

American Transcendentalism

*“It was a high counsel that I once
heard given to a young person,
‘Always do what you are afraid to do.’”*

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

A Venn diagram with three overlapping circles. The top circle is light green and labeled 'Romanticism'. The bottom-left circle is a lighter shade of green and labeled 'Transcendentalism'. The bottom-right circle is a darker shade of green and labeled 'Gothic'. The intersection of Romanticism and Transcendentalism contains the text 'Nature', 'Individual', and 'Subjectivity'. The intersection of Romanticism and Gothic contains the text 'Emotion', 'Supernatural', and 'Atmosphere'. The intersection of Transcendentalism and Gothic is empty. The central intersection of all three is also empty.

Romanticism

Nature
Individual
Subjectivity

Emotion
Supernatural
Atmosphere

Transcendentalism

Gothic

Transcendentalism

- Belief in a higher reality than found in sense experience/a higher kind of knowledge than achieved by human reason.
- Every individual is capable of discovering this higher truth on his/her own, through intuition



Born Bad or Good?

Puritans

Sinful



Enlightenment

Blank Slate



Transcendentalists

Good



The Influence of Romanticism

- The celebration of
 - individualism
 - the beauty of nature
 - the virtue of humankind

Nature & the Oversoul

- Semi-religious feelings toward nature: divinity permeates all objects, animate or inanimate
- Direct connection between the universe & the individual soul
- Purpose of human life is union with the “Oversoul” – a sort of convergence of the individual, God & Nature

The Oversoul

“The groves were God’s first temples”
– Willam Cullen Bryant



Individual

God

Nature

“In the faces of men and women I see God.”
– Walt Whitman

Transcendental Beliefs

- ✓ **Intuition**, not reason, is the highest human faculty
- ✓ **Rejection of materialism**
- ✓ **Simplicity** is the path to spiritual greatness
- ✓ **Nature** is a source of truth & inspiration
- ✓ **Non-conformity, individuality & self-reliance**

The Transcendentalists

- American Transcendentalism began with the formation in 1836 of the Transcendental Club in Boston
- Magazine: *The Dial*
- Brook Farm: communal living experiment
 - Ralph Waldo Emerson
 - Margaret Fuller
 - Henry David Thoreau
 - Bronson Alcott



Transcendentalist Authors

Margaret Fuller (1810 - 1850)

- American writer, journalist, and philosopher
- Margaret Fuller's "conversations" encouraged the women of Boston to develop their intellectual capacities.
- In 1845 Margaret Fuller published *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, now considered an early feminist classic.

Margaret Fuller

- “What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely, and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home.”
- “In order that she may be able to give her hand with dignity, she must be able to stand alone.”
- “I now know all the people worth knowing in America, and I find no intellect comparable to my own.”

Anti-Transcendentalists

- Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville
- Both explore the darker side of nature and human nature
- Both consider life in its tragic dimension, a combination of good and evil

Transcendentalism

- Transcendentalists believed that humanity was Godlike and saw the world in which only good existed
- They chose to focus on the positive rather than evil & darkness

Major Transcendentalist Works

- **Ralph Waldo Emerson**
 - “Self-Reliance” 1841
- **Henry David Thoreau**
 - *Walden* 1854
 - “Civil Disobedience”

“Self-Reliance”



Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Self-Reliance” - Emerson

- “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist.”
- “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”

“No law can be sacred to me but that of my own nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it...”

“ ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ – Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. **To be great is to be misunderstood.**”

