

Back to Walden

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Capsule Summary: What's *Back to Walden*?

A method for the madness of the world. *Back to Walden* is a book that chases Henry David Thoreau's dream of simple well-being for us all by returning to the way of life he detailed in *Walden*. But face it. In this day and age, you just can't borrow an ax and saunter down to Walden Pond, like history's most famous squatter did, and build your own cabin. So the one I built was metaphysical, not physical. I asked myself, "What if you could build Thoreau's cabin in your head and then live there for the rest of your life?" This is an account of how I did *that* and a blueprint for how you can too.

“This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people...re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss what insults your very soul, and your very flesh shall become a poem.”

~ Walt Whitman

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Chapter 1: Following in Thoreau's Footsteps

The Practice of Waldenism

Our pampered lives in America prove that we're looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places. By the time we've reached a certain age and experience, we've already put the pedal to the metal and roared down all the roads to happiness as mapped out by convention, peer pressure, religion, ego trips, fantasies, ambition, carnal desire, or family expectations.

We've groped through our first backseat sex as teens. We've overindulged in romance and committed serial matrimony. We've trampled down a career path or three. Taken a couple of wild shots at fame and fortune. Thrown back a few drinks for the road. Experimented with drugs. Mortgaged our future. Traveled hither and yon. Escaped into movies, TV, and cyber bliss. Entertained ourselves in every way credit cards can charge or laptops boot up.

"Yes," as [Zorba the Greek](#) summed up what Western society expects us to do with our lives. "The whole catastrophe!"

And what do we have to show for it? Fleeting gratification. Acute anxiety. Passing fancies. Lingering disappointments and frustrations. Moments of pure ecstasy. Long periods of total numbness. Most of all, we have gnawing questions about the nature of the universe, the meaning of life, or the GPS coordinates of the soul after death. Adulthood means navigating an endless maze of digital forms online. Old age adds up to an unsolicited AARP subscription and a vague sense of discontent, confusion, or emptiness.

If you asked me 15 years ago what I wanted carved into my tombstone, my answer would have come straight from the heart: "So What?"

Now I'm here to tell you that [Henry David Thoreau](#) answered this fundamental existential question more than 165 years ago.

"So What?"

So *Walden*.

In March of 1845, Thoreau borrowed an axe and sauntered down to the woods by [Walden Pond](#), near where he intended to build his 10-foot-by-15-foot cabin. There he “began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber.” His axe blows, as they hewed and rippled into the tranquil air around Walden Pond, stirred up sound waves that still echo to this day.

On July Fourth of that summer, [Thoreau](#), already [suffering from the TB that would eventually kill him](#), moved into his tight, shingled, and plastered house with a garret, a closet, a large window on either side, two trap doors, an entrance at one end, and a brick fireplace opposite. The [cabin](#) cost him a grand total of 28 dollars, 12-and-a-half cents.

By any measure, it was the biggest bargain in real estate history. From such economical beginnings, Thoreau’s *Walden* experiment spread in all directions as the mystical taproot of [American Transcendentalism](#). It warned of the mushrooming materialism, overindulgence, decadence, and emptiness throughout Western society in wake of the Industrial Revolution. And it conferred on the world a spiritual model that even now - especially now! - can dissolve the “[quiet desperation](#)” that still muddles the mass of American lives.

If anything, Thoreau’s *Walden* experiment in self-reliance, natural living, courage, integrity, non-materialism, and simplification is more illuminating now than it was then.

“I went to the woods,” Thoreau explained in *Walden*, “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 lasting bequest is a simple way of life that I call “[Waldenism](#),” which has transformed me and is capable of transforming you. What, precisely, does Waldenism mean? Read the next section to find out.

What is Waldenism?

I was born a century after [Thoreau's *Walden* experiment](#) began. I spent much of my early life flitting aimlessly through the disappointment, frustration, mayhem, and pathos of a much more complicated world than Walden Pond in 1845. After those early years adrift, I was motivated, like Thoreau, to rebel against the deeply shallow culture I saw in America. Like Thoreau, I thirsted after something truer, more meaningful, more plumb. But, unlike Thoreau, I didn't know where to look.

Then, in the fall of 2008, motivated by a disease as deadly as [Thoreau's own TB](#), and inspired by the dog-eared edition of *Walden* I kept beside my bed, I started building my own *Walden*-like shelter. Except mine was metaphysical, not physical. I asked myself, "What if you could build Thoreau's cabin, complete with everything it means, in your head? And what if you could live there for the rest of your life?"

To build that mental structure, I recycled some of the symbolic lumber, bricks, and mortar from Thoreau's own cabin. That is, his [Transcendentalism](#). The spiritual energy that was its basic tenet. His wonder of nature. The [Buddhism](#) he studied. Some meditation techniques known to him. Self-awareness. And his hankering for life's essential truths.

What I am attempting to fabricate with these materials is the stuff of *Walden*, Thoreau's dream of simple well-being for us all. This humble shelter I'm building in honor of Thoreau, my refuge, is an ideological home I call Waldenism.

Just as Thoreau used the natural resources around Walden Pond to raise his own house, Waldenism uses Thoreau's natural resources to raise one's own consciousness, which was what his house signified anyway.

Waldenism is built upon a foundation of Thoreau's Transcendentalism, whose groundwork was cobbled together from such wide-flung sources as Plato, Buddhism, Hinduism, Emmanuel Kant, Quakerism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), Romanticism, and Unitarianism. Basically,

Transcendentalism holds that an ideal spiritual state transcends the emotional turmoil triggered by culture and society. In the Transcendental view, we achieve spiritual insight through personal intuition rather than religious doctrine.

“Trust thyself,” as [Emerson wrote in *Self Reliance*](#). “Every heart vibrates to that iron string.”

Nature provides the raw materials for Waldenism. We fashion our meaning, not from social structure or religious dogma, but from the natural world, which is the outward symbol of inward spirit. Nobody can stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon, as I did many times each day when I worked there in 1999, and fail to recognize that nature is a mirror of one’s soul, an infinite font of spiritual energy, and one answer to “the whole catastrophe” of life.

“The earth is living poetry,” as Thoreau wrote so lyrically.

Waldenism is framed by Buddhism’s simple but profound [meditation techniques](#), capable of sheltering us from the pain, confusion, and disappointment of everyday life. Meditation is an architecture for living contentedly. Then Waldenism encloses this framework in the simple way of life practiced by Thoreau at Walden Pond, which serves as the rustic finishing carpentry.

Waldenism is wired with a constant flow of [spiritual energy](#), most evident in places such as the Grand Canyon, but crackling through the circuitry of everywhere. Some call it the “current of life.” We can open this flow of sacred current through simple awareness and, second by second, transcend the apparent confusion and chaos of the world.

Such is my blueprint for the mental structure I call Waldenism. Such is the floor plan of my new home. It’s a method for the madness of the world.

As Kahlil Gibran described this kind of mindful construction project in *The Prophet*: “Build of your imaginings a bower in the wilderness ere you build a house within the city walls.” That’s Waldenism.

By practicing Waldenism, I feel as though I'm seeing the world through Thoreau's own eyes in 1845. Perhaps spurred on by the life-threatening TB he contracted as a young man, Thoreau approached Walden Pond with lightning-rod intensity. He yearned to hover above life, elevated by his own powerful intuition, gauging truth with his own inner "Realometer," as he called it. He longed to find a more authentic meaning than the shallow ambitions hawked by our "unwieldy and overgrown establishment." He ached to cleave actuality from illusion. To ferret out substance in "a life frittered away by detail." He wanted all people to "live simply and wisely."

With such wisdom in mind, I am forever thankful, in a camel-passing-through-the-eye-of-a-needle sort of way, for how little I have. Most things are "much easier acquired than gotten rid of," Thoreau teased. Accordingly, I have spent much of the last decade downsizing my life and discarding all my prized possessions, whose only worth was the heavy burden of owning them. As Thoreau himself might have said with his passion for wordplay, I have forsaken all my valued keepsakes for the sake of keeping all my values.

While practicing Waldenism, I have heeded Thoreau's witty advice to "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes!" That means dodging weddings, job interviews, and funerals with equal gusto. In his memory, I shun all malls at all cost and pawn off my unneeded clothes on those who will have them. In all, I have reduced my state of ownership to a much less onerous state. But still I have too much.

"My greatest skill is to want but little," Thoreau cracked. "I found thus that I have been a rich man without any damage to my poverty."

Because he lived down to his extremely low standard of living, Thoreau was considered a failure in his own time by almost everyone but himself. With Thoreau as my role model, Waldenism has made me eternally grateful for how little I've managed to achieve while chasing the mirage of success for so many decades. In much the same way that amputees suffer phantom pains from their

missing limbs, success triggers phantom fantasies from its missing happiness.

Building Thoreau's metaphysical cabin in my head with the natural resources described in *Walden* is a labor of love. That being so, how can you put Waldenism to work as your own labor of love? Read the next section to find out.

Three Tools You'll Need for Going Back to Walden

As you will soon see, for much of my life I was a deeply troubled human being, one who came to the practices in [Waldenism](#) the hard way: through painful trial and error. My own quickening, after a lifetime of bad decisions and even worse consequences, has come about through three extremely simple awareness practices. These form the action side, the tools, of my Waldenism philosophy. I use them like the axe, the saw, and the hammer borrowed by Thoreau to build his cabin.

In *Walden*, Thoreau basically asked a very fundamental question: What if we each had our own simplified method to discover truth, explore ourselves, and raise our consciousness? That is what is cabin signified. That is also what I offer here with these three mental tools, which I will explain much more fully in chapters 4, 5, and 6. These put the philosophy behind *Walden* to work, framing it into Thoreau's cabin of the mind:

True Thought - Practice healthy thinking.

True Energy - Tune into spiritual energy.

True Insight - Do simple meditation.

By training yourself to think healthy thoughts, cherish the spiritual energy in everyday life, and spark your own intuition through daily meditation, you quickly develop a foolproof method for maintaining simple well-being. And simple well-being in the context of our complex, confusing, madding culture is simply a miracle.

What makes these three awareness techniques so transforming is the same inspired mindset that characterized [Walden. Thoreau went down to Walden Pond](#) with the purposefulness of a mission, a calling, a vocation. His was much the same mindset that elevated Gandhi's peaceful freedom movement, Mother Teresa's saintly deeds, Martin Luther King's dream, Einstein's science, or [Emily Dickinson's poetry](#) to the level of holy vocations. Perhaps the one most significant revelation expressed by Thoreau in *Walden* is that we are all capable of turning our own lives into very personal quests.

This is the purpose of Waldenism. By living with the kind of integrity, courage, simplicity, goodness, spirituality, kindness, curiosity, and awareness practiced by Thoreau at Walden Pond, each of us can make his or her own life into a noble experiment much like *Walden*.

The [concluding chapter of *Walden*](#) was Thoreau's trumpet call to everyone: "I learned this much, 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...He will live with the license of a higher order of things. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness."

The question is: How can you use Waldenism to advance confidently in the direction of your own dreams? Read the following section for the answer.

Blazing Your Own Trail

Mind you, I'm no scholar of either [Transcendentalism](#) or [Buddhism](#), nor am I trained as a guru of any kind. I'm qualified for nothing more than writing. But I am a good writer, and my best faculty is boiling down things to their basics. I've developed this ability during 40 years as a widely published journalist and poet, a career spent reducing the material in thousands and thousands of articles and poems to essence. Not by happenstance, one abiding precept of both Transcendentalism and Buddhism is boiling down existence to its essentials. As Thoreau put it, "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity." Rendering life to its bare bones.

That is precisely what I will bring to the following pages: Boiling down the principles espoused by Thoreau's Transcendentalism and Buddhism into these three simple, inspiring, enjoyable, easy-to-learn practices aimed at making your life much more fulfilling, more meaningful, more happy: [True Thought, True Energy, True Insight](#). These drive [Waldenism](#).

During my three-score years on earth, I've led a life rich in adventure, escape, travel, pain, passion, folly, love, friendship, delusion, success, and failure. For most of that time, I looked for happiness everywhere; everywhere, that is, but where it actually resides. That would be somewhere deep within. Thanks to Waldenism, I'm learning to do that now. Waldenism acts as a particle accelerator, driving me to my logical conclusion. And that conclusion turns out to be this illusive mindset called happiness, more feathery than a meteorite burning through thin air, which I am tracking in these pages.

In Thoreau's shadow, I'm making my own symbolic move to [Walden](#) so I can "front only the essential facts of life." In his name, I am here to see if I can learn what the quick of life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, "discover that I have not lived." Following in his footsteps, I am delving into the Eastern philosophies he culled for their ancient wisdom and truth.

Please be forewarned that [Back to Walden](#) is not a "how-to" book. It's more of a "why-to" book. *Why* is the vital question demanded

by anyone wondering what it is to be human. *Why* are we here? *Why* is life so difficult? *Why* is there so much evil? *Why* should we care?

I don't have all the answers, but I certainly have all the questions, and most of them begin with *why*. As Nietzsche said, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*."

Nor is my aim for you to imitate what I've done. Instead, I'm trusting you to employ these Transcendental tools for navigating your own unique path; the famed [Road Not Taken](#), as Transcendentalist poet [Robert Frost](#) called it. *The Road Not Taken*, the road less traveled, is exactly what Thoreau himself would have advocated for your journey, mapped out by your own distinct talents, passions, aspirations, abilities, and intuitions.

"I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible," Thoreau vowed, "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."

So blaze your own byway by taking the Henry David Thoroughfare. Then turn left at *The Road Not Taken*.

Waldenism, like the axe borrowed by Thoreau to build his house, simply lends you the tools to do it yourself in your own unique way. Waldenism imagines what we can all do to turn a humdrum life into our own personal *Walden*. And, in that endeavor, as Transcendentalist poet Walt Whitman observed, "your very flesh will become a great poem."

Chapter 2: Trapped in the American Dream

Why We All Need Walden

The Petri-dish of American culture infects us with the belief that happiness is the well-deserved fallout from our wealth, our status, our fame, our pleasures, our comforts, our possessions, our achievements.

By those standards, Thoreau was a total failure in every possible way.

In fact, as *Walden* demonstrated so vividly, the opposite is true: All these shallow things, to paraphrase Emerson, are the hobgoblins of small minds. One central message of Thoreau and Transcendentalism is just this: Because of all the cultural norms that alienate people and create false values, each of us must rebel against the popular notions of success and happiness to find our own inner truth.

[Emerson](#) defined happiness beyond the cultural norms: “To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”

In this context, how is it that the pursuit of happiness has morphed into the pursuit of unhappiness for so many of us?

Well, our road to unhappiness is a long and winding one. It begins with the human condition we are born into and dead-ends in the American Dream itself. So let’s start from the start: Is there a God to look after us once we are dragged kicking and screaming into this bewildering and traumatic life?

Who can tell? The Buddha pointed out a long time ago that we human beings have never been given the wherewithal in any unimpeachable way to know whether or not God exists. He was

quite content to leave God as an open question. In my own mind, to believe in the God pictured so anthropomorphically in the *Bible* demands an astronomical leap of faith. As a deeply devoted fallen-away Catholic, I have come to accept the Buddha's noble agnosticism with joy. Why? Because the underlying question about the God so many of us are brought up with is such a painful one: If this is a God of love, why does he, she, or it seem to be such an abusive lover? One of my favorite authors, [Graham Greene](#), himself a practicing Catholic, expressed this complaint in a devastating way. "They are always saying God loves us. If that's love, I'd rather have a bit of kindness."

Unless one possesses this mysterious predisposition called faith, it's hard not to doubt the reality of a God whom religion has made in the image and likeness of ourselves. For supreme doubters such as myself, the only hope for a deity is some providence above and beyond the ability of human beings to comprehend, or even imagine.

The God question is only one of the mysteries wrapped within the conundrum of life as we know it. [Somerset Maugham's](#) groundbreaking novel, *The Razor's Edge*, was based on his experience with a real-life seeker he called Larry, who threw over wealth and social connections to embrace Eastern spiritual philosophy. Therein Larry summed up life's "big questions" in a truly Transcendental way. "I want to make up my mind whether God is or God is not. I want to find out why evil exists. I want to know whether I have an immortal soul or whether when I die it is the end."

Elsewhere in the book, Maugham remarked on the near-impossibility of Larry's quest to answer life's existential questions. "Don't you think he may be pursuing an ideal that is hidden in a cloud of unknowing - like an astronomer looking for a star that only a mathematical calculation tells him exists?"

Here is the built-in puzzle of human existence in a nutshell. All life exists in a cloud of unknowing. All life is a search for a star that might not even be there.

“We are obliged to live our lives as if there’s meaning, without any guarantee that there is any,” explained American Buddhist writer [Lama Surya Das](#). “In that endeavor lies all the glory, honor, wonder, and, *yes, meaning of life.*”

In his 1959 classic, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, psychiatrist Viktor Frankl referred to this quest for purpose as “the self-transcendence of human existence.” As he wrote, “The more one forgets himself - by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love - the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself...Self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.”

In other words, our purpose in life is to create our own purpose; our meaning to become our own meaning; our actuality to transcend our own actuality; our happiness to extract our own happiness.

But most of us are not so wise as Emerson, Greene, Maugham, Lama Surya Das, or Frankl. So, faced with potent existential dilemmas that might express themselves only in a complex mathematical calculation, an invisible star, or a cloud of unknowing, people everywhere fall back on...What? Read on to find out.

The Prince of Lies

Confronted with a life that seems out of control, people everywhere fall back on the Prince of Lies to guide them toward happiness. That would be our own personal demon, the ego.

“Ego” is an ambiguous term with conflicting meanings. Its original, psychoanalytic meaning referred to a very useful part of the mind that mediates among the animalistic instincts of the id, the moralistic values of the superego or conscience, and the demands of the environment. Later the popular notion of ego evolved into a conceited and inflated sense of self. The Buddhist meaning differs from both these concepts by characterizing the ego as a selfish, delusional attitude that leads only to unhappiness. As a Western Buddhist nun and author, the Venerable Thubten Chodron, explained the Tibetan Buddhist definition of ego, “It could refer to either the self-grasping ignorance which is the root of cyclic existence [making the same mistakes over and over again] or the self-centered attitude which prevents us from developing impartial love, compassion, and altruism for all sentient beings.”

When I write about ego, I’m referring to this Buddhist interpretation; a self-absorbed, self-seeking, but paradoxically self-destructive disposition. The ego speaks by commandeering one’s inner voice. Our egos not only misread reality, but then lead us down the garden path with constant, wrongheaded, negative feedback in the form of our internal dialogue. The only antidote is training ourselves to correct the ego’s false logic as it happens, a solution I will detail in my chapter on [True Thought](#). Otherwise, our inner voice, as we talk to ourselves second by second, becomes the medium for the human ego broadcasting misinformation. It’s our very own Ministry of Propaganda. Our very own Thought Police.

In the most telling scene of the film “[Sylvia](#),” about the brilliant but deeply depressed poet, [Sylvia Plath](#), she desperately sought aid and comfort from a kindly neighbor just before she committed suicide in 1963. By now, Sylvia had alienated and driven away her husband, British poet Edward Hughes, with her jealous rages about his literary success and the affairs she imagined him having. In effect,

her rages became self-fulfilling prophecies when he got fed up with her jealousy and left her for another woman.

“It’s all my fault,” she told the neighbor. “It’s all my fault, it’s all my fault. All I could think of was what would happen if somebody took him away from me. You see? If you fear something enough, you can make it happen. That woman, I conjured her. I invented her. Do you understand?”

Sylvia Plath’s jealousy and fear, in fact, were fabricated by her own [ego](#), whispering sweet nothings in her ear. In the end, she suffered death by ego.

We’re all Sylvia Plath. We’re all driven by ego. Listening to its lies, we conjure much of our existence one fear, one anxiety, one frustration, one expectation, one disappointment at a time. We unconsciously write the scenes in our lives with our self-promoting, self-absorbed, but self-defeating internal discourse. This is the destructive medium of Sylvia Plath and most other unhappy people on earth. Being rational creatures, we are able to ration out an infinite number of bad decisions with brilliant rationalizations. A rational mind is the deadly curse placed on us by the human ego.

How do we each form such a bad attitude? The field of psychology tells us that during childhood we each try to handle life’s challenges through the formation of an artificial personality, a persona, based on the early conditioning chiseled into each individual by experience and our distorted perception of it.

Psychologist [Karen Horney](#) called the process of forming a personality “the comprehensive neurotic solution.” Words to live by. As Horney wrote in her landmark 1950 book, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, this faux personality attempts to be “a solution not only for a particular conflict but one that implicitly promises to satisfy all the inner needs...” This personality, this superimposed self-image, this persona, is our answer for coping with a tough life. Our answer for coping with the first noble truth of Buddhism, that “life is suffering.”

My own persona, for example, was dredged up during my troubled youth under the wanton eye of a paranoid stepfather. In desperation, I developed my own touched-up self-image in the darkroom of the ego. My persona demanded that I be, not only a gifted sprinter, but the most gifted sprinter in a big land noted for gifted sprinters. It insisted that I be a talented poet and writer, destined for fame in a country over-populated with poets and writers who believe they are destined for fame. It told me I had to be witty, I must be a magnet for women, and that adventure, travel, exploration, and escape were the means for me to find happiness and meaning.

Like most people, I fabricated a self-image that was a blueprint for failure. Then, like most people, I listened to my own inner harangue, the wagging tongue of my ego, constantly reminding me about all the disappointment, frustration, doubt, disillusionment, regret, dissatisfaction, and discontent I ought to be feeling for failing to live up to my totally unrealistic self-image.

Buddhists refer to this kind of negative conditioning as “samsara,” or the “cycle of endless grasping,” which essentially makes life work like a perpetual treadmill. Samsara conditions us to repeat our mistakes ad infinitum.

If you want to find out if you’ve designed your own blueprint for failure, read the next section.

The Neurotic in Search of Glory

Before my mother married my stepfather when I was seven, I spent my early years as a fatherless boy living in my grandparents' house in Texas. My grandfather would read the "funny pages" to me every Sunday from the *Dallas Morning News* as I was sitting on his lap in his big padded rocker.

One of my favorite comics was a rather philosophical cartoon about some colorful denizens of the Okefenokee Swamp in North Carolina. The title character was a thoughtful opossum named [Pogo](#), who was prone to probing into the nature of existence. Okefenokee literally means "trembling earth," and this clever strip sent out a constant reminder that we all operate on shaky ground. Pogo once filled a dialogue balloon with one of the most profound and succinct observations about the human condition that I've ever come across, to this day.

"We have met the enemy and he is us."

Accepting the truth of that Pogo-ism is a crucial turning point in any evolving life: I have met the enemy, and he is me. We are each our own worst enemy as we go about our lifelong pursuit of the comprehensive neurotic solution and all the delusions it triggers.

My own persona is a good example of the comprehensive neurotic solution gone over the top. In extreme cases, as [Karen Horney](#) observed, "The neurotic, in his search for glory, goes astray into the realm of the fantastic, of the infinite, of boundless possibilities." This general observation describes my own neurotic solution in particular, and my own early life in spades.

In search of glory, I spent decades competing with millions of other capable writers as we all submitted our work over and over again to the same small cabal of New York houses, which control the exercise in futility known by any other name as "publishing." All but a precious few writers in this throng live on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams. I took up permanent residency in this low-rent district, while, at the same time, listening to my ego-driven thoughts browbeating me about what a loser I was.

The end result was a lifetime of rejection slips, enough to paper the walls of the whole Bantam Dell Publishing Group, and a built-in literary critic constantly nagging me about my failed career.

Not that I had no so-called success. I'm a much-published book author, poet, and journalist. But I quickly learned how the success I dreamed about wasn't all it was cracked up to be. As a youth, I envisioned how publishing my poetry in literary journals and placing my articles in nationally known magazines must be some of life's most fulfilling triumphs. Book-publishing must be a hoot. But that was just my ego jive-talking, setting me up for the fall. Once I became widely published, the thrill vanished more certainly than morning mist on [Walden Pond](#). It was only phantom happiness, tingling along a severed nerve path.

I eventually realized that the success advertised by "popular wisdom" - which is surely an oxymoron - is just another Chimera pawned off on me by my ego. Where was all the giddy and lasting joy that went with achievement?

Frustrated by all these dismembered dreams, I escaped to...well, anyplace else. Finally, after years of escapism led me to the point of slashing my wrists, I gradually pulled my life back together. But not before the comprehensive neurotic solution had almost killed me.

Horney's neurotic scenario applies to all of us to some degree. When we are young, especially during the uncertain and often terrifying days of puberty, the ego searches desperately for a way to cope with the difficulties of adult life, which, from a teenage viewpoint, seem overwhelming. What it comes up with is a package of smoke and mirrors: delusions, fears, ambitions, passions, desires, false hopes, misconceptions, and anxieties, all loosely held together with psychological duct tape and chewing gum by the self-image, inadequate though it might be.

Buddhists believe that the accompanying delusions are the cause of most suffering, confusion, and unhappiness in the world, and they refer to them as "[attachments](#)." Sylvia's Plath's most self-destructive attachment was apparently jealousy. My stepfather's was paranoia. My own designated attachment has always been

escapism, and especially the conceit that I could avoid all my troubles by climbing out the bathroom window and slip-sliding away to another place or job or mate or reality. Other typical attachments include ambition, sex, angst, love, security, money, materialism, and overeating. Each of us has a whole nest of attachments.

