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1

Resignation

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IN THE LATE eighteenth century, Henry's grandfather built what is now a top attraction in downtown Concord.[1] Today it is called the Colonial Inn, a large Georgian structure dating back to 1716. Thoreau's grandfather built the easternmost section of the inn. At the back of the inn, where he laid the first foundation stone, is now a small, dimly lit place called The Village Forge Tavern, or "The Forge." On the walls and from the ceiling hang bellows, yokes, and a variety of old farm equipment, most of which modern-day Concordians could not identify, much less use. At the center of the Forge is a long oak bar, and behind the bar is a tall, wiry man named Lawrence.

Much of this chapter was written at Lawrence's place.

"This is a great job," he said one night.

Wealthy entrepreneurs and tech salesmen from Bedford, Concord, and Lexington are known to frequent the Forge, order overpriced drinks, and forget to tip the bartender. The manager thinks that he is doing Lawrence a favor when he gets extra hours and forgets to give him time off. Lawrence has two kids and a big extended family. And he will tell you that he needs the money. Lawrence runs the bar at the Forge, usually single-handedly.

"It's a good job," he said again, as if to remind himself. "But I'm going to quit as soon as I can. I have other dreams. I'm going to buy a piece of land up in Vermont and start a farm. Sell some produce. But what I really want to do is set up a frisbee golf course."

Lawrence, like so many modern workers, dreams of resigning. Permanently.

1. This chapter is adapted from John Kaag and Jonathan van Belle, "What Thoreau Can Teach Us about the Great Resignation," *Fast Company*, November 11, 2021, https://www.fastcompany.com/90695132/what-thoreau-can-teach-us-about-the-great-resignation.

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"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."[2] Thoreau, the quintessential jack-of-all-trades, translated Emerson's words into a way of life. Making a living no longer means making a single choice about what job you perform. Today, the trick is to move from one professional position to another—in other words, to resign at the right time. Thoreau charted this way. Of course, resignation can be understood in more dramatic registers, either as the wholesale willingness to opt out of the rat race of modern capital or as the protest against work conditions that demean or devalue. Thoreau understood resignation in all of these ways, as the freedom to try his hand at new tasks, as the refusal to bow to Mammon, as the rejection of a profession's questionable moral standing.

In a book about Henry the worker, it is strange to begin with a discussion of Henry the resigner. In other words, it is strange to begin with the end of work, but Thoreau believed, more strongly than any other, that, as the saying goes, "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end." This is hopefully the case with resignation, a fact that is quickly dawning on a growing number of modern workers. America, at least, is giving up. Collectively, we're putting in our two weeks. We tender our formal farewell.

"We're in the middle of a Great Resignation," reports Harvard Business School's *Working Knowledge*. "Employees have had the time and space to think about what really matters to them and there are plenty of options, so it's no surprise resignation rates are through the roof."[3]

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, ed. Stanley Applebaum (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1993), 24.

3. Sandra J. Sucher and Shalene Gupta, "Worried about the Great Resignation? Be a Good Company to Come from," *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, August 4, 2021.

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We've tasted the freedom of remote work and refuse to return to business as usual. As *Ars Technica* recently reported, "All across the United States, the leaders at large tech companies like Apple, Google, and Facebook are engaged in a delicate dance with thousands of employees who have recently become convinced that physically commuting to an office every day is an empty and unacceptable demand from their employers."[4] This sounds revolutionary, but it's not: Thoreau would have recognized it clearly. It is rather tempting to think that we are the first to do anything, but this is the temptation of salience, the desire to believe that our unique experience in the present is the only one that actually matters. We are not the first to resign and surely not the last.

