

Reform and the Reformers

Henry David Thoreau

The Reformers are no doubt the true ancestors of the next generation; the Conservative belongs to a decaying family, and has not learned that he who seeks to save his "life" shall lose it. Both are sick, but the one is already convalescent. His disease is not organic but acute, and he looks forward to coming springs with hope. He is not sick of any incurable disorder, of plague or consumption; but of tradition and conformity and infidelity; but the other is still taking his bitters and quack medicines patiently, and will grow worse yet. The heads of conservatives have a puny and deficient look, a certain callowness and concavity, as if they were prematurely exposed on one or both sides, or were made to lie or pack together, as when several nuts are formed under the same burr where only one should have been. We wonder to see such a head wear a whole hat. Such as these naturally herd together for mutual protection. They say *We* and *Our*, as if they had never been assured of an individual existence. *Our* Indian policy; *our* coast defenses, *our* national character. They are what are called public men, fashionable men, ambitious men, chaplains of the army or navy; men of property, standing and respectability, for the most part, and in all cases created by society. Sometimes even they are embarked in "Great Causes" which have been stranded on the shores of society in a previous age, carrying them through with a kind of reflected and traditionary nobleness, certainly disinterestedness. The Conservative has many virtues which the Reformer has not — oftentimes a singular and unexpected liberality and courtesy, a decided practicalness and reverence for facts, and with a little less irritability, or more indifference would be the more tolerable companion. He is the steward of society, and in this office at least is faithful and generous. He is a dutiful son but a tyrannical father, and does not foresee that unimaginable epoch when the rising generation will have attained to a level with the risen. Rather he is himself a son all his days, and never arrives at such maturity as to be informed that he and such as he are now mankind and the latest generation, the occupants and proprietors of the globe, but he still feels it to be his chief duty to preserve the law and order and institutions which he finds existing.

It is remarkable how well men train. The teamster rolls out of his cradle into a Tom-and-Jerry — and goes at once to look after his team — to fodder and water his horses, without standing agape at his position. What is the destiny of a man, compared with the shipping interests? What does he care for — his creator? doesn't he drive for Squire Make-a-Stir?

The ladies of the land with equal bravery are weavers of toilet cushions and tidies not to betray too green an interest in their fates. Men now take snuff into their noses, but if they had been so

advised in season, they would have put it into their ears and eyes. They may gravely deny this, but do not believe them.

In the midst of all this disorder and imperfection in human affairs which he would rather avoid to think of comes the Reformer, the impersonation of disorder and imperfection; to heal and reform them; seeking to discover the divine order and conform to it; and earnestly asking the cooperation of men.

No doubt the evil is great and manifest, and something must certainly be done; and his zeal is in proportion to the urgency of the case — but I know of few radicals as yet who are radical enough, and have not got this name rather by meddling with the exposed roots of innocent institutions than with their own.

The disease and disorder in society are wont to be referred to the false relations in which men live one to another, but strictly speaking there can be no such thing as a false relation if the condition of the things related is true. False relations grow out of false conditions. The inmate of a poorhouse would be more pauper still on a desolate island, and the convict would find his prison and prison discipline there.

It is not the worst reason why the reform should be a private and individual enterprise, that perchance the evil may be private also. From what southern plains comes up the voice of wailing — under what latitudes reside the heathen to whom we would send light — and who is that intemperate and brutal man whom he would redeem?

Now, if anything ail a man so that he does not perform his functions; especially if his digestion is poor, though he may have considerable nervous strength left; if he has failed in all his undertakings hitherto; if he has committed some heinous sin and partially repents, what does he do? He sets about reforming the world. Do ye hear it, ye Woloffs, ye Patagonians, ye Tartars, ye Nez Percés? The world is going to be reformed, formed once and for all. Presto — Change! Methinks I hear the glad tidings spreading over the green prairies of the west; over the silent South American pampas, parched African deserts, and stretching Siberian versts; through the populous Indian and Chinese villages, along the Indus, the Ganges, and Hydaspes.

There is no reformer on the globe, no such philanthropic, benevolent and charitable man, now engaged in any good work anywhere, sorely afflicted by the sight of misery around him, and animated by the desire to relieve it, who would not instantly and unconsciously sign off from these pure labors, and betake himself to purer, if he had but righted some obscure, and perhaps unrecognized private grievance. Let but the spring come to him, let the morning rise over his couch, and he will forsake his generous companions, without apology or explanation!

The Reformer who comes recommending any institution or system to the adoption of men, must not rely solely on logic and argument, or on eloquence and oratory for his success, but see that he represents one pretty perfect institution in himself, the center and circumference of all others, an erect man.

