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NEH Landmarks Workshop: Living and Writing Deliberately
July 22, 2019

My Wild Life: Choosing Individualism in Society

Targeted Course: 7th grade English

Probable Duration: 6 consecutive 50-minute class periods

Thread: Living in Society

Learning Objectives:

- Students will understand and evaluate the concept of individualism.
- Students will think critically about one's role in society.
- Students will read and understand a series of quotes and excerpts from Thoreau.
- Students will apply Thoreauian concepts to their own lives.
- Students will communally engage in the critical thinking process by acknowledging and systematically building upon ideas presented by other students.
- Students will demonstrate their understanding of Thoreau's individualist ideology by creatively employing his themes and own words (in the form of quotations) to a six-page comic book evidencing self-reflection and probable Thoreauian response.

Required Materials:

- Cramer, Jeffrey, editor. *The Portable Thoreau*. Penguin Books: NY, 2012. Specifically, this mini-unit utilizes *Where I Lived and What I Lived For* <http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/webpub/english/bedguide8e/Public%20Domain%20Readings/Thoreau%20Where%20I%20Lived%20and%20What%20I%20Lived%20For.pdf> and *The Village* <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/WALDEN/hdt08.html>
- Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (this mini-unit presupposes that students have already read and extensively studied this text)
- Paper
- Pencils
- Colored pencils
- Cardstock

Essential Questions:

1. What is individualism?
2. What is collectivism?
3. What obligations, if any, do we have to social construction and being part of a larger social group?

4. What's the most fulfilling life to live? One of independence, or one as a member of a group?
5. Can being part of a group be liberating? Can opting to be a contributing member of a group actually be an act of independence?
6. Is there liberation in accountability?
7. How do we maintain a sense of ourselves within a larger social configuration?
8. What is the most effective reflective process?
9. What role does reflection play in determining self-identity?
10. How can we normalize reflection?

Focusing Quotes and some accompanying questions for discussion or reflection. Note: All quotes are from *The Portable Thoreau*.

“In our most trivial walks, we are constantly, though unconsciously, steering like pilots by certain well-known beacons and headlands, and if we go beyond our usual course we still carry in our minds the bearing of some neighboring cape and not till we are completely lost, or turned round, -- a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost, -- do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature. Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (*The Village*, 338).

- Why is being lost such a crucial experience?
- What does Thoreau mean by “abstraction”? How do you wake from an “abstraction”?
- Why do we have to continuously “learn the points of the compass again”? What's the say about the human condition?
- How do we lose the world? Is this something we can do intentionally?
- Does realizing “where we are” necessarily correlate to the realization of “the infinite extent of our relations”? Could the two be mutually exclusive experiences?

“Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society” (*The Village*, 338).

“It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time” (*The Village*, 338).

- Let's consider “the woods” in a metaphorical sense and apply the metaphor to our on-going consideration of the individual and society.

“The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face? We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue,

and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts” (*Where I Lived and What I Lived For*, 270).

- Does Thoreau consider himself “one in a million . . . awake enough for effective intellectual exertion,” and, if so, how is our experience of his literature affected?
- Why wouldn’t Thoreau be able to look an “awake” man in the face?
- What is the “dawn which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep”?
- What does Thoreau consider to be the “highest of the arts”?
- How can we take action to try to be part of the experience of the “highest of the arts”?

“Our life is frittered away by detail” (*Where I Lived and What I Lived For*, 271).

- Do you agree? And if so . . .
- How can we stop frittering away our life?

“A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone” (*Where I Lived and What I Lived For*, 264)

“As long as possible live free and uncommitted” (*Where I Lived and What I Lived For*, 265)

“I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things” (*Where I Lived and What I Lived For*, 277).

