

Advance praise for:

*Build Your Castles In The Air:
Thoreau's Inspiring Advice For Success
In Business (And Life) In The 21st Century*

"I love Thoreau and I especially love this inspirational treatment of his work."

Dr. Wayne Dyer
NY Times #1 bestselling author; self-empowerment leader

"In Congress, in business, and as a mother of two children, I've seen first-hand the demands that our fast-forward, high-pressure culture puts on individuals, on families and on organizations. Through *Build Your Castles in the Air*, Thoreau's timeless wisdom and Chuck Hansen's modern insights offer simple yet intelligent solutions to the professional and personal dilemmas we all face, every day. Read this book and bring balance and genuine success—the type that truly matters—into your life."

Honorable Susan Molinari
Former member of Congress; president and CEO of The Washington Group

"This book embraces the human side of our rapidly and substantially changing world and will be of great benefit to both individuals and organizations. As someone who has been active in leadership development for three decades, I believe *Build Your Castles in the Air* is a rich reflection and dialogue vehicle for enhancing a sense of purpose, strategy, mission or corporate responsibility."

Victoria Guthrie
Senior fellow, Innovative Program Initiatives
Center for Creative Leadership

"I thoroughly enjoyed *Build Your Castles in the Air* by Chuck Hansen. After finishing this thoughtful book I felt like it really contained two books in one. First, the author helps interpret the wise but sometimes complex writings of Thoreau in a clear manner with surprising relevance to today's business and personal life. However, it was Hansen's own commentary and thoughts that I found most valuable. I found myself wishing for more of the author's observations and suggestions for current day business issues. With every turn of the page I found comments that offered specific advice that I or others I know are facing today. I also felt that the book, and wisdom by both Thoreau and Hansen, was uplifting and offered easy-to-grasp ideas on how to survive and thrive in today's business world."

Craig Shanklin
Former chief operating officer, Correlogic Systems

“Hansen’s book puts a context around a great work and allows the reader to sample and deeply consider the magnificent work of Henry David Thoreau by topic. I especially liked the personal commentary and the selections from *Civil Disobedience*. Hansen’s comments bring focus and relevance to Thoreau’s work.”

Louis Castle
Vice president, Electronic Arts; former GM and co-founder of Westwood Studios

*Build Your Castles
in the Air:*

*Thoreau's Inspiring Advice
for Success in Business (and Life)
in the 21st Century*



Copyright © 2005 by Charles D. Hansen, III

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

First Edition

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-37251-5 (pbk)
ISBN-13: 978-0-595-81648-4 (ebk)
ISBN-10: 0-595-37251-1 (pbk)
ISBN-10: 978-0-595-81648-7 (ebk)

His robust common sense, armed with stout hands, keen perceptions and strong will, cannot yet account for the superiority which shone in his simple and hidden life. I must add the cardinal fact, that there was an excellent wisdom in him, proper to a rare class of men, which showed him the material world as a means and a symbol.

- “Thoreau”
Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

During my career in politics, government and with three Fortune 500 companies, I have come to realize that much of the productivity and economic gains of recent years have been achieved by asking workers to do more with less, and in less time. Personal time, peace of mind and balance have been squeezed out of people's lives by the unrelenting pursuit of greater productivity and quarter-over-quarter profit increases. And technology, rather than assisting workers, has in fact served only to speed up the treadmill on which we all are running.

Upon reaching this conclusion, I realized that the familiar echo I could hear in this concept was the crystal-clear thinking of Henry David Thoreau. Picking up Walden, I almost immediately turned to his scathing indictment of the technological miracle of his day: "We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us." These words captured perfectly my thoughts about the effect of modern technology on today's worker.

As I continued through *Walden*, I was shocked by how much of that classic work applies to today's corporate world! Thoreau brings a stunning clarity of thought and insight into the increasingly grinding 21st Century work experience—not only for the worker bees, who are most often at the receiving end of corporate "stretch goals," but for their managers, most of whom are trying to find a humane way to manage their employees while simultaneously carrying out the often-inhuman demands of the organization.

