



CONDENSED WALDEN

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SEPTEMBER 1940

WALDEN; OR, LIFE IN THE WOODS. A CONDENSATION FROM THE BOOK BY HENRY DAVID THOREAU. Pleasantville NY: Readers Digest Association, Inc., September 1940 (pages 129-136):

TIMELINE OF WALDEN



WALDEN is the record of an experiment in serene living, a venture in simplicity and discipline as timely today as it was nearly 100 years ago. It is a book of which everyone has heard, but which few now read. Yet –written in sentences as rugged as the Massachusetts hills Thoreau loved– its importance and durability seem to increase with each year, as the pattern of our civilization becomes more and more complex.

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When I finally came across a copy of this, in December 2002, this is the way I reported on it:

Lightning struck, this Christmas. I finally found something that I have been searching for, for more than a decade. I had known that once upon a time, the Readers Digest had put out a condensed edition of WALDEN, and yet for obvious reasons no such condensed edition was available even in university research libraries. They just don't store that sort of stuff. So I had been haunting Goodwill stores, in Minnesota, in California, and in Rhode Island, trying to find one of those READERS DIGEST CONDENSED BOOK editions, that typically have four or five book titles on the spine. Without any success at all. Finally, the Readers Digest condensed edition of WALDEN has turned up. I found it, would you believe, on *Ebay*! Turns out that I hadn't been able to find this because I hadn't been looking in the right place. Their condensed edition only ran to



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six and a half pages, and was printed at the end of one of their regular monthly magazines. It was the Readers Digest edition of September 1940, and at the end of the monthly magazine it had two condensed books: Osa Johnson's I MARRIED ADVENTURE, and H.D. Thoreau's WALDEN: OR LIFE IN THE WOODS. A CONDENSATION FROM THE BOOK BY HENRY DAVID THOREAU (Pleasantville NY: Readers Digest Association, Inc., September 1940, pages 129-136).

As an illustration of the comparative merit which they attributed to the two books, I MARRIED ADVENTURE and WALDEN: OR LIFE IN THE WOODS, I should say that they put I MARRIED ADVENTURE first – and that they assigned it more than three times as much space as WALDEN.

The condensed edition begins with the epigraph of the volume, "I propose to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, if only to wake my neighbors up...." and continues directly with page eight's famous "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation":

I propose to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, if only to wake my neighbors up....

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Their incessant anxiety and strain is a well-nigh incurable form of disease. They have no time to be anything but machines. It is a fool's life.

And so on, as you see, skipping from page eight to page eleven, going back to page six to pick up a sentence, then proceeding with a sentence fragment from page five.

I wonder, might there be any way now, to discover the name of the person whom they assigned to concoct this READERS DIGEST CONDENSED EDITION OF WALDEN?

On the page facing this six-and-a-half-page condensation of WALDEN there is one of those bottom-of-the-page pagefiller paragraphs that are so typical of the Readers Digest, and it is about Samuel Goldwyn of Hollywood – the pagefiller paragraph instances that he "read part of a book all the way through." Oh wow!

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The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Their incessant anxiety and strain is a well-nigh incurable form of disease. They have no time to be anything but machines. It is a fool's life.

It appears that they honestly think there is no choice left; but no way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can.

I am convinced from experience that to maintain oneself on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely. For two years I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I built myself on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts.

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. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike



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as to put to rout all that was not life[,] to reduce life to its lowest terms and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience.

Near the end of March 1845, I cut down some tall, arrowy white pines by the shore of Walden Pond, and hewed timbers, studs and rafters with my axe. An old shanty provided me with boards. I dug my cellar in the side of a hill, where a woodchuck had formerly dug his burrow, down through sumac and blackberry roots. In May, with the help of acquaintances, I set up the frame of my house, and as soon as it was boarded and roofed, I began to occupy it. The exact cost of the materials in my house was \$28.12. My dwelling was small, and I could hardly entertain an echo in it, but it seemed larger for being a single apartment and remote from neighbors.

