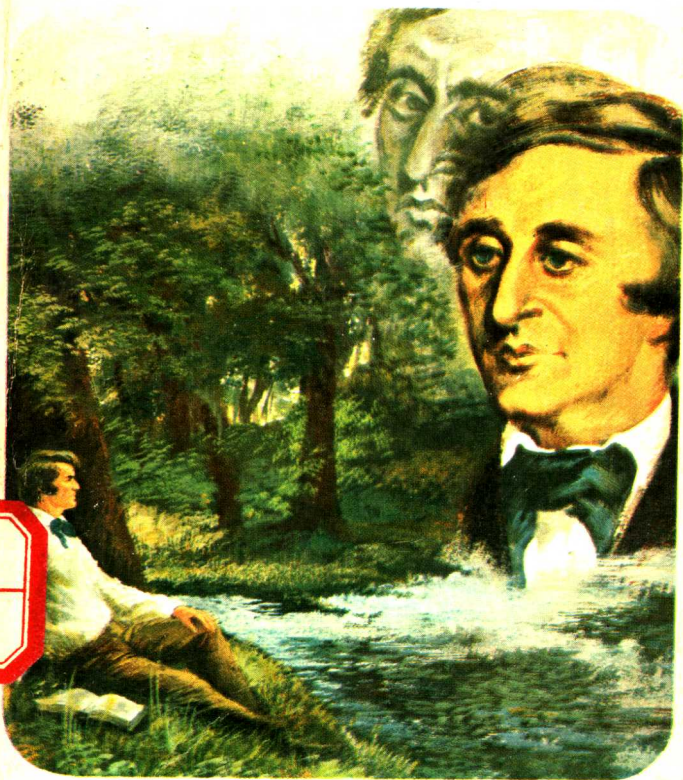


HENRY DAVID
THOREAU

WALDEN-ESSAY ON
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE



Introduction by Frederic Langmack Complete and Unabridged

WALDEN

and
"CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE"



Henry David Thoreau

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WALDEN

and

"Civil Disobedience"



Henry David Thoreau

Introduction

"Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives." This is the topic sentence from one of Thoreau's best short essays, "Life Without Principle" (1854). It is also the central theme of all of Thoreau's works. It is the thread that is woven through the fabric of both his writing and his life. It is this theme that lifts Thoreau above those humane but essentially passive nature writers whose soft descriptions of the changing seasons are used to pad out the editorial pages of big-city papers.

"Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives." There is nothing unique in Thoreau's choosing such a theme. The world's best writers have always grappled with it. At least thirteen hundred years before Thoreau, the Greek philosopher Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." What, then, places Thoreau in that group of writers who are required reading for educated people?

Thoreau's uniqueness is to be found in the way he rephrased Socrates' statement, made it personal rather than philosophic, active rather than passive, concrete rather than abstract; in the way he shook it loose from the hands of earnest but overly academic literature and philosophy professors and soaked it in the facts of everyday existence. He writes in *Walden*:

There are nowadays professors of philosophy but not philosophers. To be a philosopher is to solve some of the problems of life not only theoretically but practically.

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.

Thoreau's genius is found in the artistry with which he fuses philosophy and observed fact, statement and image, thought and feeling. Epigram hunters, like souvenir-happy tourists rummaging around an Indian burial mound, have a field day with Thoreau. But his artistry is not found in the speed with which he strings pithy phrases together. His artistry, like that of the fly fisherman, is found in the way he can gently spin out an idea, let it drift, seemingly without direction, until the beguiled reader has swallowed it, and then flick the line and sink the hook. And rare is the reader who can say that he shook off Thoreau unscarred. "How many a man has detected a new era in his life from the reading of a book."

Thoreau is many things to many people: naturalist, economist, individualist, social critic, pantheist, philosopher. But he is too much the complete artist to be neatly categorized. Unlike most novelists, he is too honest to side-step the issues by interposing characters between himself and life.

I should not talk so much about myself if there were anyone else whom I knew as well. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives.

