

THUMBING THROUGH
THOREAU

A Book of Quotations by Henry David Thoreau

Compiled by KENNY LUCK
Illustrated by JAY LUKE and REN ADAMS

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Introduction

“If I were to be baptized it should be in this pond,” wrote Nathaniel Hawthorne, reflecting upon the majesty of Walden Pond one autumn afternoon in 1843. “But then one would not wish to pollute it by washing off his sins into it. None but angels should bathe here.”

As I stood on the edge of Walden Pond, about to make a symbolic leap into what had become in my mind a scared place, Hawthorne’s poetic observation was not present in my thoughts. For a summer day, it was unusually cold; a light mist rose above the surface of the water; and having forgotten my towel and bathing suit at home in Pennsylvania, I was forced to strip down, making do with what I was wearing in that revealing moment. I hung my clothes on a nearby tree branch and began inching my way toward the water. It was a ritual Henry David Thoreau, one of America’s first literary giants, had performed countless times during his stay in the woods.

It was June 2007, and this was my second trip to Walden Pond. I had visited the previous summer but resolved only to walk along the shoreline, avoiding the seduction of the water. “This time,” I thought to myself, “I am going in.” Although I was initially reluctant, once the water rose past my waistline, I felt an extraordinary release. I made one final push off the rock where I was standing and let go. I let the water take me. Feeling free from constraints, I had transformed into one of Hawthorne’s angels, baptized by the clear, cool waters of the pond.

My experience at Walden Pond that day was emblematic. It was the culmination of a two-year journey which led me to Concord, Massachusetts, where I hoped to retrace the steps of a man who I had never met, but felt an

extraordinary affinity towards. Moreover, I saw a little bit of myself in Thoreau. Here was a man who, despite the conventions of his day, shunned every comfort and convenience. Thoreau once refused to take a doormat, for instance, offered to him by an elderly woman, hoping to avoid what he called the “beginnings of evil.” It seemed like something I would have done had I not read about it first. For the first time in my young life, I met my literary and intellectual soul mate.

Approaching Thoreau from a devotional, rather than an academic point of view, I began collecting short quotes from his works for my own purposes. Most of the quote collecting occurred in the winter months of 2006, when I was a third year undergraduate student. I spent countless hours in my university library between classes pouring over thousands of pages. I cherished each quote and in a short time was able to recite long passages from memory. Commenting on society, nature, government, spirituality and love, there seemed to be a Thoreau quote for every season. After roughly one month my list had expanded into a plethora of pages. Then, I got an idea: Why not share these treasures with others? And so it began.

Choosing which quotes to include and which quotes to ignore is tricky. With the aim of trying to preserve Thoreau’s original intentions, I was careful to not take any passage out of context. No precedent can dictate the proper course of action. However, Thoreau’s lyrical writing style makes it easy to find short, memorable truisms. Much of his best work lay not in the familiar, but in the unfamiliar. As a dedicated diarist, he wrote incessantly nearly every day. I found that the wisdom contained in his journal entries rivaled the most complex systems of thought laid out by any philosopher before or since. His correspondences, particularly with Harrison Blake, are even more exceptional. As the two men swapped letters between one another, Thoreau always found new ways to transform even the most mundane subjects into brilliant pieces of insight.

This book, appropriate for the beginner or devotee, is my attempt to bring together the best pieces of Thoreau’s writings in one collection. It is

the result of long hours of hard work by several people, and a determination constantly fueled by one inspiring idea: “If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined,” Thoreau wrote in the closing of *Walden*, “he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” In the end, we could all use a dose of Thoreau from time to time.

Kenny Luck
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Kenny Luck visiting
Henry David Thoreau’s
grave (October 2006).

SECTION I

Society & Government





I should not talk so
much about **myself** if there
were anybody else whom I **knew**
as **well**.

(*Walden*, “Economy,” p. 4)

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere **ignorance** and mistake, are so occupied with the **factitious cares** and **superfluously coarse labors** of life that its **finer fruits** cannot be plucked by them.

(*Walden*, “Economy,” p. 6)





He has no **time**
to be anything but
a machine.

(*Walden*, “Economy,” p. 6)

The mass of men
lead lives of **quiet**
desperation.

(*Walden*, "Economy," p. 8)





**It is never too late to
give up our prejudices.**

(Walden, "Economy," p. 9)

Most of the **luxuries**, and many of the so-called **comforts** of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to **the elevation** to mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor. The **ancient philosophers**, Chinese, Hind[u], Persian, and Greeks, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, **none so rich inward.**

(*Walden*, "Economy," p. 15)





The **philosopher** is in advance of his age even in the **outward form** of his life. He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his **contemporaries**.

(*Walden*, "Economy," p. 16)

I say, be aware of all enterprises
that **require** new clothes,
and not rather a new **wearer**
of clothes.

(*Walden*, “Economy,” p. 26)





While **civilization** has been improving our **houses**, it has not equally improved the **men** who are to inhabit them.

(*Walden*, "Economy," p. 37)