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## Back to Walden

By Charles Creekmore  
February 23, 2012

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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 existential question more than 165 years ago.



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Thoreau's method for treating what he called 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. Lead a mindful life. Regenerate your soul with spiritual energy. Reduce existence to its basics. 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 characterized intuition.

Faced with a dead end on the street where the American Dream lives, many citizens spend their days, instead, chasing after distraction. Americans try to download happiness on ThinkPads, cell phones, iPods, BlackBerries, Kindles. You can see them driving past in their Hummers as they text-message, tune their radios, and check their

#### DAILY QUOTATION

“It is possible to give without loving, but it is impossible to love without giving.”

*Richard Braunstein*

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OnStar directions. You notice them everywhere, bowed like "The Thinker" over the little idol of an iPhone. 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 in *Walden*, people "have become the tools of their tools."

## Biggest Bargain in Real Estate History

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, as he wrote 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.

On July Fourth of that year, 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 twenty-eight dollars, twelve-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.

"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 was 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. 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 movement of rugged individualists, united by their idiosyncrasy, each marching to a different drummer.

## Seasons at *Walden* Pond

Thoreau was ruggedly individualistic even in the face of persistent disease. 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

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same devotion as the meditations he studied in his beloved Buddhism.

Ground zero for all these activities, beliefs, and practices was *Walden Pond*, where he constructed his 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.

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 reverie, 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*. Thoreau rose above America's quiet desperation by making his philosophy his life and his life his philosophy. The two were made one.

"Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable," as Thoreau declared in *Walden*, "but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind."

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

## Desperation, Quiet or Otherwise

I was born exactly a century after Thoreau built his cabin, and for much of my life I didn't realize how desperately I needed his method of coping with desperation, quiet or otherwise. In fact, I spent my first few decades leading a life of unquiet desperation. By the time I reached midlife, after many 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 a disease as deadly as Thoreau's own TB and by the dog-eared edition of *Walden* I kept beside my bed, I started building my own *Walden*-like structure in my mind. Just as Thoreau used the natural resources around *Walden Pond* to raise his own house, I used Thoreau's un-materialistic natural resources to raise my own consciousness; that is, his Transcendentalism, his wonder of nature, the Buddhism he studied, meditation, self-awareness and his hankering for life's essential truths.

Such is my blueprint for my new home. 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."

By practicing Thoreau's method, 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. 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.

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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, *Walden* 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.

While practicing the ways of *Walden*, 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."

## Thanks to Walden

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 *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."

With this essay I invite you to empy Thoreau's way of life 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 trail by taking the Henry David Thoroughfare. Then turn left at The Road Not Taken. From there, all roads lead to *Walden*.

*This essay is adapted from Charles Creekmore's e-book, Back to Walden, posted free of charge on [www.backtowalden.com](http://www.backtowalden.com). Creekmore is a widely published poet and author of Zen and the Art of Diabetes (2003, Amercian Diabetes Association). He has written for the New York Times Syndicate, Psychology Today, AARP and many other periodicals.*

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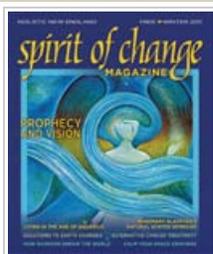
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