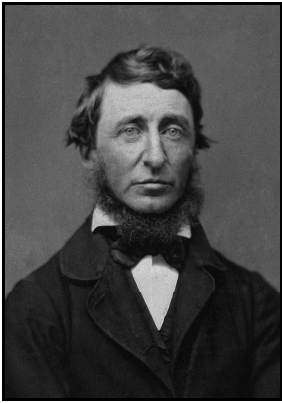


Life without Principle (Excerpts)

Henry David Thoreau (1863)

“Life without Principle” originated as a lecture called “What Shall it Profit,” first delivered at Railroad Hall in Providence, Rhode Island, on December 6, 1854. It was delivered four more times in Massachusetts in 1855, and once in New Jersey in 1856. This excerpt is from the final version, published in 1863.



(A) Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives.

(B) This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awaked almost every night by the panting of the locomotive. It interrupts my dreams. There is no sabbath. It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work. I cannot easily buy a blank-book to write thoughts in; they are commonly ruled for dollars and cents. An Irishman, seeing me making a minute in the fields, took it for granted that I was calculating my wages. If a man was tossed out of a window when an infant, and so made a cripple for life, or scared out of his wits by the Indians, it is

regretted chiefly because he was thus incapacitated for... business! I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant *business*...

(C) If I {busy myself with physical labor, even when it accomplishes little of importance}, most will commend me as an industrious and hard-working man; but if I choose to devote myself to certain labors which yield more real profit, though but little money, they may be inclined to look on me as an idler. Nevertheless, as I do not need the police of meaningless labor to regulate me, and do not see anything absolutely praiseworthy in {manual labor}... I prefer to finish my education at a different school.

(D) If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!

(E) Most men would feel insulted if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall, and then in throwing them back, merely that they might earn their wages. But many are no more worthily employed now.

(F) For instance: just after sunrise, one summer morning, I noticed one of my neighbors walking beside his team, which was slowly drawing a heavy hewn stone swung under the axle, surrounded by an atmosphere of industry, — his day's work begun, — his brow commenced to sweat, — a reproach to all sluggards and idlers, — pausing abreast the shoulders of his oxen, and half turning round with a

flourish of his merciful whip, while they gained their length on him. And I thought, Such is the labor which the American Congress exists to protect, — honest, manly toil, — honest as the day is long, — that makes his bread taste sweet, and keeps society sweet, — which all men respect and have consecrated; one of the sacred band, doing the needful but irksome drudgery. Indeed, I felt a slight reproach, because I observed this from a window, and was not abroad and stirring about a similar business. The day went by, and at evening I passed the yard of another neighbor, who keeps many servants, and spends much money foolishly, while he adds nothing to the common stock, and there I saw the stone of the morning lying beside a whimsical structure intended to adorn {his property}... In my opinion, the sun was made to light worthier toil than this...

(G) It is remarkable that there are few men so well employed, so much to their minds, but that a little money or fame would commonly buy them off from their present pursuit. I see advertisements for active young men, as if activity were the whole of a young man's capital... The community has no bribe that will tempt a wise man. You may raise money enough to tunnel a mountain, but you cannot raise money enough to hire a man who is minding his own business. An efficient and valuable man does what he can, whether the community pay him for it or not.

~~~~~  
*Respond to each of the following on your own paper. Make sure your name is at the top and staple it to this page before turning in.*

1. Thoreau begins by saying, "Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives." He doesn't say "our time," "our days," or even "our best years" - he says "our lives." How does this particular choice of words shape the tone or message of the document?
2. What does Thoreau seem to mean by "business," based on the way he uses the term in Paragraph B?
3. Thoreau doesn't come right out and say what he thinks he should be doing with his time instead of constantly working, but he hints at it in various ways throughout the excerpt. What does Thoreau think is a better use of his time than working at "normal" sorts of jobs?
4. Explain this phrase: "I do not need the police of meaningless labor to regulate me, and do not see anything absolutely praiseworthy in {manual labor}... I prefer to finish my education at a different school." {HINT: He's not talking about an actual *school*.}
5. In your own words, explain the analogy used in Paragraph (E).
6. In your own words, explain in 1-2 sentences what Thoreau observed on the day he describes in (F).
7. In your own words, explain the closing line: "An efficient and valuable man does what he can, whether the community pay him for it or not."