

Bill Schechter, Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School

Meet Mr. Thoreau

ABOUT THE COURSE...

An Introduction

Several years ago, it occurred to me that while L-S was an excellent school, it might as well be located in Cleveland, Ohio, for all that the school, its curriculum, and its students related to our local environment. What made this sense of “disconnection” seem both unfortunate and ironic is that this is an area that tourists from all over the world stream to. And when the Minuteman National Park is completed, millions more will come.

Why do they come?

Part of the story you know. Here were established the first settlements of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, over one-hundred and fifty years before the country itself was founded. Here, only a few miles from the school, one of the key battles of the King Phillips Indian war was fought. In this area, the American Revolution began, Paul Revere rode, and the Minutemen fought.

Only slightly less well known is the fact this area was also the site of a second revolution, though of a more intellectual nature. In Concord, out of which the town of Lincoln was carved, the Transcendentalist Movement was born in the 1830's. Inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and carried forward by Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau, the movement challenged mainstream religious views and social values. Though the Transcendentalists were never more than a handful in number, their vision anticipated the poetry of Walt Whitman, the Beat Rebellion of the 1950's, the political revolt and the counter-culture of the 1960's, and the emergence of an environmental consciousness in the United State in the 1970's.

Lincoln and Sudbury were part of this transcendental world. Thoreau spoke at Bemis Hall in Lincoln. He wrote about Nine-Acre Corner and walked to Nobscot Mountain, where he bemoaned the likelihood that walkers in the future might never know the taste of a wild apple.

Least well known to both tourists or residents is the fact that there is yet another world in this area, a natural world. It is one that connects us directly to the transcendentalists of a century-and-a-half ago. Of course Walden Pond is justly famous and beautiful to behold (that is, when you can find a spot in the parking lot!). However, the huge Sudbury River valley, just a mile below the school, remains a largely unchanged wilderness. As Emerson said, this “other world” is but “one paddle away.” This river

valley is the commanding natural fact of the area, yet we can easily go a whole year at L-S without thinking once about it.

History...Ideas...Nature...No, this is not Cleveland, Ohio.

Thoreau once said that he “had traveled a good deal in Concord.” While this must have seemed a modest accomplishment to many of his Harvard classmates, it really expresses Thoreau’s conviction that the wonders of the universe can be found anywhere you happen to be. Walden can be in your backyard, and your own lawn may reveal all the grand principles of nature (well, almost).

My goal and hope in this course is that you also will have an opportunity to travel “a good deal”: To travel through a mind that remains an interesting, luminescent, and challenging landscape...To learn about the world and the issues that shaped Thoreau...To become more aware of the world outside our own bolted school windows, a world which, after all, constitutes your own neighborhood.

As usual, Thoreau said it best:

We boast of our system of education, but why stop at school masters and schoolhouses? We are all schoolmasters and our schoolhouse is the universe. To attend chiefly to our desk or school house while we neglect the scenery in which it is placed is absurd.

Organization

“What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free, meandering stream.” So said Mr. Thoreau. I can’t promise that this course will always keep that brook free flowing, but I will try. Thoreau had many different sides to him, and several of those sides might be expressed at any given time.

Asked by his Harvard class secretary to report on his life in the several years since his graduation, Thoreau wrote with pointed humor: “I will give you some of the monster’s heads. I am a Schoolmaster-a private Tutor-a Surveyor-a Gardener-a Farmer-a Painter, I mean a House-Painter-a Carpenter, a Mason, A Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-Paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster [a poor poet]...” This kind of life does not lend itself to a straight cut ditch.

For this reason, we will not be moving in this course in a linear way, with sequential units. If you crave chronology, the Harding biography can supply this in a clear and engaging way.

Units:

Thoreau: The Man & His Times

- An Overview
- Journaling

- Exploring Concord
- Cabin Solo's begin

The Naturalist

- Religion and Transcendentalism
- "Walking"
- "Walden"
- Various Nature Projects
- The Simplicity Project

The Social Critic

- The Pencil Project
- The Utopia Project
- "Life Without Principle"

The Political Rebel

- Overview
- In Defense of Captain John Brown
- On Civil Disobedience
- The 'Taking A Stand Project'

Content & Pedagogy

Because this is an elective class which you take in addition to your regular course load, I will be very mindful that there's a limit to how much additional academic work you can take on. There will be no formal essays or papers to write in this course. However, I do want you to feel that you have learned something--perhaps even some important things. Here how I envisage the work load:

Reading:

- The following essays, possibly with some abridgement:
 - Life Without Principle
 - A Pleas for Captain John Brown
 - Civil Disobediance
 - Walking
- Excerpts from the following books:
 - Walden
 - The Heart of Thoreau's Journals (Shepard, ed.)
 - The Days of Henry Thoreau (Harding)
- Aphorisms from the writings of Thoreau

- Miscellaneous handouts & poems

Writing:

- Journals

Each student will keep one.
More specific directions will be given to you soon.