The year was 1837, and Henry David Thoreau gave up. In this long-ago year, two stars crossed: Thoreau graduated from Harvard, and the Panic of 1837 sparked a great economic depression that lasted until the middle of the next decade. Coming home to Concord, Massachusetts, the new grad hustled for a job in an employment drought, soon getting, then quitting, a teaching position for reasons that deserve to be discussed . . . later. After quitting, Thoreau, still hopeful for a teaching position, scrabbled for various gigs—a scrabble plagued by recurring bouts of tuberculosis. He had his first publishing success in November of 1837: an obituary for one Anna Jones, an eighty-eight-year-old Concordian. Come March 1838, Thoreau was proposing a getaway to his older brother and best friend, John Thoreau: "I have a proposal to make. Suppose . . . we should

4. Samuel Axon, "Big Tech Companies Are at War with Employees over Remote Work," *Ars Technica*, August 1, 2021.

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start in company for the West and there either establish a school jointly, or procure ourselves separate situations. . . . I think I can borrow the cash in this town. There's nothing like trying."[5] A version of such a getaway came and ended in May 1838. On May 2, with a loan of ten dollars and a letter of recommendation from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau went job hunting, without John, in Maine. Fifteen days later, Thoreau returned home. No job.

Less than one month after his Maine job search, Thoreau opened a private school at the Thoreau family house in Concord. Thoreau's four-student school soon doubled to eight, so Thoreau got John to join the faculty. In today's terms, Thoreau's school might be classed as an "alternative school." The brothers Thoreau allowed students thirty minutes of recess, rather than the traditional ten; they took field trips with vocational aspects, such as trips to a printing press. Unfortunately, in 1841, due to John's own tuberculosis, the brothers closed their small school. On January 11, 1842, twenty-five-year-old Thoreau lost John, not to tuberculosis, but to a tetanus infection from a very slight razor cut to his finger. Life is always that precarious, despite its seeming stability. The loss would make every January for the remaining twenty years of Thoreau's life a dark season inside.

In May of 1843, Thoreau moved to New York, to Staten Island, to chase his literary dreams, and he had modest success as a freelance writer, but his New York dream floundered, then flopped. After only seven months, he returned home to hunker down and get himself into some sort of order, but in April of 1844, Thoreau and his friend Edward Sherman Hoar accidentally set three hundred acres or more of Concord woods ablaze. The *Concord Freeman* reported, "The fire, we understand, was

5. Henry David Thoreau to John Thoreau, March 17, 1838, in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: The Correspondence*, vol. 1, *1834–1848*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 37.

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communicated to the thoughtlessness of two of our citizens, who kindled it in a pine stump."[6] That, perhaps, was the final combustible straw.

Starting on July 4, 1845, a few days shy of his twenty-eighth birthday, Thoreau gave up, opting for a life of resignation. As the nation celebrated Independence Day, Thoreau embraced his own, walking the two miles from Concord to the shores of Walden Pond. He would stay there for two years, two months, and two days. It is easy to interpret *Walden* as America's first environmentalist manifesto—and there is something to this—but we should remember that Thoreau's attempt to "get back to nature" was simultaneously the attempt to get away from the capitalist rat race that defined his culture. There is a difference—an absolute gulf—between "just making a living" and getting a life or truly living. This is the abiding message of *Walden*. The frenetic busyness of modern life should never be confused with the essential business of living. Human life is precious because it is so ephemeral and fleeting. People die of lockjaw, or tuberculosis, or the flu, or a pandemic—and it is best not to waste the tragically little time we are given. For Thoreau, life was best spent constructing a simple house of his own making, tending his beans and melons, and leading children through the huckleberry patches surrounding Concord. Being a great resigner entails reclaiming life, or rather making a conscious choice about what to respect and where to tap meaning.

It should be said that there are different reasons to quit a job—Thoreau was pretty much familiar with all of them. The

6. As excerpted in The Walden Woods Project, "The Thoreau Log. 1844," accessed February 19, 2022, https://www.walden.org/log-page/1844/.

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simplest reason for quitting is that you simply can't go on. Maybe you just aren't particularly good at the task at hand. There isn't shame in this—or at least not much; the true shame comes in not being able to admit it to yourself. As a teenager, Thoreau aspired to become the most famous poet in America. This was simply not to be. His talents lay elsewhere, and while he never entirely gave up poetry, he largely moved away from the form. Maybe you physically can't go on in a job. Again, it is better to recognize this as quickly as possible and listen carefully for another calling, even if that calling is a period of recuperation. Thoreau's routine bouts with tuberculosis were more often than not the cause of him cutting short a job. Health and fate have a way of making resignation rather easy. And that is usually for the best. These reasons to quit or opt out aren't particularly philosophical, but they are important, since many of us fail to acknowledge the natural limitations that make certain jobs untenable.

