

Selections from Thoreau's Writings

Thoreau on morning wisdom and nature

“Have you knowledge of the morning? Do you sympathize with that season of nature? Are you abroad early, brushing the dews aside? If the sun rises on you slumbering, if you do not hear the morning cock-crow, if you do not witness the blushes of Aurora, if you are not acquainted with Venus as the morning star, what relation have you to wisdom and purity? You have then forgotten your Creator in the days of your youth! Your shutters were darkened till noon! You rose with a sick headache! In the morning sing, as do the birds.” ~Thoreau's Journal; July 18, 1851

Thoreau on the classics and morning simplicity

“Since ‘The Odyssey’ is all over the news lately...

Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did... Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as

much affected by the faint hum of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sitting with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer's requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world.”
~*Walden*, 1854

[It should be noted that Thoreau read “The Odyssey” in its original ancient Greek. An avid classicist, he preferred to translate Homer himself and not use other people's translations.]

“The student may read Homer or Æschylus in the Greek without danger of dissipation or luxuriousness, for it implies that he in some measure emulate their heroes, and consecrate morning hours to their pages. The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have. The modern cheap and fertile press, with all its

translations, has done little to bring us nearer to the heroic writers of antiquity... It is worth the expense of youthful days and costly hours, if you learn only some words of an ancient language, which are raised out of the trivialness of the street, to be perpetual suggestions and provocations.... For what are the classics but the noblest recorded thoughts of man?... To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written. It is not enough even to be able to speak the language of that nation by which they are written, for there is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read.” ~*Walden*, 1854

Thoreau on following one's dreams

“I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary;

new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. 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. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” ~*Walden*, 1854

Thoreau on the meditative benefits of moonlight vs. sunlight

“As the twilight deepens and the moonlight is more and more bright, I begin to distinguish myself, who I am and where; as my walls contract, I become more collected and composed, and sensible of my own existence, as when a lamp is brought into a dark apartment and I see who the company are. With the coolness and the mild silvery light, I recover some sanity, my thoughts are more distinct, moderated, and tempered. Reflection is more possible while the day goes by. The intense light of the sun unfits me for meditation, makes me wander in my thought; my life is too diffuse and dissipated; routine succeeds and

prevails over us; the trivial has greater power then, and most at noonday, the most trivial hour of the twenty-four. I am sobered by the moonlight. I bethink myself. It is like a cup of cold water to a thirsty man. The moonlight is more favorable to meditation than sunlight.” ~Thoreau’s Journal; August 5, 1851

Thoreau on the wood thrush’s song as a source of inspiration and connection to nature

“I come over the hill, I hear the wood thrush singing his evening lay. This is the only bird whose note affects me like music, affects the flow and tenor of my thought, my fancy and imagination. It lifts and exhilarates me. It is inspiring. It is a medicative draught to my soul. It is an elixir to my eyes and a fountain of youth to all my senses. It changes all hours to an eternal morning. It banishes all trivialness. It reinstates me in my dominion, makes me the lord of creation, is chief musician of my court. This minstrel sings in a time, a heroic age, with which no event in the village can be contemporary. How can they be contemporary when only the latter is temporary at all? How can the infinite and eternal be contemporary with the finite and temporal? So there is something in the music of the cow-bell, something sweeter and more nutritious than

in the milk which the farmer's drink. This thrush's song is a *ranz des vaches* to me. I long for wildness, a nature which I cannot put my foot through, woods where the wood thrush forever sings, where the hours are early morning ones, and there is dew on the grass, and the day is forever unproved, where I might have a fertile unknown for a soil about me... How wonderfully moral our whole life! There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice. Goodness is the only investment that never fails. It is sung of in the music of the harp." ~Thoreau's Journal; June 22, 1853

Thoreau on the power of nature's senses

"What is called genius is the abundance of life or health, so that whatever addresses the senses, as the flavor of these berries, or the lowing of that cow, which sounds as if it echoed along a cool mountain-side just before night, where odoriferous dews perfume the air and there is everlasting vigor, serenity, and expectation of perpetual untarnished morning, —each sight and sound and scent and flavor, — intoxicates with a healthy intoxication. The shrunken stream of life overflows its banks, makes and fertilizes broad intervals, from which generations derive their sustenances. This is the true overflowing of the Nile.

