

**JUST  
ENOUGH  
IS PLENTY**

THOREAU'S ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS

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# ❖ CONTENTS ❖

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<b>I. INTRODUCTION – THE PATH TO WALDEN</b>	1
<b>Crisis of Vocation</b>	2
<b>Thoreau on Materialistic Culture</b>	5
<b>The Walden Experiment</b>	10
<b>II. THOREAU’S ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS</b>	17
<b>The Necessaries of Life</b>	17
<i>Clothing</i>	19
<i>Shelter</i>	22
<i>Food</i>	25
<b>Beyond the Necessaries: How Much is Enough?</b>	29
<b>Enough for <i>What?</i> An Interlude on Self-Culture</b>	33
<b>Comforts, Luxuries, and Tools</b>	37
<b>Appropriate Technology</b>	43
<b>Working Hours</b>	46
<b>III. AFTER WALDEN</b>	49
<b>Was Thoreau’s Experiment a Success?</b>	50
<b>Conclusion</b>	55
<hr/>	
<b>APPENDIX – ‘Deconstructing the Shed: Where I Live and What I Live For’</b>	59

The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.

– Henry David Thoreau

## I. INTRODUCTION – THE PATH TO WALDEN

Graduating from Harvard in 1837 was a young student named Henry David Thoreau. This able graduate was an aspiring poet, but his poetry, though often beautiful and inspired, was not a commodity that sold well in the market. Indeed, it did not sell at all. And so, upon returning to his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, the young Thoreau was confronted by those great economic questions all of us must face when trying to establish financial independence in a world of scarce resources: *How best to earn a living? How much time should I spend at it? How much do I need to live well and to be free?*

This book examines the difficult but rewarding struggle that ensued when Thoreau set about answering these very human questions. It begins by trying to understand the poet's 'crisis of vocation' and then moves on to consider his not unrelated critique of materialistic culture. This will provide the foundations for a sustained examination of the 'alternative economics' that Thoreau presents in his unclassifiable manifesto, *Walden*.<sup>1</sup>

Although what follows is ostensibly about this poet-philosopher named Henry Thoreau and the response he gave to the economic situation he faced, I invite the reader to consider the relevance of Thoreau's life and ideas to our own day, our own lives – our own economic situations. For as Ralph Waldo Emerson said when he was speaking at Thoreau's graduation ceremony, 'This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.'<sup>2</sup> And as for knowing what to do with it, I wish to speak a word for Thoreau.

## **Crisis of Vocation**

Aside from the fact that his poetry would not sell, there were certain expectations that attached to a Harvard graduate at the time, and being a poet was not one of them. In fact, there were only a few 'respectable' career paths open to Thoreau: He could have entered the ministry, which would have been the most esteemed path; he could have gone into a secular profession, such as law, politics, medicine, or teaching; or he could have begun trading as a merchant. This last option was absolutely out of the question for Thoreau, who at twenty was already contemptuous of the Boston businessman and all he stood for. The first option, entering the ministry, was almost as unattractive, due to his antipathy toward institutionalized religion and his inclination toward free-thinking mysticism.<sup>3</sup> Practising law held no appeal for him, nor did a political career – both were too involved with the state for this fervent individualist.<sup>4</sup> And medicine did not inspire. That left only teaching.<sup>5</sup>

As it turned out, a teaching vacancy soon arose in Concord, and Thoreau, no doubt swept along by parental and societal expectations, as well as economic need, applied for and was offered a teaching position at the town school. Though he applied himself to this job, within a month he was taken aside by a member of the school committee and reprimanded for not canning disruptive students, which was the school policy and apparently beyond negotiation. In protest to what he considered the absurdity of corporal punishment, Thoreau re-entered the classroom, randomly selected six students, administered to them a canning, and then resigned.<sup>6</sup>

With his principles intact (somewhat dubiously, perhaps), but without a job, Thoreau's crisis of vocation deepened. There was some temporary respite when he and his brother established their own

Concord Academy, a private school which ran quite successfully for a couple of years. But by March 1941, the project was abandoned and the vocational crisis reemerged. Over the next few years, lacking any clear direction, Thoreau found himself periodically employed in a variety of miscellaneous roles, including labourer, pencil-maker, gardener and general handyman at the Emerson residence, tutor for Emerson's nephew, occasional lecturer, and editor.

During this time, directionless though it may have seemed to others, Thoreau nevertheless came to understand with increasing certainty what he needed to do and what he had always wanted to be. As Carl Bode put it: 'He believed that his job was to become a writer but a writer in a noble Transcendentalist way – a poet first in what he did and next in what he wrote.'<sup>7</sup> The poet's noblest work, according to Thoreau's ambitious conception of the poet, was his life, and his poetry or prose would grow out of his life.<sup>8</sup>

The economic problem of how to support himself, however, was not yet solved. How was he to live as a poet – to follow his true calling – and still earn a living? It is a question, perhaps, to which we can all relate, in our own way. With some justification Thoreau considered it 'the most practically important of all questions,'<sup>9</sup> and yet when he sought out advice on how best to answer it he was surprised and disappointed by what he discovered:

There is little or nothing to be remembered written on the subject of getting an honest living. Neither the New Testament nor Little Richard speaks to our condition. I cannot think of a single page which entertains, much less answers, the questions which I put to myself on this subject.... Is it that men are too disgusted with their experience to speak of it? Or that commonly they do not question the common modes? The most practically important of all questions, it seems to me,

is how shall I get my living, and yet I find nothing to my purpose in any book.... I consider that society with all its arts, has done nothing for us in this regard.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, although he had just graduated from Harvard – an elite university even then – Thoreau came to realize that throughout his formal education there the question of *how to live* had been strangely passed over. Reflecting upon his studies, he felt as if he had been sent 'into the neighbourhood of some professor, where anything was professed and practiced except the art of life.'<sup>11</sup> Typifying his educational experience, he was astonished to discover upon leaving college that he had studied navigation, claiming that if he had taken one turn down the harbor he would have known more about it.<sup>12</sup> As for economics, Thoreau's gripe was that, 'Even the *poor* student studies only *political* economy, while that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy is not even sincerely professed in our colleges.'<sup>13</sup> The consequence of this, he noted dryly, is that 'while he is reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say, he runs his father in debt irretrievably.'<sup>14</sup> Needless to say, studying the classical economists had not solved Thoreau's economic problem of how to live poetically.

Feeling that books and his formal education had failed him in this crucial way, Thoreau turned his attention to his contemporaries, the people of Concord, to see whether their lives could provide him with some insight into the art of living well, the art of freedom. His observations, however, far from showing him the way, instead gave rise to one of the most penetrating critiques of materialistic culture that has ever been laid down, one all the more piercing due to the fact that Thoreau was both a ruthless critic and a literary genius.

Only by examining this critique can we understand what ultimately drove Thoreau out of his township and into the woods.

## Thoreau on Materialistic Culture

'Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives,' Thoreau began one of his essays, noting that since time was short he would 'leave out all the flattery, and retain all the criticism,'<sup>15</sup> as was his way. 'What is it to be born free and not to live free?' he asked his fellow citizens. 'Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free, of which we boast?' America may have been free from political tyrants, but it was painfully clear to Thoreau that it was 'still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant.'<sup>16</sup> A tyrant called Mammon.

This world is a place of 'incessant business,' he lamented, and there was 'nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.'<sup>17</sup> He felt that 'It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once,' but there is 'nothing but work, work, work.'<sup>18</sup> To be sure, Thoreau was not opposed to labor, industry, or enterprise, as such. His concern, rather, was that the ways by which money is acquired 'almost without exception lead downward,'<sup>19</sup> almost always involve 'lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourself into a nutshell of civility, or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity, that you may persuade your neighbour to let you make his shoes, or his hat, or his coat, or his carriage, or import his groceries for him.'<sup>20</sup> And 'those services which the community will most readily pay for, it is most disagreeable to render.'<sup>21</sup> Thus, 'It is not enough to [say] that you worked hard to get your gold. So does the Devil work hard.'<sup>22</sup>

For these reasons Thoreau thought that to do anything merely for the sake of acquiring money or material superfluities was to be 'truly idle or worse.'<sup>23</sup> The following passage states his position directly:

If I should sell my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for me there would be nothing left worth living for.... I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living.<sup>24</sup>

But Thoreau saw his townsfolk labouring under this very mistake. 'It is a fool's life,' he asserted bluntly, 'as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before.'<sup>25</sup> He had travelled widely in Concord, and everywhere, in shops, offices, and fields, the inhabitants seemed to him to be leading lives of 'quiet desperation' and doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. 'The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor.'<sup>26</sup> Thoreau likened people's materialistic cravings to the heads of a hydra, noting that 'as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up.'<sup>27</sup>

The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said, 'Those who know they have enough are rich.'<sup>28</sup> Thoreau was telling his contemporaries that they had 'enough' but that they did not know it, and so were poor. Always wanting more luxuries and comforts and never content with less, he felt that they did not understand the meaning of 'Economy,' did not understand that the 'cost of a thing is the amount of... life which is required to be exchanged for it.'<sup>29</sup> 'Most men,' he wrote, 'even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance or mistake, are so occupied with factitious cares and superfluously course labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them.'<sup>30</sup> By a 'seeming fate,' there was 'no time to be anything but a machine.'<sup>31</sup>

And for what? People's lives were being 'ploughed into the soil for compost'<sup>32</sup> just to obtain 'splendid houses' and 'finer and more abundant clothing... and the like.' But as Thoreau insisted, 'Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only.'<sup>33</sup> Indeed, he claimed that '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.'<sup>34</sup> More concerned about accumulating nice things or climbing the social ladder than they were about their own destinies, Thoreau was astounded by how 'frivolous' people were with respect to their own lives – as if they could 'kill time without injuring eternity.'<sup>35</sup>

'Who made them serfs of the soil?' he asked, again implying that his contemporaries were slaves to their uncontained material desires and yet oblivious to this self-imposed servitude. 'It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.' At the height of his indignation Thoreau even turned on the abolitionists, and told them: 'Ye are all slaves.'<sup>36</sup> This was no mere rhetorical gesture. One of his poems even mocks the abolitionists' vehemence:

Make haste & set the captive free! –  
Are ye so free that cry?  
The lowest depths of slavery  
Leave freedom for a sigh.<sup>37</sup>

It was the English poet William Wordsworth who penned the lines, 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers,'<sup>38</sup> and we can imagine Thoreau being wholly sympathetic to this critical sentiment. And yet, such uncompromising condemnation of profit-seeking and acquisitiveness, of what Thoreau called 'the commercial spirit,' may give rise to the objection that Thoreau (and Wordsworth) were just

disaffected romantics who failed to appreciate what were arguably the many *beneficial* aspects of industrial capitalism. Thoreau, however, had anticipated this retort: “What!” exclaim a million Irishman starting up from all the shanties in the land, “is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?” Yes, I answer, *comparatively* good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.<sup>39</sup> ‘As for the Pyramids,’ Thoreau remarked, inviting us to reconsider the nature of human industry, ‘there is nothing to wonder at in them 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 wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs. I might possibly invent some excuse for them and him, but I have not time for it.’<sup>40</sup> It is much the same for the United States Bank, Thoreau concluded. ‘It costs more than it comes to,’<sup>41</sup> in terms of *life*, a calculus to which we will return.

Thoreau was living in a time of great economic transformation and for him the railroad was the emblem of industrialization. He often spoke of the railroad metaphorically, as a representation of the emerging economic system that was fast changing the face of America and indeed the world. ‘We do not ride upon the railroad,’ he asserted, ‘it rides upon us.’<sup>42</sup> He developed this image in the following memorable passage:

Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding upon a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon.

And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep... and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again.<sup>43</sup>

Thoreau indeed hoped that those 'sleepers' who were being 'ridden upon' by industrialization would 'sometime get up again,' and he did what he could to 'wake [his] neighbors up.'<sup>44</sup> But it appeared to Thoreau as if his sleeping neighbours had fallen into the common mode of living not because they preferred it to any other, but because they honestly thought there was no choice left. 'So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say.'<sup>45</sup>

But Thoreau was not convinced. He was of the view that 'there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one center.'<sup>46</sup> 'Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it... [M]an's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried.'<sup>47</sup> Even 'the life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind,' and 'why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?'<sup>48</sup> Forever the thoughtful non-conformist, Thoreau tended to believe that, 'What old people say you cannot do you try and find that you can,' and on that basis he boldly proposed that there should be, 'Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new.'<sup>49</sup>

It was time for Thoreau to begin his living experiment at Walden Pond.

## The Walden Experiment

On Independence Day, 1845, a few days before his twenty-eighth birthday, Henry Thoreau left his town of Concord and went to live alone in the woods, on the shores of Walden Pond, a mile from any neighbour. He there built himself a modest cabin and for two years and two months earned a simple living by the labor of his own hands. He also wrote, among other things, his autobiographical masterpiece, *Walden* (subtitled, *Life in the Woods*), which gives an account of his two year stay. This is, without any doubt, the greatest statement ever made on the living strategy now variously known as 'voluntary simplicity,' 'simple living,' or 'downshifting.'<sup>50</sup>

In the second chapter of *Walden*, entitled 'Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,' Thoreau offers us an explanation for his exit from conventional society: 'I went the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what they had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.'<sup>51</sup> He 'did not wish to live what was not life,' he tells us, 'living is so dear;' nor did he wish to 'practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary.'<sup>52</sup>

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 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 out of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it was sublime, to know it by experience.<sup>53</sup>

Elsewhere he said that his purpose in going to Walden Pond was to 'transact some private business with the fewest obstacles.'<sup>54</sup> In one

sense, this 'private business' was simply to write in solitude, close to Nature and away from modern distractions.<sup>55</sup> In another sense, though closely related to the first, his 'private business' was to solve, or at least better understand, the economic problem of how to live poetically in a world of scarce resources. Perhaps, Thoreau had decided, the best path was to reduce his material wants and live a simple life. He thought that 'it would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them.'<sup>56</sup> Simplicity of life was to be his means to the elevation of purpose.

Thoreau had come to suspect that, 'If your trade is with the Celestial Empire,'<sup>57</sup> by which he meant, 'If your concerns are "higher" than merely getting and spending,' – then very little is actually needed to live well and to be free, provided life is approached with the right attitude. 'Simplify, simplify,'<sup>58</sup> was to be his refrain. A modest shelter from the elements should be fixture enough. Old clothes will do, will they not? 'Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion.'<sup>59</sup> Most importantly, 'keep your accounts on your thumbnail.'<sup>60</sup>

This, in essence, was the 'method' Thoreau put to the test at Walden Pond, by living simply and rejecting the division of labor. As far as possible he secured his own food, by growing beans, peas, corn, turnips, and potatoes, and occasionally fishing in the pond. He cut down some local trees and built himself a house with but one small room, and made some basic furniture. It was not much, but it was enough. And just enough was plenty. He did not wish to be chained to the economy, so he practiced self-reliance; he did not wish to be slave to artificial material desires, so he practiced self-discipline; and he did not wish to

live what was not life, so he practiced self-culture. In short, he practiced what I am calling 'alternative economics.'

