

Dan Baker

Dr. Nick W. – Thoreau/Walden

20 April 2003

Promoting Social Justice Using Thoreau's Walden and "Civil Disobedience."

As education continues to wallow in conservatism, capitalist domination, and the status quo of the middle class, it is not really surprising that so many students in high school show little interest in social activism. Lacking stimulating experiences or relevant course work, schooling continues to reflect the value of conformity over responsibility; regrettably, it also remains more focused on functional literacy and preparing students to be economically viable and less in showing them how to better themselves or their surroundings. Making schooling more applicable requires that teachers, particularly secondary language arts instructors, venture beyond traditional school practices and common educational outcomes, and design curriculum emphasizing critical literacy and social education. By connecting classrooms to lives, both inside and outside of school, teachers better prepare students for real-world pressures and societal discourse regarding complex issues such as cultural identity, communication, oppression, and marginalization. Secondary language arts teachers, therefore, are encouraged to use literature, such as Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" and parts of Walden, as part of social justice pedagogy that not only challenges students to analyze social and cultural assumptions in their world, but also to recognize the importance of social justice, and the need to be socially active participants in political process.

Social justice education is about discovery and emancipation. Relying heavily

on student-centered teaching strategies such as problem-posing, observation, reflection, and discussion, social justice educators attempt to tap into students' perceptions of their surrounding world and focus their attention on the economic and political forces shaping society. To social justice educators, all of society's groups are seen as equal participants in a collaborative setting designed to meet the needs of everyone; their curriculum stresses the importance of social justice processes that include sharing resources, taking responsibility for developing one's capacity, and providing societal surroundings that are "physically and psychologically safe and secure" ("A Brief"). Ultimately, they do not consider power, oppression, or domination effective methods for affecting change.

In fact, social justice educators go out of their way to promote schooling strategies that define and investigate forms of oppression so students "understand how it operates at various individual, cultural, and institutional levels ("A Brief"). As British philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar explains, social justice education acknowledges the "needs of different groups as quite different" (Corson 30). According to Bhaskar, these differences arise from "different group interests" and require "different forms of treatment" (31). Resolutely, social justice educators accept the idea that different groups have different needs, and that treating people equally and fairly means not treating everyone the same, or even "potentially the same" (31). Moreover, they recognize the need for providing students with curriculum that stresses the importance of interpreting societal forms of oppression because, as Paolo Freire argues, students must be made aware of the "economic and political forces determining the structure of society" (Spring 249). Doing so prepares them to work for social change, and enhances

their awareness of people living in cultures of silence.

Like Bhaskar, there are other social justice educators who support this approach to teaching, arguing that this type of schooling enhances and refines student sensitivity to the abundance of oppression in the world. This sensitivity, of course, is seen as an important first step toward finding ways to reduce society's oppressive forces. Randy and Katherine Bomer, for instance, feel that teachers, especially language arts teachers, must connect students' interests to socially significant themes, social justice, and critical action. As supporters of the National Writing Project, both agree that too many traditional reading and writing teaching strategies focus on "the individual (to the exclusion of collective social knowledge and action) and end up reproducing the same old dominant culture and social divisions" (Bomer and Bomer 1).

Solving the problem, according to the Bomer's, requires that language arts teachers pay attention to "the social and political importance of what kids contemplate as writers and readers" (9), and create approaches that help students develop a habit of "thinking in dialogue" about political and social realities (8). To Bomer and Bomer, teaching students how to read critically - how to identify, interpret, and reflect on critical concepts such as power, race, language, gender, and flow of money - not only helps learners relate critical concepts to one another, but also encourages them to participate in critical conversations "about books they read or about the world they live in" (45). This leads to student writing assignments that promote social action, and classroom dialogue that centers on student impressions of history, social and political structures, and human rights. For this to happen, teachers must be willing to reconsider how students are traditionally taught reading and writing. Doing so places instructors in a

better position to provide students with plausible curriculum that helps teach the importance of social justice as well as how to read and write critically.