Walden, or Life in the Woods



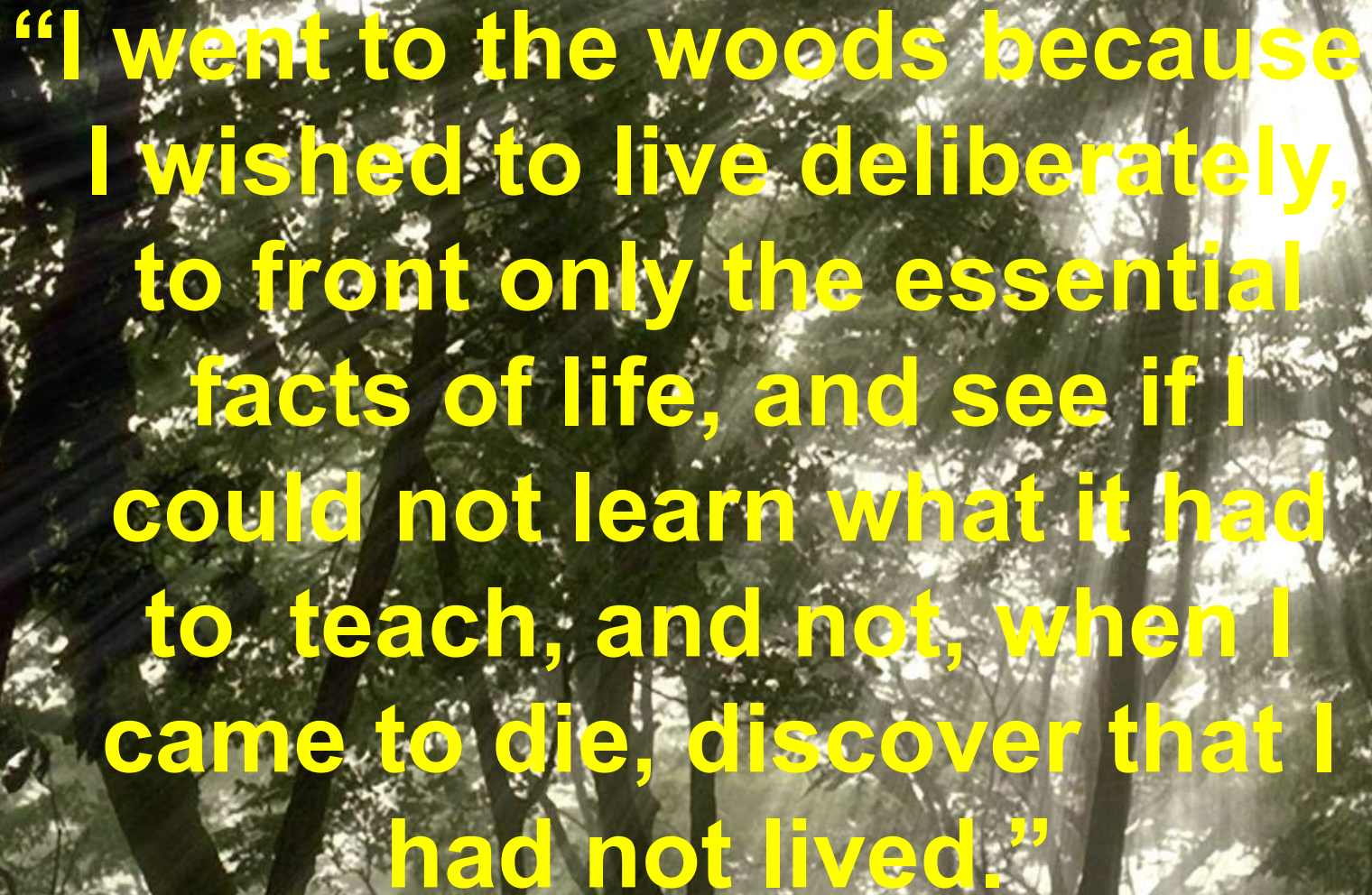
Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau criticized the direction in which civilization was going, particularly commercialization:

