

THOREAU & VAN GOGH, MEETING IN THE WILD

THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau was born in 1817 in Massachusetts and died in 1862, in the same place. Today he is regarded as a leading American poet, author and philosopher, but he is also known as an abolitionist, naturalist, tax resister, development critic, surveyor, historian and American transcendentalist. Thoreau published numerous books and articles, essays, and several volumes of poetry during his life. Most of his works deal with the either-way relationship between society, individual and nature. Thoreau's best known works are his book "Walden" (1854), a reflection upon simple living, and his essay "Civil Disobedience" (1849), in which he claims that it is an individual's right to disobey an unjust state.

Thoreau had a romantic and idealized view on nature, putting forward his idea of wilderness as a kind of pastoral garden where one can retreat from civilization. He claimed that one should live deliberately, in conjunction with nature, to find self-fulfillment. He himself lived in solitude in a cabin in Massachusetts, near the Walden Pond, for several years.



VAN GOGH

Vincent van Gogh didn't find his calling as an artist until his mid-twenties. Before then, he dabbled in art dealership, teaching, and various permutations of religious service. Yet even during these early years, his letters reveal certain characteristics that were to remain consistent throughout his life.

Foremost among these is his ability to find solace and inspiration in landscapes and nature. His letters contain many lyrical descriptions of his surroundings.

CHRISTOPHER McCANDLESS

The non-fiction narrative "Into the Wild", written by Jon Krakauer, is the biography of Christopher McCandless, a college graduate from the American East Coast, who left his family, friends and all the comforts of the civilized world to find his personal, ultimate freedom in living close to nature, clearly separated from the materialism of the American society.

He gave all his inheritance and possessions to charity to adopt a vagabond lifestyle, travelling across great parts of the American continent completely on his own. During his journey across the country, McCandless met several people who admired him for his charisma, his intelligence and his asceticism. However, he always avoided intimacy with the people he met to stay completely independent. He also never contacted his extremely worried family to tell them about his whereabouts. During his journey, McCandless also changed his name into "Alexander Supertramp" for the purpose of forming a completely new identity for himself.

"Alex" died of starvation and poisoning by toxic seeds in the Alaskan wilderness in summer 1992. His body was found in an abandoned bus, where he had lived in complete solitude over the summer. He died at the age of 24.

As Krakauer states, the book is a biography of McCandless and is based on his own interviews with family members, friends and people who he encountered on his way. Krakauer also studied letters and notes by McCandless.

In his narrative, Jon Krakauer puts forward his view of McCandless as a young man with an above-average intellect and salient spiritual ambitions. He often refers to Henry David Thoreau. McCandless himself was a great reader of books, he read the major works of Tolstoy,

Nietzsche, Pasternak, Dostojewsky, Thoreau and others. However, Krakauer refers to the works of Henry Thoreau most frequently in his narrative. One of many instances in the book where Thoreau is referred to is when “Alexander Supertramp” abandons his car in a national park. Here Krakauer writes that **“McCandless could endeavor to explain that he answered to statues of a higher order - that as a latter-day adherent of Henry David Thoreau, he took as gospel the essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” and thus considered it his moral responsibility to flout the laws of the state.”**

Later in the book Krakauer also refers to Thoreau, for example when when stating that **“Bullhead city doesn’t seem like the kind of place that would appeal to an adherent of Thoreau and Tolstoy, an ideologue who expressed nothing but contempt for the bourgeois trappings of mainstream America. McCandless, nevertheless, took a strong liking to Bullhead.”**



THOREAUS'S QUOTATIONS (FROM "WALDEN" AND "CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE")

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation .
What is called resignation is confirmed desperation

