

Reading 4, *Walden*

Henry David Thoreau's 1854 classic *Walden* is a fascinating book that has been read very differently at different times.

Many readers, even passionate environmentalists, can quickly cool to both Thoreau and *Walden*. Why? To be honest, each is a bit of a mess. Even if you have never read *Walden*, you may well be aware of some of the issues, as they frequently come up even in casual discussions of Thoreau. Let's address them at the onset, so that we can then move past them to consider how Thoreau can help us see our way through the climate crisis.

Thoreau talks about Walden Pond as if it were wilderness. In fact, it is just a mile outside of Concord, Massachusetts, the town where he lived. Hardly wilderness. More like a rather inviting local park. A great place to go camping.

Thoreau goes on and on about solitude, the wilderness solitude of Walden Pond. In fact, he had visitors nearly every day and walked home frequently (which took less than half an hour) for his mom's home-cooked dinners – which also makes clear that he was hardly “roughing it.”

Thoreau talks quite a bit about why he chose to live his life at Walden Pond. In fact, he lived there for just over two years, then spent the rest of his life in a pretty conventional way. By all accounts, his later life in Concord was pretty much like the life of his Concord neighbors that he repeatedly rails against in *Walden*.

In short, the life of wilderness solitude that Thoreau paints in *Walden* is...well... let's be kind and just say, not quite accurate.

And then there is the whole issue of “Civil Disobedience.” Thoreau made much of the fact that while living at Walden Pond he was arrested and put in jail as a result of his protest of slavery. In fact, he spent just one night in jail. While Thoreau's heart was certainly in the right place, in a century where millions of Americans were born and died in slavery, it's hard to sympathize with the hardship that Thoreau experienced during his solitary night in jail.

In general, it's hard to sympathize with Thoreau, as, in so many ways, his life was one marked by privilege. He never tires of drawing attention to the fact that at Walden Pond he lived a life that was essentially one of poverty. In fact, Thoreau came from a relatively wealthy family. He was educated at Harvard.

If you read between the lines, Thoreau draws attention to this fact in the very first sentence of *Walden*, where he notes that while living at Walden Pond “[I] earned my living by the labor of my hands only.” In a century when the overwhelming majority of Americans earned a living through the work of their hands, only a wealthy person would likely have felt the need to make such a declaration. Thoreau’s opening statement thus sounds a little like saying “brace yourself for a shock readers: even though I am hardly the sort of person that needs to work for a living, I actually got my hands dirty. Read about my extraordinary adventure!”

A few years ago, a student of mine wryly noted that bookstores are littered with how-to-get-rich manuals for people without much money. *Walden* is also a how-to manual: how to live like you don’t have any money when in fact you have (or at least your family has) quite a bit. Poverty was a game that Thoreau played at, rather than an inescapable reality of life, as it was – and still is – for so many Americans.

Thoreau was privileged by more than virtue of the fact that he came from money. True, Walden Pond was hardly wilderness, but it was secluded some distance from any neighbors. One hundred and seventy years ago, it would simply not have been safe for a woman, a person of color, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, or any number of people to live alone in such an isolated place. (I’m not sure things have improved that much in this regard in all the intervening years.)

Walden is, of course, also ableist. How, exactly, do you live Thoreau’s *Walden* lifestyle in a wheelchair? Or with certain medical conditions? Or if you are elderly?

In short, Thoreau’s sojourn at Walden Pond was a sort of game that could, for the most part, only have been played at the time by a relatively small, select group: healthy, wealthy, young white men.

Thoreau can also be seen as the great grandparent of the modern minimalist movement, as he famously reduced one of *Walden*’s core messages to a two-word imperative: “simplify, simplify.” This is arguably Thoreau’s most useful message for the 21st century.

In this sense, Thoreau did something altogether extraordinary (arguably far more extraordinary than living in a semi-wilderness setting) – yet, nonetheless, something all of us should arguably do at some point in our lives:

He stepped out of his regular routine to ponder the sort of life that he considered worth living. In practice, he took a couple of years of his life to, as he puts it, “front only the essential facts of

life.” He wanted to strip away all the stuff and crap surrounding him to find the meaningful life under it all. Among other things, he considered housing, clothing, and food.