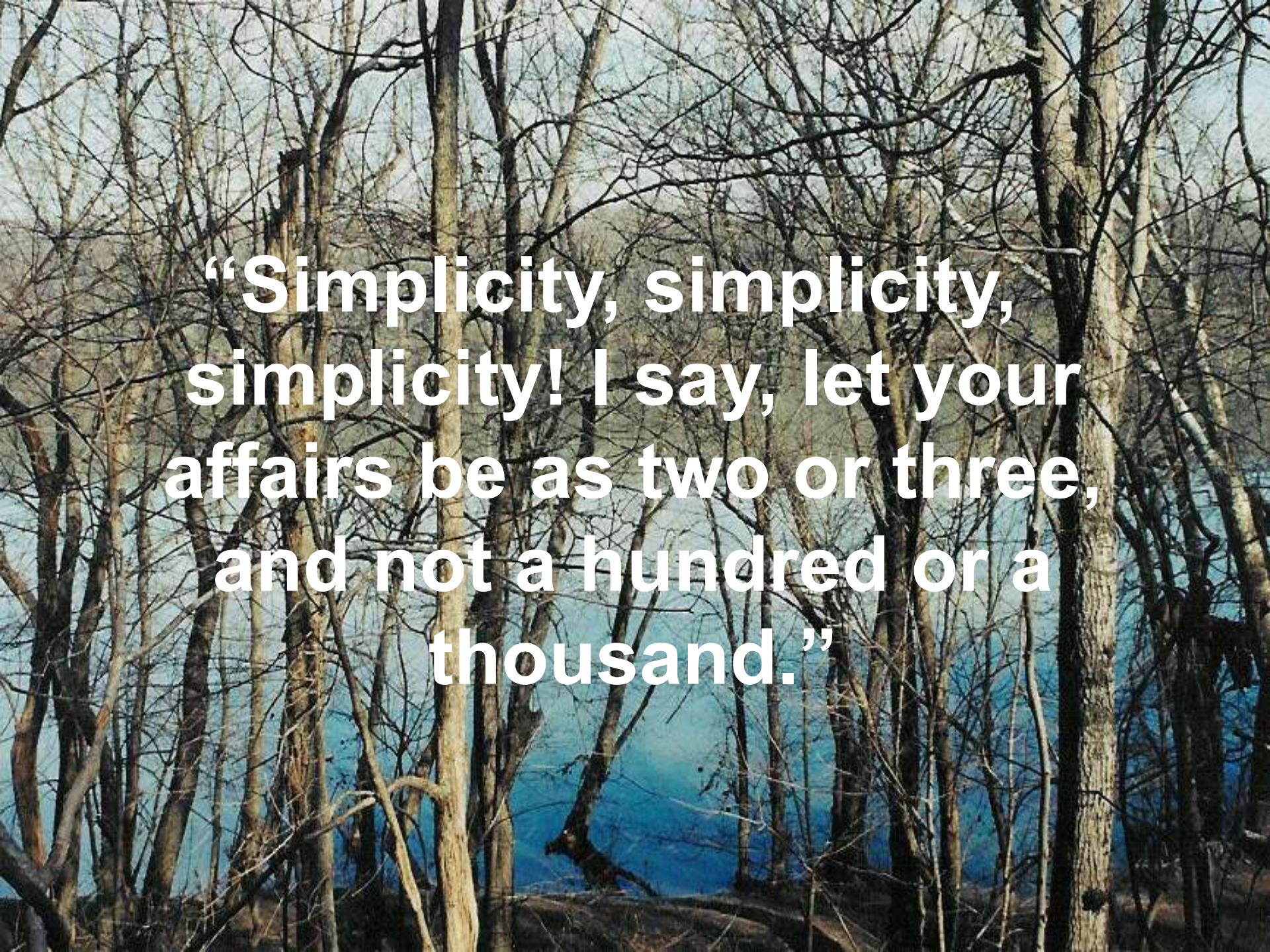
- "To have done anything just for money is to have been truly idle."
- "Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. " - *Walden*
- "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth." - *Walden*

Early Environmentalist


- "Thank God men cannot as yet fly and lay waste the sky as well as the earth!"
- "If a man walks 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 days as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is deemed an industrious and enterprising citizen."



“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.”

A photograph of a dense forest of bare trees, likely in late autumn or winter. The trees are thin and their branches are intricate and dark against a clear, bright blue sky. The lighting is natural, creating a serene and somewhat stark atmosphere.

