

Rebecca Newland

Living and Writing Deliberately: *The Concord Landscapes and Legacy of Henry Thoreau*
21-26 July 2019

Audience: Self-selected students in grades 9-12 who have an interest in transcendentalism, Henry David Thoreau, living mindfully, or self-reflection.

Setting: Library during the daily 35-minute “remediation” period. A series of 6 sessions.

Purpose: To engage students in thinking about their own lives in light of the philosophies of Henry David Thoreau as espoused in his work *Walden*.

Essential Question: How can philosophies of the past guide our lives today?

Threads:

Examining Desperate and Deliberate Lives
Being Awake, Aware, and Alive

1. Where’s Your Walden?

- a. Introductions (name, grade)
- b. Brief overview by Librarian of the goal of this series of lessons.
 - i. Goal: To provide students with weekly experiences aimed at exploring the philosophies of transcendentalism and Henry David Thoreau and applying them to the hectic and intense lives of Oakton High School students in 2019-2020.
- c. Watch “Walden” film. <https://www.walden.org/walden-film/>
- d. Ask students to return next week with an answer to the question: Where is **your** Walden?

2. Where’s Your Walden? (continued) and Living Deliberately.

- a. Ask students to share their answer to the question. (For students who did not attend the previous week, allow them to speak after hearing from those who were.)
- b. Explore what it means to live deliberately.
 - i. Share the quotation: “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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise [*sic*] resignation, unless it was quite necessary.” (Where I Lived, and What I Lived For pg 86)
 - ii. Ask students to jot down ideas about what the quotation and specifically the word “deliberately” mean to them. Pair them to discuss what they are thinking with a partner.
 - iii. Share the etymology of “deliberately” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/deliberate> and discuss its connection to “liberate” and “lib” – reading/books
 - iv. Ask students to return next time ready to share one way in which they think they do or can “live deliberately.”

3. Living Deliberately (continued) and Life of Quiet Desperation
 - a. Ask students to share one way in which they think they do or can “live deliberately.” Again allow those who did not attend the previous session to speak after those who did, or not at all.
 - b. Share: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.” (Economy pg 8)
 - c. Ask students to discuss what they believe Thoreau means by “quiet desperation.” Ask: Is living deliberately a counter to living desperate lives? What makes you say that?
 - d. Ask students to return next time to share ways they believe we can avoid living in quiet desperation.

4. Life of Quiet Desperation (continued) and Going Before the Mast
 - a. Ask students to share ways they believe we can avoid living in quiet desperation. Again allow those who did not attend the previous session to speak after those who did, or not at all.
 - b. Share the quotation: “I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.” (Conclusion; pg 303)
 - c. Ask: What might Thoreau have been advocating for in these lines? What might he have been trying to avoid?
 - d. Ask students to sketch (however untalented they believe themselves to be) one way in which they do or would like to “go before the mast.” If there is not time to finish, ask students to prepare to share their sketches in the next session.

5. Going Before the Mast (continued) and The Three Chairs
 - a. Ask students to share their sketches from the previous session, sharing a few words about what they have drawn and why.
 - b. Share the quotation: “I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society. When visitors came in larger and unexpected numbers there was but the third chair for them all, but they generally economized the room by standing up. It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof, and yet we often parted without being aware that we had come very near to one another.” (Visitors pg 132)
 - c. Ask: What misconceptions about Thoreau have you heard that this quotation contradicts? What bigger concept than simply the furnishing of his home is he addressing here? Why are all three (solitude, friendship, and society) important in our lives? What makes you say that?
 - d. Ask students to think about how they include all three in their own lives. Ask: Where/How do you see the role of the three elements in your life?

6. The Three Chairs (continued) and Conclusion

- a. Ask students to share what they discovered or concluded about the three elements (solitude, friendship, society) in their own lives.
- b. Conclude the 6 sessions by asking: How can philosophies of the past, specifically those of Henry David Thoreau, guide our lives today?
- c. Continue with a discussion of the ways we can/will use what we have discussed in the previous 5 sessions to improve our lives, live more deliberately, find our place in the world, make space for reflection, etc. (meditation, journals, internal vs external lives, quiet time, commonplace book etc.) (Mention essay contest: <https://www.walden.org/education/essay-contest/>)
 - i. Re-share the quotations we have used through the sessions. Ask which speaks most loudly to participants. Why? (Make all quotations and questions available on the Library's Google classroom for self-exploration.)
 - ii. Ask students what changes they may make or habits they may adopt after examining their lives through the sessions.
 - iii. Distribute the following list of works.
 - iv. Ask students to complete an online survey to gather information about the value they have taken away from the experience. (See Appendix A)

*Referenced page numbers are from:

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden and Other Writings*. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. New York, The Modern Library, 2000.

Readings for Further Exploration:

Alcott, Louisa May. *Moods*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1991.

A novel that includes characters based on both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who were close friends of the Alcott family.

Cramer, Jeffrey S. *Solid Seasons: The Friendship of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Berkeley, Counterpoint, 2019.

A look at the friendship between Thoreau and Emerson including extracts of their journals and letters.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo; Thoreau, Henry David; Fuller, Margaret; et al. *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings*. New York, Modern Library, 2006.

A collection of writings by a variety of transcendentalists.

Matteson, John. *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.

A look at the relationship between Louisa May Alcott and her father Bronson Alcott who were contemporaries and friends of transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Petruionis, Sandra Harbert. *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2006.

A look at the history of the abolition movement in Concord, MA as led primarily by women, but including the work and philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Solnit, Rebecca. "The Thoreau Problem." *Orion*.

<https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-thoreau-problem/> Accessed 4 Aug 2019.

A look at the misconception of Thoreau as an isolationist.

--- "Mysteries of Thoreau, Unsolved." *Orion*. May/June 2013, p. 18-23.

http://www.orionmagazine-digital.com/orionmagazine/may_june_2013/MobilePagedReplica.action?pm=2&folio=18#pg20 Accessed 4 Aug 2019.

An article addressing the seeming hypocrisy of Thoreau's time living at Walden Pond.

Walls, Laura Dassow. *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

A current and thorough biography of Thoreau.

Appendix A

Google Survey to be completed by students who have participated in one or more sessions.

1. First Name
2. Last Name
3. Grade Level
4. How many of the sessions did you participate in? (Options: 1-All 6)
5. Briefly explain why you chose to attend the Thoreau sessions.
6. Which was your favorite session? (Multiple choice listing all 6 sessions)
7. Why?
8. In what way(s) do you feel the experience was beneficial?