- Presentations of individual or group projects

A word on pedagogy: I do not see this as lecture course. We will use a regular classroom for discussions of readings, etc. But at other times we will be up and around: Camping, boating, working in the wood shop, taking photographs, going for walks, watching the sun rise over Walden Pond, re-tracing Thoreau's footsteps in Concord, etc. I want you to learn about the man, his mind, and his world. I also want you share in some of the very same experiences that he had, and then have you compare your own reactions to his.

I would make education a pleasant thing both to the teacher and the scholar. This discipline, which we allow to be the end of life, should not be one thing in the schoolroom, and another in the street. We should seek to be fellow students with the pupil, and we should learn of, as well as with him, if we would be most helpful to him...

- Henry David Thoreau

These words set a high and happy standard which I will do my best to emulate as we go forth to meet Mr. Thoreau.

UNIT ONE

PREPARING TO DISCUSS "LIFE WITHOUT PRINCIPLE"

1. "Let us consider the way we spend our lives." OK! Please do this in a paragraph or so.
2. Do you feel society (and everyone in it) is too busy and works too much?

What would you do if there was less work expected of you? How would you choose to spend your time?

3. Would you like to be rich? Or do you believe that money corrupts people? Explain.

4. What do you want to do “when you grow up? On what basis did you choose this career?

5. What do you think about state lottery? Should the state have one? Explain.

6. Have you found your religious leaders to be inspiring “moral teachers”?

7. Are most of your personal discussions at school (with friends) deeply meaningful? Or are they mostly “surface” and gossip?

8. Does the media fill your head with trivia or serious issues? Which would you rather it fill your head with?

9. Can a program like “Jerry Springer” or “Howard Stern” do violence and lasting damage to your mind.?

10. Does the American emphasis on “business” make our country great or does it narrow our society?

11. How would you characterize the effect of politics on your life?

Cock-a-doodle-doo!!

The 1st Annual Lincoln-Sudbury

Animal Call Competition

“I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer [a rooster] in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.” / Thoreau in Walden

You know that Lincoln-Sudbury already has an excellent oratory contest. This assignment will culminate in the school’s 1st Animal Oratory Contest. It will give you an ample opportunity to wake your neighbors and classmates up. You need to give your best imitation of the call of any animal you choose, from any continent you prefer: lions, yellow warblers, groundhogs, lizards, etc, etc.

May the best animal orator win!

ps: I will tell you in class how to get a copy of the call.

An Art Project A Thoreauvian Masterpiece

The masterpiece will be yours. The subject will be Thoreau's. Please choose one of your favorite aphorisms from Thoreau's writings [See Mindprints]. By hand or computer, please write the quotation on a piece of paper at least 11x17 in size. Use the rest of the paper to illustrate the quote. You can paint or draw or construct a collage. Your art work can be realistic or abstract.

Go where your inspiration takes you.

The General Ludd Memorial Discussion

Progress or Doomgress?

Thoreau, the social critic, had complicated views about industrial and technological progress. He wasn't against all change, but he was much more skeptical than many of his fellow Americans. How do you evaluate the following recent changes or inventions? Do they represent genuine progress? Or, perchance, "doomgress"??

The automobile

E-mail

Television

The Internet

Home computers

Cellular phones

Automation/ Robotization

Suburbs

Credit Cards

The VCR

Video/ Virtual reality games

Home shopping network

Malls

Superstores

Beeper

The
Memorial Thoreau Pencil
“Invent Something Anything”
Project

Thoreau’s interests and abilities ran in many different directions. While he tended to be a critic of technological change, he himself invented several methods for improving the production of pencils, which was the Thoreau family business. These improvements ranged from new machines to grind the lead, to new formulations for the lead paste, to new ways of baking the lead, to new ways of inserting the lead. The Thoreau company was the first to offer pencils of varying hardness and, for many years, they were among the finest in the country.

Your assignment is to explore the inventive mind by trying to create two inventions:

1] An improved pencil design (This you will actually fabricate in the woodshop);

2] Anything else. (This you can either fabricate or draw a blueprint type picture of).

• EXTRA CREDIT:

Extra credit will be given to who ever can reach into a bag and, without looking, pick up exactly twenty-four pencils, something Thoreau was reputed to be able to do time after time.

UNIT TWO

JOHN BROWN -The Bare Facts-

On October 26, 1859, a militant abolitionist John Brown led a band of 22 men in an attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry Virginia (now West Virginia). Brown, who had previously fought proponents of slavery in “Bleeding Kansas,” planned to steal guns from the arsenal and take them into the Appalachian Mountains from which he

planned to free slaves and, possibly, form a guerrilla army. This army, some believe, would have worked its way down the mountain chain, raiding slave plantations and helping to organize a general slave uprising.