The economic significance of Thoreau's 'life in the woods' can only be understood if we always keep in mind what he was trying to accomplish there. As noted above, Thoreau wanted to be a writer in the Transcendentalist sense, a poet not just of words but of his life; which is to say, he wanted to infuse his everyday affairs with his highest goals and yield to 'all the impulses of the soul.'<sup>61</sup> By 1845, however, it had become clear to this Transcendentalist that his 'private business' was not likely to procure him even a moderate allowance in the market. 'For a long time,' he noted, 'I was reporter to a journal, of no very wide circulation, whose editor has never yet seen fit to print the bulk of my contributions, and, as is too common with writers, I got only my labor for my pains.'<sup>62</sup> Indeed, we have seen that Thoreau, in the eight years between his graduation from Harvard and his excursion to the pond, struggled in vain to find an occupation which would not conflict with the activities that yielded his poems and essays.<sup>63</sup> His options, it seemed, were either to make some compromises and pursue a different vocation – that is, to do something for which there was much more demand in the market – or else somehow find a way to become much less dependent on the market. In the following parable, which I will quote at length due to the centrality of the point it expresses, Thoreau neatly captures the essence both of his economic situation and his response to it:

Not long since, a strolling Indian went to sell baskets at the house of a well-known lawyer in my neighborhood. "Do you wish to buy any baskets?" he asked. "No, we do not want any," was the reply. "What!" exclaimed the Indian as he went out the gate, "do you mean to starve us?" Having seen his industrious white neighbors so well off – that the

lawyer had only to weave arguments, and, by some magic, wealth and standing followed – he had said to himself: I will go into business; I will weave baskets; it is a thing which I can do. Thinking that when he had made the baskets he would have done his part, and then it would be the white man's to buy them. He had not discovered that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy them, or at least make him think that it was so, or to make something else which it would be worth his while to buy. I too had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one's while to buy them. Yet not the less, in my case, did I think it worth my while to weave them, and instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them.<sup>64</sup>

Before moving on to consider this 'study' of Thoreau's in some detail, the fruits of which are his alternative economics, I wish to take a moment to ensure that Thoreau is not misunderstood on one very important point. Whatever his neighbours may have thought, Thoreau's venture into the woods was not an attempt to escape reality or to escape what may have been his duties. On the contrary, he knew it to be a journey toward reality and an undertaking to meet his duties; in particular, the duty to take his deepest aspirations seriously. 'As I preferred some things to others,' he wrote, 'and especially valued my freedom, ... I did not wish to spend my time in earning rich carpets or other fine furniture, or delicate cookery, or a house in the Grecian or the Gothic style just yet. If there are any to whom it is no interruption [to their 'proper pursuits'] to acquire these things, and who know how to use them when acquired, I relinquish to them the pursuit.'<sup>65</sup> Thoreau was clearly terrified of falling into the ruts of tradition and conformity, of compromising his dreams and wasting life in the pursuit of trivial

luxuries, as he saw so many of his contemporaries doing and which he considered to be 'not so sad as foolish.'<sup>66</sup> He knew that he would not be able to pluck life's 'finer fruits' if he devoted too much of his time to the 'coarse labors of life,' and so he set about lowering his denominator, reducing his needs.<sup>67</sup> Thoreau's experiment with simplicity, then, was not a renunciation of life, but an affirmation of it. He found the gift of life to be glorious, and for that reason was 'anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it to on to [his] stick; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line.'<sup>68</sup> To this passage he added: 'You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature.'<sup>69</sup>

Thoreau wanted to live without dead time, and he went to Walden Pond to learn how to achieve this; or, at least, to see if it were possible. As a matter of principle, it seemed, he would not accept any division of his day between lower and higher aims, between ordinary and poetic experience. This is what it means to live efficiently, to live economically, in Thoreau's sense. This is a very different approach, it must be said, to that of mainstream economic thought, which generally assumes that to live efficiently or act economically means 'maximizing wealth,'<sup>70</sup> evaluated in terms of dollars. And thus Thoreau's economics are 'alternative' in the sense that economic success is measured not with such yardsticks as productive labour (e.g. Adam Smith) or money (e.g. Richard Posner), but with the yardstick of a life lived well, a life lived deliberately. Admittedly, this may be more difficult to quantify than money or labour, but only with this alternative yardstick in mind can we understand what Thoreau meant when he stated, 'I have always endeavoured to acquire strict business habits; they are indispensable to

every man,<sup>71</sup> and why he thought that 'Walden Pond would be a good place for business.'<sup>72</sup> His business was not to make money but to become a 'Transcendental Capitalist'<sup>73</sup> who trades with the 'Celestial Empire.' The following passage exemplifies Thoreau's radically unconventional conception of 'good business:'

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath [in the pond], I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and the hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun's falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been.<sup>74</sup>

To the people of Concord, 'this was sheer idleness... no doubt.'<sup>75</sup> But Thoreau was sure that 'if the birds and flowers had tried [him] by their standard, [he] should not have been found wanting.'<sup>76</sup> As he was to write in his journal, 'If it is not poetic, it is not life but death we get.'<sup>77</sup>

In the above passages about 'business,' and indeed throughout *Walden* at every opportunity, Thoreau conveys the joys of a 'higher and more ethereal life,'<sup>78</sup> a 'spiritual view of things,'<sup>79</sup> with the language of economics and commerce. He does this to provoke us, to unsettle us in our judgments of life, by parodying conventional means of evaluation, by making outrageous comparisons, and by mocking those who measure things in life 'by the... dollar only.'<sup>80</sup> Stanley Cavell, in his celebrated study, *The Senses of Walden*, talks of how Thoreau employs a 'maze' of economic terms, including 'money,... profit and loss, rich and poor, cost and expense, borrow and pay, owe and own, business,

commerce, enterprises, ventures, affairs, capital, price, amount, improvement, bargain, employment, inheritance, bankruptcy, work, trade, labor, idle, spend, waste, allowance, fortune, gain, earn, afford, possession, change, settling, living, interest, prospects, means, terms.<sup>81</sup> And as another commentator notes, Thoreau uses this vast imagery 'to expose the insidious control exerted over our lives by the economic system of profit and loss which we so easily take for granted,... to demonstrate how overwhelmingly our vision of life is dominated by commercial values.'<sup>82</sup> Put otherwise, Thoreau tries to help us escape the capitalist semantics that have infiltrated our vocabulary and which have come to shape the way we see the world and our place in it. His strategy is to use familiar economic concepts in unfamiliar, even shocking, ways. This strategy is epitomized by his claim that there were days at the pond, 'when idleness was the most attractive and productive industry. Many a forenoon have I have stolen away, preferring to spend thus the most valuable part of the day; for I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and summer days, and spent them lavishly; nor do I regret that I did not waste more of them in the workshop or at the teacher's desk.'<sup>83</sup>

By defining 'the cost of a thing' as 'the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it,'<sup>84</sup> Thoreau inverts the values of conventional economics, making life – instead of the dollar-value of commodities – the highest good. Life, he suggests, consists of a limited amount of time, energy, and attention, which may be conserved, saved, spent, employed, stolen, squandered, or hoarded – just like property.<sup>85</sup> This inverted value-system forms the basis of Thoreau's alternative economics.

## II. THOREAU'S ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS

It is now time to take a closer look at how exactly Thoreau set about answering the economic questions that confronted him; questions, I have suggested, which will confront any whose true calling happens to have little value in the market. *How best to earn a living? How much time should I spend at it? How much do I need to live well and to be free?* Thoreau had discovered that there was an incompatibility between his self-culture and a profit-centred civilization, but instead of studying how to sell the product of his genius in the market, remember, Thoreau studied how to avoid the necessity of selling it. For as he was to say with characteristic disdain, 'trade curses everything it handles.'<sup>86</sup>

With the groundwork complete, let us make haste to Thoreau's living experiment. We will begin with his discussion of the 'necessaries of life': what they are, how they are best understood, and what questions arise upon obtaining them. We will then examine Thoreau's perspective on what lies beyond the necessaries of life, those material things which can be broadly categorized into comforts, luxuries, or tools. We will also consider Thoreau's thoughts on two other miscellaneous subjects – technology and working hours. Finally, we will inquire into why Thoreau might have left Walden Pond and whether or not his living experiment can be judged a success.<sup>87</sup>

### **The Necessaries of Life**

The first task set by alternative economics is to determine what are the gross necessaries of life, 'for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success.'<sup>88</sup> The quoted passage is important, I believe,

because with it Thoreau is seeking to avoid a misunderstanding that might arise, and sometimes does, from his celebration of material simplicity. Simplicity is not material destitution, he is saying. We all have basic physical needs that have to be met (though they may be fewer than we commonly think). If those needs are not met then we would be consumed by anxiety over where our next meal might come from or whether we would be able to survive the cold night. And that is obviously not a condition conducive to a life of freedom, a flourishing life. Accordingly, before dedicating any of our energies to marvelling at the wonders of the world, to developing our higher capacities, or to composing novel, personally meaningful answers to the questions posed by human existence, we will need to secure at least a certain minimum of material things to ensure our healthy, physical subsistence. Securing that minimum is therefore of immediate and primary importance.<sup>89</sup>

By the words, *necessary of life*, Thoreau meant 'whatever... has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any... ever attempt to do without.'<sup>90</sup> Although most creatures have only Food as a true necessary of life, and perhaps Shelter, also, Thoreau held that the necessaries of life for a human being in his climate 'may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel.'<sup>91</sup> In the following sections I discuss these necessaries of life from the critical perspective of Thoreau's alternative economics, following the order in which he discusses them in 'Economy,' the first chapter of *Walden*. (I will, however, defer the discussion of Fuel, since it is largely metaphorical and is best addressed later. In any case, there is little to discuss, factually; the woods provided Thoreau with ample fuel for his fire.)

## *Clothing*

With respect to procuring clothing, Thoreau wondered whether we are more often led by the love of novelty and the opinions of others, than by a true utility. 'We worship not the Graces... but Fashion. The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveler's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same.'<sup>92</sup> This taste for 'new patterns,' Thoreau complained, is 'childish and savage,'<sup>93</sup> by in large a waste of our vital energy and attention. What is worse, 'The manufacturers have learned that this taste is merely whimsical. Of two patterns which differ only by a few threads more or less of a particular colour, the one will be sold readily, the other lie on the shelf, though it frequently happens that after the lapse of a season the latter becomes the most fashionable.'<sup>94</sup> Worse still, however, is that the principal object of the factory system 'is not that mankind may be well and honestly clad but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched.'<sup>95</sup> One could be forgiven for thinking that Thoreau was writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Another criticism Thoreau levelled at the institution of 'Fashion' is that it is largely out of our control, at least in terms of what is in vogue. It follows that if we choose to respect fashion (and Thoreau would insist that it is a choice) we thereby hand over some of our powers and freedoms, as well as our capacity for aesthetic judgment, to a highly dubious ruler – that monkey in Paris. Thoreau, for one, would not be ruled by a monkey:

When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, "They do not make them so now," not emphasizing the "They" at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates, and I find it difficult to get made what I want, simply because she cannot believe that I mean what I say, that I am so rash. When I hear this

oracular sentence, I am for a moment absorbed in thought, emphasizing to myself each word separately that I may come at the meaning of it, that I may find out by what degree of consanguinity *They* are related to *me*, and what authority they may have in an affair which affects me so nearly; and, finally, I am inclined to answer her with equal mystery, and without any more emphasis of the “they” – “It is true, they did not make them so recently, but they do now.”<sup>96</sup>

Thoreau reminds us that ‘the object of clothing is, first, to retain the vital heat, and secondly, in this state of society, to cover nakedness.’<sup>97</sup> On that basis he suggested – and this is his central point here – that any necessary or important work may be accomplished without adding to our wardrobes. ‘A man who has at length found something to do will not need to get a new suit to do it in.’<sup>98</sup> Beware, then, he wrote, ‘of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather the new wearer of clothes.’<sup>99</sup>

Thoreau was of the view that, in terms of what is necessary to life, functional clothing can be obtained very cheaply – ‘at prices to suit customers really’<sup>100</sup> – or even made at home for a nominal cost. Furthermore, he thought that before we seek ‘finer clothing’ we should first make sure that our pursuits are ‘finer,’ or else we are just relying on the ‘false skin’ of clothing to obtain a false respect.<sup>101</sup> Thoreau wondered how far people would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes. Should this happen, he implied, we would simply have to confer social status on the basis of *worthiness*, or the like, rather than on the basis of fine dress, which all too often merely represents an accidental and arbitrary possession of wealth.

What should it matter, in the greater scheme of things, if we have to dress in last seasons colours or wear a patch over the knee? ‘Most behave as if they would be ruined if they should do it. It would be

easier for them to hobble to town with a broken leg than with a broken pantaloons.<sup>102</sup> But, wrote Thoreau, 'No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch on his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience.'<sup>103</sup>

Bringing his argument to a head, Thoreau stated: 'Only those who go to soirees and legislative halls must have new coats, coats to change as often as the man changes in them. But if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do, will they not?'<sup>104</sup> It is an interesting question to consider, if not in relation to the worship of God, necessarily, then more generally in relation to the living of a passionate life. Old clothes will do, will they not? Thoreau proposed that they will do just fine.

As we hand down our old, superfluous clothing to those poorer than ourselves, we find Thoreau telling us that, in terms of clothing, at least, the poor are actually richer than us for being able to do with less. But Thoreau must not be misunderstood here. He is not glorifying the poor or prescribing to us a dress code. He is attempting to get us to reconsider cultural assumptions about the importance of material things (in this case clothing) to a well-lived life. As I interpret him, his argument is not that one cannot live a happy and meaningful life in fine clothing so much as fine clothing is not necessary for a happy and meaningful life. If that is so, reducing the consumption of fine clothing should not negatively affect overall well-being. In fact, since reducing consumption in clothing implies a correlative reduction in the labour needed to produce clothing, well-being is likely to increase since less time labouring means more leisure time – more freedom.

## *Shelter*

As for Shelter, Thoreau does not deny that this is now a necessary of life, though he does make a point of noting that there are instances of human beings, no hardier than ourselves, doing without shelter for long periods in colder countries.<sup>105</sup> Assuming, however, that 'Shelter' is indeed a necessary of life, Thoreau proposed that we 'Consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary.'<sup>106</sup> He had seen Indians in his town living in tents of thin cotton cloth, which in the first instance could be constructed in a day or two, at most, and taken down and put up in a few hours; and every family owned one.<sup>107</sup> He had even seen a large box by the railroad, six feet long by three feet wide, in which the labourers locked their tools up at night, and it suggested to him that anyone who was hard pushed might get such a one for a dollar, and, having bored a few holes in it to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained at night, and hook down the lid, 'and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be free.'<sup>108</sup> This will strike some as a ridiculous proposition, but Thoreau was 'far from jesting.'<sup>109</sup> An average house in his neighbourhood cost about eight hundred dollars (at the time) and Thoreau noted that to lay up this sum would take from ten to fifteen years of the labourer's life; add the farm and one would have to spend twenty, thirty, or forty years toiling – more than half of one's life is easily spent. Would the Indians have been wise to give up their tents on these terms?