Besides the Bomer's, David Solomitz also believes in organizing teaching around vitally important social justice issues. Arguing that public schools as a whole must reform so "students will want to attend them," Solomitz feels that schooling in the United States is too hierarchical and does not reflect "all aspects of the community," especially poor, ethnic, and sexual minorities (xix). Clearly a postmodernist, Solomitz's teaching philosophy champions Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. To Solomitz, classrooms should be used to confront power and hegemony discourse; he believes deconstructing oppression starts with showing students how to scrutinize the interconnectedness of society, economics, and politics.

Furthermore, like the Bomer's, Solomitz feels social and political change begins with teachers. Teachers - often the key supporters of society's privileged center - have the obligation to focus student attention on "human dignity, freedom, and social responsibility" by creating pedagogy that helps build "upon the connection between the mind, the emotions, the physical world, and the cultural environment" (205). Because schooling has traditionally been viewed as part of America's politicizing process, Solomitz sees no reason why teachers cannot use classrooms to draw attention to forms of social and political domination or marginalization. Certainly, connecting students' lives to political action and societal reform requires courage and a willingness to stay clear of traditional teaching approaches that sometimes dismiss the edges of society in favor of conditions at the middle. Instructors interested in social justice education must be comfortable with moving beyond the cultural and social context in

which they live to help create classrooms that enhance students' interest in humanity, and social and environmental issues.

Again, the goal of social justice educators is to help students gain a better understanding of the world in which they live. However, it is important to note that when students start analyzing the complexities involved in global issues such as, *unemployment, exploitation, welfare, and sexual inequality*, the learning process can be difficult, if not downright disheartening. As educator Bill Bigelow advises, teachers should be prepared to answer the following question before proceeding with any social justice content area: "How can we teach about the enormity of injustice in the world without leaving our students in despair?" (Bigelow). Sometimes, when students begin to understand the "interconnected nature of global problems," they can become overwhelmed, and feel there is no way to solve the world's problems (Bigelow).

However, this does not mean classroom instructors should fear occasions to raise student consciousness. Calling it an "interesting irony," Bigelow sees opportunities to the world's interconnectedness, such as more chances to develop global allies, and more ways to increase the "vulnerabilities of those who profit from the system" (Bigelow). Teachers interested in cultivating lessons on social justice must, according to Bigelow, create teaching strategies that offer students a sense of alternatives, and provide explicit examples of "past and present resistance to the dire threats posed by profit-driven globalization" (Bigelow). This way, students see how moments of the "past and present can prefigure aspects of a world we'd like to live in" (Bigelow). This gives students hope for the future, and bolsters their commitment to social justice. Although potentially problematic, Bigelow – like Bhaskar, the Bomer's,

and Solomitz – supports social education, and believes in the idea that challenging students and teachers to explore examples of “social movements for justice past and present” (Bigelow) can play an important role in overcoming ignorance and bringing about global change.

Keeping the aforementioned considerations in mind, language arts instructors interested in social education and encouraging students to take action against social and political tribulations could certainly place Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience,” and Walden at the center of a rather persuasive social justice teaching lesson. One suggested approach involves utilizing “Civil Disobedience” as a lesson’s primary text, and using one chapter in Walden called “The Village” as a supplemental text to introduce students to Thoreau; to some general Thoreauvian principles (ideas ranging from social responsibility to the importance of acting under the direction of one’s conscience); and to events that motivated him to write “Civil Disobedience.”

Admittedly, there are many effective approaches to teaching Walden and “Civil Disobedience.” However, by reading and assessing “The Village” first and then moving to “Civil Disobedience,” instructors give students a better chance to fully comprehend connections between Thoreau and important ideas such as, social justice, individualism, oppression, and liberation. A brief, critical reading of “The Village,” for instance, followed by an open-minded examination of “Civil Disobedience,” can alert students to Thoreau’s spirit of resistance as well as his estimation of oppressive cultural practices, and his fascination with the “general necessity of a radical reorientation of thought and action” (“Preface” Hahn). Moreover, as critic Stephen Hahn suggests, analyzing both texts can call students’ attention to the power of Thoreau’s “empathetic

imagination and his concern for community” (“Preface”): a concern that speaks to readers through a shared, straightforward expository pattern that can steer readers - especially young, language arts students! -- from “a sense of confinement within present circumstances” (49) to a vision of a better tomorrow.