In Walden, Thoreau brilliantly displays the "excellent wisdom," described by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, which allowed him to view the world not only as an environment worthy of reverence and respect, but as a source of penetrating lessons for leading a worthwhile life.

Reading Thoreau's masterpiece, it occurred to me that a collection of these gems would bring some desperately needed perspective to the increasingly harsh 21st Century work environment. Knowing that the resource most lacking in most people's lives is time, I determined that the best approach would be to excerpt from *Walden* the snippets of wisdom that applied to the most common problems faced by employees and managers in corporate America. I've also included a few quotes from Thoreau's classic anti-government essay "Civil Disobedience" (marked by a "CD").

I have arranged the quotes from *Walden* by current-day issues to which they apply, and I have added commentary—reflections from personal experience, as well as contributions from some of history's greatest thinkers, from Jesus Christ to Abraham Maslow.

Then, in the interest of accessibility, I organized the quotes around seven subject areas. I lead off with Finding Your Calling, because the first order of

business should always be to get in tune with your higher purpose. However, if you are in the middle of a work-day emergency, feel free to skip ahead in the book to *Managing Your Day-to-Day Work*, which is intended to provide the reader with triage techniques for typical workday problems.

Following that, I shift to the longer-term and deeper issue of *Managing Your Career*, because I believe that long-term happiness with work requires a long-term perspective on work. Then I return to the more immediate issues of *Managing the Business*; *Managing Your People*; *Managing Your Working Relationships*; and, *Managing the Business Environment*.

Despite all of this segmenting and separating, though, one of the first things you will learn from Thoreau is that all elements of life (indeed, of all creation) are interconnected. So, to the extent that you manage your life well, you also manage your day-to-day work well, and *visa-versa*.

The goal of this book is to make Thoreau's wisdom more accessible, in bite-sized pieces to chew on during five-minute "lunch hours," and thereby help bring to harried readers the peace of mind and purpose that Thoreau's work has brought for me.

One additional, personal note: in the midst of writing this book, I joined Capital One Financial Corp., and was delighted to discover that Capital One comes closer to the ideal organization that I describe in *Build Your Castles in the Air* than anywhere else I've worked.

So here it is. I hope you enjoy and benefit from reading *Build Your Castles in the Air* as much as I enjoyed, and benefited from, compiling it.

Chuck Hansen

Finding Your Calling

Discover the New World Within

"Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find A thousand regions in your mind Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be Expert in home-cosmography."

What does Africa—what does the West stand for? Is not our own interior white on the chart?

Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes—with shiploads of preserved meats to support you, if they be necessary; and pile the empty cans sky-high for a sign. Were preserved meats invented to preserve meat merely? Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice.

If you are called to conquer Wall Street or Main Street, then so be it. But know that within you are resources and reserves that can make the conquest possible. Explore your mind, come to understand the strength you have inside, and you'll be infinitely better positioned to conquer the world outside.

Find Your Calling

To the sick the doctors wisely recommend a change of air and scenery. ...Yet we think that if rail fences are pulled down, and stone walls piled up on our farms, bounds are henceforth set to our lives and our fates decided. If you are chosen town clerk, forsooth, you cannot go to Tierra del Fuego this summer: but you may go to the land of infernal fire nevertheless. The universe is wider than our views of it. Yet we should oftener look over the taffarel of our craft, like curious passengers, and not make the voyage like stupid sailors picking oakum. ...Our voyaging is only great-circle sailing, and the doctors prescribe for diseases of the skin merely. One hastens to southern Africa to chase the giraffe; but surely that is not the game he would be after. How long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes if he could? Snipes and woodcocks also may afford rare sport; but I trust it would be nobler game to shoot one's self.

Three directionless years out of college, I bought a one-way ticket to St. Thomas, figuring if I was going to drift through life, I might as well drift on down to a tropical paradise. Seven months and many boat drinks and Caribbean adventures later, I had an epiphany sitting on a locals' topless beach, sipping a beer: I wasn't fulfilled. I had answered Thoreau's question: "How long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes if he could?" For me, it was seven months.

