Walden,

By

Henry David Thoreau

Selected Readings from On Walden Pond with commentaries supplied by Ken Kifer PhD American Literature Arizona State University.

Thoreau's Text in This Column	My Comments in This Column
With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.	It's a puzzle that most do not set the pursuit of knowledge as a primary goal. It's human nature to excel, and knowledge provides tremendous advantages. The pursuit of wisdom should be even more basic, as wisdom allows us to profit from success. Finally, obtaining a carefully examined moral code provides a sense of integrity and self-worth. Yet our culture generally devalues these pursuits, and the eternal truths are seen as infinitely boring.
My residence was more favorable, not only to thought, but to serious reading, than a university; and though I was beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library, I had more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate round the world, whose sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from time to time on to linen paper. Says the poet Mir Camar Uddîn Mast, "Being seated, to run through the region of the spiritual world; I have had this advantage in books. To be intoxicated by a single glass of wine; I have experienced this pleasure when I have drunk the liquor of the esoteric doctrines." I kept Homer's Iliad on my table through the summer, though I looked at his page only now and then. Incessant labor with my hands, at first, for I had my house to finish and my beans to hoe at the same time, made more study impossible. Yet I sustained myself by the prospect of such reading in future. I read one or two shallow books of travel in the intervals of my work, till that employment made me ashamed of myself, and I asked where it was then that I lived.	To be able to read, think, and write well, it helps to get away from noise, confusion, distractions, and the demands of others. In addition, Thoreau was closer to Nature, the source of much poetry and art. Thoreau never read fiction and even felt embarrassed about reading travel stories.
The student may read Homer or Aeschylus in the Greek without danger of dissipation or luxuriousness, for it implies that he in some measure emulate their heroes, and consecrate morning hours to their pages. The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have. The modern cheap and fertile press, with all its translations, has done little to bring us nearer to the heroic writers of antiquity. They seem as solitary, and the letter in which they are printed as rare and curious, as ever. It is worth the expense of youthful days and costly hours, if you learn only some words of an ancient language, which are raised out of the trivialness of the street, to be perpetual suggestions and	The first sentence in this paragraph seems to have errors, but Thoreau is using the present subjunctive. We find in these lines Thoreau's very high regard (or perhaps "reverence" is the better term) for the ancient written word. Thoreau points out that the reading of ancient texts is difficult and requires much self-discipline. The reader, in reading these words, at least imagines himself in the place of the heroes, and he must give some of his time to their studies. Note the strong

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<td>provocations. It is not in vain that the farmer remembers and repeats the few Latin words which he has heard. Men sometimes speak as if the study of the classics would at length make way for more modern and practical studies; but the adventurous student will always study classics, in whatever language they may be written and however ancient they may be. For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man? They are the only oracles which are not decayed, and there are such answers to the most modern inquiry in them as Delphi and Dodona never gave. We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old. To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written. It is not enough even to be able to speak the language of that nation by which they are written, for there is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak. The crowds of men who merely spoke the Greek and Latin tongues in the Middle Ages were not entitled by the accident of birth to read the works of genius written in those languages; for these were not written in that Greek or Latin which they knew, but in the select language of literature. They had not learned the nobler dialects of Greece and Rome, but the very materials on which they were written were waste paper to them, and they prized instead a cheap contemporary literature. But when the several nations of Europe had acquired distinct though rude written languages of their own, sufficient for the purposes of their rising literatures, then first learning revived, and scholars were enabled to discern from that remoteness the treasures of antiquity. What the Roman and Grecian multitude could not hear, after the lapse of ages a few scholars read, and a few scholars only are still reading it.</td>
<td>words "emulate" and "consecrate" used here, making the reading a religious act. Note also that Thoreau admits to using his imagination to make the material better than it is. I find that movies based on books that I have read are much less colorful and imaginative than the pictures I made in my mind while reading the book. He considers the reading of a book to require a great deal of effort and concentration.

Thoreau considers the spoken language less important and essential than the written language, while linguists generally believe that the spoken language is more important. Certainly, it is easier to learn and remember a language by emphasizing speaking. Nonetheless, it has remained common for school classes which teach language to emphasize the written language or even literature over the spoken word.

Thoreau correctly points out that most of the literature of Greece and Rome was unavailable to the citizens because the spoken language had become too different from the classical language in which the literature was written, just as many people can't understand Shakespeare's language and very few can understand Chaucer's.</td>
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<td>However much we may admire the orator's occasional bursts of eloquence, the noblest written words are commonly as far behind or above the fleeting spoken language as the firmament with its stars is behind the clouds. There are the stars, and they who can may read them. The astronomers forever comment on and observe them. They are not exhalations like our daily colloquies and vaporous breath. What is called eloquence in the forum is commonly found to be rhetoric in the study. The orator yields to the inspiration of a</td>
<td>Thoreau is saying that even the very best speech is not as good as the best writing because the speaker is always trying to appeal to those around him while the writer, who doesn't have "the event and the crowd" to distract him, is appealing to readers of all ages and thus speaks immortal truths.</td>
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transient occasion, and speaks to the mob before him, to those who can *hear* him; but the writer, whose more equable life is his occasion, and who would be distracted by the event and the crowd which inspire the orator, speaks to the intellect and health of mankind, to all in any age who can *understand* him.