So exquisitely sensitive are we, it makes us embrace our fates, and, instead of suffering or indifference, we enjoy and bless. If we have not dissipated the vital, the divine, fluids, there is, then, a circulation of vitality beyond our bodies. The cow is nothing. Heaven is not there, but in the condition of the hearer. I am thrilled to think that I owe a perception to the commonly gross sense of taste, that I have been inspired through the palate, that these berries have fed my brain. After I had been eating these simple, wholesome, ambrosial fruits on this high hillside, I found my senses whetted, I was young again, and whether I stood or sat I was not the same creature.” ~Thoreau’s Journal; July 11, 1852

Thoreau's reflections on nature's impact on spirituality

“I feel as if this coolness would do me good. If it only makes my life more pensive! Why should pensiveness be akin to sadness? There is a certain fertile sadness which I would not avoid, but rather earnestly seek. It is positively joyful to me. It saves my life from being trivial. My life flows with a deeper current, no longer as a shallow and brawling stream, parched and shrunken by the summer heats. This coolness comes to condense the dews and clear the atmosphere. The stillness seems more deep and

significant. Each sound seems to come from out a greater thoughtfulness in nature, as if nature had acquired some character and mind. The cricket, the gurgling stream, the rushing wind amid the trees, all speak to me soberly yet encouragingly of the steady onward progress of the universe. My heart leaps in my mouth at the sound of the wind in the woods. I, whose life was but yesterday so desultory and shallow, suddenly recover my spirits, my spirituality, through my hearing. I see a goldfinch go twittering through the still, luring day, and am reminded of the peeping flocks which will soon herald the thoughtful season. Ah! if I could so live that there should be no desultory moment in all my life! that in the trivial season, when small fruits are ripe, my fruits might be ripe also! that I could match nature always with my moods! that in each season when some part of nature especially flourishes, then a corresponding part of me may not fail to flourish! Ah, I would walk, I would sit and sleep, with natural piety! What if I could pray aloud or to myself as I went along by the brooksides a cheerful prayer like the birds! For joy I could embrace the earth; I shall delight to be buried in it.”
~Thoreau’s Journal; August 17, 1851

Thoreau on greeting the day and night with joy

“If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal—that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.”
~*Walden*, 1854

Thoreau's reflection on nature and inner growth

“Ah, the very brooks seem fuller of reflections than they were! Ah, such provoking sibylline sentences they are! The shallowest is all at once unfathomable. How can that depth be fathomed where a man may see himself reflected? The rill I stopped to drink at I drink in more than I expected. I satisfy and still provoke the thirst of thirsts. Nut Meadow Brook where it crosses the road beyond Jenny Dugan's that was. I do not drink in vain. I mark that

brook as if I had swallowed a water snake that would live in my stomach. I have swallowed something worth the while. The day is not what it was before I stooped to drink. Ah, I shall hear from that draught! It is not in vain that I have drunk. I have drunk an arrowhead. It flows from where all fountains rise.

How many ova have I swallowed? Who knows what will be hatched within me? There were some seeds of thought, me thinks, floating in that water, which are expanding in me. The man must not drink of the running streams, the living waters, who is not prepared to have all nature reborn in him,—to suckle monsters. The snake in my stomach lifts his head to my mouth at the sound of running water. When was it that I swallowed a snake? I have got rid of the snake in my stomach. I drank of stagnant waters once. That accounts for it. I caught him by the throat and drew him out, and had a well day after all. Is there not such a thing as getting rid of the snake which you have swallowed when young, when thoughtless you stooped and drank at stagnant waters, which has worried you in your waking hours and in your sleep ever since, and appropriated the life that was yours? Will he not ascend into your mouth at the sound of running water? Then catch him boldly by the head and draw him out, though you may think his tail be

curled about your vitals.” ~Thoreau’s Journal; August 17, 1851

Thoreau’s thoughts on Transcendentalism and nature

If anyone asks me, ‘What is Transcendentalism?’ I’ll read them this. So perfect and so beautiful.