This sentence, which appears in the first chapter, "Economy," is perhaps the most famous quotation from *Walden*. It sums up the prophetic side of Thoreau that many people forget about; he was not just an experimenter living in isolation on Walden Pond, but also a deeply social and morally inspired writer with an ardent message for the masses. His use of the word "desperation" instead of a milder reference to discontentment or unhappiness shows the grimness of his vision of the mainstream American lifestyle. He believes that the monomaniacal pursuit of success and wealth has paradoxically cheapened the lives of those engaged in it, making them unable to appreciate the simpler pleasures enumerated in *Walden*. But the unpleasantness of American life, according to Thoreau, is more than simply financial or economic, despite the title of his first chapter. "Desperation" is also a word with deep religious connotations, the "lack of hope" that, according to Dante (one of Thoreau's favorite writers), was inscribed on the gates at hell's entrance. *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's Protestant spiritual classic and a bestseller in the New England of Thoreau's day, features a hero who passes through a bleak lowland called the Slough of Despair on his way to meet God. By asserting that most humans have gotten stuck in despair, Thoreau is implying that they are unable to continue farther on their pilgrimage toward true redemption.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

These words provide the answer to the question posed by the title of Thoreau's chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For." The first part of this title is a practical concern about a place of residence, while the second part is a deeply philosophical concern about the meaning of life. Thoreau combines the practical and the philosophical in his Walden project, and thus the phrase "the essential facts of life" can refer both to material necessities like food and shelter and also to the core of human existence. The double aspect of *Walden*, its treatment of hard facts as well as philosophical questions, is also evident in his mention of living at the end. Taken factually and literally, it is of course impossible for Thoreau to die understanding that "I had not lived." But taken philosophically, life means not just biological functioning but also inner fulfillment. The experimentalism of Thoreau's endeavor is expressed in his frank acknowledgement that he is testing out an idea, rather than proving a foregone conclusion. Finally, the obscure mystical side of Thoreau—which makes him often appear more of a visionary than a philosopher—is evident in his famous phrase "to live deliberately." On a literal level, he wishes to choose his path of life independently and thoughtfully, subject to his own deliberation and no one else's. But on a higher level, the phrase is mystical and haunting, since of course nobody ever *chooses* to live or deliberately seeks to exist. As elsewhere in the work, Thoreau here forces us to contemplate the transcendent meaning of human life even while we think he is simply referring to a cabin in the woods.

A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air. It is continually receiving new life and motion from above. It is intermediate between land and sky.

This description of Walden Pond from the chapter entitled “The Ponds” shows how insufficient the label “nature writer” is when applied to the mystical vision of Thoreau when he regards the landscape around him. It is true that he describes the flora and fauna of Concord with a level of vibrancy and specificity to which nature writers aspire, but he does more than merely observe and take notes. He also, at times, transforms the physical environment into a spiritual vision, with religious rather than practical or scientific meaning. Here the phrase “the spirit that is in the air” is more reminiscent of a preacher or poet than a naturalist. It is hard scientifically to define what exactly the “new life” is that comes to the water from the sky, but in a transcendental, intuitive, spiritual context it makes perfect sense. Even the description of the pond as an “intermediate between land and sky” has more of an allegorical meaning than a physical one, since in physical terms the pond is not *between* land and sky at all. Allegorically, the pond is the human soul at the juncture between earth and heaven, living in an earthly realm but reflecting a peaceful world above just as the pond reflects the sky. Thoreau makes this parallel almost explicit when he compares the depth of the pond to the depth of the soul.

Every generation laughs at the old fashions,
but follows religiously the new.

Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.

I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself,
than be crowded on a velvet cushion.

Men frequently say to me, "I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially." I am tempted to reply to such, -- This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breath of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?

Things do not change; we change.

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me.

Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward.

It is truly enough said, that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation WITH a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!

If a thousand men were not to pay the tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned from office, then the revolution is accomplished. But the rich man is always sold to the institution which makes him rich.

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry.

All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the high-test reality. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.

WALDEN, OR LIFE IN THE WOODS

Passage highlighted in one of the books found with Chris McCandless's remains

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices.

Henry David Thoreau - Walden

Passage Highlighted in one of the books found with Chris McCandless's remains. At the top of the page, the word "TRUTH" had been written in large block letters in McCandless's hand.

Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night.

Henry David Thoreau - KTAADN

Nature

O Nature! I do not aspire
To be the highest in thy quire,—
To be a meteor in the sky,
Or comet that may range on high;
Only a zephyr that may blow
Among the reeds by the river low;
Give me thy most privy place
Where to run my airy race.

