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My Parents Live in California, I Live in the Moment

Each society today seems to have its own definition of, “the good life” that they groom their own children to live. These definitions can differ vastly from one country to the next, but sometimes, we neglect that everyone has a different definition for the good life that they strive for. My idea of the good life was synonymous to my idea of happiness, which used to revolve mostly around family, friends, purpose and materialistic possessions, but after studying the transcendentalist literature of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau, I was inspired to reexamine that good life through an experiment on living simply. This amended my definition of the good life to include confidence, appreciation for details, and an enlightened self.

It's become clear to me that to lead the good life, one must first be confident within themselves that their own idea of it is what they truly desire, and is not just a norm that society expects them to follow. Only when we are fully confident in our own desires can we chase them to our heart's content. It was difficult for me to definitively articulate my interpretation of the good life, which made it even more challenging for me to think about the future. I thought that I needed materialistic possessions to lead a truly good life, but after living simply by distancing myself from social media and magazines, I started to rethink the role possessions truly had in my vision of the good life. Before the experiment, I wanted to live a

busy, fast life, and be rewarded with things. Of course, I didn't necessarily value possessions over people, but looking back now, I'm fairly surprised by how important I thought things like clothes were. Reading the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, a prominent figure in the transcendentalist movement, helped me realize that even though the media of society has instilled within me a certain greed to consume, it doesn't have to be what I truly want. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson writes, "And truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster. High be his heart..." (32). Emerson believes that people who stray from social norms have the amazing ability to have complete confidence in themselves. He says that society gives everyone a list of things to accomplish with their life, but those who stray from it because they don't find it to their liking are the happiest. People have to be confident and brave to follow their true self desires and then, "high be his heart." I've been reading glossy magazines and watching films about those with a lot of money since I was five years old, and I wanted to be part of that lifestyle. Thus, I never had any confidence in desires to do otherwise because no one encouraged me to aspire differently. After taking a step back, I realized material possessions aren't really as important to me as I thought they were. Through reexamination of my definition, I can now be more confident with my idea of the good life and have a clearer picture of the future I want, and it's not the movie props to a Hollywood glamour film. What I think can really make me happy and feel like I'm living the good life is a deep appreciation for transient moments.

Many brief everyday moments--like walking past a bakery and smelling the sugary perfume--have a certain beauty that is rarely seen in objects that were meant to be magnificent; a practice for deep appreciation of these ephemeral occasions is an important

principle in my expanded idea of the good life. Walt Whitman, a transcendentalist poet, seems to be an expert at acknowledging these brief moments of perfection, which is displayed prominently in his work of megalithic proportions, *Song of Myself*: "The past and present wilt--I have fill'd them, emptied them" (51). The entire poem was a tribute to himself and how happy he was in nature. It also has a quality that reminds me of meditation because he includes a lot of visuals, "The spotted hawk" (52), "green stuff woven" (6) and meditation requires the person to completely clear their mind and focus on details in the present moment. So when Whitman says that, "the past and present wilt," he really means he has emptied his head completely to focus on the present moment and truly notice what is happening around him. This single line impacted me deeply so that when I conducted my experiment in living simply, I vowed to spend more time outside and walk with a clear head. I took walks and saw things I wouldn't have noticed before. I don't usually notice the common, man-transplanted trees in industrial parks, but during my experiment, I saw that they bore fruit the shade of cotton candy. I definitely didn't have a particular care for the dock I live by, but when I took a moment to just notice the boats on the deep blue water, I saw that the white of the boats provided a contrast to the water that complimented the shine from the sun. I couldn't help but feel a little more at peace and invigorated by these moments. Even at home, I took note of little moments like how when the wind blew through the bug screen, it would set the curtain to life, each wave unique and giving character to a usually stiff piece of fabric. If I were to live life in a rushed manner like I wanted to in my previous version of the good life, I would never notice such beautiful moments. Beauty doesn't always have to come in the form of grand things, but it can be found in unlikely, everyday moments and items. I'm constantly being distracted from these moments, but when I

have the privilege to clear my head of the past and worries about the future to focus on the present, I find my life to be more pleasant and myself to be happier. Unfortunately, I have to snap out of these moments and I return to everyday problems, and greater questions that I don't have answers to.

Enlightenment is the last addendum to my vision of the good life because no matter what I do differently, it would be difficult to be content with my idea of the good life until I have fulfilled my own hunger to be enlightened. I only lived simply for one week, and it's not like I was even close to answering all my questions about myself and the world around me. Obviously, I never will find all the answers, but there is still a craving to understand the world and see it for myself. It's even more plain to see that I'm not the first person who has uncovered their appetite for answers. Henry David Thoreau, another American transcendentalist is best known for his book *Walden*, which records his experience while living in an isolated cabin near Walden Pond. He initially set out to the pond to gain knowledge and wisdom through personal introspection and immersion in nature because he wasn't content what he had (3). His journey to enlightenment mirrored by the four seasons and Walden Pond. After a sleepy, frozen spiritual winter, Thoreau's spirit awakens in the spring as he describes, "The pond began to boom about an hour after sunrise...it stretched itself and yawned like a waking man with a gradually increasing tumult" (249). The pond as a metaphor for a source of spiritual refreshment is most apparent in this sentence. It represents his thirst for life and child-like wonder, which is literally awakening and rediscovered in the spring. His innocence roars, urging him to be more and more aware of it with its clangor. This leads to a series of observations reminiscent of when he first moved to the location and viewed everything with keen eyes (73). This motivates him to

continue his introspective reflection and find his personal enlightenment which is relayed to us in the last chapter, *Conclusion* in which he admits, "The universe is wider than our views of it" (264). Thoreau learns that knowledge is infinite and there is more than one way to approach things. This appears to have been the fundamental base of his enlightenment. He then left Walden Pond happily with his hunger satisfied and went on to happily live the life he wanted to live. Before his retreat, Thoreau was a man who lived on his own accord, and was known for doing so; living his own definition of the good life. However, he still wasn't fully content with it, that's why he needed to do some soul searching by the pond. I feel that I am as restless as he is, so even when I can be surrounded by family, friends, purpose, possessions, and be confident and appreciative, I will still not be fully satisfied until I find the truth to my questions. I will continue to feel a void in my good life, so I can't truly live and appreciate the good life I can have. Writers can share how they think the world works and their philosophy, but I won't really be able to comprehend it until I personally find the answers--whether they be polar opposites of theirs or an exact copy.

I thought I had a fully formed, unyielding vision for the good life I want to strive towards. After reading transcendentalist work and philosophy, the vision has been questioned and adjusted. As time goes on and I grow, my definition of the good life may change or stay the same. No matter the case, studying transcendentalism has prompted me to reexamine my beliefs and definitions. I now know that although the vast majority may say they want one thing, it really may not be the absolute truth, and I don't have to conform to that majority. I can do as I please and live the life that I want, and that life is the good life: a life surrounded by those I care for, a lesser emphasis on materialistic possessions, and the beauty of small moments; guided by a

confident enlightened mind. However, this is not set in stone. Maybe years down the road, I will shun the idea of living simply or chasing enlightenment. Who knows? Social psychology dictates that we are impressioned upon by what surrounds us, so as we all change with time, so will our ideas. The good life isn't a concrete concept for anyone, its lense shifts and meanders on different objects, but you and you only choose which ones to focus on.

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