Yet Thoreau is more a novelist than an economist, more an artist than a philosopher, more a poet (which is what he called himself) than a naturalist.

Thoreau's ideas about how a poet should live differ widely from the modern view that the artist's life and the works which determine the artist's place in history are separate and distinct. A modern poet such as Dylan Thomas drinks himself to death and mars the lives of those around him but is still judged a great poet. Influenced by the Oriental philosophers and his friend Emerson's philosophy of Transcendentalism, Thoreau felt that a man's supreme artistic accomplishment was his life itself, not his artistic works, which he viewed as only by-products of a man's endeavor to perfect himself. "Is not eternity a lease for better deeds than verse?" Thoreau also felt, rather immodestly, that poets, by which he meant writers in general, not merely writers of verse, were the elite of the human race.

The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life.

If we consider his lofty and rather somber view of the poet's life and role in society, it is not surprising that there is nothing very scandalous to report about Thoreau's life. He was born into a well-educated though somewhat poor middle-class family in Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1817. During his youth he seems to have suffered no traumatic emotional experiences of the type that supposedly motivate successful artists. He reports that his was an idyllic, active, outdoor boyhood. His parents were alert people, though not intellectuals, and the young Thoreau was aware of the current events of the day, especially of the growing movement for the abolition of slavery, which his family supported.

Thoreau's schooling at Harvard proceeded without incident. He was exposed to the leading minds of his day and read Emerson's essay, *Nature* (1836), which undoubtedly contributed much to Thoreau's own blend of Transcendentalism. He was considered quiet and reserved but not eccentric. He formed few fast friendships, acquired no enemies, and had no more than the usual gripes about housing and the faculty. Uneventful as Thoreau's college years seem, in the papers he wrote and in his commencement speech can be seen the buds of the major ideas that occupied him throughout his life.

Graduating in 1837 from Harvard, Thoreau seemingly drifted unsuccessfully from job to job in the next eight years: he worked in the family business of pencil making, gave a few lectures in and around Concord, twice tried teaching school, hired out as a surveyor, worked as a handyman for Ralph Waldo Emerson, and took a position as tutor to Emerson's nephew in Staten Island. Disappointed with New York and with city life, he returned to Concord, where he stayed with few interruptions the rest of his life. To the people of Concord, Thoreau was a foolish young man who had thrown away his valuable Harvard education to loaf and walk the woods and write in the journal in which he recorded the observations and thoughts that were to become the raw materials for his lectures, essays, and books. "I love a broad margin to my life," he once commented.

Outwardly unsuccessful as these years appeared to be, it was during this time that he met authors like Emerson, Hawthorne, James, Greeley, and others whose ideas and encouragement in-

fluenced his own writing. During these apprentice years he published a few poems and essays in a magazine called *The Dial*, the publication of the Transcendentalists, and went on a boat trip along the Concord and Merrimack rivers with his brother, an experience that later formed the basis of his first book, *A Week Along the Concord and Merrimack* (1849), which he wrote while living at Walden Pond.

July 4, 1845 marks the beginning of what is considered the most significant phase of Thoreau's life, the two years in which he lived in a simple cabin beside Walden Pond. Living in the woods was an informal experiment designed to test the hypothesis that we would be happier if we simplified our wants and lived more in tune with Nature. "Simplify, simplify," Thoreau urges.

Some shortsighted critics dismiss Thoreau's experiment because he was a bachelor and had no wife and family to support. Just as unrealistic is the view of some of his ardent disciples that *Walden* is a literal handbook for living. *Walden* should not be considered a cut-and-dried scheme for living, but rather as Thoreau's dramatic way of calling attention to the fact that the only way to know yourself is to take time to listen to yourself. "If a man does not keep pace with his companions perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer." Thoreau's point in *Walden* is that few of us examine ourselves closely enough to know what drummer it is that we're marching to.

