

4. Emersonisms and Thoreauisms

The following pithy sayings are culled from the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, who were close Transcendentalist friends and nonconformists. In what areas does there seem to be a close similarity in thinking? How many of these observations have been borne out by personalities or experiences in American history?

Government

The less government we have, the better—fewer laws, and the less confided power. (*Emerson*)

I heartily accept the motto “That government is best which governs least.” . . . Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which I also believe: “That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. (*Thoreau*)

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.* (*Thoreau*)

Of all debts men are least willing to pay the taxes. What a satire this [is] on government! (*Emerson*)

*In 1845 Thoreau was jailed for one night for refusing to pay his poll tax to a state (Massachusetts) that supported slavery. The tax, much to his disgust, was paid by an aunt. Legend has it that Emerson visited him in jail, saying, “Why are you here?” Thoreau allegedly replied, “Why are you not here?”

Reform

We are reformers in spring and summer; in autumn and winter we stand by the old; reformers in the morning, conservers at night. Reform is affirmative, conservatism negative; conservatism goes for comfort, reform for truth. *(Emerson)*

Every reform was once a private opinion. *(Emerson)*

Beware when the Great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. *(Emerson)*

There is no strong performance without a little fanaticism in the performer. *(Emerson)*

Every burned book enlightens the world. *(Emerson)*

Every reform is only a mask under cover of which a more terrible reform, which dares not yet name itself, advances. *(Emerson)*

If anything ail a man so that he does not perform his functions, if he have a pain in his bowels . . . he forthwith sets about reforming—the world. *(Thoreau)*

Wealth

The greatest man in history [Jesus] was the poorest. *(Emerson)*

If a man own land, the land owns him. *(Emerson)*

Poverty consists in feeling poor. *(Emerson)*

I would rather sit on a pumpkin, and have it all to myself, than to be crowded on a velvet cushion. *(Thoreau)*

They take their pride in making their dinner cost much; I take my pride in making my dinner cost little. *(Thoreau)*

Men have become the tools of their tools. *(Thoreau)*

To inherit property is not to be born—it is to be stillborn, rather. *(Thoreau)*

That man is the richest whose pleasures are the cheapest. *(Thoreau)*

Great Men

To be great is to be misunderstood. *(Emerson)*

Shallow men believe in luck. *(Emerson)*

Every hero becomes a bore at last. *(Emerson)*

If the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come around to him. *(Emerson)*

Great men are they who see that spiritual is stronger than any material force; that thoughts rule the world. *(Emerson)*

The true test of civilization is, not the census, nor the size of cities, nor the crops—no, but the kind of man the country turns out. *(Emerson)*

An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man. *(Emerson)*

There are men too superior to be seen except by a few, as there are notes too high for the scale of most ears. *(Emerson)*

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 he hears, however measured or far away. *(Thoreau)*

Living

Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. *(Emerson)*

The only gift is a portion of thyself. *(Emerson)*

Hitch your wagon to a star. *(Emerson)*

Nothing is so much to be feared as fear.* *(Thoreau)*

We do not quite forgive a giver. *(Emerson)*

Do not be too moral. You may cheat yourself out of much life so. Aim above morality. Be not simply good; be good for something. *(Thoreau)*

I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. *(Thoreau)*

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. *(Thoreau)*