

Henry David Thoreau: What I Have to Do...

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can the example of Henry David Thoreau's integrity help you develop integrity?
- **Virtue:** Integrity
- **Definition** – Integrity is personal consistency in moral goodness.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about the life and views of Henry David Thoreau. They will explore how his actions embody the virtue of integrity and, through his example, will learn how they can pursue integrity in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Henry David Thoreau's actions and views throughout his life.
 - Students will understand how acting with integrity can affect their purpose and integrity.
 - Students will apply this knowledge to the pursuit of integrity in their own lives.
- **Background**
 - Henry David Thoreau was born in Massachusetts in 1817. He was a follower of Transcendentalism, a philosophical belief in the goodness of people and the need for the independence of the individual. Thoreau befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson who allowed Henry to stay in his home on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. It was here where, after being jailed for failing to pay poll taxes, Thoreau penned *Resistance to Civil Government*, better known as *Civil Disobedience*. After leaving Walden Pond, he continued writing, fought for abolition of slavery, and traveled across North America advocating for conservation of natural resources. Thoreau died in 1862, but his writings continue to inspire great thinkers even today.
- **Vocabulary**
 - Transcendentalism
 - Ralph Waldo Emerson
 - Poll tax
 - Abolition
 - Confined
 - Industrial Revolution
 - Spartan
 - Mexican-American War
 - Underground railroad
 - Civil disobedience
 - Incarcerated
 - Essayist
 - Lamented
 - John Brown
 - Fugitive Slave Law
 - McCarthyism
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the "Walk-In-The-Shoes" question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
 - Why was Henry David Thoreau sent to prison?
 - Why did Thoreau think it was important to do stand up against something he believed to be wrong?
 - How are Henry David Thoreau's actions consistent with the principle of integrity?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - Cain, William E., and William B. Cain, ed. *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
 - Harding, Walter Roy. *The Days of Henry Thoreau*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.
 - Lenat, Richard. "Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau." *Thoreau Reader*. 2002.
<http://eserver.org/thoreau/civil.html>.
 - Richardson, Robert D., Jr., and Barry Moser. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
 - Thoreau, Henry David. *Journals of Henry David Thoreau*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994–1997.
 - Thoreau, Henry David. Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed. *Thoreau: Political Writings*. New York: Cambridge

Handout A: Henry David Thoreau: What I have to do...

Background:

Henry David Thoreau was born in Massachusetts in 1817. He was a follower of Transcendentalism, a philosophical belief in the goodness of people and the need for the independence of the individual. Thoreau befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson who allowed Henry to stay in his home on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. It was here where, after being jailed for failing to pay poll taxes, Thoreau penned *Resistance to Civil Government*, better known as *Civil Disobedience*. After leaving Walden Pond, he continued writing, fought for abolition of slavery, and traveled across North America advocating for conservation of natural resources. Thoreau died in 1862, but his writings continue to inspire great thinkers even today.

Narrative:

“As I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. . . . I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar.” Locked in jail, Henry David Thoreau felt free.

For over a year, Thoreau had been living in a small, bare cabin near Walden Pond, Massachusetts, observing, admiring, and absorbing the natural world. In the middle of the Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth century, he had decided to set himself apart and live according to Transcendentalist principles: simplicity, economy, and moderation.

Now he found himself in a more spartan environment—prison. He had known that he would end up there. As he listened to his cellmate claim innocence in the face of barn-burning charges, Thoreau knew his own guilt. He was holding firm to his beliefs. He intended to make a point.

In 1846, the state of Massachusetts, like a number of others, required that citizens pay a tax to vote (commonly called a “poll tax”). The same year, 1846, the United States became heavily involved in a war with Mexico. Strongly opposed to the war, Thoreau believed that winning it would surely mean an expansion of slavery throughout the West and South. As a staunch abolitionist, he adamantly opposed the use of his tax money to support the government’s efforts. He explained, “What I have to do is to see that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.”

Thoreau’s opposition to slavery was not new. He had been raised in a home where slavery was regarded as evil. His mother was one of the early members of the Concord Woman’s Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1837, and spoke out often against slavery. The Thoreaus also participated in the Underground Railroad, bringing many escaped slaves to freedom. Raised in this environment, Thoreau witnessed and took part in this form of civil disobedience. In fact, the founder of the Concord Woman’s Anti-Slavery Society remembered in 1851 that “Henry Thoreau more often than any other man in Concord” was involved with caring and providing for the “passengers” that came through at night on the Underground Railroad.

Unlike his mother who was involved in abolitionist organizations, Thoreau placed more emphasis on the individual’s responsibility to live a life of integrity that did not, however seemingly minutely, support unjust enterprises. Thus, he refused to pay his poll tax and was arrested. His actions got the attention of the community, and he received some support for his protest. While incarcerated, his mentor—friend, fellow Transcendentalist, and essayist—Ralph Waldo Emerson, visited. Emerson asked, “Henry, what are you doing in here?” Thoreau quickly retorted, “What are you doing out there?” To follow an unjust law, it seemed to Thoreau, was an immoral act. “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison,” he reasoned. “If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose.”

Acting with such consistency and integrity was not easy. In his essay about the experience, *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau reflected, “I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax.” His fellow citizens, he lamented, lacked

the integrity to live up to their ideals. They talked but they would not act. “They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil. . . .”By standing up for his beliefs, Thoreau paid his version of a “tax”—a night in jail—and fulfilled what he thought were his responsibilities as a citizen.

The seemingly small act was not simply symbolic. Thoreau hoped that his example might inspire others to act with integrity and stay true to their beliefs. “If one honest man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, and be locked up in the county jail, it would be the abolition of slavery in America.”

The next day, however, Thoreau was a free man. His aunt paid the tax for him and he was released. Thoreau was not pleased. Nevertheless, he continued to protest slavery. He applauded the actions of abolitionist John Brown and his assault on the U.S. Arsenal at Harper’s Ferry. He also openly condemned the U.S. government for hanging Brown and for its support of the Fugitive Slave Law.

In a speech to the citizens of Concord, Massachusetts, in 1859, Thoreau declared, “I would rather see the statue of Captain Brown in the Massachusetts State-House yard, than that of any other man whom I know. I rejoice that I live in this age, that I am his contemporary. What a contrast, when we turn to that political party which is so anxiously shuffling him and his plot out of its way, and looking around for . . . someone who will execute the Fugitive Slave Law, and all those other unjust laws which he took up arms to annul!”

Thoreau’s ideals of uncompromising honesty and integrity influenced many people even decades later. His words and actions inspired Americans opposed to McCarthyism in the 1950s, those fighting apartheid in South Africa in the 1960s, and antiwar efforts of the 1970s. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., embraced his ideals of passive resistance and civil disobedience. Henry David Thoreau understood that one person of integrity, who holds to his or her beliefs in action as well as word, can change the world: “For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done for ever.”

Handout B: Pro and Con List

Pros:	Cons: