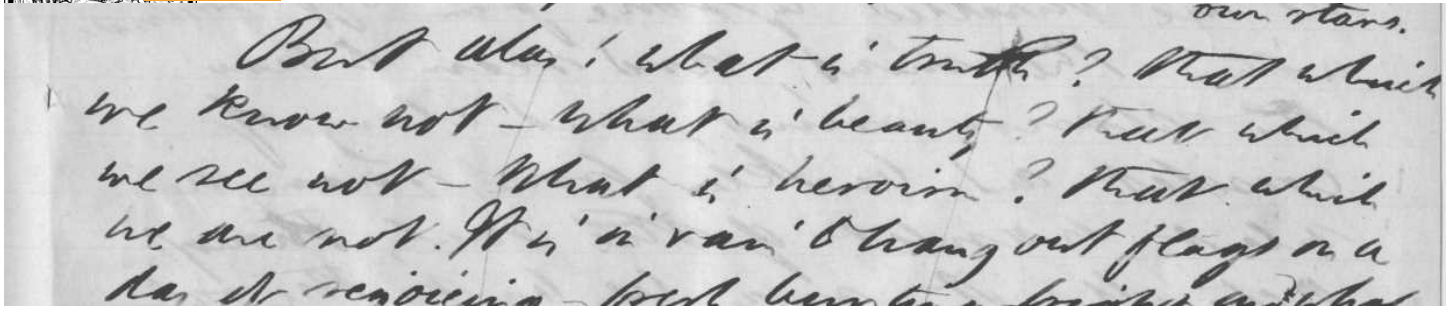




Mis-Quotations

This page is devoted to those quotations either misquoted or erroneously attributed to Henry D. Thoreau

Be yourself, not your idea of what you think somebody else's idea of yourself should be.

Misattribution. This quotation is spoken by the character of Thoreau in the 1970 play, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, by Robert Edwin Lee and Jerome Lawrence, but does not appear in any of Thoreau's writings.

Happiness is like a butterfly: the more you chase it, the more it will elude you, but if you turn your attention to other things, it comes and sits softly on your shoulder.

Misattribution. This quotation, erroneously attributed to both Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne, was written by the social worker, author and speaker, J. Richard Lessor. Although it doesn't appear in any of Lessor's books, it was published on motivational posters in the 1970s produced by Argus Communications.

[Special thanks to Jen Payne for tracking this down and confirming with Mr. Lessor]

As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.

Misattribution. By Wilfred Arlan Peterson in his *The Art of Living, Day by Day: Three Hundred and Sixty-five Thoughts, Ideas, Ideals, Experiences, Adventures, Inspirations, to Enrich Your Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972) p. 77

[Special thanks to Austin Meredith]

Writing your name can lead to writing sentences. And the next thing you'll be doing is writing paragraphs, and then books. And then you'll be in as much trouble as I am!

Misattribution. This quotation is spoken by the character of Thoreau in the 1970 play, *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, by Robert Edwin Lee and Jerome Lawrence, but does not appear in any of Thoreau's writings. It is also on the Thoreau memorial plaque on Library Way in New York City.

Be true to your work, your word, and your friend.

Misattribution. By the poet, novelist and editor, John Boyle O'Reilly (1844-1890). Although the words appear as above in several collections of quotations and axioms, the line should read "Be true to your word and your work and your friend" as published in his poem, "Rules of the Road" in *The Life of John Boyle O'Reilly* by James Jeffrey Roche, together with his complete poems and speeches edited by Mrs. John Boyle O'Reilly (New York: Cassell Publishing Co., 1891) p. 533:

Be silent and safe — silence never betrays you;
Be true to your word and your work and your friend;
Put least trust in him who is foremost to praise you,
Nor judge of a road till it draw to the end.

Misquotation: In wildness is the salvation of the world.

This misquotation comes from Aldo Leopold who wrote in *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949) p. 133: "Perhaps this is behind Thoreau's dictum: In wildness is the salvation of the world."

The correct quotation comes from Thoreau's essay, "Walking": "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world."

Never look back unless you are planning to go that way.

Misattribution. The original source for this quotation, often attributed to Thoreau, has not been identified.

Misquotation: In wilderness is the preservation of the world.

The correct quotation comes from Thoreau's essay, "Walking": "The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world."

This misquotation appeared in a few minor publications of the first half of the twentieth century but was legitimized and propagated in Perry Miller's classic, widely-used anthology, *The American Transcendentalists, Their Prose and Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956) p. 146.

Misquotation: It is not enough to be busy. The question is: what are we busy about?

Variant: It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?

The correct quotation appears in Thoreau's letter to his friend, H.G.O. Blake, on 16 November 1857: "It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?"

Misquotation: Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined. As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler.

The correct quotation is from Thoreau's *Walden*: "I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. . . . In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness."

Misquotation: Friends are kind to each other's hopes, they cherish each other's dreams.

