

Henry David Thoreau



There are a thousand hacking at the branches of [evil](#) to one who is striking at the root.



None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty.



If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for me there would be nothing left worth living for. ... There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living.

[Henry David Thoreau](#) (12 July 1817 – 6 May 1862) was an American [essayist](#), [poet](#), [philosopher](#), [abolitionist](#), [naturalist](#), [tax resister](#), [development critic](#), [surveyor](#), and [historian](#). A leading [transcendentalist](#), Thoreau is best known for his book [Walden](#), a reflection upon [simple living](#) in natural surroundings, and his essay [Resistance to Civil Government](#) (also known as *Civil Disobedience*), an argument for disobedience to an unjust state.

See also:

[Civil Disobedience](#) (1849)

[Walden](#) (1854)

Contents

-

It is not enough to be industrious; so are the [ants](#). What are you industrious about?

-

If a man [believes](#) and expects great things of himself, it makes no odds where you put him, or what you show him ... he will be surrounded by grandeur.

- But now I see I was not plucked for naught, And after in life's vase Of glass set while I might survive, But by a kind hand brought Alive

To a strange place.

- "I am a parcel of vain strivings tied", st. 6 (1841)

- Great [God](#), I ask thee for no meaner pelf Than that I may not disappoint myself,
That in my action I may soar as high

As I can now discern with this clear eye.

- My [books](#) I'd fain cast off, I cannot read, 'Twixt every page my thoughts go stray
at large Down in the meadow, where is richer feed,

And will not mind to hit their proper targe.

- [The Summer Rain](#), st. 1 (1842)

- Here while I lie beneath this walnut bough, What care I for the Greeks or for Troy
town, If juster battles are enacted now

Between the ants upon this hummock's crown?

- **Talk of mysteries! — Think of our [life](#) in [nature](#), — daily to be shown matter,
to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid*
earth! the *actual* [world](#)! the *common* [sense](#)! **Contact! Contact! Who are we?**
where are we?**

- [The Maine Woods](#), *Ktaadn*, Pt. 6 (1848)

- The [fate](#) of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls — the
worst man is as strong as the best at that game; it 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.

- I am [grateful](#) for what I am & have. My [thanksgiving](#) is perpetual. It is surprising
how contented one can be with nothing definite — only a [sense](#) of [existence](#).
Well, anything for [variety](#). I am ready to try this for the next 1000 years, & exhaust
it. How sweet to think of! My extremities well charred, and my [intellectual](#) part
too, so that there is no [danger](#) of worm or rot for a long while. My breath is sweet
to me. O how I [laugh](#) when I think of my vague indefinite riches. No run on my
bank can drain it — for my [wealth](#) is not [possession](#) but [enjoyment](#).

- Letter to Harrison Gray Otis Blake (6&7 December 1856), as published in
The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau (1958), p. 444; a line within
this has been most quoted since 1865 in the form "I am ready to try this for
the next ten thousand years, and exhaust it."

- **It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious
about?**

- Letter to Harrison Blake (16 November 1857)

- Let me suggest a theme for you: to state to yourself precisely and completely

what that walk over the mountains amounted to for you, — returning to this essay again and again, until you are satisfied that all that was important in your experience is in it. Give this good reason to yourself for having gone over the mountains, for mankind is ever going over a mountain. Don't suppose that you can tell it precisely the first dozen times you try, but at 'em again, especially when, after a sufficient pause, you suspect that you are touching the heart or summit of the matter, reiterate your blows there, and account for the mountain to yourself. **Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short.**

- Letter to Harrison Blake (16 November 1857)

- **Men and boys are learning all kinds of trades but how to make *men* of themselves.** They learn to make houses; but they are not so well housed, they are not so contented in their houses, as the woodchucks in their holes. **What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on? — If you cannot tolerate the planet that it is on?** Grade the ground first. **If a man believes and expects great things of himself, it makes no odds where you put him, or what you show him ... he will be surrounded by grandeur.** He is in the condition of a healthy and hungry man, who says to himself, — How sweet this crust is!

- Letter to Harrison Blake (20 May 1860); published in *Familiar Letters* (1865)

- You ask particularly after my [health](#). I *suppose* that I have not many months to live; but, of course, I know nothing about it. I may add that **I am enjoying existence as much as ever, and regret nothing.**

- His [last letter, to Myron Benton \(31 March 1862\)](#).

- My life is like a stroll upon the beach,
As near the ocean's edge as I can go.

- *The Fisher's Boy*, Edmund Clarence Stedman, ed. (1833–1908). An American Anthology, 1787–1900

- Whate'er we leave to [God](#), God does
And blesses us.

- *Inspiration*, Edmund Clarence Stedman, ed. (1833–1908). An American Anthology, 1787–1900

- I hear beyond the range of sound, I see beyond the range of sight, New earths
and skies and seas around,

And in my day the sun doth pale his light.

- *Inspiration*, Edmund Clarence Stedman, ed. (1833–1908). An American Anthology, 1787–1900

- She with one breath attunes the spheres,
And also my poor human heart.
 - *Inspiration*, Edmund Clarence Stedman, ed. (1833–1908). An American Anthology, 1787–1900
- **The life that I aspire to live No man proposeth me— No trade upon the street
Wears its emblazonry.**

-
To listen with one ear to each summer sound, to behold with one eye each summer scene, our visual rays so to meet and mingle with the object as to be one bent and doubled...

-
You might as well think to go in pursuit of the [rainbow](#), and embrace it on the next hill, as to embrace the whole of [poetry](#) even in [thought](#).

-
Our [life](#) revolves unceasingly, but the centre is ever the same, and the [wise](#) will regard only the [seasons](#) of the [soul](#).

-
For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snowstorms and rainstorms, and did my [duty](#) faithfully, though I never received one cent for it.

-
The [bluebird](#) carries the [sky](#) on his back.

-
[Nature](#) is full of [genius](#), full of the divinity; so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand.

-
That man is richest whose [pleasures](#) are the cheapest.

-
Any [fool](#) can make a [rule](#)
And every fool will mind it.