The philosophically interesting cases of resignation turn on a matter of choice, in the recognition of a question Thoreau echoes throughout his writing: "It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?"[7] If our work is "about" the wrong things, then so too is our life, and that is more than enough reason to quit. Otherwise, it is very possible, as Henry puts it in *Walden*, to reach the end of life and discover that you haven't actually lived.

Thoreau witnessed the rise of a consumer-based, surplus economy, which also meant that he watched money take on unprecedented importance. He is very clear about what he thinks of one's industriousness being exclusively "about" money. Thoreau never believed what many of us do—that the

7. Henry David Thoreau to H.G.O. Blake, November 16, 1857, in *Great Short Works of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Wendell Glick (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 100.

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highest-paying jobs are those that should be kept for life, at all costs. More often than not, they should be held up, scrutinized, and abandoned, since they keep one from fully living. Since we will talk about meaningless work, compensation, and immoral work later in this book, let us focus on the meaning of resigning from what today is called "making a good living." In *Walden*, Thoreau's perspective on economy stems from his reading of the Greeks, but also, as Robert Richardson suggested many years ago, from his reading of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, in which he finds "a fundamental premise that it is not gold or silver, but productive labor that is the real basis of wealth."[8] Ask yourself what you actually produce in your workday. A product, an idea, a blueprint, a well-adjusted student, or nothing at all? If the answer seems unsatisfying or nonexistent, Thoreau would suggest that it may be time to take flight.

Smith held that "every man is rich or poor according to the degree in which he can afford to enjoy the necessaries, conveniences and amusements of human life."[9] Thoreau disagreed. Necessities might be one thing, and he argued that each of us should have some ability to supply them for ourselves, but modern amusements were never particularly motivating for Thoreau the worker. In contrast to Smith, Thoreau writes, "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone."[10] Thoreau was not romanticizing poverty, but noting that our desires and monetary aspirations often create adamantine chains—golden handcuffs—that bind us

8. Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 167.

9. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations, Books I–III*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 133.

10. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 79.

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to soul-sucking work. "Again and again I congratulate myself on my so-called poverty," wrote Thoreau in the twilight of his life.[11] This was not the self-aggrandizing remarks of an ascetic saint, but rather a very honest reflection of a person whose desires never outstripped his means, and who realized the power of money to warp our lives. Thoreau continues, writing, "I was almost disappointed yesterday to find thirty dollars in my desk which I did not know I possessed, though now I should be sorry to lose it."[12]

Having money breeds the desire to keep and accumulate money, to allow our consumerist urges to grow in accord with our ledgers and many times to slip into debt, what the Romans would call subjecting yourself to *aes alienum*, turning your life over "to someone else's money." One can always declare bankruptcy, but that is surprisingly rare, much rarer than working oneself to the bone in order to get back into the black. That is positively common. We are not writing from some privileged point of view, but from the fires of firsthand experience. We have both worked jobs that we loathed in order to pay off debt that we should have never incurred. And we have both prayed to avoid succumbing in the process (how dismal to die on a job that is killing you). And we have both delayed resigning jobs on the basis of trying to make ends meet, or worse, for the sake of maintaining a lifestyle we had grown accustomed to.

Jonathan's first job out of college involved sweeping a parking lot at six in the morning, followed by parking cars in that lot for other busy workers. "Parking" is too simple a term; Jonathan's employer required that he maximize space in the lot, which meant parking cars creatively into snug and

11. Henry David Thoreau, February 8, 1857, in *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 9:245.

12. Ibid., 9:245–246.

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perilous configurations. Every morning, he negotiated the stress of squeezing someone's BMW into a jigsaw puzzle of Land Rovers and Cadillac SUVs—and every evening, with the office workers returning, the same horrible ballet, but in reverse order. It was a daily game of nightmarish Jenga with extremely expensive game pieces.