Distressed by his neighbors, who even in the 1850s were building increasingly lavish houses, Thoreau pondered what would be the simplest dwelling possible for a single person. His answer? A wooden version of a single-person tent, with a floor just big enough for a bedroll. To keep things simple from the start, he proposed recycling a used railway storage box, which could be purchased at the time for a dollar, for the purpose. Ultimately, he settled on a larger structure, which at 150 square feet may seem lavish by comparison but is nevertheless about the size of a garden shed (which his cabin at Walden Pond resembled).

When Thoreau turned his attention to clothing, he railed against the fashion industry, which even then was centered in Paris, for encouraging us to buy into fleeting trends: “The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveler’s cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same.” Because “every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new,” clothing was (as it is even more today) being discarded as unfashionable when it was still quite usable. To simplify things, Thoreau suggested not giving in to the whims of fashion. Instead, own just a few pieces of sturdy clothing and, for good measure, he warned us to “beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.”

With respect to food, Thoreau made repeated appeals for the simplicity of vegetarianism: “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 early as *Walden*, he also rejected imported foodstuffs, like coffee and tea. His last work, unpublished in his lifetime, was a celebration of local and seasonal wild fruit, which he extolled as superior to their imported counterparts, such as oranges and bananas that were being shipped into US. ports (like nearby Boston) by way of sailing ships.

In general, though he was certainly given to his share of philosophical musing, throughout his life Thoreau repeatedly drew his (and our) attention to the most basic of our day-to-day needs, which, he provocatively argued can be satisfied far more simply than we usually imagine.

But Thoreau did something more, something bigger and altogether extraordinary: he challenged us all to ponder the role that we were given at birth. This has profound environmental implications.

Think of life like a play, a theatrical performance, that has been scripted for you. When you were born, you stepped into a role, exceptionally intricate, that was written long before you were even conceived. For example, where you would live, how you would get around, what you would eat, all this was spelled out for you, in detail. It's not that you weren't given some latitude in playing the role. For example, you could choose the car that you wanted and could afford. However, you could not easily choose to forgo having a car – not if you wanted to play the role successfully (i.e. be seen as a success).

Like many generations before, my generation lived the life scripted for us. In that sense, we did not take up Thoreau's challenge to reconsider the life written for us. What's worse, in many ways ours was an over-the-top performance in the role, as we did so many things bigger and more outlandishly. For example, in dramatic contrast to Thoreau, we live in houses that are 2 1/2 times larger than those of our parents (which, incidentally, were already six times larger than Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond).

The new generation coming on the scene (and by that, I mean you, my students) cannot live the life scripted for them, as this would be environmentally disastrous. To some, this will be frustrating, perhaps enormously so, as the pressure to conform to that role (which comes from a thousand directions in our culture) can be pretty intense. Even little things, like forgoing a car and meat-eating, can be met with a backlash from those, happily living the scripted role, who see this as a threat to that way of life.

If you happily accept the role handed to you, this might be especially frustrating. Yes, the generations that came before you had lots of things that you will not have. Let's face it, we had awesome amounts of stuff. However, it is not at all clear that any of this made us happy. Indeed, it has arguably done just the opposite.

In any event, what this new generation needs to do is to take up Thoreau's challenge and reconsider and rewrite the script. This can be seen as an opportunity – a huge and exciting one. However, it is also an enormous challenge.

So, my question is just what do you make of Thoreau and his challenge to an overly bloated life? Given that he is responding to life in nineteenth-century America, imagine what his reaction would be to our consumer world. Is Thoreau onto something, should we all "simplify, simplify"?

As usual, I will select a number of your comments and respond to them in a future episode.

Class discussion of *Walden*

(Note that the following observations, which are in italics, have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, often just part of the comment is reproduced here along with my reply. In working through these, I will first quote an observation by a student, followed by my thoughts.)

I wasn't a major fan of this reading. Thoreau stood out to me as very spoiled and at times even racist (Savages?! I mean come on). Still, despite not enjoying reading such long-winded prose, I can still see how it relates to today. He mentions how buying a house can take ages and that it would be simpler to "buy" (or build) a smaller one that you can own. One that won't take you most of your life to pay off so that you may enjoy the fruits of life. Even more relatable was when he talked about college dorms, and how his "house" cost as much as one, except he didn't need to pay for it annually or have to worry about loud and obnoxious roommates/neighbors. I believe these two things were what intrigued me the most and caused me to go "Ah, okay I see what you mean" after paragraphs of barely understanding what was being said.