I ask of all Reformers, of all who are recommending Temperance, Justice, Charity, Peace, the Family, Community or Associative life, not to give us their theory and wisdom only, for these are no proof, but to carry around with them each a small specimen of his own manufactures, and to despair of ever recommending anything of which a small sample at least cannot be exhibited: — that the Temperance man let me know the savor of Temperance, if it be good, the Just man permit to enjoy the blessings of liberty while with him, the Community man allow me to taste the sweets of the Community life in his society.

I cannot bear to be told to wait for good results, I pine as much for good beginnings. We never come to final results, and it is too late to start from perennial beginnings.

But alas, when we ask the schemer to show us the material of which his structure is to be built. He exhibits only fair looking words, resolute and solid words for the underpinning, convenient and homely words for the body of the edifice, poems and flights of the imagination for the dome and cupola.

Men know very well how to distinguish barren words from those which are cousin to a deed, and the promising or threatening speaker is only rated at his faculty and resolution to do what he says. The phlegmatic audience which sits near the doors know that the speaker does not mean to abolish property or dissolve the family die, or do without human governments all over the world tonight, but that simply, he has agreed to be the speaker and — they have agreed to be the audience. They may chance to know that the lecturer against the use of money is paid for his lecture, and that is the precept which they hear and believe, and they have a great deal of sympathy with him.

After all the peace lectures and non-resistance meetings it was never yet learned from them how any of the speakers would conduct in an emergency, because a very important disputant, one Mr. Resistance was not present to offer his arguments.

There are not only books, but lectures and sermons of fiction, whether written or extemporaneous. The modern Reformers are a class of *improvvisanti* more wonderful and amusing than the Italians.

What the prophets even have said is forgotten, and the oracles are decayed, but what heroes and saints have done is still remembered, and posterity will tell it again and again.

We rarely see the Reformer who is fairly launched in his enterprise, bringing about the right state of things with hearty and effective tugs, and not rather preparing and grading the way through the minds of the people. What if the community were to pull altogether says he! — Aye, what if two — what if one even were to work harmoniously and with all his energies! say I. No wonder you plead for my cooperation — I could exert myself considerably. It would be worth the whole methinks to have my traces hitched to some good institution.

There certainly can be no greater folly than for men to set about to prove a truth at their leisure who have no other business with it. As if one were to proclaim that he was going a long journey, and because one of his neighbors was inattentive or did not believe it, should put it off. To the man of industry and work it is not quite essential that I should *think* with him. When my neighbor is going to build a house, whether for me or for himself, he does not come to me and reproach or pity me for living in a shed, but he digs the cellar and raises the frame, and makes haste to get the roof done, that he may do the inside-work more comfortably, and he knows very well what assistance he can count upon in these labors.

For the most part by simply agreeing in opinion with the preacher and Reformer I defend myself and get rid of him, for he really asks for no sympathy with deeds — and this trick it would be well for the irritable Conservative to know and practice.

The great benefactors of their race have been single and singular and not masses of men. Whether in poetry or history it is the same: Minerva — Ceres — Neptune — Prometheus — Socrates — Christ — Luther — Columbus — Arkwright.

There is no objection to action in societies or communities when it is the individual using the society as his instrument, rather than the society using the individual. While one's inspiration is so high and pure as to be necessarily solitary and not to be made a subject of sympathy or

congratulation, he may safely use any instrument in his way, whether wood or iron or masses of men. But when the vote of the society rises to a level with his own prayers, and its resolution in the least confirms his own, he may suspect himself, or he may suspect his companions. There have been meetings, religious, political and reformatory, to which men came a hundred miles — though all they had to offer were — some resolutions! What becomes of resolutions that have been offered?

In every society there is or was at least one individual, its founder and leader, who did not belong to it, but who imparted to it whatever life and efficiency it had, and sad indeed is the condition of that society, and it is the condition of most, which is deprived of its head — and soul — for the members can still vote — and as it were by force of galvanism, a spasmodic action be kept up in the body, and men call it life, and expect virtue and character from senseless nerves and muscles. Such societies, as they prize life, will have recourse to dinners and tea-parties that the members may not utterly fail for want of a belly also.

Consider, after all, how very private and silent an affair it is to lead a life — that we do not consider our duties, or the actions of our life, as in a caucus or convention of men, where the subject has been before the meeting a long time, and many resolutions have been proposed and passed, and now one speaker has the floor and then another, and the subject is fairly under discussion; but the convention where our most private and intimate affairs are discussed is very thinly attended, almost we are not there ourselves, that is the go-to-meeting part of us. It is very still, and few resolutions get passed. Few words are spoken, and the hours are not counted!