Interestingly, life-altering crises often have the ability to jolt us out of our nine-to-five schedules, but more importantly they give us the courage to reprioritize our financial lives and put our jobs (and their expendability) into perspective. Thoreau went to Walden, at least in part, because his brother died in his arms: one could be retired without warning, so it was best to be industrious about the right things while there was still the chance.

Let's fast-forward to today. "The Great Resigners" of our contemporary economy are the children of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the young adults of the Great Recession, and now the adults of the Global Pandemic. They have learned, in hardship, lessons similar to those learned by the Greatest Generation during the Great Depression: be as self-sufficient as you can, because the ship of state, always listing, is liable to keel over.

The Great Resigners have grown up under the swaying sword of climate change, so self-sufficiency also means sustainability, personally and globally. We're emphasizing a set of DIY rights to that end: the "Right to Dry," that is, the right to hang dry your laundry; the "Right to Repair," the legal push to allow the repair of old broken iPhones and such, rather than buy new (to patch and darn our wares); even the right to grow vegetables in your front yard, still prohibited in some

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places. Thoreau, two hundred years ago, saw the seeds of real liberty in such self-sufficiency. Thoreauvian self-sufficiency is not isolation, nor "rugged individualism," but simple and deliberate living to optimize *good* living. This is America's Thoreauvian Turn.

With better and better Internet infrastructure, improved administrative automation, cloud storage, and so forth, permanent remote work is now viable for millions of Americans. We got our taste of freedom during the pandemic, when many of us renovated our homes and tended our gardens (some of us discovered permaculture!). Quarantine put a new priority on the home. Many of us, no longer bound to the business plaza, the office block, migrated to the geography of our desiring, to put the home where the heart truly is, often after searching in our RVs and renovated vans; fleets of van-lifers circulated through America's National Parks and old cobwebbed Main Streets. Now there is, one might say, a new "stay-at-homestead" movement. We're trying to stay remote en masse. We've staked our pond houses, and now we mean to live deliberately—or at least that's the dream.

We can hear the critics now: the Great Resigners aren't great; they're just lazy. Maybe. When Thoreau finally succumbed to the disease that plagued his life, his dear friend Ralph Waldo Emerson reflected "that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party."[13] This may be the case, but it strikes us as slightly unfair. After all, the children who followed Uncle Thoreau through the huckleberry patch were in fact Emerson's children. Thoreau chose berrying with the Emerson kids over

13. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," *Atlantic*, August 1862, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/08/thoreau/306418/.

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the international travel of their famous father. Life is a matter of choice and perspective. It is all too easy to let our traditional professional lives mask this essential fact.

The Great Resignation is a resignation from the industrial model, the brick-and-mortar model, the office-factory model. That model, of course, is far from razed, but it has been doused in an accelerant. Who would've thought that leafy ol' Thoreau would meet us in the digital age? Perhaps he has always been waiting for the industrial one to lose steam. As you took your final commute away from the business plaza and office park, we hope you glanced in the rearview mirror to see that office block sink below the horizon. As you heard your GPS guiding you away, perhaps your own guidance system could be heard to say "get away and don't look back" or "where, exactly, is my Walden Pond?"

Caveat qui relinquio: Those who choose to resign run the risk of being criticized as being quitters, losers, and cynics.[14] It turns out that there is something to this last charge, but Thoreau helps us see that it should be a mark of distinction rather than derision, that is, if cynicism is properly understood. At certain points of his life, Thoreau was arguably the first, and most thoroughgoing, American cynic. And there is, truly, at least a family resemblance between the cynicism of today and the philosophy that he developed in the 1840s. Thoreau was, for example, no friend to the liberal elitist window dressing of New England. He attended Harvard, but only begrudgingly, and the snobbery of academe grated on this son of a pencil

14. This section on Thoreau and cynicism adapted from John Kaag, "Thoreau's Cynicism, and Our Own," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 19, 2017, https://www.chronicle.com/article/thoreaus-cynicism-and-our-own.

