

Appalachia

Volume 64
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2013: Looking for
Thoreau*

Article 5

2013

You Have to Be Here: Teaching Thoreau in Concord

Sandy Stott

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stott, Sandy (2013) "You Have to Be Here: Teaching Thoreau in Concord," *Appalachia*: Vol. 64: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol64/iss1/5>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

You Have to Be Here

Teaching Thoreau in Concord

Sandy Stott



THERE AREN'T MANY RIVERS SLOWER THAN THE SUDBURY AS IT eases through Thoreau country on its way to meeting with the Assabet. There, it becomes the Concord River, and it sidles through town and under our revolutionary arch before ambling northeast to mate with the Merrimack. A teacher of harried high school students, I like to think that our school-side Sudbury's waters cast a calming spell, and I take my students often to its banks for reading and remove. It is also the place where I teach them how to "invert your head," following Henry Thoreau's advice for readers in the center of "The Ponds" chapter of *Walden*.

There they are in a line of eight along the muddy apron of the Sudbury; they are facing me and their backs are to the river. "OK," I say, "spread your feet so your legs make a wide inverted V, then bend slowly forward so that your head's nearly touching the ground and you're looking at the river's surface through your legs; use your hands for balance. Now, hold it there and watch the water." A minute passes. I hear a few groans from the effort of holding this position; the unrippled water slips by. "Oooo, the world just flipped," says Kyra, and as if in chain reaction, others see it too—the water is the sky, the sky the water. Or, as Thoreau writes a few pages later in *Walden*'s shortest sentence: "Sky water." Inversion has brought new perspective to a familiar world, and that's the point. A person who sees the world afresh is awake to it and its possibilities, and at the outset of his book and in its second chapter, Thoreau says he wrote *Walden* for this purpose: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."

A TEACHER'S JOURNAL: SEPTEMBER 29, 2011. THE DAY BREAKS CLEAR—instead of the rainy forecast—and by the time we reach our 10:15 class, the morning's perfect with a temperature around 70 and high blue sky; a light breeze filters in from the northeast. First, we go to the back steps of the school's wooden chapel overlooking the Sudbury River's floodplain, and then we cast off in *Walden*'s chapter, "Sounds," considering the first paragraph's transition from the linear tunneling of the chapter "Reading" and the indicative semicolon in paragraph number 2's first sentence: "I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans." Here, after a chapter celebrating reading in all its difficulties, Thoreau's punctuation draws an eye-catching equivalency

A Concord Academy student tries to "invert his head," which Thoreau often did, during a morning trip to Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. SANDY STOTT

between reading and hoeing beans. “Why is he busy undercutting his earlier words?” I ask. Already, these 100-odd pages into the book, students have grown amused, weary, vexed, perplexed, and certainly used to Thoreau’s habit of unsettling his reader by biting the hand that has just written, or the finger that has just pointed, his own. A number of brows wrinkle; a few hands go up.

“He seems to be saying, ‘There’s more to it,’ to life, I mean,” says Scott. “It’s not just sitting and reading about it, following a line of words. It’s also working, hoeing along a line of beans.” They are keen readers, I think, as they explore the similarities between a row of words and one of beans. They would, as Thoreau writes he would, “know beans.”

Then, I ask them to pair off to review and figure out the eight-page section on the train (whose new Fitchburg line passed the pond first in 1844 and continues to do so today), and, after ten minutes of that work, we look at the section. Adam gets at its heart by going first to the conditional thrust of the five “ifs” that appear in rapid succession and speculating that Thoreau sees possibility in the train even as he sees it also as symbol of the industrial revolution’s exploitations and its sleep-inducing repetitions of work and consumption. We bounce back and forth among passages, and students decipher the mix of heroic possibility and the likelihood that the train’s probing iron snout will create carloads of passive followers—that it anticipates the glazed look of the modern commuter. Not to mention those who must serve the train—Thoreau likens them to “sleepers,” punning on the term for railroad ties, and points out that the train must run over them.