“The Village,” a relatively short chapter in Walden, provides a somewhat small glimpse of Thoreau’s experiment in living naturally at Walden Pond. Nestled between chapters entitled “The Bean-Field” and “The Ponds,” “The Village” delves into themes like individuality, courage, and into Thoreau’s thoughts regarding his arrest and time spent in jail for refusing to pay taxes. Confidently, the chapter echoes Thoreau’s social ethic and what Erik Erikson refers to as his “generativity,” - Thoreau’s “concern for establishing and guiding the next generation” (Richardson 242). Always the educationalist, Thoreau’s commitment to exploring the importance of individual freedom, autonomy, and social responsibility is quite obvious in “The Village,” as is his generative state of mind. It is an attitude that permeates this chapter, all of Walden, and “Civil Disobedience” as well. Teachers looking to advance their own generativity will undoubtedly find “The Village” a worthy starting point to a social justice lesson designed to help foster a deeper appreciation for social justice, and a heightened sense of why citizens must evaluate repressive institutional structures.

At the beginning of “The Village,” Thoreau’s world appears relatively calm and serene. He actively participates in simple, daily physical activities like hoeing, bathing, washing, and swimming in the pond; he feeds his mind with mental stimulations like “reading and writing in the forenoon” (Thoreau 158). Each day, he strolls to the village of Concord to hear some of the gossip floating around, “circulating either from mouth to

mouth or from newspaper to newspaper” (158). Comparing walks in nature to his trips to town, Thoreau likens birds and squirrels to men and boys; the wind in the pines sound like the rattle of carts; gossip itself appears “refreshing in its way as the rustle of leaves and the peeping of frogs” (158).

Soon, Thoreau’s overall distaste for society’s preoccupation with gossip and monetary gain is noticeable. Likening it to the irritating chatter of prairie-dogs, he calls the entire village a “great news room” (158), a place where townspeople digest gossip like so many nuts and raisins. They sit forever in public places without moving, allowing news to “simmer and whisper through them like the Etesian winds, or as if inhaling ether,” thereby producing “numbness and insensibility to pain” (158). Whether on ladders, in doorways, at the grocery, bar, post-office or bank, villagers appear to be wasting time on meaningless chit-chat, consumed by gossip and trapped by the machinery of enterprises lining the streets, each designed to allure and filch money from travelers walking the village’s capitalistic gauntlet. For Thoreau, the only way to minimize such danger in the village is to either proceed boldly toward his goal, keep thinking of “high things” or, upon hearing the “kernels and very last sievelful of news,” beat a hasty retreat back to the woods (159 - 160). Clearly, many of the village’s superficial desires are quite bothersome to Thoreau. His reaction to village vices appears to illustrate the importance of curtailing potentially harmful influences or, perhaps, the need to practice moderation.

After commenting on the village, Thoreau turns inward, ruminating on the effects of traveling in the woods at night. For Thoreau, walking in the dark woods is never frightening; seldom does he feel anxious or lost; he slings sacks of rye and meal over

his shoulder, and travels through the woods at night, never once complaining about the weight, the weather, or even the darkest paths. Actually, it appears Thoreau even likes getting lost, confident that “my body would find its way home if its master should forsake it, s the hand finds its way to the mouth without assistance” (161).

The same cannot be said, however, for other villagers who travel at night. Apparently, many have difficulty finding their way around and, ever the teacher, Thoreau always appears ready to help others find the right direction. One visitor, for example, who “chanced to stay into the evening,” finds a brighter path when Thoreau points him in “the direction he was to pursue,” and tells him to rust his feet and not his eyes (161). Two other men who had been fishing were also “directed thus on their way” (161) by Thoreau, but were not as lucky at reaching their destination until morning. Their failure reminds Thoreau of countless others villagers who continue to wander aimlessly through life cloaked by a dark cloud of ignorance - not exactly sure where they are or where they are going; generally lacking the faith or courage in themselves to try find direction. To Thoreau, most are unaware that finding a pathway to one’s true self first involves challenging darkness and losing one’s self:

not till we are completely lost or turned around . . . do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of nature . . . 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 in the infinite extent of our relations (162).