[Lama Surya Das called this rogues' gallery of attachments](#) “all the usual suspects.” Being a thoughtful person, you can psyche out your own attachments by examining the potent motivations that drive your life and the people who push your buttons.

We in the United States have our own special brand of the comprehensive neurotic solution, one based largely on marketing, materialistic values, and capitalism. What's it called? The next section lets you know.

Foiled by the Pursuit of Happiness

Here in the U.S., the American Dream is our very own comprehensive neurotic solution. What the American Dream drums into our heads with commercials and advertisements, with Hollywood movies, with supermarket tabloids, with newspapers and magazines, with the expectations built into us by family and peers, is that *we are all entitled*. The birthright of every American, judging by the messages fed to us in the media every day, is apparently wealth, fame, glory, possessions, good looks, status, and whatever other dreams we have our hearts set on bagging. You know the list, all summed up in our Constitution as “the pursuit of happiness.” Everybody deserves to be an American Idol. Anyone can grow up to be president. Every ghetto kid can play professional basketball.

The American Dream encourages us to go [“astray into the realm of the fantastic, of the infinite, of boundless possibilities”](#) every day of our lives.

The opposite but corresponding delusion is that everyone who doesn’t live up to the American Dream, by definition, is a failure. If we can’t somehow claim our American birthright, it is only because we lack enough talent, enough motivation, enough perseverance, enough creativity, enough chutzpah to get there. As if the constant negative feedback from our egos isn’t enough, writers and lecturers in the human potential movement hound us to puff up our inhuman potential. If we can’t fulfill our dreams, it’s because we’re not in touch with the [“power of intention,”](#) or we don’t follow the [“laws of success”](#) laid out in their bestselling books.

In America, there is no such thing as defeat with honor.

Thoreau prophesized the dangers of the American Dream more than 165 years ago in *Walden*. “His position is really very simple,” wrote American Studies Professor Jonathan Levin of Fordham University in his introduction for a 2003 [Barnes & Noble Classics edition of *Walden*](#). “Americans are suffering a kind of moral and spiritual depression, brought on by new and increasingly pervasive social and economic conditions that undermine individuals’ sense of material and moral agency. These conditions require individuals to sacrifice

their creativity and individuality in order to keep the social and economic mechanisms operating smoothly. The early chapters of *Walden* are filled with examples of how men and women are driven by trivial social expectations, and how these ultimately leave them alienated from their surroundings. The movement to Walden was intended to ‘simplify’ Thoreau’s living conditions and so to free him from all such externally imposed designs and expectations.”

Thoreau concluded, as Levin noted, “that sometimes individuals need to position themselves on the margins of social institutions in order to promote their transformation.”

What Thoreau proposed in *Walden* was nothing short of a Thoreau-ly radical social revolution, perhaps the only kind that can change America for the better; a revolution of rugged individualists, united by their idiosyncrasy, each marching to a different drummer.

The overwhelming majority of people chasing the American Dream never stop to think that the whole concept is based on an ego trip. It demands a bottomless cup of self-absorption. The truth about the American Dream sounds almost anti-American: Anything you ever do for selfish reasons always proves untrue to your self; while anything you ever do for selfless reasons always proves true to your self. The logic behind this self-effacing paradox is self-perpetuating.

In truth, how many self-centered people ever realize the American Dream? What, a few Hollywood stars, a handful of rockers, a politician or two, a trickle of heiresses, a tiny percentage of pro jocks, a gaggle of entrepreneurs, some television personalities? And, out of that number, how many does the dream make happy and content? The answer is none, zero, zilch.

These people might get everything they’ve always wanted, but eventually everything they want leaves them with little more than a vague sense of emptiness and the ultimate existential question. “Okay, what now?”

And those are the lucky ones. The rest of us, the pliant majority, never achieve our modest ambitions and therefore spend our lives feeling inadequate, meaningless, and unfulfilled. For the bulk of our people, the American Dream is just a Loch Ness Monster, a Boy

Scout snipe hunt, a Sasquatch, a blob of dancing swamp gas, a Northwest Passage; something mythical and unreachable, which will bring only frustration, pain, unhappiness, discontent, and an abiding sense of failure.

What, then, has the American Dream mutated into? Check out the next section.

A Short-lived Frontal Lobotomy

Now we see how the American Dream has turned into the American Nightmare.

Faced with a dead end on the street where the American Dream lives, many citizens spend their days, instead, chasing after distraction. They feverishly search for happiness in TVs, computers, cell phones, multiplex theaters, I-pods, SUVs, BlackBerries. You can see them driving past as they text-message, tune their radios, and check their OnStar directions. Quietude has become passé. Peace of mind has turned into mindless noise. In effect, they regard happiness as any thingamabob that can perform a short-lived frontal lobotomy.

Indeed, Thoreau is turning over in his grave while I type these sentences. As he protested, “Men have become the tools of their tools.”

Thoreau’s solution for the distractions of an over-indulgent culture? “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.”

In other words, 86 on the American Dream.

And what, you might well ask, have I got to offer you in place of the American Dream? The answer is as simple and sublime as its roots: *Go Back to Walden*.

Your guide is Henry David Thoreau, the undisputed wild man of 19th-century literature. He was “out there” in 1845, just as he is “out there” now. Since the 1840s, his unorthodox ideas, which left the most brilliant intellectuals of his day scratching their heads, have quietly shaken the foundation of Western thought.

His philosophy of civil disobedience and peaceful revolt profoundly influenced Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. His beliefs were embraced by George Bernard Shaw, Upton Sinclair, Ernest Hemingway, E.B. White, William Butler Yeats, Marcel Proust, Willa Cather, Edward Abbey, Sinclair Lewis, Frank Lloyd Wright, John Burroughs, John Muir, B.F. Skinner, and Loren

Eiseley, among many others. He was one of the first conservationists. Many credit Thoreau with starting the environmental movement. He was an early advocate of preserving wildlife refuges. His life is a role model for the anti-war movement, tax resistance, conscientious objection, and civil rights. He was a staunch abolitionist and among the earliest advocates of Darwinism. He studied Buddhism and Hinduism a century before they came into vogue in the West. He was a beatnik a hundred years before beats found their beat, and a hippie many decades before hip went hip. Moreover, his keen observations on the over-development, over-indulgence, and over-civilization of modern society have proven as prophetic as they are wise.

And yet, to my mind, Thoreau's most lasting gift is his simple but robust method for dealing with a world gone postal. Read on to make his method your own.

Thoreau's Method for the Madness of the World

Thoreau's method for treating our "lives of quiet desperation" is even more fundamentally sound than the tight little cabin he built on Walden Pond. Live simply and wisely. Seek your muse in nature. Follow the genius of your own intuition. Lead a mindful life. Regenerate your soul with spiritual energy. Reduce existence to its basics. Challenge the status quo. Shun materialism and luxury. Raise your consciousness with every thought you make. Meditate. And, faced with any problem, gauge fact or fiction with your own inner "Realometer."

All this methodology was embodied by Thoreau's cabin. To embrace Thoreau's way of life, just think of all these elements, these un-materialistic materials, as the foundation stones; the bricks, mortar, lumber; the windows, shingles, nails, and plaster of his little house. Then put it all together, and live there from now on, using the three tools - **True Thought, True Energy, True Insight** - which I will detail in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

"In *Walden*," wrote Fordham University's Jonathan Levin, "Thoreau uses his retreat to the woods as a way of framing a reflection on both what ails men and women in their contemporary condition and what might provide relief...Thoreau did as much as anyone to define the problem for Americans and to insist on the ultimate value of every individual's vigorous and creative energy, even in the face of persistent dehumanization and despair."

Thoreau's own "vigorous and creative energy" was inexhaustible, even in the face of persistent disease. Thoreau suffered from TB for all his adult life and died of it on May 6, 1862, at the age of 45. Accounts of his final conversations reveal the Zen of Thoreau throughout his days.

On Thoreau's death bed one of his friends, Parker Pillsbury, told him that "You seem so near the brink of the dark river, I almost know the opposite shore may appear to you."

Thoreau's Buddha-like response: "One world at a time."

When one relative observed that he was about to make his peace with God, Thoreau replied: “I was not aware that we had quarreled.”

In the four decades before his premature death, Thoreau was reborn many times. He squeezed numerous reincarnations into his brief lifespan. He was a poet, naturalist, philosopher, author, abolitionist, tax resister, Buddhist, conscientious objector, biologist, teacher, social critic, essayist, hiker, pencil maker, farmer, outdoorsman, surveyor, carpenter, lecturer, anarchist, and rebel. And good at all of them.

As one of his associates, Nathaniel Hawthorne, described Thoreau: “He is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and rustic, though courteous manners...But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion, and becomes much better than beauty.”

Despite his chronic illness, he was an avid canoeist, an enthusiastic traveler, a gifted naturalist, an ardent gardener. What’s more, he pursued his afternoon “saunters,” in sickness and in health, with much the same devotion as the meditations he studied in his beloved Buddhism.

Ground zero for all these activities, beliefs, and practices was *Walden*. In 1845, when he was 28, he moved into his self-constructed house on land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson in second-growth forest around the shores of Walden Pond, about 1.5 miles from Thoreau’s family home in Concord.

He lived there for more than two years, but wrote, rewrote, and revised *Walden*, the journal of this peak experience, for much of the next decade, before it was finally published in 1854. In *Walden*, true to his Transcendental philosophy, Thoreau used the nature around him to symbolize the inner human spirit. The book compressed his time at Walden Pond into one calendar year, using the four seasons to explore natural simplicity, harmony, and beauty as prime movers in the cycle of human growth, evolution, meaning, and satisfaction.

As Levin noted, Thoreau “set out to conduct an experiment: Could he survive, possibly even thrive, by stripping away all superfluous luxuries, living a plain, simple life in radically reduced conditions?” Then Levin added: “But, in truth, his aim was to investigate the larger moral and spiritual economy of such a life.”

Many of Thoreau’s own remarks speak to his economy of the spirit. For instance, “Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable,” as Thoreau declared, “but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.”

Thoreau spent his time at Walden Pond in reflections about life, in daily rituals based on monastic simplicity, in observing nature, in writing, meditating, daydreaming, working his garden, sauntering, and doing the elemental, elegant things that make life worthwhile.

“Sometimes, in a summer morning,” he wrote, “having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise til noon, rapt in revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness...until by the sun falling in my west window, or the noise of some traveler’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night...I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of work.”

Here was the method for the madman of Walden Pond.

“Throughout *Walden*,” concluded Levin, “and indeed throughout the greater part of his writing, the impulse to simplify conditions and cast off the debilitating and dispiriting obligations of a respectable life are bound up with uninhibited unadulterated wildness.”

The ultimate fruit of *Walden* and its way of life was unflinching honesty. Thoreau rose above America’s “quiet desperation” by making his philosophy his life and his life his philosophy. The two were made one.

Thoreau, like every last one of us, craved happiness and peace of mind. At Walden Pond, he harvested those fruits with truth, integrity, dignity, economy, intuition, mindfulness, and simplicity.

By contrast, the pursuit of happiness promised by our constitution is a fruitless harvest, a famine of the spirit, reaping only the American Dream, the almighty dollar, our social status, many artifacts of technology, those things we covet, the flotsam and jetsam of materialism. That is the madness of our method.

Thoreau's reward was as steadfast and observable as the nature he loved. As author and clergyman John Weiss described Thoreau: "His countenance had not a line on it expressive of ambition or discontent; the affectional emotions had not fretted at it. He went about like a priest of Buddha who expects to arrive soon as the summit of a life of contemplation."

Thoreau's method is the noble path I offer you here when I suggest going *Back to Walden*. How can you make Thoreau's method work for you? By building his cabin in your head. Read the next part of *Back to Walden* to study his blueprint.

More Potent Than Reality

Thoreau's reputation as a dreamer, a hopeless idealist, a bounder, isn't so surprising considering the norms, conventions, and dogmas that society always holds so dear. How many visionaries have been declared insane, anti-establishment, dangerous, revolutionary, illegal, blasphemous, heretical, or downright embarrassing by anyone threatened by their visions? Jesus, Galileo, St. Francis, Joan of Arc, Luther, the "witches" of Salem, The Belle of Amherst, van Gogh, the Suffragettes, Tesla, Gandhi, Kenyatta, Malcolm X, the feminist movement, Mandela, King, Chavez, just to mention a few.

Thoreau and other Transcendentalists were considered, according to his biographer [Robert D. Richardson Jr.](#), "as irresponsible idlers, a trial to their families, and no credit to their town."

Following in the footsteps of such idlers, we need to throw off the bonds of respectability, the shackles of success, the cuffs of convention, the ball-and-chain of normalcy, the house arrest of materialism, the jail cell of peer pressure. In short, we must blast the American Dream back to the Dark Ages, where it belongs. We need to position ourselves "on the margins of social institutions" in order to promote transformation.

The fact is that happiness doesn't just happen as a matter of happenstance. Neither do meaning, peace of mind, nor satisfaction. What I have grudgingly concluded, after being dragged kicking and screaming through *Walden's* pages and along the [noble footpaths of Buddhism](#), is that contentment requires hard work, training, and discipline. Sorry, folks, but the truth hurts.

At this point, you're probably reacting in words akin to a bumper sticker I once saw: "Oh no! Not another learning experience!"

Afraid so. But that's better by far than just another yearning experience. As [Mahatma Gandhi](#), one of the numerous luminaries deeply influenced by Thoreau's writings, advised, "Learn like you will live forever and live like you will die tomorrow."

In that context, everyone on earth must abide by one unwavering truth: Happiness is shaped, as Lama Surya Das wrote, by how we

“view, interpret, and thus experience the world.” Remember that! It’s an astonishingly simple concept, an all-important realization, yet so very hard to grasp. And how we view, interpret, and experience life depends on practice and preparation.

Of course, we might not be able to change many of life’s hard realities; our genetics, the state of the world, earthquakes, war, death, taxes, disease, the absurdity of rooting for the San Francisco Giants, and many other physical difficulties and emotional heartbreaks everyone faces. In other words, we might be incapable of erasing those personal traumas and mass tragedies that underlie all existence. But, through our attitudes, good or bad, through our viewpoints, healthy or unhealthy, through our inner voice, positive or negative, we determine how to play the cards we’ve been dealt. For most of us, that takes training.

Which is precisely where [Waldenism](#) enters stage left, along with the irresponsible idler who inspired it. Waldenism will give you the training, the method, the tools to transform your life, à la Henry David Thoreau, and turn it into a one-of-a-kind calling.

In the next chapter, I will provide you with an autobiographical sketch to show why I went *Back to Walden*. I’ll recount my life as a kind of Everyman, whose life personifies all the troubles, neuroses, attachments, ego trips, fantasies, and unrealistic expectations mentioned above. In other words, I know of what I speak when I talk about the American Dream gone haywire.

Then, in the next three chapters, I’ll detail the practices - [True Thought](#), [True Energy](#), [True Insight](#) - that have revolutionized my life. By extension, I think you’ll see that, if Waldenism works for me, it will work for anybody.

Chapter 3: Why I Went Back to Walden

No Place Left to Run

My own ground truth as I write *Back to Walden* is that I'm dying. I am dying not in the sense that any doctor has told me I have six months to live; nor in the sense, as Bob Dylan crooned, that "He not busy being born is busy dying." My reality is located somewhere between these extremes.

In fact, I still appear to be fit and in robust health, continuing to run, swim, or hike daily, as I have for 50 years. But, like all of us in the grand scheme of mortality, I'm fighting a losing battle. My [kidneys are failing](#), slowly but surely, letting me know that my death is a few years down the road, if I'm lucky. In other words, I'm dying no more nor less than anyone else.

Just as the tubercular seed of Thoreau's death lived inside him at Walden Pond and doubtless inspired the immediacy of his mission, the seed of my own death grows inside me and inspires me to make every day transcendent. Shouldn't that be the attitude of anyone at any age?

In that context, one purpose of *Back to Walden* is to record all I've learned about meaning, satisfaction, and happiness in a permanent record, much like the [ancient Japanese ritual of a death poem](#).

In the traditional death poem, or *jisei*, the idea was that, during your final days, your reflections tend to be especially lucid, meaningful, and important observations about life. The poem was considered a gift to one's loved ones, students, and friends. The tradition began with Zen monks, but was also popular among poets. Their poems were often characterized by symbols of death, such as the full moon, the western sky, the song of the cuckoo, or images of the season in which the writer died.

One example of a Japanese death poem was composed by Gesshu Soko, who died in 1696 at age 79:

Inhale, exhale
Forward, back

Living, dying:
Arrows, let flown each to
each
Meet midway and slice
The void in aimless flight
Thus I return to the
source.

In the tradition of Japanese death poems, I hope that *Back to Walden* will be especially lucid and meaningful, laying out these three essential awareness practices, [True Thought](#), [True Energy](#), [True Insight](#); but also giving my friends and loved ones a few significant observations about life.

In turn, I trust, my book will reflect back all the beliefs, principles, values, ethics, and philosophies I've committed to this permanent record and etch them forever into my soul, wherever it might wander after I die. In that sense, *Back to Walden* is also my tombstone, my gravestone rubbing, a funeral song, dirge, an elegy, my karma. My death poem.

With this lovely tradition of death poems in mind, then, I devote this chapter to my own story. One yield of practicing Waldenism and its three mindfulness techniques is the kind of clarification that monks must experience after years of contemplation, seclusion, and meditation. I think of my past as a lovely vista, which I am gazing backwards upon after reaching a summit. From here, only the defining crests stand out, in stark contrast to their surrounding valleys and hollows in shadow. From this viewpoint, my chaotic and confusing past finally makes sense.

My newfound sense of vision reminds me of a key passage in James Hilton's profound novel, [Lost Horizon](#), when one of the wise monks in Shangri-La explained how monasticism illuminates the journey of life: "You see, my dear sir, one of the first steps towards the clarifying of the mind is to obtain a panorama of one's own past, and that, like any other view, is more accurate in perspective. When you have been among us long enough, you will find your old life slipping gradually into focus as through a telescope when the

lens is adjusted. Everything will stand out still and clear, duly proportioned, and with its correct significance.”

My aim in setting down the following impressionistic portrait of my past, as everything stands out “still and clear,” is to show how I reached such a critical juncture of my life and explain precisely why I decided to go Back to Walden. My path to Walden has been neither transcendent, noble, nor straight.

I was born of old Texas stock in 1945, precisely a century after Thoreau went to *Walden*. For much of the next few decades, I led a life of unquiet desperation. I was the anti-Thoreau, living the antipathetic *Walden*. I resided in a fool’s paradise, if there ever was one. I did my own quixotic thing, questing after...What? Who knows? Some windmill to charge, some lost cause to champion, some dewy eyed Dulcinea to save. I juked and jived, quite out of control, while dodging the same essential facts of life that Thoreau had cornered so skillfully at [Walden Pond](#).

The trajectory of my life was formed even before my memory cells had the ability to store recollections, scars, or cobwebs. In 1947, when I was two, a four-engine propeller airliner piloted by my father disintegrated against a mountaintop in West Virginia on the approach to Washington’s National Airport.

My only remaining legacy from my dad is a sepia-toned photograph of himself in uniform, the cap and its visor tilted back jauntily, his lips fathering a toothy grin, eyes glimmering with something grander than the Milky Way in the summer Texas sky.

My early years were blessed by the presence of my grandfather, a bear-like, gruff, but kindly cotton man and conservationist, who took in my mother, brother, and me after my father died. He literally saved our lives by sheltering us in every way. My grandfather has been the one sustaining, positive, male role model of my life, one who cast a profound influence on me as a boy and throughout my adulthood.

This anecdote about my grandfather, I think, shows his love, his contrariness, and his perverse sense of humor. One hot Texas evening, I was caught in some sort of tomfoolery during our weekly

family get-together; I think it might have been when I shoved my cousin Mark, fully clothed, into the fish pond in my grandfather's spacious back yard. In terms of our family code, my offense called for an adult reprimand somewhere in that gray area between a slap on the wrist and capital punishment. My grandfather, in his role as patriarch, took control of the situation while 12 or so family members looked on.

"Gus," he growled his nickname for me. "Go over yonder, behind those bushes, and pick you out a good switch. Then wait for me!"

I did what I was told and waited with that sense of deep foreboding that fills every child anywhere when facing swift and just punishment. Several minutes later, my grandfather lumbered over to where I was waiting in the bushes.

"Now, Gus," he whispered, "when I slap this ol' switch on the ground a few times, I want you to holler like all get-out, by God, so everybody can hear you."

And I did.

My grandfather left a deep and lasting impression on me. But I will put off that story until the [final chapter in *Back to Walden*](#), where my relationship with him and a magical place called [Little Sandy](#), which was his own Walden Pond, will serve as a fitting climax to this book and everything it stands for.

Meanwhile, I will focus here on a very different kind of influence. Strangely enough, because I was so young when my father died, my personality wasn't formed so much by that tragedy as by the tortured, larger-than-life character who would take his place, and also shoulder aside my grandfather in the bargain. This is the stuff of the next section.

A Past Full of Rage

When I was seven, my mother remarried, and we moved away from the safe and comforting home of my grandfather. He was replaced by my stepfather, a handsome but troubled ex-Marine with a past full of rage. The foundation for his whole worldview was set in the quicksand of suspicion. He was a muscular, red-faced, terrifying, violent man, who spent his life agonizing over who was about to cross him next.

The eeriest aspect of my stepfather's appearance was a telltale twitch in his left eye, which my family tracked with its keen survival instinct. This frightful muscle tic always surfaced when paranoia was about to take over and make him go postal.

Many, many episodes with my stepfather would have shocked any innocent bystander. One that often stands out in my mind happened when I was 10-years-old, after I went outside quite early one morning to mow the lawn, which was one of my chores. Our family had been on vacation for some time, and in our absence the grass in our yard on the outskirts of Dallas had sprouted lush and tall, a foot or more high. That morning, it looked like a tiny South African veldt. This being 1955, we had only a manual push mower to do the job. As a skinny kid, I was having a hell of a time wrestling our mower in fits and spurts through the nodding, dewy grass.

Fortunately or not, my neighbor, Bobby Mayfield, happened along, noticed my struggles, and lent a hand. We were both lightweights, however, so we were busily straining and thrashing and groaning with all our might to get nowhere fast.

Little did we realize that my stepfather had been spying on us through a bank of small windows beside our front door. It was common knowledge in our family that, wherever we were, whatever we might be doing, my stepfather was liable to be hiding around the corner, keeping us under surveillance with his twitching eye. He was a one-man [Stasi](#).

What he made of this scene, as Bobby and I groped and grunted slowly across the front lawn grappling with the mower, I'll never know. But it wasn't good. I can only guess that in his tortured way

my stepfather interpreted our tussle with the lawn mower as some kind of delinquent gesture either mocking him, rebelling against his authority, embarrassing him in front of the neighbors, or thumbing our noses at the world. Who knows what evil lurks in the heart of paranoia? Truth is, I had nothing more delinquent in mind than getting my chores out of the way.

Suddenly my stepfather threw open the front door, hinges shrieking. For sound effects, conjure up the shower scene in *Psycho*. I glanced up from my task to see him charging toward us with a ballistic expression, left eye twitching homicidally. The sight would have put Attila the Hun into panic mode.

It did Bobby, too. He had seen my stepfather in action before and bailed out instantly. I can still picture him squirming right through our thick front hedge with the body language of a freaked-out groundhog.

As for me, there was no place to hide.

My power of recall shuts down at precisely that instant. I don't remember the next few minutes of pain and terror. Nor do I recollect the aftermath from many other similar incidents during the frightful years with my stepfather. He was the embodiment of the ancient Chinese curse: "[May you live in interesting times.](#)" Selective amnesia must still serve as my escape valve to protect me from the interesting times that cursed my family.

With that incident as an example, I can neatly sum up childhood this way: My stepfather was the kind of guy it takes the rest of your life to get over. And it did.

My reaction to the 11 years I spent under the thumb of this deeply disturbed man was to run like hell. I became a star sprinter in high school, an obsession that allowed me both mentally and physically to run away from the boot camp that passed as our home life. Then a ruptured hamstring muscle, ripped out of its moorings at the hip bone, ended my athletic dreams when I was only 17. But that didn't stop me from running! Thereafter, as a young adult, I pursued the fast and loose lifestyle of a poet and journalist. I also served

variously as a [VISTA](#), [Peace Corps](#), and [United Nations Volunteer](#), motivated by reasons ranging from high ideals to escapism.

And it wasn't just my stepfather I was running from, for I often asked myself a very disturbing question. Where was my beloved mother during the decade when I was at the mercy of this madman? The sad reply is that she always seemed to be asleep in her bedroom. My life, therefore, became a 100-meter dash away from a mother who wasn't really there and from a stepfather who was. And all too often. It was also a headlong getaway from anyone who ever triggered the prickly emotion of love.

I sought my meaning elsewhere, mainly in pursuit of a rich fantasy life. While chasing impossible dreams, I rambled all over, landing momentarily in such far-flung realities as New Jersey, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Oregon, California, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Washington State, Kenya, and many other short-lived phenomena. In the process, I skipped from mate to mate and job to job in a failed attempt to flee my past, which survived mainly as a dull ache in my belly and a memory full of atomic shadows.

Little did I know, but I was headed for a big comeuppance that would almost kill me and would certainly alter my life forever. For this part of my story, see the next section.