It is in this context where Thoreau made his alternative economics most explicit, expressing the core idea which we have already considered and, for emphasis, will consider again. 'If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man – and I think it is, though only the wise improve their advantages – it must be shown that

it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.<sup>110</sup> On this basis, Thoreau suggested that 'when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him.'<sup>111</sup> What is more, '*if the civilized man's pursuits are no worthier than the savage's, if he is employed the greater part of his life in obtaining gross necessaries and comforts merely, why should he have a better dwelling than the former?*'<sup>112</sup>

Thoreau wanted to show at what sacrifice our more 'advanced' dwellings were obtained and to suggest that, by living more simply, we may secure all the advantage without suffering any of the disadvantage. With this in mind, he went to Walden Pond with an axe, cut down some trees, and in about three unrushed months had built himself a modest but sturdy cabin. Again exemplifying his alternative mode of economic analysis, Thoreau declared that, 'I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more [in terms of life] than the present one.'<sup>113</sup>

It appears, then, that Thoreau was *perfectly content* with his shelter, modest though it was. Did this not make him richer than a king who is dissatisfied with his palace? With a little more wit we could *all* be richer than kings, Thoreau implied; but, unfortunately, 'Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have.'<sup>114</sup>

Furthermore, Thoreau thought that there is something important in the *experience* of providing for oneself, of being self-reliant, that has been lost as a result of so-called 'modern improvements' and

capitalism's extreme division of labor. He wondered whether 'if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands... the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged?'<sup>115</sup> But, alas, 'we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built.'<sup>116</sup>

'Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter?'<sup>117</sup> he asked, noting that never in all his walks had he come across anyone engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building their own house. 'Where is [our] division of labor to end? And what object does it finally serve? No doubt another *may* also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself.'<sup>118</sup> Thoreau had come to believe that his contemporaries were endeavouring to solve the problem of their livelihoods by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. 'To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle.'<sup>119</sup> But Thoreau showed that, if one is prepared to live simply and with more self-reliance, 'the student who wishes for a shelter can obtain one for a lifetime at an expense not greater than the rent which he now pays annually,<sup>120</sup> and 'become richer than the richest are now.'<sup>121</sup>

Thoreau's calculus here is essentially the same as it was regarding clothing. Perhaps it would be nice to live in a palace or a mansion or even the nicest house on the block, but it must not be forgotten that the more expensive one's housing is the more of one's life one will probably have to spend earning the money needed to buy or rent it (assuming we are not kings or queens). So why not keep housing modest and simple? Since housing is the greatest overall expense in most people's lives, this is an area where people should be particularly cognizant of the time / freedom cost of consumption. Perhaps by lowering 'standard of living' (measured by consumption in housing)

people could actually increase 'quality of life' (measured by subjective well-being)? Indeed, Thoreau's suggestion is that by living in modest accommodation people can literally save years of labour and thereby become 'richer than the richest are now,' not in terms of property, of course, but in terms of freedom and contentment. 'If I seem to boast more than is becoming,' he concluded, 'my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself.'<sup>122</sup>

### *Food*

During his two year stay at the pond, as noted earlier, Thoreau grew for himself the bulk of the food he ate – beans, especially, but also a few rows of peas, corn, turnips, and potatoes. He drank water. From this experience he learned, among other things, that it 'cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one's necessary food' and that 'a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength.'<sup>123</sup> Reflecting on his first year of homesteading, Thoreau wrote that, 'All things considered, that is, considering the importance of a man's soul and of today, ... I believe that [I] was doing better than any farmer in Concord.'<sup>124</sup> As well as providing for his own dietary needs, he also cultivated approximately two and half acres of beans which he later sold to meet his occasional miscellaneous expenses.<sup>125</sup> As for his second year:

... I did better still, for I spaded up all the land which I required, about a third of an acre, and I learned from the experience of both years, ... that if one would live simply and eat only the crop which he raised, and raise no more than he ate, and not exchange it for an insufficient quantity of more luxurious and expensive things, he would need to cultivate only a few rods of ground, and that it would be cheaper to

spade up that than to use oxen to plow it, and to select a fresh spot from time to time than to manure the old, and he could do all his necessary farm work as it were with his left hand at odd hours in the summer.<sup>126</sup>

By simplifying his life and practicing self-reliance, Thoreau believed that he was more independent than any farmer he knew. 'I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius, which is a very crooked one, every moment.'<sup>127</sup> This passage is significant because it shows that Thoreau's living experiment was meeting with some real success. He had gone into the woods, after all, to confront that 'vexed question'<sup>128</sup> of how to earn an honest living and still have freedom for his proper pursuits, and a life of simplicity and self-reliance was proving to be a promising response. Growing his own food, we see, was an important part of that response.

Growing his own food, however, came to be something much more than a matter of just physically sustaining himself. In a chapter of *Walden* entitled, 'The Bean Field,' we find Thoreau telling us that:

I came to love my rows, my beans... They attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antæus. But why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows. This was my curious labor all summer — to make this portion of the earth's surface, which had yielded only cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, and the like, before, sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers, produce instead this pulse. What shall I learn of beans or beans of me? I cherish them, I hoe them, early and late I have an eye to them; and this is my day's work.<sup>129</sup>

Some readers may be reminded here of the passage by Nathaniel Hawthorne in which he talks with similar devotion about his own vegetable garden:

I used to visit and revisit it a dozen times a day, and stand in deep contemplation over my vegetable progeny with a love that nobody could share or conceive of who had never taken part in the process of creation. It was one of the most bewitching sights in the world to observe a hill of beans thrusting aside the soil, or a rose of early peas just peeping forth sufficiently to trace a line of delicate green.<sup>130</sup>

Thoreau admitted that, since he had little aid from horses, cattle, or hired labor, or from the latest farming implements, he was 'much slower' in his work than other farmers.<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, he claimed that he became much more 'intimate' with his beans on this account and that his slower more personal approach yielded a 'constant and imperishable moral.'<sup>132</sup> This moral, he seemed to think, was that the fastest and most efficient way of farming, that is, the way that would yield the most profit in the market, was not necessarily the best way, all things considered. As Philip Cafaro has noted, Thoreau 'makes a point of doing most of the work himself, rather than contracting it out to more productive specialists with more elaborate tools. He does not, he tells us, bother with "imported" fertilizers. These moves would increase his productivity, but he refuses to allow that to dictate how he will farm.'<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, Thoreau could have hired himself out as a day labourer and for much less effort been able to buy his food at the grocers, but he chose not to. Doing so would have left him relying on others first to hire him and second to produce and then sell him his necessities.

But Thoreau's reasons for living simply go deeper even than securing his independence and freedom. Allowing others to grow food for him, even if it was more 'efficient' or 'economic' to do so, would also have disconnected him from the land, from direct contact with Nature, that is, from the elemental source of both his material and spiritual

nourishment. And Thoreau would have no truck with that. He did not just want the beans to eat; he also wanted the *experience* of cultivating them. In 'The Bean Field' we get an insight into the nature of his labours. Being outside, he tells us, working up a sweat under the morning sun and sky, hoeing his beans in the fresh country air, 'yielded an instant and immeasurable crop.'<sup>134</sup> At such times, he noted somewhat cryptically, it 'was no longer beans that I hoed,'<sup>135</sup> suggesting, we can suppose, that he was cultivating not so much the land as his own soul.

Thoreau delighted at being 'part and parcel of Nature.'<sup>136</sup> The chickadees became so familiar with him that at length one even perched upon an armful of wood which he was carrying, pecking at the sticks without fear. 'I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing... and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by an epaulet I could have worn. The squirrels also grew at last to be quite familiar, and occasionally stepped upon my shoe when that was the nearest way.'<sup>137</sup> Thoreau would listen to the brown thrashers as he worked his rows and would carefully observe the wildlife on the edge of his field. As he was not driven by an urge to maximize profits, and was thus in no real hurry, he could rest on his hoe and watch the 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.'<sup>138</sup> Philip Cafaro, again, captures the significance of these and similar experiences exactly: 'To a poet-naturalist, opportunities for such encounters, even opportunities to feel changes in the weather and mark the natural course of the day, are strengthening and vivifying. Thoreau contrasts this work with factory and office work, suggesting again that the experience lost is not made up in increased pay or productivity.'<sup>139</sup>

This Thoreauvian calculus deserves our most serious consideration, today more than ever before. But it will take some concerted imaginative effort on our part to broaden our view of things, since Thoreau suggested that we entrenched urbanites, who are highly dependent on the grocer and who live and work mostly indoors, can barely comprehend what it could even mean to be 'part and parcel with Nature.' And until we have some sense of its richness, some sense that there is another, simpler, more intimate way to provide for ourselves, we are likely to continue doing economics in the usual, narrow fashion and structuring our lives accordingly, not even knowing what we have lost, or, rather, what the market economy and its division of labor has taken from us. 'This is the only way, we say.'<sup>140</sup>

I will close this section by referring to another rather cryptic passage in *Walden*, in which Thoreau summarily dismisses all those timid souls who have doubts about the feasibility of alternative economics:

There is a certain class of unbelievers who sometimes ask me such questions as, if I think that I can live on vegetable food alone; and to strike at the root of the matter at once – for the root is faith – I am accustomed to answer such, that I can live on board nails. If they cannot understand that, they cannot understand much that I have to say.<sup>141</sup>

### **Beyond the Necessaries: How Much is Enough?**

So there we have it, the essence of Thoreau's views on Clothing, Shelter, and Food. We saw that he also listed Fuel as a necessary of life, a need which he met easily by collecting the dead and unmerchantable wood behind his house and the driftwood from the pond, as well as by burning a few tree stumps.<sup>142</sup> What little else Thoreau said on the

subject of Fuel was metaphorical, as noted above, and we will see that his use of metaphor in this context leads us nicely onto our next subject, which concerns the nature of what lies *beyond* the necessities of life.

Consider the following passage: 'By proper Shelter and Clothing we legitimately retain our own internal heat; but with an excess of these, or of Fuel, that is, with an external heat greater than our own internal, may not cookery properly be said to begin?'<sup>143</sup> Thoreau begins here by acknowledging, as he must, that a certain amount of the necessities of life is 'legitimate' or 'proper,' but he then goes on to suggest that they will eventually stop serving any legitimate purpose and indeed detract from life if consumed in 'excess.' On the next page his suggestion becomes a statement: 'The luxuriously rich are not simply kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot; as I implied before, they are cooked, of course a la mode.'<sup>144</sup> Thoreau's metaphor implies that fire, like material wealth, is far from being an unqualified good in our lives, but is instead good or bad depending on how much of it there is and how it is used.

It is within this metaphor that Thoreau crafted one of the central passages in *Walden*:

When a man is warmed by the several modes which I have described [i.e. Food, Shelter, Clothing, Fuel], what does he want next? Surely not more warmth of the same kind, as more and richer food, larger and more splendid houses, finer and more abundant clothing, 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.<sup>145</sup>

Let us take some time to unpack Thoreau's insight here. The unstated background point is that we must first secure the necessities of life, for without them we die. If their attainment means we have to toil all day in the humblest conditions, then toil we shall, for the sheer will to survive is a powerful driving force. When we have secured the necessities of life, however, we are suddenly confronted by what Thoreau earlier called 'the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success.'<sup>146</sup> That is, we are faced with the question of whether to keep on pursuing material things beyond what is necessary or *to do something else with our lives*. Thoreau was so critical of his contemporaries because to him they rarely seemed to face this question and instead thoughtlessly spent their lives accumulating material 'superfluities' – richer foods, splendid houses, finer clothing, hotter fires, etc. – as if that were the only way to live. 'It is a fool's life,' we heard him declare above, 'as they will find when they get to the end of it if not before.'<sup>147</sup> But there is an alternative, Thoreau insisted, and that is 'to adventure on life now,' our 'vacation from humbler toil having commenced.' Suddenly switching to a new metaphor, Thoreau proposed that, having rooted ourselves firmly in the earth and secured our material foundations, like the seeds of noble plants we should now rise confidently toward the heavens.<sup>148</sup>

Thoreau, however, must not be misunderstood here. He is not proposing that we only ever work to obtain the gross necessities of life *and no more*. Put otherwise, he does not deny that there are times when obtaining more than is strictly necessary can genuinely improve our lives and help us achieve our goals (a point which we will consider further in a later section). But Thoreau is warning us not to assume that material wealth will always contribute positively to our lives, for often, in insidious ways, it will not. It is not that there is anything inherently

evil about money or material things; it is just that each moment we spend pursuing such things beyond what is necessary is a moment we could have spent on some free, non-materialistic good – such as sauntering through the woods, in Thoreau’s case – and we should always be cognisant of this type of trade-off. Sometimes trading our time for money and things will be a good trade, no doubt. But sometimes such a trade will ultimately cost more than it comes to in terms of *life*, making us not richer but poorer, and thus be a bad trade.

This calculus, as we have seen, is the heart of Thoreau’s alternative economics. The essential lesson can be expressed as follows: *once we have obtained those things necessary to life, we should thereafter carefully assess how much more we actually need to live well and to be free, by thinking about whether the pursuit of more material things would actually improve or detract from our lives, immediately or in the long run, and act on that basis.*<sup>149</sup> Applying this calculus to our lives may not be easy or clear cut, especially in a culture that celebrates material wealth as a good in itself. But if we neglect it – if we just assume that more material wealth is what is needed to improve our lives – then we are at risk of getting cooked, of course a la mode. Those who do not want to be cooked must honestly confront the challenging question posed by Thoreau’s alternative economics: ‘How much material wealth is *enough?*’

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This question, however, leads us to an unexpected twist in the narrative of alternative economics. We discover that it is impossible to answer the question, ‘How much is enough?’, until we have first answered a prior and even more important question: ‘Enough for *what?*’ This ‘prior’

question challenges us to specify the point of our economic activity, for if we cannot identify its purpose we cannot know if our economic efforts have succeeded. Without some 'chief end' in mind to guide and justify our labor, we would merely be running in the ruts or acting for no conscious purpose, like the Brahmin who chained himself for life to the foot of a tree, but could not explain why he did it.<sup>150</sup> Thoreau is warning us, in effect, that if we do not have a clear sense of what we are doing with our lives, or why we are heading in one direction rather than another, we will not be able to tell if our attitudes toward material things are keeping us on the right path or leading us astray. In the next section we must take an apparent detour to consider this issue in more detail.

### **Enough for *What?* An Interlude on Self-Culture**

It was the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who proclaimed: 'Be the poet of your life.'<sup>151</sup> This imperative is one that we can be sure Thoreau would have received sympathetically, had he ever been exposed to it.<sup>152</sup> If we are prepared to broaden our conception of poetry to include more than just written or spoken verse, and define it (as did the romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelly) as 'the expression of the imagination,'<sup>153</sup> then to say 'Be the poet of your life,' begins to make more sense. Blurring the distinction between art and life, it suggests that we should take hold of life, as the poet takes hold of language, and shape it into something worthy – to imagine the best life we can and then set about creating such a life. For are we not each related to our own lives in a way comparable to how the artist is related to his or her raw materials?<sup>154</sup> Are we not each charged with composing as an aesthetic project the meaning of our own lives? As Thoreau wrote, 'It is

something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so make a few objects beautiful, but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, in the conclusion to *Walden* he urged us all to 'live the life [we have] imagined.'<sup>156</sup>

To some readers all this may sound grandiose, but the point being made is a serious one. 'Love your life,'<sup>157</sup> Thoreau stated with disarming simplicity, and make no excuses. 'Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.'<sup>158</sup> Thoreau thought that there are as many ways to live 'as there can be drawn radii from one centre,'<sup>159</sup> and he desired that there 'be as many different persons in the world as possible.'<sup>160</sup> But he also saw 'how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves,'<sup>161</sup> how easily we fall into the 'deep ruts of tradition and conformity.'<sup>162</sup> This troubled Thoreau deeply, for he thought that if we do not live our lives *deliberately*, if we only get out of bed because of 'the mechanical nudgings of some servitor,'<sup>163</sup> then we are just sleep-walking through life, injuring eternity by killing time. 'Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius.'<sup>164</sup> Thoreau, to be sure, is speaking not so much to geniuses here, as to the genius (or poet) in us all. Take yourself and your life seriously, he is saying. Do not let yourself be swept along. Claim your freedom and exercise your capacity to create your own fate. Compose yourself! WAKE UP!