The discussion of darkness and ignorance eventually leads to the chapter’s key

focus, Thoreau's reaction following his arrest for refusing to pay taxes. As a protest against institutionalized slavery, he refuses to "pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of, the State which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle, at the door of its senate-house" (162). Doing so, Thoreau nobly begins to expose and prosecute the state for government-supported institutionalization, fully aware of the mind-set of those who "govern public affairs" (163): "But, 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" (162). Near chapter's end, he becomes darker still. After making the point that if those that rule, the "superior" men, were virtuous, the "common man" would also be good and virtuous, he argues that the "virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass; the grass when the wind passes over it bends" (163). His skepticism of the state's ability to govern with high merit is quite clear. This, of course, leads to Thoreau's conclusion that the common man has the responsibility to oppose any government lacking virtue, any authority that squashes individual rights, or forcibly bends people with imprisonment, punishment, and enslavement.

In "The Village," Thoreau begins to investigate the price of privilege, and the price of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is an examination he intensifies in "Civil Disobedience," an essay that successfully repeats "The Village's" cerebral arrangement to create a sermonic text filled with "personal urgency" that successfully outlines Thoreau's case "against the current state of his government and for the radical primacy of the individual conscience against the State" (Rosenwald 49). Again, it has been said that Thoreau wrote "Civil Disobedience" as a reaction to being jailed for

refusing to pay taxes, and even though Thoreau does briefly mention the incident near the end of "The Village," teachers should be prepared to offer students more details. After students finish reading "The Village," a closer inspection of some of the social, political, and cultural history surrounding Thoreau's refusal to pay taxes and subsequent jailing will undoubtedly benefit students once they begin to analyze important themes and issues raised in "Civil Disobedience."

The story behind the jailing reveals a lot about Thoreau's character. In short, while living near Walden Pond, Thoreau traveled to Concord on a July day in 1846 to repair a damaged shoe. Upon arrival, a friend of Thoreau's, Sam Staples, the local tax collector, told Thoreau that he had not paid taxes for several years. Apparently, Staples offered to pay Thoreau's tax or reduce the rate. However, as a matter of principle, Thoreau refused the gesture, and chose to spend time in jail. Eventually, someone paid his tax, and Thoreau was released after spending one night in jail. Interestingly, Thoreau actually refused to leave jail after his dues had been paid. Ever the opportunist, Thoreau wanted to remain incarcerated and use the opportunity to draw attention to slavery and the Mexican War - two issues that were, at that time, being hotly debated in the United States. After Staples forced Thoreau to leave, it is believed that an inquiring Concord citizenry demanded that Thoreau give reasons for choosing to go to jail. So, as an answer, he wrote "Resistance to Civil Government," an essay he twice delivered in the form of a lecture in 1848. A year later, in 1849, the lecture was published as "Resistance to Civil Government." After Thoreau's death, this piece was published in 1866 under a new name, "Civil Disobedience."

Interlacing poetry and social commentary, “Civil Disobedience” makes a persuasive case against civil obligation. From the start, Thoreau’s scepticism of governmental authority is noticeable; this scepticism fuels the essay’s passionate arguments against controversial U.S. institutions and policies, most notably the Mexican War and slavery. Beginning with the celebrated line, “That Government is best that governs least,” (Thoreau 667), Thoreau asserts that the U.S. government rarely proves itself useful – that it never furthers any enterprise, but by the “alacrity with which it got out of its way” (668). Further, the government has never kept the country free”; never settled the West; and “does not educate” (668). All of these achievements, he feels, come from the character of the American people, and the only reason citizens do not accomplish more is because the government always gets in the way. Speaking as a practical citizen, Thoreau does not advocate getting rid of the government completely. Rather, he simply wants a “better government” (668), a government that he and every citizen can respect.