Hard-earned Nervous Breakdown

Finally, after 20 years of high-octane flight, I suffered a hard-earned nervous breakdown in 1988. At the time, I was working as a feature writer on an alternative newspaper in [Chico, California](#), where I had ended up, not by design, but by serendipity. That was also what drove every other phase of my life.

Increasingly, the failed love affairs, missed opportunities, bad moves, lack of commitment, and repressed emotions were piling up mentally. My subconscious mind had developed into one of those melancholy black-and-white [photos of the Dust Bowl](#), with windblown silt accumulating in every nook and cranny.

Then my foolhardy past finally caught up with me, touched off by an especially painful romance with a lovely, clever, but angst-ridden Spanish divorcee, who simultaneously embraced me out of desperation with one arm but shoved me away out of fear with the other.

This conflict doomed us from the beginning. I suppose she was terrified of another commitment like the one just shattered by her husband after 22 years of marriage. But, at the same time, she was insecure, confused, needy; and here I was, a kind, smitten man, who gave her a willing shoulder to cry on. All for my own selfish reasons, natch!

My girlfriend's predicament touched me in ways I'd never felt before. I was moved by her eyes welling with wet and her lips trembling at the indignity of being thrust into the scary role of single mother for three children. She gave me urges and compulsions that were quite foreign to me and the irresponsible life I'd led. I longed to care for her and her children, ached for commitment, devoted all my passion to being with her.

Which, of course, was exactly what she didn't want. As she often said, "I might love you, Charlie, but if I ever have to testify in court, I'll deny it."

She wanted love without calling it that, emotional support with no strings attached, sex without the kids finding out, and a relationship

without ever mentioning that term. In other words, she wanted the person I'd always been before meeting her. How's that for [karma](#)?

I was a heat-seeking missile homing in. And she was the one woman anywhere whose body heat was capable of bringing back so much afterglow from my childhood: danger, excitement, human bondage, frustration, futility, pain, anxiety, obsession, abandonment. Most of all, she resurrected the knowledge that I was never really good enough for anybody to love.

Buddhists, I would later find out, refer to this sort of synchronicity, when two star-crossed people somehow find each other across the vast reaches of time and space, as "[interdependent origination](#)." Everything happens as if by accident. But accident is only happenstance for accidentally on purpose.

As Francesca Freemantle, author of *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, writes about interdependent origination on the *Buddhadharma* website:

"According to this law, nothing has independent, permanent, or absolute existence. Everything is part of a limitless web of interconnections and undergoes a continual process of transformation. Every appearance arises from complex causes and conditions, and in turn combines with others to produce countless effects."

Or, as the lyrics of *Hello Young Lovers* put the same proposition:

"I know how it feels to have wings on your heels,
And to fly down the street in a trance.
You fly down a street on the chance that you meet,
And you meet — not really by chance."

Soon our chancy romance, which had begun so passionately, as so many impossible affairs do, disintegrated into serial bickering.

Meanwhile, I became increasingly isolated. The frustration of our love life triggered born-again agony from my childhood, pain so deep and repressed that it bubbled up through me with molten force. Suddenly and without warning, all the pain I'd been running

away from for decades washed over me, overwhelmed me, paralyzed me. All I could think of was killing myself.

Before long, I couldn't do anything, even the most mundane tasks of newspaper work, without breaking into tears; a skill not necessarily in the job description for a hard-boiled reporter. During my daily long-distance runs along the woodsy trails of Bidwell Park in Chico, I would often end up sitting on the ground, hyperventilating, rocking back and forth as I sobbed uncontrollably. What a mess I was!

Only the intervention of my former girlfriend and constant friend, Rachel, saved my life. Operating from a distance in Massachusetts, she telephoned some compassionate and kind-hearted friends to come and rescue me before I could do myself harm.

After that close call, I took refuge at an ironic and iconic last resort, especially for any fallen-away Catholic like me. It was a [Trappist monastery outside Chico](#) where the monks were kind enough to take me in for eight months, much like my grandfather had done so many years before. I became the abbey's unofficial basket case, penniless poet, and atheist in residence.

One of the daily jobs I did to earn my keep at the abbey was cleaning the small cinder-block visitor's chapel, which featured a half-moon window, located above the entrance and throwing morning light onto the altar and tabernacle where the consecrated hosts were kept. Oddly enough, thousands of flies, evidently escaped from a nearby cattle ranch, began gathering on the inside of this sun-burnished window every morning. There they shat with gusto, leaving specks everywhere, and collectively buzzed with a dull throb and devilish delight.

This racket was an unseemly distraction for the guests, many of whom had made long pilgrimages to the abbey so they could take retreats from stressful lives. It became my task to climb a 10-foot ladder each day and vacuum up the pulsating swarm of flies. Problem was, as soon as I sucked them all into the paper dust bag of my old Hoover, more flies would begin to butt and bicker and bat against the glass.

Every day in every way, this exercise in futility seemed to embody the life I'd created for myself in that half-moon window of opportunity allotted me on earth. I had made myself into the Lord of the Flies.

In the fullness of time, however, this unlikely refuge I was given at the abbey, with its ancient rituals, kindly monks, and cloistered way of life, provided the sanctuary I needed to confront my demons and gradually heal myself. It was my moment of truth in an accidental Sangri-La. At the monastery over the months, I spent my time meditating, reading spiritual books, daydreaming about the enduring mysteries of existence, running, and mulling over my inner life, which I had heretofore treated as a leper with a bell.

Deeply aware that I had already wasted most of my life escaping from reality, I began to concentrate on the supernatural hum, those subtle spiritual undercurrents, which operate just below everyday life. This became my lifelong quest.

There at the abbey and in the following years, after I left, I gradually discovered that, much like [the nature so closely observed by Thoreau and other Transcendentalists](#), the spiritual world is with us all the time, and largely beyond the notice of human awareness. As if reflecting the highly organized and law-abiding nature described in *Walden*, spirituality works according to a set of immutable natural laws.

During the ensuing years, I realized that, for me at least, the angst often diagnosed as psychological distress is really spiritual distress. I was a somebody having some out-of-body experience.

And so went my search for meaning as I continued to hunt for something to believe in for the next 20 years after my turning point at the monastery.

Undoubtedly, momentous spiritual moments evolve from momentous personal crises. Since I was perpetually embroiled in crisis, or so it seemed, that should have provided me with plenty of chances for spiritual redemption. As one of my oldest friends once responded after I informed him I was having a midlife crisis:

“Charlie, your whole life has been one long midlife crisis.” Amen to that.

Which leads me to my latest crisis, proving to be my penultimate. It’s also the very reason why you are reading *Back to Walden* at this exact moment. To learn why, go to the following section.

The News Was a Shocker!

In October of 2008, about the same time as I started practicing [Tibetan Buddhism](#) in earnest after years of dabbling in it, blood tests showed that in a short span of a few months my kidney function had suddenly dropped to 50 percent of full capacity. My [kidneys were failing](#), swiftly and surely, it seemed. Nobody knew why.

The news was a shocker! But my reaction was even more astounding. I began to realize how the knowledge of my failing kidneys is a lovesome thing, a fortunate thing, a thing of beauty and inspiration, a gift. I am dying, it's true, but so what?

As Jack Nicholson's character, Jake Gittes, cracked over the phone in *Chinatown*, when asked if he was alone, "Aren't we all?"

Here's the definitive existential truth. Am I dying? Sure. Aren't we all?

The inevitability of death is only endured by most of us through hard-nosed denial. We're all cast as film noir detectives of the Jake Gittes kind, ignoring reality with gritty wise cracks. But now, with deniability no longer an option for me, I've found the certainty of my own death, and the rough timetable it has given me for my future, a source of heady motivation.

One factor in this adjustment process was a series of appointments with a group of kidney specialists, who were supposed to [diagnose](#) the cause and, therefore, the fatal effect of my kidney problems.

During my first appointment, sitting in a modern waiting room - complete with its faux-Motel 6 furnishings, the perfumey odor of industrial-strength janitorial products, and magazines of the supermarket tabloid variety - I gazed around me at my fellow bovines being herded into the medical slaughterhouse. Many of the patients, bless their hearts, were grotesquely obese. I had to shift my eyes away from the elephantine ankles, painfully red and swollen, of the woman across the aisle. Someone behind me wheezed air leaking from a broken carburetor.

Those patrons who weren't grossly overweight looked frail enough to break into twigs, which might not have been far from the truth, since severe osteoporosis is one [symptom of advanced kidney disease](#). Others are debilitating anemia, nausea, drowsiness, confusion, seizures, and coma. Literally everyone around me looked defeated and ready to die.

One tottering older man shuffled in with the aid of a walker and settled uncomfortably into a chair with upholstery in the pattern of a skin rash. Soon his name was being paged by a medical assistant, and he was asked to step inside. For several disturbing seconds, the poor man struggled to rise from his chair as though it were a wrestling opponent pulling an illegal hold.

Finally, he bawled, "These goddamn chairs are built too goddamn low!" It was a voice crying in the wilderness filled with outrage, desperation, despair.

He made me want to scream as well. So did the whole scene, for there but for fortune go you and I. And my own fortune might not be that far away. I pictured myself in this same waiting room a few years into my intimidating future. Or even a few months.

Throughout the spring of 2009, the specialists at this center pricked, prodded, and poked me, up and down, looking for hard evidence explaining my kidney woes. By May, they had supposedly eliminated every possibility but two. I was informed that they wanted to drill into my bone marrow looking for either leukemia or bone marrow cancer, a Hobson's choice, if there ever was one.

Instinctively, I knew I had neither, don't ask me how. So I politely cancelled all my remaining appointments, swore never to report to that waiting room again, and took matters into my own hands.

I will detail how I escaped my own mortality and the clutches of the Industrial-Medical Complex in [Chapter 6 of *Back to Walden*](#). But here's a hint. I had neither leukemia nor bone marrow cancer. Aside from my kind, understanding, and supportive GP, the doctors simply didn't know what to make of a vigorous, lifelong runner in ruddy good health who happens to have failing kidneys. They still don't.

If only my kidneys would hold their own, I vowed, I can continue running, swimming, and hiking for...Well, that's a question still to be answered.

Meanwhile, I had to come to grips with my worst-case scenario. Unlikely as it seems, during the months following my fatal diagnosis, I reached my own separate peace. Knowing I didn't have much time to waste, I fleshed out a streamlined method for practicing spiritual awareness by splicing together the essential threads of the Transcendentalism and Buddhism beloved by Thoreau. By adopting Thoreau's lifestyle and boiling down many years of spiritual and philosophical reading to the three powerful awareness techniques summed up in chapter one, I discovered a speeded-up, pared-down method of spiritual trekking geared to those of us who haven't any time to spare. In essence, perhaps, that means everybody.

Making the best of my time, I arrived at a kind of acceptance, welcoming whatever fate awaits me, and reaching a state of happiness and peace I've never known.

All the while, my life has taken on the atmosphere of late September in New England, when the turning summer mulches into fall, the quality of slanting light makes magic, and all the world seems to be holding its breath.

In that sense, the prospect of death was a gift from a God I don't even believe in.

The offshoot of my detour into medical malpractice is [Back to Walden](#). The heart and soul of *Back to Walden* is Thoreau's lifestyle and this set of three awareness practices - [True Thought](#), [True Energy](#), and [True Insight](#) - which I believe can help anybody find peace of mind. In the following pages, I offer you these transcendent tools in hopes they can make your life more satisfying, more meaningful, more joyous.

By publishing this eBook, I don't want to suggest that I have suddenly become some enlightened spiritual guru. On the contrary, my message is much more deductive. If these simple methods work

for me, with a past so recently gone AWOL from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, they're liable to work for anyone.

I also understand that, at this point in time, what I offer you on these pages might not fit into your current agenda. I expect as much. I'm not trying to convert anyone to anything. But some day, as you dodge the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, you might find you need something beyond what "over-civilization" (as Thoreau called society) offers. Like Thoreau, you might be seized by the impulse "to cast off the debilitating and dispiriting obligations of a respectable life." Your mind might turn inward for something more.

In that case, *Back to Walden* is here for you if you need it. Your own infallible intuition - your "transparent eye-ball," as Ralph Waldo Emerson called it - will tell you when that time is at hand.

I don't want to give the impression that I've got all the answers. I'm no highly evolved human being. I am not even "An Illumined Soul," as one gravestone in my hometown Amherst cemetery claims for the dearly departed. I'm just a guy looking for truth. But, for the first time in a life of trying almost everything, I know I'm on the right track. For the first time, I'm zeroing in on what's truly authentic.

As French philosopher André Gide noted, "Believe those who are seeking the truth. Doubt those who claim to have found it."

In that context, I ought to be believed.

It is my intention that my journal will, in its own modest way, act like [Walden](#) did for countless readers, including poets, novelists, philosophers, naturalists, monastics, environmentalists, painters, bohemians, beats, hippies, and other time trekkers from every generation. I want this journal to help you and my other loved ones find joy now and for the remainder of your stay on earth. I picture you turning your life into a noble but very personal calling, whose ultimate reward is tranquility.

Later, perhaps, in the fullness of time, my eBook might help you face the same end-of-life challenges that I face now. In the best of

all possible worlds, it will be my timeless guide to you. It is the very best gift I can think to leave.

My fondest hope is for this account to impart a few nuggets of intuitive wisdom to you and my other dear ones; to offer you all my loving camaraderie from this moment on. Just as Thoreau “never found a companion as companionable as loneliness,” I hope you’ll never find a companion as companionable as my companionship on these pages.

As the lyrics of the lovely [September Song](#) go: “These precious days I’ll spend with you.”

Chapter 4: First Tool in Waldenism - True Thought

Our Inner Dummy

When many of us talk to ourselves, we tend to reason like Groucho Marx did when he declared, “I would never want to belong to any club that would accept me as a member.” Thus we allow our egos to hoodwink us into every mistake we make, think, blurt out, or believe. In that sense, we’re all in a club we don’t want to belong to because it accepted us as members. It’s called the human race.

By listening to our egos, we often make ourselves victims of our own delusions, anxieties, fantasies, ambitions, rationalizations, angers, resentments, and misconceptions. That’s how the ego handicaps us into becoming perennial losers in this all too human race.

As you might recall, when I write about the human ego, I’m not talking about the psychoanalytical meaning of it: that part of the mind that mediates among the animalistic instincts of the id, the moralistic values of the conscience, and the demands of the environment. Nor am I talking about the popular notion of ego as a puffed-up and vain self-image. I’m referring to the Buddhist interpretation of ego, meaning the kind of ignorant, self-centered attitude that makes us commit the same mistakes over and over again and prevents us from developing compassion for all beings. In the Buddhist sense, ego is the source of all negativity coursing through human thought.

Thoreau and other American Transcendentalists were well aware of the negative current running through human nature. Which is why they challenged us all to raise the level of our consciousness, our intellect, our spirituality, our state of being.

“I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life through conscious endeavor,” Thoreau wrote. “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 medium through which we look, which morally we can do.”

[Emerson](#) expressed this idea of elevating your thoughts as a revolution in human consciousness: “So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes!”

Without “new eyes,” we *view, interpret, and thus experience the world* in a very negative way, indeed, as [Lama Surya Das](#) has so astutely pointed out in *Awakening the Buddha Within*. This is the naked truth about flawed and downbeat thinking. When viewing the world through an opaque film of unhappy thoughts, there can be only one way you experience your life. As bad news, Bix.

If you see everything through the eyes of Scrooge, you’re not going to live it through the mind of Pollyanna.

The ego talks to each us by taking over our interior monologue, not unlike ventriloquist [Edgar Bergen putting words into the mouth of his puppet, Charlie McCarthy](#), back in the 1930s and 1940s, even before my time (ahem). It was one of the most celebrated acts *on the radio*. Think about that for a second. Millions of people *listened* religiously every week to *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* while a ventriloquist spoke through his wooden alter-ego, presumably without moving his lips. Hmmm.

That act is also a perfect metaphor for how we talk to ourselves. All of us have a ventriloquist, the ego, projecting words into the mouth of our own inner dummy. And like millions of people listening to ventriloquism on the radio, we suspend disbelief. We let the puppet master inside continually put depression, hurt feelings, disappointment, unrealistic ambitions, bad decisions, anger, distrust, false pride, self-absorption, self-defeat, and many other sad states into our hardwood heads. We let the ego regularly rationalize our own irrationality.

This ventriloquist act, our interior monologue, is the single most common reason why the common person is so uncommonly unhappy. What a waste!

While transmitting a constant brain storm of unhappy thoughts as we talk to ourselves, our egos also broadcast bad news to everyone we meet. I can give you a good case in point from my own past, when a noble endeavor, carried out by six idealistic volunteers, was

corrupted and ultimately spoiled by how two of them viewed, interpreted, and thus experienced the experience.

Many years ago, I volunteered for a biological expedition to one of the Sierra Madre mountain ranges in Central Mexico, where six of us spent several months camping in the wilderness while tracking [monarch butterflies to their overwintering sites](#). In addition to all the scientific data gathered, the most significant result was finding a previously undiscovered butterfly site, the grandest spectacle I've ever witnessed.

Imagine an acre of oyamel fir forest stretching along a mountain ridge, where the ground, boulders, every limb, all the surfaces were coated with fluttering gold-and-black butterflies. The landscape literally pulsed, percolated, prickled with undulating butterfly wings. Every so often, a breeze would raise a cloud of monarchs, which would settle back down with the look of colored confetti, the sound of soft rain, the touch of snowflakes.

The place was a landscape painting turned surreal by its own brush strokes coming alive. How could the gallant pursuit of such a phenomenon turn sour? Through that old humbug, the human factor.

Early on in the expedition, two of the six volunteers coupled with each other, transforming them into what my very clever friend, Terry Allen, calls a "voting block." Unfortunately, though these two voted together when it came to group decisions, they disagreed about almost everything else.

In this instance, the constant quarreling of the two "lovers" came into play every night around the campfire. I'll call this couple the "[Bickersons](#)," sticking to the theme of the afore-mentioned *Chase and Sanborn Hour*, which featured a battling couple by that same name.

Our own two Bickersons, who otherwise were smart, high-minded idealists with pristine ethics, regularly let their egos duke it out through hurtful insults and demeaning put-downs. What did they squabble about? Oh, almost anything. Do pre-meal doses of Pepto Bismol work as a prophylactic against dysentery? Does shoe seal

actually keep your feet dry? And, if so, is it environmentally sound? What's the best method of Chloroxing vegetables to kill bacteria? You know. Earth-shaking topics, whose meaninglessness was exceeded only by the meanness of the debates.

These brouhahas threw cold water on our campfire almost every night. Meanwhile, as the four spectators who had to witness this clash of egos, we other campers regularly excused ourselves and retreated to our sleeping bags. Our goodnight lullaby was the murmur of the Bickersons, stowed away inside their Volkswagon camper, as they fought each point to the bitter end.

It was a sad commentary on the power of ego over equilibrium. It was also a tutorial on negativity's impact on innocent bystanders, acting as a downer for everyone within earshot.

The common denominator of all thoughts mouthed by the ego is that they are either patently untrue, patently unknowable, or patently exaggerated. When trying to psych-out what's happening around us, none of us can compute the true content, hidden agenda, deep cover, or real aim. We see only apparent appearances. Our fatal flaw is to let the ventriloquist inside interpret the meaning. What we get is distortion, viewing life through the German Expressionistic camera lens in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

As such, all thoughts are driven by the negative spin we put on them. And the spin we put on them, in turn, drives the spin we put on life. The human mind is a hall of mirrors, relentlessly distorting reality to make it appear too fat, too skinny, too warped, too wavy. As many of us know, a funhouse hall of mirrors is not too different from the bathroom mirror we stand in front of every morning. Self-image shapes mirror-image. Welcome to the freak show being staged in your own brain.

The resolution to this problem is extremely obvious. Yes, extremely obvious, but extremely hard! As Emerson advised, look at the world through new eyes. True eyes. You must understand that by actually changing the way you view reality, you actually change the reality you view.

In that regard, what if you could edit each of your thoughts like a professional fact-checker preparing a book for publication and use your mind as a red pencil to cross out anything that isn't absolutely true, non-judgmental, uplifting, generous, fair, reasonable, loving, or kind? What if, instead of doubt and double-dealing, you could regularly instill inspiration into yourself?

In fact, my lovely reader, you can. Acting as your own fact-checker, you can become the editor of your own life. To find out exactly how, please stay tuned to the next section.

True Thought

“True Thought” is my own term for this powerful technique to transform your life; an idea often expressed by the [Dalai Lama](#) and others much wiser than myself. Just turn on your own “editing function.” Delete thoughts you don’t want and don’t need, thoughts that make you miserable. Embrace thinking that’s good, true, and brave. True thought focuses new eyes.

Not to edit our thoughts means always operating in the shadow of the ego. [Carl Jung](#) called such an ego-driven state an “inflated consciousness,” which “is always egocentric and conscious of nothing but its own existence. It is incapable of learning from the past, incapable of understanding contemporary events, and incapable of drawing right conclusions about the future. It is hypnotized by itself and therefore cannot be argued with. It inevitably dooms itself to calamities that must strike it dead.”

To be overshadowed by falsehood in this way, as Thoreau complained, means to live “as if there were safety in stupidity alone.”

Undoubtedly, you know people with no editing function. Their every thought bounces on the springboard of the tongue, about to triple summersault into words. It was for these people that the term “mad-lib” was coined. For old-timers like myself, [Yogi Berra](#) would be the prototype. He’s the most unconscious character ever to let a Freudian slip. Take these examples:

Nobody goes there anymore; it’s too crowded.

You should always go to other people’s funerals; otherwise, they won’t come to yours.

The future ain’t what it used to be.

I want to thank you for making this day [Yogi Berra Appreciation Day] necessary.

If the fans don’t wanna come out to the ballpark, no one can stop ‘em.

If you don't know where you're going, you might not get there.

You better cut the pizza in four pieces because I'm not hungry enough to eat six.

Obviously, he's a walking, talking [Zen koan](#). They don't call him Yogi for nothing.

In case a little voice is whispering in your head right now that editing your thoughts is both drudgery and donkeywork, never fear. You've done it before, and probably quite effortlessly. Whether you realize it or not, you practice a form of True Thought and have done so for many years. In your early efforts not to become the butt of your own jokes, like Yogi Berra, how did you acquire your own editing function? Think back. Probably because of humankind's great equalizer: utter humiliation.

When you were young, you learned the hard way that saying whatever was on the tip of your tongue could be embarrassing or downright calamitous. You found out that, if you said whatever was floating around the surface of your mind as jetsam and flotsam, you would hurt people's feelings, shame yourself, look stupid, or make yourself sound like a total Yogi. We all have our most embarrassing moments to prove it.

Mine happened when I was 12. There was a boy in my class who had been born without a hand, or perhaps he lost it when he was younger. His own intense self-consciousness about his missing hand showed by how he routinely kept his stump pocketed. I felt for him.

Then, one afternoon after school, I ran into the boy in my neighborhood. First thing he did was hold out his arm, quite proudly, to show off his brand new plastic hand, an immovable prosthesis designed for form without function.

"Look at this!" he said.

Now, frankly, I was confused by what he was showing me. I didn't realize at first he was displaying an artificial hand. To me, it looked to be a real hand, which was swollen and paralyzed. He must have sprained it, I guessed. All these false impressions, of course, took

only a nano-second to think, which is also precisely how long it took me to spit out the first idiotic thought bouncing around my skull.

“Gol-lee!” I chirped in my thick Texas drawl. “What the heck happened to it?”

The boy, of course, was crestfallen. So was I, especially when I realized a split-second later the horrible faux pas I’d just made. I had obviously crushed his sense of pride about the new hand, while making myself feel like a real jerk. My face lit up like a panic button. Even worse, I didn’t have the social grace to explain what had just happened and tell him what I’d actually meant to say. It was a horrifying event for both of us. So he was as relieved as I was after I made up some totally lame excuse for leaving and ran all the way home.

But I never forgot. From that moment on, I began closely monitoring what I was about to say and editing out anything that would get me in trouble. Most of us have done exactly the same thing. We already have an editing function in our brains with many years of functional use. What I am suggesting here is that you simply employ your editing software in a different way. Instead of merely striking out anything embarrassing, strike out anything that will make you unhappy. Same process, different emphasis.

In my own case, I think of this life-changing practice as “Deconstructing Charlie.” I’m attempting to intercept each of my thoughts in progress, examine it for positive or negative spin, encourage what’s constructive, and consign what’s destructive to the compost pile of fallow ideas. Amazingly enough, all this takes only a split-second.

Similar to Thoreau and his garden beside Walden Pond, I’m gradually learning to yank out everything that shouldn’t be there, weeds and all, and nourish everything that should. My brain, I’m finding, is as easy to work as Thoreau’s bean patch.

What kind of thoughts do I review with this sort of instant replay? Peruse the next section of *Back to Walden* to find out.

Confrontation with a Fallen-away Dead Head

By continually falling for the lifelong hoodwink foisted on us by our [egos](#), we prove there's a born-again sucker born again every minute. And we put out the vibes to show it.

To wit, on the very day I returned to the United States after serving two years for the [UN in Nairobi](#), I was telling my story about the Ugandan Refugee Scam to a room full of friends in Seattle. It was good for a good group yuk. Minutes later, as we all piled into the street outside on our way to dinner, a man zigzagged through the small throng and beamed in on me. Metaphysically, I suppose, I was the monkey in the middle.

“Say,” he chimed. “I’m an Australian stranded in Seattle because of visa red tape. Can you spare a twenty?”

I know what you’re thinking, and the answer is no. Even a foolish fellow living in his own fool’s paradise eventually learns a lesson or two about folly.

Thoughts are constant visitors to the land of the Ugandan Refugee Scam. To see how, you can easily spy on your own thinking as you’re caught in the act of getting gulled by your ego. While you go about your daily routine, stop for a moment here and there to eavesdrop on what kind of sham you’re pulling on yourself at any one time. Tune into your innermost chatter.

Maybe you’re the exception, but for most of us, the prattle goes something like this:

- Why does everything always happen to me?
- Damn! Just look at all those new wrinkles.
- Why aren’t I rich?
- Everyone else in the meeting gets high praise, but I just get ignored.
- Why do I always catch all the red lights?
- Man, I never get a break with the bus schedule.
- I’ll never forgive my sister for forgetting my birthday.
- Did that guy mean to slam the door in my face?

- I'll bet the minister was thinking of me when he was talking about greed.
- That clerk wanted to jerk me around by waiting on this other woman first.
- What did he *really* mean by that remark?
- If one more bad thing happens to me this morning, I'm going home.
- Men used to flock around me, and now they never pay me a glance.
- How many rejection slips can one writer stand before he just gives up?
- What if a terrorist were to trigger a suitcase atomic bomb downtown?
- I said hello to that jackass, and he barely even nodded back.
- I do everything for John, but he just sits there on the couch watching football.
- My future is a real crap shoot. I could die tomorrow.

We all know the routine. The mind is a tangle of propaganda. That's because the ego's job is to sucker us into imagined insults, offenses, and failures; unrealistic ambitions or accomplishments; feared disappointments, worries, phobias. In fact, the ego's currency is doubt, and its payoff pessimism.

The ego is the source of all hurtful inner babble. Egotism is a constant con game. It short-circuits attempts at happiness by using self-serving but, ironically enough, self-destructive rationalizations for almost any situation. The unchecked ego butts into almost every thought we have. Its bungling attempts at bucking up the self-image always backfire. The ego's artful dodging continually bilks us into a comedy of errors.

The Three Stooges would do a better job as our advocates.

Want further indication that our egos are infallibly wrong? Try the following anecdotal evidence. While working on this chapter of [Back to Walden](#), I bumped into a situation comedy whose deep insignificance was its very significance. Here is a tale of conflicting egos that evokes Thoreau's plea for us to "wedge our feet

downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance” to find the solid foundation of truth below.

Like Thoreau, I was taking my afternoon [“saunter”](#) to see what I could see, when I came to the local town complex, where the library, police station, fire station, and elementary school are all located, surrounded by playgrounds and public land. Or so I thought. Across the street from this complex, I took a path leading through what appeared to be town property, where I stopped beside an alder bush to admire a white-throated sparrow perched inside.

The little bird twitched its head this way and that, eyeing me skeptically from different angles as if I were a dream. And perhaps, as Buddhists believe, I was. Perhaps everything is.

Standing there, I recalled the legend about Antonin Dvorak’s “Going Home” section of the [New World Symphony](#); that it was inspired by, and resonates with, the song of the white-throated sparrow. As one musical blogger noted about Dvorak’s composition, it features the interval of a major third, the root sounding once, and the higher note repeated twice, much like the song of the white-throated sparrow. Later the tune is raised a fifth, a pattern that white-throated sparrows also repeat with eerie similarity.

As I was thinking deep thoughts about this Buddhist sparrow, an indignant male voice interrupted my reverie. “Who in the world are you?”

I turned to find a bearded man in jeans and a flannel shirt staring me down from about 10 meters away, at the edge of an adjacent yard.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Who are you,” the man demanded, “and what are you doing on my property?”

I admit it, I was taken aback. But, as I stuttered for an apt response, I flattered myself that I recognized instantly what I was

dealing with here. A former hippie turned home-owner. Now, this much I know for sure. There is nothing in nature more uncomfortable with itself than a liberal who owns property. Ownership brings out the repressed Republican within, whose only purpose in life is protecting everything he or she has earned. Ownership eventually puts this conservative alter-ego at odds with every dearly held progressive principle. And evidently that eventuality was now.

But remember. This was my ego talking, and the medium of the ego is disinformation. I only assumed all this was going on inside the fellow I faced. Fortunately, I recognized as much by [Deconstructing Charlie](#). So, in the twinkling of a thought wave, I set aside these cynical observations and determined to take the high road.

“I’m really sorry,” I said. “It looked like town property to me. I thought this was one of those school trails the kids take through public land.”

I paused as the man considered me, his expression a shifting collage of contradictions. What made me think this guy was a former [Dead Head](#), fallen upon affluent times. What a long strange trip it’s been!

“I apologize if this is private property,” I added.

“Are you from Amherst?” he said suspiciously.

I pondered for a split-second. Since we were miles from any town line, I interpreted his question, with the help of my ego, as a euphemism. What he was really asking, I guessed, was whether I was a burglar, a drug addict, a prowler, a stalker, a child molester. Or even worse, an illegal immigrant! But I didn’t say so, for the Deconstructed Charlie was intent upon graciousness.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m Charlie Creekmore, and I work at UMass. Like I say, I’m sorry if I trespassed, it was totally unintentional.”

The man’s face began to clear in view of my relentless civility. “Cool,” he said, the old hippie in him fighting for control. Then the Republican elbowed Jerry Garcia aside: “You can leave the way you came in.”

“Thanks,” I said. “But, if you don’t mind, I’ll leave the way I was going. I’m headed toward Amethyst Brook.”

“Cool,” he said again, but with a lingering question in his tone, not unlike the two higher notes at the end of a white-throated sparrow’s song. And, not unlike the white-throated sparrow I’d just been observing, his head twitched this way and that as he eyed me from various angles. Was I for real or not?

“Er, you ought to check for ticks,” he finally said as his better half finally took over. “They’re a lot of them in this field.”

“Thank you,” I responded. “And sorry for the intrusion. It won’t happen again.”

What ounce of wisdom can we take from this slice of life? First and foremost, I was wrestling with my own ego as much as he with his. It was a mixed tag-team match with a liberal and conservative on each side. But at least we both treated each other courteously.

Second, if this conflicted property owner gave his version, it would no doubt be completely different from mine. Why? Each of us views the world through a glass darkly, which catches only half-truths, exaggerations, distortions, and misapprehensions. When we believe we’re using an electron microscope to focus on one true reality, we’re actually using a kaleidoscope to blend alternate realities. What fools these mortals be!

The best we can do is question reality, give people the benefit of the doubt, elevate our thoughts to a Buddhist level, and edit out the bad news.

In case I’m giving you the impression that my part in this interlude was all good will and high-mindedness, don’t believe it. Yes, I treated the man with respect and graciousness. But later, as I was strolling beside Amethyst Brook, my ego began whispering in my ear. I thought about all those Alfred Hitchcock snafus in which innocent people are thrown into nightmares and charged with hideous crimes. Suppose this guy walked across the street and reported me to the police as a prowler. After all, I gave him my name and even told him where I worked.

Was I about to get [North-by-Northwested?](#)

Apparently not. So far The Man hasn't rapped on my door with handcuffs. Which is as good a way as any to describe the handiwork of the ego. It leaves us always waiting for fate to come knocking with a warrant.

For more crimes and misdemeanors perpetrated by the ego, and for more examples of what we can do about it, please pore over the next section.

At the Mercy of Relativity

In terms of the human condition, truth is a relative term, relative to each human's condition.

Thoreau told one anecdote about his encounter with a Long-Islander who gave him what was supposed to be a foolproof method for judging how to jump across streams. The fellow advised that, when he came to a brook he wanted to cross over, he held up one leg and then, if his foot "appeared to cover any part of the opposite bank," he knew he could jump the stream.

Well, Thoreau thought over this intelligence for a few moments before replying: "Why, to say nothing of the Mississippi and other small watery streams, I could blot out a star with my foot, but I would not engage to jump that distance."

We make similar astronomical leaps of faith many times each day by letting our egos guesstimate the streams of thought we want to cross. Using the mathematics of the ego, we infallibly jump to the wrong conclusion. Still, from our viewpoint at the mercy of relativity, we reckon these calculations as foolproof. While constantly teetering there on one leg with the opposite foot blotting out a star, we only prove that nothing is foolproof. As so many fools prove every second.

Several years ago, I was in a serve-yourself concession line outside a jazz concert, where a gaggle of caffeine-starved people such as me waited for a percolator to finish brewing a pot of coffee. Glug glug. When it came my turn, I picked up the pot and noticed somebody standing beside me, cup in hand.

"Can I pour you a cup?" I said without glancing up at the person.

"Well!" said a furious female voice. "I am perfectly capable of pouring my own cup of coffee!"

What was her problem? Other than the obvious answer - the human condition - we'll never know. Perhaps she had been undergoing some form of assertiveness training. Or it could be she was offended that I was apparently on an old-fashioned male-chauvinist

kick. Or maybe she was just mad at her husband, her lover, men in general, or the world and everyone in it.

If her current anger had been triggered by that old chestnut, a broken heart, I probably deserved her wrath in some kind of mysterious karmic way. In this regard, it has been my experience as an older person tiptoeing through the minefield of love the second time around that those of us who screwed up romance in our early years also screwed it up for everyone who followed. Our idiotic behavior left permanent scars on the targets of our idiocy, and they never forgot! After all, every love affair after about the age of 15 is a ricochet romance. The result is a chain reaction, a nuclear explosion, of angry people. That's why mature love often amounts to getting even for what the last guy or gal did.

If that sort of scar tissue was the motivation of this woman, what goes around was finally coming around to me as my rightful [karma](#).

Whatever set off this angry woman, it was imagined by her [ego](#). In times like these, we tend to disregard Freud's warning that "[Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar](#)." This woman was forgetting that sometimes a kindness is just a kindness.

As for me, I was just as bad. After her angry remark, I slammed down the coffee pot and went away grinding my teeth. I let my own ego get the best of me. Instead, I should have let go of the anger her remark sparked in me and quoted [Elwood P. Dowd](#), the Buddhist everyman and gentle tippler in *Harvey*: "Well, a little conflict between friends guarantees that everyone gets involved in the conversation."

Whatever was going on in her troubled mind obviously had nothing to do with me. But this was before I discovered the healing power of [Waldenism](#), and I took it personally.

Lesson learned: Trusting the ego is always a big mistake. Unfortunately, most Americans are well-conditioned to trust their egos. Ego-tripping, or at least tripping over their egos, is the national pastime.

To prove it, all you have to do is pay attention. Posturing jocks puff out their feathers, cock-like, and show us how to inflate our egos by taunting opponents. Sitcoms glorify mean-spiritedness. Patriotism instructs us in the fine art of racism while teaching us that it's always "us against them." Media interviews bury us in ego-centering, chest-thumping, and self-serving. Self-promotion is lauded as one of society's great skills, taught at business schools, university career centers, and professional-development seminars across the land. Self-help books and tapes make self-absorption into a countrywide obsession. Trash talk is passed off as a talent more respected than formal debating. Motivational speakers attempt to juice up our human potential, or in any case make us potentially human, by feeding our egos. Ego-maniacal CEOs, TV celebrities, chefs, and politicians are held up as universal role models. Psychotherapists muscle up our egos to make us more aggressively self-centered. Egotistical robber barons star in noxious reality shows.

Given our national libido for egotism, it's no wonder we often pervert reality.

If egos works overtime while artificially puffing up our self-images, they work double-overtime while artificially deflating those same self-images. The old trickster is always on the job, either building us up or breaking us down. Are you nervous about your looks? Ego. Are you psyched out by a sense of failure and disappointment? Ditto. Do you schedule every second of every day for fear of being bored? Do anxieties about your children crowd your thoughts? Are you often overwhelmed and disturbed by your love life? Is Hamlet-like angst your thing? Do you fret and fuss about the future? Are you a hypochondriac? These are all cases of the ego making us lead lives of quiet desperation in some altered reality.

True Thought is so important because ego talk never stops jabbering. That's why most of us are conditioned to drown our thoughts in pessimism and depression, leading to regular bouts of unhappiness. It's a treadmill, a [*samsara*](#) or "cycle of endless grasping," powered by negative energy. The result of accepting this twilight world foisted on us by the ego, as [Lama Surya Das](#) concluded, is utter futility. "No wonder so many of us feel alienated, alone, exhausted, cynical, and disheartened," he wrote.

As former Major League Baseball Commissioner [Bart Giamatti](#) once said about the game he loved: “It breaks your heart. It’s designed to break your heart.” So is the ego and, in fact, life itself. You might not know who did the engineering, but it’s all designed to break your heart.

Is feeling forever broken-hearted better than taking the time and energy to retrain your thoughts? If your answer is no, then you’re ready to put a gag order on the ego’s lifelong filibuster. To put a governor on your ego! That’s what thought editing is all about.

The [Dalai Lama](#) regards this concept of thought editing, by any other name, as the *only* way to achieve real happiness. Buddhists have developed many practical mind-training techniques for this purpose. One is meditation itself. The very practice requires “letting go” of any thought that enters the mind. Likewise, letting go of harmful, false, self-destructive, misleading, or mean-spirited thoughts is also one basic skill needed for thought editing.

The logic is undeniable: All the *practices* leading to happiness - including thought editing, meditation, and letting go - involve *practice*. No getting around it. Unfortunately, despite what it says in the American Constitution, happiness is not in anybody’s personal bill of rights. Not in anybody’s personal constitution. It’s not a stamp imprinted on your birth certificate and witnessed by a Notary Public. Sorry, but happiness is not something that just happens as if by happenstance.

In fact, happiness is a skill; one - like driving, playing basketball, performing surgery, writing poetry, painting a landscape, being a good parent, or any other skill - that requires concentrated training.

“Permanent happiness can only be achieved through training the mind,” said the [Dalai Lama](#). “The systematic training of the mind means the cultivation of happiness, the genuine inner transformation by deliberately selecting and focusing on positive mental states and challenging negative mental states.”

Thought editing, then, is essentially positive conditioning, the antidote to a lifetime of negative conditioning by our egos. And

training our minds to be happy is the only way to untrain our minds to be unhappy. Simple as that. Happiness is not a state of grace we inherit from our religion. Not an entitlement we receive from our birth status. Rather, as the Dalai Lama concluded in *The Art of Happiness*, it is the end product of a very disciplined and structured way of thinking.

To paraphrase [Branch Rickey](#), the baseball general manager who broke the Major League color barrier by signing Jackie Robinson, happiness, like luck, is the residue of design.

The big question is how, exactly, do you design your own happiness? The answer is by taking it one delusion, one rationalization, one misconception, one downer at a time. In with the good, out with the bad. Engineer your happiness by designing each thought you make. Let me give you a few practical illustrations in the next section, which is all part of a very simple method for training yourself to be at peace with the world.

Don't Mess with Mister In-between

How do you train yourself to be happy? Let me show you.

A few months ago, as I was just settling down for a mid-summer-night's dream, a sudden and violent thunderstorm swept through the Amherst area. I was jolted from my twilight world by a lightning strike thundering to earth right outside. It might have been the Hammer of Thor.

“Wow!” I said out loud. “That was close.”

Yes, too close. Seconds later, I became aware of a blasting automobile horn. When I opened my front door to find out what was the matter, I was greeted by a sight so odd, it boggled the imagination. The trunk of a white pine tree, which only seconds before had towered over the driveway, was lying across my beloved, 14-year-old, Ford Taurus. My car was nearly buried beneath a cascade of thickly needled branches.

As I would find out later, this lightning strike had zapped the pine tree, the exploding trunk had toppled ground-ward, and it landed on my auto. In the process, the snapped-off stump of one limb had shattered my windshield and come to rest quite noisily against my steering column.

Gabriel, come blow your horn!

Needless to say, this is just the sort of event that can pollute one's mind for weeks to come, as has happened many times to me. During the minutes following this little catastrophe, I quickly shifted from “Woah, Nelly!” to “Woe is me!”

The temptation, of course, is to wonder why one has been singled out for this singular “[act of God](#),” as insurance companies are wont to call such wonders.

After a few minutes contemplation, however, I was able to start redirecting my thoughts into a completely different mode, even as I was standing there - windblown and rain-drenched - in the debris field of this accident. When a friendly and compassionate policeman arrived a few minutes after the lightning strike, his first words

were, “As bad as this looks right now, Mr. Creekmore, you were really lucky.”

“You know,” I said to myself, “he’s right on the money. Nobody was hurt. The tree missed the place I’m renting by inches. I’m insured. The only casualty was property. I’m really fortunate for the unbroken quality of my life. I’ve suffered nothing of real substance. I was spared life and limb. If I just lost the most valuable thing I own, and it’s only a 14-year-old rattle-trap, how lucky can a guy get? I’m golden. Life is a cabaret, old chum!”

It took a lot of will power, perseverance, and [True Thought](#), but in the coming days I was largely able to avoid the whole “woe is me” pigsty in which, let’s face it, human nature likes to wallow. In the end, I turned a bolt from the blue into a windfall.

As usual, [Thoreau](#) penned words of wisdom for just such times. “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.”

Here’s the heart of the matter. Managing your thoughts, minute by minute, disables the [ego](#) and all its destructive meddling in your daily life. By transforming the way you think, you transfigure the way you feel.

To do so, simply form the habit of examining your thoughts, one by one, as they happen. When a negative thought intrudes, allow it to fade away. Just [let it go](#), the way millions of meditators do billions of times per week. Don’t get upset, don’t get angry, don’t get even, don’t judge yourself, don’t feel bad, don’t dwell on it. Just let it go. Then replace it with something healthier, something more fulfilling. And when you make a good thought bubble up through your mind, one that is inspiring, optimistic, healthy, [non-judgmental](#), kind, or [compassionate](#), let your whole soul percolate.

Is it easy? No way! Is it doable? Absolutely! If I can do it, deeply flawed as I am, so can you.

Now let me give you the opposite point of view, a word from the dark side, which I think illustrates just how potent is the power of

an ego-infected imagination. This anecdote shows how petty fears take on a life all their own.

In January of 2010, I conducted a sort of experiment in terror. Instead of weeding out all the negativity in my inner dialogue, as I had been training myself to do with *True Thought*, I deliberately did just the opposite. I began wallowing in my unhealthy thoughts, just to see what would happen. I concentrated on two rather minor romantic rejections; worried about being isolated and alone; fretted about all the rejection slips I've received in the past few months; focused on the fearful side-effects of [failing kidneys](#) that I might be facing in the future; thought about death.

In short order, I fell into a dark depression. Even though I knew I was playing a mind game with myself, the devilish mood I summoned up became all too real. It not only possessed my soul, but it repossessed all the *True Thought* I'd been training myself to practice. In the end, I had to invoke a powerful act of the will and a conscious effort to regain control - to exorcise those terrible thoughts from my mind - before I righted my equilibrium and returned to my previous state of bliss. Reverse psychology, *Untrue Thought*, had almost done me in.

My advice: Don't try this at home, boys and girls.

It just goes to show that ego works the same way Marine boot camp does. It indoctrinates minds by grinding them down, destroying self-worth, eroding will power, training them to follow orders mindlessly. The ego is our own personal Drill Sergeant, grilling and hazing and humiliating us until we follow every hurtful dictate it gives us.

Our task, then, is to become conscientious objectors. To dodge the draft created by our egos. Here's a good illustration.

As a lifelong athlete, I've been conditioned to be competitive, even though I despise all that competitiveness engenders. When I'm in an athletic environment, my own competitive thoughts rise to the surface like rainbow trout taking feathered flies. That's because, let's face it, every gym, every health club, every playing court reeks with the musky odor of testosterone. It's the anti-aphrodisiac.

For instance, when I'm shooting baskets, I have to block the urge to watch other players out of the corner of my eye to see if I'm better than they are. While running, I need to catch myself when I feel condescending toward other runners. In the pool, I have to put a damper on my urge to compete with all the competitive swimmers in adjacent lanes. Instead, I must force myself to lose gracefully, especially given my waterlogged Australian crawl. I constantly fight the instinct to look down on less-athletic people than I believe I am.

In other words, I'm an athletic snob.

That's why, rather than letting my obnoxious competitiveness whisper in my ear, I try to turn each workout into an exercise in human kindness. I swap arrogance for compassion, disdain for respect, snootiness for admiration. What graceful players, I try to think, what well-conditioned runners, what fine swimmers! These people, after all, are out there living large, putting life and limb on the line, doing the best they can. Exercise hurts. How inspiring that, with every new day, each of these people is setting a new PR for total number of workouts completed!

This is how I try to use exercise for exorcising my muscle-bound devils.

True Thought takes discipline, of course. The kind of [disciplined and structured thinking advocated by the Dalai Lama](#) for cultivating happiness is really no different from many activities we take for granted. Take driving, for instance. How did you learn to become a good driver and avoid accidents? The answer, whether you realize it or not, is a very disciplined and structured way of thinking. You trained yourself to understand that life is an accident looking for a place to happen.

The same training goes for most professions. Can you be a doctor without medical school? A lawyer without the paper chase? Look at a teacher, an architect, even a professional basketball player, a parent, a land surveyor, a bowler, or a train engineer; they all need disciplined thinking. There is some amount of discipline required in most things we do.

So why not train your mind? “If you think seriously about the true meaning of spiritual practices,” said the [Dalai Lama in *The Art of Happiness*](#), “it has to do with the development and training of your mental state, attitudes, and psychological and emotional state and well-being...True spirituality is a mental attitude that you can practice any time. For instance, if you find yourself in a situation in which you might be tempted to insult someone, then you immediately take precautions and restrain yourself from doing that. If you encounter a situation in which you may lose your temper, immediately you are mindful and say, ‘No, this is not the appropriate way.’ That is spiritual practice.”

When I posed this idea of mind-training to one of my friends, she blanched and said, “Why should it take so much work just to be happy?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Why should it take so much work just to be unhappy?”

The alternative is living in the same state of cluelessness where most people everywhere retain citizenship. Cultivating healthy thoughts is the most basic tool of happiness, peace of mind, and [Waldenism](#).

Instead of listening to the ego’s Tower of Babel, listen to your own towering intuition. As Thoreau advised, “No man ever followed his genius till it misled him.”

So heed the latitude and longitude of your own genius, wherever it leads you. Manage your True Thought so you always follow your true genius. When in doubt, just remember the words of the old [Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer song](#): You’ve got to accentuate the positive / Eliminate the negative / Latch on to the Affirmative / Don’t mess with Mr. In-between.

Chapter 5: Second Tool in Waldenism - True Energy

The Portable Grand Canyon

Back in 1999, I needed a break from hard, banal, and blasphemous reality to treat a bad case of world-weariness. So I ran away to the [Grand Canyon](#), where I signed on for minimum wage at Grand Canyon Village as the world's oldest errand boy. My pilgrimage to the Grand Canyon turned into a crash course in [spiritual energy](#).

My professional job description included collecting garbage from trash barrels lining the south rim of the canyon, douching out toilets in the public restrooms at the [Bright Angel Lodge](#), mopping bathroom floors all over the village, doing chores for grumbling guests, and cozying up to the resident ghost rumored to reside in the elegant, rustic, and historic [El Tovar Hotel](#).

I liked to think of this paranormal guest as Teddy Roosevelt, minus his horse laugh and all the Roughrider protoplasm.

As I was carrying out these critical duties, I couldn't help but notice how well my English degree had prepared me for this job. It undoubtedly qualified me for Garrison Keillor's [Professional Organization of English Majors](#), or POEM, along with all the other English grads working at Burger King or Stop & Shop.

The only fringe benefit of my underemployment was free mental health insurance. My chores allowed me to indulge my real purpose for being at the Grand Canyon, which was total immersion in spiritual energy. I was there to get back in sync with the laws of nature, get back in touch with the infinity of myself, back in harmony with the pulse of life. It all amounted to the same thing.

Chasing that secret agenda, I interrupted my menial jobs many times each day to take a break from unfettered life. I would stand on the rim of this cosmic canyon and suck up the atmosphere churning invisibly, invincibly, indivisibly inside.

One universal truth I learned from this mystical experience, my four months living on the edge of forever, was a real shocker; that I didn't need to be there to conjure up the Grand Canyon and its

wonder. I learned that we carry the Grand Canyon with us wherever we go. It squeezes into any back pocket. I found that we can pull out the Grand Canyon any time, any where we are, by simply sensing the subtle, mysterious, wild, and welling energy thrumming through all nature.

My discovery of this portable Grand Canyon is also the Transcendental truth at the center of [everything Thoreau practiced at Walden Pond](#). Spiritual energy pools in the font of everywhere and springs eternal in the human soul.

Hard to believe? Maybe. But, in fact, you can make contact with that energy right now, right here, right away, even as you read *Back to Walden*.

Imagine yourself on the south rim of the Grand Canyon and feel its supernatural power, throbbing through everything. The throb is out there, drifting on wind currents. The throb is out there in wing beats of condors. The throb is out there in those immense rock formations, shivering like water. The throb is out there in brushstrokes of sienna, ocher, cadmium, amethyst, rouge, and rust, which infuse the canyon lands with divinity. The throb is out there, flowing in the Colorado River as it traces its lifeline in the palm of existence. The throb is out there in the electric silence. Feel the throb.

To make contact with this flow of life force, you don't even have to imagine yourself at the Grand Canyon. You can envision the force anywhere you are, sense it *in vivo* by peering deep within yourself. You can draw upon spiritual energy at any point, as I consciously do many times each day; as I channel the Grand Canyon. It galvanizes your thoughts. It shoots across you synapse gaps. It beats through your bloodstream. It fuses you with the cosmos. It confers passionate aliveness.