Good point. As I made clear in the [Introduction to our online edition of *Walden*](#), there are a number of things in the book that are off-putting – if not reason enough to forever put it down. It is also the case that one can, as this comment notes, sometimes read whole paragraphs of *Walden* without a clue as to what Thoreau is getting out.

In many ways, Thoreau is certainly a product of his age. This is especially evident when he talks about people from cultures other than his own. Although he may, in fact, be drawing attention to something valuable about their culture, more often than not one gets the impression that he still nonetheless sees himself as fundamentally superior to these individuals.

In instances like this, it would be nice to be able to see these beliefs as being Thoreau's culture speaking through him, rather than his own deeply held convictions. The problem is that other writers at the time didn't buy into these beliefs, but rather, in fact, drew attention to them as problematic. Moreover, as Thoreau is urging us to reconsider many of our own beliefs, it is discouraging that he doesn't do so in this case.

So, while I certainly do not think that we should ignore any of this, it is useful to provisionally bracket it off (as did the person who made this comment) so that we can better understand what Thoreau has of value for us. For example, as this person notes, by reconsidering whether or not we would like to have a big house, or, instead of spending "most of your life" working to pay it off, it would be better to spend that time enjoying "the fruits of life."

I remember doing a project on Henry David Thoreau in eighth grade and learning about his time at Walden [Pond] and initially thinking it was quite impressive that he survived on his own. Then, I learned that he was not really very far from civilization. Now that I know more about the world as I've grown up as well, I thought it was interesting that you mentioned that he wouldn't have been able to do this if he was not a straight, wealthy, white male. That was an aspect of Walden that I had not considered before this class, and it is quite true

As I noted in my [Introduction](#) to our online edition of Walden, because Thoreau's life was one marked by privilege, most Americans would not have been able to do what he did by moving "back to nature," which was, as this comment notes, was "not really very far from civilization."

In this sense, as a back-to-nature manual, *Walden* will only likely appeal to a limited number of people. I suspect that this is one of the reasons why some people have been turned off by *Walden*. One can imagine generations of readers putting down the book saying, "Well, I certainly couldn't go out and live in some far-off wilderness— and for that matter, neither did Thoreau, regardless of how he makes it seem in the book." Fair enough.

However, the aspect of Thoreau's project that interests me most (and which I focused on in the Introduction), simplifying one's life by becoming more mindful of it in all its many details, strikes me as something that most people can, one way or another, achieve.

This is one of the reasons why we are not approaching *Walden* as a back-to-nature manual, but instead as, for lack of another term, as a "back-to-life manual," in the sense as it instructs us how to live a more authentic life, which - and this is not incidental to our purpose - will have a significantly smaller climate footprint

When I saw that Ken assigned us to read Henry David Thoreau's work, I questioned why in the hell is Ken making us read this work of literature? How can this possibly relate to our class? But I was already making such assumptions without having read the text yet. As I started to read I was pretty intrigued with what Thoreau had to say and the simplistic life he believed in. It amazed me how this work was written so long ago and for Thoreau to have already caught on to such ideas is insane. I could only imagine how cruel his critiques would be in today's time. Walden was written in 1854, the 19th century, an era that doesn't even compare to what our economy has come to now; capitalistic, materialistic, maximalist, and straight up money hungry in order to live the American dream of a lavish lifestyle.

The idea that a work with literature, especially a somewhat old one, can impact our lives in a meaningful way is not necessarily an intuitive one. Yes, reading literature can be a fun diversion, but we don't usually think of it as asking something of us, let alone something that can completely change our lives.

But this is exactly what *Walden* does, as it is asking something big of us: to completely reevaluate our lives. *Walden* is striking because Thoreau not only thoroughly, as this comment notes, “believed in” the simplistic life that he advocates, but actually lived that life. In other words, Thoreau is not just asking us to reevaluate our lives, but to act on what we learn by radically changing the way that we live.