In some withdrawn, unpublic mead
Let me sigh upon a reed,
Or in the woods, with leafy din,
Whisper the still evening in:
Some still work give me to do,—
Only—be it near to you!

For I'd rather be thy child
And pupil, in the forest wild,
Than be the king of men elsewhere,
And most sovereign slave of care:
To have one moment of thy dawn,
Than share the city's year forlorn.

VAN GOGH'S LETTERS

<p>So what do you want? Does what happens inside show on the outside? There is such a great fire in one's soul, and yet nobody ever comes to warm themselves there, and passersby see nothing but a little smoke coming from the top of the chimney, and go on their way</p>	Letter 133 - July 1880
<p>I would like to look at those country scenes again, because now I look at things differently from the time before I started</p>	Letter 135 - 7 September 1880
<p>But now, even though aware of my weakness and my painful dependence on many things, I have recovered my peace of mind and my energy revives from day to day</p>	Letter 136 - 24 September 1880

Nature always starts by resisting, but if you take her really seriously, you will not let yourself be upset by this resistance; on the contrary, it is an extra stimulus to conquer her, and at heart nature and a true (artist / poet / man) are a tune with each other. However, nature is certainly “intangible”, yet she needs to be tackled, and that with a firm hand. [...] The battle with nature sometimes has something of what Shakespeare calls the “taming of the shrew”. In many things, I believe that holding on tight is better than giving up.

Letter 152 - October
1881

Art is jealous, she does not accept that an indisposition should be counted more important than her. People like me should not really be allowed to get ill. In short, I want to get to a stage where it is said of my work: this man feels deeply and this man is sensitive. Despite my so-called roughness, or perhaps just because of it. What am I in the eyes of most people? A nonentity or an eccentric, or a disagreeable fellow - someone who has no position in society or will ever have one, in short, the lowest of the low. Assuming that everything were exactly so then I would like to show through my work what is in the heart of such an eccentric, such a nonentity. This is my ambition, which in spite of everything is based less on anger than on love based more on a feeling of serenity than on passion. Although I am often in trouble, there is inside me a serene, pure harmony and music.

Letter 218 - 21 July
1882

If you work with love and intelligence, you develop a kind of armor against people's opinions, just because of the sincerity of your love for nature. Nature is also severe and, to put it that way, hard, but never deceives and always helps you to move forward. All these things make me feel more and more refreshed inside.

Letter 220 - 26 July
1882

<p>Sooner or later the feeling and love for nature will always find a response in people who are interested in art. It is a painter's duty to immerse himself totally in nature and use all his intelligence and express his feelings in his work, so that it can be understood by others. But to work for the sake of selling is in my view not exactly the right way, but would rather put off the art lovers.</p>	<p>Letter 221 - 31 July 1882</p>
<p>Sometimes there is a mild melancholy in the falling leaves, in the muted light, in the haziness of thing, in the elegance od the slender tree trunks.</p>	<p>Letter 229 - 9 September 1882</p>
<p>We are having very beautiful bad weather these days - rain, wind, thunderstorms, but with wonderful effects, which is why I think it beautiful, but other wise it feels very chilly</p>	<p>Letter 232 - 18 September 1882</p>

<p>How good it is to walk along an empty beach and look at the gray-green sea with its long, white streaks of waves, when you are feeling depressed. But if you have a need for something great, something infinite, something in which you can see God, you don't have to look far: I think I have seen something deeper, more infinite, more eternal than an ocean, expressed in the eyes of an infant when it wakes in the morning and crows with pleasure, or laughs because it can see the sun shine in its cradle. If there is a "ray from heaven", perhaps it can be found there.</p>	<p>Letter 242, early November 1882</p> <p>AUGURIES OF INNOCENCE - WILLIAM BLAKE</p> <p>To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour</p>
<p>It was typical winter weather. It was the kind of weather that brings back old memories, and the most ordinary things look so different that it makes you automatically think up stories from the time of stagecoaches and mail coaches.</p>	<p>Letter 276 - March 1883</p>
<p>Sometimes it is just in places like this that you are no longer aware of what is known as the civilized world and leave all the decidedly behind you; sometimes you need just those places to calm yourself down.</p>	<p>Letter 307 - July 1883</p>
<p>My plan is not to save myself, not to spare emotions or difficulties too much - it is relatively indifferent to me whether I live longer or shorter.</p>	<p>Letter 309 - August 1883</p>

