

## A NEW LOOK AT THOREAU



In the summer of 1984, as a college student hungry to see the halls of power up close, I took a summer internship on Capitol Hill.

It was heady stuff for a 20-year-old. I shared a row house with three other students a few blocks from the Capitol, passing the Library of Congress and Supreme Court on my walk to work. Someone got me an insider tour of the White House, which allowed me to stick my head into the Oval Office and gaze at the Resolute desk. The president wasn't around, but I stood a few feet from him on a subsequent visit as he boarded his chopper. Around Congress, I glimpsed the vice president and star members of the House and Senate. Each day brought fresh reminders that I was working within the Vatican of democracy.

The only problem was that I wasn't sleeping well. Summer heat rose each evening to my tiny bedroom on the third story, which wasn't air-conditioned. I lay on a borrowed mattress sprawled on the floor, and the little box fan I'd bought at a corner bodega did nothing but stir around the torpid air.

On a lunch hour one day, while leaving the Smithsonian Museum of

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Natural History, I saw just the thing to usher me blissfully into unconsciousness that night. Out of the corner of my eye, I'd spotted the bright green cover of *Walden* in the window of the museum bookshop.

Two years earlier, I'd been assigned to read Henry David Thoreau in American Lit class and found him a colossal bore. His questioning of material gain left me cold. I dreamed of a life after college that included more, not fewer, possessions. I also wanted to be at the center of things, not sequestered in a shack by a pond. *Walden* seemed like a manual in how *not* to succeed.

Finally, an author I'd endured in the classroom would have some use for me, his prose as potent as a tranquilizer. I bought *Walden* from the Smithsonian and took it home, convinced that I carried literary laudanum in my hands.

That evening, propped on a pillow already damp from the hothouse climate of my rented room, I opened *Walden* and prepared to nod off. There I found these familiar words:

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things."

Thoreau did not put me to sleep. He shook me awake, pointing me toward an alternative vision of the good life. I came to understand that Thoreau's stay at Walden wasn't an exercise in escape but engagement. His time there helped him cultivate the insights that informed the work of Mahatma Gandhi and the Rev. Martin Luther King. Thoreau taught me that wise people in local places far removed from the iconic capitals of culture and politics can still make history. His legacy is a vivid reminder that true power starts from within.

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