

Thoreau: Desperate and Deliberate Lives

One: Introduction

1. **Who is Henry David Thoreau? (30 minutes)**
 - a. **Short answer: A 19th century New England writer and practical philosopher who lived at Walden Pond**
 - b. **OR show intro film (scroll down to *Walden* at Walden.org)**
 - c. **OR longer answer: (small groups, brief research and sketch presentations, include credible sources and two to three images)**
 - i. **Person: Who is HDT?**
 - ii. **Place: Where is Walden Pond and what did he do?**
 - iii. **Thing: What is his book, *Walden*, about, and what is its significance?**
 - iv. **People: A brief overview of the Transcendentalists**
2. **Thoreau quotes (Share a short collection of HDT quotes—select a few or do a Thoreau quotes image search.) (20 minutes)**
 - a. **Students choose one and write brief paragraph reflection, share and discuss some of these**
 - b. **Tie quotes together—from this short collection, what can we deduce about T's life and philosophy?**
 - c. **Google list—JFK to Tolstoy, EO Wilson to MLK**
 - i. **Remarkable breadth—social activists, politicians, writers, environmentalists**
3. **Introduce the living deliberately quote**
 - a. **Share key quote from Walden: “I *went to the woods* because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I *came* to die, discover that I had not lived.” (Show sign image at house site)**
 - i. **Thoughts, reactions, questions....**
 - ii. **What does it mean to ‘live deliberately’ and do we?**

4. Homework: Read the section on building his house in *Walden* (four or five pages in the middle of “Economy”)

Two: Thoreau’s House

5. Living Deliberately quote, cont. (15 minutes)

- i. What does it mean ‘to live deliberately’?**
- ii. Look up the terms ‘deliberate’ and deliberately’ and discuss**
- iii. Read aloud. Look at larger context of quote on surrounding page in *Walden*. Does this change or add to our understanding?**
- iv. Two questions come to mind**
 - 1. Do we live deliberately? Yes, no, and why?**
 - 2. What would it mean—look like—to live deliberately?**
 - 3. My own view is that we don’t as much as we think we do, and it is a skill to be developed.**
- v. We’ll examine several elements of T’s experiment beginning with central act—building and living in a small cabin/house at Walden Pond in 1845.**

6. Thoreau’s house (30 minutes)

- a. Discuss reading—impressions, questions? Does it appeal, why or not?**
- b. Images of cabin from book, modern reconstructions**
- c. Process of building—combination of new, recycled materials**
- d. How big is 10 x 15 feet? Measure and mark it out in classroom.**
- e. How does it compare w/ our homes? (small bedroom, bathroom or large closet in our modern homes!)**
- f. What would it be like living in such a small space? Do we need more? Why or why not?**
- g. Share list of furnishings from *Walden* and images—thoughts, questions?**
- h. Why is he doing this? What is his larger purpose?**

- i. **What it's not—becoming a hermit—tells us had lots of company, walked into town every day or two, social and active**
 - ii. **What it's sort of—living in nature—T spent much of his day out in nature, didn't really need to come to the pond for that**
- i. **How does it reflect his ideal of 'living deliberately'?**
 - i. **Building and living in a very small house**
 - ii. **Environmentally conscious, equitability**
 - iii. **Simplifying and economizing life**
 - iv. **Re-prioritizing life**
 - v. **Does this continue to have relevance?**

7. Tiny House Movement (15 minutes)

- a. **Another, very contemporary aspect of his influence—google sites/video, watch short intro film *Thoreau's cabin redux: Jay Shafer on tiny homes and happiness* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaE4EvM-UF4>)**
 - b. **Listen for beliefs, values behind choice**
 - c. **Familiar with this? Is it appealing? Observations,**
- 8. Homework: Read Sally Baker's online article (<https://www.tremr.com/sally-baker/the-future-of-back-to-nature-micro-living-and-henry-david-thoreau>)**

If you're interested, websites, plans for building T's house:

Thoreau Off-Grid Cabin Design Under \$1,000.

