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Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Statement of purpose: To teach “Civil Disobedience” and “Letter from Birmingham Jail” both as independent documents and in relation to each other. The first two lessons examine documents independently. Lessons three and four examine the similarities and differences of the two documents. Lesson five relates the ideas in the documents to current reform movements and the tradition of American protest.

Time frame: one week to ten days with modifications possible.

Grade Level: designed for secondary school.

Preparation: Students should understand the setting in which Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr. lived. This includes: abolitionism, the Mexican War, Thoreau’s disdain for slavery, civil disobedience, the system of segregation in the South, the role Martin Luther King played in Birmingham, and nonviolent protest.

Lesson 1—Analyzing the Individual Documents

Objective: Examine the significant topics in Thoreau’s essay and King’s letter. These topics might include injustice, equality, violence, and forms of protest.

1. Students should read the essay and letter. For each document they should make a list of the most significant topics.
2. In class and in small groups (works best with three to five groups), students should discuss their individual lists and make two group lists (one for Thoreau, one for King) which combine the individual findings. Each group should try to agree on the one or two most important ideas for each document and should elect a spokesperson prepared to explain these to the class. This explanation should include a definition of the topic, its significance in the text, and its historical context in relation to the author.
3. The spokespeople should present the group lists to form two class lists (one for Thoreau, one for King).
4. Each spokesperson should make a short case for the topics her or his group decided were the most significant. Through discussion, students should prioritize the topics found in the class lists and should

now understand the most significant ideas found in the documents.

Discussion questions:

1. Which document is easier to understand? Why?
2. Which of the topics contained in the documents are discussed today?
3. Which document is more compelling? Why?
4. Do the students agree on the most important topic for each document? If not, have them defend their chosen topic(s) and attempt to convince others.

Lesson 2—Examining Additional Sources (Optional)

Objective: Gain a greater understanding of Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King, and their times and ideas.

Activity:

1. Read Thoreau’s “Slavery in Massachusetts” and/or “A Plea for Captain John Brown.”
2. Read King’s “I have a Dream.”
3. View *Eyes on the Prize* documentary episodes on Montgomery and Birmingham.
4. View scenes in the movie *Gandhi* which demonstrate civil disobedience and nonviolence.

Discussion questions:

1. What topics found in the documents used in Lesson 1 are found in the above sources?
2. What new topics are introduced in the above sources?
3. How do the images of nonviolence in *Eyes of the Prize* and *Gandhi* make you feel? Was this part of the nonviolent strategy?

Lesson 3—Connecting “Civil Disobedience” and “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

Objective: Compare the two documents. Discover which topics are common to both documents.

Activity:

1. As a class, compare the two class lists which were created in Lesson 1, Activity 3. Create two new lists—one for topics shared by Thoreau and King and one for topics found in only one of the documents.
2. Through class discussion, evaluate the topics shared by Thoreau and King to determine which are the most similar and why.

Discussion questions:

1. Is the message of the documents more similar or more different? Were the authors preaching the same position or a different one?
2. In using similar words and phrases, did the authors mean the same thing? For example, do they mean the same thing when they say “injustice”?
3. Which topics do the students think are most important?
4. Which topics did the authors think were most important?

Lesson 4—Writing about the Topics

Objective: Write analytically or creatively about the topics which Thoreau and King shared. Students should convert the topics learned in lessons 1-3 into a paper (3-7 pages). The paper should be based on either one or two of the quotations found in the quotation section, or based on one or two quotation(s) that the student has discovered on her or his own. The quotation(s) can either be set at the top of the paper and referred to, or placed within the paper.

Activities: Students can pick among the following options or create their own.

1. Write an analytical paper which compares and contrasts one or two of the topics shared by Thoreau and King.
2. Write an abolitionist pamphlet which draws on the topics and language of Thoreau and King.
3. Write a fictitious historical piece in which the participant is a contemporary of either Thoreau or King. The piece should show how Thoreau’s and King’s ideas were practiced.
4. Write a dialogue between Thoreau and King in which they discuss one or two of the major topics. They could agree or disagree.
5. Write a story which combines the ideas of Thoreau and King.
6. Write a factual personal account in which the ideas of Thoreau and King played a significant role.

Lesson 5—Connections with the Present

Objective: Understand how protest movements since the Civil Rights movement have adhered to, or deviated from, the ideas of Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr. Some of these might include Vietnam draft card burning, Catholic nuns pouring blood on draft records,

the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, abortion clinic blockading, the murdering of doctors who perform abortions, practitioners of euthanasia, radical environmentalists, or the bombing of the World Trade Center. Students should consider how and why individuals break laws for a “higher purpose.”

Activities: Students can pick among the following options or create their own.

