The Modern Walden

While many during the industrial boom of the 19th century found their situation improved, literary powerhouses found their creative world in shambles. Their senses dulled, many called for a return to the "old world," calling for the skies and their minds to be unblemished by technology's growing influence. One such critic heeded his own call and created the well-known social experiment on Walden Pond. Henry David Thoreau's quest for solitude led him to 2 years in the wilderness, where he found the simpler life to be not only enjoyable, but preferable. Though in his eyes (and in many others') successful, the Transcendentalist movement never gained steam, and technology continued on in its progressive path. A century and a half later, technology continues advancing and mankind's quest for happiness has found a new route. Though Walden's experiments led him to believe a life of solitude to be successful, the 21st century cannot and does not allow such a philosophy to be successful. It is through the embracing of technology and its potential for good that mankind may reach satisfaction.

I wish to take a moment to tell of a personal story. On a late January evening I approached the rotting door of my new apartment. I had made the decision to get married as a college student, thus I knew the sacrifices my wife and I would have to make on a low-income, student salary. As I toured my new (hopefully temporary) home, I was disgusted yet not surprised at the numerous cobwebs, chipped paint, and what looked to be a cooking contraption from the 1800's. Suddenly, it dawned upon me. One feature was clearly lacking. These next few months were to be my Frankenstein. My Tell-Tale Heart. These were my months without Wi-Fi.

More out of irony than academic intrigue, I decided to use this time to fill a dream of mine: read Thoreau's Walden. Suddenly, it seemed as if my lack of Wi-Fi bound my destiny with his. As I read on, I liked to consider myself the “modern Walden,” on a quest of finding
happiness with simplicity and a spiritual awakening. As the days went on, with much patience and optimism, I never obtained any higher knowledge. My 21st century mind could not process nor apply the principles used in his experiments. 2 centuries later, I found Thoreau's quest for happiness mute in my own life.

While I make no claim to be the representative of the 21st century man, the chances of the Walden experiment gaining success in this age is improbable if not impossible. The world did not embrace the Walden experiment, and technology advances at a quicker and quicker pace. Something within the 21st century culture allows for technology and happiness at the same time, something the Walden experiment could not provide.

Amidst the woes of the Industrial Revolution, Thoreau set out to establish a spiritual awakening. In Thoreau’s mind, technology not only made spiritual awakening more difficult, it prohibited it. He says, “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.” (Thoreau). The 21st century has permitted technology to enhance our spiritual lives. What Thoreau worried would dull the senses, technology has opened up a breadth of opportunities of expression and depth of emotion. Internet forums provide a place for humans to express themselves and take in the viewpoints of others. Social media has made art, language, and photography more readily accessible. Knowledge is at the click of a mouse. The world’s greatest sentimental experiences can be shared without borders. The advantages are numerous.

Certainly, Thoreau foresaw many of the disadvantages. He said, “To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such
paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done” (Thoreau). It is the technology that does not “affect the day” that can poison our thoughts and muddle our senses. Improper uses of technology are seen in war, pornography, and the proliferation of cyber-crime. Moral issues befuddle the internet. Thus, it is the proper use of what surrounds us that will grant us happiness, not the avoidance of it.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, an institution devoted to inspiring the spiritual awakening of its followers, has made comments on the subject. “You live in a world where technological advances occur at an astounding pace. It is difficult for many of my generation to keep up with the possibilities. Depending on how technology is used, these advances can be a blessing or a deterrent. Technology, when understood and used for righteous purposes, need not be a threat but rather an enhancement to spiritual communication” (Scott xx). The church, though an ancient institution, has seen that the negative consequences of advancing civilization can be negated by the attitude of the user. Thoreau warned, “Lo, men have become tools of their tools” (Thoreau). While making a description of the state of society in his day, he made a prediction of ours. Certainly, evils exist within the bounds of technology. It is the choice of the user however to implement them. Technology can be mastered.

From my own “Walden experience,” I have learned that happiness does not result from a lack of technology, but the practical and suitable use of it that will allow us to achieve the spiritual awakening Thoreau so desperately sought. As a note, we now happily do have Wi-Fi in our apartment. However, the happiness that my wife and I feel does not come from the simple presence of Wi-Fi. It is the proper implementation of said technology that raises our spirits, and allows our 21st century minds to reach peace. As the critic once said, “As for me, I prefer
walking on two legs.” I agree. I prefer running, full sprint, towards the future potential of technology and the happiness that can be found therein.

Works Cited