‘Methinks my present experience is nothing; my past experience is all in all. I think that no experience which I have today comes up to, or is comparable with, the true experiences of my boyhood. And not only this is true, but as far back as I can remember I have consciously referred to the experience of a previous state of existence. ‘For life is a forgetting,’ etc.

Formerly, methought, nature developed as I developed, and grew up with me. My life was ecstasy. In youth, before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction; both its weariness and its refreshment were sweet to me. This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. To have such sweet impressions made on us, such ecstasies begotten of the breezes! I can remember how I was

astonished. I said to myself,—I said to others,—‘There comes into my mind such an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly, pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion, and [I] have had nought to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by superior powers. This is a pleasure, a joy, an existence which I have not procured myself. I speak as a witness on the stand, and tell what I have perceived.’

The morning and the evening were sweet to me, and I led a life aloof from society of men. I wondered if a mortal had ever known what I knew. I looked in books for some recognition of a kindred experience, but, strange to say, I found none. Indeed, I was slow to discover that other men had had this experience, for it had been possible to read books and to associate with men on other grounds. The maker of me was improving me. When I detected this interference I was profoundly moved. For years I marched as to a music in comparison with which the military music of the streets is noise and discord. I was daily intoxicated, and yet no man could call me intemperate. With all your science can you tell how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?” ~Thoreau’s Journal; July 16, 1851

Thoreau's serene season of reflection

“What shall we name this season? — this very late afternoon, or very early evening, this severe and placid season of the day, most favorable for reflection, after the insufferable heats and bustle of the day are over and before the dampness and twilight of evening! The serene hour, the Muses’ hour, the season of reflection! It is commonly desecrated by being made tea-time. It begins perhaps with the earliest condensation of moisture in the air, when the shadows of hills are first observed, and the breeze begins to go down, and birds begin again to sing. The pensive season. It is earlier than the ‘chaste eve’ of the poet. Bats have not come forth. It is not twilight. There is no dew yet on the grass, and still less any early star in the heavens.

It is the turning-point between afternoon and evening. The few sounds now heard, far or near, are delicious. It is not more dusky and obscure, but clearer than before. The clearing of the air by condensation of mists more than balances the increase of shadows. Chaste eve is merely preparing with ‘dewy finger’ to draw o’er all ‘The gradual dusky veil.’ Not yet ‘the ploughman homeward plods his weary way,’ nor owls nor beetles are abroad. It is a

season somewhat earlier than is celebrated by the poets. There is not such a sense of lateness and approaching night as they describe. I mean when the first emissaries of Evening come to smooth the lakes and streams. The poet arouses himself and collects his thoughts. He postpones tea indefinitely. Thought has taken her siesta. Each sound has a broad and deep relief of silence.” ~Thoreau’s Journal; August 11, 1853

Thoreau’s thoughts on morning clarity and regeneration

“I came near awaking this morning. I am older than last year; the mornings are further between; the days are fewer. Any excess—to have drunk too much water, even, the day before—is fatal to the morning’s clarity, but in health the sound of a cow-bell is celestial music. Oh, might I always wake to thought and poetry—regenerated! Can it be called a morning, if our senses are not clarified so that we perceive more clearly, if we do not rise with elastic vigor?” ~Thoreau’s Journal; July 7, 1852

Thoreau’s reflection on personal growth and self-improvement

“Here I am 34 years old and yet my whole life is almost wholly unexpanded. How much is in the germ! There is such an interval between my ideal and the actual in many instances that I may say I am unborn. There is the instinct for society, but no society. Life is not long enough for once success. Within another 34 years that miracle can hardly take place. Methinks my seasons revolve more slowly than those of Nature: I am differently timed. I am contented. This rapid revolution of Nature ... why should it hurry me? Is it important that I should mature as soon as an apple tree? The possibility of my own improvement, that is to be cherished.... I love and worship myself with a love which absorbs my love for the world.” ~Thoreau’s Journal; July 19, 1851