1. Gather articles or propaganda which describe or define a current protest movement. Present these findings to the class and point out if the language and ideas are similar to or different from those used by Thoreau and King.
2. Defend or attack a current protest movement by explaining how it remains true to or deviates from Thoreau and King.
3. Debate the validity of a movement or individual action, examining how closely it adheres to the ideas of Thoreau and King. This can be done by individuals or teams.

Discussion questions:

1. Is there an American tradition of protest and reform?
2. Are Thoreau and King relevant today?
3. Are there ideas from Thoreau and King which are detrimental to a democracy?
4. Are there ideas from Thoreau and King which are beneficial to a democracy?
5. How does a society determine when one’s “higher purpose” is just or unjust?
6. What are the differences between violent and nonviolent protest? Is one more effective than the other?
7. Does the Constitution protect either type of protestor?
8. Is violent protest necessary for our society to become more just? Is nonviolent protest necessary?
9. Are there ideas or principles for which you would protest? What are they and how would you protest?

Useful Quotations for Lesson 4

I. Quotations by Henry David Thoreau

“Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right.”

Henry David Thoreau in “Civil Disobedience.”

“The fate of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls—the worst man is as strong as the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning.”

Henry David Thoreau in “Slavery in Massachusetts.”

“The fear of displeasing the world ought not, in the least, to influence my actions.’ If we do not listen to our conscience ‘the principal avenue to reform would be closed.’”

Thoreau as quoted in Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Henry Thoreau—A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 32.

II. Excerpts concerning Thoreau

“There is a higher law than civil law—the law of conscience—and that when these laws are in conflict, it is the citizen’s duty to obey the voice of God within rather than that of the civil authority without.”

Explanation of “Civil Disobedience” found in Walter Harding, ed., *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Dover Publications, 1982), 207.

“Thoreau’s chief purpose in Civil Disobedience was to wean men away from their adherence to an insidious relativism and to persuade them to return again to the superior standard of absolute truth.”

“As a man of thirty, Thoreau could look forward to the day when governments, as well as men, would put justice above expediency, absolute right above the Constitution. The dictates of the individual conscience would then be accepted as having a validity superior to legislation, and governments themselves would admit as much.”

Glick Wendell, “‘Civil Disobedience’: Thoreau’s Attack upon Relativism”, *Western Humanities Review* 7 (Winter 1952-53): 37, 41-42.

III. Quotations by Martin Luther King, Jr.

“But they [Birmingham’s decent white citizens] remained publicly silent. It was silence born of fear—fear of social, political and economic reprisals. The ultimate tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people.”

Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 50.

“We must say to our white brothers all over the South who try to keep us down: We will match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with our soul force. We will not hate you. And yet we cannot in all good conscience obey your evil laws. Do to us what you will. Threaten our children and we will love you. . . . Say that we’re too low, that we’re too degraded, yet we will still love you. Bomb our homes and go by our churches early in the morning and bomb them if you please, and we will still love you. We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. In winning the victory, we will not only win our freedom. We will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process.”

Martin Luther King quoted in Stephen B. Oates, *Let the Trumpet Sound* (Mentor, New York: 1982), 228-9.

“The nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of

the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes a reality.”

Martin Luther King quoted in Flip Schulke and Penelope McPhee, *King Remembered* (New York: Pocket Books, 1986), 93.

“During my early college days I read Thoreau’s essay on Civil Disobedience for the first time. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. I became convinced then that non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. No other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau. As a result of his writings and personal witness we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest. It goes without saying that the teachings of Thoreau are alive today, indeed, they are more alive today than ever before. Whether expressed in a sit-in at lunch counters, a freedom ride into Mississippi, a peaceful protest in Albany, Georgia, a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, it is an outgrowth of Thoreau’s insistence that evil must be resisted and no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice.”

King quoted in John H. Hicks, ed., *Thoreau in Our Season* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967), 13.

IV. Excerpts which relate to Thoreau and King

“We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities. . . . those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.”

John F. Kennedy, 11 June 1963 quoted in King, *Why We Can’t Wait*, 32.

“If the end of government is to promote the welfare of its citizens, then a state which undermines the morality of its citizens forfeits its claims to legitimacy.”

William A Herr, “A More Perfect State: Thoreau’s Concept of Civil Government,” *Massachusetts Review* (Summer 1975): 484.

“The American Bill of Rights embodies the modern concept of political liberty—the concept of liberty which centers in the freedom of the moral consciousness from control by the state.”

Benjamin Ginsberg, “Rededication to Freedom,” found in Willard Uphaus, “Conscience and Disobedience,” found in Hicks, 24.

“The right to be let alone is the underlying theme of the Bill of Rights. It has continued to be fertile soil for the cultivation of individual freedom.”

Erwin N. Griswold quoted in Uphaus, “Conscience and Disobedience,” 24. □