Brown believed that slavery was a “system of brute force” which could be overturned only through the use of superior force. He was also a religious man, who believed that, in opposing slavery, he acting as an instrument of God’s will. In his opposition to slavery he was defiantly uncompromising. Some considered him a fanatic, “a religious zealot,” one who was delusional in thinking that he had heard the voice of God.

Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry went awry from the start. Before the raiders managed to secure the arsenal, a warning bell was rung and a telegraph message was sent through to Washington. The next day a contingent of the U.S. Army, under the command of the then loyal Lt. Colonel Robert E. Lee, cornered Brown and his men in a small brick firehouse which has since become known as “John Brown’s Fort.” Before the raid was over 5 civilians from the town, ten of Brown’s men, and one soldier were killed. Among the dead were two of Brown’s sons. Brown himself was seriously wounded. Six of his men escaped.

After being captured, Brown was arrested and tried for murder and insurrection. He was found guilty and, on December 2, was hanged, along with seven of his men. John’s Brown’s raid failed in its immediate object. Most historians would agree, however, that it was one of the factors that brought north/south relations to the boiling point. It helped polarize the sectional crisis, encouraging southerners to consider secession. It helped bring on the Civil War, which in turn led Lincoln, on January 1, 1863 to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves.

Brown was buried at his family farm in the Adirondacks, in New York State. His house has been preserved as well as his grave site. Somewhat incongruously, the little farm house sits huddled in the shadows of the new giant Olympic ski jumps near Lake Placid. Throughout the Civil War, union soldiers marched into battle singing the song: “John Brown’s body lies a moldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on.”

Your Journal

“What are you doing now?” he asked.

“Do you keep a journal?”

So I make my first entry today...

-Henry David Thoreau,

October 22, 1837

Above appears the first entry that Thoreau made in his new journal, after the journal-keeping idea was suggested to him by his mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. By the

time that Thoreau died in 1862, he had written over two million words in a journal that runs to 14 volumes. His journals were filled with his private thoughts as well as his observations about society and nature. Scholars agree that the material in his journals provided the basis for much of his poetry, lectures, and essays. His regular entries were his compost and topsoil.

Almost all the writing you will be required to write this semester will be journal entries. They should contain your reactions to his essays, aphorisms drawn from his work, as well as your own related thoughts about life, nature, and society. A journal is a great place to reflect, to mull, to ruminate, to observe, and to take a walk or two around your thoughts and perceptions.

I will soon explain to you how many entries you need to do, and by when.

For the teacher, there is nothing more exciting than reading a journal which is authentic, honest, and thoughtful. There is nothing more pointless than reading one which is written mechanically and lacks heart.

Thoreau said it best: “Write often, [and] write upon a thousand themes, rather than long at a time”.....A journal is “a book that shall contain a record of all your joy, your ecstasy.”

Write on.

The Great
Fallen Leaf
Project:

Your Own ‘Autumnal Tints’

Due:

This assignment will take you back to those carefree years of elementary school, when your biggest worry was coloring rather than SATs. In 1862, two years before he died, Thoreau wrote an essay called “Autumnal Tints.” It is considered a classic of nature writing. In it, he describes New England’s greatest harvest: the falling of our autumnal leaves. Thoreau tried to capture in words the vivid colors that continue to astound foreign tourists to this area. He expressed a wish that he could have found a way to preserve the leaves so that he might use them as illustrations in the essay.

Your assignment: Collect between 5 and 10 autumn leaves affix them with pride in a book of your making. On the same page, try to “see” the leaf as for the first time and briefly (a paragraph or two) describe it in words. Consider this an exercise in nature-writing. You can choose prose or poetry to express yourself.

LIFE WITHOUT PRINCIPLE

1) What was his main argument? Why did he see American life as lacking in principle?

- His best, most significant lines?
- What lines or passages didn't you understand?

2. Is his analysis of American society still relevant today or is it obsolete? Did you find yourself disagreeing with him? Do you feel the essay has personal application to your own life

3. How would you define a life with principle? What does it mean to be "pure"? Would your definitions differ from his?

4. Is your community, family, and school preparing you for a "principled life" as you define it?

YOUR UTOPIA, MY UTOPIA

-An Exercise-

Please plan your perfect community, the place of your dreams. In doing so, please consider the following details of life for starters:

- What do people do for a living: do they work in the community (if so, at what?) or work outside?
- Is the community located in the city, suburbs, or country?
- How many people live there?
- How does one join?
- Do people live as conventional families? As isolated individuals? As a commune?
- Do men and women live together?
- Are children raised by their birth parents or by the group, together?
- What is the school like? How is it organized? What is taught? Is it the same or different than L-S?