No wonder that Alexander carried the Iliad with him on his expeditions in a precious casket. A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips;- not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself. The symbol of an ancient man's thought becomes a modern man's speech. Two thousand summers have imparted to the monuments of Grecian literature, as to her marbles, only a maturer golden and autumnal tint, for they have carried their own serene and celestial atmosphere into all lands to protect them against the corrosion of time. Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations. Books, the oldest and the best, stand naturally and rightfully on the shelves of every cottage. They have no cause of their own to plead, but while they enlighten and sustain the reader his common sense will not refuse them. Their authors are a natural and irresistible aristocracy in every society, and, more than kings or emperors, exert an influence on mankind. When the illiterate and perhaps scornful trader has earned by enterprise and industry his coveted leisure and independence, and is admitted to the circles of wealth and fashion, he turns inevitably at last to those still higher but yet inaccessible circles of intellect and genius, and is sensible only of the imperfection of his culture and the vanity and insufficiency of all his riches, and further proves his good sense by the pains which be takes to secure for his children that intellectual culture whose want he so keenly feels; and thus it is that he becomes the founder of a family.

Because a book is written for all times, Thoreau finds it understandable that Alexander would treat the Iliad as a relic. He feels books are protected from harm because they contain the information within them to recreate their background. Because books educate, even uneducated people value them and work to ensure that their children will read them.

Those who have not learned to read the ancient classics in the language in which they were written must have a very imperfect knowledge of the history of the human race; for it is remarkable that no transcript of them has ever been made into any modern tongue, unless our civilization itself may be regarded as such a transcript. Homer has never yet been printed in English, nor Aeschylus, nor Virgil even -- works as refined, as solidly done, and as beautiful almost as the morning itself; for later writers, say what we will of their genius, have rarely, if ever, equalled the elaborate beauty and finish and the lifelong and heroic literary labors of the ancients. They only talk of forgetting them who never knew them. It will be soon enough to forget them when we have the learning and the genius which will enable us to attend to and appreciate them. That

Thoreau feels it is necessary to be able to read the classics in their original language in order to understand human history properly because no correct translation has ever been made. Only people who have never read them in the original language would consider them unimportant. He also feels that these ancient works are almost as beautiful as the morning itself, Thoreau's strongest praise. Finally, he suggests that books are so valuable that they can help us reach

age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations, shall have still further accumulated, when the Vaticans shall be filled with Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last.

heaven, an implied comparison to the Tower of Babel. By saying that the Vaticans will be filled with all of these books, he is suggesting that someday all religions will accept all these books (bibles from all religions, classical writings, and the greatest modern writings) as sources of wisdom.

The works of the great poets have never yet been read by mankind, for only great poets can read them. They have only been read as the multitude read the stars, at most astrologically, not astronomically. Most men have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience, as they have learned to cipher in order to keep accounts and not be cheated in trade; but of reading as a noble intellectual exercise they know little or nothing; yet 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 tip-toe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to.

Now, in addition to the ability to read a dead language, Thoreau wants the reader to be a poet as well. He feels the reader must read with insight and understanding and not as would be done for practical purposes. He goes on to explain the necessity of reading carefully and alertly.

I think that having learned our letters we should read the best that is in literature, and not be forever repeating our a b abs, and words of one syllable, in the fourth or fifth classes, sitting on the lowest and foremost form all our lives. Most men are satisfied if they read or hear read, and perchance have been convicted by the wisdom of one good book, the Bible, and for the rest of their lives vegetate and dissipate their faculties in what is called easy reading. There is a work in several volumes in our Circulating Library entitled "Little Reading," which I thought referred to a town of that name which I had not been to. There are those who, like cormorants and ostriches, can digest all sorts of this, even after the fullest dinner of meats and vegetables, for they suffer nothing to be wasted. If others are the machines to provide this provender, they are the machines to read it. They read the nine thousandth tale about Zebulon and Sophronia, and how they loved as none had ever loved before, and neither did the course of their true love run smooth, -- at any rate, how it did run and stumble, and get up again and go on! how some poor unfortunate got up on to a steeple, who had better never have gone up as far as the belfry; and then, having needlessly got him up there, the happy novelist rings the bell for all the world to come together and hear, O dear! how he did get down again! For my part, I think that they had better metamorphose all such aspiring heroes of universal noveldom into man weather-cocks, as they used to put heroes among the constellations, and let them swing round there till they are rusty, and not come down at all to bother honest men with their pranks. The next time the novelist rings the bell I will not stir though the meeting-house burn down. "The Skip of the Tip-Toe-

Thoreau suggests that people should learn to read better literature and should not stick to very basic reading. There is a great deal that is written in simple, easy, and uncomplicated language that does not require thought or reflection, and Thoreau sees little value in this kind of reading.

Thoreau spends the latter half of this paragraph making fun of some of the books that he has encountered.

He suggests that poor reading materials create dull people. I'm not sure this is true; however, I think the opposite can be true. Once when I became tired of my father's misinformation about astronomy, I gave him some recent books on the subject, and I was greatly pleased to hear his statements improve. Just as it does little good to read outdated books on scientific topics, it makes little sense to read novels with stereotypical content.

