An American Philosophy

Emerson, Thoreau and the advent of Transcendentalism

American Transcendentalism

- An American philosophy starting in the mid 19th century in New England
- Transcendentalists believed in the inherent goodness of both man and nature
- Believed that individuals needed to look inside themselves for truth
- Man’s greatness is found in the individual, not in the group

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“The Transcendental emphasis on the oneness of individual souls with nature and with God gave dignity and importance to human activity and made possible a belief in the power to effect social change in harmony with God’s purposes.

In addition to writing, the Transcendentalists expressed their idealistic philosophy through lecturing, through the Socratic dialogue format, and through a broad range of social reform activities.”

Leslie Perrin Wilson, M.S., M.A., Curator of Special Collections at the Concord Free Public Library

http://www.concordma.com/magazine/nov98/trans.html

Ralph Waldo Emerson

- 1803-1882
- Lived in Concord, MA
- Minister, teacher, writer
- Mostly wrote essays and poems
- Founder of Transcendentalism

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Emerson

- Most famous essay: “Self Reliance”
- “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.”
- “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.

Henry David Thoreau

- 1817-1862
- Emerson’s student
- Poet and essayist
- Lived according to the ideas of Transcendentalism
- Authored Walden and Civil Disobedience

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“By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April’s breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world.”

“Concord Hymn”
Thoreau

- Famous set of essays: *Walden*
- “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth.

- Most famous essay: “Civil Disobedience”
- “Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.”

Thoreau’s Simple Experiment

- July 4, 1845 - he began the 26-month experiment that made him famous.
- On property owned by Emerson, on the banks of Walden Pond, Thoreau built a cabin.
- Thoreau intended to reduce life to its bare essentials, forgoing what others considered “necessities.”

Walden Pond

- Thoreau believed there were two times when open rebellion is justified:
  - when the injustice is no longer occasional but a major characteristic
  - when the machine (government) demands that people cooperate with injustice.

- Thoreau declared that, “If the government requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law.”

Replica of Thoreau’s Cabin

Replica of Interior of Cabin

Replica of Literary Classics
Thoreau – Civil Disobedience

• “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.”

1846 – Henry David Thoreau refused to pay a poll tax – he was arrested and jailed.
– Opposed slavery and U.S.-Mexican War
– To his disdain, his aunt paid his tax for him and he was released.

• Thoreau denied the right of any government to automatic and unthinking obedience.
• He felt that obedience should be earned and it should be withheld from an unjust government.

The Legacy of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience”

Mohandas Gandhi

“Thoreau was a great writer, philosopher, poet, and withal a most practical man, that is, he taught nothing he was not prepared to practice in himself... His essay has, therefore, been sanctified by suffering. Moreover, it is written for all time. Its incisive logic is unanswerable.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I [am] convinced that noncooperation 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.”

Beyond Ghandi and King

• In the 1940’s it inspired the Danish resistance to the Nazi occupation of Denmark
• In the 1950’s it was cherished by those who opposed McCarthyism
• In the 1960’s it was influential in the struggle against South African apartheid

• In the 1970’s Civil Disobedience was discovered by a new generation of anti-war activists.
• The lesson learned from all this experience is that Thoreau’s ideas really do work, just as he imagined they would.