Thoreau’s reflection on self and infinity

“I cannot see the bottom of the sky, because I cannot see to the bottom of myself. It is the symbol of my own infinity. My eye penetrates as far into the ether as that depth is inward from which my contemporary thought springs.” ~Thoreau’s Journal; June 23, 1840

Thoreau on growing mellow with age

“The man who does not grow rigid with years and experience! Where is he? What avails it to grow hard merely? The harder you are, the more brittle really, like the bones of the old. How much rarer and better to grow mellow! A sort of stone fruit the man bears commonly; a bare stone it is, without any sweet and mellow pericarp around it. It is like the peach which has dried to the stone as the season advanced; it is dwindled to a dry stone with its almond. In presence of one of these hard men I think: ‘How brittle! How easily you would crack! What a poor and lame conclusion!’ I can think of nothing but a stone in his head. Truly genial men do not grow [hard]. It is the result of despair, this attitude of resistance. They behave like men already driven to the wall.” ~Thoreau’s Journal; July 30, 1851

Thoreau on flowers reflecting human character and virtue

“Just so much beauty and virtue as there is in the world, and just so much ugliness and vice, you see expressed in flowers. Each human being has his flower which expresses his character. In them nothing is concealed, but everything published.” ~Thoreau’s Journal, June 26, 1852

Thoreau's thoughts on character and individuality

“To myself I am as pliant as an osier, and my courses seem not so easy to be calculated as that of Encke’s comet, but I am powerless to bend the character of another. He is like iron in my hands. I could tame a hyena more easily than my friend. He is material which no tool of mine will work. A naked savage will fell an oak with a firebrand, and wear a hatchet out of the rock, but I cannot hew the smallest chip out of the character of my fellow to beautify or deform it. Nothing was ever so unfamiliar and startling to me as my own thoughts.

We know men through their eyes. You might say that the eye was always original and unlike another. It is the feature of the individual, and not of the family; in twins, still different. All a man's privacy is in his eye, and its expression he cannot alter more than he can alter his character. So long as we look a man in the eye, it seems to rule the other features, and make them too original. When I have mistaken one person for another, observing only his form and carriage and inferior features, the unlikeness seemed of the least consequence, but when I caught his eye and my doubts were removed, it seemed to pervade every feature. The eye revolves on an independent pivot which we can no more control than our

own will. Its axle is the axle of the soul, as the axis of the earth is coincident with the axis of the heavens.”

~Thoreau's Journal; July 10, 1840

Thoreau on living in simplicity and light

“I never met a man who cast a free and healthy glance over life, but the best live in a sort of Sabbath light...The best thought is not only without sombreness, but even without morality. The universe lies outspread in floods of white light to it. The moral aspect of nature is a jaundice reflected from man. To the innocent there are no cherubim nor angels. Occasionally we rise above the necessity of virtue into an unchangeable morning light, in which we have not to choose in a dilemma between right and wrong, but simply to live right on and breathe the circumambient air. There is no name for this life unless it be the very vitality of vita. Silent is the preacher about this, and silent must ever be, for he who knows it will not preach.”

~Thoreau's Journal; August 1, 1841

Thoreau on the present modes of living and getting a living

“I hate the present modes of living and getting a living. Farming and shopkeeping and working at a trade or

profession are all odious to me. I should relish getting my living in a simple, primitive fashion. The life which society proposes to me to live is so artificial and complex—bolstered up on many weak supports, and sure to topple down at last—that no man surely can ever be inspired to live it, and only 'old fogies' ever praise it. At best some think it their duty to live it. I believe in the infinite joy and satisfaction of helping myself and others to the extent of my ability. But what is the use in trying to live simply, raising what you eat, making what you wear, building what you inhabit, burning what you cut or dig, when those to whom you are allied insanely want and will have a thousand other things which neither you nor they can raise and nobody else, perchance, will pay for? The fellow-man to whom you are yoked is a steer that is ever bolting right the other way.” ~Thoreau’s Journal; November 5, 1855

Thoreau’s struggles with daily routine and societal influence

“I remember only with a pang the past spring and summer thus far. I have not been an early riser. Society seems to have invaded and overrun me. I have drank tea and coffee and made myself cheap and vulgar. My days have been all noontides, without sacred mornings and evenings. I

desire to rise early henceforth, to associate with those whose influence is elevating, to have such dreams and waking thoughts that my diet may not be indifferent to me.”