<p>Zola says: “As an artist, I want to live life to the full” - “Want to live life” without mental reservation, naive like a child; no, not like a child, like an artist - with goodwill; as life turns out, so I will find something in it, so I will give of my best.</p>	<p>Letter 336 - 28 October 1883</p>
<p>If you travel for hours and hours through the area, you feel as if there is actually nothing but this earth - endless - the mold of wheat or heather, and the endless sky. You sense nothing, even if in itself it is quite large: you only know there is earth and sky</p>	<p>Letter 350 - 16 November 1883</p>
<p>I have deliberately tried to work on creating the impression that these people, who, by the light of a little lamp, eat their potatoes with those hands that they put in the dish, that have themselves dug the earth, and so it is their own manual labor by which they have honorably earned what they are eating</p>	<p>Letter 404 - 30 April 1885</p>

<p>If I compare myself to other people, there is something very wooden about me, as if I had spent ten years in solitary confinement. And the cause of this lies precisely in the fact that I had a difficult and disturbed time some ten years ago with worry and distress and no friends</p>	<p>Letter 448 - February 1886</p>
<p>I must also do a starry night with cypress trees or perhaps over a field of ripe wheat; the nights here can be very beautiful. I'm inclined to believe that the result may be rather disturbing and irritating and not at all pleasing to people with preconceived and fixed ideas about technique.</p>	<p>Letter 474 - 9 April 1888</p>
<p>I always feel like a traveler, going somewhere, towards some destination. If I sense that this somewhere, this destination, doesn't in fact exist, that seems to me quite reasonable and very likely true.</p>	<p>Letter 518 - 6 August 1888</p>
<p>Oh! The sun is so beautiful here in the middle of summer. It beats down on your head, and I've no doubt at all that it drives you crazy. But since I already am, I simply enjoy it.</p>	<p>Letter 15 to Bernard - 18 August 1888</p>

Starry, starry night
Paint your palette blue and gray
Look out on a summer's day
With eyes that know the darkness in my soul
Shadows on the hills
Sketch the trees and the daffodils
Catch the breeze and the winter chills
In colors on the snowy, linen land
Now, I understand what you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they did not know how
Perhaps they'll listen now
Starry, starry night
Flaming flowers that brightly blaze
Swirling clouds in violet haze
Reflect in Vincent's eyes of china blue
Colors changing hue
Morning fields of amber grain
Weathered faces lined in pain
Are soothed beneath the artist's loving hand
Now, I understand, what you tried to say to me
How you suffered for your sanity
How you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they did not know how
Perhaps they'll listen now

For they could not love you
But still your love was true
And when no hope was left inside
On that starry, starry night
You took your life as lovers often do
But I could have told you, Vincent
This world was never meant for one
As beautiful as you
Starry, starry night
Portraits hung in empty halls
Frameless heads on nameless walls
With eyes that watch the world and can't forget
Like the strangers that you've met
The ragged men in ragged clothes
The silver thorn of bloody rose
Lie crushed and broken on the virgin snow
Now, I think I know what you tried to say to me
How you suffered for your sanity
How you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they're not listening still
Perhaps they never will

VINCENT

by Don McLean (1971)

INTO THE WILD (1996) by Jon Krakauer

Based on the life of Christopher McCandless

Quotation	Reference
I don't want to know what time it is. I don't want to know what day it is or where I am. None of that matters	
Dark spruce forest frowned on either side the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean toward each other, black and continuous, in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness	Jack London - White Fang. One of McCandless's favorites

