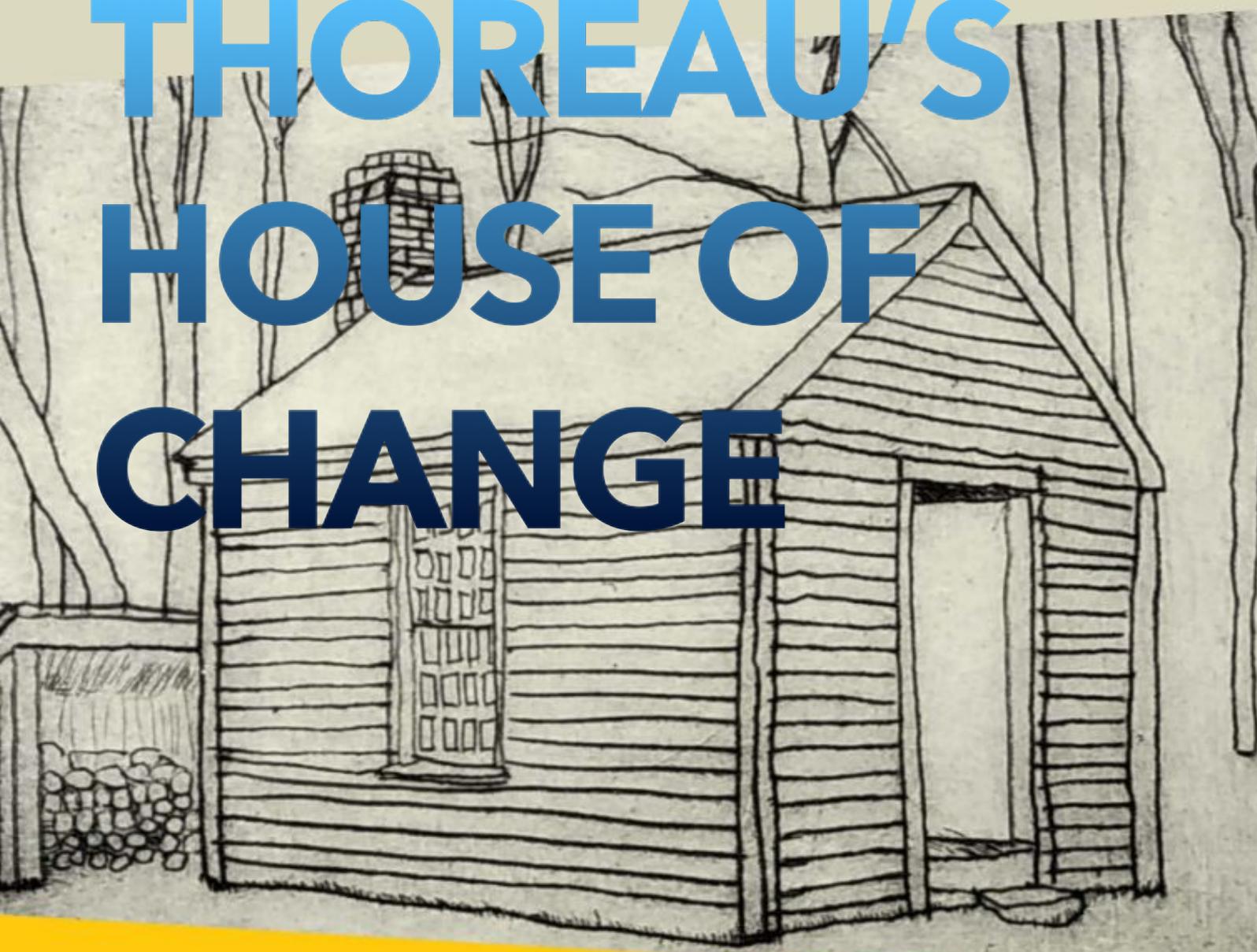


**Antonio Casado da Rocha**

# CASA DE CAMBIOS

*Activar nuestras capacidades transformadoras  
siguiendo a Henry D. Thoreau, Martha Nussbaum  
y Otto Scharmer*

# THOREAU'S HOUSE OF CHANGE

A black and white line drawing of a small, rustic wooden cabin. The cabin has a gabled roof, a chimney on the left side, and a window with a grid pattern. To the left of the cabin, there is a stack of logs. The drawing is done in a simple, sketchy style with fine lines.