On the subject of respect, Thoreau writes that he cannot respect any political system that benefits the powerful. Particularly in America, he feels the majority is permitted to rule because it is the strongest physically, not because it is “most likely to be in the right , nor because this seems fairest to the minority” (668). Any government founded on this principle – the idea of serving what the majority desires – cannot effectively serve justice. Thus, the only way to guarantee virtue and provide thoughtful answers to questions of right and wrong is for citizens to rely on their conscience, a human quality that corporations like the U.S. government will never possess. Arguing that it is “not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right” (669),

Thoreau's lesson for citizens is simple: Because people are obliged to do what is right, it is, therefore, more important to develop respect for what is right rather than developing respect for the law. To Thoreau, too much respect for the law is dangerous and leads to acts of injustice, such as war and slavery. Claiming laws "never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice" (669), Thoreau uses the American government's involvement in the Mexican War and institutionalized slavery to illustrate the danger of civil obligation for the sake of expediency.

Calling it the "work of a comparatively few individuals using the standing government as their tool," that shows how "successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage" (667), Thoreau feels that America's involvement in the Mexican War represents an example of blind acceptance of an oppressive governmental policy. According to Thoreau, the "standing army" and the war itself do not represent the best interests of the American community; to him, the Mexican War and all wars embody the "damnable business" (669) of an abusive, perverse government. Persuasively, Thoreau also points out that the American government cannot be held completely responsible for war. Indeed, when U.S. citizens choose civil obligation and support the government's war stance, they are guilty of complicity and helping to create discourse that can persuade masses of men to forego their peaceable natures and serve the state and country not as men, but as machines; doing so sends files of soldiers, colonels, captains, corporals, "privates, powder-monkeys, and all" off to war, and march in "admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences" (669). To

Thoreau, what is even more disappointing in America is that people who commonly support the status quo – people who continually serve the state without question – are often seen as “good citizens,” while those that choose morality over unjust government laws are “commonly treated as enemies” (670).

Thoreau’s challenge for readers, it appears, is to figure out how to behave toward the American government. For him, the answer seems simple enough: be civilly disobedient and choose not to associate with the government for, as he argues, no citizen should recognize the American government as their government “which is aslave’s government also” (670). According to Thoreau, citizens have the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist,” any government when it becomes tyrannical; he feels each has the duty to rebel when the “friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized” (670-71). Again, focusing on the Mexican War and slavery (“a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves” (671)), Thoreau maintains that when America becomes a military state, “honest men” (670), merchants, and farmers, have the duty to revolt. Specifically, he challenges people to let conscience guide their civil disobedience, and that they “cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico” (672). Knowing that there were “thousands who are *in opinion*, (Thoreau’s emphasis) opposed to slavery and the war” (672) that did nothing about it, he passionately implores citizens to break from the status quo and understand that if injustice “is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go” (677); moreover, he asks citizens who remain consumed by passivity to consider the importance of doing justice, “cost what it may” (672). Although he admits that it is not necessarily a man’s duty, “as a matter of course, to

devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong” (674), Thoreau does feel that it is the duty of every citizen to not give practical support to a wrong. Therefore, not only must citizens refuse to fight in an unjust war, but also must stop supporting a government that conducts war and enslaves men. To Thoreau, when the state is corrupt, there is more worth to be found in disobedience.

Arguably, this should be the most important lesson in this essay as well as the entire social justice teaching unit. Collectively, the prose of “Civil Disobedience” and “The Village” demands that readers choose justice over expediency, and that each

Baker 16

person do what justice requires, regardless of cost. As a group, high-school aged students should not find either “Civil Disobedience” or “The Village” difficult to read or Thoreau’s lesson hard to comprehend. In fact, given the unique psychology of this particular age (teenagers who can, at times, be quite concerned with issues related to individuality, fairness, inquisition, rebellion, or anti-authoritarianism), it is likely that more than just a few adolescents will find Thoreau’s bold, demanding tone appealing, especially when they start unraveling his foremost arguments, and reveal his views on justice and individualism. Whether it is read by a classroom room full of young adults, individualists, anarchists, elitists, secularists, or “persons of great religious devotion, leaders of collective campaigns, and members of resistance movements” (Rosenwald 154), as Lawrence Rosenwald argues, “Civil Disobedience” particularly reveals itself as Thoreau’s undogmatic attempt to sift through “all of the traditions available to him, rejecting what he could not use and holding fast to what was good” (173). Ultimately,

Thoreau has the unique ability to awaken a wide variety of readers, particularly those seeking guidance with matters of non-resistance.