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maker. He quickly decided that universities, even the best ones, might teach "all of the branches [of learning]" but "none of the roots."[15] Deep education, the lessons that actually stick, should prepare one for meaningful work, and lessons and labor should in turn be practical, hands-on, and best learned in the world beyond the classroom walls. It should already be clear that Thoreau harbored a not-so-private suspicion, deeply cynical, of the modern labor force. When Thoreau escaped in 1845 to Walden Pond, two miles from his native Concord, Massachusetts, it was, at least in part, in search of that sort of education, far from the world of commerce, farming, and modern economy.

Thoreau's resignation into the woods was a quest to embody that most Emersonian of ideals: self-reliance. Emerson, Thoreau's mentor and fourteen years his senior, had also taken issue with the high intellectual culture of Harvard and Cambridge, as well as the pull of powerful economic forces, and he argued that there was often a high price of admission to modern institutions and organizations: the freedom to exercise one's autonomy. Thoreau's apparent separation from society was an attempt to "live deliberately, to front the essential facts of life," to see if he "could not learn what it had to teach."[16] The point of his two-year experiment with simple living was to see what life could be like without the corrupting forces of social conventions and traditional politics.

All of this is consonant with cynicism's long history. But as one looks more closely at that history, and at Thoreau, it becomes clear that modern cynics truncate, or pointedly misunderstand, the full scope of cynicism as a school of thought and

15. As quoted in John Albee, *Remembrances of Emerson* (New York: Robert Grier Cooke, 1901), 22.

16. Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, 88.

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Thoreau's rendition of it. Just as a spoiler: there is no harm in resigning—quite the opposite, in fact. The first Cynic, Diogenes of Sinope, epitomized the ideal of simplicity that Thoreau sought to revive in the nineteenth century. At Walden, Thoreau lived in a ten-by-fifteen-foot boarded cabin; Diogenes had done him one better, living in an overturned barrel, clothed only in rags. He stood against another school of philosophy, Epicureanism, which, in its distorted modern form but not in its ancient original one, espouses that the meaning of life could be grasped in the opulence of civilization. The Cynics, and Thoreau, too, wanted to know what life would be like without societal constraints, but also, and more important, without the trappings of material wealth.

Today, many so-called cynics are also self-reliant capitalists. Their suspicion of big government and institutional control is rooted in the sense that those agents cheat people out of the riches to which they are entitled. Of course, this idea would have been anathema to Diogenes and Thoreau, who would have believed that our age has erred grievously in confusing material wealth with human prosperity writ large.

According to legend, Diogenes would sit in his barrel and bark at wealthy pedestrians ("cynic" comes from the Greek word *kynikos*, meaning "doglike"). Thoreau took a slightly more subtle approach to criticizing modern capitalism, but only slightly. "Economy," remember, is Thoreau's spirited critique of modern materialism. The term "economy," Thoreau reminds his readers, was not originally about what one possessed as surplus, but rather where, or, more specifically how, one lived. It is about a house, a dwelling: that is all.

At Walden, by divesting himself of life's excesses, Thoreau attempts to relearn what goes into making a place for oneself and appreciating the priceless things—virtue, beauty, peace—that money can't buy. "Most of the luxuries, and

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many of the so called comforts of life," he attests, "are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind."[17] Today, "making a living" often has nothing to do with life itself, but rather, and disturbingly, with its deferral, a sacrificing of the present moment for the sake of future wealth. Thoreau knows that oikos has another meaning beyond dwelling or home; it can, and often does, refer to a cage.

Thoreau's apparent escape to the outskirts of civilization might look as if it anticipates the separatist mindset of many modern cynics, but it doesn't. As Robert Richardson noted some thirty years ago in his biography of Thoreau, his "venture was in no sense a retreat or withdrawal. He himself thought of it as a step forward, a liberation, a new beginning."[18] Cynicism maintains its distance from society in order to gain a critical vantage point on social ills, but also, and just as important, to reevaluate what is, at once, most personally significant and universally true about life. This is what resigning from work can and should mean, not just in some cases, but in all.

