

THE ETHICS OF WESTERN LIFE



"All That a Man Wants—Even Nature and Labor"

WHAT LIFE MEANS TO ME—Life Without Principle

(By Henry D. Thoreau.)

Note—Speaking of this essay of Thoreau's, an eminent publicist said the other day: "No greater service could be done the public today than the publication of "Life Without Principle." I regard the essay as one of the greatest and truest utterances of a man whom I rank higher than Emerson."

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

This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! I am awakened 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 can easily buy a blank book to write thoughts in; they are commonly ruled for dollars and cents. An Irishman, seeing me make 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, aye, to life itself, than this incessant business. 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 these woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed as an industrious and entertaining citizen. As if a town had no interests in its forests but to cut them down!

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. 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 around 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, do-

ing needful 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 this Lord Timothy Dexter's premises, and the dignity forthwith departed from the teamster's labor, in my eyes. In my opinion, the sun was made to light worthier toil than this. I may add that his employer has since run off, in debt to a good part of the town, and, after passing through chancery, has settled somewhere else, there to become once more a patron of the arts.

Mere Money Grubbing

The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money merely, is to have been truly idle or worse. If the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself. If you would get money as a writer or lecturer, you must be popular, which is to go down perpendicularly. Those services which the community will most readily pay for, it is most disagreeable to render. You are paid for being something less than a man. The state does not commonly reward genius any more wisely. Even the poet laureate would rather not have to celebrate the accidents of royalty. He must be bribed with a pipe of wine; and perhaps another poet is called away from his muse to guage that very pipe. As for my own business, even that kind of surveying which I could do with most satisfaction my employers do not want. They would prefer that I should work coarsely and not too well, aye, not well enough. When I observe that there are different ways of surveying, my employer commonly asks which will give him the most land, not which is most correct. I once invented a rule for measuring cordwood, and tried to introduce it in Boston; but the meas-