- **[Truth](#), [Goodness](#), [Beauty](#) — those celestial thrins,
Continually are born; e'en now the [Universe](#), With thousand throats, and eke with greener smiles,

Its [joy](#) confesses at their recent [birth](#).**

- Sphere Music — Some sounds seem to reverberate along the plain, and then settle to earth again like dust; such are Noise, Discord, Jargon. But such only as spring heavenward, and I may catch from steeples and hilltops in their upward course, which are the more refined parts of the former, are the true sphere music

— pure, unmixed music — in which no wail mingles.

- That [virtue](#) we appreciate is as much ours as another's. We see so much only as we possess.
- Friends — They are like air bubbles on water, hastening to flow together. History tells of Orestes and Pylades, Damon and Pythias, but why should not we put to shame those old reserved worthies by a community of such? Constantly, as it were through a remote skylight, I have glimpses of a serene friendship-land, and know the better why brooks murmur and violets grow. This conjunction of souls, like waves which met and break, subsides also backward over things, and gives all a fresh aspect. I would live henceforth with some gentle soul such a life as may be conceived, double for variety, single for harmony — two, only that we might admire at our oneness — one, because indivisible. Such community to be a pledge of holy living. How could aught unworthy be admitted into our society? To listen with one ear to each summer sound, to behold with one eye each summer scene, our visual rays so to meet and mingle with the object as to be one bent and doubled; with two tongues to be wearied, and thought to spring ceaselessly from a double fountain.
- [Poetry](#) — No definition of poetry is adequate unless it be poetry itself. The most accurate analysis by the rarest wisdom is yet insufficient, and the poet will instantly prove it false by setting aside its requisitions. It is indeed all that we do not know. The poet does not need to see how meadows are something else than earth, grass, and water, but how they are thus much. He does not need discover that potato blows are as beautiful as violets, as the farmer thinks, but only how good potato blows are. The poem is drawn out from under the feet of the poet, his whole weight has rested on this ground. It has a logic more severe than the [logician's](#). You might as well think to go in pursuit of the [rainbow](#), and embrace it on the next hill, as to embrace the whole of poetry even in [thought](#).
- [Aeschylus](#) had a clear eye for the commonest things. His [genius](#) was only an enlarged [common sense](#). He adverts with chaste severity to all natural facts. His sublimity is Greek sincerity and simpleness, naked wonder which [mythology](#) had not helped to explain... Whatever the common eye sees at all and expresses as best it may, he sees uncommonly and describes with rare completeness. The multitude that thronged the theatre could no doubt go along with him to the end... The social condition of genius is the same in all ages. Aeschylus was undoubtedly alone and without sympathy in his simple reverence for the mystery of the universe.
- On the death of a friend, we should consider that the fates through confidence

have devolved on us the task of a double living, that we have henceforth to fulfill the promise of our friend's life also, in our own, to the world.

- An early morning walk is a blessing for the whole day.
- **Have no mean hours, but be grateful for every hour, and accept what it brings. The reality will make any sincere record respectable.** No day will have been wholly misspent, if one sincere, thoughtful page has been written. Let the daily tide leave some deposit on these pages, as it leaves sand and shells on the shore. So much increase of terra firma. this may be a calendar of the ebbs and flows of the soul; and on these sheets as a beach, the waves may cast up pearls and seaweed.
- **Who looks in the sun will see no light else; but also he will see no shadow. Our life revolves unceasingly, but the centre is ever the same, and the wise will regard only the seasons of the soul.**
- **We are as much as we see.** Faith is sight and knowledge. The hands only serve the eyes.
- The Indian...stands free and unconstrained in Nature, is her inhabitant and not her guest, and wears her easily and gracefully. But the civilized man has the habits of the house. His house is a prison.
- **It is a great art to saunter.**
- A slight sound at evening lifts me up by the ears, and makes life seem inexpressibly serene and grand. It may be Uranus, or it may be in the shutter.
- We are apt to imagine that this hubbub of Philosophy, Literature, and Religion, which is heard in pulpits, lyceums, and parlors, vibrates through the universe, and is as catholic a sound as the creaking of the earth's axle. But if a man sleeps soundly, he will forget it all between sunset and dawn.
- One cannot too soon forget his errors and misdemeanors. To dwell long upon them is to add to the offense. Repentance and sorrow can only be displaced by something better, which is as free and original as if they had not been.
- And the cost of a thing it will be remembered as the amount of life it requires to be exchanged for it.
- **For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snowstorms and rainstorms, and did my duty faithfully, though I never received one cent for it.**

- **Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves.**
- **Men go to a [fire](#) for entertainment.** When I see how eagerly men will run to a fire, whether in warm or in cold weather, by day or by night, dragging an engine at their heels, I'm astonished to perceive how good a purpose the level of excitement is made to serve.
- And now, at half-past ten o'clock, I hear the cockerels crow in Hubbard's barns, and morning is already anticipated. It is the feathered, wakeful thought in us that anticipates the following day.
- **How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live.**
- **Nothing is so much to be feared as [fear](#). [Atheism](#) may comparatively be popular with [God](#) himself.**
- **The bluebird carries the sky on his back.**
- **The perception of [beauty](#) is a moral test.**
- 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.
- Every poet has trembled on the verge of science.
- [Fire](#) is the most tolerable third party.
- **Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.**
 - November 11, 1854
 - Referring to an 1849 dairyman's strike, during which there was suspicion of milk being watered down
- **Nature is full of genius, full of the divinity; so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand.**
- The same law that shapes the earth-star shapes the snow-star. As surely as the petals of a flower are fixed, each of these countless snow-stars comes whirling to earth...these glorious spangles, the sweeping of heaven's floor.
- **That man is richest whose pleasures are the cheapest.**
- This bird sees the white man come and the Indian withdraw, but it withdraws not. Its untamed voice is still heard above the tinkling of the forge... It remains to remind us of aboriginal nature.

- It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves.
- If you are describing any occurrence... make two or more distinct reports at different times... We discriminate at first only a few features, and we need to reconsider our experience from many points of view and in various moods in order to perceive the whole.
- The commonest and cheapest sounds, as the barking of a dog, produce the same effect on fresh and healthy ears that the rarest music does. It depends on your appetite for sound. Just as a crust is sweeter to a healthy appetite than confectionery to a pampered or diseased one.
- You must love the crust of the earth on which you dwell more than the sweet crust of any bread or cake; you must be able to extract nutriment out of a sand heap.
- The savage in man is never quite eradicated.
- **Any [fool](#) can make a [rule](#)
And every fool will mind it.**

-
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.