It begged another question: what was my calling? What could fulfill me if not living the life of St. Jimmy of the Caribbean? The answer turned out to be political communications. In my gut, I knew that's what I would be happy doing.

So I quit hunting giraffes and left the islands to embark on the journey toward my calling. Within three years, I was press secretary to a member of Congress. Since then I've served as communications director for the Virginia secretary of transportation and speechwriter to a Virginia governor.

My calling has changed since then, and I've tried to follow it faithfully, right up to this moment, as I work on my first book. The lesson remains with me: finding your calling, being the best at what in your heart you know you want to do, is the most powerful motivator of all—whether for yourself or your employees. Find self-actualization, as Maslow called it, and success, happiness and fulfillment will result.

Possibilities

John Farmer sat at his door one September evening, after a hard day's work, his mind still running on his labor more or less. Having bathed, he sat down to re-create his intellectual man. It was a rather cool evening, and some of his neighbors were apprehending a frost. He had not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard some one playing on a flute, and that sound harmonized with his mood. Still he thought of his work; but the burden of his thought was, that though this kept running in his head, and he found himself planning and contriving it against his will, yet it concerned him very little. It was no more than the scurf of his skin, which was constantly shuffled off. But the notes of the flute came home to his ears out of a different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain faculties which slumbered in him. They gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived. A voice said to him—Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you? Those same stars twinkle over other fields than these.—But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither? All that he could think of was to practise some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect.

It is a valid question: “Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you?” But at the end of a long day, with the challenges of our work and our lives and all the demands that are upon us, it is a very hard question to get to.

John Farmer is on to something—perhaps some gentle music, a glass of wine on a porch swing, deep breathing and a view of the high-altitude cirrus clouds bypassing us and the troubles we face—it is possible to free your mind... to dream... to ask...

Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you?

Managing Your Day-to-Day Work

Deliberate

I delight to come to my bearings—not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may—not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by.

It's the difference between riding the whitewaters of the typical business day and sitting on the bank, watching the river rush by. Undeniably, to brave the rapids, frantically steering and paddling, crashing up against rocks and down over waterfalls, is exciting, and fun to do. But there is also reward to sitting on the bank and contemplate where the river begins and where it ends, and how it came to run by this spot, and what we are called to do within it. Time spent reflecting on these questions can bring us valuable perspective on the daily turbulence we endure, often by choice, out in the whitewaters of this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Twenty-first Century.

Email

For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it.

In his essay about Napoleon, Ralph Waldo Emerson reports that the great general once directed that all letters be left unopened for three weeks, "and then observed with satisfaction how large a part of the correspondence had thus disposed of itself and no longer required an answer."

Hmm...

Impermanence of Our Work

"Yes, we have done great deeds, and sung divine songs, which shall never die"—that is, as long as we can remember them. The learned societies and great men of Assyria—where are they?

At the end of this day, which of your actions has made the more significant impression: the perfectly crafted memo you fired off at work; or, the perfectly crafted story you gently weaved for your little girl at bedtime?

Managing Your Career

Break Out

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. 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!

Even the most ambitious and audacious plans can become routine and plain. You must continue to challenge yourself.

Career Management

I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much the freer.

Are you shepherding your career, or is your career shepherding you?
(Hint—which part of your anatomy comes in contact most often with the shepherd's staff—your hand or your rear end?)

Managing the Business

Common Sense

The broadest and most prevalent error requires the most disinterested virtue to sustain it. (CD)

Common Sense is Too Common

Why level downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as common sense? The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring.

Voltaire said that “Common sense is the least common of the senses.” He and Thoreau do not necessarily disagree. Thoreau condemns the idiocy that passes as wisdom when we refuse to think; Voltaire laments the absence of thinking that would make real common sense more common.

Conventional Wisdom

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous.

