

## 186 QUOTATIONS



Henry David Thoreau

(1817-1862)

Henry David Thoreau is one of the most quoted people in the world. He expresses attitudes and ideals common to many people in pronouncements that are profound because his figurative language is archetypal and often entertaining because so rebellious and blunt. His manifesto “Civil Disobedience” (1849) influenced Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and later protest leaders. His retreat to Walden Pond is the prototype of the traditional American vacation retreat to the countryside or wilderness. And his famous *Walden* (1854) is a masterpiece of transcendental literature that became one of the most popular American books worldwide, established the tradition of nature writing, influenced the 1960s countercultural revolution, and inspired the Environmentalist movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not bad for a homeless man.

*Walden* is most unique in its (1) organic form, (2) abundant metaphorical epigrams, (3) rendering of individuation, (4) vivid evocations of transcendent consciousness, and (5) philosophical fertility, surpassed in America only by *Moby-Dick* (1851). The weakness of *Walden*, like the Environmentalist movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, is its sentimental idealization of Nature. His pond is much smaller than the world, it reflects his peaceful soul and it conceals no monsters. Yet he was not the hippie or the liberal it became popular to assume he was. Many of Thoreau’s followers must overlook contradictions of their beliefs: his opposition to drugs, alcohol, tea, coffee, butter, meat, sex, atheism, welfare, supporting public schools, raising the standard of living, protecting species by attempting to stop evolution, government interference in free enterprise, and any degree of Socialism.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, reading, intellect, inductive objectivity, archetypal intuition, truth, philosophy, the past, independence, solitude, westward movement, Nature, Victorianism, wilderness, fear, pastoralism, agrarian pastoralism, machine in the Garden, man in society, scorn for Socialism, money, government, anarchism, Democracy, America, culture, progress, reform, minority power, conscience, moral action, civil disobedience, jail, violent rebellion, wisdom, simplicity, motive for retreat to Walden Pond, pond reflects his soul, individuation, Puritanism and redemption, drugs, transcendence, idealism, religion, God, optimism, death, immortality:

## YOUTH

I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.

The symbol of perpetual youth—the grass blade. [*Walden*, before Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*]

The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends.

The youth gets together his materials to build a bridge to the moon, or, perchance, a palace or temple on the earth, and, at length, the middle-aged man concludes to build a woodshed with them.

Dreams are the touchstones of our characters.

## EDUCATION

It is not all books that are as dull as their readers.

The adventurous student will always study classics.

We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old.

The writer speaks to the intellect and heart of mankind, to all in any age who can understand him.

Books must be read as deliberately as they were written.

How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book.

As for supporting the schools, I am doing my part to educate my fellow-countrymen now.

They should not *play* life, or *study* it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly *live* it from beginning to end.

Why level perception downward to our dullest perceptions always, and praise that as common sense? The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring.

## READING

This only is reading, in a high sense, not that which lulls us as a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the while, but what we have to stand on tiptoe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to.

The works of the great poets have never yet been read by mankind, for only great poets can read them.

## INTELLECT

The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things.

## INDUCTIVE OBJECTIVITY

O the evening robin, at the end of a New England summer day! If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean *he*; I mean the *twig*.

## ARCHETYPAL INTUITION

Shall I not have intelligence with the earth?

My instinct tells me my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws.

Is not the hand a spreading palm leaf with its lobes and veins?

No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly.

Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf.

I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body. You find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf.

The earth is not a fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree... You may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows out into.

I am particularly attracted by the arching and sheaf-like top of the wool-grass; it brings back the summer to our winter memories, and is among the forms which art loves to copy, and which, in the vegetable kingdom, have the same relation to types already in the mind of man that astronomy has. [compare Platonism and the psychology of Jung]

Even ice begins with delicate crystal leaves.

#### TRUTH

Rather than love, than money, give me truth.

It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak, and another to hear.

#### PHILOSOPHY

To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.

#### THE PAST

As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile. [This bombast in 1854 sounds very much like Mark Twain in *Innocents Abroad* in 1867.]

#### INDEPENDENCE

I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society.

I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually.

I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad.

As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or to the county jail.

Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined.