Walden wasn't published until 1854, seven years after Thoreau left Walden Pond. But in the interim Thoreau's reputation had been growing, principally because of the publication of the influential essay *Civil Disobedience*. In spite of the fact that this essay raises more questions than it answers, it has had an unprecedented influence on political leaders all over the world. The battle which rages in *Civil Disobedience* is between the will of the majority and the conscience of the individual. "Must the citizen even for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator?" Thoreau's answer is a withering NO. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

Many critics feel that Thoreau pumped himself dry writing *Walden* and point to his meager output in the decade before his death from tuberculosis in 1862. It is true that he published no poetry and few of the kind of timeless essays which have won him fame. Yet his last years were hardly ones of inactivity. He ardently supported the abolition of slavery. By becoming an active propagandist for abolition, he was demonstrating his

belief that a poet's work consists of something more than stacking up essays and poems like so much firewood for the benefit of future generations of critics. Thoreau was an enthusiastic supporter of the controversial John Brown and his bloody raid on Harper's Ferry. In 1859, the year Brown was hanged, Thoreau gave two lectures in his defense. The city fathers refused to ring the town bell announcing the first lecture and the audience was almost unanimously opposed to Brown's actions. By the end of the talk, however, Thoreau had won over his listeners, and when he gave it again in Boston he spoke before his largest audience.

My life has been the poem I would have writ
But I could not both live and utter it.

This couplet gives some clue to understanding the last decade of Thoreau's life. Perhaps he wrote little because he was disillusioned by the rather cool reception his more philosophical essays and poems had received. But one could also argue convincingly that perhaps the egoistic drive for literary fame had withered as he matured and came to understand that recognition of yourself is all that matters.

If men can be said to have a conscience or an inner self, then perhaps we can say the same of nations. The writer who has done the most to create the American conscience, the bench mark from which we measure both our country's progress and decay, is Thoreau. How much more vital Thoreau still is than are the pretentious committees which have lately been summoned to define goals for Americans. And if you listen closely to those whose job it is to hold press conferences and tell us that we have created the best of all possible worlds, you can detect a strained earnestness, a slight rising of the voice, as if they were half afraid that Thoreau might speak out from the back of the room and burst the bubble.

We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.

After reading *Walden*, we can hear Thoreau chiding the officials of one of our largest electronic firms who once proudly announced they had spent eighteen million dollars in a concentrated effort to perfect color television:

"What!" exclaim a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land. "Is not this railroad which we have built a fine thing?" Yes, I answer, *comparatively* good, that

is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.

Yet it is too easy to skewer the passing follies of mankind with Thoreau's polished epigrams and to forget that he was primarily concerned with urging us toward a perfection of our inner selves—a reflective maturity toward which all of us must grope if we are to be truly human and not merely a certain pattern of holes on a market research punch card.

Only that day dawns to which we are awake.

—Frederic Langmack

1 | Economy

WHEN I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent. Some have asked what I got to eat; if I did not feel lonesome; if I was not afraid; and the like. Others have been curious to learn what portion of my income I devoted to charitable purposes; and some, who have large families, how many poor children I maintained. I will therefore ask those of my readers who feel no particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book. In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely it must have been in a distant land to me. Perhaps these pages are more particularly addressed to poor students. As for the rest of my readers, they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits.

I would fain say something, not so much concerning the

Chinese and Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England; something about your condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not. I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Bramins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downwards, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders "until it becomes impossible for them to resume their natural position, while from the twist of the neck nothing but liquids can pass into the stomach;" or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars,—even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness. The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor. They have no friend Iolaus to burn with a hot iron the root of the hydra's head, but as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up.

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? They have got to live a man's life, pushing all these things before them, and get on as well as they can. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and wood-lot. The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh.

But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt

and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. It is said that Deucalion and Pyrrha created men by throwing stones over their heads behind them:—

Inde genus durum sumus, experiensque laborum,
Et documenta damus quâ sumus origine nati.