Hop, a Romance of the Middle Ages, by the celebrated author of 'Tittle-Tol-Tan,' to appear in monthly parts; a great rush; don't all come together." All this they read with saucer eyes, and erect and primitive curiosity, and with unwearied gizzard, whose corrugations even yet need no sharpening, just as some little four-year-old bencher his two-cent gilt-covered edition of Cinderella, -- without any improvement, that I can see, in the pronunciation, or accent, or emphasis, or any more skill in extracting or inserting the moral. The result is dulness of sight, a stagnation of the vital circulations, and a general deliquium and sloughing off of all the intellectual faculties. This sort of gingerbread is baked daily and more sedulously than pure wheat or rye-and-Indian in almost every oven, and finds a surer market.

The best books are not read even by those who are called good readers. What does our Concord culture amount to? There is in this town, with a very few exceptions, no taste for the best or for very good books even in English literature, whose words all can read and spell. Even the college-bred and so-called liberally educated men here and elsewhere have really little or no acquaintance with the English classics; and as for the recorded wisdom of mankind, the ancient classics and Bibles, which are accessible to all who will know of them, there are the feeblest efforts anywhere made to become acquainted with them. I know a woodchopper, of middle age, who takes a French paper, not for news as he says, for he is above that, but to "keep himself in practice," he being a Canadian by birth; and when I ask him what he considers the best thing he can do in this world, he says, beside this, to keep up and add to his English. This is about as much as the college-bred generally do or aspire to do, and they take an English paper for the purpose. One who has just come from reading perhaps one of the best English books will find how many with whom he can converse about it? Or suppose he comes from reading a Greek or Latin classic in the original, whose praises are familiar even to the so-called illiterate; he will find nobody at all to speak to, but must keep silence about it. Indeed, there is hardly the professor in our colleges, who, if he has mastered the difficulties of the language, has proportionally mastered the difficulties of the wit and poetry of a Greek poet, and has any sympathy to impart to the alert and heroic reader; and as for the sacred Scriptures, or Bibles of mankind, who in this town can tell me even their titles? Most men do not know that any nation but the Hebrews have had a scripture. A man, any man, will go considerably out of his way to pick up a silver dollar; but here are golden words, which the wisest men of antiquity have uttered, and whose worth the wise of every succeeding age have assured us of; -- and yet we learn to read only as far as Easy Reading, the primers and class-books, and when we leave school, the "Little Reading," and story-books, which are for boys and beginners; and our reading,

The comments Thoreau makes here are true. My mother, for instance, was an English teacher and taught literature, yet she never opened a book except to prepare a lesson. To some extent, the lessons in school can be designed to take the place of the students reading for themselves, and often when the students are supposed to read, they study Cliff Notes instead. When students would read books and write reports on them, my mother would consult Master Plots, rather than having assigned books she was acquainted with. When I was in college studying literature, I could find no one to discuss it with, even among my fellow English students. If nothing else, discussing the assignment would have been excellent preparation for the test.

Again, Thoreau is correct in saying that few people know anything about the bibles of other religions. Here, the problem might be more that they don't want to know about the other religions.

Today also, I find very few people who can engage in an intellectual conversation or who want to. Even more rare is the person who has reached his own opinions.

our conversation and thinking, are all on a very low level, worthy only of pygmies and manikins.	
I aspire to be acquainted with wiser men than this our Concord soil has produced, whose names are hardly known here. Or shall I hear the name of Plato and never read his book? As if Plato were my townsman and I never saw him, -- my next neighbor and I never heard him speak or attended to the wisdom of his words. But how actually is it? His Dialogues, which contain what was immortal in him, lie on the next shelf, and yet I never read them. We are underbred and low-lived and illiterate; and in this respect I confess I do not make any very broad distinction between the illiterateness of my townsman who cannot read at all and the illiterateness of him who has learned to read only what is for children and feeble intellects. We should be as good as the worthies of antiquity, but partly by first knowing how good they were. We are a race of tit-men, and soar but little higher in our intellectual flights than the columns of the daily paper.	Plato's accounts of Socrates and his teaching translate into English well and make interesting stories, but how many people have ever read them or heard them read? In calling people "tit-men," Thoreau is thinking of the titmouse, a bird that stays close to the ground rather than flying high in the sky.
It is not all books that are as dull as their readers. There are probably words addressed to our condition exactly, which, if we could really bear and understand, would be more salutary than the morning or the spring to our lives, and possibly put a new aspect on the face of things for us. How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book! The book exists for us, perchance, which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered. These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life. Moreover, with wisdom we shall learn liberality. The solitary hired man on a farm in the outskirts of Concord, who has had his second birth and peculiar religious experience, and is driven as he believes into the silent gravity and exclusiveness by his faith, may think it is not true; but Zoroaster, thousands of years ago, travelled the same road and had the same experience; but he, being wise, knew it to be universal, and treated his neighbors accordingly, and is even said to have invented and established worship among men. Let him humbly commune with Zoroaster then, and through the liberalizing influence of all the worthies, with Jesus Christ himself, and let "our church" go by the board.	Thoreau makes the suggestion that if we read we can discover books that help us out of difficulties or that open new opportunities for us. I know that there are a number of books that have been extremely influential in my life, *Walden* being one of them. On more than one occasion, a few words from a book have done me much more good than anything anyone could have said. Thoreau uses the example of a farm hand to suggest that reading more widely can have a liberalizing influence on a person. Of course, his suggestion of the man abandoning the church would not have been well-received in some quarters. However, Emerson wrote in "Brahmin," "Find me and turn thy back on heaven."
We boast that we belong to the Nineteenth Century and are making the most rapid strides of any nation. But consider how little this village does for its own culture. I do not wish to flatter my townsmen, nor to be flattered by them, for that will not advance either of us. We need to be provoked, -- goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot. We have a comparatively decent system of common	I find Thoreau's conclusion to be very sensible. I see no reason why people should abandon the learning process after a certain number of years in school when learning further can make them more free