As I have often observed, one of the things that I find interesting about cultural norms is that, when we are born into them, they generally seem pretty normal. So, if you were born into a culture where nearly everyone drives a car, nothing seems more natural than getting one of your own as soon as you can. However, there’s really nothing natural about this desire, as it is entirely culturally constructed.

Hence, examining a full-fledged car culture that has existed for generations, like our own, may not be as interesting as looking at when this culture historically emerged. If you can catch it at that moment (in this case a little more than 100 years ago), you often find people raising all sorts of concerns about new practices, such as – to give just one example - fears that automobile use would result in a nation of people who would not be exercising enough, as they were when they walked and bicycled everywhere.

Thoreau is interesting because he lived at a time when consumer culture was just beginning to take off in the United States. To us, the nascent consumerism of the time may seem quaint and virtually insignificant; however, to Thoreau, it was anything but, as he saw how it was fundamentally changing people. As *Walden* makes clear, this deeply concerned him.

When I began reading this, I wondered why...[Ken]... had assigned us such a seemingly trivial piece of literature and how that connected to this class...I soon realized that the purpose of reading this was to get the reader to evaluate all of the unnecessary luxuries that we have in our lives and to convince us of why we don't really need all those extra things. Thoreau repeatedly argues that man has put himself in his own state of misery. All of the advantages we've made and the amenities we've created have only left us anxious to have it all. We've mistakenly put ourselves in a vicious cycle of never feeling fully fulfilled with what we have. This has left us miserable, and from his economic point of view, poor...So then, how does all this fit into the environmental theme of this class? Consumerism. And not simple consumerism, but consumerism without thinking of the consequences it could be having.

Thoreau’s central argument is that we have done this to ourselves.

As this comment aptly notes, humanity has put itself into a “state of misery.” We pursue happiness by consuming all sorts of things that all sorts of companies encourage us to buy. However, as Thoreau notes, not only doesn’t consumerism make us happy, it puts us into a state of misery.

According to Thoreau, we spend our lives in a vicious circle of desiring what we do not have, working long hours in unhappy jobs to get these objects of desire, only to find that

they do not give us the happiness that we had hoped they would. Hence, as this person notes, “[w]e’ve mistakenly put ourselves in a vicious cycle of never feeling fully fulfilled with what we have. This has left us miserable, and from his [Thoreau’s] economic point of view, poor.” Well said.

Not only does Thoreau diagnose the problem with the human condition in the age of consumerism, he prescribes a cure: “Simplify, simplify.” As this comment fleshes it out, “I soon realized that the purpose of reading this was to get the reader to evaluate all of the unnecessary luxuries that we have in our lives and to convince us that we don’t really need all those extra things.”

If this were not bad enough in itself, in the century and a half separating us from Thoreau, we have done something else to us that is putting us into a new “state of misery.” The aforementioned “vicious cycle of never feeling fully fulfilled with what we have” is now bringing a whole new kind of misery to the human race (and our planet) by way of the climate crisis.

As this person notes, the problem is “[c]onsumerism. And not simple consumerism, but consumerism without thinking of the consequences it could be having.” Although climate change deniers would like to deny that our actions are bringing misery to human beings and our planet, the facts that climate change scientists have reported to us speak for themselves.

Hence, just as consumerism and the vicious pursuit of stuff was really beginning to take off in the United States, Thoreau clearly saw that it brought not happiness, but misery. What he didn’t know was that it was already beginning to bring a whole new kind of misery to human beings on the earth, as atmospheric CO2 levels were beginning to rise in his era because of the so-called industrial revolution that produced all that stuff.

[Regarding Thoreau’s] points about consumerism, he probably couldn’t have imagined a world where everyone is able to show off their stories with a click of a button on a small phone. This curated view of life pushes people to want the same objects as their favorite influencer, because they want to be happy and content.

Although consumerism in Thoreau’s day may seem quaint to us now, it is anything but quaint today. In many cases, this is a result of advertisers becoming more sophisticated in the age of the Internet.

Back when I was growing up, advertisers had a limited number of options: TV, radio, magazines, billboards, etc.

What is intriguing is that none of these options were directly in the business of selling products. In other words, a TV network did not care whether it was selling you cigarettes or dishwasher detergent. Instead - though it may be a little unnerving to think of it in these terms - TV networks are not in the business of selling products, but rather viewers - people.

