

## *Living Well is the Best Revenge*

**I**n the mid-1980s, using locally cut timber and a few borrowed tools, I built a small one-room cabin in a hickory grove and spent a year living as close as I could to the natural world. I had no electricity, no running water, and I heated the cottage with wood, at least some of it garnered from land that belonged to me.

One February night while I was in the cottage, there was a terrific snowstorm, followed by high winds and a bitter cold snap. I learned the next morning that the town and its associated industries were in chaos. The power had been off for twelve hours or more. Computer companies had lost all their backup. Traffic was stalled and snarled, and people at home were shivering in the dark. All I knew of this was that the wind had made beautiful patterns in the snow at the edge of the meadow beside my cottage.

A year in the woods observing the natural world is hardly innovative ground; I was taking my cues, of course, from Henry Thoreau. And during the time that I lived there, in order to better understand the roots of my experiment, I read or reread Thoreau's writings, including the better part of his journals. The more I read, the more I understood how prescient this Mr. Henry Thoreau really was. So many of his observations and pronouncements have proved true, and so many of the issues that he concerned himself with have come around to haunt us in our time, not the least of which is the main one, namely the way we go about making a living.

Thoreau says he went to Walden to drive life into a corner and find out what his necessities were. He did away with nonessentials, borrowed an axe, cut some timber, bartered a few bricks, and built his one-room cabin by Walden Pond. For a while he cooked outdoors; he didn't even have a fireplace until December, and he would commonly let the fire die even on the coldest winter nights.

He gives a careful accounting of his annual income and expenses in *Walden*, down to the three cents for a watermelon, and the six cents he spent on a pumpkin. All told, he calculates that he expended no more than eight dollars and seventy-four cents on food that year, less on clothing, and even less on



what we would now term energy costs, i.e., two dollars for lamp oil. His firewood was free; he scavenged it from the woods. The construction of the house was his big expense, twenty-eight dollars and twelve cents.

His example was purposely extreme. He wanted to demonstrate that one could distill life to its essence and continue to live well, not only well, but ecstatically in his case. Given the fact that, throughout the literate world, at both a scholarly and popular level, we are still discussing his philosophy (if not practicing it), it is safe to say that Thoreau succeeded in making his point.

One of Thoreau's disciples, Mahatma Gandhi, not only successfully put into practice the Thoreauvian concept of civil disobedience, but also attempted to spread the idea of a simplified economy. Gandhi promoted the Thoreauvian view that the essence of civilization is not the multiplication of wants but the elimination of need. It is a message that—in spite of dwindling global resources, the increasing gulf between the rich and the poor, the continued erosion of the environment, and the drastic loss of species diversity—has yet to be accepted by decision makers.

The lesson predates Thoreau and Gandhi, however. In fact it predates civilization. The words ecology and economics have the same root, *oikos*, the house, and the basic principles of each field—that is, the orderly arrangement and management of affairs of the house—are in fact interchangeable. Earth is our house, and any successful economic system should be able to manage the house in an orderly manner. Any other system is unworkable in the end.

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## *Return of the Native*



One still autumn night some years ago, I was out in the woods under a smoky half moon when I heard a wolf howl. I had just climbed a ridge and was resting on a stone wall with a darkened, grassy meadow ahead of me and the deep, mysterious hollows of the woods behind. The howl sounded out from the area that I had just come through. It was a long, brassy yowl that began with a series of short barks and rose in a classical wolfly crescendo, and it was repeated several times, growing fainter with each howl.

I would wager that nobody raised in a European cultural tradition hears such a sound without hearing as well the full scope of wolf mythology. I shuddered. Then I returned to reason. Wolves don't attack people, and in any case this was eastern Massachusetts, and the last wolves were extirpated from this valley by 1723, according to the local histories. What I had heard, of course, was an eastern coyote. I later learned that a lone male coyote will sometimes howl like a wolf when it is not traveling with a pack. I was not at all surprised to hear this. In fact, I had been waiting for them.

Because of a variety of historical accidents, the land around the house in which I live has yet to be developed. There is a series of old fields that drop down to the wide floodplain of a slow-moving brook, and there are three working farms to the north and west and nearly a square mile of woodland. There are foxes, muskrats, otters, raccoons, opossums, and far too many skunks. It was only a question of time before a coyote showed up.

Eastern coyotes, whoever they are, wherever they came from, have been increasing in number in New England for over forty years. Records indicate that they were in the Adirondack region in the 1940s and by the late 1950s had made it to Massachusetts. One was seen in Otis in the midfifties and a year later one turned up at Quabbin.

Whether these are a new breed of coyote recently arrived, or a return of the native, is a matter of debate among mammalogists. But all agree that a large canid of some sort was living here when the first English settlers arrived and that, in