schools, schools for infants only; but excepting the half-starved Lyceum in the winter, and latterly the puny beginning of a library suggested by the State, no school for ourselves. We spend more on almost any article of bodily aliment or ailment than on our mental ailment. It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men and women. It is time that villages were universities, and their elder inhabitants the fellows of universities, with leisure -- if they are, indeed, so well off -- to pursue liberal studies the rest of their lives. Shall the world be confined to one Paris or one Oxford forever? Cannot students be boarded here and get a liberal education under the skies of Concord? Can we not hire some Abelard to lecture to us? Alas! what with foddering the cattle and tending the store, we are kept from school too long, and our education is sadly neglected. In this country, the village should in some respects take the place of the nobleman of Europe. It should be the patron of the fine arts. It is rich enough. It wants only the magnanimity and refinement. It can spend money enough on such things as farmers and traders value, but it is thought Utopian to propose spending money for things which more intelligent men know to be of far more worth. This town has spent seventeen thousand dollars on a town-house, thank fortune or politics, but probably it will not spend so much on living wit, the true meat to put into that shell, in a hundred years. The one hundred and twenty-five dollars annually subscribed for a Lyceum in the winter is better spent than any other equal sum raised in the town. If we live in the Nineteenth Century, why should we not enjoy the advantages which the Nineteenth Century offers? Why should our life be in any respect provincial? If we will read newspapers, why not skip the gossip of Boston and take the best newspaper in the world at once? -- not be sucking the pap of "neutral family" papers, or browsing "Olive Branches" here in New England. Let the reports of all the learned societies come to us, and we will see if they know anything. Why should we leave it to Harper & Brothers and Redding & Co. to select our reading? As the nobleman of cultivated taste surrounds himself with whatever conduces to his culture, -- genius -- learning -- wit -- books -- paintings -- statuary -- music -- philosophical instruments, and the like; so let the village do, -- not stop short at a pedagogue, a parson, a sexton, a parish library, and three selectmen, because our Pilgrim forefathers got through a cold winter once on a bleak rock with these. To act collectively is according to the spirit of our institutions; and I am confident that, as our circumstances are more flourishing, our means are greater than the nobleman's. New England can hire all the wise men in the world to come and teach her, and board them round the while, and not be provincial at all. That is the uncommon school we want. Instead of noblemen, let us have noble villages of men. If it is necessary, omit one bridge over the river, go round a little there, and throw one arch at least over the darker gulf of ignorance which surrounds us.

and independent.

The fact that most people do little reading makes them useful machines for industry, working all day long, coming home to be mesmerized by the television, and using the weekend to do chores and go to church. However, if people spent more time learning, they would know how to solve more of their own problems.

Of course, Thoreau is thinking here more of learning for intellectual growth than learning for practical reasons, but I think the two are more alike than most would admit. In acquiring the ability to analyze poetry, for instance, one is acquiring the ability to analyze life situations. In arguing history, one is also learning methods of evaluating one's own life.

It's very ironic that our modern society puts so much stress on education now, but as individuals we give it so little attention.

Thoreau's Text in This Column	My Comments in This Column
At a certain season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I have bought all the farms in succession, for all were to be bought, and I knew their price. I walked over each farmer's premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry with him, took his farm at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher price on it -- took everything but a deed of it -- took his word for his deed, for I dearly love to talk -- cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on. This experience entitled me to be regarded as a sort of real-estate broker by my friends. Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat? -- better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but to my eyes the village was too far from it. Well, there I might live, I said; and there I did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the years run off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in. The future inhabitants of this region, wherever they may place their houses, may be sure that they have been anticipated. An afternoon sufficed to lay out the land into orchard, wood-lot, and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the door, and whence each blasted tree could be seen to the best advantage; and then I let it lie, fallow, perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.	For those wanting to build imaginary homesteads, a classic is Kain's *Five Acres and Independence*, first written during the thirties, which proposes to help the reader understand the necessities, design, and problems of a small farm. During the 80's, I wrote a series for a self-sufficiency group in which I tried to explain the relationship of the topography to the micro-climate of the home and homestead. In that series, I highly recommended spending a great deal of time daydreaming about the homesite, with the daydreaming focused on real situations. Thoreau's conclusion comes as a surprise at the end of such wistful thinking, but it is not a surprise considering his attitude towards those "whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms."
My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms, -- the refusal was all I wanted, -- but I never got my fingers burned by actual possession. The nearest that I came to actual possession was when I bought the Hollowell place, and had begun to sort my seeds, and collected materials with which to make a wheelbarrow to carry it on or off with; but before the owner gave me a deed of it, his wife -- every man has such a wife -- changed her mind and wished to keep it, and he offered me ten dollars to release him. Now, to speak the truth, I had but ten cents in the world, and it	Unlike Thoreau, I have been burned by ownership. Finding a place was difficult. The cost of travel was high. I had to remove trash, threaten dumpers, repair road damage, and frequently take starving abandoned animals to the pound. My cabin was broken into before it was finished and has been repeatedly ransacked since, with the

surpassed my arithmetic to tell, if I was that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together. However, I let him keep the ten dollars and the farm too, for I had carried it far enough; or rather, to be generous, I sold him the farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds, and materials for a wheelbarrow left. I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty. But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes,

"I am monarch of all I *survey*,
My right there is none to dispute."

police indifferent. I had to fight a court battle and deal with adjacent timber harvesting. Finally, I had to quit living there due to lack of available jobs.