There's no reason not to stop at any time and tap into the lovely stuff of infinity. I still do it, much the same as when I worked at Grand Canyon Village.

Nature is the medium for this supernatural pulse. Nature's energy flows to all your senses. The energy dances on incoming tides, along with surf scoters, positive ions, ancient secrets, extinct species, dead languages. It kindles heaven with heat lightning. It transmits the babble of a forest brook. It warbles through the sound waves of birdsong. It finger-paints the sky with Northern Lights. It rides the wake of water striders on [Walden Pond](#). It strums the arpeggio of evening crickets. It wets your brow with morning dew. It perfumes the breezes. It's anywhere.

Though poets, painters, hikers, philosophers, mystics, monks, yogis, priests, naturalists, sailors, shamans, healers, trekkers, pilgrims, runners, explorers, mountain climbers, astronauts, and other seekers of every kind have sensed this ubiquitous force for many thousands of years, [spiritual energy has always persisted as one of life's sacred mysteries](#).

[Transcendentalism rests on a premise of this unifying energy](#) that generates all reality, holds it together, and allows us to transcend the trials and tribulations of daily existence.

"I believe there is a spiritual energy here for all of us," said Reverend Jenny M. Rankin of the [First Parish Unitarian congregation](#) in Concord, Massachusetts, in a 2010 sermon about Transcendentalism. "Something that we can touch and tap into. Something that will help fuel us in our own spiritual seeking and our own social justice doing."

What she was describing here, I feel every day, many times over. To me, spirituality means tapping and distilling nature's transcendental sap as it rises, second by second, and branches through my consciousness.

Transcendental painter [Rockwell Kent](#) (1882-1971) drew upon this same source. Kent "reveled in the spiritual energy of remote wilderness," according to Jake Milgram Wien, the guest curator of a 2005 Kent exhibition at the Portland Museum of Art in Maine. Wien said that Kent's paintings are "grounded in the writings of 19th-century American Transcendentalists who celebrated the divine rhythm of the natural world and its intuitive mysteries."

The brilliant, freaky, and unearthly poet [William Blake](#) addressed the phenomenon of this spiritual life force by simply concluding that “Energy is eternal delight.” Later, Romantic poets referred to this same life spark as “moral energy” and pictured nature as pulsating with it.

These seething spiritual vibrations have been sensed since time immemorial by numerous sages in numerous civilizations from numerous traditions in numerous altered states. Spiritual energy is known as [Prana](#) or [Kundalini](#) in Yoga, [Akasha](#) in Hinduism and Buddhism, Chi or [Qi](#) in Chinese medicine. Other, more poetic terms from other belief systems include the current of life, élan vital, spiritual life force, life energy, spiritual fire, grounded luminosity, somatic energies, the breath of life, auras, rays, vibrations (or, in the 1960s, good vibes!), that oceanic feeling, subtle energy, and the breath of heaven.

All these concepts of spiritual energy vary in one way or another, yet they are all variations on the same theme. They purr with the common “presence” described by Cass Adams in his lovely anthology, *The Soul Unearthed: Celebrating Wilderness and Personal Renewal Through Nature*. “In the neutrality of nature, I open up to a presence that is both in me and far beyond me, a presence that reaches out into the infinite unknown of the sky and the material world before me...It is an inherent and integral part of who I am - and of who we are - to experience wonder, joy, and abundance.”

In fact, this kind of “wonder, joy, and abundance,” this kind of “presence,” is what you, yourself, can experience at any time in any place, as if you were suddenly transported into one of Rockwell Kent’s “mythical, timeless realms.” Simply use your own intuition to appreciate, to breathe in, to sponge up the metaphysical energy around you, within you, without you, and everywhere.

But what exactly is this charged essence that for eons many generations of ultra-sensitive, spiritually sophisticated individuals have been experiencing? In the next section of *Back to Walden*, I’ll explore some of the surprising possibilities being studied by some of history’s most celebrated skeptics, known collectively as the

scientific community. These explorations are quietly shaking science to its core.

Physics of the Impossible

Imagine my surprise when I learned that the spiritual energy I sensed at the Grand Canyon and throughout all nature is also a key line of inquiry in a scientific theory whose scope is quite simply “everything.”

Personally, the only proof I need of spiritual energy is to experience it, many times each day, washing over, washing around, washing through me. I am content to accept it on its own terms, as one of those exquisite mysteries that transform life from drudgery to ecstasy.

In this chapter, I invite you to experience and treasure the mystery of spiritual energy, nature’s sacred current. I also invite you to ponder the mounting scientific evidence for a promising new hypothesis, gaining momentum in the same way that Darwinism did in the time of Thoreau. This new hypothesis could well explain spiritual energy as part of a brilliant, overarching, profound, and controversial theory on how the universe works at its most fundamental level. It’s an unorthodox theory that proposes an organizing force for everything in the cosmos, including consciousness itself. As such, the new scientific hypothesis echoes the concept of “generative energy” espoused by American Transcendentalism more than 165 years ago.

To learn more about this hypothesis, I did exactly what Thoreau did in the mid-19th century to learn more about Darwin’s [Theory of Evolution](#). He read everything he could put his fingers on.

The catalyst for this new theory is no less a transcendent character than Albert Einstein. In 1913, Einstein and Otto Stern calculated the lowest possible energy that a quantum mechanical physical system can have, an amount of light energy associated with the so-called “vacuum” of outer space, and named it the [Zero Point Field](#). It is not my purpose here to give you an in-depth account of the Zero Point Field and all its implications. For that you can follow my links, explore my references, or simply Google “Zero Point Field.” My goal is simply to summarize what I’ve read in popular terms.

Here's the back story. Einstein helped fuel theories about the Zero Point Field when he commented with an air of universal significance that "The Field is the *only* reality." Other scientists, somewhat in awe of Einstein's version of reality, have called his calculations on the Zero Point Field "the physics of the impossible." So was atomic energy before the Manhattan Project. Accordingly, the Zero Point Field carries cosmic implications going far beyond the Pandora's Box of atomic energy that Einstein helped unlock with his theoretical work throughout the early 20th century. The energy contained in this universal Zero Point Field dwarfs the mushroom cloud by putting atoms to work in an entirely different way.

Recent discoveries in the discipline of vacuum physics indicate that the Zero Point Field of outer space is actually a vast sea of light waves; an almost infinite ocean of energy, containing countless eddies, tides, and undercurrents formed from various kinds of light, running throughout the whole universe.

All light flows in sloshing electromagnetic waves - think about radio waves, microwaves, X-rays, or gamma rays - composed of tiny charged particles called photons. These electromagnetic waves create fields, or regions of influence, made from photon particles bobbing up and down like buoys in an ocean. What distinguishes all the various forms of light are their wavelengths, ranging from hundreds of miles long for some radio waves, to one-millionth of a nanometer short for gamma rays. Einstein and others proposed that outer space is a background sea full of these diverse electromagnetic light waves, countless fields of them, all occupying the quantum vacuum of outer space. It's a field of fields.

As contemporary astrophysicist [Bernard Haisch](#) explained in his enchanting book *The God Theory: Universes, Zero-Point Fields, and What's Behind It All*: "Electric and magnetic fields flowing through space oscillate as a pendulum does...At every possible frequency, there will always be a tiny bit of electromagnetic jiggling going on. And if you add up all these ceaseless fluctuations, you get a background sea of light whose total energy is enormous. This is the electromagnetic Zero Point Field."

In that regard, astrophysicists have called the Zero Point Field a “cosmic free lunch.” If successful in harnessing the limitless energy of space, scientists might be able to create anti-gravity WARP drives, not to mention automobiles that run on the sustainable “physics of the impossible.” Zero Point Energy might also open up the possibility that humans travel beyond their own solar system. NASA and British Aerospace have heavily funded work into Zero Point Field energy propulsion. Arthur C. Clarke, among others, has championed this work and suggested that aerospace companies should charge their most brilliant scientists with studying the Zero Point Field.

What these researchers would like to draw upon, according to journalist [Lynne McTaggart](#) in her 2001 book, [The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe](#), is “a vast inexhaustible energy source all sitting there unobtrusively in the background of the empty space around us, like one all-pervasive, supercharged backdrop. To give you some idea of the magnitude of that power, the energy in a single cubic yard of empty space is enough to boil all the oceans of the world.”

So goes the scientifically verifiable potential of the Zero Point Field. Now comes the speculative part.

Over the course of the century since Einstein proposed the Zero Point Field, conjecture about it has Darwinized into a new theory that involves a perfect storm of unconventional hypotheses, mathematics, research, and experiments. This theory about the Zero Point Field, *if it can be validated*, would be the most influential scientific hypothesis since [Relativity](#) in the 20th century and [Evolution](#) in the 19th. The theory would not only connect everything in existence, but also bond physics with metaphysics, reality with surreality, psychology with parapsychology, life force with life source. The universe might finally be unified into a universal unity, instead of just expanding and drifting away *ad infinitum* at the mercy of the Big Bang.

The hypothesis springs, like Zero Point Energy itself, from many fields. Beyond those researchers working on zero-point-energy

propulsion, an array of additional scientists from various disciplines is studying the Zero Point Field for other reasons. In addition, there is a meteor shower of writings about the Zero Point Field from many perspectives by many authors with wildly differing credentials. My problem was deciding which credentials possess enough credibility to lend some of it to this incredible theory. To do so, I needed to separate my logical, orderly, and skeptical left brain, the one I'm forced to use for earning my keep as a science writer, from my poetic, messy, and gullible right brain.

As that noted pop theoretician, Frank Sinatra, complained quite ungrammatically, "Who can I turn to?"

[Ervin Laszlo](#) is an admirable candidate, and the person I chose to lead me down the noble Zero Point path. He is well-qualified to translate the baffling lingo and physics of the Zero Point Field into the Queen's English and explain the far-reaching, god-like, mind-boggling entity formerly known as "empty space." Laszlo holds the highest degree of the Sorbonne, has been nominated for two Nobel Prizes, has written 75 books translated into 20 languages, and has served as a professor of philosophy, systems theory, and future studies in the U.S., Europe, and the Far East. Laszlo has also been described as "one of the best thinkers of our time" and a visionary who "links the best of modern science to the wisdom of the great spiritual thinkers."

In Laszlo's mesmerizing book, [Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything](#), he described how the quantum vacuum of space percolates with a subtle sea of fluctuating light energy fields, from which all things arise: atoms and galaxies, stars and planets, living beings, and even human consciousness.

This Zero Point Akashic Field, as Laszlo called it, is both poetically and scientifically named after the mythical [Akasha](#) of the Sanskrit and Indian cultures. According to him, Akasha - derived from the Sanskrit word for "Kash," meaning radiating or shining - was considered "an all-encompassing medium that underlies all things and becomes all things. It is real, but so subtle that it cannot be

perceived until it becomes the many things that populate the manifest world.”

As Indian Yogi [Swami Vivekanada](#) described it, “Akasha is the omnipresent, all-penetrating existence. Everything that has form...is evolved out of this Akasha.” In both Hinduism and Buddhism, Akasha is the universal medium in which everything is contained.

To Laszlo, naming Einstein’s very real light-energy field after the mythic Akasha was not just a metaphor. “Scientists now realize that space is not empty,” Laszlo wrote, “and what is called the quantum vacuum is in fact a cosmic plenum [fullness]. It is a fundamental medium that recalls the ancient concept of Akasha.”

One person energetically attempting to integrate all the scientific and quasi-scientific research on Zero Point Energy is McTaggart, who has made it something of a cause célèbre.

As Publisher’s Weekly commented about her book, *The Field*: “McTaggart...describes scientific discoveries that she believes point to a unifying concept of the universe, one that reconciles mind with matter, classic Newtonian science with quantum physics, and, most importantly, science with religion. At issue is the Zero Point Field, the so-called ‘dead space’ of microscopic vibrations in outer space as well as within and between physical objects on earth. These fields, McTaggart asserts, form a ‘cobweb of energy exchange’ that links everything in the universe; controls everything from cellular communication to the workings of the mind; and could be harnessed for unlimited propulsion fuel, levitation, ESP, spiritual healing, and more.”

Whoa! That’s a mouthful of both astro- and meta-physics. But it certainly echoes Laszlo. What McTaggart found was no less than astounding - perhaps too astounding for me, from my small-minded viewpoint, to embrace in its entirety. A design for all reality. In my next section of *Back to Walden*, I will tell you how this extraordinary design employs the same spiritual energy that powers the Transcendentalism of Thoreau and Emerson.

A Blueprint for Our Existence

If you've ever stood in a flurry of monarch butterflies at one of their [over-wintering sites](#) in the mountain ranges of central Mexico, there's only one question on your mind. How did each fragile knot of tissue and DNA, with the atomic weight of confetti, make its way here from a milky aquamarine chrysalis in New England or someplace else, several thousand miles distant? How did it come flitting and flickering to this particular butterfly site, where many previous generations of monarchs have traveled without the aid of oral communication, compass, sextant, or map?

One likely answer is the [Zero Point Field](#), which could well serve as the archives of all information from all time for everything in the whole universe. Do monarchs and millions of other creatures tune into brainstorms from outer space?

Some believe the answer is yes.

“Researchers discovered that the Zero Point Field contains the blueprint for our existence,” wrote McTaggart in *The Field*. “Everything and everyone is connected with one another through this field in which all information from all time is said to be stored. Ultimately, everything - from man to matter - can be traced back to a collection of electric charges that are continually in contact with this endless sea of energy. Our interaction with this Field determines who we are, will become, and have been. The Field is the alpha and omega of our existence.”

Laszlo basically confirmed McTaggart's reporting. “Beyond the puzzle-filled world of mainstream sciences, a new concept of the universe is emerging,” wrote Laszlo. “In this concept the universe is a highly integrated, coherent system...Its crucial feature is ‘in-formation’ [information which actually forms, or creates, everything touched by it] that is generated, conserved, and conveyed, and links all its parts almost instantaneously...It transforms a universe that is blindly groping from one phase of its evolution to the next into a strongly interconnected system that builds on the in-formation it has already generated.”

In other words, the Zero Point Field might literally hold the font of all knowledge and the wisdom of the ages.

This unifying field of “[in-formation](#)” with its omnipresent coherence and instantaneous trans-universal communication would, among other things, go a long way toward finally explaining some of the thousands of hard-core mysteries in animal behavior, including the [transcontinental migration](#) of monarch butterflies, birds, bats, wildebeests, and many other animals. More examples of “in-formed” behavior include the perfectly coordinated, darting changes in direction exhibited by flocks of birds and the exhausting upriver spawning runs of salmon, herring, and other saltwater fish. In fact, the Zero Point Field would clarify everything from birdsong, to instinct, to human intuition itself.

“In the in-formed universe our brain/mind can access a broad band of information,” Laszlo wrote, “well beyond the information conveyed by our five sensory organs. We are, or can be, literally ‘in touch’ with almost any part of the world, either here on earth or beyond the cosmos. When we do not repress the corresponding intuitions, we can be in-formed by things as small as a particle or as large as a galaxy.”

Is Laszlo’s “in-formation” yet another term for spiritual energy? Do the light waves eddying throughout deep space form the spiritual energy with which mystics of every kind have been communing for ages past? Does the energy in the Zero Point Field hold the blueprint for existence? Who knows? Certainly not me. But speculation about the Zero Point Field is truly a fascinating journey into the nano-stuff, nano-substance, and nano-nonesuch of those Transcendental vibes throbbing at the sub-atomic level of being.

Do I believe in the theories surrounding Zero Point Energy? I honestly don’t know. Maybe it would help to tap into some universal in-formation from yet another spiritual field, *The Field of Dreams*: “There comes a time when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place and the universe opens itself up for a few seconds to show you what’s possible.”

If nothing else, research on the Zero Point Field works to demystify [Transcendentalism](#) and make it even more relevant today than it was 150 years ago.

“Transcendentalism meant the immediate experience of the Sacred - the Holy,” said contemporary Unitarian minister Jim Robinson of the Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel in London. “You can experience the Sacred, here and now, in your ordinary life. The experience is an intuition - an inner knowing. It is available to everyone...Each person can experience the underlying Oneness of creation, the Life Force within everything, the Beauty and Love which sustains human life, what [Emerson called the Over-Soul](#).”

Like unto the Akashic Field, the Over-Soul is a spiritual presence that pervades all aspects of man and nature. Emerson referred to it as “that great nature in which we rest—that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other—We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.”

How is 19th-century Transcendentalism relevant today? Connecting all the missing links, spiritual energy = Over-Soul = Akasha = information = Zero Point Field. It’s a cosmic plenum.

Emerson’s passage also describes exactly how I feel each morning in early spring, as I stand in back of my house with binos trained on a harlequin-feathered [wood duck](#) couple that nests near the adjacent Harkness Pond. To me, nothing could express a coherent universe better than a wood duck’s moss-and-sepia-spangled plumage, more enlightening than a shooting star scattering cosmic information behind it.

My own experience is that spiritual energy - whether you call it information, the Zero Point Field, [Akasha](#), or anything else - permeates nature. But that doesn’t mean I need science to confirm what I already know.

To me, spiritual energy is the only force you can depend on in a universe based on infinite and instantaneous change at every

moment. In the following section, I'll describe how the force may be with you, any time at all.

Joyously, Drunkenly, Divinely Aware

Perhaps, in the greater scheme of things, the Zero Point Field serves as a majestic signpost in the sky, just as the “[Drinking Gourd](#)” did for runaway slaves navigating by night on the Underground Railroad while the North Star pointed their way toward a terminus called freedom. Follow the Drinking Gourd! The spiritual energy given off by the [Zero Point Field](#) is our compass reading for true north.

The real question is how to tap into this lovely stuff that Thoreau called “[generative energy](#).” I do it the way he did, by guzzling it down, raw and undiluted, in nature.

Like Thoreau, I look for spiritual energy in my own back yard, a kind of poor-man’s Walden Pond, numerous times each day. I just take a break from whatever I’m doing, step out my back door, inhale a few deep meditative breaths, and stand there, floating within the womb of perpetuity. It’s the perfect medicine for melancholy.

As Thoreau wrote, “There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still.”

If I close my eyes, I can almost feel the spiritual energy lighting upon my upturned brow as electrified dew. I’m always a slightly wiser man for this tiny encounter with the Zero Point Field and all the archival knowledge I might intuitively be drawing from it.

Each summer, my yard forms a grassy, overgrown copse shaded by its own canopy, a rustling Over-Soul of oak, maple, hemlock, shagbark hickory, and white pine trees. From my back door, I can peer through this shady nook into Harkness Pond, my own mini-Walden, 25 strides from the house.

By day, this modest body of water transforms into a tiny sea brimming with jitterbugging minnows, sunning turtles, sperming tadpoles, paddling muskrats, burping bullfrogs, and salmon-tinted newts floating in suspended animation. This miniscule ocean, like any crosshair of navigational coordinates in nature, exists only to be the center of the intelligent universe.

Above the radiated surface of Harkness Pond, iridescent red and blue dragonflies dogfight like World War I biplanes. Often, a flock of cedar waxwings will crowd noisily into the pond-side birch trees and flit across the bright, becalmed waters jerking gnats, flies, and midges out of thin air.

By night, my back yard turns into a coral symphony of wind chimes from ancient Tibetan monasteries, of peepers wheezing eternal messages, of mystic music gravitating from waltzing planets, of crickets plucking at zither strings, of cicadas beating out tone poems with inner tambourines. I often watch the pond through a lightshow of fireflies and cherish this free program of celestial melody, moon glow, migrating stars, and biological fireworks. The grandness and pageantry of the [1812 Overture](#) pale by comparison to my back yard of any mid-summer's eve.

If you want to exercise your own awareness of spiritual energy, go outside. Suck in the breezes. Wonder at the light. Wallow in the grasses. Gulp the air. Press the mulching leaves and rich soil to your nose. Marvel at the birdsong. Listen to the bullfrogs. Taste what's on the wind. Laugh out loud. Gobble down the spiritual feeling. Reel boozily under the influence of sheer ecstasy!

“The aim of life is to live,” observed novelist [Henry Miller](#), “and to live means to be aware, joyously, drunkenly, divinely aware.”

That's why, many times each day, I halt whatever I'm doing to enjoy an intense moment of mind-boggling mindfulness. My ecstasy has the added benefit of making my neighbors suspect I'm a little touched. It's the same kind of suspicion suffered, I gather, by Thoreau's own passing neighbors when they noticed that “irresponsible idler” enjoying much the same tomfoolery at Walden Pond 165 years ago.

As Thoreau had already noted way back when, modern society works quite hard at turning reality on its head. “The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated,” wrote Thoreau in a section of *Walden* entitled “[Higher Laws](#).” “We soon forget them. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little stardust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.”

Such a fine madness, indeed, practiced by such a fine madman.

Natural mindfulness of nature and its seething spiritual energy is a wonder that transcends seasons. Quite early one morning during February, for instance, I spotted a pretty red fox. It was crossing the frozen, snow-packed Harkness Pond, back-dropped across the way by skeletal birches and the bare limbs of fountainy willow trees.

Unaware of being observed, the fox sat on the ice, using its shrubby tail as a meditation rug. It scratched under its chin in that dainty way foxes do. Then it pranced across the rest of the ice, leaving two perfectly coordinated lines of paw prints in the snow. That's because red foxes "direct register," meaning they plant their rear paws exactly into the prints just made by their front paws.

Glistening in the sun, this characteristic pattern of prints reminded me somehow of Halley's Comet leaving a feathery bright tail behind it.

Just before the fox reached the northern edge of my pond, a noisy flock of crows spotted it and swooped down from the buttermilk-colored sky to mob the little canine with crow-barks and cat-calls. The fox took a quick glance over one shoulder at the dive-bombing birds and scampered into the shallow ravine carved out by Harkness Brook, where, a few months henceforth, that lovely wood duck couple would move in to nest. From that point, I could follow the fox's escape only by the movement of the shadowy boo-birds intent on giving it the raspberries.

This scene made me think about the interconnectedness of all living things, linked by a complex weave of natural laws, instinctual messages, chemical signals from their DNA, intuitive perceptions, shivering energies, paranormal communications, and age-old conditioning.

How could the oneness of the universe escape anyone paying attention?

As mentioned earlier in my journal, Buddhists have a lovely term for such synchronicity: “interdependent origination.” To them, this, our connectivity, is the natural fallout from millennia of karma.

In the next section of *Back to Walden*, which is the last in this chapter on spiritual energy, I’ll show you how you can create your own web of interdependent origination every time you go for a walk. It’s every bit as easy as falling off a log, but not nearly so painful.

Those Vibrating Heartstrings of Existence

I look for revelations every time I walk in the fields, or go for an amble through the woods, or run along the nearby [Robert Frost Trail](#). Every living creature or natural object or elemental force or universal law I observe is yet another symptom of divine energy.

Hiking is one noble path I take toward spiritual energy. Almost every weekend I go for a long hike in the nearby [Quabbin Reservoir](#), a huge preserve in Western Massachusetts created by the Metropolitan District Commission in the 1930s as the main water supply for Boston. Personally, I use the Quabbin as a vast reservoir of spiritual energy, not unlike the Grand Canyon.

The Quabbin was engineered by damming the meandering Valley of the Swift River, three branches of it, and swallowing an entire landscape, including four historical communities. I like to think of the Quabbin as an engineering ode to those overfed, seven-foot-long, 500-pound beavers, the size of brown bears, which shaped many of New England's landscapes eons ago. I imagine these beefy beavers receiving their electronic blueprints from the [Zero Point Field](#) and following that grand design to bulldoze the earth like migrating glaciers.

From the tower overlook at the Quabbin, you can observe how this colossal beaver pond was formed behind the [Windsor Dam](#), an earth-filled structure 2,640 feet long, rising 170 feet above the Swift River's bed. Together with the slightly smaller [Goodnough Dike](#), these two dams impound 412 billion gallons of water pooled within an area of 38.6 square miles. The Quabbin was named after a Native American chief called Nani-Quaben, meaning *Place of Many Waters*. From this tower, the Place of Many Waters resembles an eagle's eye-view of Lake Champlain. From here, you can also commemorate how the Quabbin's creation required the flooding, and "discontinuance" of four towns, Dana, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott; thus dislodging all the residents, moving all their houses, dismantling all their dreams, and even relocating all their cemeteries under the watchful eye of Eminent Domain.

Indeed, I once lived in one of these movable houses from the Quabbin, a farmhouse called "Tuttle Farm," which had been

transported by railway from the Quabbin area in the 1930s and perched on a hill belonging to Amherst College. Aptly enough, the place came with its own ghost, whom I called Tuttle. Judging by the ghostly footfalls, Tuttle seemed to roam up and down my stairs at night as a protest, I like to think, against the Metropolitan District Commission making him a displaced person in 1938, forever unstuck in time and space like Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Most of what is left of these four historical villages is underneath a lake of mythical proportions, flooding everything but approximately 60 hilltops and the huge Prescott Peninsula as far as the eye can see. What is also left are scores of old roads, a cartographer's nightmare hen-scratched around and about the Quabbin. These haunted roads crisscross the land surrounding the Quabbin and serve as hiking trails, cob-webbing the woods of this vast reservation, which I have been exploring for some years now. Hiking the Quabbin is one sure way of raising my consciousness and generating spiritual energy.

