

**Thoreau Institute 7/1/97**  
Will Fitzhugh, *The Concord Review*

- Good Afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am glad for this chance to talk about Thoreau, U.S. Education, and *The Concord Review*.
- I gather that Thoreau was a kind of handyman around Concord, who made less money than you do, who, from his writing, got—“never more than a few hundred dollars a year”—less than your stipend for this Seminar, if you think about it—and he died at 44, in 1862, in the middle of the U.S. Civil War. People who celebrate Concord, because they live there and hope to promote admiration, tourism, and other things, like to quote Thoreau as saying “I have traveled a good deal in Concord.” The implication is that all you need to know can be found in your own backyard. This kind of local boosterism is not uncommon. In Iran, where I did some work for the Peace Corps in the late 1960s, the saying was “Isfahan esfa jehane,” meaning “Isfahan is half the world.” Of course, for some people and not just in Concord, their village is the world, a view which even receives some support in the *Tao Te Ching*. But it is a misunderstanding, I suggest, to think that Thoreau expected to learn all he needed to know, and all he wanted to think about, from Concord. We are now in Lincoln, so I can say this in public.
- I don’t know much about Thoreau, except what I picked up from looking in a couple of books and from reading *Walden* once. He entered Harvard College at 16, and afterwards taught school for about three years. He did odd jobs around town—gardening, fence-building, whitewashing, carpentering, planting melons and trees, and doing some surveying. He also kept a journal, and his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* came out in 1849, when he was 32. 215 copies were sold and when the remainders were sent to the author, he said in his diary “that he had a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, seven hundred of which he had written himself.”
- I thought I might speculate a bit about the other two hundred volumes and say a few words about his reading and writing. Reading and writing don’t get the same good press in American education that they used to, but I would argue that, his other good qualities notwithstanding, without his reading and writing, Thoreau would have had little influence on Mohandas K. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. or anyone else.
- Perhaps a quote from *Walden* on his attitude toward reading will be in order: “Most men have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience, as they have learned to

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cipher in order to keep accounts and not be cheated in trade; but of reading as a noble intellectual enterprise they know little or nothing; yet this only is reading in a high sense, not that which lulls us as a luxury and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the while, but what we have to stand on tip-toe to read and devote our most alert and wakeful hours to.” [p. 137, *Walden*]

- Clifton Johnson, in his introduction to *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, says “He would sometimes dart through a hedge or over a neighbor’s back fence to escape an encounter which meant boredom. Very few were acceptable companions to him on his walks.”
- Just as an experiment, I thought I would ask the question: “If Thoreau saw one of us coming, would he dart through a hedge, or would he find an acceptable companion for a walk?”
- To answer this question, I looked through *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* to see the sort of thing he liked to talk about. On page 5, he is talking about Homer, Chaucer and Shakespeare. On page nine, he talks about the Mississippi, the Ganges and the Nile, and whether annual tribute is paid to the Pasha as it was to the Pharaohs. Later he speaks of Persian gardens, Haroun Alraschid and the artificial lakes of the East. He mentions John Gutenberg and Richard Arkwright, and says that “according to fable, when the island of Ægina was depopulated by sickness, at the instance of Æacus, Jupiter turned the ants into men.” He mentions Narcissus, Memnon, Phaeton, the Sirens, Pan, Prometheus, the Sphynx, the Sibyls, the Eumenides, the Parcae, the Graces, the Muses, Nemesis, etc. (on the same page—66), he says that *Robinson Crusoe* was translated into Arabic and made a great sensation—“read by Mahometans in the market-places of Sanaa, Hodyeda, and Loheya, and admired and believed.” He mentions the god of the Society Islanders along with Juno, Apollo, Venus, Minerva, Echo, and Pan. He talks about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Christ and Buddha. He says on page 83: “The reading I love best is the scriptures of the several nations, though it happens that I am better acquainted with those of the Hindus, the Chinese, and the Persians, than of the Hebrews, which I have come to last.” He writes that “There are few books which are fit to be remembered in our wisest hours, but the *Iliad* is brightest in the serenest days, and embodies still all the sunlight that fell on Asia Minor.” There is much more, as you might imagine, Pindar and Ben Jonson and Ibrahim Pasha, and Goethe, but here is one final quote before I move on: “Read the best books first, or you may not

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have a chance to read them at all.” (p. 114, *A Week on the Concord*, etc.)

