



“A Historical Lesson on Civil Disobedience”

By
Earth Day Network

“Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine.”- H.D. Thoreau

Topic: This lesson will explore Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and examine one’s relationship and role with any government, along with exploring historical examples and references to Thoreau’s writing manifested.

Class: High School Social Studies and English, particularly 11th or 12th grade.

Unit Length: Several days.

Goals and Objectives:

- Students will examine their concept of what it means to be a “good” citizen.
- Students will analyze and compare/contrast arguments and literary devices in the piece.
- Students will interpret and evaluate the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance with examples.
- Students will discuss their own model of an ideal citizen in an ideal government.
- Students will conduct independent research on the historical context of Thoreau's writing and then organize and present that information in through journal writing and discussion.

Assessment:

- Analytical take-home essay (see assignment description below)
- In-class group work on citizenship and law (below)
- Journal writing (take-home) on an observation of at least two places

Warm-Up/Icebreaker:

1. First, a free copy of “Civil Disobedience” can be found at: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Civil_Disobedience - Henry David Thoreau](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Civil_Disobedience_-_Henry_David_Thoreau) with an additional one consisting of further anecdotes, <http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil.html> With an inquiry-based introduction, ask students what the term "Civil Disobedience" means to you? Have you ever practiced nonviolence before? Why or why not? Make sure to illustrate the background of the story, in brief, Thoreau was living at Walden Pond at the time and was arrested for not paying his poll tax.

2. Read Henry David Thoreau's essay, "Civil Disobedience." Discuss why he wrote this

work. (This may take more than one day depending on one's class, so assign the rest for homework if necessary).

3. Read the following statements and analyze:

- "I heartily accept the motto, 'That government is best which governs least'; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe— 'That government is best which governs not at all'; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient."

- "But if it (a law) is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law."

- "Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislation? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward."

- "The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right."

- "Law 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."

- "The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies."

- "How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it."

- "There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing."

- "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

- "I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest.... When I meet a government which says to me, 'Your money or your life,' why should I be in haste to give it my money?"

- "If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man."

- "I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man or a musket to shoot one with- the dollar is innocent— but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases."

- "I believe that the State will soon be able to take all my work of this sort out of my hands, and then I shall be no better a patriot than my fellow-countrymen. Seen from a lower point of view, the Constitution, with all its faults, is very good; the law and the courts are very respectable; even this State and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable, and rare things, to be thankful for, such as a great many have described them; but seen from a point of view a little higher, they are what I have described them; seen from a higher still, and the highest, who shall say what they are, or that they are worth looking at or thinking of at all?"

- “There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.”

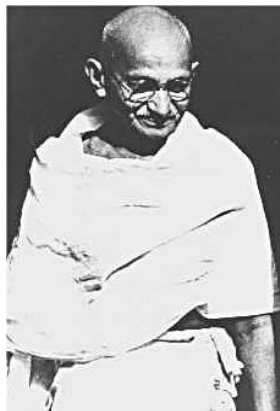
4. Have students read and analyze these statements with a student-based discussion following afterwards.

5. Read the following excerpts from Mohandas K. Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and analyze their relevance and influence that Thoreau played upon both men and their subsequent movements.

6. Group activity: **A.** Thoreau acted on his beliefs by going to jail rather than paying taxes to finance the Mexican War and slavery in the U.S. What present day causes or issues are applicable and would Thoreau have done the same today? Explore with four other classmates. Choose one of the causes, and in a chart on the board, list strategies that Thoreau and/or you would and would not pursue or use. **B.** With a small group of students, stage a reenactment of Thoreau’s arrest while living at Walden Pond, his night in jail, and his subsequent release (Or, an EDN sponsored, free play on Thoreau’s stay at Walden can be found at www.waldenplay.com). Feel free to add imaginative touches to the story. For example, Emerson did visit Thoreau at the jailhouse and said: “What are you doing in there.” Thoreau replied: “What are you doing out there?” Remember to keep this consistent in the end with Thoreau’s message. **C.** Design a class protest poster based on the reading of the essay. Include a slogan and visual images that convey Thoreau’s political views and display in class.