I spaded up all the land which I required for my beans, potatoes, corn and turnips. I learned that if one would live simply and eat only the crops he raised, and raise no more than he ate, he would need to cultivate only a few rods of ground. He could do all his necessary farm work as it were with his left hand at odd hours in the summer. It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do.

My food alone cost me in money an average of only 27 cents a week. By working as a day laborer about six weeks a year, I could meet all my expenses. I found that this occupation was most independent; the laborer's day ends with the going down of the sun, and he is then free to devote himself to his chosen profession. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study.

IT IS some advantage to live a primitive life, though in the midst of civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life. Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. Our life is frittered away by detail. Most men live mean and sneaking lives: always on the limits, trying to get out of debt; making themselves sick, that they may lay up something against a sick day.

Spending the best part of one's life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have gone up garret at once.

The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, is an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as are a million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a simple life.

Most men are so occupied with the factitious cares of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, but so to love wisdom as to live a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and



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trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. What is the nature of the luxury which enervates and destroys nations? Are we sure that there is none of it in our own lives?

Nations are possessed with an insane ambition to perpetuate the memory of themselves by the amount of hammered stone they leave. What if equal pains were taken to smooth and polish their manners? It should not be by their architecture, but by their power of thought, that nations should seek to commemorate themselves. To what end, pray, is so much stone hammered? One piece of good sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon.

There is nothing to wonder at in the Pyramids so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been manlier to have drowned in the Nile. Many are concerned about these monuments – to know who built them. For my part, I should like to know who in those days did not build them – who were above such trifling.

I learned from my two years' experience that it would cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one's necessary food; that a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength. Pray what more can a reasonable man desire, in ordinary noons, than a sufficient number of ears of green sweet corn boiled, with the addition of salt?

As for clothing, perhaps we are led oftener by the love of novelty and a regard for the opinion of men than by utility. I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable clothes, than to have a sound conscience; yet no man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch on his clothes. A man who has important work to do will not need a new suit to do it in.

I will not deny that shelter is a necessity of life. Yet most men are needlessly poor all their lives because they think they must have such a house as their neighbors have. Consider how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary. When a man is warmed, what does he want next? Surely not more warmth of the same kind, larger and more splendid houses, more numerous, incessant, and hotter fires, and the like. When he has obtained those things which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil having commenced.

WHEN I took up my abode in the woods, every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity with Nature herself. I got up as the sun arose, and bathed in the pond, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods. It was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did.

The morning is the most memorable season of the day. However, to him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. Sometimes I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amongst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house. I grew in those seasons like corn in the



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night, yet this was sheer idleness to my fellow townsmen, no doubt. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation. My days were not days of the week, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock.

I had this advantage, in my mode of life, over those who were obliged to look abroad for amusement, that my life itself was becoming my amusement and never ceased to be novel. It was a drama of many scenes and without an end. Housework was a pleasant pastime. When my floor was dirty, I rose early and, setting all my furniture out of doors, dashed water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white.

Meanwhile my beans were impatient to be hoed. Before the sun had got above the shrub oaks, I began to level the ranks of haughty weeds, working barefoot in the dewey sand. Making the yellow soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms, making the earth say beans instead of grass – this was my daily work.

When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labor. The nighthawk circled overhead like a mote in heaven's eye, falling from time to time with a swoop and a sound as if the heavens were rent. Or sometimes I watched a pair of hen hawks circling high in the sky, alternately soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts. Or from under a rotten stump my hoe turned up a sluggish and outlandish spotted salamander. When I paused to lean on my hoe, these sounds and sights were a part of the inexhaustible entertainment which the country offers.

THERE CAN BE no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still. When I enjoy the friendship of the seasons nothing can make life a burden to me. The rain which waters my beans and keeps me in the house today is not drear and melancholy, but good for me too.

