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Living Thoreau as a Means of Approaching Walden

Target Students: Grade 10 Honors American Literature

Description: Through individual activities and writing assignments, students will begin to understand the ideas which motivated Thoreau's essays and his experiment at Walden Pond, and generate their own responses to similar perspectives, gained by participating in activities similar to Thoreau's. By living, thinking, and writing about experiences which parallel some of Thoreau's, students will approach *Walden* with a more personal connection to the text.

This series of assignments is intended to be accomplished over the course of several months, being presented on alternating Mondays and due at the end of two weeks (thus, every other Friday, students will submit a completed journal and on the following Monday, a new assignment will be started).

Note: This series of assignments is intended as a ***pre-reading activity***, to be begun well before the class starts work on *Walden*. If *Walden* is typically read in the late winter or early spring, these assignments would be started by October. Direct reference to Thoreau and his experiment will be kept to the minimum, so as to keep the focus on the students' ideas and experiences. Connections will be made through discussion and revisits to the journals when *Walden* is actually begun for class.

Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from:

Thoreau, Henry David, "Life Without Principle," *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1993.

Thoreau, Henry David, *Walden or, Life in the Woods, and "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience."* New York: New American Library, 1960.

Rationale: Too often, students come to know important writers and "big ideas" as flat words upon a page. They see print rather than "hear" the voices of these writers speaking to them. They often "read" and dismiss, sometimes distressingly rapidly. This project is an attempt to counteract that tendency among too many of our students by putting them into situations in which they will listen to a human voice speaking the words, and then requiring them to interact directly with the meaning behind the text by living and writing about connected experiences.

Purpose:

- To bring life to the words and ideas of Henry David Thoreau;
- To create assignments which will enable students to experience first hand some of the activities about which Thoreau writes in both *Walden* and other texts;
- To provide journal prompts that will allow students to interpret their experiences in a personal way, focusing variously on the skills of observation, reflection, comparison/contrast, and synthesis;
- To structure within the classroom setting an opportunity to share ideas, perceptions, questions, and reactions to both the words and ideas of Thoreau and each other.

Process:

- 1. Making text come alive through oral reading:** Every other week, Monday's class will begin with a reading from the works of Henry David Thoreau. Class time will be spent speculating on the meaning of the passage, the import of a particular word, or the relevance to our lives of the ideas within. (For example, a discussion at the Thoreau Institute summer session explored the meaning of living "*deliberately*," from the selection found in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately...." (*Walden*, 66).
- 2. Walking out in the world:** Each Monday of this series, students will receive an assignment sheet headed by the quote discussed that day. Following the quote will be an assignment which will require them to undertake some related activity, which in turn will lead to journaling.
- 3. Journaling:** Included in each activity is a directed journal assignment. These should be written with a recognition that they might be shared in whole or in part with the entire class. In these journal assignments, students will respond to the prompt. An absolute minimum length of one page of response is required. After discussion among Thoreau Institute participants and presenters, I have decided to require that students *hand write* these journals, as opposed to typing them. [with obvious exceptions for students on an I.E.P. that specifies use of a word processor] This is in recognition of the increased degree of intimacy with one's own written word that results from the manual act of writing.
- 4. Discussing/Publishing:** On the Fridays on which the journals are due, class discussion will begin with a question related to the key idea(s) of the quote. Students will be asked to make meaning out of the author's words, and will be encouraged to use their own related experiences as illustrations or explanations of their interpretations.

Note: I expect to experiment with various forms of publication beyond the discussions. For example, I foresee having students select journal entries or excerpts to put into print for sharing, mimicking style or tone in their own essays, playing around with poetic expression of ideas, or using nonverbal means of representing ideas, such as art projects, photo essays, etc.

Evaluation: Student grades will be based on a collection of criteria.