- What's a typical day?
- Who is allowed to have sex, and at what age?
- Is there monogamy? Is there conventional marriage, or some unconventional arrangement?
- What kind of food is served?
- What is the division of labor in the community? How is it determined who does what? Are tasks different for men and women?
- How is it determined who gets what pay? Are people to be paid equally? Does all money go to the group? Does the surplus go to the group?
- Do young people date? What do teenagers do (up to the age of 18)? What's their role?
- Is there a common religion that binds the community together?
- How is the community governed?
- What is the name of the community?
- Can anyone join? Can people take everything they bought with them if they leave?

Other issues and aspects of life?

- What would the community look like from a helicopter?

The
Nature as Art as Nature As Art
Project

Due:

For this project, I would like you to create a work of art, using only natural materials that you find in nature. I will show you a sample.

Nature as Literature
An Exercise in Writing & Sauntering

Thoreau is considered one of our greatest and earliest nature writers. His ability to describe the nature around him derives equally from his power of observation and the power of his pen.

This exercise has two parts:

1) Please describe for others in the class, a place that is very special and familiar to you, concentrating on its natural setting. The place can be as close as your backyard or as far as a thousand miles away.

2) We are then going to take a walk. You can take notes as we go. When we return, I'd like you to write down what you saw.

The Poetry of Nature

Due:

Here are some examples of poems about nature. Please read them. Which one(s) did you like best, and why? Which one most puzzled you?

Please try to write one of your own.

On Civil Disobedience

READING QUESTIONS (FOR DISCUSSIONS & JOURNAL)

1. You have been taught to follow the rules and obey the law. How does Thoreau argue against this?
2. Why did Thoreau believe the right to revolution was applicable in his time?
3. What moral obligation does he believe every citizen has? How does this apply to your own life? Does it?
4. What does Thoreau mean when he says, "Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine"?
5. How does he think that a just minority can work its will?

6. Do you agree with Thoreau's theory of civil disobedience, and his general view about the proper relationship between the government and the individual?

A Plea for Captain John Brown

READING QUESTIONS (FOR DISCUSSIONS & JOURNAL)

1. How do Thoreau's neighbors and the newspapers characterize Brown?
2. How does Thoreau characterize him?
3. How does Brown illuminate, for Thoreau, the role of the individual in history? In what ways does Brown fulfill Thoreau's ideal of heroism? Does he fulfill your definition? Why or why not?
4. In what context does Thoreau mention Christ and the "divine"?
5. What position does Thoreau take regarding violence?
6. Is this article relevant to society today? To you? Is Thoreau too hard on people, in terms of expecting them to take action against social injustice?

Walking

READING QUESTIONS (FOR DISCUSSIONS & JOURNAL)

1. How do you interpret the meaning of the first paragraph?
2. What adjective would you apply to his attitude toward walking, and how does he contrast himself with his neighbors?
3. Why "walk like a camel"?
4. What, according to him, are the preconditions (or requirements) for taking a good walk?
5. He took many walks in Sudbury during his lifetime. Could he take a good walk in Sudbury today?

6. Why, when he walks, is he drawn to the west?
7. Why does he think that "...in wildness is the preservation of the world"? What is the main argument this essay?
8. Why does he call for a "Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance"?
9. Why is his play on words with "sauntering" a key to the meaning of the piece?
10. What impact, if any, did this piece have on you?

Life Without Principle

READING QUESTIONS (FOR DISCUSSIONS & JOURNAL)

1. In what way do many in society live without principle, according to Thoreau? How would he have them look at life differently?
2. Why is he so critical of those who have participated in the California gold rush? What kind of mining does he approve of?
3. In what ways does he find our culture shallow (see pages 5 & 6)? Is any of this still relevant?
4. Does he state or imply a remedy? Is a remedy needed today? If so, what?

UNIT THREE

Readings

- Walking
- Excerpts from Walden
- Life Without Principle
- Civil Disobedience
- A Plea for Captain John Brown

WriteNow

Due:

“Simplify, Simplify..”
A Project in Doing Without

Thoreau was an eloquent advocate of the simple life. Turning a common belief on its head, Thoreau claimed a man was rich in proportion to the number of things he could without. He himself went to live by Walden Pond in search of the simple life.

Does simplicity enrich, as Thoreau contended? Does it help clear away the trivia that distracts us from deeper insights into nature and into ourselves –“the essential facts of life” --Walden

Or does “living simply” just cause us inconvenience and a sense of deprivation? This is your opportunity to find out. For the next week, choose something that you value owning or doing, and do without it. Then discuss in your journal how the experience affected you.

So tell me...

ARE YOU A LUDDITE?