**“Simplicity, simplicity,
simplicity! I say, let your
affairs be as two or three,
and not a hundred or a
thousand.”**

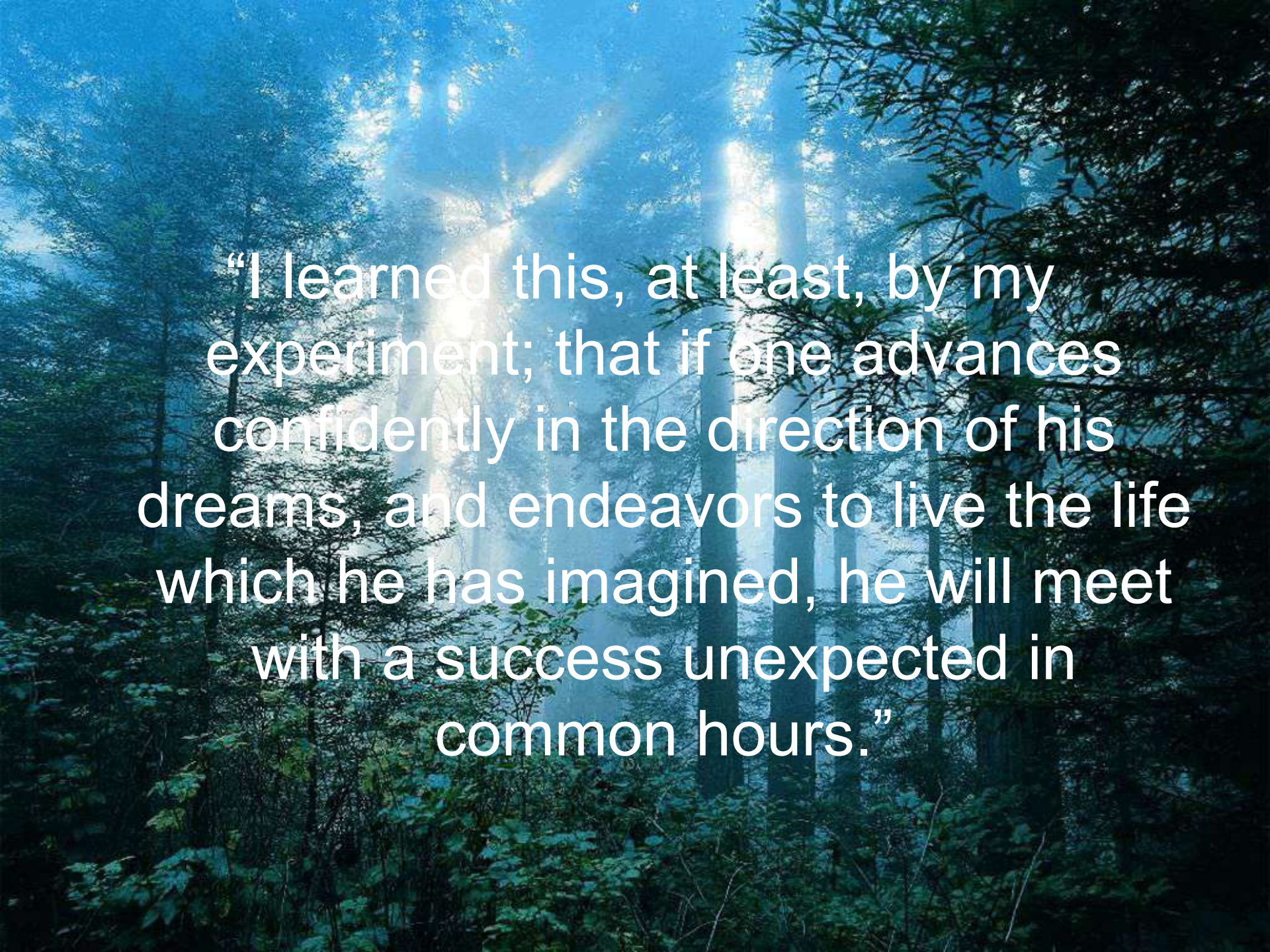
A blue-tinted photograph of a snowy forest. The trees are covered in snow, and the ground is a smooth, white expanse. The overall mood is serene and quiet. A quote is overlaid in the center of the image.

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



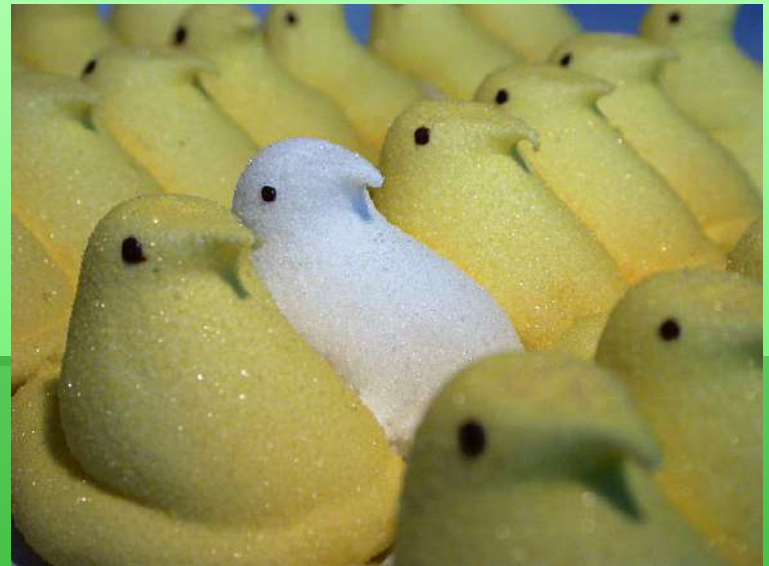
CONFORMITY

WHEN PEOPLE ARE FREE TO DO AS THEY PLEASE,
THEY USUALLY IMITATE EACH OTHER.

A photograph of a dense forest with sunlight streaming through the canopy, creating a bright, ethereal atmosphere. The text is overlaid in white, centered on the image.

“I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”



“Civil Disobedience”

Henry David Thoreau

“Civil Disobedience”

- Thoreau’s essay urging passive, nonviolent resistance to governmental policies to which an individual is morally opposed

Civil Disobedience



- Written after Thoreau spent a night in jail after refusing to pay a poll tax.
- Thoreau refused to pay the \$1.50 tax because the revenues went to the government which was allowing slavery to continue and which was waging an unjust war against Mexico.

