

Henry david thoreau,
where i lived and
what i lived for



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Where I Lived and What I Lived For Henry David Thoreau insists, in his chapter entitled "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" in *Walden*, that the only way to live deliberately is to distance oneself completely from the rest of the world as a means of finding an internal alarm clock that would wake him up to really live life as it was meant to be experienced. The essential concept behind this idea was that in living in places such as cities and towns, becoming regulated not by his own choices but by the necessity of earning food and board, most men tend to sleepwalk through life, only being awake in a physical sense while remaining woefully somnolent in the spiritual sense. "The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life." According to Thoreau, life has become so busy with the rushing railroad and the preoccupation with commerce and other such non-essential aspects of life that the average man has completely lost sight of his own worth and the true realities of life. In detailing the costs associated with building his home, including such notes as the use of refuse shingles for the roof and sides and the purchase of two second hand windows, he rails against the inflated prices and costs of living found within the town or city as a part of the capitalistic process. "I thus found that the student who wishes for a shelter can obtain one for a lifetime at an expense not greater than the rent which he now pays annually." Having rejected the concept of ownership in the form of deeds and fences as well as condemned the process of ownership in which prices become inflated well higher than they had to be, Thoreau then moves to describe the false impressions of living space to which most people in the commercial world seem to cling. Recognizing the smallness of his home, Thoreau first indicates

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the unnecessary extravagance of the homes of others: “ Many of our houses, both public and private, with their almost innumerable apartments, their huge halls and their cellars for the storage of wines and other munitions of peace, appear to be extravagantly large for their inhabitants. They are so vast and magnificent that the latter seem to be only vermin which infest them.” However, he also begins to indicate how the appropriate living space isn’t just the empty rooms and built spaces of human creation, but should include the shared spaces of the outdoors, the connection with nature and the consideration of the ultimate creation.

While I find I agree with Thoreau regarding the busy-ness of life, especially as it has increased significantly in speed even since Thoreau’s time, I cannot agree with him that it is necessary to completely remove oneself from the center of life in order to discover what the realities are. Reading poetry such as Emerson and the writings of Thoreau himself makes it clear that life should not be about the material gains one makes but should instead be focused upon spiritual pursuits. This is not to say one should faithfully follow a particular religious persuasion, but instead that one should be focused upon developing relationships with the world around him. This cannot be accomplished if one is living in a small shack in the middle of uninhabited territory. While it is easy to become too wrapped up in modern living, taking time out occasionally, perhaps as often as once a day, to evaluate one’s goals and objectives may be all that’s necessary to wake up that portion of a man’s soul that Thoreau seems to feel is forever asleep.

Works Cited

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993.

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