An in-class reading and writing assignment

In one of the the most amazing, tightly-written, closely reasoned, and unbelievably clear arguments you have ever attempted to put down on paper, please explain in one page why you are or are not a Luddite (or, more precisely, a “neo-Luddite”). Before giving your conclusions, show that you understand the complex issues involved—pro and con—and what is at stake.

Before you attempt this writing assignment (shucks, let’s call it a “writing challenge”), you must do the readings.

WriteNow

THE
“Seeing Nature”
PROJECT

Due:

For Thoreau, and the other Transcendentalists, Nature was nothing less than a reflection of the divine, the very face of God. By observing the smallest organism as well as the largest natural creations, one could learn the truths and principles that organized

nature and the universe. From this knowledge, a person could better understand the outside world, but also the reality and nature of their own divinity. But the observations of nature needed to be careful and sustained.

Thoreau said, "The question is not what you look at but what you see." This thought underlies this project.

What you need to do:

1) NATURE WRITING: Choose a natural phenomenon to observe, from the sky to a houseplant to a scene outside your house or scene on a walk, and anything and everything in between). Your observation should be as sustained as possible, over hours, days, or weeks. Write down your observations in your journal, as well as any thoughts you have in reaction to you what you see. Turn this into your own attempt at nature writing. I am interesting in the sheer power of pure physical description. Can you capture what you see in words? If your physical description evolves into a description or reflection of a larger issue, so much the better.

2) PHOTO: Take a photograph or draw a picture that allows us to "see" nature in a what you consider to be a different (perhaps more truthful) way.

3) FIND A POEM about nature that you like. Prepare to share it with the class. Make copies if possible.

4) WRITE A POEM: Write a nature poem based on something you have seen or observed, recently or way back when or have dreamed about

5) COLLECT A LEAF: Collect a leaf,

Be prepared to share the fruits of your "seeing" after the project is done. May your work help us to see more truly!

Due:

The
Solitude
Project

On July 4th 1845, Henry David Thoreau went to live on the shores of Walden Pond in search of the solitude he felt he needed to "confront the essential facts of life." This project will require you to experience something that hasn't changed one bit since Thoreau's time: solitude.

This assignment requires each of you to experience solitude and then reflect on that experience.

In your journal, include also your own definition of “solitude.” Is it the absence of something? The presence of something? Or what?

The length and character of your “solitude experience” should be shaped by your definition.

Be prepared to discuss your journal entry.

UNIT FIVE

Bill Schechter
Lincoln-Sudbury Regional H.S.
Sudbury, Mass.

1. Course Introduction
2. Readings For Meet. Mr. Thoreau
3. Thoreau’s Life/ Summary
4. What We Knew
5. Journal Instructions
6. Transcendentalism/ Exercise
7. Transcendentalism/ A Sketch
8. Invention & Pencil Project
9. Nature As Literature
10. Nature As Art Project
11. Poetry of Nature
12. Leaf Project
13. The Seeing Nature Project
14. The Solitude Project
15. The Simplify Project
16. Thoreau On Progress
17. “Doomgress” Discussion
18. Thoreau As Social Critic
19. Thoreau As Political Activist
20. John Brown/ The Bare Facts
21. Violence Discussion
24. In The Course Homestretch
25. Thoreau Woodstock
26. Thoreau Final Project
27. Thoreau Masterpiece Project
28. Animal Calls

- 29. Thoreau Letter
- 30. Thoreau On Teachers Exam
- 31. Reading Questions
- 32. Life Without Principle/ Questions

WriteNow

FINAL PROJECT

For your final project, I would like you to illustrate your favorite Thoreau quotation (see essays, see MindPrints, see Journal Drippings, see handouts) in some creative way.

This can be done through art work, photography, a collage, a mobile, a diorama made of things found around the house, things that move, who knows! Just make it amazing. Is that too much to ask?

The quotation can be as short as a sentence or as long as a paragraph. The quotation itself should be found somewhere in or on the creative representation you make.

It is due the last day of exams.

Scientific grading system: If I say “Wow!” you get an “A”. If I say, “Ah!” you get a “B+”. I say “Hey!” you get a “B”. If I say, “Well!” you get a “B-”. If say, “Hmm?” you get a “C+”. If I say, “Wha?” you get a “C”. If I say, “Eh!” you get a C- If I say, “Ich!” you get a “D”. If you don’t hand it in, you get an “F”.

THE HOME STRETCH:

One Last Time Around The Pond

1) Walden Woodstock

Read, share, or play any song or poems you know that touch on or express, in some way, Thoreauvian themes on nature technological change, or taking a political stand.

2) A Thoreauvian Charade Parade

Choose three quotes from MindPrints or one of Thoreau’s writings that you particularly like. Be prepared to express them through charades. No mouth. Only hands. You can do the entire quote or one or two key lines within it.