Companies like Nielsen Media Research track how many (as well as what kind of) viewers a particular TV show has. Networks then “sell” these viewers to advertisers, who are indeed in the business of selling products, like dishwashing detergent. If networks deliver advertisers an audience of people that would likely buy this particular product that they are selling to the advertisers (which, in the case of dishwashing detergent, would have largely been women in the 1950s), they are paid in direct proportion to the number of viewers (people).

If a TV show is a flop, and hence doesn’t attract a significant number of viewers that can be sold to advertisers, it will quickly be canceled. Conversely, a show is a success if it attracts millions of people that can be sold to the highest bidder.

Although, in certain ways, advertising is far more sophisticated now, in a sense, not much has really changed. However, now it is often influencers and social media companies who are in the business of selling people.

Let’s take YouTube as an example. As you may well know, the goal of many YouTube influencers is to develop a large audience of viewers. Once an influencer has enough, they can then monetize their channel. This is another way of saying that influencers can sell these viewers (people) to an advertiser.

As far as which advertisers would like to buy the particular group of people that influencers are selling, there is no need for the influencer to worry about this. YouTube generally knows more about an influencer’s audience than they do, as they have been tracking their online activities. Hence, YouTube knows that the audience may be principally composed of young women, for example.

In point of fact, YouTube knows a great deal about each and every subscriber (i.e. has hundreds or even thousands of “data points” on each of them). YouTube acts as a broker, matching up with the right people to sell to advertisers interested in buying that particular lot. Of course, YouTube charges a fee for this service.

Even if would be influencers do not have many viewers (people) to sell, they can still benefit here, as advertisers may give them modest compensation by sending them free products, which they can then directly market to their viewers by way of “haul” videos or by doing reviews of the product.

Influencers like this because they get free swag. Advertisers like it, because they not only get an audience by just giving out stuff, they also don’t have to go to the trouble of producing an advertisement, as the influencer takes on the job of making the product seem desirable. In fact, this is likely an effective form of advertising, as viewers may well be more likely to purchase the product on offer as they may trust the influencer.

Sadly, I suspect that most influencers are not aware how the underlying system works and what it is that they are actually doing.

Thoreau would, no doubt, have been shocked by all this. But, in a way, there is really nothing new here, as the underlying enterprise is to groom us to become good (ideally, rampant) consumers.

However, to us, the way that this project has permeated our lives in the age of the Internet is more than a little disturbing, as the following comment notes:

The script of life is basically written for them every time you crave to be another human on your favorite social media. I don't think there is going to be a time in which consumerism is not rampant. We are programmed to keep desiring, and the rise of technology has amplified that.

While I totally understand this person's fatalism, in terms of online influencers and social media, there is in fact a simple solution here: we need a new generation of socially responsible influencers, who care about the well-being of their viewers and the planet, rather than just personal gain. And, of course, what is also needed is a new generation of viewers who would support such influencers directly (by way of a service like Patreon), rather than by purchasing products that they are hawking.

One of the intriguing things about YouTube is that anyone can post material for free. In other words, you do not need to be selling something in order to upload a video. Of course, YouTube now reserves the right to add in advertisements to any video whenever they like. Nonetheless, if you want to post a video of something like your kitten being silly, you are perfectly free to do so. (In case you didn't know, silly kitten videos are a thing on YouTube.)

What this means is that an influencer can use their platform in nearly any way that they choose - though there are limits here, as they cannot, for obvious reasons, do something like spread hate speech.

Imagine if an influencer with millions (even hundreds of millions) of viewers decided not to act for personal gain by selling these people to advertisers. Instead knowing that, as influencers, they have...well... enormous *influence* on their viewers, they instead acted in a socially responsible, rather than exploitive manner, and used their platform to help make the world a better place.

In other words, as this comment succinctly notes, people "crave to be another human on your favorite social media." Sometimes, we act on the desire to be the influencer by emulating them. If they dress a certain way, we dress that way. If they purchase certain products, we too purchase them. Influencers monetize this influence (in other words, act for personal gain) by selling their viewers to companies that want to sell these clothes and products.