Note the deep irony in being rich without damaging poverty. Thoreau, like Jesus, saw poverty as a virtue.

It's possible to retain some rights to a property after selling it, such as mineral rights. Here Thoreau claims poetic rights to all the land.

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.

Crusty farmers are more suspicious nowadays, some due to vandalism and theft, others due to modern selfish attitudes. At any rate, most rural land now seems to be marked "no trespassing."

The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were: its complete retirement, being, about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by a broad field; its bounding on the river, which the owner said protected it by its fogs from frosts in the spring, though that was nothing to me; the gray color and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated fences, which put such an interval between me and the last occupant; the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, nawed by rabbits, showing what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which I heard the house-dog bark. I was in haste to buy it, before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple trees, and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture, or, in short, had made any more of his improvements. To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on; like Atlas, to take the world on my shoulders -- I never

Not one of the features that Thoreau found desirable about the farm has any value for securing wealth. In fact, he was worried about the owner making improvements that would have made the farm more productive. Note that while Thoreau admits to wanting to fall into the same trap as his "townsmen whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms," his goals and expectations are not the same. Remember that Thoreau said, "This curious world which we inhabit is more wonderful than it is convenient; more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used." Rather than being

heard what compensation he received for that -- and do all those things which had no other motive or excuse but that I might pay for it and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted, if I could only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I have said.

interested in pecuniary profits that require a lot of work, Thoreau wants the kind of profits that are best secured by contemplation.

All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale -- I have always cultivated a garden -- was, that I had had my seeds ready. Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.

In other words, Thoreau might not have been prepared to be a farmer in any other way, but at least he had the seeds. But is he talking about the seeds of plants only or also about the seeds of ideas?

Thoreau's statement is less strong than New Hampshire's "Live free or die!" but Thoreau lived it.

Old Cato, whose "De Re Rusticâ" is my "Cultivator," says, and the only translation I have seen makes sheer nonsense of the passage, "When you think of getting a farm turn it thus in your mind, not to buy greedily; nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it enough to go round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will please you, if it is good." I think I shall not buy greedily, but go round and round it as long as I live, and be buried in it first, that it may please me the more at last.

It seems to me that there is a deeply buried pun in this: "bought the farm" means "to have died and been buried," as very few people could afford to complete the payments during their lifetime. Of course, this paragraph also describes what Thoreau actually did with his life.

The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to describe more at length, for convenience putting the experience of two years into one. As I have said, 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.

Thoreau's plan for *Walden* follows the calendar. He earlier made this statement on his title page. "Ode to Dejection" is a poem by Coleridge; Chanticleer is the rooster in Chaucer's story.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door

Thoreau says his stay began on Independence Day by chance, but moving to the woods is a show of personal independence.

As Thoreau reported in "Economy," he used an ax to cut and shape some tall, thin

and window casings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited a year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere.

pines to make his rafters, floor timbers, and studs, flattening only the sides that he would nail boards to. He mortised and tenoned the frame together, and had it raised by his friends. He next laid the foundation for his chimney. Then he planed rough boards to give them a "feather-edge," nailed them parallel along the roof and sides, and overlapped them, so they would shed water. This was the condition of the house when he moved in, the inside still unfinished.

The only house I had been the owner of before, if I except a boat, was a tent, which I used occasionally when making excursions in the summer, and this is still rolled up in my garret; but the boat, after passing from hand to hand, has gone down the stream of time. With this more substantial shelter about me, I had made some progress toward settling in the world. This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder. It was suggestive somewhat as a picture in outlines. I did not need to go outdoors to take the air, for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness. It was not so much within doors as behind a door where I sat, even in the rainiest weather. The Harivansa says, "An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning." Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them. I was not only nearer to some of those which commonly frequent the garden and the orchard, but to those smaller and more thrilling songsters of the forest which never, or rarely, serenade a villager, -- the wood thrush, the veery, the scarlet tanager, the field sparrow, the whip-poor-will, and many others.

The advantages and disadvantages of a dwelling are opposite sides of a coin. Sleeping unsheltered on the ground allows you to enjoy every insect, breeze, and star but provides no protection. A lean-to or tarp protects you from rain but blocks the view of the stars. A tent keeps out crawling insects but separates you from many fine sensations of the night. An unfinished cabin provides better rain protection but limits your view to windows. A tight, well-built, and insulated house keeps out all insects and the cold, but completely cuts you off from Nature.

It seems that subdivisions next to ponds would share this bird life, but we destroy the birds' habitat and food supply to grow grass.