Let's think about what you actually get back when you resign your station in modern society, a station that has become almost coextensive with your job. When confronted with the question "What do you do?," what would you answer if you had the chance to do something else, or to do anything you wanted, or to do nothing at all? This is the situation that Diogenes once confronted, and we can learn something important from his response. One day, the Cynic was asked who he was.

17. Ibid., 14.
18. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, 153.

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This question almost always was answered in reference to a person's city of origin, just as most of us identify with a particular profession or office space. "I am a mailman." "She is a professor." "They work for the IRS." And so on. Instead of giving the scripted answer, Diogenes provided a revolutionary one: he did not come from any particular polis or city-state, but rather from the cosmos at large; he was the first cosmopolitan.

This is not unlike Thoreau's refusal to participate in—or pay taxes to—a nation whose policies he could not sanction (in this case, Thoreau refused to support the Mexican-American War). In a barrel, in a shanty shack, in a prison, in the middle of nowhere—you get the very real sense that, existentially speaking, you are not bound to any particular political locus or mode of labor. That can be quite isolating, but also liberating, and ultimately—rather surprisingly—unifying. Resigning from the roles that you often play gives you the freedom to assume other, wider affiliations (or not to assume any affiliations at all). That is one of the perks of resignation.

Diogenes said he was a citizen of the cosmos at large—a cosmopolitan in the most literal sense. Thoreau, too, at the end of *Walden*, celebrates the universal man and woman in spring's cosmic renewal. This is the other, largely forgotten, side of cynicism: the suspicion of all things organized gives way to the belief that human beings are, in fact, deeply and universally related—tied together not by conventions, like jobs, but by nature. Institutions may be corrupt and corrupting, but the true danger of societal constraints is that they isolate people and place false boundaries between cultural groups and socioeconomic strata.

On one side of cynical resignation, then, is the critical, or negative. On the other is hope—hope for a community that transcends any particular provincial loyalty. Cynicism downplays our traditional attachments to religion, economics,

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and politics. In so doing, it frees us to realize the bonds that exist beyond those self-imposed borders of the usual forms of employment.

Thoreau led a life of great resignation, but there is one moment that stands out, which we have only glossed over and deserves real consideration: the case of Henry vs. Deacon Nehemiah Ball. Nehemiah: a name forged in the fire and brimstone of the Old Testament. The deacon, an esteemed figure of the Puritan establishment in Concord, did not disappoint. Thoreau, having recently graduated from Harvard, had been hired as a schoolmaster at the Center School for $500 a year, making him one of the best-paid educators in town. This was, by some accounts, Thoreau's dream—the chance to educate the youth so as to secure his country's moral destiny. It sounds overblown, but this is probably what Thoreau thought about his job. But in the second week of his employment, the deacon came for a visit. He sat with growing disapproval—the students just weren't obedient enough—and at the end of the class, he instructed Thoreau to administer corporal punishment.

Before his altercation with the deacon, Thoreau refused to whip his pupils, and the news of his permissive approach to pedagogy had spread through the Concord community. The deacon's command was a test: How far would Thoreau go to keep his job, albeit an immoral one? Thoreau protested. The schoolmaster insisted. And then Thoreau did something that has confounded scholars for more than a century. He chose a handful of students—accounts vary from just two students to more than a dozen—at random and beat them. The next day Thoreau returned to class and announced that he could no longer teach: his conscience would not allow it.

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But just wait a moment. What was this demonstration of whipping his students? Was it one of brutality, one of shame, one of protest? We are not sure, but it says, we believe, something important about immoral work. Thoreau came to see that the immorality of many professions stems from the command-and-control structure of institutions. Thoreau was only following orders; he supposedly wasn't responsible for these beatings; he was just a part of a system that systematically disadvantaged (read: oppressed) its youngest members. In following orders, Thoreau made himself complicit, made himself the torturer, and demonstrated the sheer random injustice of it all. There are no heroes here. Thoreau was, in fact, responsible, and he knew it. So did the children whom he beat. But he did something that many immoral workers never do: he quit and he never looked back. From all accounts, he became a stellar teacher and a stellar worker, both in the practical sense of teacher and worker, and, more importantly, in the moral one. Sometimes we resign our position and lose a paycheck, but gain the peace of mind to sleep at night, and regain our self-respect.