Even if the influencer is not directly selling a product, they may well (perhaps inadvertently) be doing harm here. For example, if they celebrate a lavish lifestyle filled

with private jets and a fleet of cars, the influencer may influence their viewers to act in a similarly environmentally destructive manner.

What would happen, however, if the influencer wasn't displaying products or a lifestyle that is wildly unsustainable from an environmental point of view, but instead showed them trying to make the world a better place?

Curious what this would be like? In a sense, this is what Leonardo DiCaprio did with the film *Before the Flood*. Not every influencer would, of course, need to travel the world in their effort to make a difference. Instead, they could be doing something small, like getting involved with a local activist group. Instead of showing a haul of fast fashion, the weekly installment on their channel could show them brainstorming climate solutions with friends or out protesting with them or canvassing for votes for a candidate with a strong environmental/climate platform.

In so doing, an influencer would largely cease to be a person out for private gain, but rather an activist working to make the world a better place.

In the first chapter, he [Thoreau] discussed the absurdity he found in the “spending of the best part of one’s life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it.” This part stuck out to me because while it may not have been related to climate change, this way of life so many are used to and plan ahead for may turn from a questionable liberty to virtually no liberty at all if the earth continues to warm in the way it already has been. Liberty will feel quite meaningless if we can no longer reasonably live on the planet we were born on.

This is an intriguing observation.

In a sense, Thoreau is offering us two options: 1) to live our lives as they were scripted for us, or 2) to try to find a more authentic way of living. Thoreau clearly feels that we should take the second option.

But what about the “questionable liberty” (to use Thoreau’s words) of the first option? In Thoreau’s era, going this route would, as far as he was concerned, have meant an authentic, and presumably unhappy, life.

But, as this comment makes clear, the stakes are far higher in the 21st century, as the first option, living the life that most Americans now do, will severely restrict liberty for not only most Americans, but for most human beings (as well as a host of additional beings on the planet).

In other words, if we pursue the liberty scripted for us, this will not only mean that we will never personally have true liberty (which is, essentially, Thoreau’s point), but in the era of a climate crisis brought about through the misguided pursuit of liberty, we will greatly hamper everyone’s liberty.

As this comment suggests, “Liberty will feel quite meaningless if we can no longer reasonably live on the planet we were born on.”

When considering “Walden” through the lens of living in an urban area instead of the wilderness (as suggested by Ken in the Introduction), it is exciting to see how Thoreau’s ideas can be applied. Tiny homes, like the ones introduced in the documentary “Minimalism”, come to mind as an improvement to urban life. I think they are a good upgrade from Thoreau’s 150 sq/ft cabin, and are fitted with features to make them more adaptable to fit more people and cater to varying circumstances.

One of the difficulties with *Walden* is that the lifestyle that Thoreau is suggesting can seem extreme. After all, most people will not likely find the idea of living out in the garden shed very appealing.

However, all sorts of people are not only now advocating for a much simpler way of living, but, like Thoreau, are rolling up their sleeves and actually doing it. [Minimalism](#), the [tiny-house movement](#), [slow food](#), [slow fashion](#), and a host of similar movements have now moved into the mainstream.

None of these are, strictly speaking, emulating Thoreau’s experience at Walden Pond. Instead, whether directly influenced by Thoreau or not, the activists bringing about these transformations are doing exactly what Thoreau suggested: rethinking how we can satisfy some of our human needs in a way that will not only make us happier, but be more environmentally sustainable in the bargain.

After reading this article *Walden*, I believe that our family's lifestyle is also in line with simplify, although the main reason for this is that my mother likes to save money, so our family has always had a small but practical amount of clothes, and we have never bought luxury goods or fast fashion. My clothes from childhood to adulthood are all second-hand clothes from my cousins, and even if I wear old clothes, I don't think I'm any different from others. I think this lifestyle habit is really great and easy to implement.

I try my best to be as sustainable as possible- with at least half my wardrobe being thrifted, but I have also realized that even if it's sustainable consumerism, it is consumerism nonetheless. I'll buy a new sweater from the thrift even when I don't need one. I believe that the path to minimalism and anti-consumerism is not just a personal one but a societal one - a journey to stop the indoctrination of children and youth to begin with. I also think that minimalism is a concept that can be quite difficult for many people who are low income.