'Awakening' is one of the most prominent moral tropes in *Walden*. The epigraph to *Walden* reads: 'I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.' And in the final paragraph of *Walden* we read: 'Only that day dawns to which we are

awake. There is more day to dawn.<sup>165</sup> This notion of 'awakening' brings us face to face with our focus question, which I hope has not been lost. If we are to know how much material wealth is *enough*, and thereby avoid labouring with out end or purpose, then first we need to confront the question, 'Enough for *what?*' Put otherwise, we need to ask ourselves, 'What should we want material wealth *for?*' If we neglect this question, that is, if we neglect our 'proper pursuits,' we are at risk of wasting our lives in the pursuit inessential trivialities and living lives of 'quiet desperation.' Thoreau was certainly not going to answer the question for us – we must each find our '*own way*'<sup>166</sup> in life, he properly insisted – but he did try to 'wake up his neighbors' who were asleep to the question. 'Moral reform,' he stated, 'is the effort to throw off sleep.... The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive.'<sup>167</sup>

Thoreau began each day by getting up at dawn and bathing in the pond: 'that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did.'<sup>168</sup> What could awaken us more immediately, what else could thrust us so intensely into a state of sensual excitement and awareness, than a plunge, first thing in the morning, into a clear, cold pond?<sup>169</sup> *Walden*, it could be said, seeks to do for its readers what bathing in the pond did for Thoreau. Should we never find time to read *Walden*, however, we might at least imagine Thoreau busting into our bedrooms at the break of dawn, as the first rays of sunlight are peeking over the Walden Woods, putting our sleepy selves over his shoulder and marching us towards the pond, then promptly throwing us in and afterward diving in himself. As we emerge from the chilling water, gasping for breath but now *fully awake*, we find ourselves face to face with Thoreau, who,

with the sparkle of dawn in his eyes, puts his hands on our shoulders and says: *'Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?'*<sup>170</sup>

As I have said, Thoreau does not try to answer these perennial human questions for us, but he does insist that we must face them head on when shaping our attitudes to money and material things. If we do not face them, Thoreau argued, we cannot possibly understand the meaning or purpose of 'Economy.' Ask yourself: What is money really *for*?

At this important juncture we see just how distant the methodology of alternative economics is to that of most mainstream economic theory. Economists typically assume that the 'ends' of consumer behaviour are arbitrary from an economic perspective, mere 'preferences,' and not a subject matter with which they need to concern themselves. The economist's job, rather, is to efficiently maximize the size of the economic pie, so that as many unquestioned 'preferences' as possible can be satisfied via free market transactions. Economists also tend to assume that human beings have an insatiable desire for material wealth, ownership, and consumption whose pursuit is limited only by scarcity of resources.<sup>171</sup> Thoreau's alternative economics rejects these assumptions. From his perspective, as we have seen, it makes no sense to pursue material wealth if the 'ends' of consumer behaviour are ignoble or childish, and thus the ends must be justified before the economic activity can be justified. The ends are inseparable from the means, such that we cannot judge individuals or societies to be 'successful' merely on the grounds that they are the richest, for they might spend all their money on trinkets, baubles, and other inane trivialities. As Thoreau asserted, 'The cart before the horse is neither beautiful nor useful.'<sup>172</sup> It follows that an alternative economist is necessarily concerned with the justifiability of 'preferences,' and does not just accept them as 'given.'

Furthermore, Thoreau did not conceptualize human beings as economic agents who have insatiable desires for material wealth and who are always frustrated by scarcity of resources. Far from it, he thought that we can know when we have enough, if only we put our minds to the matter. True wealth, according to this view, is not so much about getting what we want as wanting what we have. And just perhaps this abundance is attainable by a simple act of will? Again, the words of Lao Tzu ring true: 'Those who know they have enough are rich.'<sup>173</sup>

### **Comforts, Luxuries, and Tools**

The purpose of the preceding section was to show that we cannot answer the question, 'How much is *enough*?' until we have first answered the question, 'Enough for *what*?' Having exposed that relationship, we are now in a position to return to our examination of what attitude Thoreau adopts in relation to material resources beyond the necessities of life. On this question his alternative economics entails – at times implicitly, at times explicitly – a categorization of material resources into 'comforts,' 'luxuries,' and 'tools.' Discussing those three categories is the purpose of this section.

We all want the material resources needed to pursue our chief purpose in life, whatever that purpose might be. But might there be times when our pursuit of material resources does not support but actually interferes with our chief purpose? Everybody wants *enough*, but how much is *too much*? The answer to this question, once again, will be shaped by the answer given to, 'Enough for *what*?' and there is no single right answer to that question. We will see, however, that Thoreau's alternative economics provides a framework for inquiry that each of us can apply to our own lives, despite the fact that we each

have unique life goals. Our answers to the questions posed will probably be different, since our life goals will probably be different, but I contend that alternative economics at least gets us struggling with the right questions, which is no minor accomplishment.

To begin with, consider a scenario in which a person is comfortably able to secure the necessities of life, but no more. Should this person spend their time despairing at how little they have? Or are the necessities alone enough to live well and to be free? Although Thoreau does not advocate that we only seek the necessities and no more – and never is it his intention to glorify true poverty – he does insist (as a self-respecting Stoic) that if it so happens that our fate is to live a life founded upon the necessities only, this is no cause for despair, necessarily. In such circumstances, he argued, we may be simply 'confined to the most significant and vital experiences [and] compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar... It is life near the bone where it is sweetest.'<sup>174</sup> His point is that once our basic needs are met, 'Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul,'<sup>175</sup> which is but an inflection of the old adage that, 'The best things in life are free.' With the necessities of life secured, a strong-minded and cheerful Stoic might still be able to fall in love, experience the joys of conversation and friendship, saunter through Nature and delight in her 'inexhaustible entertainment,'<sup>176</sup> be part of a community or enjoy solitary contemplation, participate in political life, have aesthetic or spiritual experiences, meditate, sing, laugh, etc. – none of which need to rely on money, or much money. As Thoreau put it, 'The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man's abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet mind may live as contentedly there, and have

as cheering thoughts, as in a palace.<sup>177</sup> In this context I cannot resist also quoting John Burroughs:

[T]o be in direct and personal contact with the sources of your material life; to find the universal elements enough; to find the air and the water exhilarating; to be refreshed by a morning walk or an evening saunter; to find a quest of wild berries more satisfying than a gift of tropical fruit; to be thrilled by the stars at night; to be elated over a bird's nest or a wild flower in spring – these are some of the rewards of the simple life.<sup>178</sup>

As noted, Thoreau had possessions that went beyond the bare necessities of life, though a materially simple life he certainly lived. We know he built himself a small cabin with but one room, and ate a lot of beans. He tells us that his furniture, part of which he made himself, consisted of a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches in diameter, a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet, and a frying-pan, a dipper, a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a japanned lamp.<sup>179</sup> Though he did not wear rags, he happily wore patches on his old clothing, and since he spent so much time outdoors his clothing looked well-worn and weather-beaten. Beyond these things, he stated that a few implements, such as 'a knife, an axe, a spade, a wheelbarrow, etc., and for the studious, lamplight, stationery, and access to a few books, rank next to necessities, and can all be obtained at a trifling cost.<sup>180</sup> According to Thoreau, if our goals are 'higher' then we should recognize the limited need for money and possessions in our lives. '[M]y greatest skill has been to want but little,<sup>181</sup> he insisted.

Some material resources are simply indispensable to life – Food, Clothing, Shelter, and Fuel – and Thoreau classified these as ‘necessaries.’ As mentioned above, Thoreau also has three other categories of material resources, namely, ‘comforts,’ which serve to make our lives more pleasurable; ‘luxuries,’ which are superfluous, even harmful; and ‘tools,’ which serve to further our self-development and help us achieve our life goals. A few words will suffice to clarify the place these latter three categories have in Thoreau’s alternative economics.

With respect to ‘comforts,’ let us begin by noting that Thoreau was far from being an ascetic or a puritan. He never denied himself material resources because he sought spiritual nourishment from deprivation. Nor did he disapprove of pleasure. Far from it, pleasure was very important to him. For this reason, he felt that there was a proper place for ‘comforts’ in life, material things that were not necessary to life, but just made life better, happier, more pleasant. Nevertheless, Thoreau felt that we have to be careful. The risk with comforts is that they are addictive. They can easily become the chief focus in our lives, consuming a lot of our time and energy, and Thoreau felt that the purpose in life is not to be comfortable, but to live passionately. Furthermore, sometimes the time and money that we exchange for comforts can simply be a bad trade, in the sense that the comforts ultimately cost more in terms of ‘life’ than they come to. And so it is not that Thoreau is against the warmth of comforts, it is just that he thought we are easily cooked. When answering the question, ‘How much is enough?’, alternative economics requires that we keep these considerations in mind.

If Thoreau was guarded with respect to ‘comforts,’ he was even more so with respect to ‘luxuries.’ Perhaps there are some people, he

claimed, who could build more magnificently and live more lavishly than the richest do now, 'without ever impoverishing themselves,<sup>182</sup> but he had his doubts about whether any such people exist. Luxuries, he believed, were superfluous to a good life and, indeed, tended to cause more harm than good to those who were unlucky enough to be burdened by them. Referring to the superfluities of luxurious furniture and ornaments, he writes:

At present our houses are cluttered and defiled with it, and a good housewife would sweep out the greater part into the dust hole, and not leave her morning's work undone. Morning work! By the blushes of Aurora and the music of Memnon, what should be man's *morning work* in this world? I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and threw them out the window in disgust.<sup>183</sup>

Thoreau's point here, as it has been so often before, is that we must not waste our limited time and attention on things that are irrelevant to our 'morning work,' that is, to our 'proper pursuits.' For it is not just that luxuries are superfluous to a good life – a criticism which sounds rather benign. More malignantly, they function to distract us from our proper pursuits, essentially wasting our time and thus our lives. In a famous phrase which we have already had occasion to consider, Thoreau claimed, '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.'<sup>184</sup> And on this basis – again inverting mainstream economic perspectives – Thoreau provocatively stated: 'a man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone.'<sup>185</sup>

This is not the end of it, however. Although Thoreau was critical of having and consuming luxuries, he was also critical of those people – Thoreau would call them ‘fools’ – who feel greatly deprived, despite their comforts, because they are without luxuries: ‘men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessaries, but for want of luxuries.’<sup>186</sup> This point is important, though it is limited to the middle and upper classes, not the poor. If we read between the lines, Thoreau is suggesting that whatever dissatisfaction people have with their material situations may well be the result of failing to look properly at their lives, rather than the result of any genuine lack. Let us not be like the man who complained of ‘hard times because he could not afford to buy him[self] a crown!’<sup>187</sup> That type of complaint is symptomatic of what some social critics are today calling ‘affluenza,’ understood as a collective psychological disorder that leaves people feeling deprived despite their plenty.<sup>188</sup>

On top of all this, Thoreau was simply unimpressed by and even pitiful of the luxuriously rich, ‘that seemingly wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters.’<sup>189</sup> When the ‘degraded rich’ start living decent lives, Thoreau spat in their direction, ‘then perhaps I may look at your baubles and find them ornamental.’<sup>190</sup>

And finally, there are ‘tools,’ those things which genuinely serve to further our self-development and help us achieve our life goals. If we look to Thoreau’s own life, in the category of ‘tools’ he would have included books, stationary, a lamp, his flute, hand lenses, wheel-barrow, etc. What we include in this category depends on what our life goals are, but we should always bear in mind that that tools may no longer help us, just as comforts may no longer bring pleasure, when used

unwisely or excessively.<sup>191</sup> 'Men have become the tools of their tools,' Thoreau asserted.<sup>192</sup> 'The best works of art are the expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition.'<sup>193</sup>

In essence, Thoreau's views on material resources could be expressed as follows. Throughout much of human history it was a constant struggle to secure the necessities of life, and in such circumstances Thoreau perceived a certain wisdom and prudence in human decision-making, insofar as the guiding principle was to 'satisfy the more pressing wants first.'<sup>194</sup> But in affluent societies, where most have more than enough to live well, Thoreau would ask: 'are the more pressing wants satisfied now?'<sup>195</sup> The suggestion is that, unlike the wise and prudent primitive societies, we are satisfying less pressing wants (for superfluous comforts, luxuries, and tools) and neglecting what are for us more genuinely pressing wants, such as a flourishing inner life. That is only his general hypothesis, however. We must test it ourselves.

### **Appropriate Technology**

What about technology? Must the simple liver indiscriminately renounce it? Thoreau thought that it is certainly better to accept than reject the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of humankind offer – provided, of course, that they are genuine advantages.<sup>196</sup> But he warned that often with these 'modern improvements' there is 'an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance.... Our inventions are want to be pretty toys, which distract us from serious things. They are an improved means to an unimproved end.'<sup>197</sup> It is all very well to invent or be able to afford some new gadget, Thoreau was saying, but we should look upon new technologies with a measure of scepticism, for however ingenious and

marvellous the invention may seem, it will likely have unintended side-effects and even shape who we are as persons, in ways that are not always obvious or positive. Looking to our own day, the television, for example, is a remarkable human achievement, and yet, aside from sleeping and working, the television now consumes more time of the typical North American or Briton than any other activity, and other 'advanced societies' watch almost as much.<sup>198</sup> One does not have to be an 'elitist' to have doubts about whether this is really the best way to spend our freedom. The point is that if we do not know what to *do* with technology, then it can be life-debilitating rather than life-enhancing.

Trying to get us to question the purpose of various technologies and whether they actually improve our lives, Thoreau wrote:

We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.... As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.<sup>199</sup>

The problem is that technology is often *just there* – fascinating, new, socially celebrated, affordable, and available – and it is so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that, since earlier generations did without it, we 'moderns'/'postmoderns' must therefore have progressed, that we are necessarily better off. Pernicious nonsense, Thoreau would say. We must show some discrimination in terms of what we choose to celebrate. If some new technology genuinely furthers our life goals and does not distract us from more important activities, then, by all means, we

should take advantage of it. But Thoreau warned that all too often – in insidious ways – technology costs more than it comes to.

Two reasons that made Thoreau particularly suspicious of technology were (1) that we have to spend time working to earn money to afford technology, and he wonders whether we might oftener be better off without the technology and with more free time; and (2) that technology tends to distance us from the natural environment and can affect our life experiences for the worse. Both these points are masterfully illustrated in the following passage:

One says to me, "I wonder that you do not lay up money; you love to travel; you might take the cars and go to Fitchburg today and see the country." But I am wiser than that. I have learned that the swiftest traveler is he that goes afoot. I say to my friend, Suppose we try who will get there first. The distance is thirty miles; the fare ninety cents. That is almost a day's wages. I remember when wages were sixty cents a day for laborers on this very road. Well, I start now on foot, and get there before night; I have travelled at that rate by the week together. You will in the meanwhile have earned your fare, and arrive there some time tomorrow, or possibly this evening, if you are lucky enough to get a job in season. Instead of going to Fitchburg, you will be working here the greater part of the day. And so, if the railroad reached round the world, I think that I should keep ahead of you; and as for seeing the country and getting experience of that kind, I should have to cut your acquaintance altogether.<sup>200</sup>

Travelling by train might seem to be the most 'efficient' way to travel, but Thoreau challenges us to rethink how this new technology affects our experience and what are its full costs, comprehensively defined. And although Thoreau's example here

considers transportation only, the points he makes are generally applicable to all our decisions relating to technology.

To the objection that Thoreau is advocating an unsophisticated primitive existence, the appropriate response is twofold: first, that although he often damned technologies as debilitating luxuries, he did not deny that they could also be enabling tools worthy of praise and exploitation; secondly, Thoreau suggested that just perhaps there is a sophistication and elegance to the clothesline, the bicycle, and the water tank, that the dryer, the automobile, and the desalination plant, decidedly lack. Conversely, perhaps there is a certain primitiveness to technological gimmicks. As Leonardo da Vinci once wrote: 'Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.'