(<https://www.instructables.com/id/Thoreau-Off-Grid-Cabin-Design-Under-900/>)

Three: Thoreau's journal

- 9. Thoreau's journal—another way he chose to live deliberately**
 - a. Look at entries from T's journals available online in various places including here:**
http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals.html
 - b. For 24 yrs, beginning at age 20 in 1837 to 1861, six months before his death, kept journal**
 - i. Walls: “And this is what truly staggers the mind: from this point, Thoreau did not stop doing this, ever—not until, dying and almost too weak to hold a pen... through the end of his life, with few exceptions, Thoreau wrote a dated entry that explored whatever caught his mind that day.”**
 - ii. Often entries many pages long—would have taken hours**
 - iii. 2 million words, something like 7,000 pages**
 - iv. close observations and reflections, quick sketches, developed his insight and philosophy**
 - v. entries often drafts of books, essays—much Walden**
 - c. What role does journaling, writing serve in living deliberately?**
 - i. Does anyone keep a journal?**
 - ii. Why keep a journal? List various reasons, but**
 - iii. Key as an act of deliberate self-reflection**
- 10. Journal as experiment (Make small, pocket-sized journals of about 4x6 inches for each student with recycled manila folder cover with around a dozen pages of paper stapled inside.)**
 - a. When and What to write? At the end of the day, or whenever it strikes you. Record the activities of the day, observations or reflections, interesting or important things you thought or heard, things worth noting—why?**
 - b. How much to write? A good paragraph at least, or more. For three days.**
- 11. Homework: Read passages *Thoreau's Journal: A Life of Listening***

(<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/thoreau>); write one journal entry.

Four: Thoreau's conscience

12. Living Deliberately and Social Conscience

a. To what extent does living deliberately guide our values, beliefs, and actions?

b. Many ways to explore question of how to live deliberately one way is to consider our actions and beliefs as both individuals and members of society. Dramatically, this involved Thoreau getting arrested and spending a night in Concord jail.

1. It is a complicated backstory so here's a short article on it from *History of Massachusetts Blog* (<https://historyofmassachusetts.org/henry-david-thoreau-arrested-for-nonpayment-of-poll-tax/>)

2. Key background issues here include the Mexican-American War, slavery and expansionism, and the status of escaped slaves.

3..Here's a very good *School of Life* video on the issues and event: *Thoreau and Civil Disobedience* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gugnXTN6-D4>)

c. Confronted about his nonpayment of a small tax, T felt that paying it would be supporting a government whose policies he was in moral opposition to, and so refused. To explain his position he delivered a lecture and published an essay, since known as "Civil Disobedience."

d. The slavery issue offers an historically-based example to begin to frame and explore these ideas

13.. Reading *Civil Disobedience*

a. T's essay is challenging for students so I assign key sections, half of the overall length, excerpting about twelve pages:

- 1. The opening through the paragraph beginning, “How does it become a man to behave toward the American government today?”**
- 2. from “Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts...” through the next paragraph on voting, “All voting is a sort of gaming...”**
- 3. the long paragraph beginning, “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course...”**
- 4. from “Unjust laws exist: ...” through the paragraph beginning “If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine...”**
- 5. from “Under a government which imprisons unjustly,...” through the next paragraph beginning, “I have contemplated the imprisonment of the offender,...”**
- 6. from “I have paid no poll tax for six years...” through “This is the whole history of ‘My Prisons.’”**
- 7. the concluding paragraph, “The authority of government...”**

13. There are many interesting and important ideas to explore here, and I would offer several and add student suggestions from the reading:

- a. What is T’s criticism of majorities? What happens to minorities in a democratic system?**
- b. Can laws be unjust? How and why?**
- c. Is he right that we serve the state with our bodies, not our minds or conscience?**
- d. He says that we aren’t obligated to correct a wrong, but cannot even passively support or promote one—do we?**
- e. What do we do when our conscience is in opposition to the government?**

Some Sources:

Sally Baker. *The Future of “Back to Nature:” Micro Living and Henry David Thoreau.* (<https://www.tremr.com/sally-baker/the-future-of-back-to-nature-micro-living-and-henry-david-thoreau>)

The Morgan Library. *Thoreau’s Journal: A Life of Listening.* (<https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/thoreau>)

***Thoreau’s cabin redux: Jay Shafer on tiny homes and happiness* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaE4EvM-UF4>)**

***Thoreau Off-Grid Cabin Design Under \$1,000.* (<https://www.instructables.com/id/Thoreau-Off-Grid-Cabin-Design-Under-900/>)**

***The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau.* (http://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/writings_journals.html)**

“Henry David Thoreau Arrested for Nonpayment of Poll Tax.” *History of Massachusetts Blog.* <https://historyofmassachusetts.org/henry-david-thoreau-arrested-for-nonpayment-of-poll-tax/>

“Thoreau and Civil Disobedience,” *The School of Life.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gugnXTN6-D4>