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Events Calendar

Good Company

Audio

Contact

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Back to Walden

By Charles Creekmore

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.

Thoreau gave us history's best description of depression, unhappiness, and anxiety more than 150 years ago when he wrote in Walden that "The mass of [people] lead lives of quiet desperation."

Thoreau's method for treating 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. Lead a mindful life. Regenerate your soul with spiritual energy. Challenge the status quo. Shun materialism and luxury. Meditate. And, faced with any problem, gauge fact or fiction with your own inner "realometer," as he described intuition.

Thoreau's method was embodied by his cabin. In March of 1845, Thoreau borrowed an axe from Ralph Waldo Emerson and sauntered down to the woods by Walden Pond, near where he intended to build his 10-foot-by-15-foot cabin. There, as he described in Walden, 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.

"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."

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, 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?"

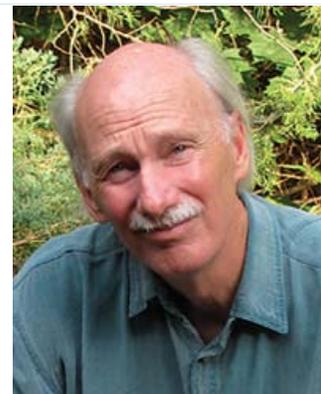
To build that mental structure, I recycled some of the symbolic lumber, bricks, and mortar from Thoreau's own cabin. That is, his transcendentalism. The spiritual energy that was its basic tenet. His wonder of nature. The Buddhism he studied. Some meditation techniques he knew. Self-awareness. And his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

What I have fabricated with these un-materialistic materials is the stuff of Walden, Thoreau's dream of simple well-being for us all. Just as Thoreau used the natural resources around Walden Pond to raise his own house, I used Thoreau's natural resources to raise my own consciousness, which was what his house signified anyway.

My new cabin was built upon a foundation of Thoreau's transcendentalism, which 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."





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My little cabin 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 I enclose this framework in the simple way of life practiced by Thoreau at Walden Pond, which serves as the rustic finishing carpentry.

My inner cabin is wired with a constant flow of spiritual energy, most evident in natural wonders such as the Grand Canyon, but crackling through the circuitry of everywhere. We can open this flow of sacred current through simple mindfulness of nature and, second by second, transcend the apparent confusion and chaos of the world.

Such is my blueprint, the mental structure, of my new home. It's a method for the madness of the world.

By living in my new inner cabin, I feel as though I'm seeing the world through Thoreau's own eyes in 1845. Thoreau approached Walden Pond with lightning-rod intensity. He yearned to hover above life, elevated by his own powerful intuition. He longed to find a more authentic meaning than the shallow ambitions hawked by what he called our "unwieldy and overgrown establishment." He ached to cleave actuality from illusion. To ferret out substance in "a life frittered away by detail."

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 recent years 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.

"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."

With this article, I invite you to build Thoreau's metaphysical cabin in your own head by going back to Walden. Like the axe borrowed by Thoreau to build his house, Walden lends you the tools to do it yourself in your own unique way. In his book, Thoreau imagines what we can each do to turn a humdrum life into his or her own personal Walden. And, in that noble endeavor, as transcendentalist poet Walt Whitman characterized living a truly authentic life, "Your very flesh will become a great poem."

*This article is adapted from Charles Creekmore's electronic book, Back to Walden, which is posted complete and free of charge on www.backtowalden.com/2010/6/the-practice-of-waldenism/ backtowalden.com. He is a widely published freelance writer and the author of a 2003 spiritual book, *Zen and the Art of Diabetes Maintenance*.*