## **Working Hours**

Before closing this part of the discussion it may be worthwhile to reflect on Thoreau's attitude to working hours. His basic insight here, which is central to his alternative economics, can be expressed quite briefly, since it has been implicit throughout much of what has already been discussed and now just needs bringing to the surface.

We only have a limited amount of time on earth with which to live our lives, and out of self-respect we should not waste that time. Indeed, Thoreau suggested that we should be as covetous of our time as most people are of their money. On this subject he spoke not to those who are 'well employed, in whatever circumstances, and they know whether they are well employed or not.'<sup>201</sup> Rather, he directed his attention mainly to 'the mass of men who are discontented,'<sup>202</sup> those people who are not passionate about their working lives and who seek more time to do other, more inspiring, things. Thoreau suggested that in affluent

societies more time is probably available, if only one's material wants are reduced and controlled. Conversely, he warned that if one's material wants are allowed to creep up indefinitely, then one's working week will never decline and may even increase, despite considerable increases in wealth and advances in technology. This self-imposed labor of Sisyphus is one to which so many seem to have been condemned, but fortunately there is an alternative path to follow, a simpler way. Why not minimize and then stabilize one's material wants, and work less? In the same vein, instead of converting increases in income and productivity into more comforts and luxuries merely, as most do, why not convert those increases into more free time instead? It is well worth considering. Nevertheless, those who would not know what to do with more leisure if they were given it are bluntly advised by Thoreau 'to work twice as hard as they do now.'<sup>203</sup>

During his experiment, Thoreau discovered – and let this give us a moment's pause – that in living a life of voluntary simplicity he could meet all the expenses of living 'by working about six weeks in a year.'<sup>204</sup> This left him with the whole of his winters, as well as most of his summers, 'free and clear for study.'<sup>205</sup> Having thus secured his freedom, which is what he sought, he had no reason to envy (and indeed had reason to pity) the 'successful' capitalists, merchants, shopkeepers, mechanics, farmers, lawyers, doctors, etc. who were money rich but time poor. In one of his more acidic moments Thoreau even commented that those who spent their time earning superfluous money 'deserve[d] some credit for not having all committed suicide long ago.'<sup>206</sup> Their highest duty in life to accumulate colored paper! Does any divinity stir within them?, Thoreau wondered. What are their destinies worth to them compared with coloured paper?<sup>207</sup>

Thoreau's central insight on the subject of working hours is powerfully captured in the following passage:

Those slight labours which afford me a livelihood, and by which it is allowed that I am to some extent serviceable to my contemporaries, are as yet commonly a pleasure to me, and I am not often reminded that they are a necessity. So far I am successful. But I foresee that if my wants should be much increased, the labor required to supply them would become a drudgery. If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for me there would be nothing worth left living for.... I wish to suggest that a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well. There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting a living.<sup>208</sup>

Thoreau saw his neighbors spending the best part of their lives accumulating dross in order to enjoy a questionable liberty in their final years. This reminded Thoreau of 'the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have gone up garret at once.'<sup>209</sup> Thoreau again returns to the metaphor of 'sleeping away life' to hammer home his point:

I confess that I am astonished at the power of endurance, to say nothing of the moral insensibility, of my neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day for weeks and months, aye, and years almost together. I know not what manner of stuff they are of, sitting there now at three o'clock in the afternoon, as if it were three o'clock in the morning.<sup>210</sup>

The fact that Thoreau was able to provide for his basic needs by working only six weeks per year, or thereabouts, should provoke those of us who work approximately 48 or 50 weeks a year, in jobs we do not always like, to at least reassess what exactly we are getting back for the time we are giving up. Even if we suppose that Thoreau's working hours were to some degree distorted for one reason or another, his arguments still deserve reflection. From the perspective of alternative economics, are we doing 'good business' by always trading our time for a higher material standard of living? Are we forced by the 'curse of labor' to work so much? Or are we freer than we think we are?

Thoreau's view on the matter is perfectly clear: 'I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely.'<sup>211</sup> This is perhaps the most important lesson that he learned while living in the woods, and it was a lesson that stayed with him for the rest of his life.

### **III. AFTER WALDEN**

On 6 September, 1847, Thoreau left his cabin at Walden Pond and again took up residence in Concord, where he remained for the rest of his years, a 'sojourner in civilized life.'<sup>212</sup> Though he always lived a life of voluntary simplicity, he came to accept that industrial capitalism was an impersonally dictated social order within which he had to live, however much he despised it.<sup>213</sup> Since his material needs were so few, however, for a long time he found that he barely had to work one month each spring and fall to support himself. Emerson once made a fairly representative list some of Thoreau's various roles during these post-Walden years, a list which included 'building a boat or a fence, planting, grafting, surveying,' with 'short work' preferred to 'long

engagements.<sup>214</sup> Thoreau eventually settled on the trade of surveying, an occupation that allowed him to spend his time outside, wandering the countryside around Concord, which suited him ideally. These 'slight labours,' as we have just seen, were 'commonly a pleasure' to him, and he was 'not often reminded they [were] a necessity.'<sup>215</sup> Though surveying was not highly paid, it paid enough for him to generally work mornings only, leaving him with the afternoons and evenings absolutely free for his 'proper pursuits.' At the beginning of life, as at the end, Thoreau was very careful not to be seduced into exchanging his precious time for an insufficient amount of comforts and luxuries.

By the time he died in 1862, Thoreau had attained a certain recognized position as a writer, although the amount of money he earned from his writing and lecturing over his entire life was minute. But the fact that his books, essays, and poems, barely sold was of little consequence. He had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, and although he had not made it worth anyone's while to buy them, he felt that it had nonetheless been worth his while to weave them.

### **Was Thoreau's Experiment a Success?**

Even though Thoreau is now recognized as one of America's finest writers, the focus of our current study has been the alternative economics that he practiced during his experiment at Walden Pond, and the question that remains is: Was his experiment a success?

The question is a complex one, although perhaps not so complex as it is sometimes made out to be. If, in his experiment at the pond, we attribute to Thoreau the aim of living a life of complete independence and self-sufficiency – like Adam, or Robinson Crusoe, perhaps – a life in which he ate only what he grew and grew only what he ate, neither

worked for another nor hired another, and avoided all trade and barter, then we must conclude that his experiment was a failure. Thoreau, after all, lived on Emerson's land; he borrowed an axe and other tools to get himself started; he set himself up in an unproductive corner of Massachusetts as a marginal commercial farmer whose cash crop did not bring in enough money to satisfy all his needs; he therefore he hired himself out as a day laborer when he needed to make ends meet, and occasionally hired labor himself;<sup>216</sup> furthermore, he was no stranger in the village, and would sometimes dine comfortably with his family or at the Emerson residence. These are the types of reasons that led critics like James Russel Lowell to allege that '[Thoreau's] shanty life was a mere impossibility, so far as his own conception of it goes, as an entire independency of mankind.'<sup>217</sup>

But this is to misunderstand the nature of Thoreau's project, and to misjudge it on that account. There is nothing to indicate that Thoreau sought 'an entire independency of mankind.' He did not set out to reject features of civilization that were of genuine advantage or to live as a hermit. Let us not forget that he lived a mile from society, *but only a mile*. My point, here, is that before we are in a position to judge the success of Thoreau's experiment we must have a proper understanding of its nature, and to help us understand this we should look to Thoreau's own carefully crafted words: 'My purpose in going to Walden Pond was neither to live cheaply nor live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles.'<sup>218</sup> In one sense, as noted earlier, this 'private business' was simply to write in privacy. Since we now know that while he was at the pond he wrote *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the bulk of *Walden*, and perhaps a draft of his essay 'Civil Disobedience' – three texts (especially the latter two) which are now considered among the greatest works of American

literature – it would seem that his experiment at the pond must be judged a resounding success. But this is to move too quickly, perhaps, since earlier we saw that his ‘private business’ also included his struggle with the economic problem of how to live poetically in a world of scarce resources. To what extent can we say that this struggle was a success?

We have seen that to ‘live poetically,’ in Thoreau’s sense, essentially involves (1) providing for one’s material needs in a way that is meaningful, fulfilling, and respectful of nature (2) having the freedom and independence for one’s ‘proper pursuits,’ whatever they may be. On this basis, it would seem equally clear that, in his struggle for a poetic existence, Thoreau met with some real success in his experiment (even though it turned out that the struggle did not so much lead to a destination as much as it was an ongoing creative process). In hewing timber for his cabin on ‘pleasant spring days, in which the winter of man’s discontent was thawing’<sup>219</sup> he discovered ‘the pleasure of construction,’ he sang as worked, and ‘made no haste in [his] work, but rather the most it.’<sup>220</sup> He also tells us that, ‘In those days, when my hands were much employed, I read but little, but the least scraps of paper which lay on the ground, my holder, or tablecloth, afforded me as much entertainment, in fact answered the same purpose as the Iliad.’<sup>221</sup> As for his work in the bean field, he tells of how hoeing his rows ‘yielded an instant and immeasurable crop,’<sup>222</sup> and attached him to the earth in a way that was nourishing. Even when Thoreau felt the need to hire himself out as a labourer – an occupation which he deemed ‘the most independent of any’<sup>223</sup> – it was not always time wasted. In one journal entry he wrote: ‘Great thoughts hallow any labor. Today I earned seventy-five cents heaving manure out of a pen, and made a good bargain of it.’<sup>224</sup> Perhaps the most significant feature of his time at the pond, however, was his discovery that by living simply

and generally relying on himself for his needs, he could maintain himself by working about six weeks per year only, leaving him with the whole of his winters, as well as most of his summers, 'free and clear for study,<sup>225</sup> or, more generally, for following the bent of his genius.<sup>226</sup> On top of these successes, there are good reasons for thinking that throughout his time at the pond Thoreau was, quite simply, happy. 'My life was ecstasy,'<sup>227</sup> he wrote in the most successful expression of this feeling.

Nevertheless, before we can conclude that Thoreau's experiment at the pond was largely a success, we must confront the question: 'Why, then, did he leave?' After all, he only stayed for two years and two months, after which time he returned to live in Concord. But if he had secured the freedom, tranquillity, and happiness that he sought, why did he not remain at the pond his whole life? This is sometimes considered a fatal blow, proof that his experiment was an idealized distortion of social and economic reality, one that not even Thoreau could sustain.<sup>228</sup> I think we must hesitate, however, before judging his experiment a failure on this account. During his time at the pond Thoreau had learned by experience that very little is actually needed to live well and to be free, if only life is approached with the right attitude. Furthermore, he had cultivated a deep understanding of 'the essential facts of life' and developed a genuine love of simplicity. All this meant that he was able to live with an 'inexpressible confidence'<sup>229</sup> and 'calm trust in the future,'<sup>230</sup> knowing that if he were ever to lose all his possessions he would be 'nearly as well off as before.'<sup>231</sup> Could he not then leave his experiment behind yet take its lessons with him? Was he not correct in his claim that, 'It is not the tub that makes Diogenes, the Jove-born, but Diogenes the tub?'<sup>232</sup> We should not dismiss in advance the possibility that those who successfully prosecute an inward voyage

might learn to live in acquisitive society and yet above it, liberated from imprisonment within its values.<sup>233</sup>

'I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there,' Thoreau tells us near the end of *Walden*. 'Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more for that one.'<sup>234</sup> It should not surprise us that there is a measure of uncertainty in this explanation, given that his time at the pond was an enormously positive and creative period in his life. It would surely have been very tempting to stay. Indeed, a journal entry written five years after leaving the pond reads: 'But why I changed - ? Why I left the woods? I do not think I can tell. I have often wished myself back.'<sup>235</sup> In another entry, however, he was less regretful: 'Perhaps I wanted a change.... Perhaps if I lived there much longer I might live there forever – One would think twice before he accepted heaven on such terms.'<sup>236</sup> This last point, I think, gets to the heart of the matter. Sublime though his experience was at the pond, Thoreau's ethic of self-cultivation and his constant yearning for self-renewal required a stance of openness to new and diverse experiences. Expressing this need to move onward and upward, he wrote: 'I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.'<sup>237</sup>

In the end, whether *we* judge Thoreau's experiment to be a success or a failure is arguably beside the point, since Thoreau cared little for the 'smoke of opinion'<sup>238</sup> and instead chose to think for himself. His own assessment of his time at the pond is perhaps best represented in the following passage:

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, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. 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.<sup>239</sup>

## Conclusion

So ends our examination of Thoreau's living experiment at Walden Pond and the alternative economics that he developed there. Or does this examination, by its very nature, have no end? After all, living a life of 'simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust,' involves 'solv[ing] some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically also.'<sup>240</sup> And this is not so much a destination as it is an ongoing creative process. Our study has left much unsaid, necessarily, and perhaps the discussion has raised more questions than it has answered. But perhaps that is how Thoreau would have wanted it. He was not interested in giving us detailed instructions on how to live a simpler life; nor did he want to save us the trouble of thinking for ourselves. Rather, he wanted to stoke the fire in our souls and inspire us with ideals. 'Don't spend your time in drilling soldiers,' he once wrote, 'who may turn out hirelings after all, but give to the undrilled peasantry a *country* to fight for.'<sup>241</sup>

Ever since he was a young man, Thoreau believed that the object of life was 'something else than acquiring property'<sup>242</sup> and that true success did not consist in 'much money, many houses' but in 'trying to

better [our] condition in a higher sense than this.<sup>243</sup> He had no desire to succeed in the desperate measure of getting rich or comfortable merely. He felt that there was a very different ideal to fight for: to weave one's trade with the Celestial Empire into one's everyday affairs – that is, to live poetically. By striving with almost unrivalled determination to live in this spirit, Thoreau was able to compose as an aesthetic project the meaning of his own life, 'to invent and get a patent for himself.'<sup>244</sup> A couplet that he scribbled down in his journal truthfully describes his greatest achievement:

*My life has been the poem I would have writ,  
But I could not both live and utter it.*

Thoreau's life is a reminder that dedicated individuals can establish a simpler, freer, way of life for themselves, simply by adopting a new frame of mind and acting upon it with creativity and conviction. Doing so may not be easy, of course, since it will involve moving in the opposite direction to where most of humankind is marching. But as Thoreau would say, '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.'<sup>245</sup> Thoreau would also advise us not to wait for our politicians or peers to attain enlightenment before we begin our journey toward simplicity, for it might be a long time before they wake up. Those who have the courage to go forward alone, however, can start today.<sup>246</sup>

As we are propelled into the 21<sup>st</sup> first century by the forces of a materialistic history, the reasons for returning to – or rather, advancing toward – Thoreau are compelling. To put it proverbially, if we do not change direction, we are likely to end up where we are going. Our planet's ecosystems urgently need us to explore alternative ways to live,

and one promising way to lessen our impact on nature is to reject the materialistic lifestyles of consumer culture and voluntarily embrace 'a simpler life' of reduced consumption. Furthermore, in a world where extreme poverty exists amidst such plenty, there are powerful humanitarian arguments in favour of taking less so that others can have more. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'Live simply so that others may simply live.'<sup>247</sup> But a life of voluntary simplicity need not generate any sense of deprivation. Indeed, the Voluntary Simplicity Movement is demonstrating through the lives of millions of participants that by lowering our 'standard of living' (measured by income/consumption) we can actually increase our 'quality of life' (measured by subjective well-being). Paradoxical though it may sound, voluntary simplicity is about living more with less. And perhaps this paradox has something to say to everyone, especially those of us who are everyday bombarded with thousands of cultural and institutional messages insisting that 'more is always better.' Voluntary simplicity is an art of living that is aglow with the insight that 'just enough is plenty.'