~Thoreau's Journal; August 13, 1854

Thoreau's thoughts on the triviality of employment for money

“How trivial and uninteresting and wearisome and unsatisfactory are all employments for which men will pay you money! The ways by which you may get money all lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money merely is to have been truly idle. If the laborer gets no more than the wages his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself. Those services which the world will most readily pay for, it is most disagreeable to render. You are paid for being something less than a man. The state will pay a genius only for some service which it is offensive to him to render. Even the poet-laureate would rather not have to celebrate the accidents of royalty.” ~Thoreau's Journal, August 7, 1853

Thoreau on morality and law

“I wish my countrymen to consider, that whatever the human law may be, neither an individual nor a nation can

ever commit the least act of injustice against the obscurest individual without having to pay the penalty for it. A government which deliberately enacts injustice, and persists in it, will at length even become the laughing-stock of the world.

The law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free. They are the lovers of law and order who observe the law when the government breaks it. I would remind my countrymen that they are to be men first, and Americans only at a late and convenient hour. No matter how valuable law may be to protect your property, even to keep soul and body together, if it do not keep you and humanity together.

Will mankind never learn that policy is not morality—that it never secures any moral right, but considers merely what is expedient? chooses the available candidate—who is invariably the Devil—and what right have his constituents to be surprised, because the Devil does not behave like an angel of light? What is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity—who recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority.

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.

Show me a free state, and a court truly of justice, and I will fight for them, if need be; but show me Massachusetts, and I refuse her my allegiance, and express contempt for her courts.” ~“Slavery In Massachusetts” (Delivered in Framingham, Massachusetts, July 4, 1854. Published in *The Liberator*, July 21, 1854.)

Thoreau's travel philosophy and The Yellow House

“A man must generally get away some hundreds or thousands of miles from home before he can be said to begin his travels. Why not begin his travels at home? Would he have to go far or look very closely to discover novelties? The traveller who, in this sense, pursues his travels at home, has the advantage at any rate of a long residence in the country to make his observations correct and profitable.

Now the American goes to England, while the Englishman comes to America, in order to describe the country. No doubt there [are] some advantages in this kind of mutual criticism. But might there not be invented a better way of coming at the truth than this scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours method? Would not the American, for instance, who had himself, perchance, travelled in England and elsewhere make the most profitable and accurate traveller in his own country?

How often it happens that the traveller's principal distinction is that he is one who knows less about a country than a native! Now if he should begin with all the knowledge of a native, and add thereto the knowledge of a traveller, both natives and foreigners would be obliged to read his book; and the world would be absolutely benefited. It takes a man of genius to travel in his own country, in his native village; to make any progress between his door and his gate. But such a traveller will make the distances which Hanno and Marco Polo and Cook and Ledyard went over ridiculous." ~Thoreau's Journal; August 6, 1851

Thoreau's poem, "The Inward Morning"

Packed in my mind lie all the clothes
Which outward nature wears,
And in its fashion's hourly change
It all things else repairs.
In vain I look for change abroad,
And can no difference find,
Till some new ray of peace uncalled
Illumes my inmost mind.
What is it gilds the trees and clouds,
And paints the heavens so gay,
But yonder fast-abiding light
With its unchanging ray?
Lo, when the sun streams through the wood, Upon a
winter's morn,
Where'er his silent beams intrude,
The murky night is gone.
How could the patient pine have known
The morning breeze would come,
Or humble flowers anticipate
The insect's noonday hum—
Till the new light with morning cheer
From far streamed through the aisles,
And nimbly told the forest trees
For many stretching miles?
I've heard within my inmost soul
Such cheerful morning news,
In the horizon of my mind
Have seen such orient hues,
As in the twilight of the dawn,
When the first birds awake,
Are heard within some silent wood,
Where they the small twigs break,

Or in the eastern skies are seen,
Before the sun appears,
The harbingers of summer heats
Which from afar he bears.

(Published in the October 1842 issue of "The Dial")