Early in the section Thoreau also compares the train’s whistle to a hawk’s elongated scree when it calls, and I note that a couple of red-tailed hawks live in our area, and that Thoreau’s description seems to me typically precise. As if on cue, a red-tailed hawk appears above the field, circling slowly, searching for a thermal, and we watch it. As it rises, the hawk issues its call, its “train whistle,” and I hear a murmur of wonder around me; then another red-tail joins the first. Our eyes on the sky as both hawks lift higher, we spot a V of geese, a large one up high, perhaps 50 birds, and they are flying from the northwest toward the southeast; they are tiny at that height. Almost directly above, they seem to pause, the V breaks, and winged chaos ensues; then the V reforms as a U and they fly off to the west. I’ve never seen this scramble and redirection of geese; we wonder aloud about the break-up and reformation. Students then spot as many as four hawks at different altitudes, and during the next five minutes, we simply watch the show in the air.



This is the view Sandy Stott's students saw after "inverting their heads" at the waterline of Walden Pond: not the old sky, but a new one. SANDY STOTT

These minutes of looking up give weight to the common phrase, "You had to be there." Yes, to witness, to know the world's tiny, daily miracles, you have to be here.

What Are We Doing?

What are we—an English class at an academically intense independent school—doing outside inverting our heads or reading the sky-script of hawks and geese instead of bending to our texts in our fluorescent, indoor box, Room 121, this year? Why are we not preparing for Tests, those lockkeepers out there along the dug canals and pathways of the "real" world?

Well, for starters, we are answering Ralph Waldo Emerson's question. At the opening of his signal 1836 essay, "Nature," Emerson asks, "Why should not we also enjoy original relations with the universe?" For a 19-year-old David Henry Thoreau (he would soon effect modest self-invention and reverse his

first two names), this question made sense; in fact, it could serve as the mission of his lifetime. And, as I've cast and recast this course over years of teaching Thoreau's work, I've settled on having each student aim at a three-month answer to it. Not old words, but new words; not old experience, but new; not the old sky, but a new one. Every day.

THAT RAISES A QUESTION, ONE MY STUDENTS AND I ASK EACH OTHER in varying forms: Given original relations and their freedom from received vision and wisdom, what then? We go out with this freedom for what? Thoreau wrestles with this question throughout his work, saying at one point, "Don't just be good; be good for something."

Although this second question arrives early in the semester, as the term ages, we return to it, especially when we reach the end of Thoreau's *Walden* "experiment" (he is insistent on using this word in its scientific fullness; *Walden* itself can be read as a sort of poetic lab report). We next consider his landmark essay, "On Civil Disobedience."

Early in *Walden*, Thoreau launches a startling comparison: "It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself." I read this aloud and look out over the class. They have all taken a required and demanding United States history class; they are versed in the long nightmare of slavery and its ongoing effect on relations in our country. Many have read Thoreau's contemporary, Frederick Douglass, and his story of self-liberation, first from illiteracy and then from his southern overseer. "What do you think of that?" I ask.

"Pretty easy to say for a free white man who gets to go home for dinner whenever he wants," says Percy, giving summary voice to generations of readers nettled by Thoreau's finger-pointing and crowing and what seems to them posing. But here we are at the heart of Thoreau's moral universe, and in "Civil Disobedience," he works to answer Percy's charge. What should he, a free white man, do in his era, when he saw slavery as its primary metaphor and evil? His answer is complex, and we wrestle with its various reasonings as we read his essay that has rippled beneath and through protest and change movements around the world. "So different," says Charlotte of the writing. "Where's the nature, the pond looking back at him, the friendly pine needles, the neighborhood animals and misfits?"

"It's true," I think and say. "The language of 'Civil Disobedience' is moral and mechanical. Let's look at his advice about response to society's machinery when it turns unjustly." We turn to a midpoint in the essay, and Tessa reads

aloud: “If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counterfriction to stop the machine.”

“What would that look like?” I ask in the quiet that follows.

“Heat and pain,” says Adam, and physics students chime in with friction’s characteristics, describing the burn of being rubbed the wrong way, or, at length, any way at all. Although Thoreau was facile with machinery—see his family’s pencil business and Thoreau’s improvements to it—he did not love its promise as central to whatever improvements or revolutions might better people and this world. For that hope, he turned to the individual. And part of Thoreau’s appeal to high school students is their kindred feeling that they, with their questions and insights, should be and are counterfriction to the machine of the societies they will inherit.

“Our whole life is startlingly moral,” Thoreau writes in the “Higher Laws” chapter of *Walden*, and once you are awake to this perception, prodded perhaps by the insistent finger of his prose, life gets complicated. I look out over my classroom, full of both privilege and promise. Bent to their books, bowed some by the work of becoming, they are, even in their wearied states, inspiring. Like Thoreau, I have put much of my faith in a better world in the “I” each one represents.

