

Social interactions in "walden" and social networking today

Sociology



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Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are. We have had to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette and politeness, to make this frequent meeting tolerable and that we need not come to open war. We meet at the post-office, and at the sociable, and about the fireside every night; we live thick and are in each other's way, and stumble over one another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another.

Certainly less frequency would suffice for all important and hearty communications. Consider the girls in a factory — never alone, hardly in their dreams. It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live. The value of a man is not in his skin, that we should touch him. " Social Interactions in Walden and Social Networking Today In " Solitude", the fifth chapter of Walden, Henry David Thoreau talks about the importance of solitude. He lambastes that society lacks the necessary space and time, to engage in meaningful discussions.

Thoreau uses powerful metaphors, and a condescending tone to criticize the high frequency, lack of depth and general propriety of the social interactions in his society; in today's world of Facebook and Twitter, he would do five summersaults with double-twists if he saw how we communicate every minute of every day. At the beginning of the passage, Thoreau uses a scornful tone and a vivid metaphor to show that he despises the all too frequent and shallow interactions between members of his society. He starts off by describing his society as being " commonly too cheap".

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Thoreau uses the word "cheap" to portray a society that doesn't put enough effort into "acquir[ing] any new value for each other". By using "commonly", we can infer that Thoreau believes we act this way too often. Instead of taking time to reflect and gain deeper insights, we "meet at very short intervals, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are." Here, Thoreau uses "a new taste of old musty cheese" as a metaphor for the unoriginal, uninspired and outdated ideas that people constantly and frequently regurgitate to one another.

Continuing on, Thoreau uses a metaphor and a condescending tone to show that he loathes the social conformities that his society practices in order to keep peace. Thoreau starts off by attacking the fact that society "has to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette and politeness," so as to "make this frequent meeting tolerable" and to "not come to open war." But avoiding war also means that we don't engage in controversial yet necessary and serious discussions. We use etiquette, or social conformities to cover up the meaningless chatter that we engage in.

That way, we avoid stirring emotions and thus make these frequent interactions tolerable. Thoreau then goes on to mock our incessant meetings "at the post-office, and at the sociable, and about the fireside every night." We meet everywhere and anywhere and talk about everything and nothing. He reflects on this by saying that we are "living thick and are in each other's way and stumble over one another" meaning that we crowd each other, and do not allow each other enough time or space to think about and reflect on our ideas. Because of this, we "thus lose some respect for one another.

Basically, we lose respect for each other, when we invade each other's space, and deny each other the time to think and reflect.

As a solution to his critique, Thoreau uses a frank tone, an allusion and a powerful metaphor to express that in order to acquire more sincere thoughts, we must physically and emotionally separate ourselves from society more often. Thoreau wants us to realize the importance of learning something new about each other or relaying a new piece of information, and therefore recommends that we meet "less frequen[tly]" so that the meeting will "suffice for all important and hearty communications. His use of "suffice", shows us that we should only interact when necessary, and only when we can engage in relevant and thoughtful discourse, proving that Thoreau does not care for the small chit chat that his society practices everyday. He would rather have us talk about important issues once in a while than talk about non-sense all the time. But it's not just the frequency that matters. Thoreau also believes that we are too crowded.

In an allusion to a newspaper article about female workers who worked 13 hour shifts and slept six to a room (Female Workers of Lowell), Thoreau says that the women were "never alone, hardly in their dreams". Fatigue, as well as lack of space for these women did not allow them to think or even dream about the dismal state of their lives. However, Thoreau argues that we will gain new insights if we physically separate ourselves from other people, saying that "It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live".

Lastly, Thoreau finishes off this passage by giving us one last metaphor about the value of genuine interactions. He states that "the value of a man
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is not in his skin, that we should touch him," using "skin" to symbolize the outer layer that we allow people to see when we engage in small talk. When Thoreau says "value of a man" he is referring to our ideas and beliefs that we hold close to our souls, and not on the outer layers of our body. We should engage in interactions revealing our deeper values and thoughts, so "that we should touch" each others' souls and not just scratch the "skin".

Thoreau would be shocked and horrified if he were to participate in the social networking that has gripped modern day America. According to recent studies, the average teen is awake for 15 hours and 45 minutes every day and about 15% of that time is spent on a social networking site ("Teenagers and Social Media") which is a very shocking statistic, even to the typical American student. We have moved from human interactions, no matter how shallow, to electronic interactions. This is the exact opposite of what Thoreau would have wanted.

Social networking is yet another way to avoid having real and meaningful conversations with human beings. We are putting our effort into a constant stream of nonsensical platitudes instead of short bursts of meaningful exchanges. If Thoreau were to even catch a glimpse of these kinds of superficial interactions, he would turn on his heels, jump back into his spare Flux Capacitor and return to the past(Back to the Future). Thoreau's criticisms have affected me greatly, causing me to scrutinize my own interactions with people, and the social conformities that I practice.

Every time that I go on a social networking site, I ask myself, What good will this do? Am I really connecting with other people or is this just a waste of time? Would they say this in person? Who am I really talking to? Social
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conformities or a person? These are all questions that pop into my head when someone updates a status, likes a photo, or messages me. Because of Thoreau, I have started to shift my efforts towards real human interactions and minimized my superficial social networking.