This passage are about the folly of conventional wisdom, which can be passed down through the generations, passed on as “news” or “analysis,” or passed off by so-called “experts.” Compare to reality the many predictions made by the economic and political experts, and the folly of conventional wisdom and the opinions of those “in the know” becomes clear.

Every life, and every business, should not start from scratch in its learning about the way the world works, but instead build on the truths learned by others and over the ages. The trick is to select the learnings that are genuinely true, and discard those which are simply institutionalized negativity. In the end, you must trust yourself to make the correct distinctions.

Corporate Culture

I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of men being forced to live this way or that by masses of men. What sort of life were that to live? (CD)

You shape the corporate culture, not the other way around.

Managing Your People

Flattery Gets Them Nowhere

I do not wish to flatter my townsmen, nor to be flattered by them, for that will not advance either of us. We need to be provoked—goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot.

Empty praise and flattery is a de-motivator, both for the employee in question and for the rest of the team looking on. But it is possible to provoke and goad in a positive way: appealing to professional pride; creating challenges; providing the promise of rewards and recognition; and, generally expecting, and seeing, the best in your employees.

Innovators

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men, generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to put out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels? (CD)

In his seminal work, *Structures of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn convincingly answers Thoreau's questions. Kuhn showed that people and their organizations are naturally inclined to aggressively resist and attack improvement and innovators. Even innovative organizations have a "way it is done here," as those who challenge the ruling paradigm are sometimes rudely informed. If you're taking fire from all directions, maybe you are challenging sacred - and possibly incorrect—assumptions. And if an employee no longer offers the creative solutions she once did, it may be the culture you have created has beaten the innovative spirit out of her.

Lead by Example

You who govern public affairs, what need have you to employ punishments? Love virtue, and the people will be virtuous. The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass—the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends.

A key to personal happiness in life is to align your behavior with your expectations for your own behavior. If you see yourself as someone who values work-life balance, but in reality spend too much time working and not enough time living, the conflict generates cognitive dissonance—the uneasy and unhappy feeling that something is not quite right. Inevitably you modify your behaviors or your expectations to achieve alignment between the two—hopefully you choose to leave unchanged that which is more noble.

Organizations demonstrate a similar dynamic. Senior leadership—and particularly the CEO—sets the expectations of behavior for the organization, sometimes by their words, but most often and effectively by their actions. These expectations sweep over the employees like wind over grass, bending the employee behaviors in its direction.

When the behavior of the employees of an organization does not match the expectations communicated by the leadership, then either the behavior or the expectations will be compelled to change over time. As Thoreau says, usually the employees bend to the example set by senior leadership, and that is where the blame for chronic employee misbehavior should be placed. If that sounds like too much responsibility loaded onto too few shoulders, then don't take the job.

Managing Your Working Relationships (boss, coworkers, associates, vendors)

Cubicle Living

...we live thick and are in each other's way, and stumble over one another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another.

These days, when only those who should be leading by example have offices, and the rest of us are spread like crop seed out in cubicle farms, even the friendliest coworkers can get on each other's nerves.

Considerate behavior can still leave room enough to stumble over one another in our daily work, and sometimes the collaborative design of our office space leads us to collaboratively drive each other nuts.

During these tense moments, it is a good idea to follow Thoreau's example and get away from it all. That doesn't mean you go live in the woods for a couple years. A lunch away from your desk, a walk through the office park, a quiet corner in the library, stolen minutes in a coffee shop—there are many ways get out of the thick, out of each other's way, and preserve that respect for the other.

Cynicism

Some would find fault with the morning red, if they ever got up early enough.

I have been in work environments that were so bad, even the most bitter cynics fell short of the mark in their complaints. But more often I have experienced good and even excellent work environments. Yet, the cynics never go away. Even in the best situations, it seems some people cannot move beyond complaining, blaming, gossiping and backstabbing.