The correct quotation is in the "Wednesday" chapter of Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*: "The Friend asks no return but that his Friend will religiously accept and wear and not disgrace his apotheosis of him. They cherish each other's hopes. They are kind to each other's dreams."

Misquotation: Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.

The first half of this quotation is a misquotation from Thoreau's *Walden*:

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things."

The second half of this quotation is misattributed to Thoreau and may be a misquotation or misremembering of Oliver Wendell Holmes' (1809-1894) "The Voiceless":

Alas for those that never sing,
But die with all their music in them.

What lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

Misattribution. By Henry Stanley Haskins (1875-1957) from his anonymously published *Meditations in Wall Street* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1940) p. 131.

Use what talent you possess: the woods would be very silent if no birds sang except those that sang best.

Misattribution. The first known use, although it was unattributed, is from *The Ladies Repository: A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion*, September 1874, p. 231. It was reprinted two years later in *The Latter-Day Saints' Millennial Star*, number 37, volume XXXVIII (Monday: September 11, 1876) p. 583.

This quotation has also been misattributed to Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933).

There is no value in life except what you choose to place upon it, and no happiness in any place except what you bring to it yourself.

Misattribution. By the Chinese author Lin Yutang (1895-1976) in his book, *On the Wisdom of America* (New York: John Day, 1950) p. 446:

Thoreau once thought the moon was larger over the United States than over the Old World, the sky bluer, the stars brighter, the thunder louder, the rivers longer, the mountains higher, the prairies vaster, and he mystically concluded that the spirit of man in America should be larger and more expansive "else why was America discovered?" Thoreau was wrong, and Thoreau was right. There is no value in life except what you choose to place upon it, and no happiness in any place except what you bring to it yourself.

Misquotation: Many men fish all their lives without ever realizing that it is not the fish they are after.

Michael Baughman wrote in his *A River Seen Right* (Lyons Press, 1995) p. 156, clearly paraphrasing and not quoting: "I think it was in *Walden* where he wrote that a lot of men fish all their lives without ever realizing that fish isn't really what they're after." Baughman may have been paraphrasing from Thoreau's Journal, January 26, 1853:

It is remarkable that many men will go with eagerness to Walden Pond in the winter to fish for pickerel and yet not seem to care for the landscape. Of course it cannot be merely for the pickerel they may catch; there is some adventure in it; but any love of nature which they may feel is certainly very slight and indefinite. They call it going a-fishing, and so indeed it is, though perchance, their natures know better. Now I go a-fishing and a-hunting every day, but omit the fish and the game, which are the least important part. I have learned to do without them. They were indispensable only as long as I was a boy. I am encouraged when I see a dozen villagers drawn to Walden Pond to spend a day in fishing through the ice, and suspect that I have more fellows than I knew, but I am disappointed and surprised to find that they lay so much stress on the fish which they catch or fail to catch, and on nothing else, as if there were nothing else to be caught.

The closest parallel in a non-Thoreau text is from E.T. Brown's *Not Without Prejudice: Essays on Assorted Subjects* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1955) p. 142: "When they go fishing, it is not really fish they are after. It is a philosophic meditation."

You cannot dream yourself into a character; you must hammer and forge yourself one.

Misattribution. By the English historian, James Anthony Froude (1818-1894) from his book, *The Nemesis of Faith*. First misattributed to Thoreau by readers of Anna Cabot Lowell's *Seed-Grain for Thought and Discussion: A Compilation* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856) in which the preceding quotation was by Thoreau. Froude's quotation as given in Lowell's anthology reads:

If you think you can temper yourself into manliness by sitting here over your books, it is the very silliest fancy that ever tempted a young man to his ruin. You cannot dream yourself into a character; you must hammer and forge yourself one.

Libraries will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no libraries.

Misattribution. This quotation first appeared in the 1980 edition (p. 331) of *The Whole Earth Catalog* — originally created by Stewart Brand in 1968 — and a variant by the American Library Association, "Books will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no books," appeared in the early 1980's. Both are in turn adapted from the line in a Gilbert Shelton Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers cartoon ("The Freaks Pull a Heist!"):

Dope will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no dope.

If you would find yourself, look to the land from which you came and to which you go.

Misattribution. Misattributed to Thoreau by readers of Stewart Udall's *The Quiet Crisis* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963) in which Udall wrote on page 190 regarding Thoreau:

To those who complain of the complexity of modern life, he might reply, "If you want inner peace find it in solitude, not speed, and if you would find yourself, look to the land from which you came and to which you go."

Misquotation/Misattribution: It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

The correct quotation is from Thoreau's Journal of 5 August 1851: "The question is not what you look at, but what you see." The above quotation is by Richard D. Richardson Jr who wrote "It is not what you look at that matters, it's what you see" in his biography, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (University of California Press, 1986) p. 171. He was *not* quoting Thoreau.

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Thoreau quotation

It is a common saying among country people that if you eat much fried hasty pudding it will make your hair curl. My experience, which was considerable, did not confirm this assertion.

—*Journal*, 20 November 1850 (<https://www.walden.org/collection/journals/>)

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