

# Watt's Happening? #254

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## Walking with Thoreau in 2024



*As we move into this New Year perhaps it is time to have a closer look at the simple things that surround us. (Don Pettit photo)*

**N**aturalist/philosopher Henry David Thoreau famously moved to a forest near Concord, Massachusetts, built a cabin beside a pond and wrote one of the most revered natural philosophy books of all time: *Walden*. The year was 1845.

*“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”*

We learned something during the pandemic that we should remember as we look into the New Year ahead of us. For a time, we were all forced to “*live deliberately*” and deal with only “*the essential facts of life*.” Family, friends, neighbours, helping others and being helped, food, shelter and security became the most important parts of living, while the past importance of conspicuous consumption and living large for a time faded away.

*“When it was proposed to me to go abroad, rub off some of the rust, and better my condition in a worldly sense, I feared lest my life would*

*lose some of its homeliness. If these fields, and streams and woods, and the simple occupations of the inhabitants should cease to interest and inspire me, no culture or wealth would atone for the loss."*

Thoreau preached the benefits of staying home and looking with fresh eyes on the commonplace, everything we take for granted, all that surrounds us that goes unnoticed in this modern world of unlimited distraction.

## **YES, THERE ARE LIMITS**

The idea that our economies, our desires and wants could be constrained by the physical limitations of our planet has not been a popular one over the last few decades. Apparently, science and technology will continue to provide "more" for everyone "forever".

In our market economy of unlimited, forever growth, "externalities" like clean air, clean water and wholesome food, the poor and homeless who fall through the cracks, the aged, not to mention millions of other species, have been put aside as unimportant.

This New Year let's remind ourselves that we are only as safe and secure as the least safe and secure among us. When we help a neighbor or when we help nature by reducing our expectations, we are helping ourselves and everyone who will come after us as well. Even our smallest actions have immense impact.

*"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb nail."*

Heat pumps can extract enough heat from even frigid air to heat our homes; solar panels convert

sunlight into clean electricity, and wind turbines change wind into clean electricity too. These new and vastly abundant new energies provide real solutions as we face what is now being called the climate crisis.

But these wonderful technologies will not save us if human expectations ramp up at the same time: super-efficient LED lights are an excellent idea, unless they encourage us to install more of them and leave them on all the time.

## **HAPPINESS**

The U.S. constitution's declaration of the rights of individuals to the unrestrained "pursuit of happiness" is a cruel misconception when promoted in the context of unlimited consumption and material wealth.

Happiness is not something achieved with big houses, big trucks or world travel, and trying to achieve it that way is literally making our planet uninhabitable.

Happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment are experienced through having a purpose in life, (a purpose larger than yourself!) and to some degree fulfilling that purpose. Beyond basic needs, more stuff, more experiences or more "living large" will not bring happiness, just an unending search for more.

*"...for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone."*

For two hundred years the petroleum age has allowed us to encircle the planet as fierce individuals, independent, with so much energy at our fingertips that we thought we could go it alone. Now the Earth is telling us that this is not working well at all.

In this New Year of 2024, it is time to reconnect with each other and with our planet, and walk once again in the footsteps of Henry David Thoreau.

*... an unending search for more.*