Don't let these chronic complainers dim the beauty that you see in life, in your company, in your day-to-day work experience. You do not need to condemn them or avoid them if you can separate your beliefs and perceptions from theirs—after all, these might be your coworkers, friends or even your manager. Keep in mind though that in most conversations, a cynic will set the tone, and it can be very difficult to pull a person or group of people to your level of existence when they are mired in the tar pit of cynicism.

But no matter what, don't let them drag you in with them.

Managing The Business Environment (Society, Government, Culture, etc.)

Free Enterprise

Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. (CD)

Not even during the Revolutionary period would this statement have been as revolutionary as it seems today.

Legally Right v. Morally Right

I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. (CD)

No offense to my hard-core Democrat friends out there, but Bill Clinton proved that you can be a (mostly) law-abiding citizen and a scoundrel simultaneously. Laws are a standard of desperation, by which we protect ourselves from ourselves, rather than a standard of aspiration, by which we would improve ourselves and our communities. In this light, the term “law-abiding citizen” is one of the worst backhanded compliments possible. Someone who has merely obeyed the law throughout his life has done the absolute minimum necessary to get by.

Now apply that to business. It is possible for a company to act within laws, regulations and reporting rules and still be dishonest in its actions and in its culture. When executives talk to employees, investors, communities or the government, they should be guided not by what is legally required, but by what is morally right.

Progress

Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour, without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads?

Progress of any kind, like a railroad, is only useful if we know where we want it to take us, and why.

Conclusion

In the end, what Thoreau offers is freedom. Freedom from false values. Freedom from imposed expectations. Freedom to find who we really are, and then to live as that person. Freedom to dream of a better life, and then to live that dream.

If one “endeavors to live the life which he has imagined,” Thoreau offers freedom from the life-limiting, soul-killing conventions of our culture. These conventions are derived from a collective lack of courage, and manifested through conventional wisdom, peer pressure, parochialism, the twin assassins of “we don’t do it that way” and “not invented here,” and a societal phobia of failure.

All of it conspires to convince us that we are naive to want to live differently, fools to aspire to a better way. “There *is* no other way,” we are told (by the well-intentioned and otherwise). But Thoreau challenges that conclusion, and challenges us: “*Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you?*”

The time has come for you to take up that challenge, and to create your glorious existence. Thoreau shows the way, and brings the good news that the universe is ready to help us, once we begin:

“... if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings.”

Do not shy away from what seems to be the impossible, because what we think is impossible is only so if we continue to live by the constraints that our society and our fellow man have placed upon us.

Aspire to an existence worthy of your imagination, and then bring your reality into alignment with that. Build your castles in the air. Thoreau is right: that is where they should be. Commit your plan to paper, map out the steps you’ll need to take and the things you’ll need to learn and the help you’ll need to seek out. And then take action, every day, to put foundations under your castles built in the air.

Chuck's Writing

Chuck Hansen's writing regularly appears in magazines and on Web sites, and he has several other book projects underway, including *Crossing a Big Ocean*, an account of his astonishing experiences living in the Caribbean and crossing the North Atlantic on a 53-foot sailboat. To engage Chuck to write an article for your publication, get the latest information on his writing projects, find links to current and past magazine articles or request clips, or subscribe to Chuck's e-newsletter, email him at chuck@chuckhansen.com visit www.chuckhansen.com.



Motivational Speaking

Chuck Hansen can be a speaker at your next meeting or event, presenting his perspective on the power of Henry David Thoreau's words in our modern world. Participants in these sessions will get:

- Immediate strategies for handling the chaos of the typical business day, with working materials that the participants keep
- A foundational approach for life focusing on the big picture and the truly important, rather than on artificial emergencies, and based on the timeless wisdom of Henry David Thoreau
- From this balance springs the opportunity for increased productivity, both professionally and personally
- Insight for gaining true personal freedom

The presentation is based on *Build Your Castles in the Air: Thoreau's Inspiring Advice for Success in Business (and Life) in the 21st Century*. This book can be made available to each participant as part of the speaking engagement.

For details on this and other presentation topics, availability, references and more, contact Chuck at chuck@chuckhansen.com or at www.chuckhansen.com.