

## **Thoreau's Walden: Conscious Living for the Modern Man**

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### **Abstract**

Man immerses himself in cares only to forget caring for his own self, is a truth that is relevant even today, nearly one hundred and seventy years after Thoreau pointed out this irony. Thoreau at Walden Pond sought to discover 'the essential facts of life', which led to the understanding of 'free will' that is the bedrock of all conscious activity.

This paper will examine the need for making 'conscious choices' that Thoreau advocates in Walden. People's efforts are misdirected due to lack of conscious choices, and Thoreau systematically investigates the various areas where man's efforts are wasted.

My paper will unravel the key ideas of conscious living that Thoreau offers as succour for our somnambulistic lives. The key ideas that will be explored include recognition of divinity in man, transience of life, pointlessness of opinions and advice, and ungenerous charity.

**Key words:** American Transcendentalism, Thoreau, Walden, conscious choice, free will, transience

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Human beings engage themselves in manifold activities, under the unconscious belief that those activities are crucial to their existence. Thoreau in *Walden* challenges this notion by bringing to fore the futility of human activities. Also, building upon this insight, this paper examines the next important idea that Thoreau presents - 'the divinity of man'. Immersed in mundane life, man cannot recognize in himself the dimension of divinity or higher consciousness. However Thoreau presents useful ideas that helps us acknowledge this latent divinity. Some of the key ideas are: recognition of transience, pointlessness of advice and opinions, and ungenerous charity. Using these notions, Thoreau has brought to fore the integral aspect of his philosophy - 'free will'. Free will springs from the ability to make conscious choices; Thoreau strategically develops this idea in *Walden*, to positively affirm the relevance of conscious choices even to this day.

At the outset, Thoreau comments about the "mass of men who are discontented and idly complaining of the hardness of their lot or of their times, when they might improve them." (16); the situation is not very different from our present day living, where much time and energy is wasted over regret and lament. Thoreau explores the reason for this dissatisfaction. He notices

that the inhabitants in Concord appeared to be “doing penance in thousand remarkable ways” (5). He marvels at the capacity of man to afflict himself with suffering greater than even the hardship faced by mythical heroes. He sarcastically observes that most men who inherited lands had absolutely no idea about how to manage them. But they worked laboriously under the impression that by doing so, they are bettering their lives. This prompts Thoreau to remark at the fundamental irony of human labour- to toil endlessly in pursuit of wealth by forsaking the only wealth they can have. Thereby, “men have become the tools of their tools” (37).

Misdirected effort deteriorates rather than enriches human life. Man’s “fingers from excessive toil are too clumsy” (6) to reap the benefits of his labour. Thoreau also notices the same foolishness in man’s attempts to erect monuments and tombs. “The mainspring is vanity, assisted by the love of garlic and bread and better” (58), summarizes the main motivation for engaging in such work. It is also remarkable that men starve often “not for want of necessaries, but want of luxuries” (61). Another reason why people love to work is perhaps to pretend to be “industrious” or to “keep out of worse mischief” (70).

Commenting on the newly built railroads, Thoreau states, “we do not ride upon the rail road, it rides upon us “(92); this brings to fore the realization that man eventually becomes the victim of his own inventions. Although he pretends to be the master, he has actually laid himself down in subservience to the glory of objects without which he can no longer live. Thoreau also remarks on the futility of reading the morning paper that presents nothing new but only that which has always been happening. It appears that “if we are acquainted with the principle” of presentation of facts, we need not care about “myriad instances and applications” (93).

Thoreau asks poignantly, “Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises?” (326). It is only when we are “unhurried and wise” that we perceive that “petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of reality” (95).

Man appears to be nothing more than a machine and remains blind to the fact that to “maintain one’s self on this earth”, involves no “hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply

and wisely” (70). Instead man “closes his eyes and slumbers” and consents to be “deceived by shows”. This leads men to “establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit”, which is “built on purely illusory foundations” (96). Hence the major part of our lives “is frittered away by detail” (91).

Thoreau observes that it is the lack of “enterprise and faith” of men that prompts them to buy, sell and “spend their lives like serfs” (208). Quoting Thseng-tseu, he remarks that “one who can truly savour his food can never be a glutton”, which leads to the understanding that activities are futile so long as they are performed unconsciously. (218) However, when one refuses to “tolerate incredible dullness” of activity and instead “infuses novelty”, he has shifted from unconscious to conscious living. (332).

“The merchant who wends to market by day or night”, is so steeped in his mercenary cares, that it is a wonder if any “divinity stirs within him” (7). His own destiny is of no consequence to him, but he is smugly content being a slave to his routine. Thoreau remarks that as long as “men remain in their present low and primitive conditions”, they shall not experience any divinity in themselves”. But if they should feel “the influence of spring of springs arousing them”, then “they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life”. (41). It is but a pity that “only one in a hundred millions” is awake to a divine or poetic life; the rest are slumbering. Thus Thoreau attempts to awaken in us the consciousness which is the only remedy for our slumbering lives of routine, for “to be awake is to be alive” (90).