-
Any man more [right](#) than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one.

-
Under a [government](#) which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a [prison](#).

-
There will never be a really [free](#) and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the [individual](#) as a higher and independent [power](#), from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.

-
A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more [perfect](#) and [glorious](#) State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.

Main article: [Civil Disobedience \(Thoreau\)](#)

- **If a thousand [citizens] were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible.**

- **The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war;** is applauded by those whose own act and authority he disregards and sets at naught; as if the state were penitent to that degree that it hired one to scourge it while it sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment.
- **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.**
- **To speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.** After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? — in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? **Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? 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. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.** It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. **Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.**
- How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answered that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it.
- **When a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.**

- **All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it.** The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. 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.** When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. They will then be the only slaves. Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote.
- **He who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist.**
- **Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?**
- 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.
- **Any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one.**
- Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison... the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor.
- I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it.
- **I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject.**
- **They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humility; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountain-head.**
- No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America. They are rare in the history of the world. There are orators, politicians, and eloquent men, by the

thousand; but the speaker has not yet opened his mouth to speak who is capable of settling the much-vexed questions of the day.

- **For eighteen hundred years, though perchance I have no right to say it, the New Testament has been written; yet where is the legislator who has wisdom and practical talent enough to avail himself of the light which it sheds on the science of legislation?**
- A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, serve the State with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated by it as enemies.
- **The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual.**
- **The rich man... is always sold to the institution which makes him rich.**
- 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. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then 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. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine.** What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn. [\[3\]](#)
- **Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.** I please myself with imagining a State at least which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. **A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.**
- Gradually the village murmur subsided, and we seemed to be embarked on the placid current of our dreams, floating from past to future as silently as one awakes to fresh morning or evening thoughts.

-
To some extent, [mythology](#) is only the most ancient [history](#) and biography. So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and [essential truth](#)...

-
In the mythus a superhuman [intelligence](#) uses the unconscious [thoughts](#) and [dreams](#) of men as its hieroglyphics to address men unborn.

-
You can hardly convince a man of an [error](#) in a lifetime, but must content yourself with the reflection that the [progress](#) of [science](#) is slow. If he is not convinced, his grandchildren may be.

-
The [great god Pan](#) is not [dead](#), as was rumored. No god ever dies. Perhaps of all the gods of New England and of ancient Greece, I am most constant at his shrine.

-
It is remarkable that, notwithstanding the [universal](#) favor with which the [New Testament](#) is outwardly received, and even the [bigotry](#) with which it is defended, there is no hospitality shown to, there is no appreciation of, the order of [truth](#) with which it deals.

- **To some extent, [mythology](#) is only the most ancient history and biography. So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and essential truth, the I and you, the here and there, the now and then, being omitted.** Either time or rare wisdom writes it. Before printing was discovered, a century was equal to a thousand years. The poet is he who can write some pure mythology to-day without the aid of posterity
- **The hidden significance of these fables which is sometimes thought to have been detected, the ethics running parallel to the poetry and history, are not so remarkable as the readiness with which they may be made to express a variety of truths.** As if they were the skeletons of still older and more universal truths than any whose flesh and blood they are for the time made to wear. It is like striving to make the sun, or the wind, or the sea symbols to signify exclusively the particular thoughts of our day. But what signifies it? **In the mythus a superhuman intelligence uses the unconscious thoughts and dreams of men as its hieroglyphics to address men unborn. In the history of the human mind, these glowing and ruddy fables precede the noonday thoughts of men, as Aurora the sun's rays.** The matutine intellect of the poet, keeping in advance of the glare of philosophy, always dwells in this auroral atmosphere.
- As we passed under the last bridge over the canal, just before reaching the Merrimack, the people coming out of church paused to look at us from above,

and apparently, so strong is custom, indulged in some heathenish comparisons; but we were the truest observers of this sunny day

- **You can hardly convince a man of an error in a lifetime, but must content yourself with the reflection that the progress of science is slow. If he is not convinced, his grandchildren may be.**
- I am not sure but I should betake myself in extremities to the liberal divinities of Greece, rather than to my country's God. [Jehovah](#), though with us he has acquired new attributes, is more absolute and unapproachable, but hardly more divine, than [Jove](#). He is not so much of a gentleman, not so gracious and catholic, he does not exert so intimate and genial an influence on nature, as many a god of the Greeks.
- The Grecian are youthful and erring and fallen gods, with the vices of men, but in many important respects essentially of the divine race. In my Pantheon, [Pan](#) still reigns in his pristine glory, with his ruddy face, his flowing beard, and his shaggy body, his pipe and his crook, his nymph Echo, and his chosen daughter Iambe; for the great god Pan is not dead, as was rumored. No god ever dies. Perhaps of all the gods of New England and of ancient Greece, I am most constant at his shrine.
- It seems to me that the god that is commonly worshipped in civilized countries is not at all divine, though he bears a divine name, but is the overwhelming authority and respectability of mankind combined. **Men reverence one another, not yet God.** If I thought that I could speak with discrimination and impartiality of the nations of Christendom, I should praise them, but it tasks me too much. They seem to be the most civil and humane, but I may be mistaken.
- There are various, nay, incredible faiths; why should we be alarmed at any of them? What man believes, God believes.
- **I trust that some may be as near and dear to [Buddha](#), or [Christ](#), or [Swedenborg](#), who are without the pale of their churches.** It is necessary not to be Christian to appreciate the beauty and significance of the life of Christ. **I know that some will have hard thoughts of me, when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha, yet I am sure that I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing, and I like him too.**
- **The wisest man preaches no doctrines;** he has no scheme; he sees no rafter, not even a cobweb, against the heavens. It is clear sky. If I ever see more clearly at one time than at another, the medium through which I see is clearer.
- Have you learned the alphabet of heaven and can count three? Do you know the

number of God's family? Can you put mysteries into words? Do you presume to fable of the ineffable? Pray, what geographer are you, that speak of heaven's topography? Whose friend are you that speak of God's personality? ... Tell me of the height of the mountains of the moon, or of the diameter of space, and I may believe you, but of the secret history of the Almighty, and I shall pronounce thee mad.

