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Wisdom

Henry David Thoreau's Walden: two years in the woods to live "deliberately"

A cabin that cost 28 dollars, a pond in Massachusetts and the question Thoreau has put to readers since 1854: what do we really need all that we have for?

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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On 4 July 1845 **Henry David Thoreau**, a 27-year-old writer from Concord, Massachusetts, moved into a small cabin he had built himself by Walden Pond, on land belonging to his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. He stayed there two years, two months and two days. The book he later wrote, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, was published in 1854.

Why he went to the woods

Thoreau did not want to leave the world for ever. The pond was only about two kilometres from town, and he often walked into Concord. He wanted to carry out an experiment: how little does a person need to live well, and what remains when you remove what is unnecessary?

> *"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach." (Walden)*

The accounts

The first chapter of the book, "Economy", contains precise accounts. The cabin cost him 28 dollars and twelve and a half cents. Thoreau grew beans and noted what he ate and how much he spent. The accounts were not just a curiosity: he wanted to show that many people work their whole lives to pay for things they do not need, and that the real cost of a thing is the amount of life we give in exchange for it.

He wrote that the mass of men lead lives of "quiet desperation", and advised: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"

Attention to nature

Most of the book is not theory but observation: the changes of the pond through the seasons, the ice cracking in spring, the animals, the colours of the water. Thoreau was a careful observer of nature, and his notes are used today by scientists studying how flowering dates have changed in the Concord area.

Civil disobedience

During his time at Walden, Thoreau spent a night in jail because he refused to pay a tax, in protest against slavery and the war with Mexico. From this experience came the essay "Civil Disobedience" (1849), which later influenced Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

Pencils and land surveying

Thoreau was not only a writer. His family ran a pencil workshop in Concord, and according to his biographer Laura Dassow Walls, he helped improve the quality of the pencils by experimenting with the mixture of graphite and clay. Later he earned his living mainly as a land surveyor, measuring and mapping his neighbours' properties. This work often kept him outdoors, in fields and woods, and gave him the chance to observe nature with a surveyor's precision.

The great journal

From 1837 until shortly before his death, Thoreau kept a journal that reached roughly two million words. In it he recorded not only thoughts but also precise observations of plants, birds, ice and weather. In his last years the journal became more and more a scientific record of the seasons in Concord. It was precisely these notes that later allowed climate researchers to compare the flowering times of plants in the 1850s with those of today.

A book that sold slowly

When it was published in 1854, *Walden* was not a great success. According to Walls, the first printing of about two thousand copies took about five years to sell. Thoreau died in 1862 of tuberculosis, at the age of 44, without seeing the book become famous. Only in the twentieth century did *Walden* become one of the classics of American literature and a foundational text for environmental movements and for those seeking a simpler life.

From Thoreau to Gandhi and King

The essay on civil disobedience had a great influence beyond America. According to the scholar George Hendrick, Mohandas Gandhi read it in South Africa and published extracts from it in his newspaper in 1907, while he was developing his method of non-violent resistance. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his 1958 book that reading Thoreau's essay in college was his first intellectual contact with the theory of non-violent resistance. So one night in the Concord jail became part of world history.

The critics

Not everyone admires Thoreau. In a 2015 essay in *The New Yorker*, Kathryn Schulz argued that he was a harsh moralist who judged others without understanding their circumstances, and that his experience at Walden was less solitary than he presented it, because he often returned to his family's home. His defenders reply that Thoreau never claimed to live in complete isolation and that the book is an experiment, not a guide for everyone. The debate shows that classics go on provoking.

What we can take

1. **Count the cost in lifetime.** Before a big purchase, ask: how many hours of work does this cost me?
2. **Simplify one area.** Not everything at once: clothes, the phone, the calendar.
3. **Observe one place through the seasons.** A park, a tree, a window. Slow attention

calms the mind.

4. **Beware of idealising.** Thoreau too returned to town. The aim is not to escape but to live more consciously.

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