1. **Relevance:** Students are expected to address the quote and connected assignment directly. While there are many opportunities for free thinking and open response within the curriculum, this assignment is meant to serve a clear focus.
2. **Thoroughness:** Responses, regardless of whether the task for the day is a written journal or some other means of expression, should evidence care and thought. In written responses, simple factual recording of events (unless that *is* the task of the prompt) will not receive as high an evaluation as one which clearly displays engagement on the part of the student. Although a minimum requirement of one written page is specified in the assignments, the word *minimum* will be stressed. Among my honors students, I can anticipate three to four pages, typically, for this kind of task. Limiting responses to one page only will carry a penalty for these advanced students.
3. **Form and Style:** Unless otherwise indicated, essays are expected to follow standard conventions regarding clear introductions, well developed and supported body paragraphs put together logically, appropriate conclusions, coherence and unity throughout, and attention to stylistic concerns such as sentence construction and variety, as well as effective vocabulary choices, etc. Students are held accountable for exercising standard English conventions of grammar, spelling, and usage where appropriate to the genre, implied audience, purpose, and degree of formality.
4. **Execution:** For those parts of this project which produce nonverbal products, a component of the final evaluation will be the quality of the execution. Consideration will be given to creativity, design, use of shape and/or color, assembly techniques, and appropriateness of imagery for the given assignment
5. **Preparation:** Students are expected to have journals or related projects completed by the beginning of class on the date due. Lateness carries a penalty of loss of credit.

Assignments: Each to be presented singly on a separate sheet of paper.

"I take it for granted, when I am invited to lecture anywhere, -- for I have had a little experience in that business,-- that there is a desire to hear what I think on some subject, though I may be the greatest fool in the country, -- and not that I should say pleasant things merely, or such as the audience will assent to; and I resolve, accordingly, that I will give them a strong dose of myself. They shall have me, though I bore them beyond all precedent. So now I would say something to you, my readers. Since you are my readers, and I have not been much of a traveller, I will not talk about people a thousand miles off, but come as near home as I can. As the time is short, I will leave out all the flattery, and retain all the criticism. Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives. . . If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!"

"Life Without Principle" (1863), (p. 75)

A. Preparation to write -- Sometime in the next two weeks, review how you spent one complete day. In a "Ben Franklinesque" manner, list by the hour what you were doing (bullet this information). In the margin at the right of your list, reflect upon the quality of each hour - was it rushed? puzzling? enriching? disturbing? worthwhile? wasted? conscious, even? (Use as many other adjectives as you feel appropriate.)

B. Journal -- Evaluate the quality of your day. This essay will be at least one complete page of *handwritten* response. It should follow traditional essay form, *i.e.*, introduction, body, conclusion, and be well supported by references to the above list.

"Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like the corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. they were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works."

Walden, (p.79)

A. Preparation to write -- Forsake your work. Take yourself away ALONE to a quiet place in nature: woods, field, lake or seaside. Bring nothing with you, except perhaps a blanket to sit upon . [You might put on bug spray before setting out.] Stay there for at least one full hour. Discover your own reverie.

B. Journal -- Write a reflective essay on this experience. How did your mind occupy itself?

"I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pondside; 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."
Walden, (p. 214)

A. Preparation to write -- Break out of the rut! Choose one particular pattern that is a regular part of your life - perhaps the way you walk to school or to a friend's house, the order of your morning or bedtime routine, the way you typically spend Sunday afternoon. . . and do it in a totally new and different way. Turn it upside-down or inside-out; cease doing it completely; begin doing something else that you have never done before as a part of your routine. Deliberately alter the pattern of your past behavior in such a way that you are, essentially, walking on untrod ground.

B. Journal -- Describe the changes you made, but focus most of your journal on the **effect** they had on you. How did it make you feel to break routine? What was easy? Difficult? What did you learn - about your routines? about yourself? by doing this? Did any one of your family or acquaintances question you or criticize you for this change in the pattern?

"We are often reminded that if there were bestowed on us the wealth of Croesus, our aims must still be the same, and our means essentially the same. Moreover, if you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are but confined to the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is ever on a lower level by magnanimity of a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul."

Walden, (p. 218)

A. Preparation to Write -- Go through three to five days without spending **any** money. Prepare for this by reviewing your typical expenditures: Do you buy school lunches? Eat fast food? Rent movies? Ride the train? Order on-line? Buy drinks in a vending machine? What will you need to do as alternatives to these activities (*ex.*, do you have to get up earlier to make your own lunch?). *It is not acceptable to stockpile lunches, snacks, tickets, water bottles, etc.!!* To appreciate the intent of this assignment, it is necessary for you to **do without**.

