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an excerpt of

Simplicity and Sanity

THE first time I assigned *Walden* in an undergraduate class, I opened our discussion of the book by asking the students for their initial reactions. A man wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt quickly raised his hand to say he was surprised that a writer as famous as Thoreau would use so many clichés. When I asked for an example, the student answered, “Like, if you don’t march along with everybody else, it’s because you’re stepping to the beat of a different drummer. My mom’s got that one on a magnet on her refrigerator.”

I agreed that the different drummer must be weary by now, having been called on so many times, but I pointed out that when Thoreau used the metaphor it was fresh and vigorous, for he had made it up. Indeed, I explained, Thoreau originated dozens of expressions that have become part of our common awareness, if not always of our common speech, and I rattled off examples. Then another student asked me a shrewd question: in composing his memorable phrases, was Thoreau voicing ideas nobody had ever thought of before, or was he just finding new ways to convey old truths? Having recently fallen under the spell of Thoreau, I answered that his thinking was as original as his writing. At the time, I understood *original* to mean unprecedented, something utterly new under the sun, roughly what my students and my hip colleagues meant by “cutting edge.”

Over the years since then, having read more widely, I’ve realized that one could find precedents for virtually all of Thoreau’s central ideas: from sources close to him in space and time, such as Emerson; from sources long influential in the West, such as the Greek philosophers or the Bible; and from more remote sources that were only just beginning to reach America, such as ancient Buddhist and Hindu thought. I also came to understand that originality does not mean novelty, but returning to origins. Thus, when Emerson demands in

the opening paragraph of *Nature*, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” he is exhorting us to encounter things *directly*, and not merely through scriptures or hand-me-down notions or intermediaries such as ministers or pundits. He is urging us to probe the depths of existence for ourselves, accepting nothing on hearsay or faith. The Latin root of *origin* means to rise, to give birth, to set in motion. To be original, therefore, is to seek the source from which all things rise. Thoreau was just that kind of seeker—not only for the two years and two months he spent living beside Walden Pond, but for his entire adult life. He was original in the deepest sense: a radical, one who delved down to the roots.

I suspect that Thoreau would have felt amusement mixed with scorn for those who brag of being “cutting edge” because they wear the latest fashions, own the latest electronic gadget, or spout the latest lingo. Novelty was never his goal; his goal was integrity. He strove for wholeness, the union of life and thought. The motive for his tireless observation, reflection, reading, and writing was not merely to gain a deeper understanding of our mysterious existence but to *practice* that understanding, to act it out, day by day. Of course, he did not act out his ideas or values perfectly; no one does. But he dramatized the effort with unrivaled power. We learn of his effort from the testimony of people who knew him and from biographies, but mainly from his own account, written in one of the most compelling prose styles ever created by an American writer.

The combination of radical thinking, deliberate living, and literary brilliance has drawn countless readers to Thoreau, especially those who sense there is something profoundly wrong with the vision of the good life offered by our industrial, technological, and materialistic society. In America one can trace a lineage of dissident souls—John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Helen and Scott Nearing, Anna and Harlan Hubbard, Thomas Merton, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, and a great many others—who found in Thoreau the confirmation, if not the inspiration, for their own efforts at rethinking the meaning and conduct of life.

I belong to this lineage of writers inspired by Thoreau, however humble my place may be. After forty years of reading him, I am more impressed than ever by the power of his example and the vigor of his prose, and I am at times astounded by the prescience of his social critique. To illustrate his uncanny relevance to our present dilemmas, I want to examine one key element in his philosophy—the call for simplicity. . . .

I would be hard-pressed to exaggerate the pervasiveness of advertising. Nearly every earthly surface is plastered with ads—bus shelters, gas pumps, the interiors of elevators, the shells of eggs in grocery stores, trays at airport security gates, room keys in motels, the paper sheets on doctors' examining tables—so that the built environment begins to resemble the costumes of race car drivers, with each square inch peddling some product. . . .

Along with praising greed, this marketing blitz overturns several others of the Ten Commandments, such as keeping the Sabbath holy and shunning idols and telling the truth, and it encourages nearly all seven of the deadly sins, notably pride, sloth, envy, gluttony, and lust. Advertising does not create these impulses, of course; it merely exploits them, and it does so using the best talent and techniques that money can buy. . . . There is no comparably well-funded, relentless, and pervasive influence appealing to our benevolent impulses such as compassion, humility, generosity, prudence, fidelity, or thrift. . . .

Near the end of his life, Thoreau observed that “most men . . . do not care for Nature and would sell their share in all her beauty, as long as they may live, for a stated sum—many for a glass of rum. Thank God, men cannot as yet fly, and lay waste the sky as well as the earth! We are safe on that side for the present. It is for the very reason that some do not care for those things that we need to continue to protect all from the vandalism of a few.” The vandalism of a few is still a threat to natural beauty, as witnessed in the push by a handful of corporations, lobbyists, and public officials to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling or to carve up the last remnants of old growth forests with logging roads. But today the vandalism of the many is the greater threat. Billions of ordinary people, obeying their appetites and the enticements of the marketplace, are laying waste to the sky as well as the land and sea.

Nature is already imposing limits on the human economy, through resource depletion and ecological breakdown. If we human beings were as wise as we claim to be in calling ourselves *Homo sapiens*, we would do voluntarily what nature will otherwise force on us. We would restrain our appetites and, over generations, reduce our population. We would fashion an economy

based on needs rather than wants. We would measure every product, every technology, every private or public decision, against the standard of ecological and communal health.

As a first step in that direction, let us quit using the word “consumer” for a season and use instead the close synonym, “devourer.” Thus, the Office of Consumer Affairs would become the Office of Devourer Affairs. In schools, the study of consumer science, which used to be called home economics, would become devourer science. Savvy shoppers would subscribe to *Devourer Reports*. Pollsters would conduct devourer surveys. Newspapers would track the ups and downs of the devourer price index.

The point of these substitutions is not mere wordplay. The point is to regain a sense of what our language implies. To consume means to use up or lay waste, as fire reduces a house to rubble and ash. We should resent being called consumers, and all the more so when those who apply the label suggest that they care only about our happiness and well-being.

Let us think of ourselves, instead, as “conservers”. For conservers, the Earth is not a warehouse of disposable stuff, but the source and sustainer of life, surpassingly beautiful, worthy of love. True, we must draw upon the Earth in order to live, but we should do so gratefully, respectfully, and modestly, aiming to preserve rather than devour our planetary home. This is the ethical imperative at the heart of the call to simplicity. . . .



Unlike Thoreau and his contemporaries, we now face problems that are global in scale, and so we need wise policies at the national and international level. But solutions even of global problems must begin with changes in the vision and practice of individuals. We arrived at our current predicament as a result of billions of individual choices. We can turn our civilization around and head in a new direction by making new choices, person by person, household by household, neighborhood by neighborhood, business by church by school. Beginning right now, we can choose to lead materially simpler lives, to conserve rather than consume, to own fewer things and give away what we don't need; we can undertake fewer activities, and those we do undertake we can pursue with more care and delight. We can move around less and pay closer attention to our home ground. We can draw more of our food and other

necessities from local sources. Instead of chasing after manufactured sensations, we can revel in nature and community. Instead of distracting ourselves with novelties, we can seek what is enduring. We can strive to be, like Thoreau, truly original, and delve down to the wellsprings of life. . . .