Some of my pleasantest hours were during the long rainstorms in the spring or fall, which confined me to the house, soothed by their ceaseless roar and pelting; when an early twilight ushered in a long evening in which many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves. On warm evenings I frequently sat in the boat playing the flute, and saw the perch, which I seem to have charmed, hovering around me.

Men frequently say to me, "I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks." I am tempted to reply: Why should I feel lonely? What sort of space is that which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men, surely, but to the perennial source of our life. 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 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



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another.

I am naturally no hermit. I think that I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker to any full-blooded man that comes in my way. I had only three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society. There were men of business among my visitors, but they thought only of employment, and of the great distance at which I dwelt from something or other; and though they said that they loved a ramble in the woods, it was obvious that they did not. But I had more cheering visitors than they. Children come a-berrying, railroad men taking a Sunday morning walk in clean shirts, fishermen and hunters, poets and philosophers; in short, honest pilgrims, who came out to the woods for freedom's sake.

BY SEPTEMBER, two or three small maples had turned scarlet across the pond. Gradually from week to week the character of each tree came out, and it admired itself reflected in the smooth mirror of the lake. When chestnuts were ripe I laid up half a bushel for winter, roaming the woods with a bag on my shoulder. It was in November that I first began to inhabit my house, when I began to use it for warmth as well as shelter. It did me good to see the soot form on the back of the chimney which I had built, and I poked the fire with more satisfaction than usual.

When freezing weather came I plastered the walls. At length the winter set in in good earnest, just as I had finished, and the terrestrial music of the wind began to howl around the house as if it had not had permission to do so till then. Night after night the geese came lumbering in with a clangor and a whistling of wings, even after the ground was covered with snow.

My employment out of doors now was to collect the dead wood in the forest, sometimes trailing a dead pine tree under each arm to my shed. Every man looks at his woodpile with a kind of affection. I loved to have mine before my window, and the more chips the better to remind me of my pleasing work. And how much more interesting an event is that man's supper who has just been forth in the snow to hunt the fuel to cook it with!

At this season I seldom had a visitor. When the snow lay deepest no wanderer ventured near my house for a fortnight at a time, but there I lived as snug as a meadow mouse. In the morning I would take an axe and pail and go to the pond in search of water. Cutting my way through snow and ice, I open a window under my feet, where, kneeling to drink, I look down into the quiet parlor of the fishes, pervaded by a softened light as through a window of ground glass. There a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the twilight sky. Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.

ONE ATTRACTION in coming to the woods to live was that I should have opportunity to see the spring come in. Fogs and rains and warmer suns are gradually melting the snow; the days have grown sensibly longer. I am on the alert to hear the chance note of some arriving bird, or the striped squirrel's chirp, or see the woodchuck venture out of his winter quarters.

The first sounds of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than ever! The faint silvery warblings heard over the bare, moist fields, from the bluebird and the redwing, as if the last



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flakes of winter tinkled as they fell! What at such a time are histories, chronologies, and all written revelations? The brooks sing carols and glees to the spring. The sinking sound of melting snow is heard in all dells, and the ice dissolves apace in the ponds. The grass flames up on the hillsides like a spring fire, as if the earth sent forth an inward heat to greet the returning sun.

The change from storm and winter to serene and mild weather is a memorable crisis which all things proclaim. It is seemingly instantaneous. Suddenly an influx of light filled my house, though the evening was at hand, and the clouds of winter still overhung it, and the eaves were dripping with sleety rain. I looked out the window, and lo! where yesterday was cold gray ice there lay the transparent pond already calm and full of hope. I heard a robin in the distance, the first I had heard for many a thousand years, methought, whose note I shall not forget for many a thousand more – the same sweet and powerful song as of yore.

We need the tonic of wildness – to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the seacoast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thundercloud, the rain.

AFTER TWO YEARS I left the woods, perhaps because it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!

But if a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away. I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind; and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.