Or, as Raleigh rhymes it in his sonorous way,—

“From thence our kind hard-hearted is, enduring pain and
care,
Approving that our bodies of a stony nature are.”

So much for a blind obedience to a blundering oracle, throwing the stones over their heads behind them, and not seeing where they fell.

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance—which his growth requires—who has so often to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials, before we judge of him. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.

Some of you, we all know, are poor, find it hard to live, are sometimes, as it were, gasping for breath. I have no doubt that some of you who read this book are unable to pay for all the dinners which you have actually eaten, or for the coats and shoes which are fast wearing or are already worn out, and have come to this page to spend borrowed or stolen time, robbing your creditors of an hour. It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been whetted by experience; always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt, a very ancient slough, called by the Latins *aes alienum*, another's brass, for some of their coins were made of brass; still living, and dying, and buried by this other's brass; always promising to pay, promising to pay, to-morrow, and dying to-day, insolvent; seeking to curry favor, to

get custom, by how many modes, only not state-prison offenses; lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility, or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity, that you may persuade your neighbor to let you make his shoes, or his hat, or his coat, or his carriage, or import his groceries for him; making yourselves sick, that you may lay up something against a sick day, something to be tucked away in an old chest, or in a stocking behind the plastering, or, more safely, in the brick bank; no matter where, no matter how much or how little.

I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both North and South. It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself. 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? Does not he drive for Squire Make-a-stir? How godlike, how immortal, is he? See how he cowers and sneaks, how vaguely all the day he fears, not being immortal nor divine, but the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of himself, a fame won by his own deeds. Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate. Self-emancipation even in the West Indian provinces of the fancy and imagination,—what Wilberforce is there to bring that about? Think, also, of the ladies of the land weaving toilet cushions against the last day, not to betray too green an interest in their fates! As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.

When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. But alert and

healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true to-day may turn out to be falsehood to-morrow, mere smoke of opinion, which some had trusted for a cloud that would sprinkle fertilizing rain on their fields. What old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new. Old people did not know enough once, perchance, to fetch fresh fuel to keep the fire a-going; new people put a little dry wood under a pot, and are whirled round the globe with the speed of birds, in a way to kill old people, as the phrase is. Age is no better, hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures, for private reasons, as they must believe; and it may be that they have some faith left which belies that experience, and they are only less young than they were. I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my Mentors said nothing about.

One farmer says to me, "You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with;" and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw material of bones; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plow along in spite of every obstacle. Some things are really necessities of life in some circles, the most helpless and diseased, which in others are luxuries merely, and in others still are entirely unknown.

The whole ground of human life seems to some to have been gone over by their predecessors, both the heights and the valleys, and all things to have been cared for. According to Evelyn, "the wise Solomon prescribed ordinances for the very distance of trees; and the Roman prætors have decided how often you may go into your neighbor's land to gather the acorns which fall on it without trespass, and what share belongs to that neighbor." Hippocrates has even left directions how we should cut our nails; that is, even with the ends of the fingers neither

shorter nor longer. Undoubtedly the very tedium and ennui which presume to have exhausted the variety and the joys of life are as old as Adam. But 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. Whatever have been thy failures hitherto, "be not afflicted, my child, for who shall assign to thee what thou hast left undone?"

We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests; as, for instance, that the same sun that ripens my beans illumines at once a system of earths like ours. If I had remembered this it would have prevented some mistakes. This was not the light in which I hoed them. The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; ay, in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry, Mythology!—I know of no reading of another's experience so startling and informing as this would be.

The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well? You may say the wisest thing you can, old man,—you who have lived seventy years, not without honor of a kind,—I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that. One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels.

I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do. We may waive just so much care of ourselves as we honestly bestow elsewhere. Nature is as well adapted to our weakness as to our strength. The incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well-nigh incurable form of disease. We are made to exaggerate the importance of what work we do; and yet how much is not done by us! or, what if we had been taken sick? How vigilant we are! determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it; all the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties. So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre. All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant. Confucius said, "To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge." When one