I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood

In this series of paragraphs, Thoreau establishes the location of Walden Pond and

between that town and Lincoln, and about two miles south of that our only field known to fame, Concord Battle Ground; but I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant horizon. For the first week, whenever I looked out on the pond it impressed me like a tarn high up on the side of a mountain, its bottom far above the surface of other lakes, and, as the sun arose, I saw it throwing off its nightly clothing of mist, and here and there, by degrees, its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was revealed, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods, as at the breaking up of some nocturnal conventicle. The very dew seemed to hang upon the trees later into the day than usual, as on the sides of mountains.

his home. However, his method of location is not the one used by the USGS (Geological Survey). Instead, he tries to establish its location in the imagination, thus connecting it to Concord, the battle ground, the terrain, morning and autumn sensations, the nearby and distant peaks, the lakes and oceans, the West and the steppes of Tartary, and even the stars in the night sky.

This small lake was of most value as a neighbor in the intervals of a gentle rain-storm in August, when, both air and water being perfectly still, but the sky overcast, mid-afternoon had all the serenity of evening, and the wood thrush sang around, and was heard from shore to shore. A lake like this is never smoother than at such a time; and the clear portion of the air above it being, shallow and darkened by clouds, the water, full of light and reflections, becomes a lower heaven itself so much the more important. From a hill-top near by, where the wood had been recently cut off, there was a pleasing vista southward across the pond, through a wide indentation in the hills which form the shore there, where their opposite sides sloping toward each other suggested a stream flowing out in that direction through a wooded valley, but stream there was none. That way I looked between and over the near green hills to some distant and higher ones in the horizon, tinged with blue. Indeed, by standing on tiptoe I could catch a glimpse of some of the peaks of the still bluer and more distant mountain ranges in the northwest, those true-blue coins from heaven's own mint, and also of some portion of the village. But in other directions, even from this point, I could not see over or beyond the woods which surrounded me. It is well to have some water in your neighborhood, to give buoyancy to and float the earth. One value even of the smallest well is, that when you look into it you see that earth is not continent but insular. This is as important as that it keeps butter cool. When I looked across the pond from this peak toward the Sudbury meadows, which in time of flood I

Looking at the structure of this paragraph, Thoreau seems to drift from one idea to another without a plan. He would surely get a poor grade for it in Freshman English. However, he first makes the pond alive and real and then takes us up on a hill for a broader view and finally connects the pond to the oceans.

Thoreau's statements beginning with "it is well to have some water in your neighborhood" illustrate a feature of his writing that creates problems for many readers: he does not clearly distinguish between his scientific, spiritual, poetic, and humorous points of view, leaving it to the reader to make that distinction. Here, the statement about butter is plainly humorous, but the rest seems to mix the scientific and the transcendental outlook. His statements show his awareness of the water table; in fact, lowering the

distinguished elevated perhaps by a mirage in their seething valley, like a coin in a basin, all the earth beyond the pond appeared like a thin crust insulated and floated even by this small sheet of intervening water, and I was reminded that this on which I dwelt was but *dry land*.

water table in some areas can cause the ground to sink. Continental shelves and sea level are approximately the same height, almost as if the continents are floating.

Though the view from my door was still more contracted, I did not feel crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my imagination. The low shrub oak plateau to which the opposite shore arose stretched away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men. "There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon," -- said Damodara, when his herds required new and larger pastures.

Again, Thoreau connects Walden Pond to distant and romantic places.

Walter Harding points out that Damodara is another name for Krishna. Thoreau frequently read the Bhagavad-Gita, in which Krishna was the hero-teacher.

Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe. If it were worth the while to settle in those parts near to the Pleiades or the Hyades, to Aldebaran or Altair, then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life which I had left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless nights by him. Such was that part of creation where I had squatted; --

"There was a shepherd that did live,
And held his thoughts as high
As were the mounts whereon his flocks
Did hourly feed him by."

What should we think of the shepherd's life if his flocks always wandered to higher pastures than his thoughts?

Thoreau makes Walden Pond seem magical to his readers, yet to the people of Concord, it must have been just another small, nearby pond. But in his imagination, he lived in a different place and time, a place in some distant solar system and during his favorite moment in history. His locating Walden so remotely from everyone else makes me think back to the second paragraph in *Walden* where he claims that if someone "has lived sincerely, it must be in a distant land to me."

The "forever new and unprofaned" is what he seeks in the morning in the next paragraph and what he finds true of Walden Pond in later years (reported in "The Ponds").

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the

Aurora is the goddess of the dawn.

Daily bathing was not

pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again." I can understand that. Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint burn of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air -- to a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bear its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light. That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, "All intelligences awake with the morning." Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been

established in the US until the later half of the 20th century. Some in Thoreau's day bathed just once a year. In fact, one early explorer cited the Mexican Indians' bathing as proof of savagery.

Thoreau twice describes insects as feeling wrath, see the battle of the ants in "Brute Neighbors." "Wrath" and "wanderings" are from the *Iliad*. Thoreau is just using colorful language and is not engaging in the pathetic fallacy (the belief that all Nature shares our feelings). However, Thoreau is trying to awaken us to the strangeness of ordinary events. A passing insect does not awake any sense of strangeness, yet the insect lives in an alien world which it experiences through uncanny senses. Thoreau sees this insect as a herald announcing that Mother Nature still is alive.

Essential to understanding Thoreau's purpose in life is to understand that some times (such as the morning) and places (such as Walden) are sacred and magical.

