



# Ralph Waldo Emerson & Henry David Thoreau: Preaching and Practicing Transcendentalism

*Charles River Editors*

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\*Includes inspirational quotes from both Emerson and Thoreau

\*Includes Emerson's article about Thoreau's life in the August 1862 edition of Atlantic Monthly

\*Includes a Bibliography of their works and secondary works about them.

\*Includes pictures of Emerson, Thoreau and important people and places in their lives.

"Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God." – Ralph Waldo Emerson

"A living dog is better than a dead lion. Shall a man go and hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest pygmy that he can? Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what he was made. Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate enterprises? 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." – Henry David Thoreau

In the mid-19th century, Romantic literature was still in full bloom across the West, but some American authors began producing literature that, while still Romantic, was unique enough to be considered a different genre. This new genre, Transcendentalism, focused on the spirituality of the self and nature, not rejecting religion outright but concentrating on pragmatism and the importance of individuals as the spiritual center of the cosmos. In addition to drawing upon the Age of Enlightenment, Transcendentalist authors also utilized the philosophy of Plato, who taught that self-fulfillment through attaining knowledge should be an individual's ultimate goal.

The leader of Transcendentalism, and the man who ushered the movement's practices and literature, was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1802-1883), one of America's most famous writers and speakers. Emerson initiated Transcendentalism with the publishing of his essay *Nature* in 1836, which espoused the virtues of nature and the interconnectedness of all life in nature. With his focus on the environment and natural history, Emerson became the first major American writer whose work was not influenced in any way by European literature. Emerson established group meetings, gave a series of lectures, and helped produce a Transcendentalist publication in the 1840s, which included his famous essay *Self-Reliance*. As Emerson's movement and stature grew, he befriended other authors, including Henry David Thoreau, who became his greatest protégé. As a protégé of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau took the values of the movement to heart and was particularly interested in the interconnection between man and nature, writing in *Walden*, "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." That famous work was Thoreau's account of his experience living for two years in a small cabin in a forest along the shore of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts.

In 1846, Thoreau was arrested for failing to pay taxes, which was based on his opposition to slavery and other ways the government spent taxpayers' money. After being freed, he gave a lecture about the roles of governments and individuals in society, which eventually became the famous essay "Civil Disobedience." Thoreau's message of civil disobedience has resonated more than any of his other Transcendentalist values, and it had a profound influence on the philosophy and nonviolent protests of activists like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson & Henry David Thoreau* looks at the lives and works of both men, examining their

ideology and the Transcendentalist movement.

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