B. Journal -- Evaluate the experience: Of what did you feel deprived? What did you not really miss? What creative alternatives did you discover? Did you surprise yourself in any way as a response to this activity? What do your reactions to this assignment show you about your priorities? Based on this assignment, how do you differentiate between "need" and "want"?

"After hoeing, or perhaps reading and writing, in the forenoon, I usually bathed again in the pond, swimming across one of its coves for a stint, and washed the dust of labor from my person, or smoothed out the last wrinkle which study had made, and for the afternoon was absolutely free. Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there. . . As I walked in the woods to see the birds and squirrels, so I walked in the village to see the men and boys. . . The village appeared to me a great news room. . . I observed that the vitals of the village were the grocery, the bar-room, the post-office, and the bank; and as a necessary part of the machinery, they kept a bell, a big gun, and a fire engine, at convenient places.... "

Walden, (pp. 115 - 116)

- A. Preparation to write** -- Spend some time observing the "village of RMHS." Make notes regarding what is important around here... Thoreau mentions places like the post-office and the bank. What are the comparable "vitals" of this place? What criteria are you using to assess relative importance? What do your assessments say about *what* this community's values? About *whom* it values?
- B. Journal** -- Consider how viewing a place through that which is "vital" to it shapes our perceptions of that place. After doing your preparatory work for this journal, do you see RMHS in any ways different from before?

"One young man of my acquaintance, who has inherited some acres, told me that he thought he should live as I did, if he had the means. I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for, beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead. The youth may build or plant or sail, only let him not be hindered from doing that which he tells me he would like to do.

Walden, (53)

- A. Preparation to write** -- Identify something you currently do simply because that is the way [your parent, your family, your friends] do it, or because "that's the way it's always been done," but which, given the complete freedom to choose, you would do either differently or not at all. Briefly describe this condition/situation; identify the reasons why you would prefer to change the way you do this; identify what you would gain or lose by choosing to follow your own inclinations in this matter.
- B. Journal** -- Write an essay in which you address the questions, Why do you think most of us, most often, "follow along"? What internal tensions are created by following the crowd? By choosing not to follow the crowd? What are the pros and cons of finding your own way in life?

"The student who secures his coveted leisure and retirement by systematically shirking any labor necessary to man obtains but an ignoble and unprofitable leisure, defrauding himself of the experience which alone can make leisure fruitful. 'But,' says one, 'you do not mean that the students should go to work with their hands instead of their heads?' I do not mean that exactly, but I mean something which he might think a good deal like that; I mean that they should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics. If I wished a boy to know something about the arts and sciences, for instance, I would not pursue the common course, which is merely to send him into the neighborhood of some professor, where anything is professed and practised [sic] but the art of life; . . . Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month, -- the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this -- or the boy who had attended the lectures on metallurgy at the Institute in the meanwhile, and had received a Rodgers penknife from his father?"

Walden, (pp. 39 - 40)

- A. Preparation to write** -- Identify a skill or talent which you have learned about or developed by doing. Make some notes about how the learning process occurred. Then, research at either the library or on-line what materials and advice are available to someone who knows nothing about this area. Include in this investigation of resources any lessons or classes you took that did NOT have a major "hands on" element. Compare your own experience and expertise with what you find in "How To" sources.
- B. Journal** -- Write an essay that compares/contrasts what one would learn about a particular body of knowledge in two separate ways: first, by reading about it or consulting "experts" only (as in, if you were to do library research or attend a lecture on the subject); and second, by doing that same activity, finding out what you needed to know from other sources *when* and *if* you needed to. Your own experience, identified above, will be the example that illustrates and supports your observations. Either begin or conclude your essay by responding to the question posed in the quote about the boy and the knife .

