A Plea for Simplicity

Adapted from Henry David Thoreau, Walden (Boston, 1854).

The Industrial Revolution brought many exciting changes, inventions, and opportunities for people. Many Americans were excited by the new technologies, products, and places they could go. Other people saw mainstream American life as becoming materialistic and corrupt. A few idealistic Americans tried to create small communities founded upon a set of religious or social ideals separate from the outside world. An ideal community like this is called a utopia. Some writers tried to warn their fellow citizens of potential dangers they saw in new American habits and attitudes. Henry David Thoreau was a writer like this who wrote about a year he spent living in the woods. Thoreau urged Americans not to get too caught up in the growing complexity of life.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation…Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind…

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to face only the essential facts of life, and to see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life. Living is so dear. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live sturdily and Spartanlike.

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! I say, let your affairs be two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand. Instead of a million, count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumbnail. Simplify, simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one, and instead of a hundred dishes, five. And reduce other things in proportion.

The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment. It is cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by lack of calculation and a worthy aim. And the only cure for it, as for them, is in a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose.

It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride 30 miles an hour. But whether we should live like baboons or like men is a little uncertain. If we do not forge rails and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build the railroads? And if the railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroads; it rides upon us.