“Civil Disobedience”

Influenced individuals such as
**Ghandi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. &
Cesar Chavez**



Click on photo for
info about each
person

Tiananmen Square, China

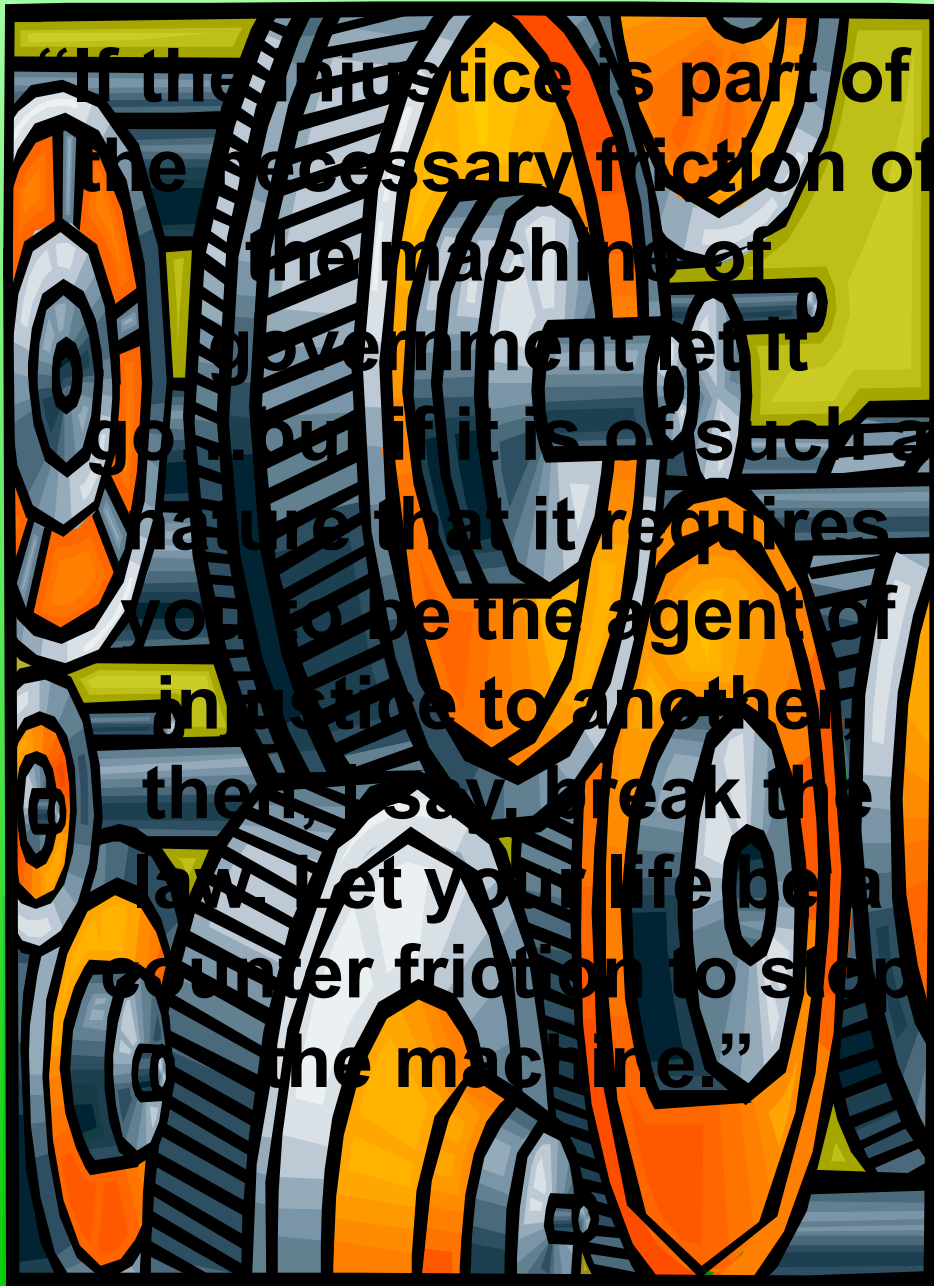
June 7th, 1989

For More Info Click: [FRONTLINE: the tank man | PBS](#)



“Civil Disobedience”

- “That government is best which governs least...That government is best which governs not at all.”
- “I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government.”
- “I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave’s* government also.”



Click on the photo for more information.





“Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison...It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of the race should find them..”

Snapshots

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Unbeknown to others, Thoreau would sometimes, in the middle of the night, sneak out for a few odds and ends.