

Thoreau's Experiment With The Simple Life

✖ Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862) was born in Concord, Massachusetts, where he lived most of his life. He attended Harvard University and soon after completing his studies, joined his father's pencil manufacturing business. During this period Thoreau had taken to endless walking in the woods surrounding Concord; observing the minute details of nature and recording them in a copious fashion in numerous notebooks. Emerson stated in a essay about Thoreau that he could..." draw out of his breast pocket his diary, and read the names of all the plants that should bloom on that day....He could tell by the plants what time of year it was within 2 days."

In 1845 Thoreau built a small hut on the shore of Walden Pond, near Concord, where he lived in solitude for 2 yrs. It was his experiment in simple, grounded living which, he hoped, would enable him to gain some insight into the primary realities of life. His writing during this time was later published as a book entitled: ' Walden ', which encapsulated his feelings on nature, simple right living and the need for solitude. The work offered up profound spiritual insights and wisdom – later becoming recognized as a ' high water mark ' in American literature.

" I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach me, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Thoreau. Walden

The experience of Walden never left Thoreau; it continued to pour through his writings and through his life. Whether on

environmental issues, life philosophy, or social justice, Thoreau's drew on his contemplative nature – which had blossomed during this period – to shine a light on these important subjects. In later years, through his writings on civil disobedience, he came to influence the work of many, including Tolstoy, Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King Jnr. Such was the depth and breath of his thoughts and deliberations.

“ I read Thoreau ... I read Walden first ... and his ideas influenced me greatly. I adopted some of them and recommended the study of Thoreau to all my friends who were helping me in the cause of Indian Independence ... There is no doubt that Thoreau's ideas greatly influenced my movement in India. ”

Gandhi

SIMPLICITY

Although Thoreau's fine mind was employed in many different arenas, at the heart of his thoughts and writing was the repeated, single theme of simplicity in all its richness and profound presence. He had come to slowly and appreciatively recognize the importance of leading a simple life in order to bring clarity and understanding to the experience of existence. Unfortunately, in our modern world our lives have increasingly become complex – very complex – indeed to a point which Thoreau wouldn't recognize. We regularly run around in frantic activity – busy, busy, busy – without a thought for mindfulness or appropriate pacing and then we wonder why we get so tired and need to seek rest. We over burden ourselves with stressful states of work, reaching out to accomplish so much, and then wonder why our bodies collapse under the strain. Life has become so frenetic for many of us, that it has now assumed the status of normality, the routine, the everyday way we conduct ourselves – but at what costs? Levels of stress related illnesses have now peaked at an all time

high with no sign of them abating and yet we still continue to engage with the very thing that causes the problem – overburdened busyness. We are not here to preoccupy ourselves with constant activity that can easily overshadow and destroy the life of contemplation and reflection. This is the core message of the biblical story of Martha and Mary. Whilst Jesus was visiting their home Martha was concentrating on preparing a meal and undertaking other household duties but she was unhappy with her sister Mary who was apparently doing ‘nothing’ but listening to their invited visitor. Increasingly she grew agitated with the situation until she could not hold back any further. She approached Jesus to express her concerns over Mary’s lack of work effort, but to her surprise, Jesus was not at all sympathetic to her argument. *“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her”* (Luke 10:38-42). Traditionally Christians see Martha as representing action whilst Mary represents contemplation – “the better part”. Thoreau would not have disagreed with this. He knew, that in order to penetrate the depths of our intellectual and spiritual powers, we need to generate a spacious margin in our lives for creative reflection and meditation.

“ The millions are awake enough for effective physical labour; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, and only one in a hundred million to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face.”

Op cit

NATURE AS DIVINE REVELATION

From this same realm of spaciousness and mindfulness, Thoreau argued, came a deep appreciation for nature and all she had to

offer, including spiritual insights and revelations. The latter have always been present in the Pantheism of such poets as Wordsworth and Shelley, so Thoreau never appeared 'embarrassed' about his feelings here. His journals are rich in observations of nature, but they never take on a purely scientific perspective (analysis and cataloging). They go much deeper than that, and they enter into a very personal and subjective awareness that speak with the intensity and spirituality of a religion.

"I would [like to] improve every opportunity to wonder and worship as a sunflower welcomes the light. The more thrilling, wonderful, divine objects I behold in a day, the more expanded and immortal I become."

"A farmer once asked me what shrub oaks were made for, not knowing any use they served. But I can tell him that they do me good. They are my parish ministers, regularly settled."

Op cit

During his two years sojourn at Walden Pond, Thoreau became a silent witness to nature, which allowed him to understand and celebrate the richness and diversity of its full manifestation. It was undoubtedly a unique experiment that induced a purity of vision that still remains remarkable today. However, Thoreau is not without his critics. Many consider him just a nineteenth century, New England 'backwoodsman' whose pantheism is stretched too far into overly sentimental prose that has no real relevance to our world today. But whatever our views on him, whether we see him as a gifted writer whose poetic song sings to us of spiritual revelations or as an 'idle, ' 'primitive, ' "skulker"

(Robert Louis Stevenson's comment), one thing is for sure – he will be remembered.

THE WORLD TODAY

We live in a culture of activity today, of such crazy proportions, that we run the risk of harming ourselves as well as the planet. We simply cannot go on reaching out for unsustainable, economic development and growth – fueled by scientific endeavour and ensuing technologies – as if it was a religious duty that we were committed to following at all costs. We must now, as never before, take a deep look at our lives and simplify all that we do. Obviously we can't all run away to the woods like Thoreau and live the life of a hermit but we can try to find our own special Walden, wherever that may be, and commit to doing our very best. We must never forget that Walden is not just a geographical point somewhere in the New England landscape but a state of mind, an attitude of simple living that can be transported anywhere, anytime, if we so decide. After his two years experiment in simple living Thoreau left Walden Pond to pursue life elsewhere, but he recognized that he had touched something quite special and precious during this time, and he never forgot this.....

“ I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.”

Op cit

May we all engage ever deeper with the joys of simplicity.

Michael Lewin

“Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!”

Henry David Thoreau

“Nothing is more simple than greatness; indeed, to be simple is to be great.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Simplicity is the glory of expression. "

Walt Whitman

*"Many of us have not been informed of the simple fact that as
we go deeper into the rat race, we ultimately become the
things that are acquired, owned, and consumed." Chris
LaPlante*