Next and nearest to that unfortunate man, even whom we would stand by in our philanthropy, is the mystery of his life. It is nearer than cold or hunger, for they are but the outside of it — it is between him and them, and do what we will, we must leave him alone with that.

The information which the gods vouchsafe to give us is never concerning anything which we wished to know. We are not wise enough to put a question to them. Tell me some truth about society and you will annihilate it. What though we are its ailing members and prisoners. We cannot always be detained by your measures for reform. All that is called hindrance without is but occasion within. The prisoner who is free in spirit, on whose innocent life some rays of light and hope still fall, will not delay to be a reformer of prisons, an inventor of superior prison disciplines, but walks forth free on the path by which those rays penetrated to his cell. Has the Green Mountain boy made no better nor more thrilling discovery than that the church is rotten and the state corrupt? Thank heaven, we have not to choose our calling out of those enterprises which society has to offer. Is he then indeed called, who chooses to what he is called? Obey your calling rather, and it will not be whither your neighbors and kind friends and patrons expect or desire, but be true nevertheless, and choose not, nor go whither they call you. “Thy lot or portion of life, is seeking after thee; therefore be at rest from seeking after it.”

From the side to which all eyes are turned, and the hue and cry leads, from the effort which the state abets, and the church prays for, the least profitable result comes, the least performance issues.

We would have some pure product of man’s hands, some pure labor, some life got in this old trade of getting a living — some work done which shall not be a mending, a cobbling, a reforming. Show me the mountain boy, the city boy, who never heard of an abuse, who has not *chosen* his calling. It is the delight of the ages, the free labor of man, even the creative and beautiful arts.

Be sure your fate
Doth keep apart its state;
Not linked with any band,
Even the noblest of the land;
In tented fields with cloth of gold
No place doth hold,
But is more chivalrous than they are,
And sigheth for a nobler war;
A finer strain its trumpet sings,
A brighter gleam its armor flings.
The life that I aspire to live
No man proposeth me,
Only the promise of my heart
Wears its emblazonry.

How long shall vice give a home to virtue? One generation abandons the enterprises of another. Many an institution which was thought to be an essential part of the order of society, has, in the true order of events, been left like a stranded vessel on the sand.

When a zealous Reformer would fain discourse to me, I would have him consider first if he has anything to say to me. All simple and necessary speech between men is sweet; but it takes calamity, it takes death or great good fortune commonly to bring them together. We are sages and proud to speak when we are the bearers of great news, even though it be hard; to tell a man of the welfare of his kindred in foreign parts, or even that his house is on fire, is a great good fortune, and seems to relate us to him by a worthier tie.

It is a great blessing to have to do with men, to be called to them as simply as into the field of your occupation. It refreshes and invigorates us. But this happiness is rare. For the most part we can only treat one another to our wit, our good manners and equanimity, and though we have eagles to give we demand of each other only coppers. We pray that our companion will demand of us truth, sincerity, love and noble behavior, for now these virtues lie impossible to us, and we only know them by their names. Only lovers know the value and magnanimity of truth, while traders prize a cheap honesty, and neighbors and acquaintances a cheap civility.

If you have nothing to say let me have your silence, for that is good and fertile. Silence is the ambrosial night in the intercourse of men in which their sincerity is recruited and takes deeper root. — There are such vices as frivolity, garrulity, and verbosity, not to mention profanity, growing out of the abuse of speech which does not belong wholly to antiquity, and none have imparted a more cheerless aspect to society.

A man must serve another and a better use than any he can consciously render. Every class and order in the universe is the heaven of certain gifts to men. There is a whole class of musk-bearing animals, and each flower has its peculiar odor. And all these together go to make the general wholesome and invigorating atmosphere. So each man should take care to emit his fragrance, and after all perform some such office as hemlock boughs, or dried and healing herbs. Though you are a Reformer we want not your reasons, your good roots and foundations — nor your uprightness and benevolence which are your stem and leaves — but we want the flower and fruit of the man — that some fragrance at least as of fresh spring life be wafted over from thee to me. This is consolation and that charity that hides a multitude of sins. Our companion

must be a sort of appreciable wealth to us or at least make us sensible of our own riches — in his degree an apostle á Mercury, á Ceres, á Minerva, the bearer of diverse gifts to us. He must bring me the morning light untarnished, and the evening red undimmed. There must be the hilarity of spring in his mirth, the summer's serenity in his joy, the autumnal ripeness in his wisdom, and the repose and abundance of winter in his silence. He should impart his courage and not his despair; his health and ease, and not his disease, and take care that this does not spread by contagion.