Thoreau constantly preaches against being asleep (or not fully alert) while awake. In addition to experiencing drowsiness caused by sedentary living and/or sleep disorder, we tend to let our minds drift and float in an absent-minded daydream

had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions 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?	Thoreau, to the contrary, has been "anxious to improve the nick of time" and to "anticipate ... Nature herself" ("Economy," Part II). A major purpose of his life is to remain awake and sensitive to Nature and to higher feelings within. He ends *Walden* with the promise that "there is more day to dawn."
We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. 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 atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.	Here Thoreau assigns us the task of not only staying awake without an alarm clock but also of using our imaginations to actively make our days more meaningful and to labor to accomplish that goal. Remember that he said he wanted to "brag as lustily as chanticleer" . . . "if only to wake my neighbors up." The purpose in staying awake is to make our lives as valuable as we can make them.
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 did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."	Although seemly stating his purpose for moving to the pond, Thoreau is posting his personal catechism for the world to see and is claiming the woods to be a superior place to live close to life. Although Christians have disagreed as to whether the world was made by God or the devil, Thoreau has no uncertainty, and wants to live life as intensely as possible. Ironically, Thoreau died of tuberculosis when only 44, and yet, because he lived so intensely and devoted his life to living rather than to making a living, he lived a

	fuller and richer life than those who lived over twice as long.
Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy, made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the *Nation* have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether *they* do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers	Thoreau, as usually, uses classical fables to make his point. If you accept Thoreau's purpose in life as valid, then you see why he so highly criticizes our attention to the tedious details of life. He cannot be taken seriously about avoiding the necessity for counting, as he worked as a surveyor and took careful measurements of scientific phenomena. What he is saying is that he rejects a life like Prufrock's, "measured out with coffee spoons." He rejects an ant-like existence that concentrates on the necessities of life and the acquisition of property. He feels that we should give less attention to unimportant details, so we can concentrate better on the meaningful things in life. Along with criticizing our personal lives, he criticizes the government for exactly the same faults. Note, that unlike modern libertarians, he does not see the government as having worse problems than individuals; instead, he sees the problems of both as being the same: we are in great haste and devote all of our energies to keeping up with the rat race, but we greatly neglect our own psychological, intellectual, spiritual, social, and poetic growth as a result, both as individuals, as a culture, and

are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again.

as a nation.

Again, he attacks the railroad as a sign of the kind of civilization his countrymen were beginning to build, the kind of culture that we live in today, where people spend all of their time rushing about at high speeds and yet are always late. But he points out that if we spend our lives seeking after the truly important goals of life, we don't need all the latest gadgets or to travel around at the highest speeds.

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. As for *work*, we haven't any of any consequence. We have the Saint Vitus' dance, and cannot possibly keep our heads still. If I should only give a few pulls at the parish bell-rope, as for a fire, that is, without setting the bell, there is hardly a man on his farm in the outskirts of Concord, notwithstanding that press of engagements which was his excuse so many times this morning, nor a boy, nor a woman, I might almost say, but would forsake all and follow that sound, not mainly to save property from the flames, but, if we will confess the truth, much more to see it burn, since burn it must, and we, be it known, did not set it on fire -- or to see it put out, and have a hand in it, if that is done as handsomely; yes, even if it were the parish church itself. Hardly a man takes a half-hour's nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, "What's the news?" as if the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels. Some give directions to be waked every half-hour, doubtless for no other purpose; and then, to pay for it, they tell what they have dreamed. After a night's sleep the news is as indispensable as the breakfast. "Pray tell me anything new that has happened to a man anywhere on this globe" -- and he reads it over his coffee and rolls, that a man has had his eyes gouged out this morning on the Wachito River; never dreaming the while that he lives in the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and

Thoreau felt that most of the work we do is unnecessary. He was able to supply his personal needs by working only about one day per week.

It might be thought that Thoreau was highly critical of his neighbors without including himself, but in "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors," he tells about racing to a fire and being just as excited as the rest. This story is also a reminder of a sour moment in Thoreau's life in 1844, when he accidentally set the woods on fire while on a fishing trip with a friend.

Jesus told his followers to first take care of their own eyes before trying to cope with other people's eyes, and Thoreau gives the same moral, using eyes to represent insight as well, but he employs Arkansas news to illustrate his point, and he compares the reader to a

has but the rudiment of an eye himself.	blind cave creature.
For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life -- I wrote this some years ago -- that were worth the postage. The penny-post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter, -- we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure, -- news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelve-month, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. As for Spain, for instance, if you know how to throw in Don Carlos and the Infanta, and Don Pedro and Seville and Granada, from time to time in the right proportions, -- they may have changed the names a little since I saw the papers, -- and serve up a bull-fight when other entertainments fail, it will be true to the letter, and give us as good an idea of the exact state or ruin of things in Spain as the most succinct and lucid reports under this head in the newspapers: and as for England, almost the last significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649; and if you have learned the history of her crops for an average year, you never need attend to that thing again, unless your speculations are of a merely pecuniary character. If one may judge who rarely looks into the newspapers, nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts, a French revolution not excepted.	Thoreau now criticizes the post office and newspaper. In those days, the person receiving the letter paid the cost, so it must have been irksome to pay for some letters which contained nothing worth reading. He evidently adds the note "I wrote this some years ago" to mollify friends who had written him letters. His statement is still true; letters worth keeping are rare. And the newspapers still report all the stupid details without explaining what actually happened. The TV news does the same. Formerly, I could get a good explanation in *Time* or *Newsweek*, but they are not much better than the tabloids nowadays. In saying that nothing new ever happens in other countries, Thoreau is not so much judging the countries as he is judging the kind of news that our news services gather. As long as the focus is on trivia, gossip, scandal, celebrities, war, and pompous oversimplification, nothing worthwhile will be revealed. But Thoreau also has a problem with any kind of news -- see the next paragraph.
What news! how much more important to know what that is which was never old! "Kieou-he-yu (great dignitary of the state of Wei) sent a man to Khoung-tseu	To Thoreau, we should be focusing not on news but on truths that do not change from day to day, year to year