**Epílogo de Jorge Riechmann**

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# THOREAU'S HOUSE OF CHANGE

**KEYWORDS:** THOREAU,  
WALDEN, POLITICAL  
TRANSCENDENTALISM,  
TRANSITION CAPABILITY,  
TRANSFORMATION, THEORY U,  
NUSSBAUM, SCHARMER

**P**ublished in August 1854, Thoreau's *Walden* is 170 years old. Nearly seven human generations have gone by since the book began transforming the place it was written in Concord, Massachusetts, making it somehow sacred for thousands of visitors every year. In the chapter on "Former Inhabitants," Thoreau reminisces winter night plans to repeople Walden Woods, so that his "house raised last spring" became "the oldest in the hamlet." [1] That did not happen, but since then Thoreau has become an icon for those interested in the transformation of human dwelling spaces such as villages, towns and cities into something "unique, intrinsically worthy of respect and dignity, relational, life-giving and sustaining, and defiant of commodification". [2]



Urs Peter Flueckiger, Texas Tech University

My book *Casa de cambios* [House of Change] was published in 2022, a few months after the Thoreau Society co-organized a symposium in Iceland on “Thoreau & the Nick of Time.” Ours is indeed a time of deep transformation, and moved by the spirit of the symposium I aimed to reflect on that in this my third essay on Thoreau. Actually, the title comes from a line in his first book, in which Thoreau quotes Philip James Bailey declaring that “Imagination is the air of mind,” adding this typically transcendentalist comment: “All things are as I am. Where is the House of Change?” [3] Accordingly, my starting point is a defense of what I call *political* transcendentalism, understood as “a cultivation of capability to transcend the persistent, cultural narrative of separation” between cities and nature, materiality and spirituality, personal change and social change. [4]

*House of Change* discusses the “C question” (climate chaos as a result of the kind of economy that Thoreau criticized in *Walden*, both the book and the place) in the light of the “X factor” (the role of universities as cultural catalyzers of change), and then proposes a six-stop “journey” to develop capabilities for personal and social transformation. This journey or learning process is based on both conversations with Basque-Spanish-

Catalonian philosophers, and my own practice at the “school of transformation” led by Otto Scharmer from the MIT and the Presencing Institute, also known as “Theory U”. Scharmer mentions Thoreau amongst other authors who influenced his thinking, [5] but the relationship between Theory U and transcendentalism had not been yet explained in any detail, and I devote part of the book to track it.

Another chapter is devoted to American philosopher Martha Nussbaum and her “capability approach.” Nussbaum proposes 10 central capabilities as the basis for community development and universal human rights, and I argue for an extra 11th capability: *being able to transition* from the present to the best possible future (in terms of the other capabilities). I relate this with Thoreau’s faith on “the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor” (90). In the rest of the book I unpack this transformation capability using *Walden* as a prototype.

## 1. CULTIVATE COMMUNITIES WITH PURPOSE

The first transition skill is to create a space for a common activity that can be cultivated with others. Communities of practice are potentially transformative, but it takes time to access to the source of motivation and uncover one’s deep intentions. Thoreau describes the move to Walden as a way to meet with people “under more favorable circumstances than [he] could anywhere else,” since “fewer came to see [him] on trivial business.” Company was winnowed by mere distance from town (144). Therefore, the motivation for going to Walden was not so much being alone as it was building a container: a place for meaningful conversations with others around a shared intention. But to be resilient the enterprise must be worthwhile: “In the long run men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.” (27)

## 2. MAKE SENSE IN THE STRANGE

The time in Walden was a transformative experience because it sieved “only the finest sediment” (144) so that Thoreau could “front only the essential facts of life” (90). This learning is about ethics, but it is also epistemological since it involves criticism of usual patterns of thought and “knowing by downloading,” to state it in Theory U terms. There is a lot of questioning of certainties in *Walden*, and to satisfy his “craving for reality” Thoreau went to the edges of the system, establishing a horizontal connection with others, no matter how strange or “queer” (175). Theory U is about leading from the

emerging future, and for Thoreau the future can only be seen by relating to and looking at the present with fresh eyes. The biggest challenge is to “see what is before you, and walk on into futurity” by “being forever on the alert” (111).

