that this was the man they were in search of, the man of men, who could tell them all they should do.

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

HENRY DAVID THOREAU shaped his life into an adventure that he recorded in his journals and other writings which reveal him as a special breed of man rarely found in any nation. And yet he seldom went beyond the surroundings of Concord, Massachusetts.

I have traveled a good deal in Concord.

If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me.

He was graduated from Harvard University in 1837. For a while he followed his father's profession of manufacturing pencils, and then with his brother, John, he organized a private school for boys. But he learned that a steady income need not be the fundamental purpose of a lifetime, and so instead of earning money regularly at a tedious occupation that paid him more than he needed, he became financially self-sufficient by working at a variety of tasks he enjoyed and performed well: surveyor, carpenter, laborer, general handyman.

Those slight labors which afford me a livelihood, and by which I am serviceable to my contemporaries, are as yet a pleasure to me, and I am not often reminded that they are a necessity. But I foresee that if my wants should be much increased, the labor required to supply them would become a drugery. If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, there would be nothing left worth living for. I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage.

[As did Esau, Genesis 25:29-34]

His most enduring friendship was with Ralph Waldo Emerson, fourteen years older and a world famous essayist, philosopher and poet. As one of Henry's many employers, Emerson considered him a gentleman not afraid to soil his hands in the world or to be thought uncouth. Henry always wore a straw hat and stout shoes during his long walks, and in the pockets of his sturdy gray pants he carried a note pad and pencil, together with a magnifying glass and jackknife.

It is desirable that a man be clad so simply and that he live in all respects so compactly and preparedly that, if an enemy take the town, he can, like the old philosopher, walk out the gate empty-handed without anxiety.

Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes. If you have any enterprise before you, try it in your old clothes.

Thoreau's viewpoints came neither off the top of his head nor from the tip of his tongue, but from the full depth and breadth of his character. He didn't bow to the crowd or wait to hear what his latest convictions should be. He took no man's word as law, and he wasn't afraid to speak his own mind.

It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.

What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true today, may turn out to be falsehood tomorrow, mere smoke of opinion.

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.

I would not have anyone adopt my mode of living on any account; I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.

How can anyone be weak who dares to be at all?

Evaluating the general customs and preferences of Concord society, Thoreau saw many needless complexities which overload and frustrate the individual.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

Why should we live in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises?

Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity. I say, let your affairs be as two or three. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary, eat but one. And reduce other things in proportion.

Be ever so little distracted, your thoughts so little confused, your engagements so few, your attention so free, your existence so mundane, that in all places and in all hours you can hear the sound of crickets in those seasons when they are to be heard.

Emerson owned a few acres of wooded property along the shore of Walden Pond two miles south of Concord, and in 1845 he allowed twenty-eight year old Henry to build a frame cabin close beside the pond where he lived alone two years, a mile from any neighbor. Thoreau constructed his small dwelling mostly from used materials. It measured ten by fifteen feet, with walls eight feet high, the outside covered with boards and shingles, plastered within. He placed a large window on each side of the rectangular room, a brick fireplace at one end and a door at the other. The cash outlay for this "snug harbor in the woods" he figured at exactly twenty-eight dollars, twelve and a half cents.

The cost of a thing is the amount of life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.

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.

Thoreau's cabin was not a sleazy, escapist hideaway. According to Emerson, "He knew how to be poor without a hint of squalor."

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

Shall we always study to obtain more things and not sometimes to be content with less?

With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor.

Walden Pond, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters around, with its greatest depth at a hundred and two feet, remained remarkably clear and pure in Thoreau's day. Writing in his journal, he mentions at various times the typical trees in the woods -- pine, beech, oak, elm, spruce, hemlock, holly, juniper, dogwood, hickory, maple, chestnut, apple and cherry. As the seasons passed he also lived among goldenrods, lilacs, grapes, berries and toadstools. His visitors were red squirrels, woodchucks, raccoons, muskrats, minks, foxes, meadow mice, hares, bees, spiders and warring ants. The pond itself was home to water-bugs, ducks, turtles, bullfrogs, eels and leaping fish -- bass and trout and jeweled pickerel. Overhead were fish hawks and marsh hawks, hoot owls and cat owls and barrel owls, geese, pigeons, partridges, sparrows, white bellied swallows, red-wings, bluebirds, blue jays, robins, one solitary loon, and "the singing of a brown thrasher high in the birch."

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 is not life -- living is so dear -- nor did I wish to practice resignation unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep, to live sturdily, 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 -- or if it were sublime, to know it by experience.

The words of Henry David Thoreau stand as a challenge to every individual. Some of us might dodge this challenge by hastily labeling him a romantic loner. Others may admit they admire his example, but then evasively place his works on a pedestal engraved New England Transcendentalist, thus making his down-to-earth wisdom practically inaccessible. Few people will read the many volumes of personal journals he wrote during his forty-five year lifetime, telling how he kept his daily activities simple and wholesome, vigorous but quiet, as he cultivated an intimacy with the natural world which ceaselessly fascinated him.

While scholars continue to regard Thoreau reverently as a significant figure in American Literature, his writings pass in and out of academic fashion. Nonetheless, his perceptions and insights endure, reflecting an innate common sense and astonishingly high level of consciousness.

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust.

There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really hear and understand, would possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men -- not one has been omitted -- and each has answered them according to his ability, by his words and his life.

I wish to live ever as to derive my satisfactions and aspirations from the commonest events, everyday phenomena, so that what my senses hourly perceive, my daily walk, the conversation of my neighbors, may inspire me, and I may dream of no heaven but that which lies about me.

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.

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, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom which we can call reality and say: this is, and no mistake -- and then begin.

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I hearing get, who had but ears,  
And sight, who had but eyes before;  
I moments live, who lived but years,  
And truth discern, who knew but learning's lore.

-- Henry David Thoreau