Day 1:

Begin the class with a “Walk and Talk.” Present the class with the following question: *What is the most fulfilling life to live -- one of staunch individualism, or one as a member of a group?* “Randomly assign students to pairs. In pairs, students will make two laps around the school. In the first lap, the person on the right talks first about the topic. The only comment/question the partner can make is ‘Can you elaborate on that?’ At the end of the first lap, the partner listening says ‘Thank you for your comments’ and they trade roles. They follow the same rules about comments and expressing gratitude. When the pairs return to the classroom, they will complete a graphic organizer” (from 2017 Living Deliberately participant Nadyne Shimada’s curriculum plan) which they create themselves by folding one piece of paper in half the long way and labelling the left-hand column “Individual” and the right-hand column “Society.” Give students approximately 10 minutes to complete this task, but check to see if they need 10 more minutes.

Distribute copies of *Where I Lived and What I Lived For* and *The Village*. Remind students of some annotation elements / rules (this mini-unit presupposes that students have had ample experience in guided annotation and note-taking), and lead class in starting to read, examine and annotate either of the essays. Students will finish annotations at home for homework over the next three nights.

Day 2:

Proceed into a debate. Randomly divide the class into fourths and moderate students as $\frac{1}{4}$ of the class debates one side and $\frac{1}{4}$ debates the other. The other $\frac{1}{2}$ of the class should be observing and taking notes (fishbowl-style), and the two halves switch out approximately half-way through the time allocated for debating (most of the class period). The second half should draw upon some ideas presented during the first debate in an effort to extrapolate and extend. Conclude the class with silent, reflective journaling (approximately ten minutes). Students should identify two of the most thought-provoking ideas they heard, and they should elaborate upon those ideas.

Day 3:

Begin with independent journaling in response to the following: *Describe a person (not yourself) who seems like an independent individual.*

Introduce the comic book assessment (see page 6), share an example comic book, and allocate the remainder of class to work on this project.

Day 4:

Begin with independent journaling in response to the following: *Describe a time you chose to conform against your better judgement.*

Comic book work time.

Day 5:

Begin with independent journaling in response to the following: *Describe a time you made a decision or held a belief that seemed contrary to social convention.*

Comic book work time.

Allow students time over the weekend to finalize their comic book. On Monday, students should be prepared to turn in their comic book, as well as their annotated copies of *Where I Lived and What I Lived For* and *The Village*.

Day 6:

Gallery Walk. Students should place their comic book and a piece of paper with their name on it on their desks. They should each get out a pencil to carry with them through the Gallery Walk. Students should then circulate throughout the room and read as many of their peers' comic books as they're able to within the allocated time (approximately 20 minutes). They should write one positive, laudatory comment on the piece of paper on their peers' desk.

Conclude the mini-unit with an all-class discussion of the two Thoreau essays. Focus should be on centralizing quotes -- quotes which students feel singularly address the main concepts of the essays. Collect annotated Thoreau essays.

My Life Through a Thoreauian Lens:

A Comic Book Assessment

Fold two pieces of cardstock in half to create six pages. This will become your Thoreauian comic book in which you will anachronistically transpose Thoreau into a contemporary setting and situation. Create a plausible contemporary middle school situation -- a situation you or a peer encountered and dealt with either last year or this year -- and tell the tale in a series of panels using illustrations, word bubbles, thought bubbles and captions. Refer heavily to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* for advice on variation in panel transitions, panel types, etc. The story must have a beginning, middle and end. Refer to our studies of Freytag's pyramid as you create your initial draft/storyboard. You must present some element of conflict. We will brainstorm scenarios together as a class, and the majority of your work will be completed in class, so your peers and I will be here to help you out.

Make sure you leave enough space in at least eight of your panels to insert Thoreau images (attached) and accompanying speech bubbles through which Thoreau comments on the situation you've depicted. Thoreau can either be an active participant who interacts with characters in your comic and helps spur the action and / or decision-making, or he can act as an evaluator / judge providing subjective, running commentary on the situation. In either case, Thoreau should only speak his own words. You can use quotes provided to you ("Focusing Quotes") or you can select quotes of your own choosing. The quotes must come from either *Where I Lived and What I Lived For* or *The Village*.