- Perhaps you have guessed that I bring all this up about how much reading we might have to do in order to be an interesting companion on one of Thoreau’s walks, to provide a bit of a counterweight to the idea that Thoreau was only interested in birds, plants, trees, insects, sunsets, and streams.
- Now let me move a little bit closer to a consideration of the current status of reading and writing in American education, in the light of this glimpse into Thoreau’s library. Peggy Means McIntosh, of Wellesley College, says that instead of concentrating on reading and writing and other practices of the ‘vertical thinking of the outmoded white male culture’ we should help students to “be in the deepest relationship with the invisible elements of the universe,” and Howard Gardner, a MacArthur Fellow at the Harvard School of Education, has found so many different kinds of intelligence, including, most recently, existential intelligence, that educators use his work to persuade themselves that the time available for reading and writing ought to be as brief as it has become. This kind of anti-inellectualism is not new in American life, as Richard Hofstadter and Charles Sykes point out, but I would like to offer some evidence of the effect of notions like these on history education, or as a Vice-President of the National Council for the Social Studies has called it, “pastology.”
- The most recent [1994] National Assessment of Educational Progress test of United States history was given to 8,000 American high school seniors. This was a fairly easy, one-hour, multiple-choice and short-answer test, far less demanding than, for example, the four-hour International Baccalaureate history tests which are externally graded.
- On this test, 99% of our students scored below 82, 89% scored below 63, and 57% scored below 42. Those scores again: 99% were below 82, 89% were below 63, and 57% were below 42. The results were quite similar in previous NAEP tests, going back to the ones reported by Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch in 1987 in *What Do Our 17-year-olds Know?*
- I am sure we don’t like to think of ourselves as having a kind of self-destructive educational philosophy in our schools, but John J. Fialka of the *Wall Street Journal* reports in his new book *War by Other Means, Economic Espionage in America*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997, p. 201) “U.S. companies now spend some \$25

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billion each year on remedial education for employees. One study shows that American students, measured against Chinese and Japanese equivalents, start out roughly equal in kindergarten, and then go steadily downhill. The study (by Harold Stevenson and his colleagues at the University of Michigan—*The Learning Gap*) published in 1992, surveyed first- and fifth-grade students in...U.S. schools against those in similar communities in Japan and Taiwan. The highest-scoring American schools fell below the lowest-scoring Asian schools. Among the top-scoring one hundred students, eighty-eight were Japanese, eleven were Taiwanese, one was American.”

- *The Economist* for March 29, 1997 reported the 8th grade results of the Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS). In Math the United States scored 28th of 41 nations, below Slovenia, Thailand and Bulgaria, among others, and 17th in Science, below South Korea, New Zealand and the Czech Republic. *The Economist* notes in its report that “It seems that how much a country can afford to spend has less than you might think to do with how well educated its children are. American children have three times as much money spent on their schooling as young South Koreans, who nevertheless beat them hands down in tests.” (South Korea was 2nd in Math and 4th in Science). By the way, there is nothing to indicate that United States students are first in the world in reading and writing either, nor do they seem likely to get there by the year 2000.
- In 1987, when I started *The Concord Review*, the idea was to take good essays already being written by high school students of history in the English-speaking world, get some funding, and then distribute them, on a quarterly basis, to high school teachers and students of history—to give them a benchmark against which to measure their own work in history and in writing. The idea was well received by many, but we were turned down by 126 foundations, who thought it was elitist, or did not affect enough students, or bore little relation to the current goals of restructuring and empowerment and the like. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the Department of Education turned us down several times, but never really said why. But the good essays were out there, and as of this month we have published 330 papers, averaging 5,000 words, by students from 34 states and 21 other countries. About 25% of our authors have gone to Harvard, Princeton, or Yale, and some have even gone on to study history.
- It has been easier to get good essays, although we could use many more, than to

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get subscriptions. While one school in California has had class sets since 1988, with 220 subscriptions this year, we also have teachers who have had an essay by one of their students published—but still have not subscribed themselves to help keep the opportunity going for others. As a result, we have had to suspend publication twice for lack of funds and we have never had an office or paid anyone a salary. *The Concord Review* has much less money than, for example, the Westinghouse Science Talent Search, which (1) limits itself to the United States, (2) does not seek any subscribers, and (3) makes no effort to distribute the exemplary work in science and math which it honors with \$205,000 in prizes each year.