For homework: Journal reflection is expected at this class. Additionally, review class lessons and prepare for the essay topic being debated the next day.

7. Discuss the essay question: Is it right to disobey the law when one's conscience dictates him or her to do so? If so, when and how? If not, why? Cite examples. Students’ essays will be configured to answering this question.



“There are two ways of countering injustice. One way is to smash the head of the man who perpetrates injustice and to get your own head smashed in the process. All strong people in the world adopt this course. Everywhere wars are fought and millions of people are killed. The consequence is not the progress of a nation but its decline. Soldiers returning from the front have become so bereft of reason that they indulge in various anti-social activities. One does not have to go far for examples. In the Boer War, when the British won a victory at Mafeking, the whole of England, and London in particular, went so mad with joy that for days on end everyone did nothing but dance night and day! They freely indulged in wickedness and rowdyism and did not leave a single bar with a drop of liquor in it. *The Times*, commenting, said that no words could describe the way those few days were spent, that all that could be said was that "the English nation went amafficking (a- Mafeking)". Pride makes a victorious nation bad-tempered. It falls into luxurious ways of living. Then for a time, it may be conceded, peace prevails. But after a short while, it comes more and more to be realised that the seeds of war have not been destroyed but have become a thousand times more nourished and mighty. No country has ever become, or will ever become, happy through victory in war. A nation does not rise that way, it only falls further. In fact, what comes to it is defeat, not victory. And if, perchance, either our act or our purpose was ill-conceived, it brings disaster to both belligerents.

But through the other method of combating injustice, we alone suffer the consequences of our mistakes, and the other side is wholly spared. This other method is *satyagraha*. One who resorts to it does not have to break another's head; he may merely have his own head broken. He has to be prepared to die himself suffering all the pain. In opposing the atrocious laws of the Government of South Africa, it was this method that we adopted. We made it clear to the said Government that we would never bow to its outrageous laws. No clapping is possible without two hands to do it, and no quarrel without two persons to make it. Similarly, no State is possible without two entities (the rulers and the ruled). You are our sovereign, our Government, only so long as we consider ourselves your subjects. When we are not subjects, you are not the sovereign either. So long as it is your endeavour to control us with justice and love, we will let you do so. But if you wish to strike at us from behind, we cannot permit it. Whatever you do in other matters, you will have to ask our opinion about the laws that concern us. If you make laws to keep us suppressed in a wrongful manner and without taking us into confidence, these laws will merely adorn the statute-books. We will never obey them. Award us for it what punishment you like, we will put up with it. Send us to prison and we will live there as in a paradise. Ask us to mount the scaffold and we will do so laughing. Shower what sufferings you like upon us, we will calmly endure all and not hurt a hair of your body. We will gladly die and will not so much as touch you. But so long as there is yet life in these our bones, we will never comply with your arbitrary laws.” –M.K. Gandhi's “On Civil Disobedience”

Gandhi translated a version of Thoreau's essay for *Indian Opinion*, while crediting Thoreau's piece as "the chief cause of the abolition of slavery in America." Additionally, Gandhi stated:

"Thoreau was a great writer, philosopher, poet, and withal a most practical man, that is, he taught nothing he was not prepared to practise in himself. He was one of the greatest and most moral men America has produced. At the time of the abolition of slavery movement, he wrote his famous essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience". He went to gaol (jail) for the sake of his principles and suffering humanity. His essay has, therefore, been sanctified by suffering. Moreover, it is written for all time. Its incisive logic is unanswerable."

From **Gandhi, M.K.** "For Passive Resisters" *Indian Opinion* 26 October 1907



"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 re-read 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."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. contributed this reminiscence on September 7, 1962 in "A Centenary Gathering for Henry David Thoreau," a special section in *The Massachusetts Review*, autumn 1962 (IV:I, p. 43).

For homework: Second journal reflection on King and Gandhi. Essay due next class.

Assessment: Have students turn in their essays and discuss "Civil Disobedience," examples in history, and their personal beliefs and opinions regarding the essay and their readings.