Most people appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have. – **H.D. Thoreau**

## **Deconstructing the Shed: Where I Live and What I Live For**

Samuel Alexander

'How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book.'<sup>248</sup> Over the last two years as I have lain down to sleep in my small, self-constructed, inner-city shed, this passage from Henry Thoreau's *Walden* was never far from my mind. Whether Thoreau hoped that *Walden* itself would mark a new era in the lives of its readers, no one can be sure. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine Thoreau penning the quoted passage on the shores of Walden Pond, tantalizingly aware that he was in the process of drafting a manifesto that would indeed spark personal revolutions in the lives of generations of readers. My life, for one, has certainly changed drastically since my pre-*Walden* days, which are seemingly of another lifetime and yet not so long ago, when I would march off to work in my charcoal suit and long black coat to begin my day as a freshly graduated lawyer. The shift in consciousness – an earthquake of the soul – which shook me away from the law firm and into the shed is attributable, almost exclusively, to my engagement with *Walden*. I would like to thank the editor of this journal for inviting me to offer a short, reflective commentary on this personal, on-going engagement, for putting my story into words has crystallized somewhat that which I had previously understood only at

the level of raw experience. To paraphrase Soren Kierkegaard, life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards.

## **I. Crisis of Vocation**

After completing my Master of Laws at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, I found myself confronted by those great economic questions everyone must face when trying to establish financial independence in a world of scarce resources: *How best to earn a living? How much time should I spend at it? How much do I need to live well and to be free?* Although I had just graduated from a respectable university, I came to realize that throughout my formal education the deepest questions concerning *how to live* had been strangely passed over. Furthermore, when I looked at the world around me, I gained little insight into how I should live *my* life. I saw the potential for freedom, but not freedom itself. And so, unable to ignite my imagination, I spiralled quietly into a deep, vocational crisis. Completely lost and lacking any direction, I anxiously wallowed around what I now suspect were the margins of a depressive episode.

One day, in an act of desperation, I took a train to a small, rural community called Featherston, an hour or so out of Wellington, and with what little money I had I rented an old, rustic cottage, at a very reasonable price. In retrospect, I feel this temporary exit from society is one of the wisest things I have ever done, if only because it gave me the time and solitude needed to search my soul. I lived in the cottage for three months – alone, at peace, tremendously happy, and absolutely free. Isolated from the worries and expectations of the world, it was a privileged time of uninhibited creativity and committed intellectual inquiry. I would begin each day ritualistically by soaking in a

deep, iron-cast tub, while one of Beethoven's symphonies roared emotionally in the background, setting the mood for the day. Bathing in this manner was a meditative, even spiritual, exercise for me, similar, perhaps, to Thoreau's daily plunge into the icy waters of Walden Pond, except more pleasurable, I would imagine. Subsisting predominantly on bread and cheap red wine, I spent my days and nights in the cottage before an open fire, composing music, writing abundantly, and reading the great philosophers, especially Rousseau and Nietzsche. I would work creatively till exhaustion then sleep till I was refreshed, wholly unconcerned about the hour of the day.

As the weeks passed, moments began to blur into one, until time itself seemed to stand still. I would often find myself gazing into the fire in a trace-like state, rapt in a timeless reverie, as if lost in the richness of ordinary experience. To borrow the apt words of Thoreau, 'I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been.'<sup>249</sup> Whenever the inclination took me, whether day or night, I would take long walks in the nearby woods or meadows, often to absorb the pink and purple hues of the sky at sunrise, or to enjoy the silverly blue tints of a moonlit landscape. I even recall going out for walk one evening during a fiercely wet and windy storm, just for the experience. As I marched alone in the dark, confronting the tempestuous elements, Tom Waits' song, "God's Away on Business," boomed thunderously through my headphones. All my senses were alight, which was typical of this phase in my life.

Be sure, I am not romanticising my experience at the cottage in any way. It was genuinely romantic, for all that word connotes, and I felt intensely alive. I tasted a poeticized existence and its sweetness was intoxicating and unforgettable. For three months I persisted in this state of passionate tranquillity. It was terrifyingly meaningful.

But then the money ran out. My crisis of vocation, which I had successfully repressed for some time, suddenly returned to the surface of my life in an intensified form, shattering my artificial utopia like a stone through glass. During my time in the cottage I had experienced an idealized freedom, but foolishly and regrettably I had taken no steps toward securing it. Now, with a few dollars to my name, I had no option but to return to society to begin my search for a livelihood. The unromantic but important lesson I took away from the cottage was that a poeticized existence depends on money and resources, to some degree, at least. As Marx perceived long ago, life is fundamentally economic.

Fortuitously – if that is the right word – two weeks after leaving the cottage I applied for and was offered an associate position in a small law firm in Christchurch, New Zealand, which I accepted out of financial necessity. Within a few days I had packed my few possessions into a hired van and set out, somewhat despondently, to begin my experiment with reality. It was as if I had been caught in a current and swept out to sea.

I practiced law for about eighteen months. Admittedly, this turned out to be quite a stimulating time for me, owing mainly to the brilliance of my employer, and I proved to be a competent advocate. But my heart was never fully in the game. A career in law promised wealth and status, as well as a form of intellectual engagement, but from the outset I knew it was not my calling. Though I had no idea what my calling was at this time, I knew at least that it did not involve seeking wealth and status. Not all rich people are unimaginative, but only unimaginative people need to be rich; and only timid souls seek status. I was seeking something else.

After a year working in the law firm I managed to exchange a scheduled pay rise for an extra day off work. I now recognize that this negotiation was my first significant act of 'downshifting,' which can be crudely defined as the exchange of income/consumption for more freedom, although at the time I was unfamiliar with this concept, as such. My friends accused me of entering semi-retirement, which was not so far from the truth. During my final six months in the law firm I used my three-day weekends to prepare a proposal for a doctoral thesis. Doctoral study, I surmised, would at least allow me to pursue my burning passion for philosophy and politics, as well as give me a few years to think about my place in the world, about which I was still confused. I moved to Melbourne, Australia, to begin my doctoral study in the middle of 2006. I was 26.

## **II. The Political becomes Personal**

Like most university students, post-graduate or otherwise, I did not have much money, although my scholarship stipend, as well as a short stint lecturing, meant that I always had enough. Not long after arriving in Melbourne I rented the cheapest room I could find, which turned out to be in a five person share-house not too far from campus, and there I settled down to begin my post-graduate life. Due to the accidents of my personal history, I enrolled for my PhD in the law school, however my proposed topic was interdisciplinary in nature, more suitable, perhaps, for the departments of politics, philosophy, or economics, than law. The next few years of study were to change my life in ways that I could have never foreseen. For reasons to be explained, I gratefully hold Thoreau responsible.

Without going into unnecessary detail, my doctoral research (which is all but complete) involved evaluating the notion of a private property / market system 'beyond growth.' Directed toward the highly developed nations, my thesis argues that when an economy grows so large that it reaches or exceeds the threshold point beyond which any further growth is 'uneconomic' (i.e. socially or ecologically counter-productive), property rights should no longer be defined and defended in order to grow the economy. Instead, property rights should be constructed or reconstructed to achieve more specific welfare enhancing objectives – such as eliminating poverty or protecting the environment – and the efficient growth of GDP or lack thereof should be treated as a by-product of secondary importance.<sup>250</sup> Put simply, the normative basis of my thesis is the assumption that money and resources are extremely important to human beings *up to a point* – the threshold point – but beyond that point, which evidence suggests is surprisingly moderate,<sup>251</sup> the pursuit of more wealth insidiously detracts from what makes life meaningful and degrades the health and integrity of our living planet. This normative position highlights the importance of having a concept of economic sufficiency and of knowing how much is 'enough.'

To cut a long story short, when I began constructing the arguments in support of my 'post-growth' theory of property, I quickly realized that my position would be rejected by anyone who subscribed to the dominant view that a nation's progress depends upon ever-increasing growth in GDP per capita. For my thesis to be persuasive, then – or even given a fair hearing – it was absolutely critical that I presented a sound case for why getting richer is not always a trustworthy path to well-being, especially in affluent societies. Indeed, I wanted to argue that, in circumstances of affluence, lowering material 'standard of living' (measured by income/consumption) could actually increase 'quality of

life' (measured by subjective well-being). This required a fundamental rethinking of orthodox views on money and consumption, including a rejection of the consumerist presumption that 'more is always better.' As I began exploring the ethics of consumption and building a normative case for simple living, I found myself naturally drawn to Thoreau's simple living experiment on the shores of Walden Pond. I studied *Walden* obsessively, almost biblically, and I soon became aware that it was changing my life forever, an impact that I am sure many readers of this journal can empathize with.

Despite my thesis being framed predominantly in terms of political and legal theory, what I was really struggling with was the question of what *personal* acts could be undertaken to oppose consumer capitalism and whether the cumulative impact of such seemingly insignificant acts could be of any real significance. I did not just want to theorize about alternative political and legal structures, though I felt that was important too; I also wanted to learn how best to live within the existing regime that I was critiquing. Since my thesis was advocating a radically anti-consumerist stance in relation to money and possessions, I felt this aspect of my thesis, especially, had to be *lived* to be truly sincere. And so, step by step, I escalated my personal exploration of the simple life.

Although I had lived like a poor student for most of my adult life – by this stage I was 28 – I knew that my material standard of living was much higher than it needed to be. Accordingly, I set myself the task of finding ways to live more with less, which, in a sentence, is what I believe simple living is all about. Prompted by the example of Thoreau, the possibility of squatting in the backyard of the house I was renting entered my imagination as a potential means of reducing my outgoings significantly. With barely a moment's thought, I approached my house-

mates and tentatively tabled the idea of giving up my room and living in the backyard, explaining my reasons for wanting to do so. I told them about Thoreau and of my interest in exploring 'the simple life' in an urban context. They considered my proposition to be humorously insane but unproblematic, and so my plans received their consent, even their positive encouragement. In exchange for living in the backyard it was agreed that I would be responsible for purchasing for the house a number of amenities shared by all, such as dishwashing liquid, washing powder, rubbish bags, toilet paper, light-bulbs, mops, etc. This arrangement meant that my 'rent' would be extremely low – approximately AU\$15 per week – but the reasoning given was that my presence would be no inconvenience at all. Since I would have access to the kitchen and bathroom inside, the costs of electricity, gas, water, etc. were to be spilt equally, an arrangement which I happily accepted.

With the essential negotiations complete, it was time to make my madness a reality.

### **III. Constructing the Shed**

I built the shed over three weekends in the spring of 2008 with my good friend and house-mate, Mathieu. Neither of us had any building experience, and being PhD students in law and meteorology, it would not be unfair to assume that we were among the least practical people on Earth. Perhaps we were lacking in the necessary skills – we didn't really know – however the challenge of building a shelter seemed natural and appealing, so we took to the task with zeal. We had ordered two books online about building basic sheds and cabins, but in our enthusiastic haste we got to work before they arrived. The books turned up in the letterbox a few days after construction had finished,

much to our amusement, and they remain unread. Who knows what wisdom they contain!

We knew, at least, that builders need materials, so that seemed like a good place to start. In the spirit of sustainability and frugality, our goal was to reuse or recycle as much material as possible. We found an old wooden bed frame underneath the stairs, along with a few tarpaulins, two strong hinges, a hammer, and some nails and screws. We also appropriated some wood that was lying forgotten underneath the house, which we felt justified putting to good use. My girlfriend, Helen – who was unconditionally supportive throughout this venture despite having some understandable reservations about it – also informed me that there was a pile of abandoned wood by the railway tracks near her place, which I promptly transported to the construction site. A friend lent us an electric drill (apologies to Thoreau) and a painfully blunt handsaw.

All this provided us with the bulk of our building materials and tools, but it was not quite sufficient for our project. We needed some more wood for the frame and floor of the shed, more tarpaulins for waterproofing, more screws and hinges, as well as some polycarbonate sheeting for the roof. These things we obtained from the hardware store. (When we showed the assistant at the hardware store our building plans, which resembled a two-year-old's drawing of a house, he laughed loudly and firmly recommended that we consider purchasing a ready-made shed or a tent. We thanked him for his sound advice then stubbornly ignored it.) We also picked up some old blankets from a second-hand clothing store to line the inside of the shed. In total, the cost of all these materials was AU\$573.

The building process itself was an absolute delight, not only because the spring days were crisp and clear, but also because I was engaged in

meaningful (and often humorous) work with a true friend. The French, gypsy-punk music added another dimension too. In such circumstances, long days of physical work are no chore at all. We began by constructing the frame of the shed, which was 1.8m wide, 3.6m long, and 2.4m high. The old bed frame was cut up and used to provide extra framing for the base of the shed, upon which we laid the flooring. Tarpaulin was used to waterproof the walls and roof, and the abandoned wood from near the railway tracks was cut up into weatherboards and nailed horizontally into place for the outside walls. With the remaining wood we crafted a simple door and were pleasantly surprised when it swung into place, although the door was not quite square, creating an unfortunate gap which let through a draft. At the front of the shed we also put in place a wooden shutter in the top left corner, which was hinged at the top to swing up and out to create a window space when desired. A piece of thick bamboo was used to hold the wooden shutter up, in the manner of an old beach hut. Finally, three overlapping sheets of polycarbonate sheeting were laid on the roof and nailed into place. Due to a shortage of wood and a complete lack of common sense, we did not create a slope in the roof, hoping that the minor slope of the ground would suffice to induce any rain water to run off. Our hopes were sadly disappointed. During the first heavy rain, water pooled on the roof and the shed leaked, so later some repairs were needed. The result was a truly bizarre roof design that, although ultimately effective, would have had dear Thoreau turning in his grave. (In our defence, however, one stormy Melbourne evening in March 2010 parts of the Southern Cross railway station collapsed, which was made of steel and concrete, while the shed remained dry and erect. The ultimate vindication!)

As the finishing touch, the shed was given a title. The words, 'Ceci n'est pas une cabane,' were painted above the door, which translate as, 'This is not a shed.'

#### **IV. Practicing Simplicity**

Since living in the backyard is a violation of the tenancy agreement, the landlord has not been told of my living experiment. He rarely makes his presence known anyway (especially when he is needed to fix something). When the yearly house inspection is due, I simply pack the shed full of bikes, crates, chairs, blankets, tools, boxes, bags, etc., and hide any evidence that it is inhabited. That is, I disguise it as a shed. When the landlord first saw the shed he understandably looked a bit confused and stated firmly that any further building projects must be run past him first. Much to my relief, however, he was otherwise unbothered by its presence and to this day he seems entirely oblivious to the fact that it is my home. Perhaps I'll send him a copy of this essay one day.

At the time of writing these words, I have lived in the shed for a little under two years. In all honestly I can report that they have been the richest and most fulfilling years of my life. Exactly how much longer I will live in the shed, I cannot say, but since I am squatting illegally on someone else's land, it is hard to conceive of it as a permanent residence. Furthermore, I am in a committed relationship with my girl Helen, who has a magical young child, both of whom I have an increasing desire to live with under the same roof. Due to the insecurity of squatting, however, as well as for reasons of space, I can hardly invite them to live with me in the shed. Accordingly, it would seem that my days in the shed are numbered.

Life in the shed is not just about the shed, however. That is but the most conspicuous (and arguably confused) manifestation of my ongoing struggle with the question of how to live simply in an urban context. The importance of the shed, for me, lies in the fact that housing is typically life's greatest expense, and potentially, therefore, a category where the most savings can be made. Since my rent over the last two years has been approximately AU\$15 per week, significant savings were indeed possible. When the day comes that I must leave the shed, for one reason or another, my aim will be to keep the cost of housing to a minimum by embracing as modest accommodation as possible. For when I remember that the shed took six days to build, and functioned well enough as a shelter, I am deeply bothered by the fact that many people spend twenty, thirty, even forty years laboring to pay for their homes. Truthfully, I would sooner live in a tub my whole life, like Diogenes, than exchange forty years of my life for house. Posterity will surely look back on our times and be astounded at how inefficiently we housed ourselves! My time in the shed has taught me the great Thoreauvian lesson that a person can be 'richer than the richest are now'<sup>252</sup> while living in very humble circumstances. This has given me 'a calm trust in the future,'<sup>253</sup> since I now know that a fancy house is not a necessary part of living a happy and meaningful life.