3) The Art of Thought

Take your absolute favorite quote and represent it artistically, either through drawing, painting, collage, sculpture, dance, or whatever (especially whatever.)

4) “The Call of The Wild”: The First Non-Human Oratory Contest at L-S.

You will be given a bird or animal sound (hopefully of your choice). Then let’s hear your “Call of the Wild.” It’s been building up inside of you for decades. Now let it out! This will be a judged competition.

5) Perchance a Guest Speaker

WriteNow

December 22, 2000
Mr. Richard Devlin, President
American General
2929 Allen Parkway
Houston, TX 77019

Dear Sir:

We write to inquire why you feel it is fair for your company to appropriate the words of Henry David Thoreau as a way of advertising the services that your company offers. ‘Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you’ve imagined!’--these are the supposedly Thoreauvian words that your advertising messages highlight, in what is apparently a rough paraphrase of the author's far more eloquent words toward the end of his book, *Walden*.

The problem with using his words--whether correctly quoted or not--to augment your company’s profit line is simply this: in almost everything he wrote, Thoreau denigrated the importance of money, or of living one’s life in order to make money, in favor of living simply. Indeed, he warned in his essay “Life Without Principle” that “the ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward” and he urged instead that we “sink a shaft...to the gold” within us.

Thoreau was a man who took ideas and principles seriously. It seems wrong to bend his life around 180 degrees to suit your company’s purposes, particularly as he is no longer here to defend himself. Wouldn’t your company perform more of a service, in addition to its other good works, by helping to educate a new generation of Americans to the enduring, powerful, and challenging ideas of this great American writer?

Sincerely,

The "Meet Mr. Thoreau" class
Lincoln-Sudbury Regional H.S.
Sudbury, MA. 01776
(just five miles from Walden Pond)

THOREAU ON
TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE
& PROGRESS

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. ...We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New, but perhaps the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.

-1849

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.

-Walden

After all, a man whose horse trots a mile a minute does not carry the most important messages; he is not an evangelist, nor does he come round eating locusts and wild honey.

-Walden

Men think 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...; but whether they should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers [railroad ties], and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives and improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in a season? But if we stay at home, who will want railroads? We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us. Do you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man...The rails are laid on them...They are sound sleepers I assure you.

-Walden

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn.

-Walden

July 3, 1998
Editor
Boston Globe

To The Editor:

With respect to the issue of what qualities we need to check for in prospective teachers, and the utility of the new state teachers exam in helping us discern those qualities, a quotation from a Henry D. Thoreau, himself a former public school teacher, is relevant. Of another great American, Thoreau wrote: "He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way and righted up a falling man."

Shame on those who think that this idiotic, imperfect exam is reliable as the sole assessment in separating good teachers from bad, whether among those who flunked or among those who passed or between them. If this kind of test sets the standard, we're in big trouble. Those charged with saving public education clearly haven't got a clue about what makes for effective classroom teachers. Facts are stubborn things. Eventually-- hopefully soon--the testing fever will break, and we can move on from defining pronouns and the quick fix.

As for the few points that separated the lowered passed grade from the new "more rigorous" one, they provided a far more significant measurement of political demagoguery than of teacher candidate competence.

Bill Schechter
History Dept.
Lincoln-Sudbury Regional HS

617-731-1525/home

WriteNow

Like even recent college graduates, Thoreau was unsure about his place in the world. Having done some teaching during his college years, he thought the classroom might be a hospitable place and accepted a job in the Concord public schools. He didn't last long. The school administration pressured him over his failure to apply corporal punishment to his students. Thoreau, who believed that education should be a pleasant experience for teachers and students, became disgusted. He chose six students at random, gave them a whack, and then wrote his letter of resignation to the Concord school committee, saying, basically, "OK, are you happy?" So much for public school teaching.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU
1817-1862

“I am a Schoolmaster--a private Tutor, a Surveyor--a Gardener, a Farmer--a Painter, I mean a House Painter, A Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glass-paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster [an inferior poet]”

No summary of a few pages can do justice to Thoreau's life. His own attempts, in his Journal, to record the meanderings of his mind used millions words. For those of you who might like to read a more complete biography of Thoreau, I would recommend *The Days of Henry Thoreau* by Walter Harding.

Thoreau was born in 1817, in Concord, Mass. For the next five years, his family moved around the area while his father searched for a way to make a living. In 1823, the family returned to Concord and the father settled into work as a pencil-maker. This business would eventually bring the family a measure of prosperity, with the help of the youngest son who helped invent new machines and processes for making pencils. David Henry (which he later changed to “Henry David”) entered Harvard University in 1833, where the president chose to remind him that, “You have barely got in.” He did well enough at school, but was something less than a social success. His classmates found him cold, detached, and somewhat strange. For his part, Thoreau found his Harvard experience very forgettable, except for use of the school's library. Even after he graduated, he successfully fought for the right to keep his borrowing privileges.