<p>SOS I need your help. Ai am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you.</p>	<p>A note on the door of the bus, handwritten in neat block letters on a page torn from a novel by Gogol</p>
<p>I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my love. I felt in myself a superabundance of energy which found no outlet in our quiet live</p>	<p>Lev Tolstoj - Family Happiness Passage highlighted in one of the books found with Chris McCandless's remains</p>
<p>I'm going to have to be real careful not to accept any gifts from them [parents] in the future because they will think they have bought my respect</p>	<p>A letter to his sister Carine</p>
<p>To the deserts go prophets and hermits; through deserts go pilgrims and exiles. Here the leaders of the great religions have sought the therapeutic and spiritual values of retreat, not to escape but to find reality.</p>	<p>Paul Shepart - Man in the landscape: a historic view of the esthetics of nature</p>

He answered to statutes of a higher order. He took as gospel the essay “on the Duty of Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau and thus considered it his moral responsibility to flout the laws of the state.

Jon Krakauer - Into the wild . P. 28

In a gesture that would have done both Thoreau and Tolstoy proud, he arranged all his paper currency in a pile on the sand and put a match to it. One hundred twenty-three dollars was promptly reduced to ash and smoke.

Jon Krakauer - Into the wild. P. 29

He had been infatuated with London since childhood. London's fervent condemnation of capitalist society, his glorification of the primordial world, his championing of the great unwashed . He read and reread "The call of the Wild", "White Fang", "To build a a fire", "an odyssey of the north". He was so enthralled by these tales that he seemed to forget they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London's romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the subarctic wilderness. He overlooked the fact that London himself had died by his own hand on his California estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk , obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print.

So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more damaging to the the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun.

Chris McCandless's letter to Ron Franz, April 1992

Don't settle down and sit in one place. Move around, be nomadic, make each day a new horizon. You are still going to live along time, and it would be a shame if you did not take the opportunity to revolutionize your life and move into an entirely new realm of experience

Chris McCandless's letter to Ron Franz, April 1992

<p>His ambivalence toward sex echoes that of celebrated others who embraced wilderness with single-minded passion, to say nothing of countless lesser-known pilgrims, seekers, misfits, and adventures. Like not a few of those seduced by the wild, he seems to have been driven by a variety of lust that supplanted sexual desire</p>	<p>Jon Krakauer - p. 67</p>
<p>As to when I shall visit civilization, it will not be soon, I think. I prefer the saddle to the streetcar and star-sprinkled sky to a roof, the obscure and difficult trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities</p>	<p>The last letter sent from EVERETT RUESS to his brother Waldo, dated 11 November 1934</p>
<p>It is true that I miss intelligent companionship, but there are so few with whom I can share the things that mean so much to me that I have learned to contain myself. It is enough that I am surrounded with beauty</p>	<p>The last letter sent from EVERETT RUESS to his brother Waldo, dated 11 November 1934</p>

Everything had changed suddenly - the tone, the moral climate. You didn't know what to think, whom to listen to. As if all your life you had been led by the hand like a small child and suddenly you were on your own, you had to learn to walk by yourself. There was no one around, neither family nor people whose judgement you respected.

Boris Pesternak - Doctor Zhivago
Passage highlighted in one of the books found with Chris McCandless's remains. "Need for a purpose" had been written in McCandless's hand in the margin above the passage.

But we little know until tried how much of the uncontrollable there is in us, urging across glaciers and torrents, and up dangerous heights, let the judgement forbid as it may.

John Muir - The Mountains of California
Jon Krakauer - P. 144

Oh, how one wishes sometimes to escape from the meaningless fullness of human eloquence, from all those sublime phrases, to take refuge in nature, apparently so inarticulate, or in the wordlessness of long, grinding labor, of sound sleep, of true music, or of a human understanding rendered speechless by emotion!

Boris Pesternak - Doctor Zhivago

McCandless starred and bracketed the paragraph and circled "refuge in nature" in black ink. Next to this passage he noted HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED

I HAVE HAD A HAPPY LIFE AND THANK THE LORD.
GOODBYE AND MAY GOD BLESS ALL

McCandless tore the final page from Louis L'Amour's memoir, "Education of a Wandering Man". On the other side of the page, which was blank, he penned this brief adios.