One characteristic of these roads is also its most poignant. For they often lead downhill, toward the ghost towns they used to link, and disappear into the lapping waters along the 181 miles of Quabbin's sandy shoreline. They are highways to nowhere. Besides providing [Rockwell Kent](#) views of the reservoir, these disappearing roads remind us of all we have gained, and all we have lost.

My relationship with the Quabbin recalls the words of Michael J. Roads, author of [Journey into Oneness](#). "For brief moments I perceive the interface between this dense physical reality in which we are so entrenched and the metaphysical realities that so easily elude us."

On the way to the Quabbin watchtower while hiking a ghost trail one afternoon, I experienced an intense moment of *déjà vu*, bringing back a deluge of metaphysical realities that so easily elude us.

I spotted a [pileated woodpecker](#), a crow-sized, prehistoric-looking, black-and-white species with a neon-red, rock-and-roll, Woody Woodpecker topnotch. I watched the woodpecker excavating for wood-boring insects inside several previously drilled, peach-sized

holes along the bark of a dead tree trunk, the bird's head tilting radically right and left in skeptical fashion.

That sighting reminded me of the time, 30 years before, when I had experienced a close encounter with spiritual energy in the flesh. My girlfriend, Rachel, and I had been birding in a marshy area of the Ozark Mountains near Eureka Springs, Arkansas, and spotted a large woodpecker, perched on a trunk only 25 yards away. It stayed there, trapped in the lenses of our binoculars, for at least 60 seconds. With absolute awe, we both realized at the same time that we were focused on a male ivory-billed woodpecker.

Of course, I don't expect anyone to believe me. As has been widely publicized all over North America, the birding establishment has long considered the ivory-bill to be extinct. Hence, our sighting was quickly dismissed with the kind of disdain reserved for crackpots of every ilk. One male birder, with behavior diagnostic of his species, openly mocked us for daring to think we could see the unseeable.

What we couldn't explain in words, and really didn't care to, was that our identification of this rare woodpecker went far beyond the act of verifying all its field marks in a birding guide. No, there was something sacred and timeless about this stubborn bird as it bickered with extinction. Seeing it was like the feeling one must enjoy after making a pilgrimage of several thousand miles to find an ancient holy place, lost to civilization for centuries. That feeling, that sense of the sacred and the timeless, is as good a definition as any for spiritual energy. That ivory-billed woodpecker was our rendezvous with the Zero Point Field. Our rendezvous with Akasha.

Rachel and I had the last laugh about our unbelievable spotting. Starting in 2004, there were several [sightings of ivory-billed woodpeckers](#) by "expert birders" in eastern Arkansas, not far from where we saw ours. When this exciting news started making headlines in many newspapers and TV stations around the U.S., Rachel emailed me with a one-word message that said it all:

"Hah!"

And that's also what I say to myself whenever I'm communing with nature's life energy. "Hah!"

Nature always inspires me with a sense of the sacred and the timeless, in much the same way that Thoreau must have been inspired by each of his daily afternoon "saunters," which he took so religiously from his outpost on Walden Pond.

Any moment of our lives can also become an encounter with spiritual energy. Any moment can become an encounter with an ivory-billed woodpecker. An encounter with the Grand Canyon. With Henry David Thoreau sauntering around Walden Pond. With the lost world beneath the Quabbin Reservoir. It's only a matter of mindfulness.

When imbibing spiritual energy, I'm often reminded of a line from the *Field of Dreams* film: "There comes a time when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place and the universe opens itself up for a few seconds to show you what's possible."

There's no reason in the world not to take pleasure in our collective field of dreams right outside. Nature's spiritual energy is our most ancient legacy. If the Akashic life force is indeed any kind of human inheritance, this is where we can go to claim it: in our own back yard.

Here is what the miraculous simplicity of *Walden* was all about: delighting in the natural, elemental, and elegant things that make life worthwhile.

Chapter 6: Third Tool in Waldenism - True Insight

Transcendental Medication

On a woody trail I often hike, which hugs the winding [Amethyst Brook](#) in my hometown of Amherst, some kind-hearted stranger has put up a bench swing, hanging by ropes from a two-by-four nailed to adjacent pine trunks. The swing invites you to sway there on its wooden planks and lose yourself in this lovesome brook, where it forks into two divergent streams, as if channeling a Robert Frost poem. It's for anyone to use "[For Free](#)," as the charming Joni Mitchell song from the 1970s was entitled.

Standing beside the cascading water, you can behold this handmade sign posted over the swing, its words burned lovingly into the wood: "Stop here, traveler, and find rest for your soul."

That captivating notion, in fact, tells you all you need to know about [meditation](#). Stop here, traveler, and find rest for your soul. And all for free.

In the simplest of all possible worlds, you find rest for you soul by using meditation to rediscover your own marvelous intuition. Indeed, you awaken the secret sage you always were and always will be. You finally heed the built-in oneness of your own genius, heretofore drowned out by the hue and cry of a culture gone ballistic, the pandemonium of digital widgets turning day-to-day life into virtual reality, the hubbub of your own insatiable ego screeching in your ear.

I firmly believe that a pandemic of aimless wandering has long since broken out in America and elsewhere. So many of us are lost. One of my friends, who tended to take the wrong turn whenever she got the chance, always described herself as "geographically hard of hearing." Many of us suffer from that same malady in the spiritual sense. We're metaphysically hard of hearing.

Overwhelmed by a life that is both confusing and out of control, we literally cannot hear ourselves think. Our intuition, the inner voice of wisdom, truth, and common sense, is lost in the jackhammer din

of the ego babbling, electronic thingamabobs broadcasting, or shit hitting the fan. We can't hear truth shouting at us.

That is precisely what meditation, practiced with an authentic spiritual philosophy all your own, can do. Jolt you back to reality. That jolt, I hope, is the formula I'm giving you in this chapter.

In his complexly simple style, [Lama Surya Das](#) summarized the effects of meditation this way: "By simply being right there, on the spot, you can make your life become workable and wonderful. A Zen master says, 'Awakening to this present instant, we realize the infinite is in the finite of each instant.'"

Henry David, wherever he exists now in the flickering energy exchange of the cosmos, must be doing a little jig to celebrate this Zen master's Thoreau-bred wordplay. When we meditate, each finite instant passes like a moment made of infinity on the rim of the Grand Canyon.

As Thoreau wrote about dipping into every instant of instantaneousness: "Time is but a stream I go a-fishing in."

Or, as [Emily Dickinson](#) put the same proposition in her lyrically transcendent way: "Forever is composed of nows."

Wow! It would be senseless for me to try and duplicate the nobility of such words, just as it would be lame for me to try and mimic the meditation guides that others have already written so much better than I ever could. You can easily Google a virtual monastery full of spiritual gurus, much more qualified than I am, who have written lucid, easy-to-understand guides to meditation. I recommend any of the [books written by Lama Surya Das](#), whose instructions on meditation are authentic, sensible, well-written, and geared to Western readers.

So I won't give you a how-to on meditation. What I can do instead is a why-to on meditation. I can tell you the story of my own meditative trek, a noble 25-year path that led me from the miserable, bewildered, frantic escapist I was in the now of then, to the joyful, satisfied, and purposeful human being I continue to be in the forever of my current now.

During this journey, as I hope you'll see, the dovetailing effects of meditation and intuition worked to lead me along my own road less traveled and, at the end of that unbeaten path, to a Shangri-La called [Waldenism](#). My own history of meditation is really a history of *Back to Walden* as it was intuited, conceived, and came to be. By extension, you can imagine your own personal *Walden*, your own personal quest, coming about as the direct result of awakening your own intuition through meditation.

This is your journey I have taken, just as yours is my journey you are taking.

Meditation is how you will know how to go *Back to Walden*. It leads to unexpected miracles. It is a continual process of being jolted back to consciousness and saying, "Thanks! I needed that."

That being so, when was I first slapped in the face by meditation? My meditative journey began in inauspicious fashion. My introduction to meditation was through [TM](#), a technique I soon nicknamed "Transcendental Medication" because of the pleasantly druggy effect it had on my tortured consciousness.

I suppose I first became aware of TM in about 1980, while I was working as a writer for the University of Massachusetts Amherst in an antediluvian building called Munson Hall. Next door to Munson is a creaky old athletic facility and gymnasium known for decades as "The Cage," where, at the time, UMass played its home basketball games, despite a flock of resident pigeons crisscrossing overhead in noisy disharmony.

That summer, UMass hosted a large conference for a mysterious organization known collectively by its acronym, TM, for [Transcendental Meditation](#) (no relation to Transcendentalism). The daily meditation activities for the TM conference centered in The Cage. All I knew at the time about TM I learned in a brief exchange with my lovely, effervescent girlfriend, Rachel (who would later spot the [ivory billed woodpecker](#) with me), after she rushed breathlessly into my office one morning.

"I hear they can fly!" she giggled.

“Who can fly?” I said.

“Those TM freaks.”

“Fly? You mean metaphorically, like an LSD trip?”

“No, they claim they can really fly. Levitate, you know, like yogis. At least, that’s what somebody just told me. You wanna sneak into The Cage and watch them?”

As tempting as that offer sounded, I was on deadline at the moment, so I couldn’t go next door for the air show, but Rachel did. Sometime later, she reported back to me with a crestfallen look on her face.

“I take it they didn’t fly,” I said.

“Well,” she said, smiling wanly. “Guess it depends on your definition of flying. After I snuck past the security people, I peeked through the grandstands, and nobody was doing anything. Just kind of squatting there in, what do you call it? The lotus position. Then, all of a sudden, they began hopping around.”

“Hopping around?”

“Yeah, you know. Kind of using one leg as a catapult. Like human pogo sticks.”

“In other words, yes, they *can fly*. But briefly.”

This vision of a basketball court percolating with human pogo sticks was my introduction to Transcendental Meditation. To this day, I still have a hard time getting past that image. The TM technique, as I would soon read, was founded by [Maharishi Mahesh Yogi](#) and basically espouses a simple form of meditation, practiced for about 20 minutes at a time, twice daily. On its website, TM offers a whole list of authentic [benefits](#), chief of which is reducing stress. Flying, needless to say, isn’t one of them.

Reducing stress must have been the main draw for me, because at that point in my life I was a perpetual motion machine, fueled by self-inflicted stress. That’s why, sometime in the early summer of

1985, I ambled over to the “TM house,” located just off-campus, a couple blocks from Munson Hall, and plopped down a cool \$400 - a truly precious sum for me at the time - to “buy my [mantra](#).”

This terminology, of course, is a very irreverent way to describe the transaction, but that’s precisely how scores of people refer to their original TM experience. Many of my smarter friends simply asked somebody else for a mantra. But for me, at least, TM wasn’t “For Free.”

On that first day, I was part of a group orientation, peopled by four novice meditators led by a very sincere young TM instructor. We all sat in stuffed furniture around the living room at the cozy TM house, and, after a brief introduction, the instructor took us one-by-one upstairs for the official ceremony conferring our mantras. I thought of mine as a “magic word.” And indeed it must have taken some kind of magical thinking on my part to fork over \$400 at that point in my life.

My instructor, in a ritualistic way, whispered my mantra to me, then informed me I should repeat it out loud, very quietly, a few times to make sure I got it.

“Hidding, hidding, hidding,” I chanted lowly.

After that, I was instructed never to say it aloud again, and, above all else, never, ever reveal it to anybody else, under pain of...Well, there were certainly no threats, for this was a truly gentle young man, but the moral consequences were left to my still very Catholic imagination.

This ceremony sounds a little silly now; but for me, at least, the very secretiveness of it all added to the mystique, and therefore the lure, of what I considered an exotic Oriental practice. What naiveté! For TM, in truth, was about as Americanized as baseball, Hollywood, and...well, buying mantras. Westernization was its thing.

After each of us received our own personal mantra, we sat at our first meditation session as a group. We were told to relax in our chairs - no lotus positions even entered the conversation - and to focus only on the silent mantra we were each repeating to

ourselves. The instructor advised us that, invariably, idle thoughts would creep into the meditation, for that's what the mind does. It's the parrot of our consciousness. But, as soon as we perceived our mind wandering away from the mantra and generating any kind of thought, empty or otherwise, we should just "let it go" and bring our focus gently but firmly back to the mantra.

What I had just learned was one very genuine form of meditation, among hundreds. I was hooked within seconds, even though I'd always been the hyperactive sort and had a very difficult time concentrating on my mantra. Twenty minutes passed in the twinkling of a thought wave. Then the instructor gently tinkled a bell to bring our meditation to an end.

Afterwards, I remember sitting on the front stoop of the TM house with a young student named Lisa from the group and wondering about how our vision of the world had already been altered. We were both noticing how a slight glow, an iridescent nimbus, was now visible around the bushes, trees, and flowers in the front yard. The world had suddenly taken on a magical aura. Everything seemed to tremble with excitement. I had been Transcendentally Medicated for the first time.

TM quickly became a staple in my life, but it never did become the cure-all I was looking for. It never did confer meaning or peace of mind. Nevertheless, it was the first step in a pilgrimage of 10,000 miles. Read the next section to find out where that fateful journey would lead.

A Cow Coop Gone All Frank Lloyd Wright

I performed the TM meditation technique dutifully for the next 20 years, even though I quickly forgot the philosophical instructions that went with it. I suppose you might say I practiced TM irreligiously, rather than religiously.

Over that period, I meditated under the Eiffel Tower, on a bullet train speeding through Japan, in transcontinental airliners, on a bench in the ancient historic section of Geneva. I did TM during a three-day bout of insomnia while camping on a sweltering beach beside the Indian Ocean. I did it while inner-tubing down a snake-infested river in Costa Rica and while squatting near a leopard's rocky lair on the Serengeti Plain. I meditated overlooking Gatún Lake in Panama. While burning with malaria in Nairobi. I even experimented with a running meditation, concentrating on my mantra during five-mile gallops alongside the Sacramento River. I still credit meditation, along with running, for the miracle of surviving my frantic, hell-bent life.

The benefits were, and are, undeniable. [TM brought me a sense of quietude](#) that existed nowhere else in my life. It rarely failed to ease my troubled mind. Meditation calmed me down. Indeed, I found that my soothing mantra often made me doze off during meditation. The practice was something I desperately needed and couldn't have lived without. Even though I still joke about my TM experience, the organization gave me something that brought me through many a life-threatening trauma, all of my own making. So I will be forever indebted.

Let's face the fact. TM has proven so successful precisely because it was marketed as a Westernized, secular, mental-health practice. I don't write that as a criticism - far from it! - because in the American culture of today, millions of people crave an effective technique to ease their mental strain. I certainly did.

Nevertheless, undoubtedly through my own fault, TM gave me limited benefits. I gradually realized how my agnostic TM practice was oddly lacking, strangely compartmentalized. I knew I was missing something.

Though TM reduced my personal stress level - the byproduct of my failed pursuit of the [American Dream](#) - it never reached beyond *that* to enlighten my search for truth, purpose, and happiness. It never cured my “moral and emotional depression.” It never in-formed me with the secrets of the universe, as [Ervin Laszlo](#) might say. My meditation practice never brought out my Transcendental intuition, waiting inside to be woken up and crowned with its rightful authority.

With time, I began to realize I was searching for something beyond a stress-free existence; something located in the “cloud of unknowing” that shrouds every actor in the human comedy. I was yearning for answers that TM, or at least the narrow form of TM I practiced, couldn’t give.

Though, for the longest time, I couldn’t put this vague sense of yearning into words, the inkling about what was missing in my TM meditations gradually became more and more acute. In fact, what I couldn’t perceive at the time seems obvious now. That which was missing in my meditation was that which was missing in my life: an underlying meaning.

In the end, as I would eventually learn, this search for meaning was the very meaning of my search.

Let me tell you a charming story about how this quest for meaning led me to the Waldenism I practice today, the [Transcendental philosophy](#) behind it, and the Buddhist meditations that replaced TM in my life and worked as my search engine.

In the late 1980s, after my close brush with suicide and during my eight-month retreat into a Trappist monastery, I began looking for some kind of philosophical gyroscope to balance my life. Like Thoreau at Walden Pond, I plunged into reading, poring over an eclectic mixture of philosophical, metaphysical, and Eastern texts for wisdom. I also had rambling discussions with the monks and found that each of them had come to the monastery because of a long pilgrimage toward truth and understanding. The monastery, in effect, was their *Walden*.

Some of the monks had even entered the hermitage in much the same desperate state that had landed me there. In effect, we had been committed to an asylum. One such desperado was a 91-year-old monastic named [Brother Bob](#), a tall, gaunt, goateed man, who was the spitting image of [Don Quixote](#) and had a past, like mine, full of titling at windmills.

Brother Bob's remarkable story, like Thoreau's account of *Walden*, would alter my life forever.

Unlike other monks, Brother Bob was treated as someone special; mostly, I suspect, because he had for many years helped support the abbey with his own sizeable fortune. Instead of the small rooms, or cells, inhabited by the rest of the monks, Brother Bob lived in his own separate residence, a cinderblock structure, which he called his "Bullpen." That's because it literally had been the bullpen before the Trappists had bought this property in the 1950s, when it was a cattle ranch.

After Brother Bob moved into this structure in the early sixties, he used his artistic temperament and considerable talents to turn the former bullpen into a small architectural wonder; a sort of cow coop gone all Frank Lloyd Wright, surrounded by an Oriental garden - sonorous with running water and wind chimes - and peopled inside with Ming Dynasty vases, Picasso studies, and other priceless works of art.

As I would sit conversing for hours with Brother Bob in his airy living room, I could gaze through the large picture windows he'd installed in his Bullpen and admire the Sierra Nevada range in the distance, not far from where "the last wild Indian," [Ishi](#), had come down from the wilderness in 1911 to surrender to the White Man's culture.

I often thought about my own arrival at the monastery and how it had come about in much the same way as [Ishi's own surrender](#) during the early 20th century. Like Ishi, I had no place left to go, for total freedom had become my cell. As I would soon find out, that was true of Brother Bob as well.

During our talks, Brother Bob told me an almost mythic tale about himself. For much of the 1930s and 1940s, he had worked at

Paramount Studios as one of its most important art directors, designing scenery and costumes for countless stars, including the Marx Brothers, Mae West, Gary Cooper, Charles Laughton, and Cary Grant. In the process, by Bob's own account, he lived a decadent life in every conceivable way.

He eventually quit Hollywood - though not before making a small fortune - because of a progressively bad case of restlessness, compounded by a vague urge for something more meaningful in life. You know. That old chestnut.

Evidently, meaning, like God, works in mysterious ways. According to Brother Bob, one night in a redwood forest in Northern California, his yearning came to a head when he was waylaid by a powerful disembodied voice, which acted as an invisible highwayman, telling Bob to give away everything he owned. Amazingly enough, that's precisely what Bob proceeded to do, but, as he told me, "grudgingly, painstakingly, kicking and screaming all the way."

In religious terminology, such an experience is referred to as a "locution," the audible equivalent of a vision. Bob believed it was God speaking to him. Being agnostic on that score, I don't judge. Maybe, within the wavering field of microscopic vibrations and electric charges that we call reality, this experience was actually a schizophrenic attack, a mental breakdown, or Bob's own intuition, speaking to him in a manner he couldn't ignore. I don't know.

But when I asked him why he followed the dictates of a phantom voice, Brother Bob was unequivocal: "Listen! When a voice comes out of nowhere in a dark redwood forest and tells you what to do, you'd be a damned fool not to listen."

And so he did. It was during the process of locating a new home for his fortune that he first contacted the monks in the [Trappist monastery](#) where he and I would eventually end up, though 30 years apart. Bob decided to give the abbey everything he owned.

Meanwhile, however, God, or fate, or life (whichever way you look at it) intervened. Bob was diagnosed with incurable cancer and given a matter of days to live. A last-ditch surgery was prescribed,

which might give him a few months more at most. Or, then again, it might kill him.

“So, on the night before my surgery,” Brother Bob told me, “the abbot visited me in my hospital room and said, ‘Look, Bob, why don’t you become a monk?’ Well, I was dumbfounded. ‘Hell, I’m no more a monk than the Man in the Moon,’ I told the abbot in no uncertain terms. ‘I’m just not monk material!’”

At this point in his story, Brother Bob chuckled low in his throat, stroked his goatee, and winked at me.

“But the abbot said, ‘Come on, Bob, you’re gonna die anyway. So why not take vows and go out in style?’ So I did, by golly, and, wouldn’t you know it? I lived. That’s how God tricked me into becoming a monk. That was more than 30 years ago, and I’ve been here in this cloister ever since. I stumbled over my own purpose in life, despite myself.”

I didn’t know it at the time, but Brother Bob’s story was a precursor. It would predict how, 20 years later, I would stumble over my own purpose in life, despite myself. For that story, read on. See how somebody else’s God tricked me into becoming what I am today. That would be “happy.”

Stand and Deliver!

In the 20 years after I left the monastery, all through the 1990s and well beyond the turn of the century, I was still “metaphysically hard of hearing.” I needed some signpost to point me toward a more focused philosophy than the one I was cherry-picking from many different sources. Like [Brother Bob](#), I needed some kind of locution in the redwood forest to waylay me and shout, “Stand and deliver!”

That locution, in effect, would happen during my bout with kidney disease, a story I began in chapter 3. Here’s the ending.

During those 20 years of wandering through the desert of my mid-life, I tramped down many a metaphysical path without finding what I thought I was looking for. I spirited what I could from spiritual readings. I helped myself to self-help books. I psyched myself out in psycho-therapy. I dabbled in [Buddhism](#) by practicing a very diluted form I dubbed “Buddhist Lite.” I immersed myself in nothing, and nothing immersed itself in me. The words I lived by were contained in the tongue-in-cheek slogan I posted over my computer: “Think shallow.”

A key moment in my evolution happened in 2007, when I decided to discontinue the lone TM meditation technique I’d been practicing since 1985. Instead, I replaced it with various Buddhist techniques, which train the mind in a variety of ways, including mindfulness, concentration, insight, compassion, and projection. I noticed the difference instantly, as if my viewpoint on life suddenly switched from one dimension to 3-D.

One key conflict, I now see with my current insight, stymied my pilgrim’s progress. I was very much attracted to both [Transcendentalism and Buddhism](#), but these two philosophies, which interlock in so many ways, were apparently divorced by one irreconcilable difference. To self or not to self? That was the question.

German philosopher [Emmanuel Kant](#) was the inspiration for much of American Transcendentalism when he proposed a human revolution based on the radical independence of intuition. Kant said that the very essence of this intuition “consists in proposing an absolute self

as unconditionally existing, incapable of being determined by anything higher than itself, but determining all things through itself.”

In other words, you bow to no one but the supreme authority of yourself. This is heady territory for members of a downtrodden society suffering “a kind of moral and spiritual depression,” as Professor Jonathan Levin described Thoreau’s viewpoint. Accordingly, one central goal of Transcendentalism has always been to bring out the best in us, the distilled nectar of oneself, the intuitive nature that has been denatured, bullied, browbeaten, and gagged by the shrill and deafening crowd.

Like Transcendentalism, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is bringing out our intuitive wisdom, but with a crucial difference. [Buddhism takes a contrary view of self.](#)

In Transcendentalism, the self is, in effect, a supreme being; a fully empowered emissary, with portfolio, of the collective Over-Soul. But Buddhists don’t believe in a self, as such, nor a soul either. Buddhism advocates the total atomization of self in the pursuit of enlightenment. Selflessness is its thing. Buddhist philosophy also pretty much ignores the concept of soul.

These are notions almost impossible for Westerners to assimilate. In the West, we can’t even conceive of losing our souls, immortal or otherwise. And the possibility of leading an active and fulfilling life without our self back in the saddle again is quite alien to us.

Minus the self, we think of ourselves pretty much as Gertrude Stein thought of Oakland: “There is no there there.”

This critical difference between my two favorite philosophies somehow neutralized both and stopped me from committing to either, even though I loved the worldview of Transcendentalism and was moved by the [powerful meditation techniques in Buddhism.](#)

Then came the moment in October of 2008, referred to in [chapter 3](#) of *Back to Walden*, when I discovered that my kidneys were quickly losing their ability to filter my blood. Blood tests showed I had

suddenly lost 50 percent of my kidney function. My kidneys were apparently failing, and failing fast!

I was shocked back to reality by this news. I realized that, in track & field terms, I was suddenly on my “gun lap.” All that was left of my life was one last sprint to the finish line. If ever I was going to “kick it in,” the time was now or never.

This Transcendental shock treatment somehow made me understand that my meditation should really be the search engine for an integrated belief system, a focused method for questing after truth, like *Walden*, rather than just the bemused sort of groping that had served as my spiritual life. So, with my kidney dysfunction as fresh in my mind as [consumption must have been for Thoreau at Walden](#), I began to conceive my own private worldview powered by my own private method of viewing that world.

Now here’s the miraculous part. My longstanding conflict between self-denying Buddhism and self-seeking Transcendentalism was suddenly resolved in a flash of instant enlightenment, rising spontaneously from one of my meditation sessions like a disembodied voice bellowing through a bullhorn in a redwood forest.

Why not, I reasoned in that moment of truth, instill a Western soul into Eastern Buddhism? Why not give Tibetan Buddhism an American selfhood? And what better way than recombining the DNA of Buddhism and Transcendentalism? What better way than practicing Buddhist meditation in the context of [Transcendental philosophy](#)? This would be the method to my madness.

It was the best of both worlds. East meets West. Buddha, my jolly good fellow, shake hands with Henry David Thoreau, the rugged individualist!

That, my dear reader, is precisely when I began developing Waldenism. But a funny thing happened on the way to the forum for my new practice.

