

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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.
-Henry David Thoreau

- ❖ A lifelong abolitionist (anti-slavery) and he was a conductor on the underground railroad
- ❖ Met Ralph Waldo Emerson (essayist) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (Scarlet Letter)
- ❖ Thoreau's philosophy of civil disobedience later influenced the political thoughts and actions of such notable figures as Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr.

Biography

- Born 1817 in Massachusetts
- Dad was a pencil maker. His maternal grandfather led the first recorded student protest in the American colonies in 1766
- 1837, started teaching, but resigned rather than be forced to administer corporal punishment to his students.
- 1840, at age 23, he proposed by letter to Ellen. She refused him on the advice of her father
 - ↳ she was being courted by two Thoreau brothers, one proposes in-person (she accepts, but immediately regrets doing so and recants; she then wants to marry Henry but her dad is disagreeable to it).
 - ↳ She pursues her lifelong interests in geology, and she eventually married a guy who was a minister and education reformer.
- 1842, brother died of tetanus (bacterial infection) in Thoreau's arms
- 1845, Henry David Thoreau decided it was time to be alone. He settled in a forest on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and built himself a tiny cabin. *"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately,"* stayed two years, living simply with nature.
- 1846, spent a night in jail for refusing to pay the poll tax over the past six years (due to his dislike for slavery and the Mexican-American War)
- 1859, after Harper's Ferry, Thoreau wrote an uncompromising defense of John Brown's actions
- Died 1862 in Massachusetts of tuberculosis (which he contracted in 1835)



Philosophy (major ideas)

It is morally justified to peacefully resist unjust laws

↳ this inspired Americans involved in the struggle against slavery and the fight for trade union rights and women's suffrage (*of note, he was quick to blame women for his lack of success*)

Thoreau's basic premise is that a higher law than civil law demands the obedience of the individual. Human law and government are subordinate. In cases where the two are at odds with one another, the individual must follow his conscience and, if necessary, disregard human law

He was a well-known advocate of transcendentalism, or the belief in the inherent goodness of people and nature, making a virtue of self-reliance.

The best government “governs not at all”

There exists within each human being a moral sense and an intuitive capacity for the apprehension of spiritual truths

Argues for acting on one's individual conscience and not blindly following laws and government policy.

Transcendental spiritual truths are revealed through

The search for the ultimate reality begins with simplification and the dispelling of the superfluities of life, and with the desire for clarity of vision and spiritual alertness

Thoreau argued that the government must end its unjust actions to earn the right to collect taxes from its citizens. As long as the government commits unjust actions, he continued, conscientious individuals must choose whether to pay their taxes or to refuse to pay them and defy the government

Action from principle brings about change in institutions and governments

Violence is ok to abolish American slavery

The divine source of all things exists in nature, yet divine reality is not exhausted by nature

He supports the concept of Bioregionalism, a philosophy that suggests that systems are more sustainable and just if they are organized around naturally defined areas through physical and environmental features

He advocated for the protection of animals and wild areas, free trade, and taxation for schools and highways. He disapproved of the subjugation of Native Americans, slavery, consumerism and mass entertainment.

The individual has no duty to make governments better or even to eradicate the worse injustice.
↳ *He hints toward advocating for anarchy!*