In recent years my outgoings have also been reduced noticeably by growing as much of my own food as possible. On top of the financial savings, the very process of gardening is strangely therapeutic – an ancient truth which escaped me for far too long. The garden space I have available is approximately 1.5 metres wide and 10 metres long, in which I grow organically all manner of fruit, vegetables, and herbs. Since there are water restrictions in Melbourne, a friend and I installed a water tank behind the shed to secure extra resources. I also keep

four chickens in the backyard, which provide two or three eggs a day as well as an abundance of fine manure. The chicken coop also functions well as a compost heap. Some of my happiest memories of late are of letting the chickens roam freely in the community park behind the house, while I would drink tea in the shade and enjoy the bemused looks of my neighbors.

The garden does not provide for all my food, however, so I have come to supplement my vegetarian diet with locally and organically grown produce, sourced conveniently and surprisingly cheaply by the Melbourne University Food Co-Op. My reasons for choosing a vegetarian diet, I confess, are rather vague and uncertain. Strange as it may sound, there is something of 'the ascetic' in me, and perhaps a large part of my motivation for giving up meat and fish was the rather enjoyable challenge of self-discipline. A moment's research also unveils the troubling environmental impacts of excessive meat and fish consumption, which provided me with additional motivation to rethink my eating practices. At risk of sounding too sentimental, I am also a bit unsure about whether I, personally, could shoot a cow in the head every time I desired a steak, a reality of meat consumption that never used to cross my mind, pushed out of sight by the obscuring distances of a money economy. Since I am undecided about this point, I thought it was easy enough to do without the steak and avoid being implicated in the violence. Whatever the case, I have never felt as healthy as I have since eating a vegetarian diet, which perhaps is justification enough.

Staying on the subject of food for a moment longer, I also do my best to avoid supermarkets, and sometimes find that it can be months between visits. I resent supermarkets for how they use their financial power to promote the toxic practices of agri-business, and thus I do

everything I can to avoid giving them any of my money. Their convenience is seductive, however, and avoiding them entirely remains a challenge.

Another feature of my journey toward the simple life in recent years has been my purchase of renewable energy. Since I did not have the lump sum to purchase solar panels or wind turbines, nor the desire to fix such devices to a rental property, I called my electricity provider and inquired about the possibility of purchasing 100% renewable energy. A few minutes later I was, as they say, burning green fuel. This came at a price, of course, but the increased rates soon became a part of life and were forgotten. In any case, I effectively offset the costs of the increased rates by taking many small steps to reduce my energy consumption. My greatest energy savings have come through never using a heater, even on those winter nights which sink to zero degrees. It is always the same temperature inside the shed as it is outside, regrettably, making those winter nights rather character-building. But with the right attitude it is really not so bad. I suspect we are all hardier than we think we are. When it gets cold I put on the wool jersey my Grandma knitted me when I was a teenager or wrap myself in an extra blanket. When necessary – and often it has been necessary – I sleep in my ski-jacket, gloves, and a wool hat. The days and nights may be cold, but I never am.

With respect to clothing, I find that purchasing what is necessary at second-hand stores comes at a minimal cost, given some creativity and a little discipline. This does not mean puritanically denying self-expression through what I wear, or giving up 'style,' (although others are entitled to disagree about that). But it does involve rejecting high-fashion and all its stands for in favor of some 'alternative' aesthetic. According to my calculations, high-fashion clothing is comically

expensive, such that I would sooner pay \$200 for an old turnip than I would for a nice shirt. I have higher aspirations in life than to have my place in the world defined by a nice shirt. As for the cheap, mass-produced clothing found in many department stores, a little research reveals that it is almost always the product of wage-slaves in the factories of the Third World. Accordingly, my policy is to do what I can to avoid being implicated in the fashion industry at all.

Perhaps 'dressing down,' as it is sometimes called, should even be understood as an outward statement of simplicity, an effort, however small, to express aesthetically one's opposition to consumer culture. Politics aside, however, I have never had the desire to look brand new. Moreover, I enjoy being able to lie on the grass without giving a moment's thought to whether my clothes will get dirty. Over the last year I have spent a total of AU\$38 on clothing (which is approximately my average yearly expenditure on clothing over the last four years). I did receive a pair of shoes recently as a birthday gift, however, after my parents saw large holes in the pair I had been wearing. I have also been the grateful recipient of a few castaway items from my brother and from friends, which I saved from being thrown away. As Thoreau would say, 'if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do, will they not?'<sup>254</sup> It is an interesting question to consider, if not in relation to the worship of God, necessarily, then more generally in relation to the living of a passionate life. Old clothes will do will they not? Thoreau proposed that they will do just fine, and I have come to think that he was quite right.

When I speak publicly about simple living at festivals, conferences, meetings, etc., one of the issues I am almost always asked about is the *practice* of simplicity. Most people seem to accept the dangers of greed and acquisitiveness, as well as the social, ecological, and humanitarian

benefits of living simply. But there is much doubt over what simple living actually consists of and whether it is even feasible to live simply in the consumer cultures of advanced capitalist societies. My response to these important, practical questions usually begins by acknowledging that there is not one and only one way to live simply. I ask people not to expect a 12-point plan that can be formulaically applied, for the reality is that there is no Method or Equation of Simplicity into which we can plug the facts of our lives and be told how to live. The simple life, I say, is as much about questions as answers, in the sense that practicing simplicity calls for creative interpretation and personalized application. It is not for 'experts,' therefore, or for anyone, to prescribe universal rules on how to live simply. We each live unique lives and we each find ourselves in different situations, with different capabilities, and different responsibilities. Accordingly, I continue, the practice of simplicity by one person, in one situation, may very well involve different things to a different person, in a different situation. Furthermore, simple living is not so much a destination as it is an ongoing, creative process. With this non-universalist disclaimer noted, I then make a few general remarks about what a simple life might look like in practice and how one might begin to live it. I might offer something like the following thumbnail sketch.

Simplicity, as I have come to understand it, is first and foremost a set of attitudes, a recognition that abundance is a state of mind, not a quantity of consumer products or attainable through them. In the words of Richard Gregg:

Voluntary simplicity involves both an inner and an outer condition. It means singleness of purpose, sincerity and honesty within, as well as avoidance of exterior clutter, of many possessions

irrelevant to the chief purpose of life. It means an ordering and guiding of our energy and desires, a partial restraint in some directions in order to secure a greater abundance of life in other directions. It involves a deliberate organization of life for a purpose.<sup>255</sup>

That last sentence gets to the heart of the matter. If we are to know how much material wealth is *enough*, and thereby avoid laboring without end or purpose, we first need to confront the question, 'Enough for *what*?' Put otherwise, we need to ask ourselves, 'What should we want material wealth *for*?' Anyone who neglects this question is at risk of spending life pursuing material superfluities in a state of 'quiet desperation.'<sup>256</sup> There is no single right answer to the question of life's purpose, of course – we must each find our '*own way*,'<sup>257</sup> as Thoreau properly advised – but to live simply means always being awake to the question. 'To be awake is to be alive.'<sup>258</sup>

Having determined a sense of life's purpose, the practice of simplicity then involves securing the material conditions of life, starting with food, shelter, and clothing. Eating locally, purchasing 'green,' eating out in moderation, eating less meat, eating simply and creatively – I know by experience that this can be done very cheaply. Given some thought and a little discipline, a good diet can be obtained at a surprisingly low cost, especially if you are able to cultivate a vegetable garden. Given that sheltering oneself and one's family is typically life's greatest expense, rethinking the meaning and purpose of a house is one of the most important aspects to living simply. This is also likely to be the hardest part of transitioning to a simple life, and may take a lifetime to figure out. Indeed, current political, economic, and social structures can make living in 'simple' housing very difficult – perhaps

even impossible or illegal – which is one of the main reasons the transition to a sustainable society will depend upon a politics of simplicity (a complex issue which I cannot not explore here, though it is of the utmost importance).<sup>259</sup> In terms of clothing and furniture, buying secondhand is the way to go. Where possible, make your own.

With the necessities of life secured, the practice of simplicity can be explored in an infinite variety of ways. I will not try to list them all. Nevertheless, here are a few representative examples. Simple living might involve riding a bike instead of driving a car; choosing a washing line over a dryer; or even something as simple as choosing a book over television. It might involve avoiding air travel, conserving water by taking a bucket into the shower, or taking energy reduction seriously. Or it might simply involve taking a second look at life, for dissatisfaction with our material situations can often be the result of failing to look properly at our lives rather than the result of any genuine 'lack.' Simple living generally aims to declutter all aspects of life – personal, work, social, economic – and they will probably value self-sufficiency and be able to entertain themselves for free. Many simple living happily subscribe to the frugality maxim of the Depression years: 'Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.' Many will also avoid unnecessary technology and try to live more slowly and peacefully. Baking bread at home is a symbolic practice. Generally speaking, simple living never goes shopping without a proper purpose and is wary of credit cards. They tend to lend when asked and borrow when necessary.

Rather than stay at luxurious resorts, simple living might spend \$12 per night bush camping in the midst of nature. Rather than work long hours to afford a life dedicated to consumption, simple living might step out of the rush and reduce work hours, freeing up more time to be creative, learn a musical instrument, socialize with friends / family,

volunteer or join an organization, meditate, relax, etc. Rather than choose competition, simple lives are likely to choose community. Not money, but meaning. And so and so forth, until the very elements of life have been transformed. Start with a few small steps, enjoy the adventure, and soon enough your life has changed.

## **V. Money**

The overarching issue of what place money has in the simple life deserves a little more attention. Although living simply is much more than just being frugal with money and consuming less – as I have said, it is also a state of mind – in a market economy spending wisely plays a central role. In their celebrated text, *Your Money or Your Life*, Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin provide elaborate financial exercises for readers to undertake which seek to provoke reflection on the real value of money and the true cost of commodities. I found their exercises surprisingly enlightening. To over-simplify greatly, one of their core exercises can be paraphrased as follows: Over a one month period, meticulously record *every* purchase made, and then categorize your expenses (rent / mortgage, bills, food, clothes, coffees, petrol, books, etc.). Multiply each category by twelve to get a rough estimate of the annual cost. Then carefully calculate how much time was spent obtaining the money required to buy everything that was purchased that month (including time travelling to and from work) and multiply by twelve to get yearly working hours (making appropriate adjustments for holiday entitlements). With this information at hand, Dominguez and Robin invite people to critically assess not only the amount of time and money spent on each category, but also the categories themselves. This exercise may sound mundane and a bit pointless – everybody assumes

they are careful, rational spenders – but if it is carried out with precision the results may well surprise, and perhaps even shock. One might find that seemingly little purchases add up to an inordinate amount over an entire year, which may raise new and important questions about whether the money might have been better spent elsewhere, not at all, or exchanged for more time by working less. Once you have worked out the figures for one year, consider how much would be spent on each category over ten years.

The aim of this financial exercise is not to create tightwads, as such, but smart consumers who are conscious of the life/time cost of their purchases. After all, as Thoreau would insist, 'The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.'<sup>260</sup> When exploring the simple life with this in mind, I have discovered that some thoughtful reductions and changes to my spending habits, rather than inducing any sense of deprivation, have instead been life affirming. To provide two mundane but personally significant examples, always taking a packed lunch and limiting myself to one take-out coffee per week has resulted in savings of about \$75 per week. That's almost \$4000 per year or \$40,000 over ten years.

When I realized how easy it was to eliminate many costs that I once considered necessities, things started getting quite interesting. In the interests of experimentation, I decided to dedicate a year to seriously reducing my outgoings. From 4 July 2009 to 3 July 2010, I kept an exact account of every dollar I spent. The total for that year was AU\$6,792, which still included a great many comforts and superfluities. During this period I also spent several hundred dollars printing flyers on simple living, although perhaps this expense was more of a necessity than a superfluity. I can truthfully say that the only time during the year

when I felt deprived by my simple living experiment was when my brother had his first child, since I had made a commitment not to travel by plane for a year and this meant that I could not be with him and his family at that special time. This was by far the most difficult challenge of my living experiment and one that raised the most doubts about its justification.

I was able to live as cheaply as I did partly due to my unusually cheap living arrangements in the shed, which some may regard as a distorted reality. But even so, had I rented a room inside the house (which would have cost AU\$530 per month), my living costs would only have risen to a total of AU\$13,152. When it is remembered that the average full-time wage in Australia today is over AU\$67,000,<sup>261</sup> one begins to get some perspective – so easily lost! – on how affluent Western societies really are. Everyday in the news we read about how growing the economy is still the number one priority. But is getting even richer really the answer to the problems facing Western societies? Or do we labor under a terrible mistake?

When it comes to spending money in accordance with the ethos of simple living, it is also important to bear in mind Vicki Robin's profound democratic insight: That how we spend our money is how we vote on what exists in the world. Purchasing something sends a message, consciously or unconsciously, to the marketplace, affirming the product, its ecological impact, its process of manufacture, etc. Simple living, therefore, involves shopping as conscientiously as possible, directing one's monetary 'votes' into socially and ecologically responsible avenues and avoiding irresponsible avenues. A tension can arise here, of course, because shopping conscientiously or ethically tends to be (but is not always) more expensive. If it is true, however, that market expenditure is a vote on what exists in the world, it would seem that the global

consumer class has the potential to become a non-violent revolutionary class and change the world, simply by changing its spending habits. *Simplicity is the new spectre haunting capitalism.* Never before have so many people had the option of casting off the chains of consumer culture, stepping out of the rat race, and living in opposition to the existing order of things. Money is power, and with this power comes responsibility.

Consumers of the world unite!

## **VI. Deconstructing the Shed**

I am under no illusions about what my time in the shed means. I certainly have not provided, nor did I ever aim to provide, a template for simple living. The reality is that I am squatting illegally on land owned by another, and if I am ever caught living in the shed – which is in breach of the tenancy agreement as well as building regulations – it is almost certain that my experiment will be extinguished at once. There could well be consequences, perhaps in the form of a fine. (Given that my doctoral thesis is exploring ways that the laws of property could be restructured to promote simple living, it seems only fitting that the current laws of property have been hanging threateningly over my head throughout my candidature). Furthermore, my living experiment in the shed only ever got off the ground due to the good grace of my dear house-mates, and this fact alone means that my experiment may not be easily repeated by others. Should the house-mates ever have a change of heart, which they would be quite entitled to do, this would also mark the end of my time in the shed, again exposing the delicate contingency of my way of life.

Such insecurity of accommodation has not bothered me much, I should add, since my unmarried, post-graduate life without dependents has left me unconcerned about the possibility of being summarily evicted at any moment. But I recognize that others, in different circumstances, would understandably find such insecurity a cause of considerable anxiety and worry. Generally speaking, human beings wish to lay down roots – myself included – and this means that squatting is at most a temporary solution to the problem of how to live. Time is nigh, perhaps, to deconstruct the shed.