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

No man ever followed his genius til it misled him.

## SOLITUDE

A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will.

I had three chairs in my house: one for solitude; two for friendship; three for society.

There was one [Emerson] with whom I had "solid seasons," long to be remembered, at his home in the village, and who looked in upon me from time to time; but I had no more for society there.

I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers.

The man who goes alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready.

## WESTWARD MOVEMENT

I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe.

Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free.

I have traveled a good deal in Concord.

Thank Heaven, here is not all the world.

## NATURE

The life in us is like the water in the river.

If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.

I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another.

It was the only battle which I have ever witnessed, the only battle-field I ever trod while the battle was raging; internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other [ants]... I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors.

It was one of the most thrilling discords I ever heard. And yet, if you had a discriminating ear, there were in it the elements of a concord such as these plains never saw nor heard.

## VICTORIANISM

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled.

## WILDERNESS

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness.

The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage.

The savage in man is never quite eradicated.

I love the wild not less than the good.

We need the tonic of wildness.

Grow wild according to thy nature.

It is life near the bone where it is sweetest.

It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization.

Is it impossible to combine the hardiness of these savages with the intellectualness of the civilized man?

Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure—as if we live on the marrow of koodoos devoured raw.

We cannot but pity the boy who has never fired a gun; he is no more humane, while his education has been sadly neglected.

Contrast the physical condition of the Irish with that of the North American Indian, or the South Sea Islander, or any other savage race before it was degraded by contact with the civilized man.

In Wilderness is the preservation of the World.

#### FEAR

Nothing is so much to be feared as fear.

I believe that men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced.

#### PASTORALISM

He that does not eat need not work.

Farmers are respectable and interesting to me in proportion as they are poor.

It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.

I should be glad if all the meadows on the earth were left in a wild state, if that were the consequence of men's beginning to redeem themselves.

It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes.

Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.

#### AGRARIAN PASTORALISM

We have no festival, nor procession, nor ceremony, not excepting our Cattle-shows and so-called Thanksgiving, by which the farmer expresses a sense of the sacredness of his calling, or is reminded of its sacred origin.

I would that our farmers when they cut down a forest felt some of that awe which the old Romans did when they came to thin, or let in the light to a consecrated grove...that is, would believe that it is sacred to some god.

#### MACHINE IN THE GARDEN

We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.

That devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore; that Trojan horse....

When I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils...it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!  
I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me.

#### MAN IN SOCIETY

[He] lives too fast.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

I have never yet met a man who was quite awake.

There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man.

Men will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, and never make an effort to get up.

#### SCORN FOR SOCIALISM

The character of the American people has done all that has been accomplished, and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way.

The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow,—one who may be known by...a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance; whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the Almshouses are in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a fund for the support of the widows and orphans that may be; who, in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently.

#### MONEY

But the rich man...is always sold to the institution which makes him rich.

Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue.

That man is the richest whose pleasures are the cheapest.

#### GOVERNMENT

I should not like to think that I ever rely on the protection of the State.

I saw that the State was half-witted...and I lost all my remaining respect for it.

It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it.

In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases.

The freest of my neighbors...cannot spare the protection of the existing government, and they dread the consequences to their property and families of disobedience to it.

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies.

## ANARCHISM

I heartily accept the motto,—“That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe,—“That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.

I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government.

## DEMOCRACY

The fate of the country...does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning.

The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual.

I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject.

## AMERICA

The only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without [tea, coffee, and meat].

The Constitution, with all its faults, is very good; the law and the courts are very respectable; even this State and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable, and rare things, to be thankful for.

No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America.

## CULTURE

What is called eloquence in the forum is commonly found to be rhetoric in the study.

The audiences go to the Lyceum to suck a sugar-plum.

## PROGRESS

Men have become the tools of their tools.

The improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence; as our skeletons, probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors.

It is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man,—and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages.

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

## SOCIAL REFORM

As for doing good, that is one of the professions which are full.

There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.

I confess, that practically speaking, when I have learned a man's real disposition, I have no hopes of changing it for the better or worse in this state of existence.

Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man.

#### MINORITY POWER

A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight.

