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Living Life Deliberately, Teaching Deliberately: Lessons from Walden Pond to Winthrop Teachers and Learners

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Living Life Deliberately, Teaching Deliberately: Lessons from Walden Pond to Winthrop Teachers and Learners

One of the great joys of teaching literature is that I get to read great books, poems, and plays, over and over—and I get paid for it! I am not sure how early on I figured out this scam, but I am glad I found a way to trick society into rewarding me for something I would do for free. (Please do not tell payroll about this—I accept their checks and deposit them with relatively little guilt.)

One book I have read more times than I can count is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. As Thoreau writes, "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book." In my case, I have dated several eras of my life from my continual rereading of *Walden*. Although I never thought about it before, much I have learned from Thoreau applies to teaching and learning.

He talks about reading, a central activity for both us and our students: "To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a

noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem." He goes on: "It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object." I am proud of the focus on critical reading at Winthrop—and I see that my emphasis on critical reading in my teaching was influenced by my Concord friend.

One more comment about reading, my favorite: "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written." As readers, we probably can never do that, but the idea should make us try harder to read more deliberately, more reservedly. Our students can certainly learn to do that, and they do, in courses in the general education core and across the curriculum.

I first read *Walden*, or parts of it, when I was in 11th grade English, American literature with Miss Williams, one of my

most challenging and favorite teachers. When I read his famous line, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," I did not want to believe that to be true. But it is true, of course, and not just for old folks like me. I see in my students those signs of quiet desperation, and I hope my teaching and what we read and talk about can relieve some of that.

One of my favorite sections of *Walden* is "The Bean-Field," in which Thoreau writes about his labors in growing the crop that would provide not only his food but also his income. "I was determined to know beans," he says, a line that is both humorous and profound. I see "knowing beans" as a metaphor for teaching, and our classrooms as our own bean fields. "I came to love my rows, my beans," he says. As he continues to work, hoeing his rows, weeding his field, he realizes, "It was no longer beans I hoed, nor I that hoed beans."

As I have written before,

“His next lines describe exactly what I strive to be and do as a teacher: ‘I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close.’ There are some days in the classroom, some magic days, where that is exactly what happens. I live for those moments.”



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teaching is like farming. We prepare the soil, we plant the seeds, we water them, we watch them as they produce tender green shoots, we weed them, we fertilize them—and then comes the harvest. But the true harvesters are not us, but our “beans,” our students. How miraculous! How many times has a former student told you that something you said or did in class changed her life? I think I have heard that half a dozen or so times—and it makes me think that it has happened to many more students than I hear from. We are like Johnny Appleseed, who plants, then moves on. But what groves we leave behind us!

In the first and longest chapter, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” Thoreau makes his famous pronouncement: “Simplify, simplify.” How I need to hear that this busy, harried week, as I need to hear this: “Our life is frittered away by detail.” I don’t know about you, but that certainly describes my week. From Thoreau, I know the virtue in simplifying, and I know how to do it, too. Reading. Solitude. Hoeing my beans.

In that chapter, he tells us why he went to the woods, but he could also be talking for me, telling me

why I long ago chose to be a teacher: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach.” Aha! He says it straight out: teaching and learning.

His next lines describe exactly what I strive to be and do as a teacher: “I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close.” There are some days in the classroom, some magic days, where that is exactly what happens. I live for those moments.

Like a good writer, Thoreau has a “Conclusion,” and he tells us straight out what he learned: “I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” How many students have I told this advice, a student who has a dream but is unsure if he can get there. The road seems so long, so hard. Because it *is* long, because it *is* hard—but if we just keep walking, day

by day, class by class, semester by semester, we will get there. And it will be glorious!

Thoreau ends with more good advice to young people, and to us: “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them.” As teachers, we are the co-builders of those foundations.

Early in *Walden*, Thoreau says, “I know of no practical advice ever given to me by my elders.” Ah, but how much practical advice has this elder of mine given me? I could not count them. He marched to a different drum, as I often do, as many of us do. I would be a poorer person if he had not written his book, if he had not lived his life, deliberately, fronting only the essential facts of life. Henry David Thoreau is one of my greatest teachers, and I treasure what I have learned from him, about living my own life, deliberately, but also about living my life as a teacher.



Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

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promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

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Thought For the Week

"Classic--a book which people praise and don't read."
--Mark Twain