If *Walden* has done one thing to me, it has etched into my being the desire to live simply and deliberately. Reading Thoreau's poetic descriptions of nature opened my eyes, like never before, to the miracle of Earth's living processes, and with my eyes now open I crave the nourishment of close contact with nature, even though my urban context cannot provide for the intimacy I truly desire. Having fallen deeply in love with nature, I now see more clearly my duty to protect her from unnecessary violence, and my ongoing journey to live more simply is an attempt to meet that duty as best I can. Thoreau's words also serve as a fiery reminder that we each owe a duty to ourselves as well, a duty to take our own lives, our own dreams, seriously. In *Walden* Thoreau warned people against wasting their lives in the pursuit of material superfluities, a lesson predicated upon the assumption that every lived moment is of immeasurable importance. When I feel that I am losing sight of this insight, dipping into the pages of *Walden* usually shakes me awake at once. Any book capable of doing that is worth infinitely more than its own weight in gold.<sup>262</sup>

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## ENDNOTES TO 'JUST ENOUGH IS PLENTY: THOREAU'S ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS'

- <sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982).
- <sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The American Scholar' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Emerson* (1981) 68.
- <sup>3</sup> Thoreau once said, 'The fact is that I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot.' Bob Blaisdell (ed), *Thoreau: A Book of Quotations* (2000) 11. For an excellent examination of Thoreau's spirituality, see Alan D. Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness* (2001).
- <sup>4</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Civil Disobedience' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 109.
- <sup>5</sup> In reviewing Thoreau's history of employment, I am indebted to the more detailed account given in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 1-27.
- <sup>6</sup> In any case, as he was later to admit, 'As I did not teach for the good of my fellow-men, but simply for a livelihood, this was a failure. Thoreau, above n 1, 323.
- <sup>7</sup> Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 15.
- <sup>8</sup> See Fred Lorch, 'Thoreau and the Organic Principle in Poetry' (1938) LIII *PMLA* 286.
- <sup>9</sup> H. Daniel Peck (ed), *A Year in Thoreau's Journal: 1851* (1993) 21.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 306.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid (emphasis in original).
- <sup>14</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Life without Principle' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 632.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid 650.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid 632.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid 634
- <sup>20</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 262.
- <sup>21</sup> Thoreau, above n 14, 634.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid 640.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid 634.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid 636.
- <sup>25</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 261.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid 260.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> See Goldian Vanenbroeck (ed), *Less is More: The Art of Voluntary Poverty* (1991) 116.
- <sup>29</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 286.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid 261.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid 568.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid 269.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid 263.
- <sup>36</sup> I am indebted to Carl Bode for this reference. See Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 25.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The World is Too Much With Us; Late and Soon' in John Hayden (ed), *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems* (1994) 166.

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- <sup>39</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 308.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid 312.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid 345.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid 345-6.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid 337.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid 266.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid 264-5.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid 274.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid 264.
- <sup>50</sup> Samuel Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture* (2009).
- <sup>51</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 343.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid 343-4.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid 275.
- <sup>55</sup> One of Thoreau's motivations for going to Walden Pond was to write, 'A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,' which he did. See Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 138-227.
- <sup>56</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 267.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid 275.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid 344.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid 344.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid 344.
- <sup>61</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'The Service,' quoted in Leo Stoller, *After Walden* (1957) 16.
- <sup>62</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 273.
- <sup>63</sup> See Leo Stoller, *After Walden* (1957) 6-7. Stoller suggests that if Thoreau's poems and essays had brought him money, the Walden Experiment may never have eventuated.
- <sup>64</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 274.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid 324.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid 275.
- <sup>67</sup> It was Thomas Carlyle who once said, 'The Fraction of Life can be increased in value not so much by increasing your Numerator as by lessening your Denominator.' See Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1999) 145.
- <sup>68</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 272.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>70</sup> See generally, Richard A. Posner, *The Economics of Justice* (1981).
- <sup>71</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 275.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid 276.
- <sup>73</sup> Judith Saunders, 'Transcendental Capitalist at Walden,' in Harold Bloom (ed), *Henry David Thoreau's "Walden"* (1987) 59.
- <sup>74</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Walden' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 363.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid 364.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid 364.
- <sup>77</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Journal* (1962) 185.
- <sup>78</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 296.
- <sup>79</sup> Ibid 400, 457.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid 483.
- <sup>81</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (An Expanded ed, 1981) 88-9.
- <sup>82</sup> Saunders, above n 73, 59-60.

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<sup>83</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 440.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid 286.

<sup>85</sup> Saunders, above n 73.

<sup>86</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 324.

<sup>87</sup> I have been assisted in the following discussion by the following texts: Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (An Expanded ed, 1981); Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics : "Walden" and the Pursuit of Virtue* (2004); Leo Stoller, *After Walden* (1957); Leonard Neufeldt, *The Economist : Henry Thoreau and Enterprise* (1989); Harold Bloom (ed), *Henry David Thoreau's "Walden"* (1987); Christian Becker, 'Thoreau's Economic Philosophy' (2008) 15(2) *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 211; Thomas D. Birch and Fred Metting, 'The Economic Design of Walden' (1992) 65(4) *The New England Quarterly* 587; Richard Prud'Homme, 'Walden's Economy of Living' (2001) 20(3) *Raritan* 107.

<sup>88</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 267-8.

<sup>89</sup> I should make clear that Thoreau is not suggesting that there is necessarily a conflict or trade-off here between such things as 'developing higher capacities' and 'obtaining the necessities of life.' As we have seen and will see again, his aim is to ensure that there is no conflict here; that is, he seeks to develop his higher capacities *as* he provides for himself. But, as a matter of basic instinct, Thoreau is pointing out that should a conflict actually arise, then securing necessities of life will always be prioritized over higher development. That is, when starving, one will look for food before reading Shakespeare or watching the sunset.

<sup>90</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 267

<sup>91</sup> Ibid 267.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid 280.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid 281.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid 281.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid 282.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid 280.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid 276.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid 278.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid 279.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid 277.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid 278.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid 282.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid 283.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid 283-285.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid 284.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid 284.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid 286.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid 288. I am reminded here of the following passage from John Ruskin: 'Lately in the wreck of a Californian ship, one of the passengers fastened a belt about him with two hundred pounds of gold in it, with which he was found afterwards at the bottom. Now, as he was sinking – had he the gold? Of had the gold him?' See Goldian Vanenbroeck (ed), *Less is More: The Art of Voluntary Poverty* (1991) 41.

<sup>112</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 289 (emphasis in original).

<sup>113</sup> Ibid 304.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid 290.

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- <sup>115</sup> Ibid 300.
- <sup>116</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>117</sup> Ibid 300-1.
- <sup>118</sup> Ibid 301.
- <sup>119</sup> Ibid 288.
- <sup>120</sup> Ibid 304.
- <sup>121</sup> Ibid 295.
- <sup>122</sup> Ibid 304.
- <sup>123</sup> Ibid 315.
- <sup>124</sup> Ibid 309-10.
- <sup>125</sup> These expenses included seeds, rice, Indian meal and salt to make his own bread, oil for his lamp, etc.
- <sup>126</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 310.
- <sup>127</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>128</sup> Ibid 284.
- <sup>129</sup> Ibid 404-5.
- <sup>130</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse* (New ed, 1857).
- <sup>131</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 406.
- <sup>132</sup> Ibid 406.
- <sup>133</sup> Cafaro, above n 87, 98.
- <sup>134</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 408.
- <sup>135</sup> Ibid 408.
- <sup>136</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking' in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 592.
- <sup>137</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 518.
- <sup>138</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 409.
- <sup>139</sup> Cafaro, above n 87, 99. Thoreau's point is not that factory and office work are not valuable. His suggestion is that the drive to maximize profits is disconnecting more and more people from the simple pleasures of contact with nature in their working lives. Thoreau is questioning whether the increased profits that arise from factory and office work is worth that disconnection from nature.
- <sup>140</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 266. In this context Thoreau also quotes Confucius: 'To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge.' Thoreau, above n 1, 267.
- <sup>141</sup> Ibid 319.
- <sup>142</sup> Ibid 309.
- <sup>143</sup> Ibid 268.
- <sup>144</sup> Ibid 269.
- <sup>145</sup> Ibid 270-1.
- <sup>146</sup> Ibid 267-8.
- <sup>147</sup> Ibid 261.
- <sup>148</sup> Ibid 271.
- <sup>149</sup> See Philip Cafaro, 'Less is More' in Samuel Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture* (2009)127-134 (applying and discussing this calculus in the context of food consumption).
- <sup>150</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 260. See also, Cafaro, above n 87, 80.
- <sup>151</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (2001) Section 299. See also, Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985).
- <sup>152</sup> In many places Thoreau talks of poetry with respect to life, rather than verse. For example, in 'Life without Principle,' he writes: 'The poet... must sustain his body by his poetry.' Thoreau, above n 14, 636. See also, Thoreau, above n 1, at 300 and 308. Stoller

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cites several other examples from Thoreau's *Journals*. See Stoller, above n 87, at 106, 114, 116, 119, 121. See also, Lorch, above n 8.

<sup>153</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelly, *A Defence of Poetry* (2007 [1840]) 12.

<sup>154</sup> On this point, see Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics,' in Paul Rabinove, *Ethics* (2000) 261-2: '[I]n our society, art has become something that is realted only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or done by experts. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life? ... From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.'

<sup>155</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 343.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid 562.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid 560.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid 343.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid 266.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid 325.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid 562.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid 562.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid 342.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid 342.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid 572.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid 325.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid 343.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid 341.

<sup>169</sup> See Cafaro, above n 87, 19-21.

<sup>170</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, edited by Joseph Moldenhaur (1974) 71.

<sup>171</sup> Cafaro, above n 87, 81.

<sup>172</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 293.

<sup>173</sup> Above n 28.

<sup>174</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 567.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid 568.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid 409.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid 566-7.

<sup>178</sup> Quoted in Clara Barrus, *Our Friend John Burroughs* (2008) 133.

<sup>179</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 319.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid 269.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid 324.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid 271.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid 291.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid 269.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid 335.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid 316.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid 290.

<sup>188</sup> Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, *Affluenza : When Too Much is Never Enough* (2005); John De Graaf et al, *Affluenza : The All-Consuming Epidemic* (2nd ed, 2005); Oliver James, *Affluenza : How to be Successful and Stay Sane* (2007).

<sup>189</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 271.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid 293.

<sup>191</sup> See Cafaro, above n 87, 84.

<sup>192</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 292.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>194</sup> Ibid 294.  
<sup>195</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>196</sup> Ibid 295.  
<sup>197</sup> Ibid 306.  
<sup>198</sup> Richard Layard, *Happiness : Lessons from a New Science* (2005) 86.  
<sup>199</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 307.  
<sup>200</sup> Ibid 307.  
<sup>201</sup> Ibid 271.  
<sup>202</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>203</sup> Ibid 324.  
<sup>204</sup> Ibid 323.  
<sup>205</sup> Ibid 323.  
<sup>206</sup> Thoreau, above n 136, 595.  
<sup>207</sup> Ibid 263.  
<sup>208</sup> Thoreau, above n 14, 636.  
<sup>209</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 308.  
<sup>210</sup> Thoreau, above n 136, 595.  
<sup>211</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 325.  
<sup>212</sup> Ibid 258.  
<sup>213</sup> Stoller, above 87, 71.  
<sup>214</sup> Ibid 52-3.  
<sup>215</sup> Thoreau, above n 14, 636.  
<sup>216</sup> See Stoller, above n 87, 31.  
<sup>217</sup> Henry Stephens Salt et al, *Life of Henry David Thoreau* (1993) 51.  
<sup>218</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 275.  
<sup>219</sup> Ibid 296.  
<sup>220</sup> Ibid 297.  
<sup>221</sup> Ibid 300.  
<sup>222</sup> Ibid 408.  
<sup>223</sup> Ibid 324.  
<sup>224</sup> See Bode, above n 5, 15  
<sup>225</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 323.  
<sup>226</sup> Ibid 310.  
<sup>227</sup> ‘In youth... I can remember that I was all alive, and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction; both its weariness and its refreshment were sweet to me. This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains,’ as quoted from Thoreau’s journals. See Stoller, above n 87, 69.  
<sup>228</sup> Stoller variously calls the experiment ‘ineffectual,’ ‘unsuccessful,’ and ‘failed.’ See Stoller, above n 87, at 3, 27, 108.  
<sup>229</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 410.  
<sup>230</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>231</sup> Ibid 310.  
<sup>232</sup> From Thoreau’s journals, as quoted in Stoller, above n 87, 112.  
<sup>233</sup> See Stoller, above n 87, 49.  
<sup>234</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 562.  
<sup>235</sup> David Robinson, *Natural Life : Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (2004) 79.  
<sup>236</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>237</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 562.  
<sup>238</sup> Ibid 264.  
<sup>239</sup> Ibid 562.  
<sup>240</sup> Ibid 270.

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- <sup>241</sup> From Thoreau's Journals, as quoted in Stoller, above n 87, 123.  
<sup>242</sup> From Thoreau's Journals, as quoted in Stoller, above 87, 120  
<sup>243</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>244</sup> From Thoreau's Journals, as quoted in Stoller, above n 87, 108.  
<sup>245</sup> Thoreau, above n 1, 564-5.  
<sup>246</sup> Ibid 326.  
<sup>247</sup> On Gandhi's view of simplicity see, Mahatma Gandhi, 'The Quest for Simplicity: My Idea of Swaraj,' in Majid Rahnema (ed) *The Post-Development Reader* (1997) 306-7.

## ENDNOTES TO 'DECONSTRUCTING THE SHED: WHERE I LIVE AND WHAT I LIVE FOR'

- <sup>248</sup> Henry Thoreau, *Walden*, in Carl Bode (ed), *The Portable Thoreau* (1982) 360.  
<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 363.  
<sup>250</sup> For a preliminary sketch of my thesis, see Samuel Alexander, 'Property beyond Growth: Toward a Politics of Voluntary Simplicity' in David Grinlinton and Prue Taylor (eds), *Property Rights and Sustainability: The Evolution of Property Rights to Meet Ecological Challenges* (2010) .  
<sup>251</sup> There is now a considerable body research examining the correlation between income and well-being. A good place to begin is Ed Diener et al, *Well-Being for Public Policy* (2009). See also, Ed Diener and Martin Seligman, 'Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well-Being' (2004) 5(1) *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 1; Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2005); and Diener et al, *International Differences in Well-Being* (2010).  
<sup>252</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, above n 1, 295.  
<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 410.  
<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 278.  
<sup>255</sup> Richard Gregg, 'The Value of Voluntary Simplicity,' in Samuel Alexander (ed), *Voluntary Simplicity: The Poetic Alternative to Consumer Culture* (2009) 111-2.  
<sup>256</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, above n 1, 263.  
<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 325.  
<sup>258</sup> Ibid, 343.  
<sup>259</sup> For some discussions of the politics of simplicity, see Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth* (2009); Jerome Segal, *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of the Alternative American Dream* (1st ed, 1999); Charles Siegel, *The Politics of Simple Living* (2008) (available at <http://www.preservenet.com/simpleliving/PoliticsOfSimpleLiving.pdf>); and Samuel Alexander, 'Property beyond Growth,' above n 3.  
<sup>260</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, above n 1, 286.  
<sup>261</sup> In February 2010 the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that the average full-time adult weekly earnings was AU\$1,290.70 <<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/6302.0>> at 5 August 2010).  
<sup>262</sup> A short time after completing this essay the landlord gave notice that he was ending the lease of the rental property where the shed was built (for reasons wholly unrelated to the existence of the shed or my presence, I should add). This meant – by force of property law! – that I was required to deconstruct the shed *physically*. I have since moved in with Helen, which (as implied) was already on the cards, and the exploration of the simple life now continues, albeit in new circumstances. I intend to write about this new phase of the journey in the near future, as I feel that it raises new and equally important issues about

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living simply in an urban context. But first I must reconstruct the shed – both literally and metaphorically.

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