- **Some old poet's grand imagination is imposed on us as adamantine everlasting truth, and God's own word! [Pythagoras](#) says, truly enough, "A true assertion respecting God, is an assertion of God"; but we may well doubt if there is any example of this in literature.**
- The New Testament is an invaluable book, though I confess to having been slightly prejudiced against it in my very early days by the church and the Sabbath school, so that it seemed, before I read it, to be the yellowest book in the catalogue. Yet I early escaped from their meshes. It was hard to get the commentaries out of one's head and taste its true flavor. — I think that Pilgrim's Progress is the best sermon which has been preached from this text; almost all other sermons that I have heard, or heard of, have been but poor imitations of this. — It would be a poor story to be prejudiced against the Life of Christ because the book has been edited by Christians.
- **It is remarkable that, notwithstanding the universal favor with which the New Testament is outwardly received, and even the bigotry with which it is defended, there is no hospitality shown to, there is no appreciation of, the order of truth with which it deals.**
- **It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected Scriptures or Sacred Writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindus, the Persians, the Hebrews, and others, as the Scripture of mankind.** The New Testament is still, perhaps, too much on the lips and in the hearts of men to be called a Scripture in this sense. Such a juxtaposition and comparison might help to liberalize the faith of men. This is a work which Time will surely edit, reserved to crown the labors of the printing-press. This would be the Bible, or Book of Books, which let the missionaries carry to the uttermost parts of the earth.
- It is remarkable, that almost all speakers and writers feel it to be incumbent on them, sooner or later, to prove or to acknowledge the personality of God. ... In reading a work on agriculture, we have to skip the author's moral reflections, and the words "Providence" and "He" scattered along the page, to come at the profitable level of what he has to say. What he calls his religion is for the most part offensive to the nostrils. ... There is more religion in men's science than there is science in their religion.

- The vessel, though her masts be firm,
Beneath her copper bears a [worm](#).
 - *Monday, Though All the Fates Should Prove Unkind*, st. 2
- Far from New England's blustering shore, New England's worm her hulk shall
bore, And sink her in the Indian seas,

Twine, wine, and hides, and China teas.
 - *Monday, Though All the Fates Should Prove Unkind*, st. 2

-
[Dreams](#) are the touchstones of our [characters](#).

- It would be worth the while to look closely into the eye which has been open and seeing at such hours, and in such solitudes, its dull, yellowish, greenish eye. Methinks my own soul must be a bright invisible green.
- The finest workers in stone are not copper or steel tools, but the gentle touches of air and water working at their leisure with a liberal allowance of time.
- **It takes two to speak the truth, — one to speak, and another to hear.**
- Even the death of Friends will inspire us as much as their lives. They will leave consolation to the mourners, as the rich leave money to defray the expenses of their funerals, and their memories will be incrusting over with sublime and pleasing thoughts, as monuments of other men are overgrown with moss; for our Friends have no place in the graveyard.
- This world is but canvas to our imaginations.
- **Dreams are the touchstones of our characters.**

-
The unconsciousness of [man](#) is the [consciousness](#) of [God](#).

- **Go where we will on the *surface* of things, men have been there before us.**
- **The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man *fronts* a fact**, though that fact be his neighbor, there is an unsettled wilderness between him and Canada, between him and the setting sun, or, farther still, between him and *it*.
- **A true account of the actual is the rarest poetry, for common sense always takes a hasty and superficial view.**

- [Poetry](#) is the [mysticism](#) of [mankind](#).
- A poem is one undivided unimpeded expression fallen ripe into [literature](#), and it is undividedly and unimpededly received by those for whom it was matured.
- If you can speak what you will never hear, if you can write what you will never read, you have done rare things.
- **The unconsciousness of man is the consciousness of God.**
- As if our birth had at first sundered things, and we had been thrust up through into nature like a wedge, and not till the wound heals and the scar disappears, do we begin to discover where we are, and that nature is one and continuous everywhere.
- What are the earth and all its interests beside the deep surmise which pierces and scatters them?
- It is so rare to meet with a man out-doors who cherishes a worthy thought in his mind, which is independent of the labor of his hands.
- The eye may see for the hand, but not for the mind.
- **My life has been the poem I would have writ,
But I could not both live and utter it.**
 - *My Life Has Been a Poem I Would Have Writ*

These are just a few samples, for more quotes from this work see: [Walden](#).

-
Only that day dawns to which we are [awake](#). There is more day to dawn. The [sun](#) is but a [morning star](#).

- **The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.** What is called resignation is confirmed desperation.
- None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty.
- **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.**
- **Men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life.**

- **Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at.**
- **If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life.**
- **There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root**, and it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve.
- 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."
- Whatever my own practice may be, **I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized.**
- **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.**
 - Commonly misquoted, converted to imperative mood, as "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined. As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler".
- **A living dog is better than a dead lion.** Shall a man go and hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest pygmy that

he can? Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made. **Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? 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.**

- **Money is not required to buy one necessity of the soul.**
- **Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.**

-

I hear many condemn these men because they were so few. When were the [good](#) and the [brave](#) ever in a majority?

- I do not wish to force my thoughts upon you, but I feel forced myself. Little as I know of Captain Brown, I would fain do my part to correct the tone and the statements of the newspapers, and of my countrymen generally, respecting his character and actions. It costs us nothing to be just. We can at least express our sympathy with, and admiration of, him and his companions, and that is what I now propose to do.
- He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man.
- **I hear many condemn these men because they were so few. When were the good and the brave ever in a majority?** Would you have had him wait till that time came? — till you and I came over to him? The very fact that he had no rabble or troop of hirelings about him would alone distinguish him from ordinary heroes. His company was small indeed, because few could be found worthy to pass muster. Each one who there laid down his life for the poor and oppressed was a picked man, culled out of many thousands, if not millions; apparently a man of principle, of rare courage, and devoted humanity; ready to sacrifice his life at any moment for the benefit of his fellow-man.
- **It was his peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him.** They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but no others.
- I speak for the slave when I say that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me.
- **I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which**

both these things would be by me unavoidable. We preserve the so-called peace of our community by deeds of petty violence every day. Look at the policeman's billy and handcuffs! Look at the jail! Look at the gallows! Look at the chaplain of the regiment! We are hoping only to live safely on the outskirts of this provisional army. So we defend ourselves and our hen-roosts, and maintain slavery. I know that the mass of my countrymen think that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharp's rifles and revolvers is to fight duels with them, when we are insulted by other nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them, or the like. I think that for once the Sharp's rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them.