It is rare that we are able to impart wealth to our fellows, and do not surround them with our own cast off griefs as an atmosphere, and name it sympathy. If we would indeed reform mankind by truly Indian, botanic, magnetic, or *natural* means, let us strive first to be as simple and well as nature ourselves.

I would say therefore to the anxious speculator and philanthropist — Let us dispel the clouds which hang over our own brows — take up a little life into your pores, endeavor to encourage the flow of sap in your veins, find your soil, strike root and grow — Apollo's waters and God will give the increase. Help to clothe the human field with green. Be green and flourishing plants in God's nursery, and not such complaining bleeding trees as Dante saw in the Infernal Regions.

If your branches wither, send out your fibers into every kingdom of nature for its contribution — lift up your boughs into the heavens for ethereal and starry influences, let your roots like those of the willow wander wider, deeper, to some moist and fertile spot in the earth, and make firm your trunk against the elements.

Be fast rooted withal in your native soil of originality and independence, your virgin mould of unexhausted strength and fertility — Nor suffer yourself ever to be transplanted again into the foreign and ungenial regions of tradition and conformity, or the lean and sandy soils of public opinion.

What! to be blown about, a creature of the affections, preaching love and good will and charity, with these tender fibers all bare in a cold world, and not a brother kind enough to throw a spadefull of earth over them! Better try what virtue there is in sand even, and cover your roots with the first exhausted soil you can find.

Who shall tell what blossoms, what fruits, what public and private advantage may push up through this rind we call a man? The traveller may stand by him as a perennial fountain in the desert and slake his thirst forever.

The wind rustling the leaves, the brags of some children have thrilled me more than the lives of the greatest and holiest men. What idle sorrow and stereotyped despair in the saints! What wavering performance in the heroes! Even the prophets and redeemers have rather consoled the fears than satisfied the free demands and hopes of man! We know nowhere recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life, a memorable and unbribed praise of God. So long as the Reformers are earnest enough and pleased with their own conceptions, they may entertain me, but when the time comes that their theme is exhausted, and only the sad alternative is left to do the things they have said; and they would rather that I should do them, then they are intolerable companions.

I like the old world and I like the new — winter and summer, hay and grass — but the death that presumes to give laws to life, and persists in affirming essential disease and disorder to the child who has just begun to bathe his senses and his understanding in the perception of order and beauty — that perseveres in maturing its schemes of life till its last days are come, is not to be compared to anything in nature. The growing man or youth is a fact which commonly we

do not enough allow for in our speculations, but to remember which would be fatal to many a fine theory. Speak for yourself, old man. When we are oppressed by the heat and turmoil of the noon, we should remember that the sun which scorches us with his beams is gilding the hills of morning and awaking the woodland quires for other men. So too it must not be forgotten, the evening exhibits in the still rear of day a beauty to which the morning and the noon are strangers.

It is hard to make those who have talked much, especially preachers and lecturers, deepen their speech, and give it fresh sincerity and significance. It will be a long time before they understand what you mean. They will wonder if you don't value fluency. But the drains flow. Turn your back, and wait till you hear their words ring solid, and they will have cause to thank you! How infinitely trackless yet passable are we. Is not our own interior white on the chart? Inward is a direction which no traveller has taken. Inward is the bourne which all travellers seek and from which none desire to return. There are the sources of the Nile and Niger.

Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czars is but a petty state — with its ocean borders, its mountain ranges, and its trackless paradises of unfallen nature. And, O ye Reformers! if the good Gods have given ye any high ray of truth to be wrought into life, here in your own realms without let or hindrance is the application to be made.

Those who dwell in Oregon and the far west are not so solitary as the enterprising and independent thinker, applying his discoveries to his own life. This is the way we would see a man striving with his axe and kettle to take up his abode. To this rich soil should the New Englander wend his way. Here is Wisconsin and the farthest west. It is simple, independent, original, natural life.

Most whom I meet in the streets are, so to speak, outward bound; they live out and out, are going and coming, looking before and behind, all out of doors and in the air. I would fain see them inward bound, retiring in and in, farther and farther every day, and when I inquired for them I should not hear that they had gone abroad anywhere, to Rondont or Sackets Harbor, but that they had withdrawn deeper within the folds of being.

England and France, Spain and Portugal, Gold Coast and Slave Coast, all front upon this private sea, but no bark from them has ventured out of sight of land — though it is without a doubt the direct way to India.