In an influential essay, entitled “What is Enlightenment?,” Immanuel Kant attempts to define “enlightenment.” Arguing that man must release himself from his “self-incurred tutelage” – his “inability to make use of his understanding without direction of another” (“Modern”) – Kant believes that laziness and cowardice are the reasons man is trapped by tutelage; he feels this is why so many allow others to serve as their guardians. Essentially, Kant argues that people must have the courage to use their reason, and act as independent thinkers, which is the essence of enlightenment. Doing so, according to Kant, can only happen when people throw off the “yoke of tutelage from their shoulders” to “disseminate the spirit of the rational appreciation of both their own worth and every man’s vocation for thinking for himself” (Modern).

Considering recent political and social upheavals in the U.S. – for instance, the gradual erosion of civil liberties, free speech, and other Constitutionally protected rights and freedoms; events surrounding the war in the Middle East, including the U.S. government’s blatant disregard for United Nation’s policies, and citizen support of jingoistic rituals and systemic pressure on dissidents; and an unjust legal system buoyed by recent legislation by, and presidential appointments to, an increasingly conservative U.S. Circuit Court system – now is an important time for high school language arts teachers to help students cast aside Kant’s tutelage yoke by offering social education pedagogy that centers around Henry David Thoreau’s Walden and “Civil Disobedience.” For teachers, it is important to realize that the high standards Thoreau sets in both texts were for himself; he felt it was his duty to push himself, and it

should be painfully obvious that he does not expect readers to explicitly follow his teachings. Moreover, for young student-readers, it is important to remember that neither text advocates breaking laws or claims that all laws are wrong. However, were it not for some basic Thoreauvian principles found in both texts, the U.S. may still have slavery, and the British Empire may still occupy India. Both in the past and at present, Thoreau's views on individualism and skepticism of the government remain vital, and continue to inspire countless social activists, reformers and, yes, teachers! As frustrating as it may be to teach in America's public high schools, instructors cannot lose sight of hope or Thoreau's vision of social awareness. Himself a classroom teacher, Thoreau clearly understands the value of teaching young minds the importance of questioning and looking for huckleberries in the woods. While it may be a heavy responsibility, now is the time for language arts teachers to promote social education in their classrooms for, as Thoreau writes in "Civil Disobedience," "For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever" (Thoreau 679).

Teachers interested in developing a social justice teaching unit may find it helpful to consult additional scholarly resources beyond "Civil Disobedience" and Walden. This in mind, the following annotated list is designed to offer resource material from scholars (like those previously mentioned in this paper) who offer credible insight, commentary, depth, and perspective on a variety of issues related to Thoreau, Walden, "Civil Disobedience," and designing social justice pedagogy.

The list includes the following:

Cooney, Joan. "Neither Nonresistance Nor Violence: Thoreau's Consistent Response to Social Evils." The Concord Saunterer 3 (1995): 133-139. Cooney examines "principles underlying Thoreau's civil resistance" and whether he changed his beliefs after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 (Cooney 133). Arguing that Thoreau felt "morally compelled to rescue the suffering victims of injustice regardless of any social, economic, or physical distress that he or the citizenry might have to endure" (133), Cooney claims slavery was a serious public issue to Thoreau. It was an injustice that, according to Cooney, moved him to use a "wide range" of tactics to reach his goals -- methods that were neither extremely passive nor gratuitously destructive (133). In a well-considered outline of Thoreau's most effective, pragmatic, and direct methods for fighting slavery -- persuasion, pressure, and coercion, "all psychological tactics" (135) -- Cooney explains why Thoreau was effective at fighting slavery through "word and deed" (135), especially when combined with pressure and coercion. Using "Resistance" as one example, she highlights pressure tactics Thoreau used, such as breaking the law and resigning from government office; refusing to pay poll tax (which took money from the government); and, participating in the Underground Railroad (which "interfered with the 'property rights' of slaveholders") (136). Using a variety of examples -- a variety of how he used words and deeds -- lends credible support to Cooney's overall

argument. More importantly, her careful examination of Thoreau's writing and the events of his life successfully illustrate Thoreau's social philosophy – his principles “of rescuing the victims of injustice” (137) -- and how his conscience fueled his civil disobedience.