A year later, Thoreau opened his own school in Concord with his older brother John. The school seemed a success and earned the affections of its students. But this venture too came to an end after several years when his brother died of lockjaw. Though Thoreau would occasionally work as a tutor, his classroom teaching career was over.

In searching for a way to live--and to make a living, Thoreau did not have to look far. In Concord, he found an important mentor and patron: Ralph Waldo Emerson. By this time, Emerson--the latest in a line of ministers from an influential Concord family--had become one of America's most celebrated writers. His transcendental essays had inspired an intellectual movement and had made Concord its hub. This is one reason Thoreau spoke of being fortunate to have been raised in the town, and to have been born there “in the very nick of time.” In Emerson, Thoreau found an example of an intellectual who made his living by lecturing and writing. In his transcendental philosophy, Thoreau found ideas which imparted a deeper purpose to his long-time interest in nature and which came to define his life's purpose. It was also Emerson who suggested to Thoreau that he keep a journal.

After 1839, the landmarks in Thoreau's life were less outward events and more his literary work and intellectual explorations. In that year, Thoreau and his brother made a trip on local rivers, and this forms the basis of his first major work, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac*.

He began to lecture at the Concord Lyceum. He published some magazine articles. Through it all, even as he moved from occupation to occupation, finally settling into surveying, he continued his most important work: sauntering through the fields and forests of Concord (and Lincoln and Sudbury!), studying nature, and finding in it important insights into life, society, and the higher purposes of the “the divine.” His observations and reflections found their way into his journal, and from this record came his better known essays and lectures.

On July 4, 1845, Thoreau initiated his most deliberate experiment, building a simple cabin on the shores of Walden Pond and residing there for two years, two months, and two days. There he lived on close terms with nature, seeing what lessons it had to teach about the fundamental questions of human existence. He ultimately lefts because, he tells us, the time had come and he “had other lives to live.” The story of his experiment can be found in his most famous essay, *Walden*, which, with his other work, helped to develop an environmental consciousness in America.

Thoreau’s idyllic Walden years were interrupted by a brief but famous stay in the Concord jail, following his arrest for refusing to pay taxes. He felt that he could not in good conscience help to finance the government’s war on Mexico, which he believed would result in the expansion of slavery. Though his jailing lasted only one night (thanks to an anonymous samaritan who paid his fine--much to Thoreau’s disgust!), the reverberations of this event would echo through the Twentieth Century. It would inspire Thoreau’s essay *Civil Disobedience*, in which he argued that the individual human conscience was superior to any system of law. His political ideas would also profoundly influence the thinking of great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1859, Thoreau entered the public political arena once again, coming to the defense of militant abolitionist John Brown. Thoreau’s willingness to speak out--loudly, clearly, and repeatedly-- against slavery distinguished him from many of his transcendentalist friends.

To the end of his life, Thoreau continued to “travel a great deal in Concord,” studying its people, and its fauna and flora. He also made important excursions to the Maine woods, to Cape Cod, and to the White Mountains. He became one of our great natural scientists (he preferred the term “natural historian”), and was the second person in the United States to read Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. He came to support Darwin’s theory about evolution and, in one of his last works (just recently published), Thoreau showed how it operated through the dispersion of seeds and forest succession.

Throughout his life, Henry Thoreau “marched to a different drummer,” refusing to accept the social conventions and values of his neighbors that didn’t make sense to him. In his walks, in his writing, in his political stands, he went his own way, trying to live a life of serious purpose and uncompromising principle.

Though he considered himself a poet, he never wrote the great verse he had hoped to. Perhaps he explained his own failure best:

“My life has been the poem I could have writ, but I could not both live an utter it.”

He died on May 6, 1862, at the age of 44. In his eulogy, Emerson said that “no

truer American existed than Thoreau” and that “the country does not know yet...how great a son it has lost.” Here history provides a happier ending, for Thoreau’s fame and importance has grown greatly since his time, receiving a great boost of appreciation during the 1960’s. And in our own confusing times, on our own poor, polluted planet, it is still growing, as people continue to turn to the brilliant, eccentric mind of that Concord mystic to help illuminate the way ahead.

Thoreau Woodstock

Please bring to class a song that you think is Thoreauvian in spirit, in terms of its political, social, or environmental commentary. If you can bring in a copy of the lyrics, so much the better.

CURRICULUM FINAL

An Introduction to Transcendentalism
YOUR VIEWS ON
NATURE AND RELIGION

1. How can one find truth and, specifically, the meaning of life? Can you find it by reasoning? How would you define “reason”?
2. What is the relationship between these two words: “religion” and “spirituality”? Are they the same?
3. If you believe in God, how do you understand the problem of salvation? How does one find God? How is one to be “saved”? How does one find a place in Heaven?
4. Have you ever had a “religious experience”? Where and when?
5. How would you describe your own personal relationship to nature?
6. Do you support the current environment movement? If so, why?