- I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character — his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light.

"Walking" began as a lecture called "The Wild," delivered by Henry at the Concord Lyceum on April 23, 1851. He gave this lecture many times, developing it into the essay finally published in the *Atlantic Monthly* after his death, in 1862.

-
In wildness is the preservation of the [world](#).

- **In wildness is the preservation of the world.**
- Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.
- Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open.
- There are other letters for the child to learn than those which Cadmus invented.
- My desire for knowledge is intermittent; but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence. I do not know that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before — a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy.

This essay was derived from the lecture "What Shall It Profit?" which Thoreau first delivered on 6 December 1854, at Railroad Hall in Providence, Rhode Island. He delivered it several times

over the next two years, and edited it for publication before he died in 1862. It was first published in the October 1863 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* where it was given its modern title.

-
The [greatest](#) compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I [thought](#), and attended to my answer.

-
If a man walk in the woods for [love](#) of them half of each day, he is in [danger](#) of being regarded as a loafer...

-
You must get your [living](#) by [loving](#).

-
A grain of [gold](#) will gild a [great](#) surface, but not so much as a grain of [wisdom](#).

-
A little [thought](#) is sexton to [all](#) the [world](#).

-
[Read](#) not the [Times](#). Read the [Eternities](#).

-
Where there is a lull of [truth](#), an institution springs up. But the truth blows right on over it, nevertheless, and at length blows it down.

-
Why should we not meet, not always as dyspeptics, to tell our bad [dreams](#), but sometimes as *eupeptics*, to congratulate each other on the ever [glorious morning](#)?

- **The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.** I am surprised, as well as delighted, when this happens, it is such a rare use he would make of me, as if he were acquainted with the tool.
- I take it for granted, when I am invited to lecture anywhere, — for I have had a little experience in that business, — that there is a desire to hear what I *think* on some subject, though I may be the greatest fool in the country, — and not that I should say pleasant things merely, or such as the audience will assent to; and I resolve, accordingly, that I will give them a strong dose of myself. They have sent for me, and engaged to pay for me, and I am determined that they shall have me, though I bore them beyond all precedent.
- I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.
- I will not talk about people a thousand miles off, but come as near home as I can. As the time is short, I will leave out all the flattery, and retain all the criticism.
Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives.

- **If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen.** As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!
- Most men would feel insulted, if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall, and then in throwing them back, merely that they might earn their [wages](#). But many are no more worthily employed now.
- **The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money *merely* is to have been truly idle or worse.** If the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself.
- **Those services which the community will most readily pay for it is most disagreeable to render. You are paid for being something less than a man.**
- As for my own business, even that kind of surveying which I could do with most satisfaction my employers do not want. They would prefer that I should do my work coarsely and not too well, ay, not well enough. **When I observe that there are different ways of surveying, my employer commonly asks which will give him the most land, not which is most correct.**
- Do not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for love of it.
- The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man. You may raise money enough to tunnel a mountain, but you cannot raise money enough to hire a man who is minding *his own* business. **An efficient and valuable man does what he can, whether the community pay him for it or not.** The inefficient offer their inefficiency to the highest bidder, and are forever expecting to be put into office. One would suppose that they were rarely disappointed.
- Perhaps I am more than usually jealous with respect to my freedom. I feel that my connection with and obligation to society are still very slight and transient. Those slight labors which afford me a livelihood, and by which it is allowed that I am to some extent serviceable to my contemporaries, are as yet commonly a pleasure to me, and I am not often reminded that they are a necessity. So far I am successful. But I foresee, that, if my wants should be much increased, the labor required to supply them would become a drudgery. If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure, that, for me, there would be nothing left worth living for. I trust that I shall never thus sell my birthright for a mess of pottage.

- **I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living.** All great enterprises are self-supporting. The poet, for instance, must sustain his body by his poetry, as a steam planing-mill feeds its boilers with the shavings it makes. **You must get your living by loving.**
- Merely to come into the world the heir of a fortune is not to be born, but to be still-born, rather. To be supported by the charity of friends, or a government-pension, — provided you continue to breathe, — by whatever fine synonymes you describe these relations, is to go into the almshouse.
- In the Catholic Church, especially, they go into chancery, make a clean confession, give up all, and think to start again. Thus men will lie on their backs, talking about the fall of man, and never make an effort to get up.
- **The title *wise* is, for the most part, falsely applied.** How can one be a wise man, if he does not know any better how to live than other men? — if he is only more cunning and intellectually subtle?
- The rush to California, for instance, and the attitude, not merely of merchants, but of philosophers and prophets, so called, in relation to it, reflect the greatest disgrace on mankind. That so many are ready to live by luck, and so get the means of commanding the labor of others less lucky, without contributing any value to society!
- I did not know that mankind were suffering for want of gold. I have seen a little of it. I know that it is very malleable, but not so malleable as wit. **A grain of gold will gild a great surface, but not so much as a grain of wisdom.**
- Men rush to California and Australia as if the true gold were to be found in that direction; but that is to go to the very opposite extreme to where it lies. They go prospecting farther and farther away from the true lead, and are most unfortunate when they think themselves most successful.
- Howitt says of the man who found the great nugget which weighed twenty-eight pounds, at the Bendigo diggings in Australia: — "He soon began to drink; got a horse, and rode all about, generally at full gallop, and, when he met people, called out to inquire if they knew who he was, and then kindly informed them that he was 'the bloody wretch that had found the nugget.' At last he rode full speed against a tree, and nearly knocked his brains out." I think, however, there was no danger of that, for he had already knocked his brains out against the nugget.
- It is remarkable that among all the preachers there are so few moral teachers.