#### CONSCIENCE

Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?

I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.

Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared to our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that is what determines, or rather, indicates, his fate.

#### MORAL ACTION

Even voting *for the right* is *doing* nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail.

A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men.

I hear many condemn these men because they were so few. When were the good and the brave ever in a majority? ["A Plea for John Brown," 1859]

Any man more right than his neighbor constitutes a majority of one.

#### CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

I was not born to be forced.

I have paid no poll tax for six years.

Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison.

I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave's* government also.

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts.

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth,—certainly the machine will wear out....perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but *if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another*, then, I say, break the law. [emphasis added]

As for adopting the ways which the state has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone.



## JAIL

[Once after Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax to protest slavery and the Mexican War, Emerson noticed him through window bars of the Concord jail]:

“Henry, what are you doing *in there?*”

“Waldo, what are you doing *out there?*”

[In jail] I was shown quite a long list of verses which were composed by some young men who had been detected in an attempt to escape, who avenged themselves by singing them.

## VIOLENT REBELLION

I speak for the slave when I say that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain [John] Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me. [Affirms Brown’s anti-slavery violence against the government]

## WISDOM

It is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.

Goodness is the only investment that never fails.

## SIMPLICITY

Our life is frittered away by detail... Simplify, simplify.

A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts, of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind.

The only cure...is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose.

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself.

## MOTIVE FOR RETREAT TO WALDEN POND

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

I am convinced, that if all men were to live as simply as I then did, thieving and robbery would be unknown. These take place only in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough.

## POND REFLECTS HIS SOUL

Sky water.

Lakes of light.

White Pond and Walden are great crystals on the surface of the earth.

How much more beautiful than our lives, how much more transparent than our characters, are they!

A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature.

I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite, some ponds will be thought to be bottomless.

These are the lips of the lake on which no beard grows. It licks its chaps from time to time.

The fishes of thought were not scared.

#### INDIVIDUATION

It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time.... Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

Explore your own higher latitudes...be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, nor of trade, but of thought.

You may perhaps find some "Symmes' Hole" by which to get at the inside at last. [Poe based the ending of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) on the speculation by a science fiction writer named Symmes that there are "holes at the poles."]

The other side of the globe is but the home of our correspondent. Our voyaging is only great-circle sailing.

#### PURITANISM AND REDEMPTION

Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome.

Chastity is the flowering of man; and what is called Genius.

He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established.

All that he could think of was to practice some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it.

I had rarely for many years used animal food, or tea, or coffee.

I would fain keep sober always.

Even music may be intoxicating.

#### DRUGS

I prefer the natural sky to an opium-eater's heaven.

#### TRANSCENDENT CONSCIOUSNESS

Shall I go to heaven or a-fishing?

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in.

Fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.

The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.

It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook.

In such transparent and seemingly bottomless water, reflecting the clouds, I seemed to be floating through the air as in a balloon, and their swimming impressed me as a kind of flight or hovering, as if they were a compact flock of birds passing just beneath my level on the right or left, their fins, like sails, set all around them.

However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you... This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.

In warm evenings I frequently sat in the boat playing the flute, and saw the perch, which I seemed to have charmed, hovering around me, and the moon travelling over the ribbed bottom, which was strewn with the wrecks of the forest.

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself.

As I walked on the railroad causeway, I used to wonder at the halo of light around my shadow, and would fain fancy myself one of the elect.

Through our own recovered innocence we discern the innocence of our neighbors.

The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence.

Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.

#### IDEALISM

Thus we kept on like true idealists, rejecting the evidence of our senses.

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them. [This doctrine is popular with politicians voting on budget deficits.]

#### RELIGION

Ministers spoke of God as if they enjoyed a monopoly of the subject.

Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring him forever.

I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did.

#### GOD

God is alone,—but the devil, he is far from being alone; he sees a great deal of company; he is legion.

God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages.

I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me.

#### OPTIMISM

The poets of the world will be inspired by American mythology.

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.

Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

#### DEATH

When a man dies he kicks the dust.

[Asked if he had made his peace with God]: I have never quarreled with Him.

#### IMMORTALITY

There needs no stronger proof of immortality.

Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this?