- Recently, however, things have been looking up. We have found a serious patron in John Abele, co-founder of Boston Scientific Corporation, who has provided some major support, so we were able to award a \$2,000 Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize to three authors this year (2 from the U.S. and 1 from Japan) and to produce a special Emerson Prize issue, which was sent to every member of the National Council for History Education. Our website, up since June 1996, has already had more than 8,000 visitors. We still get some very good essays, and we are starting to be able to put in an appearance at one or two educational conferences around the country.
- The New England History Teachers Association has honored the journal with its Kidger Award, the New England Regional Council for the Social Studies gave it an Academic Freedom award in March, and the Kennedy Library has recently honored the journal as well.
- Naturally I have a desire to see *The Concord Review* survive, and so I am looking for essays worth publishing and subscribers to help pay the bills, but I do think there are larger questions to be asked about why we don't take important things more seriously.
- Why are we so easily tempted to retreat from reading and writing to local, non-literate, hands-on, immediate personal experience? Have we lost faith in the educational value of reading and writing? or do we think kids just can't be persuaded to do it anymore? or have we just decided to drag ourselves up onto the entertainment juggernaut?
- Why is our culture, particularly when it comes to high school education, as inattentive to serious academic work as it is? I hope we can have some discussion about this, but I would like to remind you of a recent ad for Pepsi-Cola. Two boys,

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about eleven, are having a short discussion. One says, "What do you want to do after school?" The other one says, "Well, I have been thinking about joining the Army, saving some money, and then going on to college." The first boy then says, "No! I mean Today!" And Pepsi provides the punch line: "Be Young! Have Fun! Drink Pepsi!"

- It is tempting to think of Thoreau as a sort of mystical botanist, wandering through Concord and other New England spots appreciating nature and collecting observations for his notebooks.
- If we want to imitate Thoreau ourselves, and have our students be more like him, we should consider stretching our minds and our reading and our learning closer to the extent of his before we limit ourselves to our own immediate experience and our own immediate surroundings.
- I will close with one of my favorite Thoreau quotes, which I found in *Walden*. Perhaps you know that before General Electric icemakers were born, Ponds like Walden and Wenham Pond were iced over in the winter, and men came to cut up the ice into blocks so it could be packed in sawdust and shipped to India and other places to cool people's drinks. Thoreau in this passage begins by referring to watching men cut up the ice on the pond in the winter, but the passage gives a nice flavor of the reach of his mid-nineteenth-century mind.
- "Thus for sixteen days I saw from my window a hundred men at work like busy husbandmen, with teams and horses and apparently all the implements of farming, such a picture as we see on the first page of the almanac; and as often as I looked out I was reminded of the fable of the lark and the reapers, or the parable of the sower, and the like; and now they are all gone, and in thirty days more, probably, I shall look from the same window on the pure sea-green Walden water there, reflecting the clouds and trees, and sending up its evaporations in solitude, and no traces will appear that a man has ever stood there. Perhaps I shall hear a solitary loon laugh as he dives and plumes himself, or shall see a lonely fisher in his boat, like a floating leaf, beholding his form reflected in the waves, where lately a hundred men securely labored.
- "Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, since

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whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the *Vedas*, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. With favoring winds it is wafted past the site of the fabulous islands of Atlantis and the Hesperides, makes the periplus of Hanno, and, floating by Ternate and Tidore and the mouth of the Persian Gulf, melts in the tropic gales of the Indian seas, and is landed in ports of which Alexander only heard the names.” Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Bantam Books, 1962) pp. 324–325

- Thank you. We have some time for comments and questions...