The prophets are employed in excusing the ways of men.

- In our science and philosophy, even, there is commonly no true and absolute account of things. The spirit of sect and bigotry has planted its hoof amid the stars. You have only to discuss the problem, whether the stars are inhabited or not, in order to discover it.
- Of what significance the things you can forget? **A little thought is sexton to all the world.**
- **I hardly know an *intellectual* man, even, who is so broad and truly liberal that you can think aloud in his society.** Most with whom you endeavor to talk soon come to a stand against some institution in which they appear to hold stock, — that is, some particular, not universal, way of viewing things.
- In some lyceums they tell me that they have voted to exclude the subject of religion. But how do I know what their religion is, and when I am near to or far from it? I have walked into such an arena and done my best to make a clean breast of what religion I have experienced, and the audience never suspected what I was about.
- To speak impartially, the best men that I know are not serene, a world in themselves. For the most part, they dwell in forms, and flatter and study effect only more finely than the rest. We select granite for the underpinning of our houses and barns; we build fences of stone; but we do not ourselves rest on an underpinning of granitic truth, the lowest primitive rock. Our sills are rotten.
- While there are manners and compliments we do not meet, we do not teach one another the lessons of honesty and sincerity that the brutes do, or of steadiness and solidity that the rocks do. The fault is commonly mutual, however; for we do not habitually demand any more of each other.
- When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip. We rarely meet a man who can tell us any news which he has not read in a newspaper, or been told by his neighbor; and, for the most part, the only difference between us and our fellow is, that he has seen the newspaper, or been out to tea, and we have not. In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office.
- I do not know but it is too much to read one newspaper a week. I have tried it recently, and for so long it seems to me that I have not dwelt in my native region. The sun, the clouds, the snow, the trees say not so much to me. You cannot serve two masters. **It requires more than a day's devotion to know and to possess the wealth of a day.**

- We may well be ashamed to tell what things we have read or heard in our day. I do not know why my news should be so trivial, — considering what one's dreams and expectations are, why the developments should be so paltry. The news we hear, for the most part, is not news to our genius. It is the stalest repetition.
- **We do not live for idle amusement.** I would not run round a corner to see the world blow up.
- Not without a slight shudder at the danger, I often perceive how near I had come to admitting into my mind the details of some trivial affair, — the news of the street; and I am astonished to observe how willing men are to lumber their minds with such rubbish, — to permit idle rumors and incidents of the most insignificant kind to intrude on ground which should be sacred to thought. Shall the mind be a public arena, where the affairs of the street and the gossip of the tea-table chiefly are discussed? Or shall it be a quarter of heaven itself, — an hypæthral temple, consecrated to the service of the gods? **I find it so difficult to dispose of the few facts which to me are significant, that I hesitate to burden my attention with those which are insignificant, which only a divine mind could illustrate. Such is, for the most part, the news in newspapers and conversation. It is important to preserve the mind's chastity in this respect.**
- **It is so hard to forget what it is worse than useless to remember! If I am to be a thoroughfare, I prefer that it be of the mountain-brooks, the Parnassian streams, and not the town-sewers.** There is inspiration, that gossip which comes to the ear of the attentive mind from the courts of heaven. There is the profane and stale revelation of the bar-room and the police court. The same ear is fitted to receive both communications. Only the character of the hearer determines to which it shall be open, and to which closed. **I believe that the mind can be permanently profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things, so that all our thoughts shall be tinged with triviality.**
- **Read not the Times. Read the Eternities. Conventionalities are at length as bad as impurities. Even the facts of science may dust the mind by their dryness, unless they are in a sense effaced each morning, or rather rendered fertile by the dews of fresh and living truth. Knowledge does not come to us by details, but in flashes of light from heaven.** Yes, every thought that passes through the mind helps to wear and tear it, and to deepen the ruts, which, as in the streets of Pompeii, evince how much it has been used. How many things there are concerning which we might well deliberate, whether we had better know them, — had better let their peddling-carts be driven, even at the slowest trot or walk, over that bridge of glorious span by which we trust to pass at last from the farthest brink of time to the nearest shore of eternity! Have we no culture, no refinement, — but skill only to live coarsely and serve the Devil? — to

acquire a little worldly wealth, or fame, or liberty, and make a false show with it, as if we were all husk and shell, with no tender and living kernel to us? Shall our institutions be like those chestnut-burs which contain abortive nuts, perfect only to prick the fingers?

- **Do we call this the land of the free? What is it to be free from King George and continue the slaves of King Prejudice?** What is it to be born free and not to live free? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom? **Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free, of which we boast? We are a nation of politicians, concerned about the outmost defences only of freedom. It is our children's children who may perchance be really free.**
- **With respect to a true culture and manhood, we are essentially provincial still, not metropolitan,** — mere Jonathans. We are provincial, because we do not find at home our standards, — because we do not worship truth, but the reflection of truth, — because we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end.
- The finest manners in the world are awkwardness and fatuity, when contrasted with a finer intelligence.
- **Where there is a lull of truth, an institution springs up. But the truth blows right on over it, nevertheless, and at length blows it down.**
- **What is called politics is comparatively something so superficial and inhuman, that, practically, I have never fairly recognized that it concerns me at all.** The newspapers, I perceive, devote some of their columns specially to politics or government without charge; and this, one would say, is all that saves it; but, as I love literature, and, to some extent, the truth also, I never read those columns at any rate. I do not wish to blunt my sense of right so much.
- Those things which now most engage the attention of men, as politics and the daily routine, are, it is true, vital functions of human society, but should be unconsciously performed, like the corresponding functions of the physical body. **They are *infra*-human, a kind of vegetation.** I sometimes awake to a half-consciousness of them going on about me, as a man may become conscious of some of the processes of digestion in a morbid state, and so have the dyspepsia, as it is called.
- Politics is, as it were, the gizzard of society, full of grit and gravel, and the two political parties are its two opposite halves, — sometimes split into quarters, it may be, which grind on each other. Not only individuals, but States, have thus a

confirmed dyspepsia, which expresses itself, you can imagine by what sort of eloquence. Thus our life is not altogether a forgetting, but also, alas! to a great extent, a remembering of that which we should never have been conscious of, certainly not in our waking hours. **Why should we not meet, not always as dyspeptics, to tell our bad dreams, but sometimes as eupeptics, to congratulate each other on the ever glorious morning? I do not make an exorbitant demand, surely.**

[Manuscripts of Thoreau](#) published in *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings* (1993) edited by Bradley P. Dean

-
Who could [believe](#) in prophecies of [Daniel](#) or of Miller that the world would end this summer, while one milkweed with [faith](#) matured its seeds?