Dedmond, Francis B. “‘Many Things to Many People’: Thoreau in His Time and Ours.” Thoreau Symposium. Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana. April, 1986. Hoping to explain his popularity, and to find answers to “pertinent questions about the phenomenon that is Henry David Thoreau” (Dedmond 60), Dedmond focuses on Thoreau's *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience.” Arguing that the “essence” of Thoreau is undoubtedly in “these two works” (61) – one, a “masterpiece of self-examination and revelation”; the other a “defiant cry in defense of the supremacy of conscience and of a life lived in accordance with the higher law” (61) -- according to Dedmond, both works lead readers to various discoveries. Scholars, for example, learn and write about Thoreau's responses to the “arts and humanities, about his love of nature . . . about his views on political and social issues” (64) after they read both works. For others, reading Thoreau leads to personal discovery. As support, Dedmond refers to his own revelatory experience with Thoreau as a young student. Claiming to have been “conditioned by the trauma of the times” during the “depression days and post-depression days of the 1930's and 1940's” (66), Dedmond believes Thoreau's “insistence on the

worth of the individual,” and views on the “reprehensible dehumanization that threatened to brutalize the individual,” were things “some of us wanted to hear in those days” (66). Besides himself, Dedmond lists Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and the hippie counter-culture of the 1960's, as examples of readers who “made discoveries in Thoreau of great relevance for themselves, for others” (64), and added “new dimensions to the Thoreau scholarship” (68). As a whole, Dedmond's brief examination of why Thoreau remains popular and vital is uplifting, and reflects Dedmond's interest in discussing the joys of discovering and re-discovering Thoreau.

Kohl, Herbert. “Teaching for Social Justice.” Rethinking Schools Online.

15:2 (Winter 2000/2001). 9 January 03

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/Archives/15_02/Just152.htm.

At first glance, Kohl appears disappointed by the need to advocate teaching social justice in school, calling it a “sad statement on the moral sensibility of our schools” (Kohl). Arguing that many people “do not believe justice is worth fighting for,” and that “contemporary society values self-interest and personal gain over compassion and the communal good” (Kohl), Kohl offers suggestions, both “personal and pedagogical” (Kohl), to instructors looking to foster social justice, and to create classrooms that serve students and society. For example, he implores teachers to teach with their conscience, taking care not to align themselves with “texts,

people, or rules that hurt children.” (Kohl). He feels it is important to align with colleagues and find a school that supports quality work. Further, he suggests that teachers continue to enhance teaching skills. According to Kohl, passion and effort are not enough. Teachers must take time to learn how to teach well before “presuming to take on larger systems” (Kohl); they must also regularly pick and choose from new and alternative techniques and curriculum. Lastly, teachers should not turn teaching social justice into a “grim responsibility” (Kohl). Rather, Kohl suggests making life fun, and learning new things that “only obliquely relate to issues of social justice” (Kohl). As a whole, Kohl’s suggestions are interesting, although a bit brief and obvious. More depth and examples of teaching strategies would make the case more persuasive and informative, especially to an audience of current classroom teachers. However, Kohl’s suggestions do inspire, and could serve as a worthy introduction to anyone interested in learning more about teaching for social justice.

Taylor, Bob Pepperman. America Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996.