to know his news. Khoung-tseu caused the messenger to be seated near him, and questioned him in these terms: What is your master doing? The messenger answered with respect: My master desires to diminish the number of his faults, but he cannot come to the end of them. The messenger being gone, the philosopher remarked: What a worthy messenger! What a worthy messenger!" The preacher, instead of vexing the ears of drowsy farmers on their day of rest at the end of the week, -- for Sunday is the fit conclusion of an ill-spent week, and not the fresh and brave beginning of a new one, -- with this one other draggle-tail of a sermon, should shout with thundering voice, "Pause! Avast! Why so seeming fast, but deadly slow?"

or even century to century. In Thoreau's story, the messenger rather than reporting the news reports universal truths.

Because we concentrate on trivia and keeping up with the Joneses, we fail to make other kinds of progress and perhaps are even falling behind.

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. 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. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experience, that is, by failure. I have read in a Hindoo book, that "there was a king's son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father's ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. So soul," continues the Hindoo philosopher, "from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be *Brahme*." I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think

I have seen firsthand that a committee has two ways of solving a problem: one is by making actual changes, the other is by rewriting documents so that the problem no longer appears to exist. Very often, suggestions to write the problem out of existence are seen as wise and sound thinking, while measures to correct the problem are seen as idealistic and unrealistic. That's how we drift into a society where children become pregnant, use drugs, and carry weapons to school.

Very often the difference between what is going on and what we pretend is going on is so great that the truth can seem like a fairy tale. Sociologists and anthropologists who study our society find that our stated goals are often the opposite of our hidden ones. Examples might include tax laws that encourage cheating, schools and teachers who discourage students from learning, and women who

that that *is* which *appears* to be. If a man should walk through this town and see only the reality, where, think you, would the "Mill-dam" go to? If he should give us an account of the realities he beheld there, we should not recognize the place in his description. Look at a meeting-house, or a court-house, or a jail, or a shop, or a dwelling-house, and say what that thing really is before a true gaze, and they would all go to pieces in your account of them. Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving then. The poet or the artist never yet had so fair and noble a design but some of his posterity at least could accomplish it.

wear erotic clothes yet complain that men are only interested in sex. Very often we pretend we are solving some problem which we have no real interest in solving, such as poverty. Or we devote our energies to solving imaginary problems, such as the hundreds of billions spent each year to protect us from foreign aggression.

Note that Thoreau connects this problem to the problem of not being completely awake. We prefer to be deluded because it avoids the problem of having to think. We'd rather not admit that the Emperor has no clothes. We prefer to pretend that it doesn't really matter, and we prefer to look up to some time when we think people were more honest and closer to the truth. But, as Thoreau points out, no time was ever better than right now.

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry, -- determined to make a day of it. Why should we knock under and go with the stream? Let us not be upset and overwhelmed in that terrible rapid and whirlpool called a dinner, situated in the meridian shallows. Weather this danger and you are safe, for the rest of the way is down hill. With unrelaxed nerves, with morning vigor, sail by it, looking another way, tied to the mast like Ulysses. If the engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains. If the bell rings, why should we run? We will consider what kind of music they are like. Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of

Note that while the railroad was only a dozen years old in America when Thoreau moved to Walden, railroad slang is common in Thoreau's prose.

This passage from *Walden* is very often anthologized as many have heard Thoreau's call to "spend one day as deliberately as Nature."

The time when I best heeded this call was during my high-school years, after having read *Walden*. At the time, I was full of false beliefs

opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d'appui*, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time. If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.	serious self-doubts, a great deal of guilt over nothing and fear of everyone, and I was completely lacking in a plan or even a direction for my life. Life seemed more like a prison than an opportunity. But as I walked home from school each day, a distance of two miles and a half, I used the calmness brought about by exercise to review in my mind all that I knew and believed about the world. One of the important truths I discovered -- important to me, not necessarily to anyone else -- was that I didn't have to decide about every issue; I could permit myself to say "I don't know." I used this time to better understand myself and the world I lived in. As a result, I became stronger and wiser.
Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining-rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine.	This description of Thoreau's search for eternal truths is perhaps his finest poetry. Wordsworth wrote in "Intimations of Immortality" that "our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting" and that we were born "trailing clouds of glory ... from God," so Harding saw that idea here. However, children are also superior learners who are free of the "shams and appearances" that Thoreau wants us to slough off. Thoreau is not seeking some lost childhood dream; he is seeking discoverable reality.