- Who could believe in prophecies of [Daniel](#) or of [Miller](#) that the world would end this summer, while one [milkweed](#) with faith matured its seeds?

Disputed[Edit](#)

- What lies before us and what lies behind us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within out into the world, miracles happen.
 - Attributed to Thoreau, in *The Life You Were Born to Live : A Guide to Finding Your Life Purpose* (1995) by Dan Millman, p. xi, and to [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) in *Promotion of Pharmaceuticals : Issues, Trends, Options* (1993) by Dev S. Pathak, Alan Escovitz, and Suzan Kucukarslan, p. 74, but no occurrence of it prior to the 1990s has been located.

Misattributed[Edit](#)

- Truths and roses have thorns about them.
 - This is commonly misattributed because Thoreau wrote it in his journal June 14, 1838, but it was not original. This was a popular aphorism in his day, appearing in several collections of proverbs during his lifetime. Its origin is unknown, but it had appeared in print before his birth. E.g., in [Joseph Dennie](#) and Asbury Dickins, *The Port Folio*, vol.2, no.1 (July 1809), p. 431; and in Felipe Fernandez, *Exercises on the rules of construction of the Spanish language*, 3rd ed. (1811), p. 228.
- None are so old as those who have outlived enthusiasm.
 - First attributed to Thoreau in *A year of sunshine: cheerful extracts for every day in the year* (Kate Sanborn, 1886) and *American literature* (Mildred Cabell Watkins, 1894), but there is no known citation to Thoreau's works.

- Wealth is the ability to fully experience life.
- Success usually comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it.
 - No known citation to Thoreau's works. First found, uncredited, in the 1940s in the variant "Success usually comes to those who are too busy to look for it", p. 711, *Locomotive Engineers Journal*, Volume 76, 1942. [Google Books](#)
- Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.
- 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 will come and sit softly on your shoulder.
 - According to [The Quote Investigator](#), "the earliest instance of this saying was crafted by the enigmatic "L" for "The Daily Crescent" newspaper in New Orleans [in June 1848]. ... The linkage to Henry David Thoreau is unsupported."
- **Thoreau believed that one of the [arts](#) of [life](#) was to make the most of it.** He loved the [multum in parvo](#), or pot-luck; to boil up the little into the big. Thus, he was in the [habit](#) of saying, — Give me healthy senses, let me be thoroughly alive, and breathe freely in the very flood-tide of the living world. But this should have availed him little, if he had not been at the same time copiously endowed with the [power](#) of recording what he imbibed. His senses truly lived twice.
- His [words](#) also were as distinct and true to the ear as those of a great singer, and he had [Tennyson](#)'s splendid gift in this, that he never went back on his tracks to pick up the fallen loops of a sentence as commonplace talkers do. He would hesitate for an instant now and then, waiting for the right word, or would pause with a pathetic [patience](#) to master the trouble in his chest, but when he was through the sentence was perfect and entire, lacking nothing, and the word was so purely one with the man that when I read his books now and then I do not hear my own voice within my reading but the voice I heard that day.
 - [Robert Collyer](#) in "[Thoreau](#)" an address at the Church of the Messiah (28 January 1883); first published in *Clear Grit: A Collection of Lectures, Addresses and Poems* (1913)
- **He chose to be rich by making his wants few, and supplying them himself.** In his travels, he used the railroad only to get over so much country as was unimportant to the present purpose, walking hundreds of miles, avoiding taverns, buying a lodging in farmers' and fishermen's houses, as cheaper, and more agreeable to him, and because there he could better find the men and the information he wanted.

There was somewhat military in his nature not to be subdued, always manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition. He wanted a fallacy to expose, a blunder to pillory, I may say required a little sense of victory, a roll of the drum, to call his powers into full exercise.

- [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) in "[Thoreau](#)" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1862)
- **Idealist as he was, standing for [abolition](#) of [slavery](#), abolition of tariffs, almost for abolition of [government](#), it is needless to say he found himself not only unrepresented in actual [politics](#), but almost equally opposed to every class of reformers.**
 - [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) in "Thoreau" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1862)
- I think his fancy for referring everything to the meridian of Concord did not grow out of any ignorance or depreciation of other longitudes or latitudes, but was rather a playful expression of his conviction of the indifference of all places, and that the best place for each is where he stands. He expressed it once in this wise: — "I think nothing is to be hoped from you, if this bit of mould under your feet is not sweeter to you to eat than any other in this world, or in any world."
 - [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) in "Thoreau" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1862)
- Whilst he used in his writings a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender, and absolute [religion](#), a person incapable of any profanation, by act or by thought. Of course, the same isolation which belonged to his original thinking and living detached him from the social religious forms. This is neither to be censured nor regretted. [Aristotle](#) long ago explained it, when he said, "One who surpasses his fellow-citizens in virtue is no longer a part of the city. Their law is not for him, since he is a law to himself." Thoreau was [sincerity](#) itself, and might fortify the convictions of [prophets](#) in the ethical laws by his [holy](#) living. It was an affirmative experience which refused to be set aside. A truth-speaker he, capable of the most deep and strict conversation; a physician to the wounds of any [soul](#); a [friend](#), knowing not only the secret of friendship, but almost worshipped by those few persons who resorted to him as their confessor and prophet, and knew the deep value of his [mind](#) and great [heart](#). **He thought that without religion or devotion of some kind nothing great was ever accomplished: and he thought that the bigoted sectarian had better bear this in mind.**
 - [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) in "Thoreau" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1862)
- **In reading Henry Thoreau's Journal, I am very sensible of the vigor of his constitution.** That oaken [strength](#) which I noted whenever he walked or worked or surveyed wood lots, the same unhesitating hand with which a field-laborer accosts a piece of work which I should shun as a waste of strength, Henry shows in his literary task. He has muscle, & ventures on & performs tasks which I am

forced to decline. In reading him, I find the same thoughts, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step beyond, & illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generality. 'Tis as if I went into a gymnasium, & saw youths leap, climb, & swing with a force unapproachable, — though their feats are only continuations of my initial grapplings & jumps.