I began to suffer exhausting anemia, which is one major symptom of [end-stage kidney disease](#). For the next six months, my energy, my

very life, my spirit, were all sucked away. Barely functioning became increasingly hard. All the while, through an act of sheer willpower, I somehow continued my Buddhist meditations, Transcendentalist readings, and a semblance of my avid daily exercise routine, a 50-year-old habit of running, swimming, biking, hiking, basketball, and weight training.

Let's face it, though, by the spring of 2009 I was barely dragging my ass through my daily workouts, and by six o'clock each evening I would fall into bed feeling thoroughly bone-chilled, drained, mightily exhausted.

Meanwhile, a team of doctors, performing many kinds of tests, couldn't diagnose what was actually causing either my kidney dysfunction or my anemia. The medics did, however, rule out the first as the cause of the second, because I hadn't reached the end stage, or dialysis phase, of kidney disease. Apparently, my conditions were mutually exclusive, and the specialists began looking for something *even more fatal* than kidney disease.

If the "experts" were right, I was about to die a brutal death by oxymoron. My reaction? I decided I was simply falling apart at the seams and prepared myself for the worst.

Finally, after I went through months of exams and countless needle pricks, specialists dismissed everything but two possible causes for my severe fatigue: bone marrow cancer or leukemia. Should I choose "[The Lady or the Tiger?](#)"

They wanted to drill into my bone to determine which one was about to kill me. That knowledge, face it, would be a pyrrhic victory at best. At that juncture, in May of 2009, I had every reason to believe my life was guttering out faster than a candle flame in a typhoon. In other words, I had reached the same point of desperation as [Brother Bob](#) did, the night before his last-ditch cancer surgery, when his God tricked him into becoming a monk.

Then, in June of 2009 while meditating once again, I experienced another moment of revelation, another kind of locution in a Redwood forest. Some "inner voice," which I must conclude was my own intuition, told me for no apparent reason to take massive doses

of Vitamin B-12. Since I was already taking more than the daily recommended allowance of B-12, my intuition seemed irrational. Maybe, like many kidney patients suffering from uncontrolled anemia, I was losing it mentally as well.

But, like Brother Bob, I did as I was told, recalling his own words: “When a voice comes out of nowhere and tells you what to do, you’d be a damned fool not to listen!”

And so I did. Within days, these mega-doses began to ease my symptoms of anemia. By the fall of 2009, I was feeling quite up to snuff again. Maybe I was intuitively communicating with the [Akashic Field](#), the font of all knowledge.

Like Brother Bob and his cancer, I had just discovered that even a clay pigeon like me can dodge the eternal bullet fired by that Big Trap Shooter in the sky.

But, as Friedrich Nietzsche observed, “When you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you.” And here’s what the abyss told me. The outcome of my life-altering, life-threatening experience was a sudden desire - really an overwhelming passion! - to do something meaningful, humanitarian, something lasting with whatever time I might have left of my life. ‘Twas an urge to do something *Waldenesque*. A yearning to kick in my last lap, like a latter-day [Steve Prefontaine](#) in the 1972 Olympics, when he was running on nothing but fumes and true grit.

But what can I do, I asked myself? In search of a purposeful answer, I meditated on this crucial question for the next few months hoping my Transcendental intuition could come up with a plan once again. Interestingly enough, the answer came on New Year’s Day of 2010, during yet one more meditation. That’s when another flashpoint of inspiration, much like my B-12 revelation, came to me.

Why not write a book for my dearest friends, loved ones, and other searchers, wherever they might be, giving them the same simple tools I’d been using to reach my own state of contentment? Why not post my own website, which would make my eBook free and accessible for anyone anywhere who needed it?

My reasoning was simple. Perhaps I can save a few people longing for meaning and contentment from years of muddling around, like it took me.

That was the precise instant when *Back to Walden* became a twinkle in my eye. *Back to Walden*, I hoped, could help treat the outbreak of metaphysical deafness that plagues this country and beyond. I was shifting into *Walden* mode.

That precise instant is also when I understood the moral of my own life story. I suddenly realized the truth behind a long search that had taken the last 25 years to play itself out! To see that moral, read the next section.

Your Very Own Realometer

The moral behind my own life of unquiet desperation is that I can rise above life's trials and trepidations through the simple act of meditating to unlock my own intuition. I mean, how Transcendental is that?

In his small classic, [The Natural](#), author Bernard Malamud found the sweet spot in his story by the way humans struggle and evolve. He summed it up this way: "We have two lives, the life we learn with, and the life we live with after that."

Having finally learned a little bit about my life after decades of struggle, I'm finally beginning to celebrate the life I live with after that. How? By being born again with the natural power of my own intuition.

Apparently, I was also born again physically. In October of 2010, my kindly GP at the University of Massachusetts, Dr. Warren Morgan, talked me into blood tests for the first time in more than 18 months. They showed that my kidney function, which had dropped off a nephrological cliff two years before, was holding steadier than a yaw Yankee clipper catching a fair wind to Java.

Having absolutely no scientific evidence to support me, I'm perfectly willing to credit this small marvel to my meditation, the intuition it inspires, and the [Waldenism](#) I practice. I mean, who's going to argue with me?

Wherever he is now, the late great Brother Bob must be chuckling low in his throat, stroking his goatee, and winking at me. He knows damn well that his own God bamboozled me into practicing Waldenism in much the same way that He tricked Brother Bob into becoming a monk and spending his last thirty-some-odd years in a Trappist monastery. All's fair in love, war, and religion.

My own interpretation might be a tad different than Brother Bob's. Here's mine: Meditation is the tool for awakening the brilliance within, vocalizing your internal voice, resurrecting your buried you. Meditation is the gateway to intuition. It is also the desire path to

your own distinct genius, to the life you live after the life you learn with.

Meditation brings out your own common sense, which, as Mark Twain pointed out, is uncommonly uncommon. Alfred North Whitehead put it this way: “Common sense is genius in homespun.” And meditation is the home-spinner.

That said, I’m not here to tell you how to meditate. I’ve found that some of the most powerful meditative practices are those we make up to meet our personal needs.

Don’t forget. Waldenism is a do-it-yourself philosophy aimed at doing it to yourself in your own homespun way.

With that hope in mind, I’ll briefly outline five examples - five easy pieces, as it were - of my own favorite meditations of diverse kinds, which you’re welcome to adopt, adapt, or trash at will. These meditations span the range of meditation types, variously aimed at concentration, insight, mindfulness, truth, wisdom, compassion, and much more.

Breath-counting: My staple meditation is a standard one among Buddhists. [Breath-counting](#). You simply focus on the physical sensations of your breath where it is inhaled and exhaled at the base of the nostrils. Count each breath, going from one to 10, and then start again. As with every meditation, when stray thoughts pop up, quietly and gently let them go and resume your focus. When you lose count, just go back to number one. Do that for as long as you like, typically from 20 minutes to an hour. You can either sit in a chair, cross your legs in a lotus or semi-lotus position, or use a meditation bench, it’s your call.

Candle Meditation: This is a short meditation I made up to end my meditations with a Big Bang, using the [projection technique](#) [Buddhists](#) employ in many of their meditations, imagining themselves as the Buddha, the Clear Light of intuition, or many other things. I spend several minutes staring into a candle flame, concentrating on nothing but the wick’s bright gaseous burn. Then I shut my eyes. Now I focus on the disembodied image of the candle, which is superimposed on the inside of my eyelids. I say to myself,

“Clear Light, rise up through me and consume me with your truth. Clear Light, rise up through me and consume me with your wisdom. Clear Light, rise up through me and consume me with your compassion. I am Clear Light. I am the candle flame. I am the Buddha. As I go about my day, let me see my life through the eyes of the Buddha.” Then I blow out the candle.

Life as a Midway: I made up this meditation to drive home the [Buddhist concept of life as illusion](#). I picture a carnival midway, complete with sideshows, concession stands, game booths, amusement park rides, a tunnel of love, a funhouse. I think about each. Sideshows con us into seeing something freakish or titillating or magic in exchange for our money. Just like life. Concession stands sell us fluff, like cotton candy, which evaporates into nothing at first bite. Just like life. The rides thrill us with the illusion of danger. Or, then again, merely make us queasy. Just like life. We float through the tunnel of love for its promise of darkness and romance, but it leaves us feeling only frustrated and sexually unfulfilled. Just like life. In the funhouse, the room of mirrors makes us feel alternately fat, emaciated, twisted, and disembodied. Just like life. Undulating floorboards throw us off-balance. Just like life. Blasts of air mess our hair and levitate skirts. Flashing lights throw grotesque shadows on everything. Ghouls and skeletons and witches and demons leap at us from dark nooks and materialize in glass cases. Whistles and moans and screams and cackles churn the air. It’s a sort of Dante’s Inferno. And yet it’s all artifice. It’s all illusory and untrue. It’s all a fantasy world to regard with skepticism and disbelief. Just like life.

Sending and Taking: This is my own personal meditation based on the [Buddhist concept of *tonglen*](#), or sending and taking, in which one mentally “breathes in” the pain of others and replaces it with compassion. I start by focusing on each breath. As I inhale, I imagine myself sucking all the dark, bad karma out of the air. As I exhale, I imagine myself as a kind of catalytic converter, changing bad karma and fouled air into good karma and clean air. After several minutes, I concentrate on each of my friends and loved ones, inhaling their pain and bad karma, then exhaling good karma and compassion. After I finish doing *tonglen* with each friend, I

extend the process to all the suffering souls in the whole world, sucking in their pain, sending them all my compassion.

I Am Infinite: This is a kind of [Buddhist insight meditation](#) that I adapted to my own purposes. I sit at a window overlooking my woodsy back yard and Harkness Pond beyond. I start by speculating about my place in nature. I think about how the chemicals in my body, after I die, will return to the soil, dust to dust, ashes to ashes. They will become part of the plants. They will become part of the animals that eat the plants. They will be assimilated by humans who eat the plants and animals. Some of my chemicals will leach into streams and ponds. From there, they will run into the sea and evaporate into the air. After my death, I will be part of all living things. I will circulate throughout the ocean currents. I will circulate throughout the jet streams. I will become chemical reactions in the infinite energy exchange that powers the universe. I will be part of everything, part of everywhere, part of every infinity, now and forever, amen.

To repeat myself, your responsibility as a practitioner of Waldenism is to create your own personal quest. That means making up your own meditations or adapting them to your own life.

As you have probably realized by now, what I conceive of as Waldenism is merely a template for you to create your own personal Waldenism, your own special philosophy of life. The very concept is based on people marching to different drummers, rugged individualists united by a passion for doing their own thing in their own way.

My Waldenism will be vastly different from your Waldenism. Your True Thought will be a far cry from my True Thought. Your True Energy will be a different animal than my True Energy. Your True Insight will be a damn sight different from my True Insight. That's because we each have our own singular truth.

In that noble pursuit, it's worth quoting the master, writing about the heroic and relentless pursuit of purpose: "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...till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality.”

My lovely reader, your own “Realometer” - which you can use to locate that hard, fast, and genuine place called truth, to wedge through the muck of public opinion, to go a-fishing in the stream of time - is meditation. Remember: The ultimate purpose of your life is to create your own ultimate purpose! Which, not by coincidence, is the perfect lead-in to the seventh and last chapter of *Back to Walden: Turning Life into Your Own Personal Quest*.

Chapter 7: Turning Life into Your Own Personal Quest

We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us

Just as Thoreau borrowed the tools to build his cabin beside Walden Pond and simplify his life, Waldenism borrows the tools from Thoreau to build your own metaphysical shelter and simplify your life. Think of [True Thought](#), [True Energy](#), and [True Insight](#) as an ax, saw, and hammer on loan from Thoreau to build your own retreat.

Here's a good story to illustrate the method to my madness, putting [Waldenism](#) to work, moment to moment, in a purposeful way. Here's how the three tools work.

As I mentioned in [chapter 4 of *Back to Walden*](#), during the summer of 2010, a bolt of lightning struck a big white pine beside my driveway, and the exploding trunk landed on my dearly beloved, 14-year-old, Ford Taurus. My mashed vehicle had been the best car I'd ever owned, no contest. My ex-wife, Martha, who has remained a beloved friend since our difficult but gracious separation in 2004, responded to my calamity with her typical wit: "The gods are trying to tell us something. But they're speaking in a foreign language."

There is much wisdom in Martha's jest. It expresses the lengths to which we must all go to interpret the fateful catastrophes, disappointments, frustrations, fortunes, and lucky streaks that each life encounters on its way to fruition.

Her remark about the gods speaking another language reminds me of those odd translations you get from assembly instructions for foreign products or from your word-processing software. One such Russian translation once interpreted "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" this way:

"The liquor is strong, but the meat is rancid."

Too often we have similar problems translating the alien language, with its many shades of meanings, being communicated by the gods and their providence. We're at the mercy of a lingo that's bizarre at best, and a reality that's confusing at tops. Beyond the language

barrier, we must come to grips with the subjunctive mood of existence itself. How do we find meaning in a life that might not even have any meaning, at the hands of a God that might not even exist, leading to an afterlife that might be not even be there?

Life often seems like a crap game in which we're constantly trying to read the subtle signs stirred up by our tumbling dice in the faint hope that luck, indeed, will be a lady tonight. Would you just blow on these ivories please?

So, when a tree falls on one's car, what the devil are we supposed to be learning from it? Shrug! The answer, I've discovered from a lifetime that can be summarized as doing everything the hard way, is Waldenism.

In this instance, the case of my squashed car, Waldenism worked out the whole mess to my advantage, as if by magic, and gave added purpose to my already purposeful life. Here's how. After the insurance company totaled my car and offered a pittance of what this noble machine was worth to me in the real world, I didn't try to get angry or get even with life. What's the use?

Instead, I wielded True Thought, True Energy, and True Insight, the tools of Waldenism:

I concentrated on the positive fallout from this "[Act of God](#)."

I sucked up all the spiritual energy I could from nature.

I summoned up my own intuitive common sense by meditating.

In the process, this is precisely how Waldenism processed this process. Instead of allowing myself to dwell on the "woe is me" aspect, I actively sought out the accidental benefits that made me benefit from this accident. "Okay, now that my car is totaled," I mused, "how do I make this situation work for me? Seek advice. Check out my resources. Look for an answer that makes me better off than I was before. Turn the silver lining into a golden opportunity" (as touchy-feely as all that sounds).

Meanwhile, back at the wreck, I remembered Pogo's universal manifesto: "We have met the enemy and he is us." Hence, every

time I gazed at my flattened Ford, I used it as a reminder not to make myself into my own worst enemy by dwelling on the dark side.

While honing my True Thought, I also focused on showering myself with True Energy by hiking along cascading brooks, by bird-watching, by soaking up nature's mythical essence, by running, by meditating. True Energy kept me optimistic and open to new revelations falling like an Irish mist from the [Akashic Field](#).

And finally, while hammering away with True Thought and True Energy, I also conjured up True Insight through my daily meditations. I let the thoughts spontaneously generated by altered consciousness rise to the surface and alter my consciousness even more. Consequently, what my intuition told me (as un-intuitive as this sounds) was to visit the financial advisor at my credit union. Here was a man with a firm grasp of the obvious that appeared so murky to me, an English Major facing the often ungrammatical world of high finance. What an MBA student might say in Corporate Speak is that I "partnered" with my financial advisor.

The solution he handed me was so simple, it defied belief. Why not start collecting my Social Security benefits early, as soon as I reached my "[Official Social Security Retirement Age](#)," but while I was still working? With this influx of excess capital, I could pay for a new car and also invest a chunk of my monthly Social Security check in an interest-bearing account to support my, until now, unsupportable retirement. More importantly, it would also support my cherished *Back to Walden* website at backtowalden.com, the purpose of my purpose.

Talk about synchronicity! Before a tree played patty-cake on my car, I had no idea such options were open to me. I would have simply waited to collect Social Security until I retire, if ever, from my job at UMass, translating Engineeringese into the Queen's English. But, because my Ford Taurus threw itself under this toppling timber, I now have a windfall of cash, literally created by a bolt from the blue, to sponsor my whole future, going *Back to Walden* and helping my loved ones go there, too. Until then, my retirement plan was basically survival of the fittest.

My purpose in life thus became even more purposeful. How's that for a simple twist of fate?

The squishing of my Ford Taurus demonstrates the kind of [“interdependent origination,”](#) or synchronicity, that Buddhists say operates within every life as the motor that runs [karma](#). “Everything is part of a limitless web of interconnections,” wrote Francesca Freemantle, author of [Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead](#), “and undergoes a continual process of transformation.”

Unfortunately, we usually can't decipher the foreign language being spoken to us by karma as it happens. Philosopher Soren Kirkegaard expressed this puzzle so eloquently, it has become one of my favorite quotes: “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.” Yes, yes, yes. How very Pogo-esque.

Kirkegaard's conundrum, fortunately, doesn't stop us from benefiting from the process while it's taking place. Shit happens. But just because we can't seize the sense as it hits the fan doesn't mean we can't seize the day as it fans into night. How so? By going *Back to Walden* and seizing our purpose through the practice of Waldenism. You can translate the foreign language of the gods and arrive at your own purposefulness, day by day, moment to moment, time after time. The secret to turning your life into your own personal quest is the interaction of these three Transcendental tools I've explained in *Back to Walden*: True Thought, True Energy, True Insight. It's a method capable of decoding any baffling message from the gods and translating it into your own personal meaning.

All three tools have permeable membranes, through which the gaseous, lighter-than-air quality of wisdom constantly passes. All three work tongue and groove. By practicing these three techniques with total consciousness, and by paying attention to what they reveal, you suddenly become privy to all the hidden purpose, meaning, and truth that had previously been obscured by the sound and fury of life. You become [in-formed](#) by the universe.

How does this karmic synchronicity among healthy thinking, spiritual energy, and intuition work? Transcendentally, my dear Watson! Transcendentally.

Without applying such mindfulness to the issue of my pulverized car, the event would have remained a tree falling unheard in a forest. But these three techniques interact constantly to solve the great riddle in the [Zen koan](#) of everyday life. These three tools let us live life both backward and forward simultaneously, synchronously, timelessly.

For, you see, the purpose of this mysterious progression called life is to progress through this mysterious purpose called living. At the end lies a self-fulfilling prophet. You. Waldenism, practiced purposefully, answers questions you never dared to ask, with solutions you never dared to imagine.

This is the preserve surrounding *Walden*, a refuge of mind, metaphor, and myth, where several of my dearest friends now reside. They have all met the enemy and figured out who it was by looking in the mirror. They have all gone *Back to Walden*, each in his or her own extraordinary way, before *Back to Walden* even existed. In my next section, let me begin to tell you about these wonderful people and the noble purpose they have found in their lives.

Illegal Swimming in Walden Pond

After practicing [Waldenism](#) for some time, I now have much keener insight into the gutsy friends around me who have met their own challenges to arrive at the ultimate meaning in their lives. I begin to recognize the people who have discovered true purpose, not by worshipping the false gods of ego, but by bowing to their own infallible intuition, ideals, and talent.

These folks have all gone [Back to Walden](#) in their own way. As Jonathan Levin wrote: “In [Walden](#), [Thoreau](#) is clear...about the location of meaning and value. He is saying that it does not reside in the natural facts or in social institutions or in anything ‘out there,’ but in consciousness. It is a product of imaginative perception, of the analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making, mytho-poetic power of the human mind.”

Speaking of which, one of my charming friends, Bree Carlson, an environmental engineer who founded the campus chapter of [Engineers Without Borders](#) at UMass Amherst and is about to go on an eight-month leave of absence from her job to hike the Appalachian Trail, wrote this “analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making, mytho-poetic” message to me during the summer of 2010:

“I spent last night at Walden Pond doing a little illegal swimming. Thoreau would be proud of me!”

I like to think that all my cherished friends, as described in the sections below, spend their lives doing a little illegal swimming in [Walden Pond](#).

One of these Transcendental swimmers is my wonder-bending friend [Diane Wald](#), the best example I know of Thoreau’s “mytho-poetic power of the human mind” (though she would probably gag at that academic phrase). As a “poet” in every sense of this word, Diane reduces language to its bare bones, rather than fleshing it out into academic flabbiness. Her medium is poetic Over Soul, not bookish Over Weight.

[Diane](#) lives with her husband, novelist Carey Reid, in a house full of mercurial cats that move from room to room like tiny unpredictable

weather fronts, butting into each other and creating an atmosphere of constant climate change. Mark Twain would have been greatly amused by the New England feel of the place. If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes.

Diane is also the best poet nobody ever heard of. That statement, of course, is an exaggeration, because Diane is well-respected and admired among poets. But there's an unfortunate truism during the current Age of Distraction, in which the principal tool of self-awareness is the smart phone: Nobody reads poetry anymore except other poets.

Diane is a poet's poet. She writes witty, surprising, well-crafted, profound verse that leaps off the page and slaps you in the face. What's even more remarkable, her poetry is she, and she her poetry. As she once wrote to me, "I hope my readers are interested in my poetry because they're interested in me." There's no gap between the writer and the written.

As one of her former poetry professors once said, "Don't hear the bell. Be the bell."

In February of 2011, Diane published her third book of poems, [Wonderbender](#), following up on two earlier masterpieces: [Lucid Suitcase](#) and [The Yellow Hotel](#). Let me give you a tiny sneak preview from the wondrous *Wonderbender*:

A Silent Wind over the Islet
I'd forgotten you so liked art. And many things
advanced in those days to a point of consciousness
beyond any speech or understanding
the nerves could utter. Yet when I designed
the fine-blown glassware you impressed
upon each piece a delicate leaf, a hand,
a monstrous kiss that marked each one's
relief from the next, an individual differing
so slightly from its kin, but greatly,
that every one-celled stem
floated its flower-house into a globe, a fishbowl end,
resting at last at level on the table.

Tigers love water. They sleep with their heads towards the outside wall, and write with blue chalk on the sidewalk. Outside blue. Eagerly I hand over the lights to you, but soundless now, as the man with his ear to the floor must be disowned and drowned and downed by the giant. Once you healed a woman twice. The color teal. The crayfish glimmering in still pools and insect wings of mica. And the hush. The awful stars. It all comes back to me now in a wind-up of clouds as softly they fall to your tie, to your shoulders.

How shall we move from one height to the next except by the dark back stairs? A wooden linkage creaks, a figure moves in violets and regrets, pressing its face to the wall along the steps so that the dreamers on the other side can hear the contours of a presence at once kind and cold. I remember you loved the hour without name and every shade behind the purchased mask with both its mouths. The clocks we found moved backwards, moved in unison once a year, and we've survived that moment in the mirror as amber acquaintances. In the very end you will be made to speak of me, you will entirely forget, in every case, the distance from the liquid to the rim, And you will then believe we really did all the things we imagined.

And here's a tidy, delicious slice of life from *The Yellow Hotel*:

“It occurs to me that there are two ways to poetry, not two ways of poetry though that may also be. Two ways vital, two and a lot of others. The *deep internal personal* and - the *sustaining*. When these two come together there is yes for me yes for you, always yes you feel it. It occurs to me that the *sustaining* can be learned or absorbed by great *desiration* (desiring), and that the *deep internal personal* must be released. Before it.”

It occurs to me that Diane has made the *deep internal personal* and the *sustaining* come together through three interlocking purposes, in which the yearnings of her soul combine great desiration and deep internal personal release. One purpose is her poetry, of course.

Another is her love of animals. She pours much of her passion into her job of almost 10 years, working for an animal welfare organization in Boston. Going above and beyond the call of duty in her job, she annually sends out an impassioned plea to all her friends, asking them to support her own personal CATS FOR PEACE! march in an annual “walk” fundraiser, thus campaigning for pacifism and saving countless abandoned pets in the bargain.

Her third interlocking purpose is undying support for her friends who are writers, including me. Here, for instance, is part of an email she sent me after reading my first post on backtowalden.com during the summer of 2010: “WOW. i’ve just spent a most enjoyable and enlightening 30 minutes racing through what’s on your website – that is to say it begs for a closer reading, but it was too much fun to savor the first time around (does that make sense?). it’s brilliant! it’s just such a fucking good read, first of all. and then of course it’s all so wise. i love it.”

If I had a cover, virtual or otherwise, I’d stick Diane’s remarks on it. As it is, Diane has a lasting place on the cover of my life.

The above email message, in fact, is only one of many from Diane. She is perpetually encouraging. How can you not love a friend who is so accomplished in her own right, so dedicated to her own causes, and yet so devoted to her own friends? Diane’s life is a fine case of purpose over ego, mind over matter, cause over affect. Her meaning in life is both selfless and self-perpetuating. She went *Back to Walden* before *Back to Walden* ever went *Back to Walden*.

It’s no accident she’s married to Carey Reid, author of a haunting 1994 novel entitled [*Swimming in the Starry River*](#), about an enchanting little girl, suffering from a terminal and deforming disease, and the gritty parents who must cope with it. The

suspension of disbelief is so potent while reading this book that Carey often meets fans who mistakenly assume that *he actually is* the father from *Swimming in the Starry River*, and *he really raised* the deformed little girl in the story.

“Few novels appeal so directly to the human spirit,” raved one reviewer. “Simply lovely, a treasure, a shining star,” wrote another.

So is Carey, himself, lovely, a treasure, a shining star. He has found his own purpose in much more than the lilting prose and poetry he has written over the years. Carey is a Staff Development Specialist for [World Education](#), which provides training and technical assistance in literacy education, among other subjects, around the world. His job is to train teachers of adult basic education. As such, he’s a passionate advocate for all the refugees around us who must face the most debilitating prejudice of all: language and reading handicaps in a land where these skills are absolutely critical for simple, everyday survival.