"Meanwhile my beans, the length of whose rows, added together, was seven miles already planted, were impatient to be hoed, for the earliest had grown considerably before the latest were in the ground. . . What shall I learn of beans or beans of me? My auxiliaries are the dews and rains which water this dry soil, and what fertility is in the soil itself, which for the most part is lean and effete. My enemies are worms, cool days, and most of all woodchucks.... When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from Boston to this my native town, through these very woods and this field, to the pond. . . The pines still stand here older than I; or, if some have fallen, I have cooked my supper with their stumps, and a new growth is rising all around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes. Almost the same johnswort springs from the same perennial root in this pasture. . . it was only about fifteen years since the land was cleared, and I myself had got out two or three cords of stumps, . . . but in the course of the summer it appeared by the arrowheads which I turned up in hoeing, that an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here and planted corn and beans ere white men came to clear the land. . . As I drew a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day.. . It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans, what with planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and threshing, and picking over and selling them, -- the last was the hardest of all, -- I might add eating, for I did taste. I was determined to know beans.

Walden, (pp. 107 - 111)

- A. Preparation to write** -- Determine to **know** something deeply and variously. Choose your favorite *fresh* fruit or vegetable. Get one. Sit with it for a period of time without touching it. Put it in your hand, close your eyes, and "know" it through your fingers. Smell it for at least one full minute. Take a bite, if it's edible in its raw state. Go to a gardening resource and gather facts about its cultivation or growing habits. What conditions does it require? What are its enemies? How many varieties are there? Research its uses. Research its past - has it always been used as it is today? (For example, in the early 1800's, apple pie was not served as a dessert, but rather as part of the entree.) How far back in time is there evidence of its consumption? Is it linked to any cultural traditions? Check several cookbooks and determine how many ways it can be prepared. Does it always belong to one or another part of the meal, such as a side vegetable, or can it also appear in the bread, the appetizer, the dessert? Check the aisles of the supermarket. In how many forms can this fruit or vegetable be purchased? Talk to family members or friends to find out what they know of this food.
- B. Journal** -- How does knowing about something in depth alter your perception of that item? Use the above activity as illustration of your insights and conclusions. What other things besides foodstuffs do you think would benefit from our knowing in depth?

"As with our colleges, so with a hundred 'modern improvements;' there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. Either is in such a predicament as the man who was earnest to be introduced to a distinguished deaf woman, but when he was presented, and one end of her ear trumpet was put into his hand, had nothing to say. As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough."

Walden, (p. 40)

- A. Preparation to write** -- Over the next two weeks, spend several diverse periods observing conversations around you. Enter a chat room as an objective observer, not a contributor. Sit in on a casual conversation among classmates or family, but do not participate. Be as unobtrusive about this as possible. Make note of the topics being discussed in a variety of these kinds of situations. (Your observations will not be as useful if you do this only once.) While doing this activity, avoid situations that include members of your class, as that will alter the spontaneity of the conversations.
- B. Journal** -- Discuss your observations of what people talk about. Evaluate the significance of the various subjects - how much of this talk is about very important things? (Please, exercise discretion - do not talk about anything which others would consider embarrassing or private!) This is, of course, a subjective approach, so you will need to explain what you consider "important." Is what we talk about during a casual encounter indicative in any way of what we really care about, or who we really are? Explain your response to this question.

"No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience. . . Who could wear a patch, or two extra seams only, over the knee? Most behave as if they believed that their prospects for life would be ruined if they should do it. It would be easier for them to hobble to town with a broken leg than with a broken pantaloons. . . It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes.

Walden, (pp. 19 - 20)

A. Preparation to write -- Choose one of the following options:

1. Go to a public place where NONE of your classmates will be, wearing an outfit that is completely out of style. Look at old photos or magazines of a few years ago to get a sense of what's been changed. Hunt in your closet. Borrow from a sibling or parent. The purpose is to find something that is noticeably "out." Do not tell anyone why you are choosing to wear this outfit.

2. Convince a sibling or parent to wear something which has been discarded not because it is no longer serviceable, but only because it is out of fashion. If you are unsuccessful in your persuasion, note the arguments that person made against doing what you've asked. If you are successful, be sure to follow the activity with a discussion about how this activity made that person feel while he/she was doing it.

B. Journal -- If you yourself have worn the out of date clothing, respond in your journal to what was going through your head while preparing to do so, and what thoughts you had during and after doing so. If you chose option #2, summarize the exchange that took place with the person you tried to convince; describe the level of resistance to the idea which this person made. After the initial exchange took place, and after the person has finished the activity [or not], what ideas came out in the discussion you had with this person? In light of the results of this experiment, how do you respond to the opinion expressed in the quotation?