

from **Civil Disobedience**

Henry David Thoreau

I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least";¹ and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe: "That government is best which governs not at all"; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves; and, if ever they should use it in earnest as a real one against each other, it will surely split. But it is not the

less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow; yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the West. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India rubber,² would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions, and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it. . . .

1. "That . . . least": The motto of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, a literary-political journal.

2. **India rubber:** A form of crude rubber.

from Walden

Based on the essay by **Henry David Thoreau**



This adaptation of the essay excerpt includes targeted passages from the text for you to read on your own.

BACKGROUND

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was a transcendentalist, a member of a philosophical and literary movement that celebrated individualism. Thoreau graduated from Harvard and taught for a few years. He then decided to become a nature poet. On July 4, 1845, he began an experiment. He hoped this experiment would bring him closer to nature and teach him about life. In Massachusetts, on land owned by a friend, he built a small cabin. It was on the shore of Walden Pond. For more than two years, he lived there very simply, studying, and writing about the natural world. Walden is a record of his experiences.

ADAPTATION

I first went to live in the woods on the fourth of July, 1845. My house was not finished for winter. It was merely a defense against the rain. The walls were made of rough boards with wide gaps, which let in enough air to make it cool at night. It had a clean and airy look. This was especially true in the morning when its timbers were wet with dew.

My cabin was by the shore of a small pond. It was about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it. I was in the midst, or middle, of a large wood between that town and Lincoln. But I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, was as far as I could see.

For the first week, the pond seemed to me like a pool high up on the side of a mountain. As the sun arose, I saw it throwing off its nightly clothing of mist, and here and there its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was revealed.

Meanwhile, the mists, like ghosts, were **stealthily** withdrawing into the woods, as if leaving a secret religious meeting. The dew seemed to hang upon the trees later into the day than usual.

NOTES

stealthily: in a sneaky way



Reading Check

What is the environment Thoreau has chosen to live in?

Read this passage from the selection to learn why Thoreau went to live in the woods.

TARGETED PASSAGE


3 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, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice **resignation**, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and **Spartan-like** as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were **sublime**, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion....

deliberately: intentionally
essential: core; most important

resignation: giving up

Spartan-like: in a simple and disciplined way, like the people of ancient Sparta

sublime: beautiful; grand

 **Reading Check**
Why did Thoreau choose to go to the woods?


ADAPTATION (continued)

It appears to me that most men are uncertain about life—they don't know whether it is of the devil or of God. Many people have hastily decided that our purpose is to respect and enjoy God.

We live unpleasantly, like ants. Our life is wasted worrying about details. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, keep the business of your life simple and easy to manage. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, see if you can eat just one. Reduce other things.

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? As for work, there is very little of it that matters. We are so used to working and keeping busy that we do it without thinking. If I should only give a few rings of a bell, as if there were a fire, almost everyone around would stop everything and follow the sound. They would not do this mainly to save the property from flames. Instead, they would do it to simply see it burn.

Almost any man who takes a half hour's nap after dinner wakes up and immediately asks, "What's the news?" It's as if the rest of mankind is waiting to tell him what he missed. After a night's sleep, the news is as necessary as breakfast itself. "Pray tell me any thing new that has

 **Reading Check**
Why does Thoreau think people need to simplify their lives?

happened to a man any where on this globe.” Over his coffee, he reads in the newspaper that a man has had his eyes poked out this morning on the Wachito River. He never imagines that while he too lives in the dark unexplored cave of this world, his own eyes can barely see what is real.

For my part, I could easily do without the post office because there are very few important communications, or messages, made through it. In addition, I am sure that I never read anything worth remembering in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one mad dog killed—we never need to read of another. One is enough.

Read this passage from the selection to learn about how Thoreau suggests we live.

TARGETED PASSAGE

7 Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito’s wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and **fast**, or break fast, gently and without **perturbation**; let **company** come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry,—determined to make a day of it....

✓ Reading Check

According to Thoreau, why is reading the news all the time a problem?

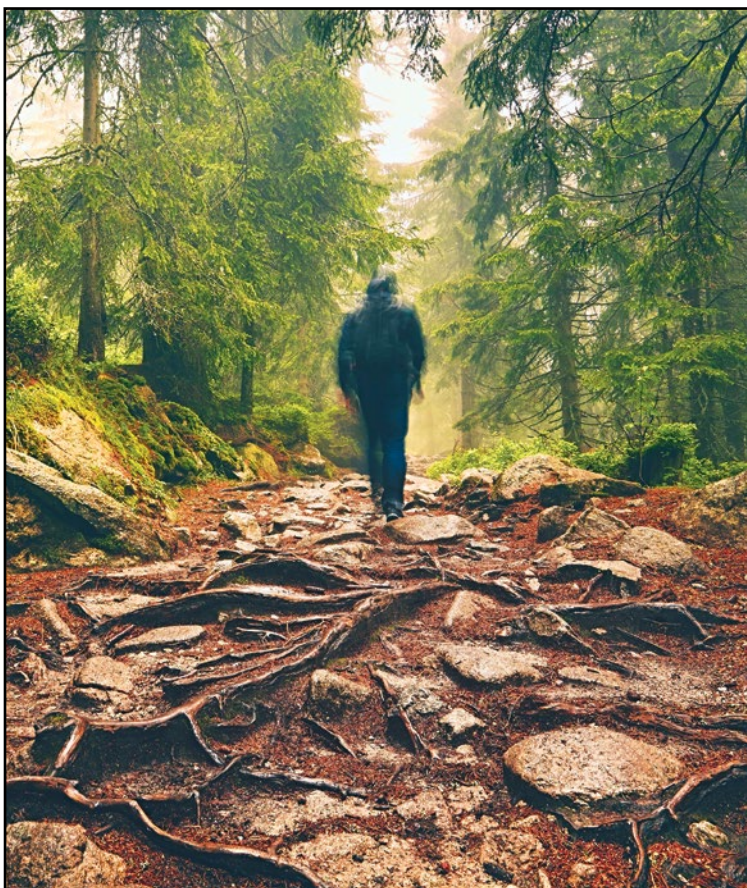
fast: to choose not to eat

perturbation: disturbance or stress

company: guests

✓ Reading Check

What suggestions does Thoreau give for how we can live our lives more intentionally? Does he think time is an important thing to pay attention to?



ADAPTATION (continued)

Time is like the stream I go fishing in. I drink at it. But while I drink, I see the sandy bottom and notice how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would rather drink deeper. I would rather go fishing in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I have always wished that I was as wise as the day I was born.

The mind is a knife. It cuts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any busier with my hands than necessary. I can accomplish more just by thinking. I have a feeling that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and paws. With it, I can burrow my way through these hills. Here I will begin to search for what is valuable.

 **Reading Check**

How does Thoreau feel about time? What does Thoreau think he will achieve by spending time thinking in the woods?

**TURN & TALK**

Do you agree with Thoreau that people spend too much time and effort on unimportant things? What are some things that you could do without? Discuss your thoughts with a partner.