

Where I Lived, and What I Lived For
Harrell Fletcher
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I was asked to do a residency at an art center in Brittany, France called Domaine De Kerguehennec that is located on an old estate in the country. I spent about a month every Summer there for about three years. The whole thing concluded with an exhibition in 2006 made up of some of my older work and several new projects that I made specifically for Kerguehennec, including a sculpture for the sculpture park, a newspaper, a calendar, and a video piece. The video is called *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For* and is based on text from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. As most people in the US know (but as it turned out not so many in France) in the late 1800 Thoreau lived in Concord, Massachusetts, and was very critical of modern society. As a project he moved to the country by a lake called Walden Pond, and built a cabin there that he lived in for a year or so while he thought and wrote. The book *Walden* is about that experience, with a large dose of his philosophical views added in. During my visits to Kerguehennec living in a little stone cottage for a month at a time, largely cut off from the outside world, I was reminded of Walden. I decided to construct a piece in the same way that I made *Blot Out The Sun*, a video based on *Ulysses* by James Joyce that I shot at Jay's Quick Gas here in Portland a few years ago. In both cases I read the book, highlighted passages that intrigued me and then wrote those pieces of text onto cue cards. I then asked people at the gas station, or in the case of the *Walden* piece, down by the lake at Kerguehennec, to read the lines while being video taped. I liked the idea that people come to the park at Kerguehennec to get a small dose of removal from society, and might in some small ways relate to the ideas expressed in *Walden*. The video was shot in French, so we have included here the original English version along with an image of the person who read the text for the video.



Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. He has no time to be anything but a machine. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.



The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats.



A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them.



I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose.



One farmer says to me, You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with; and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw material of bones; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plow along in spite of every obstacle.



Undoubtedly the very tedium and ennui which presume to have exhausted the variety and the joys of life are as old as Adam. But man's capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried.



What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad. One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels.



All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant.



To many creatures there is in this sense but one necessary of life, Food. None of the brute creation requires more than Food and Shelter. The necessities of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success. Animal life, is nearly synonymous with the expression, animal heat; for while Food may be regarded as the Fuel which keeps up the fire within us -- and Fuel serves only to prepare that Food or to increase the warmth of our bodies by addition from without -- Shelter and Clothing also serve only to retain the heat thus generated and absorbed. The luxuriously rich are not simply kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot; as I implied before, they are cooked, of course a la mode.



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.



There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. How can a man be a philosopher and not maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men?



For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snow-storms and rain-storms, and did my duty faithfully; surveyor, if not of highways, then of forest paths and all across-lot routes, keeping them open, and ravines bridged and passable at all seasons, where the public heel had testified to their utility. I have watered the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle-tree, the red pine and the black ash, the white grape and the yellow violet, which might have withered else in dry seasons. In short, I went on thus for a long time (I may say it without boasting), faithfully minding my business, till it became more and more evident that my townsmen would not after all admit me into the list of town officers, The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others? Finding that my fellow-citizens were not likely to offer me any room in the court house, or any curacy or living anywhere else, but I must shift for myself, I turned my face more exclusively than ever to the woods, where I was better known.



No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience. I have heard of a dog that barked at every stranger who approached his master's premises with clothes on, but was easily quieted by a naked thief.



It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes. Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new. I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that corporations may be enriched.



As for a Shelter, I will not deny that this is now a necessary of life, though there are instances of men having done without it for long periods in colder countries than this. Every child begins the world again, to some extent, and loves to stay outdoors, even in wet and cold. It would be well, perhaps, if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies, for our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them.



I know one or two families, at least, in this town, who, for nearly a generation, have been wishing to sell their houses in the outskirts and move into the village, but have not been able to accomplish it, and only death will set them free.



While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have. I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion.



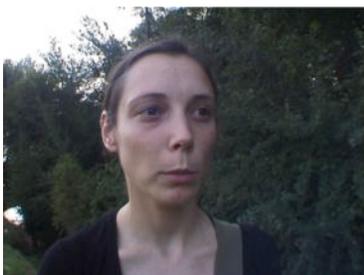
Men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper. We have built for this world a family mansion, and for the next a family tomb.



The best works of art are the expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition, but the effect of our art is merely to make this low state comfortable and that higher state to be forgotten. The cart before the horse is neither beautiful nor useful. Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation: now, a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper.



There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest.



Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building his house.



Better paint your house your own complexion; let it turn pale or blush for you.