A brief sketch of
Transcendentalism

There is no understanding Henry David Thoreau, the source of his inspiration and the rationale for his life’s work, without appreciating the ideas that shaped his view of the world.

Thoreau was a self-described “transcendentalist,” one of a group of influential New England writers shaped by the intellectual movement of the same name. By the time of his graduation from Harvard, Thoreau had been introduced to transcendentalist ideas by his mentor and Concord neighbor, the eminent Concord writer Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The American transcendentalist movement, itself part of the broader 19th Century European Romantic movement, was inspired by the publication of Emerson’s essay, “Nature” in 1836 and “Self-Reliance” in 1841. Like other Romantics, American transcendentalists rejected the prevailing “philosophy of empiricism” which held that all knowledge comes from experience, from information acquired by the five senses and the intellectual capacity to reason.

While transcendentalists agreed that knowledge of the physical environment (or “matter”) was acquired this way, they asserted that each and every individual could also learn about a higher reality, the “world of the spirit,” through an inborn power. Known as common sense or “intuition,” this trans-scendental power functioned above and beyond the five senses. The faculty of “intuition” provided every person with their own ability to know what is absolutely true.

Transcendentalists saw nature not only as beautiful, but as a reflection of divinity--literally, the face of God. They believed that the “macrocosm” (the universe) and the “microcosm” (the individual) were directly connected. Both also contained the divine, as well as all other objects, animate and inanimate. They believed that the purpose of human life was union with the so-called “over-soul” which embraced--and was reflected in-- everything in the world. People could develop their potential by immersing themselves in the beauty of the natural world. Beauty and truth could be experienced only through intuition, though careful observation of nature might help to uncover its laws and provide a glimpse into the divine.

Though transcendentalists were preoccupied with the “world of spirit,” they tended to be anti-religious, that is, they felt that organized churches obstructed the individual’s relationship to God. They felt that the authority of organized religion needed to be rejected and that people needed to find God within themselves, through the power of “intuition.” In pursuit of this divine knowledge, seekers needed to be prepared to resist accepted social codes and customs. Truth could be found in nature and within one’s self. Self-reliance and individuality--not obedience to outside authority--were the pathways to self-understanding and to the divine. Only by being true to one’s spiritual quest, by being prepared to really “see” nature around and within one’s self and to “listen” to one’s intuitive power, could one find Truth--and God.

[This sketch relies heavily on the Encarta (1995) and World Book (1997) Electronic Encyclopedias for content and some phrasing.]

Wrap-Up Discussion

Utopianism

1. What did you find most attractive about the Shakers and their way of life, based on the movie you saw?
 2. What did you find least attractive, from your own personal point of view?
 3. The Shakers and Thoreau provide two very different varieties of utopian thinking and experimentation. The former chose a collective path at Canterbury and elsewhere, Thoreau a very individualistic one at Walden. Using your own present life as your starting point, how would your way of life have to change to move you closer to fulfilling your own conception of utopianism.
 4. For neo-Luddites the present, ever-accelerating technological society increasingly resembles an anti-utopian nightmare. Thoreau was skeptical about the benefits of technological progress; the Unabomber killed to try to stop it. Which way do you see technology carrying us, in a utopian or anti-utopian direction. What's your "Big Picture" assessment?
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THE ISSUE OF VIOLENCE

1. Have you ever used violence against a person? What was the circumstance?
 2. Have you ever been a victim of violence? Explain
 3. Were you ever "spanked" by your parents? What do you think about this form of punishment?
 4. Do you consider yourself a "non-violent" person? Is this a matter of principle with you? Are there situations in which you would use violence?
 5. Is war immoral? Can violence ever be the moral choice?
 6. Can the use of violence be justified in fighting a social injustice? If "yes," give an example. If "yes," where would you draw the limits?
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"Thoreau's Cabin"

WHAT WE "KNEW" ABOUT THOREAU:
Our Starting Point

- Lived on Walden Pond and did so his whole adult life
- Wrote many essays/books, e.g., "Civil Disobedience"
- Friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Wrote poetry
- Built cabin by himself
- Works not popular at time
- Liked nature, wrote about it
- Thrifty/ "cheap"
- Travelled in Maine
- Against Industrial Revolution
- Visited Sudbury/ Nobscoot connection
- Philosopher
- Led simple life, few possessions
- Read deeply into classics
- Lived alone
- Visited Harvard, Ma.--"Fruitlands"
- Self-sufficient
- Was busted

All of above was written on the board by the teacher, without challenge.