A final word about Nehemiah Ball. In a recent conversation with an emeritus professor of philosophy from a prestigious university, we asked him why a person like Thoreau would quit the position he had at the Center School, so soon after being hired. The professor paused for a long moment, long enough for all of us to think about the immorality of corporal punishment. The professor had dedicated his life to studying Thoreau. This was going to be good. He took a breath: "Many people think they need a job. Many jobs require you to have a boss. And most bosses are assholes. Old Nehemiah was one of them."[19] And

19. Robert Gross provides a much more measured (and probably fairer) assessment of Deacon Ball. Ball was a staunch believer in education, a sincere and very hardworking man, who came to sit on the school committee who oversaw classes. It was his job to see how young instructors were faring in the classroom,

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sometimes that is more than enough reason to leave and never look back.

As we were writing this chapter and considering how to end it, we came across a post on LinkedIn that, we believe, does the job. Daryan Rahimzadeh, a former Google employee, and, according to his profile, a "Woodworker, Dog Dad, Aspiring Inspirer," wrote about his own resignation from Google. We reached out to Daryan and asked if we could use his post in its entirety, which he happily agreed to (to the benefit of us all).

> After 5+ years in a variety of roles in the recruiting and staffing world at Google, I'm excited to announce . . .
>
> . . . nothing.
>
> Yup. Nothing.
>
> I left Google last week after 18 months of burn-out, two re-orgs, several different roles, shifting performance expectations, four different managers, all of this amidst my own personal stuff I had going on. When I looked at 2022, I knew I couldn't do it again. I looked at what I wanted to do next, what I wanted to accomplish this year and the only thing that came to mind was:
>
> Nothing.
>
> That's not entirely true, but that's how I felt. After 5 years of relatively strong performance, I started to struggle in my role. I asked for help and tried to figure out "Why

and he observed that Thoreau's students were, in fact, unruly. Again, it was his job to instruct Thoreau to institute appropriate punishment. This says nothing about Ball's character and everything about punitive education practices in the nineteenth century. The point, however, probably stands: Thoreau quit his job when it encouraged him to violate his conscience. See Robert A. Gross, *The Transcendentalists and Their World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 461.

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can't I do this?" I leaned on colleagues, managers, leaders, coaches, therapists, psychiatrists, and while many of them were great listeners and supportive, no one really had any answers for me. I was depressed and burnt-out.

I don't really have an agenda here, but I would like to share the biggest thing I learned about mental health/well-being this past year, which seems kind of obvious in hindsight, but I wish I had heard it more clearly before:

No one will do it for you. You have to do it yourself.

And that is HARD to hear when you're depressed. I so desperately wanted a manager or HR or Sundar himself to send me an email with a silver bullet, some program or role or announcement that would change everything, and then all of a sudden I'd be back to crushing it. And every morning, I'd find:

Nothing.

If you're waiting for someone to come and save you, please hear me when I say that someone is YOU. You don't have to do it alone, please, talk to someone, talk to everyone. Hell, talk to me, I'll listen. Seriously. DM me. But it does need to be YOU that does it—whatever IT is. Leaving a job, going part-time, going back to school, ending a relationship, moving back home, seeing a therapist, getting on medication, whatever IT might or might not be.

I was hesitant to post anything about this here because I thought "well that's not very professional." The thought about what OTHERS think about me, my work, career, etc. has always driven my decision making. I'm not doing that anymore. I'm working on getting my soul back. I'm working on putting the "being-me" into "my well-being." And you know what's more important than you being well?

Nothing.[20]

20. Used with permission from Daryan Rahimzadeh himself.

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