I would say then to my vagrant countrymen: Go not to any foreign theater for spectacles, but consider first that there is nothing which can delight or astonish the eyes, but you may discover it all in yourselves. One hastens to Southern Africa perchance to chase the giraffe; but that is not the game he would be after. How long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes, if he could? — What was the meaning of that Exploring Expedition with all its parade and expense, but a recognition of the fact that there are continents and seas in the moral world to which every man is an inlet, yet unexplored by him; but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storms and savage cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to steer and sail for one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific ocean of one's being alone.

Erret et extremos alter scrutetur Iberos.
Plus habet hic vitae, plus habet ille viae.

Let the other wander and scrutinize the outlandish Australians.
This one has more of God, that one has more of the road.

Here is demanded the eye and the nerve. Only the defeated and deserters go to the wars — cowards that run away and enlist. O ye Chivalry, ye could not fight a duel with your lives, and so ye challenged a man!

I met a pilgrim travel-worn, who could speak all tongues and conform himself to the customs of all nations, who carried a passport to all countries, and was naturalized in all climes, who had vanquished all the chimeras and caused the Sphinx to go and dash her head against a stone, who never retraced his steps nor returned to his native land, and was reputed to have travelled further than all the travellers. He bore for device on his shield these words only — “Know Thyself.”

“Direct your eye sight inward, and you’ll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmographie.”

Most revolutions in society have not power to interest, still less alarm us, but tell me that our rivers are drying up, or the genus pine dying out in the country, and I might attend. Some events in history are more remarkable than important, like eclipses of the sun by which all are attracted, but whose effects no one takes the trouble to calculate. Revolutions are never sudden. The most important is commonly some silent and unobtrusive fact in history. In the year 449 three Saxon cyules arrived on the British coast. “Three scipen gode comen mid than flode.”

To the sick the doctors wisely recommend a change of air and scenery. Who chains me to this dull town?

There is this moment proposed to me every kind of life that men lead anywhere or at any time — or that imagination can paint. By another spring I may be a mail carrier in Peru, or a South African planter, or a Siberian exile, or a Greenland whaler, or a settler on the Columbia River, or a Canton merchant, or a soldier in Mexico, or a mackerel fisher off Cape Sable, or a Robinson Crusoe in the Pacific, or a silent navigator of any sea.

How many are not standing on the European coast whom another spring will find located on the Wisconsin or the Sacramento!

I can move away from public opinion, from government, from religion, from education, from society. Shall I be reckoned a rateable poll in the county of Middlesex, or be rated at one spear under the palm trees of Guinea? Shall I raise corn and potatoes in Massachusetts, or figs and olives in Asia Minor? Sit out the day in my office in State street, or ride it out on the steppes of Tartary? For my Brobdingnag I may sail to Patagonia, for my Lilliput to Lapland. In Arabia and Persia my days’ adventures may surpass the Arabian Nights entertainments. I may be a logger on the head waters of the Penobscot, to be recorded in fable hereafter as an amphibious river God by as sounding a name as Triton or Proteus — carry furs from Nootka to China and so be more renowned than Jason and his Golden Fleece, or join a South Sea exploring expedition to be recounted hereafter along with the Periplus of Hanno.

And how many more things may I do with which there is none to be compared!

Thank Heaven here is not all the world. The buckeye does not grow in New England, and the mocking bird is rarely heard here. Why should I fall behind the summer and the migrations of birds? Shall we not compete with the buffalo who keeps pace with the seasons, cropping the pastures of the Colorado till a greener and sweeter grass awaits him by the Yellowstone? The wild-goose is a more cosmopolite than we — he breaks his fast in Canada, takes a luncheon in the

Susquehanna, and plumes himself for the night in a Louisiana bayou. The pigeon carries an acorn in his crop from the King of Holland's to Mason and Dixon's Line. Yet we think if rail-fences are pulled down and stone walls set up on our farms, bounds are henceforth set to our lives and our fates decided. If you are chosen town-clerk forsooth, you cannot go to Tierra del Fuego this summer.

But what would all this activity amount to?

Goosey goosey gander
Where shall I wander?
Up stairs down stairs
In a lady's chamber?

Shall we not stretch our legs? Why shall we pause this side of sundown? We will not then be immigrants still further into our native country. Let us start now on that farthest western way which does not pause at the Mississippi or the Pacific, pushing on by day and night, sun down, moon down, stars down, and at last earth down too.

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Retrieved on 1st November 2020 from sniggle.net

Thoreau never published this text. It has been assembled from notes he used first when giving a lecture on “The Conservative and the Reformer” in Boston in 1844, and later when trying to reuse this material for *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

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