### 3. LET GO AND LET COME

Thoreau invites the reader to “explore thyself” (322), simplifying and letting go of the old life, and to “put some things behind” so that “an invisible boundary” is crossed and we can “live with the license of a higher order of beings” (323). It is a process of “Self-emancipation” in the “provinces of the fancy and imagination” (7). This journey or movement is a vertical one, metaphorically surveying the bottom of Walden Pond in search of “a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality” (98). But it is also a sort of collective reset. In *Walden*, Thoreau describes several anthropological records of millennial rites in which a community starts anew driven by “the belief that it was time for the world to come to an end” (68). Thoreau’s favorite metaphors for this reset are waking up, morning work, and getting lost: “not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (171). The reset (that is, the dot at the bottom of the standard representation of the U in Scharmer’s books) is a break with both the future and the past, toeing the line between them: “to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment” (17).

### 4. WORK WITH YOUR HANDS, HEAD AND HEART

At Walden, Thoreau built a neat little house with the help of a few friends, using old materials and fresh wood from a squatted piece of land; that house has become an iconic element in popular culture and replicas of his experiment can be found all over the world. In Theory U terms, Thoreau prototyped the new and explored the future by doing. There are at least two lessons about that in *Walden*. The first is in “Economy”: change the metrics by connecting with your love, with that which is most dear to you. Life, not money, is the right measure: “the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (31). The second is to connect the head with the heart and the hand: “to practise some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect” (222). The “head is hands and feet,” writes Thoreau (98), adding that “labor of the hands, ... has a constant and imperishable moral” (157).

## 5. FIGHT WITH INTELLIGENCE AND PERSEVERANCE

The final stages of the U journey have to do with revising, adapting, and co-shaping whatever has been learnt in the process, grounding it, and somehow institutionalizing it in new practices. This is done with others, and not without strife nor joy, even in *Walden*; when Thoreau writes that “we belong to the community” (46) he is being sarcastic, but he also acknowledges that we shape our fate collectively. That might be the reason why schools and educational reforms were the principal result of the original transcendentalist movement. Thoreau was involved in the creation of social infrastructures by shaping safe places and rhythms for listening to others and to nature. In Theory U, in addition to listening, there is another key practice: perseverance, never giving up. The same principle is suggested by Thoreau: “to him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere” (73).

## 6. THINK OUT OF THE BOX

Every end is a new beginning, and so *Walden* ends like it began: in springtime, with new plans and new life around. Both Thoreau and Scharmer invite the reader or participant on a journey in which the subject undergoes a transformation of viewpoints, from “ego” to “eco”. Critical thinking and imaginative leadership could be thus understood as the capacity to facilitate such transformative practices. Thoreau was one of the first critics of the industrial world. *House of Change* is an invitation to think with him about the challenges of the present. The goal is extending and democratizing certain capabilities for personal and social transformation, and ends by explaining why, paradoxically, the best hope for humanity might be found in non-anthropocentric and indigenous thinking.

The book includes an afterword by Jorge Riechmann, a leading environmental philosopher and activist in the Spanish branch of Scientist Rebellion, and artwork by Alberto Areta.

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## NOTES

1. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 264. All the following quotes refer to this edition.
2. Engle, Jayne; Agyeman, Julian & Chung-Tiam-Fook, Tanya. "Imagine Shaping Cities as if People, Land, and Nature Were Sacred," in *Sacred Civics: Building Seven Generation Cities*, ed. Jayne Engle, Julian Agyeman, and Tanya Chung-Tiam-Fook (New York: Routledge, 2022), 3.
3. Henry D. Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. William L. Howarth & Elizabeth Hall Witherell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 292.
4. Engle, Agyeman & Chung-Tiam-Fook, 5.
5. C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2016), 30.