Thoreau praises the Egyptian and Hindoo philosophers for having raised “the veil from the statue of divinity”. Quoting Mencius, he states that divinity is “that thing very inconsiderable” but significant as it “distinguishes men from brute beasts” (219). It is this recognition that seems to beckon him from “a mean, moiling life” to a “glorious existence” (222).

Divinity can arise when one acknowledges the transience in life. Thoreau remarks that we very often resist this fundamental fact and seek security in the unchanging. “All day long we

are on the alert, and at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties.” Man therefore is resistant to change due to lack of faith. But change is always a “miracle to contemplate” that takes place “every instant.” (11).

After transience, the next key notion that helps one understand his inherent divinity is the futility of advice and opinions. But “public opinion is not as deadly a tyrant as one’s own opinion of himself”. Thus man should always give primacy to the opinion he has of himself, for what “he thinks of himself determines his destiny” (7). The opinions of others are always given to change. The “truth of today might turn out to be the falsehood of tomorrow”. Thus “the opinions old people cannot be reliable” (8) “Man’s capacities have never been measured; nor are we able to judge of what he can do by any precedents.” (10)

Wondering about the extent to which we are led by opinions, Thoreau remarks that our clothes are also determined by the current fashion trends. We have “more regard for the opinions of men” rather than for “true utility” (21). Ironically, “It is luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow” (36).

The third important aspect that leads us to recognize our divinity is charity or the lack of it. Thoreau’s profound assertion, “You must have a genius for charity”, hints at the fact that charity demands more than merely giving (73). Elaborating on this idea, Thoreau says, “A man is not a good man to me because he will feed me if I should be starving....” (74). It implies that charity must involve something more integral to the act of giving. “If you give money, spend yourself with it, and do not merely abandon it to them” (75); the above line is reminiscent of Khalil Gibran’s remark in *The Prophet*, “It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.” Thoreau makes the same point when he hints that the act of giving must be accompanied by a deep intention to give, not just material or money, but compassionate understanding. It is when we give of ourselves that we are able to judge if the poor man is really in need. Sometimes a poor man’s rags are merely a reflection of his taste, and you may be appalled to know that he would only use your money to buy more rags. Also, the giver might be giving only out of guilt

rather than compassion. If the very pattern of life of the benefactor perpetuates poverty, his giving is not generosity but merely a camouflage of his guilt (75). Thus, without going into these under currents, “philanthropy is greatly overrated” (76). When a man gives out of his guilt, he shares his sorrow and not joy. “What saddens the reformer is not his sympathy with his fellows in distress...but his private ail” (78). Therefore, Thoreau surmises, that it is better to heal ourselves first and become “as well as Nature”, dispelling the “clouds which hang over our brows”, before we engage in philanthropy of any kind. Deconstructing the popularly held notion of philanthropy, Thoreau nudges us towards an authenticity where true divinity lies.

This leads us to the realization that to live an authentic life, we need to make conscious choices out of our free will. Speaking about free will, Thoreau elucidates “A simple independent mind does not toil at the bidding of any prince” (57). The man, who has made the choice to listen intently to his own heart’s whisperings, will never need to be enslaved by another. Thoreau thus draws attention to one of the basic ideas of American Transcendentalism, of which he was a part of - ‘self-reliance’. Self reliance can only spawn from a conscious involvement in human activities. “Although for the most part we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make our occasions”, Thoreau insists that “by a conscious effort we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences” (134). However engrossing an experience may be, there exists a certain realm in our mind which is “conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me”; this is the “spectator who shares no experience but takes note of it”. It is this space that man can take advantage of, to explore his will and make conscious choices. He realizes then, that making a choice that crafts his life is far more creative than any artistic activity. “It is something to be able to paint a particular picture or to carve a statue...but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look”; therefore, “to affect the quality of day is the highest of arts” (90).

Thoreau observes that “with a little more deliberation and choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers” (99). Citing his own life as an

example Thoreau states that his mode of life gave him the benefit of amusement in itself. Like the others who led their lives robotically, he was not “obliged to look abroad for amusement, to society and the theatre.”, but instead his very “life became amusement” and “never ceased to be novel” (112). This mode of life would serve as the perfect antidote for the “stereotyped but unconscious despair concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind”. As Thoreau observed earlier, “there is no play in them, for this comes after work” (8).

The paths of tradition and conformity are well trodden, but it requires an exertion of free will to practice conscious choices and advance in the direction of one’s dreams. Thoreau summarizes his driving intent to lead life consciously with the words, “I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way...” (71). When one followed his genius carefully, “it showed him a fresh prospect every hour” (112). This, Thoreau foretells, will make him “meet with a success unexpected in common hours” (323).

### **Works Cited**

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