- [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) in his journal (24 June 1863)
- Henry Thoreau is like the woodgod who solicits the wandering poet & draws him into antres [sic] vast & deserts [sic] idle, & bereaves him of his memory. & leaves him naked, plaiting vines & with twigs in his hand. Very seductive are the first steps from the town to the woods, but the End is want and madness.
 - [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), *Emerson: Selected Journals 1841–1877*, edited by Lawrence Rosenwald (2010), p. 427
- Thoreau wants a little ambition in his mixture. Fault of this, instead of being the head of American Engineers, he is captain of a huckleberry party.
 - [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), *Emerson: Selected Journals 1841–1877*, edited by Lawrence Rosenwald (2010), p. 557
- ...Thoreau gives me in flesh & blood & pertinacious Saxon belief, my own ethics. He is far more real, & daily practicing obeying them, than I; and fortifies my memory at all times with an affirmative experience which refuses to be set aside.
 - [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), *Emerson: Selected Journals 1841–1877*, edited by Lawrence Rosenwald (2010), p. 597
- It is curious that Thoreau goes to a house to say with little preface what he has just read or observed, delivers it in lump, is quite inattentive to any comment or thought which any of the company offer on the matter, nay, is merely interrupted by it, & when he has finished his report, departs with precipitation.
 - [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), *Emerson: Selected Journals 1841–1877*, edited by Lawrence Rosenwald (2010), p. 664
- Henry avoids all commonplace, & talks birch bark to all comers, & reduces them all to the same insignificance.
 - [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), *Emerson: Selected Journals 1841–1877*, edited by Lawrence Rosenwald (2010), p. 688
- Truly, [Nature](#) absorbed his attention, but I don't think he cared much for what is called the beauties of nature; it was her way of working, her [mystery](#), her economy in extravagance; he delighted to trace her footsteps toward their source He liked to feel that the pursuit was endless, with mystery at both ends of it
 - [Julian Hawthorne](#) in [The Memoirs of Julian Hawthorne \(1938\)](#)
- **He is a singular character — a young man with much of wild original nature**

still remaining in him; and so far as he is sophisticated, it is in a way and method of his own. He is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and rustic, though courteous manners, corresponding very well with such an exterior. But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion, and becomes him much better than beauty. He was educated, I believe, at Cambridge, and formerly kept school in this town; but for two or three years back, he has repudiated all regular modes of getting a living, and seems inclined to lead a sort of Indian life among civilized men — an Indian life, I mean, as respects the absence of any systematic effort for a livelihood. ... Mr. Thoreau is a keen and delicate observer of nature — a genuine observer — which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and Nature, in return for his love, seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness.

- [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#), in his [Journal entry for \(1 September 1842\)](#)

- **Among American writers Thoreau was the pioneer of nature-study.** [Audubon](#) had preceded him but he worked mainly with the brush; to multitudes Thoreau opened the gate to the secrets of our natural environment. The subtle delicacy of the grass-blade, the crystals of the snowflake, the icicle, the marvel of the weird lines traced by the flocks of wild geese athwart the heavens as they migrated, these he watched and recorded with loving accuracy and sensitive poetic feeling as no one in our land before had done. I have thrown a stone upon the cairn at Walden Pond which has now grown so high through the tributes of his grateful admirers. I shall throw still others in grateful admiration if the opportunity comes to me.
- Thoreau's thin, penetrating, big-nosed face, even in a bad woodcut, conveys some hint of the limitations of his mind and character. With his almost acid sharpness of insight, with his almost animal dexterity in act, there went none of that large, unconscious geniality of the world's heroes. He was not easy, not ample, not urbane, not even kind; his enjoyment was hardly smiling, or the smile was not broad enough to be convincing; he had no waste lands nor kitchen-midden in his nature, but was all improved and sharpened to a point. "He was bred to no profession," says Emerson; "he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. When asked at dinner what dish he preferred, he answered, 'the nearest.'" So many negative superiorities begin to smack a little of the prig. From his later works he was in the habit of cutting out the humorous passages, under the impression that they were beneath the dignity of his moral muse; and there we see the prig stand public and confessed.

- A man who must separate himself from his neighbours' habits in order to be happy, is in much the same case with one who requires to take opium for the same purpose. What we want to see is one who can breast into the world, do a man's work, and still preserve his first and pure enjoyment of existence.
 - Robert Louis Stevenson in "Henry David Thoreau: His Character and Opinions", *Cornhill Magazine* (June 1880)
- ...every idea I've had is there. I needn't have bothered thinking.
 - [John Cage](#), of discovering Thoreau's journals, *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage* by Kenneth Silverman (2010), p. 262
- **He sounds, as it were, the fatal bottom of our organic existence, and yet claims not merely to accept the universe, as another Transcendentalist, [Margaret Fuller](#), put it, but to rejoice in it.** ... To the dark immensity of material Nature's indifference we can oppose only the brief light, like a lamp in a cabin, of our consciousness; the invigorating benison of [Walden](#) is to make us feel that the contest is equal, and fair. It has emerged over time as one of the great testaments of American individualism, assuring the New World, traditional reassurances failing, of the value, power, and beauty of the unfettered self.
 - [John Updike](#), in "[A Sage for All Seasons](#)" in [The Guardian](#) (26 June 2004)
- Thoreau's disobedience is disobedience as refusal. I won't live in your world. I will live as if your world has ended, as indeed it deserves to end. I will live as if my gesture of refusing your world has destroyed it.
 - [Curtis White](#), "The spirit of disobedience: An invitation to resistance," *Harper's*, April 2006, p. 36