I am truly blessed to have two such Thoreau-ly inspiring friends as Diane and Carey. In my next section of *Back to Walden*, I’ll focus on yet another couple paddling around, both purposefully and quite illegally, in Walden Pond, much to the delight, I’m sure, of its most famous squatter.

Poor Everybody!

As I noted in my last post for [Back to Walden](#), I have several close friends who spend their lives metaphorically dog-paddling around [Walden Pond](#), while its iconic squatter, disguised as a breath of fog, spies on them from behind a bush and secretly beams his pleasure at the civil disobedience and Transcendentalism of all this illegal sport.

Two of these Transcendental swimmers are [Terry Allen](#) and her spouse, [Ernie Urvater](#), whom she routinely refers to as “My Spiritual Advisor.”

Terry has been my loyal, lovely, and loving friend for more than 30 years now, ever since she interviewed me for a job in 1978 as a staff writer on the University of Massachusetts Amherst magazine, for which she was the editor. On that day, after she’d studied my resume and we chatted for a little while, she peered across her desk at me.

“We can really use a poet around this dump,” she said. “You’re hired.”

Though she doesn’t know it, Terry is an Accidental Buddhist; someone with Buddhist sensibilities she isn’t even aware of possessing. The best example is her response, which I’ve heard her utter many times over the years, when she hears bad news about anyone we know. Her reaction is a perfect [act of compassion](#): “Poor everybody!”

Terry, in her wisdom, has also quipped many insightful things to me over the years, one of which cut to the heart of why I became such a rabid fan of the then New York Baseball Giants as a lonely, alienated 11-year-old, cut off from his family in Texas by a harsh stepfather and suddenly transported to a foreign world called New Jersey.

“Creekmore rooted for the Giants when he had nothing else to root for,” as Terry once voiced that mytho-poetic experience.

Never has anything else ever rung so true about me. My 53 some-odd-years of rootless rooting finally came to fruition in November of 2010, when the now [San Francisco Giants finally won their first World Series](#) during my tenure in the team's rabid rooting section of lonely, alienated desperadoes with nothing else to root for.

Terry has faced more than her fair share of life's trials and tribulations, including a life-threatening disease that she first defeated, then stomped to death, more than 15 years ago. She survived all that to become a bike-riding, tennis-playing whirlwind and serious student of [Emily Dickinson](#), the [patron saint of Transcendental poets](#).

A few years ago, Terry began volunteering as a docent at the [Emily Dickinson Museum](#) in Amherst, located in the Dickinson homestead, where the poet spent her life jotting down verses late into every night and earning her reputation as "the world's most famous shy person," in Garrison Keillor's words. Terry not only gives tours at the museum, but attends numerous workshops, lectures, and conventions devoted to the poet.

Beyond her dedicated service to Emily Dickinson, Terry found her true calling as the guiding light behind two luminous films about Dickinson, done in collaboration with her husband, Ernie, the noted director, editor, and producer. He's a wonderful "documentarian" with a long track record of thoughtful, evocative, beautifully elicited shows on diverse subjects ranging from a program on the French Impressionist painter [Berthe Morisot](#), to a study of [New England Paganism](#).

Ernie was a so-called "[red-diaper baby](#)." In the 1940s his family ended up in the Rockaways, on Long Island, as did Woody Allen, whose [Radio Days](#) is embedded in that time and locale. After working as a physics professor at Colorado State University, Ernie turned his Renaissance mind to making riveting documentaries about subjects that captured both his imagination and his ethical concerns.

Ernie has also come to my rescue as a knight in shining armor on more than one occasion, such as the time he lent me \$10,000 so I could pay off the debts that were sucking away my spirit. Then he

let me work off this loan doing writing and text editing for some of his exquisite documentaries, including a proposal for a show about [Brother Bob](#), which PBS almost accepted.

“We came within a whisker of actually doing it,” as Ernie recalls. “I applied for some grant money from PBS. We made the short list and were assured that we would get the money. At the last minute, their funding was cut in half, and we were in the half that was cut.” And so it goes, as Kurt Vonnegut would say.

Terry and Ernie did their two Dickinson films for nothing more than the love of their art and their devotion to the poet. [The Poet in Her Bedroom](#), completed in 2008, and [Seeing New Englandly](#), finished in 2010, are part of a series named *Angles on a Landscape*. Both are lyrical and lilting odes to Dickinson and her quiet genius. These works of art reveal the private and cultural influences that engrossed Dickinson’s life and shaped her imagination, her philosophy, her poetry. The films are simple masterworks about this complex poet, who telescoped her complicated life of the mind into brilliant poems.

The Poet in Her Bedroom, hauntingly scripted by Terry, is an inspired, 32-minute, impressionistic portrait of Dickinson (1830-1886), who was unknown and unpublished in her lifetime. Since her death well over a century ago, nearly 1,800 of her lyric poems have been discovered, published, and translated into dozens of languages. The poet never married and eventually confined herself to her father’s house and grounds. Nonetheless, Dickinson lived a rich and creative life. The elegant Dickinson family homestead on Main Street in Amherst, Massachusetts, has become a pilgrimage site for thousands of people from around the world trekking here to learn more about this extraordinary woman, who, as this film shows, created the great body of her work behind a closed door, at a small table, in the privacy of her upstairs bedroom.

“Lovely, lovely, lovely,” responded one viewer of the film from California. “Those were the best 32 minutes I’ve seen in a long time. I felt so peaceful sitting in my big seafoam green chair watching and listening to your creation. Now more than ever I must read some more of Emily’s poetry.”

Seeing New Englandly gets its title from the poet's own description of herself. "I see New Englandly," she wrote, thus summarizing her "think globally but act locally" worldview. Dickinson was "...alert to the drama of the weather, the spectacles of the northern sky, the lives and deaths of the people around her, the natural world she shared with plants and creatures, and also events far beyond the horizon of her native town," as the film's narration, written and spoken by poet Susan Snively, describes her.

Terry and Ernie received absolutely no financial reward for their labor of love. Instead, they found their purpose, powerfully and purposefully purposed. They have found the meaning of their lives in the life of their meaning. How fortunate they are!

Terry and Ernie also produced companion boxes of stunning Emily Dickinson greeting cards, lovingly painted, designed, and realized by local artist Elizabeth Pols, another virtuoso in my small circle of friends. In my next section, I'll tell you something about Lizzy, yet another brilliant, unrecognized talent, cast, both literally and figuratively, in the Emily Dickinson mold.

Heron Skulls, Paradise, and Other Perfections

Like many of my friends, [Elizabeth Pols](#), code-name Lizzy, has experienced little exposure beyond the hills of “Wistful Vista,” as I like to call our little Shangri-La of Amherst in western Massachusetts after the fictional hometown of *Fibber McGee and Molly*, the clever show from the Golden Age of Radio. But that hasn’t stopped her from exploring life’s ultimate meaning in the skillful brushstrokes of her dazzling paintings.

For those of us fortunate to view Lizzy’s exhibitions in person, the purpose and passion of her super-natural and super-realistic artwork is abundantly clear. Take her 2006 mixed-media exhibition with the Thoreau-esque title “That Which Is and Cannot-Not-Be.” These works feature breathless paintings of fauna skulls, made bone clean and surgically pristine by nature’s corps of corpse cleaners, the deathwatch beetles. Lizzy has posed these skulls, looking both spine-chilling and enchanting, on elegant table linens and framed them in antique wooden cases.

As Lizzy so eloquently described her exhibit, “The presence of the skulls, animal and bird, in *Great Blue Heron, Cove Box*, and *That Which Is and Cannot-Not-Be* may suggest a Memento Mori with its cautionary message: Remember that you must die. But rather than serving any claim about the impermanence of earthly things, these pieces speak instead to the realities of nature, its cycles, indeed to its essential permanence. The great blue heron eats the fish and crabs; when it dies, the crabs eat the flesh off its skeleton; the skeleton degrades and becomes part of the sand; sand becomes glass, is worn to smoothness, and again washed up on the beach as sea glass; to be scooped up as archaeological treasures. I have collected bits from the sea since childhood - bones and [shells](#), sticks, stones, and sea glass - my windowsills, studio shelves, and dashboard are littered with the souvenirs of wandering in nature. In these boxed works - which incorporate realist panel paintings with found and altered objects - I am making a souvenir in the literal sense of the word: making an act of remembering. By presenting the viewer with both that which is in my mind’s eye and that which is in my pocket I hope to enhance the reality of each.”

Lizzy, as one might expect after reading these words, has been a keen devotee of Thoreau since she was a teenager.

She wrote to me that “I actually fell in love with Thoreau much before Smith College (though I probably told you that my college freshman year Mountain Day excursion was to Walden Pond). I still have the battered little copy of *Walden* my dad gave me - I was maybe 15, I think? It traveled with me to college, to Italy, and on the tons of moves I’ve made since - it’s one of the few books that I can always put my hands on. I do think that HDT calls very strongly to the young and romantic soul - even younger than 18!”

Shortly after Lizzy fell in love with Thoreau, she fell in love with Sean Tarpey, a dashing art history major with an old Land Rover, a yaw sailboat, and a magical twinkle in his eye. She and Sean would soon be married, and for years he would ply his trade in the museums at Amherst and Mt. Holyoke colleges. Sean currently produces beautiful, custom-made vessels, trademarked with his special brand of workmanship, integrity, and “simplicity itself,” at [Rumery’s Boat Yard](#) in Biddeford, Maine. They are the kind of boats that the landlocked HDT might sail around Walden Pond if given the chance.

As for Lizzy, Thoreau has inspired many of her transcendent re-workings of the natural world, which have, in turn, inspired me.

Indeed, Lizzy’s lovely limited-edition print of a hawk perched stylistically on the framework of a Roman ruins is, in turn, perched stylistically over the little altar where I meditate each day. It serves as an inspiration for my inner life, as well as my natural-born intuition.

Thus, just as the great blue heron eats crabs, which subsequently eat the flesh off its skeleton after it dies, the inspiration from purposeful works of genius, such as Lizzy’s, is recycled again and again. The inspiration ripples outward like the original ax blows from the tool borrowed by Thoreau to build his [cabin beside Walden Pond](#). Where it stops, nobody knows.

Lizzy, in her charming creations, has captured and recaptured all this interconnectivity. Indeed, she has made it Transcendental in her paintings.

Those same razor-thin slices of infinity that Lizzy has isolated and immortalized in her realistic paintings, my dear old friend Tom Fix isolates and immortalizes in his artful photography. Each photo, I must say, seems electrified with flickering electrons in-formed from the [Akashic Field](#). Each is a slice of life lifted free-form from the continuum of time immemorial. As with Thoreau, time is but a stream that Tom goes a-fishing in with his timeless camera.

For those of us who have known Tom and his lovable personality for the last 40 years, as I have, we realize that with each photo he snaps, something of his soul travels along his neural paths, through his fingertips, into his camera, and from there saturates the image itself. That which he photographs is also that which photographs him.

When I first met Tom in 1969, he was a loose-limbed and footloose American expatriate, living in a wilderness cabin high on a rocky Gibraltar called “The Malahat,” which separates Victoria, British Columbia, from the rest of Vancouver Island. A keen devotee of independent thinking, Ernest Hemingway, pacifism, cross-country skiing, horse racing, fly-fishing, loyalty to his friends, hard drinking, and nude swimming parties, Tom was a walking-talking enigma. Still is.

He was also a spiritual seeker in his own right. He still refers to himself as one of those “bewildered spiritual stragglers” who, along with Joan Didion and other seekers, went [slouching towards Bethlehem](#) in the 1960s. As such, he recognized me almost instantly as a kindred spirit.

After quitting his graduate teaching fellowship position in the history department of a major Canadian university, Tom spent the next few years as a sort of professional Huckleberry Finn, working as a dishwasher at an exclusive boy’s school, in a lumber yard, in a facility for emotionally disturbed teens, finally as a groom at an Arizona racetrack.

All the while, he developed hundreds of atmospheric photos that pulled the essence from wherever he went and

whomever he met, and portrayed reality surrealistically in lovely pixilated brushstrokes, dabbled with sunlight, ecstasy, and Transcendentalism.

Tom's lens was a two-way aperture, in which each arresting image on the way in passed his spirit on its way out, just as it was being released once more to roam the world at large as a wandering life force.

Much like me, Tom drifted into his own purposefulness. After years of following the wayward wind, he decided that his noble calling was to settle down as a devoted husband and father, no easy task for a free spirit like Tom. Shortly thereafter, Tom got a good job as the water quality expert for a city in western Washington and eventually bought a small farm that he calls "Fungus Corners."

After his first child was born, he sent me a postcard with a snapshot of his lovely newborn, Cora, on one side. On the other was this existential query from the bewildered spiritual straggler in Tom: "Okay, what do I do now?"

Since then, Tom and his wife Carol have raised two extraordinary children and a barnyard full of dogs, horses, and other critters.

Even from afar, Tom continues to encourage me with his support and wit. After learning about my [failing kidneys](#) and symptoms of anemia, he wrote, "First I thought 'God, how horrific,' then I realized you were living one of my better hangovers."

When Tom found out I might try to embarrass him by publishing the tribute you are now reading in [Back to Walden](#), he replied in typical fashion: "Anyway, I'm honored to be in your book, but maybe instead of the romantic rebel I should be portrayed as the guy who abetted your crazy wanderlust. Still a victim of my passions with great weakness for those base desires, I haven't found your tranquility, but I may be closing in."

My response: “Sorry, Tom, but there’s no getting around the truth about your romantic rebellion. Except that, over the course of your life, you’ve evolved quite spiritually from a rebel *without*, into a rebel *with*, a cause.”

These past 20 years, Tom has also continued to train his internal lens to detect the secret life of every instant, of every landscape, of every facial expression. That’s what he does, framing life, second by second, like a latter-day Leonardo, in the fish-eye lens of his mind’s eye. And what emerges from the acid bath in his dark room (which is only virtual in the digital reality of today) are dripping portraits of his most memorable encounters, most memorable moments, time after time, from here to eternity.

That’s how Tom Fix became the chronicler of his own destiny as it was revealing itself, at first bit by bit, and now (digitally) bite by bite, in photos.

The common denominator for all these golden friends of mine - Diane Wald, Carey Reid, Terry Allen, Ernie Urvater, Elizabeth Pols, Tom Fix - is that they produce their purposeful art “For Free.” Joni Mitchell would be proud. So would Henry David Thoreau. My friends are tantamount to early Olympians, before the Olympics became a commercial and professional monstrosity, chasing their dreams for ideals, for spiritual integrity, for community, for friends, for nothing more.

For, in truth, purpose has no profession. No payoff. Purpose is a way of life, a way of seeing, a way of contributing, a way of serving, a way of giving to loved ones, both known and unknown, both near and far. Purpose is [the life we live after the life we’ve learned with](#).

As [Viktor Frankl](#) wrote about personal purpose in his landmark book, [Man’s Search for Meaning](#), “Again and again I therefore admonish my students in Europe and America: Don’t aim at success - the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one’s personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself.”

That said, there was one larger-than-life character who served as a role model for purposefulness in my formative years, precisely because he lost himself in a cause greater than himself and surrendered his ego to the love of his family. Read the last climactic section of *Back to Walden* to see how this Teddy-Roosevelt-like figure can also inspire you to find your own purpose and complete your own noble quest in your own purposeful way.

Back to Little Sandy

In the previous sections I describe several purposeful soul mates of mine. These are the friends, loved ones, and role models with whom I've taken my longest journey; the one toward understanding. They've taught me that anything is possible if it is also noble.

But they weren't the first to teach me this vital lesson. The place where I first intuited that anything noble is possible, many decades ago, was called Little Sandy. This wildlife refuge in the Pineywoods of East Texas was where my grandfather went *Back to Walden* and took me with him when he did. My grandfather was the man who saved my life after my father died, and Little Sandy is where he did it.

My grandfather had both a formative and in-formative impact on my life. This big, gruff, loving man played a key role in my upbringing and, by extension, my journey *Back to Walden*. He had a lasting effect on me as my first and last great influence, the bookend role model of my life and hard times.

My grandfather was one of those early-20th-century, Teddy-Roosevelt-type, conservationist/fishermen; someone who practiced Gaia some 40 years before the term was ever invented by independent research scientist James Lovelock.

In 1898, the [Little Sandy Hunting and Fishing Club](#) was founded near Hawkins, Texas, on a 3,802-acre preserve that was eventually included in the National Wildlife Refuge system in 1986.

My grandfather was one of its early members and part of the group that planned the creation of two adjoining lakes by damming the Sabine River in the early 1920s. The management of this magical kingdom became the focus of my grandfather's life, preserving a nature preserve that was a throwback to Eden and all its inhabitants. This swampy refuge was a place of primeval innocence for me and everything that lived there. Pogo would have been happy to share this land of trembling earth.

Before I was 11 and moved away to the alien planet of New Jersey, my grandfather took me to [Little Sandy](#) many times. Each trip filled me with nature's infinite promise, infinite spiritual energy. All these visits now fuse into one in the overgrown refuge of my memory. Every moment there lasts forever, just as the sad dirges of Little Sandy's resident mourning doves still echo down through the years.

Below, as I shift from past tense to present, is a verbal collage of those mystical times:

Home again, home again, jiggedy jog. Little Sandy is signaled by the tires of my grandfather's big old 1952 Buick thundering across a grated steel cattle guard. Rumble, rumble, rumble! Inside this protective grating, life turns simple once again. Thoreau would be beaming.

In the club's dusty courtyard, three rustic buildings - the Men's Clubhouse, the Women's Clubhouse, the Dining Room - wait sluggishly in the dappled Texas shade. Desire paths form a ragged triangle in the crabgrass connecting this trio of rambling buildings.

Out on Little Sandy Lake, a fishing boat parts the water with a wake of pure white fire. Saw-grass islands flinch under the stroking of an unseen hand.

The lingering sound of Little Sandy is still a distant outboard dredging up the murmur of eternity. Someone is scaling fish on a metal drain board. Cicadas shake their tambourines in the trees.

Cattails nodding in noonday sunshine. Gators snoozing in tall lakeside grasses. Gasoline fumes rising through heat waves. The slick from our outboard rainbows the water.

Our little boat rolls under my grandfather's heavy buttocks as he shifts his weight. "That's the stuff, Gus," he says after I flick a Chugger into the still lake near a waterlogged stump. He always calls me Gus, I never knew why. "You'll find you a big ol' sleeping bass over yonder."

Never matters if I do. At Little Sandy, maybe is all that counts. A high-pitched trumpet call winnows through the marshes beyond the spillway.

“Know what that is, Gus?” says my grandfather. His reel purrs as he casts his fly, drip-dropping a watery bulls-eye that ripples toward evermore. “That there’s a [whooping crane](#). Not more than 50 left in this whole world. Y’all remember this day, hear? That whooper makes you a special sorta guy.”

And I know for sure he’s right, just because he says so.

In the sultry afternoon, while my grandfather naps, old Horace hitches up a wagon to a headstrong mule named Truman and lets me drive this rig by myself around the levy. All I have to do is sit there on the buckboard as that mule hauls ass along the two-rutted path running halfway round Little Sandy Lake.

Whipping the reigns, I try to flick big horseflies off Truman’s flanks before they draw blood, but a red rivulet runs down his twitching muscles.

Truman gets pokier and pokier the farther from his stable we get. But, when I finally let him turn around, I have to tug the reigns with all my might to hold him back.

Later, at dinner, I tell this story in my high-pitched Texas drawl. “Goll-lee!”

My grandfather chuckles gruffly and growls, “That sorry ol’ mule sure knows the way home, by God.”

Mrs. Greason serves up dinner on big steaming platters. Her Southern fried chicken crisps up golden brown and fragrant. My grandfather teaches me the most important lesson in Texas high cuisine: how to poke a hole with one finger in a steaming biscuit and fill it up with melting butter and clover honey.

I drink my milk in a stemmed goblet, round as a coconut shell and beaded up with dew. The long table, gabby with fishermen telling tales, smells of sweat, bug juice, iced tea, lemon, mashed potatoes, pipe smoke, turnip greens, hot apple pie.

After dark, bullfrogs burp their tubas on the banks of the brood ponds. The porch swing mews slowly, asking its existential question. Eh? Lightning bugs sprinkle stardust on the night. Time to scratch my chigger bites.

In my Grandfather's room, his radio picks up [Harry Caray](#) from far-away St. Louis. "Holy Cow!"

*The overhead fan shushes. I lie next to my grandfather in bed, his slow breath lulling me to sleep as he reads the *National Geographic* by lamplight.*

Life would never again be so simple as Little Sandy. Never so good. But my grandfather's lasting gift was showing me that living is all possibility. Little Sandy meant I could do whatever I dreamt. But only if I dreamt big enough and noble enough.

His only rule was much the same as the only rule in [James Hilton's Sangri-La](#): "Be Kind."

Life, though, is a long day's journey into night, breeding forgetfulness. Burying promise. After those Little Sandy days, my mother married a deeply troubled Marine, whose vision of child-rearing would break all the Geneva Conventions. My grandfather was crushed to death in a head-on collision on his way home from Little Sandy. I was sidetracked by an Asian war that atomized America's integrity. I failed at marriage. Wrote seven or eight unpublishable novels. Left anyone who ever meant anything to me.

My purpose got lost while I was busy filling out change-of-address forms. Nothing rang true, and I was true to nothing. Life gobbled me down and spit me out.

But the beauty of mistakes, even after we make them over and over, is that we always seem to get another chance.

And thus have I arrived at this redemptive point in my life, when many years of searching have finally come home to roost. The events described in this book have finally brought me full circle, back to my grandfather, back to Little Sandy. For me, going back to

Little Sandy is my own “analogy-perceiving, metaphor-making, mytho-poetic” image for going *Back to Walden*.

I’m quite sure my Grandfather never had the slightest suspicion either Henry David Thoreau or Walt Whitman ever existed. Yet he instinctively followed Thoreau’s philosophy at Little Sandy in his own Transcendental way. He instinctively followed Whitman’s advice by loving the earth and sun and the animals, giving alms to everyone that asked, standing up for the stupid and crazy, devoting his income and labor to others, having patience and indulgence toward the people, re-examining all he’d ever been told at school or church or in any book, dismissing what insulted his very soul.

We should each have such a role model. My grandfather was a force of nature, his very flesh a poem.

So, in fact, are we all. We’re each a force of nature waiting to be re-enforced. Each a poem waiting to be fleshed out. By using the three tools described in *Back to Walden*, we can marshal the force of our own nature, follow in Thoreau’s footsteps, and “advance confidently in the direction of our dreams.” We can each build his or her own mythic cabin beside Walden Pond. This, I am convinced, is the meaning of our lives. All that remains is to make it happen.

Perhaps the most beloved character in American literature is Atticus Finch, [Harper Lee’s](#) Zen lawyer in her Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel, [To Kill a Mockingbird](#). He became the father of my Boomer generation. After devouring this book in high school, we all wished we’d had this gentle man, with his natural-born integrity and quiet courage, reading us to sleep each night.

In one of the many noble lessons Atticus taught his two children, Scout and Jem, he eulogized a cantankerous old woman named Mrs. Dubose, who found her simple but profound purpose in life by kicking a morphine habit, a drug prescribed to ease her pain during her final months on earth. She thereby died the right way: clear-headed, pissy, independent, mindful.

“I wanted you to see something about her,” Atticus told Scout and Jem. “I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you

know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all 98 pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew."

You and I can be Mrs. Dubose. All of us, in the grand scheme of mortality, are licked before we begin, but we can find our purpose "and see it through no matter what." That, in fact, is the definition of purpose. Purpose is as purpose proposes. We can each kick our addictions, our attachments, and become "the bravest person I ever knew."

We're all Mrs. Dubose. All Atticus Finch. We're all [Don Quixote](#) on a noble quest, no matter how loony it seems to everybody else. To dream the impossible dream is in itself an impossible dream come true.

Waldenism, as I hope I've shown herein, is one way to chase that dream and find simple well-being. *Back to Walden* lends you Thoreau's own toolbox to do it.

I was somehow moved to tears by the last line of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, after Jem had his elbow socket unhinged by the racist Bob Ewell and was saved by the mysterious and reclusive neighbor, Boo Radley. When Jem's arm had been set in a cast and he was sedated, Atticus, ever-devoted as always, sat patiently by his bedside to guard against any danger or answer any need.

As Harper Lee described this watch so eloquently and so simply: "[Atticus] would be there all night, and he would be there when Jem waked up in the morning."

Maybe I was moved to tears by this passage because it reminded me of my big, gentle grandfather, who smelled of talcum powder and read the *National Geographic* in bed. Like Atticus Finch, he still stays with me through each night and is always there when I wake. It is my fondest hope that *Back to Walden* can offer that same service to you, being there whenever you need it. Being there each time you wake.

I recently had a very revealing exchange with a friend while we were talking about the three simple awareness tools I'm advocating in *Back to Walden*.

“At this point in my life,” my friend said, “I just don't have time.”

“At this point in my life,” I responded, “I just don't have time not to.”

How many of us have time not to? If nothing else, please take away one great truth from this book. See your dream through, no matter what. Remember: You rarely win, but sometimes you do.

Nobody can change the past. But the future is a story yet to be written, one which must begin sometime. Why not now?

- End -