Students should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics. Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month -- the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this -- or the boy who had attended the lectures on metallurgy at the Institute in the meanwhile, and had received a Rodgers' penknife from his father? Which would be most likely to cut his fingers?



I have learned that the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot. I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much the freer.



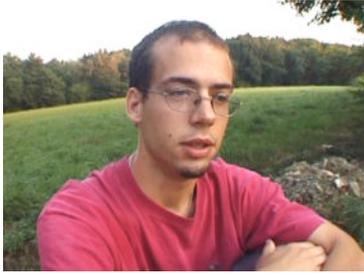
Nations are possessed with an insane ambition to perpetuate the memory of themselves by the amount of hammered stone they leave. What if equal pains were taken to smooth and polish their manners? One piece of good sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon.



What more can a reasonable man desire, in peaceful times, in ordinary noons, than a sufficient number of ears of green sweet corn boiled, with the addition of salt?



Yet men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessities, but for want of luxuries.



For myself I found that the occupation of a day-laborer was the most independent of any. The laborer's day ends with the going down of the sun, and he is then free to devote himself to his chosen pursuit, independent of his labor; but his employer, who speculates from month to month, has no respite from one end of the year to the other.



I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead.



As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.



It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.



Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!



Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.



To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.



There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still.



This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. I love to be alone. The sun is alone.



A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The fluviatile trees next the shore are the slender eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around are its overhanging brows.



Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in lines of beauty, as it were the constant welling up of its fountain, the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast. The thrills of joy and thrills of pain are undistinguishable. How peaceful the phenomena of the lake! Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance, lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence. Nations come and go without defiling it. It is a mirror which no stone can crack, whose quicksilver will never wear off, whose gilding Nature continually repairs; no storms, no dust, can dim its surface ever fresh; -- a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks, swept and dusted by the sun's hazy brush.



Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her. The birds with their plumage and their notes are in harmony with the flowers, but what youth or maiden conspires with the wild luxuriant beauty of Nature? She flourishes most alone, far from the towns where they reside. Talk of heaven! ye disgrace earth.



Once it chanced that I stood in the very abutment of a rainbow's arch, which filled the lower stratum of the atmosphere, tinging the grass and leaves around, and dazzling me as if I looked through colored crystal. It was a lake of rainbow light, in which, for a short while, I lived like a dolphin.



Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized. If the day and the night are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs, is more elastic, more starry, more immortal -- that is your success. All nature is your congratulation, and you have cause momentarily to bless yourself. The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality. Perhaps the facts most astounding and most real are never communicated by man to man. The true harvest of my daily life is somewhat as intangible and indescribable as the tints of morning or evening. It is a little star-dust caught, a segment of the rainbow which I have clutched.



Our whole life is startlingly moral. There is never an instant's truce between virtue and vice. Goodness is the only investment that never fails.



We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. Any nobleness begins at once to refine a man's features, any meanness or sensuality to imbrute them.



A farmer, a hunter, a soldier, a reporter, even a philosopher, may be daunted; but nothing can deter a poet, for he is actuated by pure love. Who can predict his comings and goings? His business calls him out at all hours, even when doctors sleep.



I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn.



Ice is an interesting subject for contemplation. Why is it that a bucket of water soon becomes putrid, but frozen remains sweet forever? It is commonly said that this is the difference between the affections and the intellect.



What is man but a mass of thawing clay? The ball of the human finger is but a drop congealed. The fingers and toes flow to their extent from the thawing mass of the body. Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven? There is nothing inorganic. The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit -- not a fossil earth, but a living earth.



It is glorious to behold this ribbon of water sparkling in the sun, the bare face of the pond full of glee and youth, as if it spoke the joy of the fishes within it.



A single gentle rain makes the grass many shades greener. So our prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts. We should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it; and did not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our duty.



In a pleasant spring morning all men's sins are forgiven.



At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature.



Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find A thousand regions in your mind Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be Expert in home-cosmography. Be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought.



Some can be patriotic who have no self-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They love the soil which makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay. Patriotism is a maggot in their heads.



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. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness.



It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you. As if Nature could support but one order of understandings, could not sustain birds as well as quadrupeds, flying as well as creeping things. As if there were safety in stupidity alone.



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.



The fault-finder will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poorhouse. The setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man's abode.



Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. Things do not change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts.



If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me. Humility like darkness reveals the heavenly lights. The sun is but a star.