The tale goes—apocryphal or not—that when *Walden* went off to press, the printer wrote back and said he was delayed because he had run out of the slug for “I.”¹ Early in *Walden* Thoreau writes, “I should not talk about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. . . . Moreover I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life . . . some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land.”

From his land distant now in time and 1½ miles from Concord center, Thoreau sent his insistent letter, and, as we reach its end and I read my students’ writing, some of it in the form of return letters, I see that many have

¹ In Thoreau’s day, printers had to set each page’s content by laboriously lining up the little metal representations (slugs) of each letter for each word of the text before those slugs could be inked and the page then printed on paper.

taken Walden personally and have begun “original relations” with it. Kate begins her letter this way:

After some reflection I am beginning to think, or rather hope, that in fact high school for me will perhaps be the most parallel to Thoreau’s experience at Walden. I do not wish to act so selfishly for the rest of my life as I have now. But I do believe that Concord Academy has provided me with time to “experiment” and discover and deepen what I believe. After some thinking, I have decided the most Thoreauvian aspect of my life is dancing.

And Kate then argues for the “genuine” nature of individual expression in dance, and, across distance, it’s clear that she too roots faith in the individual.

The man who played the flute over Walden Pond’s midnight waters and reveled in daily walking, who was in his friend Emerson’s mind a descendant of Pan, would approve, I think.

It is now November, and we are in the land of little, slanting light; in the fawn-colored cold, we go again to the water. This water is cupped by small hills, and, even given each summer’s riot of beach-going pilgrims, it is still transparent and the home of the many colors Thoreau saw. Walden Pond draws seekers still (an estimated 500,000 per year), and so we approach it before the state reservation’s official morning opening, when we will—except for a few cross-pond swimmers—be the only ones there.

We’re off early and at the pond just after 7 A.M.; we trek out to the house site, visit its now imaginary space into which we fit standing 33 people, with room for a few more if they were here. We consider the “arrowy” pines from which Thoreau fashioned his house and the way the land tips toward the pond. We look at the forest succession and recall Thoreau’s insights about how the world becomes itself. Here’s where our 27-year-old writer arrived to figure out what to do with his life; in the 17 years Henry Thoreau had left, he surely did a lot.

Then, we disperse for 15-minute solos that, despite their brevity, seem to spread an uncanny calm through our crew. From a point near Thoreau’s cove, I can see most of them, backed by white pines, facing the water and washed in the just-risen sun’s light. Only the murmur of traffic from nearby Route 2 offers modern disturbance to the scene. Until the train announces itself with a barnyard-type bleating, and it is as if its engine has arrived from the deep past. It hurries by, and then, as we must, we head back to the east beach.

There, Adam and Scott strip off clothes and hurl themselves in. Others “invert their heads,” and watch the tendrils of water-fog twist over the surface of what is now the sky. Immersion, new perspectives, original relations.

Fittingly, right after we drive back to school, one of our pondside number stands before the whole school and gives his fifteen-minute senior talk—one student talking, 400 of us listening. There is faith in “I.”

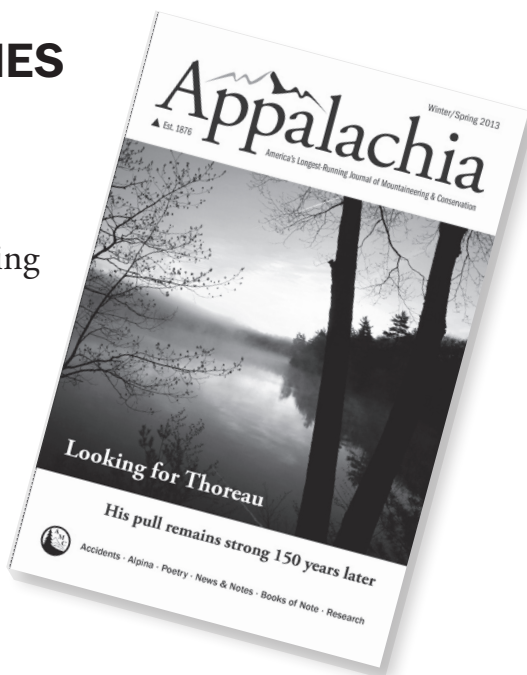
SANDY STOTT is an English teacher at Concord Academy. He edited *Appalachia* from 1989 through 1999.

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of September 2021. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date info, visit outdoors.org.