Today, Americans deal with innumerable obligations and societal pressures, causing them to live their lives as robots of sorts, merely shuffling through the days. While often they may blame this hectic way of living on modern inventions like excessive technology, gaining the capacity to stop and focus on the present has been a struggle throughout history. This lack of ability to truly feel and experience life was an issue even in Thoreau’s time. In *Walden*, Thoreau encourages the reader to “live deliberately” by describing the importance of finding one’s purpose, of living simply, and of being intellectually dedicated to each new day (1882).

Thoreau asserts that man must discover his purpose in the world and not simply drift through everyday life. He maintains that man can accomplish this by unearthing “only the essential facts of life” (1882). This unearthing process requires more than merely drifting through one’s day. Through deliberate and extensive investigation, contemplation, and experience, one will gradually discard the lies and unnecessary information in the world and establish a sense of what comprises the meaning of life and reality (1885). One’s small fears and worries will prove unneeded, and only the great truths of life will persist and prevail (1884). To reach this sense of purpose, one must be courageously independent, keeping in mind that “if [he] does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer” (1907). In the end, man will have discovered his particular purpose at his own rate, using his own determination.

Thoreau explains that simplicity is another factor in the formula of deliberate living; in order to know his purpose, man must also learn how to live with simplicity and moderation. Thoreau encourages his audience to have “a command over [its] passions” (1891). He believes
that “Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it” (1891). In the end, discarding materialism and ignoring what society declares “normal” actually frees a person to live out his dreams the way he sees fit - and thus to experience his life’s purpose. Instead of traveling a path already worn by society and culture’s norms, one should carve a new walkway; he should discard the pressures, obligations, and temptations of society in favor of following his own heart. Thoreau writes of the need for “a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose” (1883). A materially “poor” life can simultaneously abound with spiritual wealth; living a simple life will show a man how to acknowledge and appreciate what he has. Thoreau declares, “I say, let your affairs be as two or three […] and keep your accounts on your thumb nail” (1882). Instead of being consumed by the unproductive hurry of detail and quantity, one should choose a path of moderation that will result in both simplicity and a sense of purpose and truth, eliminating that which conflicts with one’s pure spiritual needs.

Thoreau repeatedly describes the need to live a life based on necessities and not on items acquired by thoughts of greed or luxury. Therefore, a person must engage in the process of weeding out anything material or philosophical that may consume him. Thoreau gives an example of this simple way of life by using a metaphor about food and diet. He writes, “The gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them” (1889). Using this idea, Thoreau ultimately relates a person’s eating habits to his intellectual life. When a person eats, he should be fulfilling his biological needs or prodding his intellectual and spiritual growth; he should never eat out of greed, selfishness, desire, or need to fill a spiritual void. This idea
applies not only to food, but also to every aspect or affair of one’s life. The above quote can apply to anyone or any nation that values excessive material objects over spiritual growth.

Beyond simplifying one’s life, Thoreau also encourages the individual to be fully aware and to experience his life, rather than be bombarded by daily obligations. He writes that “the millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive” (1881-2). Thoreau finds that a large part of humanity is figuratively and intellectually “asleep.” This majority fails to find meaning in daily life; it does not truly examine life’s choices, decisions, and justifications before it expresses its conclusions. Yet man cannot simplify his life or find his purpose without being spiritually awakened and intellectually stimulated. He must then use that cognitive transformation to “be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within [him], opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought” (1904). Living deliberately means always being especially aware of one’s personal knowledge and thought processes.

Through a lengthy metaphor about dawn and morning, Thoreau gives an example of being intellectually awake by describing how every sunrise symbolizes a new beginning for one’s life. While morning is naturally when the day begins, Thoreau expands upon that scientific idea by saying that man should be awakened by his “own newly-acquired force and aspirations from within […] instead of factory bells” (1881). He should arise in the morning because he wants to and because he is excited by the prospect of the dawning day - not merely because employment or another obligation is calling. Just the same, morning should not be experienced in a merely physical sense. Thoreau notes that “[one’s] prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts” - thoughts that are new and that discard past regrets (1901). By
greeting each day with a fresh attitude, one can experience the full reward of intellectual exertion and live in a more deliberate way.

Thoreau acts out the ideal of deliberate living and intellectual alertness when he chooses to leave Walden Pond. He sees that his footsteps in the woods have literally worn a path, and he says, “The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity!” (1905). Thoreau leaves the woods because he senses the approaching dangers of a routine. In his two years at Walden Pond, he has indeed “suck[ed] out all the marrow of life,” so now it is time for him to relocate (1882). He will leave the woods so that he can try something new and different; he will leave the woods so that he can stay awake spiritually and intellectually. Thoreau wishes for the reader to achieve the same - to awaken mentally and emotionally, on every level, and to continue to live deliberately.

Ultimately, Thoreau contends that finding one’s purpose, simplifying one’s life, and waking each morning with joy at the day’s possibilities will all meld together to result in deliberate living. He argues that one needs to weed out unnecessary intellectual and material influences in order to discover what really matters in life. If one complies with these ideals, one will likely not endure Thoreau’s own personal fear: dying without having ever really lived (1882). Thoreau’s ideas are timeless, and his ways of understanding oneself and experiencing life will no doubt still strike a chord in present and future audiences.

Works Cited