By examining political ideas "in the context of his work as a whole" (Taylor xi), Taylor attempts to explain why conventional understandings of Henry David Thoreau's political ideas are often "inaccurate and misleading" (7). Persuasively, Taylor clarifies Thoreau's ideology, most notably in critical

readings of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *The Maine Woods*, and *Walden*. He casts Thoreau as less an "egocentric individualist," and more as a concerned commentator interested in the "future moral character of our political community" (13), and the "health of the democratic community we profess to value" (7-8). For instance, in essays such as "Founding," a critique of *The Maine Woods*, Taylor explores Thoreau's skill at linking nature to broader social and political concerns by paying close attention to those claiming Thoreau's nature trips are simply "eccentric excursions into the natural world," or that he is "fundamentally biocentric, antihumanist, private, or apolitical" (37). For those looking to increase awareness of Thoreau's social and political thinking, or discover reasons why Thoreau should be considered one of the most important voices in the American political tradition, Taylor's work is an enlightening resource that captures Thoreau's interest in America – in its politics, its citizens, and values that affect each generation.

Zinn, Howard. "Obedience and Disobedience." Declarations of Independence. 9 January 03

http://www.ecn.cz/temelin/textonly/obed_zin.htm.

By exploring the phrase, "obey the law," and how each learns that the power to obey the law should override "the fundamental instinct for personal survival, Zinn (like Thoreau) seeks to answer the question: "Are we not more obligated to achieve justice than obey the law?" (Zinn).

Conceding that all rules and regulations are not wrong, Zinn does, however, feel that the “dominant ideology” regarding obeying laws leaves “no room for making intelligent and humane distinctions about the obligation to obey the law” (Zinn). Calling the phrase “stern and absolute,” Zinn believes that all governments teach “obey the law” to all populations – a practice that disregards personal beliefs. To him, it is an “unbending rule” that ensures control and obedience (Zinn). Moreover, he asserts that “obey the law” appeals to most citizens who fear disorder and believe that disobedience leads to anarchy. Using convincing examples, Zinn illustrates how societal and political outcries of “obey the law” have led to several acts of injustice, such as: calling in police and the military to break up demonstrations in the 1960's; the deaths of four students at Kent State University in 1970; and hundreds of murdered students demonstrating in Beijing in 1989 (Zinn). Certainly, peace and stability are important to Zinn, but he does make it clear that “absolute obedience to law may bring order temporarily, but it may not bring justice” (Zinn). In the end, Zinn’s critique of the phrase “obey the law” is significant. He successfully demonstrates how protest and rebellion can help ensure justice and maintain order. Moreover, he persuasively argues that questioning absolute obedience to the phrase, “obey the law,” must continue to play a role in the “reconstitution of social order toward greater justice and a healthy new understanding among Americans about the need for racial equality” (Zinn).

Works Cited

- Bigelow, Bill. "Defeating Despair." Rethinking Schools Online. 16:3 (Spring 2002). 10 March 03
<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/16_03/Desp163.shtml>.
- Bomer, Randy, and Katherine Bomer. For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action. Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 2001.
- Cooney, Joan. "Neither Nonresistance Nor Violence: Thoreau's Consistent Response to Social Evils." The Concord Saunterer 3 (1995): 133-139.
- Corson, David. Language, Diversity, and Education. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Erlbaum Associates, 2001.
- Dedmond, Francis B. "'Many Things to Many People': Thoreau in His Time and Ours." Thoreau Symposium. Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana. April, 1986.
- Hahn, Stephen. On Thoreau. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000.
- Kant, Immanuel. "What is Enlightenment?" Modern History Sourcebook. 9 January 03
<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/kant~whatis.html>>.
- Kohl, Herbert. "Teaching for Social Justice." Rethinking Schools Online. 15:2 (Winter 2000/2001). 9 January 03
<http://www.rethinkingschools.org/Archives/15_02/Just152.htm>.
- Rosenwald, Lawrence A. "The Theory, Practice, and Influence of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience." A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau. Ed. William E. Cain. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Solomitz, David O. Schooling for Humanity. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2001.

Taylor, Bob Pepperman. America's Bachelor Uncle: Thoreau and the American Polity. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996.

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden and Other Writings. New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2000.

Zinn, Howard. "Obedience and Disobedience." Declarations of Independence. 9 January 03

http://www.ecn.cz/temelin/textonly/obed_zin.htm.