Title of Lesson:
From Thoreau to King: Approaching Racial Injustice through “Civil Disobedience”

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Lesson Abstract:
In this lesson, students will explore the effects of civil disobedience on the struggle for Home Rule in India and racial equality in America. Perhaps more importantly, they will examine the impact of writers and writing on politics and social change. This will occur through close reading and discussion of the texts.

Lesson Content:
In 1849, American writer Henry David Thoreau developed an essay that he called “Resistance to Civil Government.” This would later evolve into his famous work, “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,” which has since become a prominent text in international efforts at nonviolent resistance. While Thoreau is often inaccurately characterized as a hermit or an anarchist, the purpose of the essay is to explain exactly how participatory one should be in his government. Primarily, Thoreau is concerned with one’s role in government, and he delineates how to be a good citizen, which includes activating one’s rights rather than leaving them stagnant. He encourages people to go beyond the vote to the point of nonparticipation in activities, rules, or taxes that one has no faith in, and he combines his philosophical views with two specific anecdotes where he faced “consequences” for nonparticipation, namely, for practicing civil disobedience. Later, Mohandas Gandhi, de facto leader of the Home Rule movement in India and a young Martin Luther King, Jr., later to become one of the foremost leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement, read Thoreau’s essay and became convinced of the significant role that nonviolent resistance could and should play in the quests for Hind Swaraj and desegregation. Thus, Thoreau’s original act of going to jail for not paying his poll tax, which he refused on principle for its funding of the Mexican War and implicit sponsorship of slavery, led to the writing of “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,” which started a chain of inspiration and resonance of ideas, first through Mohandas Gandhi and later back to America where it provided support to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s goal of desegregating the United States and ultimately creating a Beloved Community. Gandhi and King echo Thoreau in three important ways: government is less powerful than the individual, people have a moral responsibility to resist an oppressive government, and individuals must be willing to put themselves on the side of justice, even when it means facing consequences from the State.

Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” is a critique of the pre-Civil War U.S. government, but it is also a criticism of the power that all governments attempt to wield over their constituents. Thoreau finds this power struggle moot, for he argues that “[government] has not the vitality
and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will” (Thoreau 1). He explains that it is only man’s participation in government that gives the system any control at all, yet far too often citizens resist acknowledging their roles in the infrastructure. Hence, he begins philosophically to search for the best form of a government. He says, “to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it” (Thoreau 2). The first problem of governments, then, is not that they exist but that people do not ask enough of their governments; in fact, the citizens Thoreau addresses, his peers, do not seem to have an understanding of their own desires, in which case they cannot choose a government that accurately represents their goals and opinions. In this way, they are subject to the government rather than participatory in it, which only emboldens the system. Thoreau reasons, “Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?...Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator?...I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward” (Thoreau 2).

Both Gandhi and King echoed this systemic disconnect between governments and their people and sought to alter the relationship. Gandhi had read and admired “Civil Disobedience” while imprisoned in South Africa and called it a “masterly treatise” which “left a deep impression” on him (Fischer 38). Thoreau’s ideas regarding the State resonated with Gandhi. Iyer explains that “Gandhi held that the State, unlike a human being, is soulless and unguided by conscience. At best, it represents the efforts of legal authorities to establish external compliance within a complex network of social relations. States can claim no more finality or infallibility than any individual can” (Iyer 3-4). Couched in this belief is Gandhi’s idea that individuals merely enforcing systemic rule are not the problem; the system itself is the problem and must be approached as such. Changing the system would take satyagraha, or soul force, a determination to replace injustice with morality and conscience by first recognizing that the oppressor is also being oppressed by the system and can be loved as a human with a potential to reject his oppression as well. “Freedom for Gandhi was neither a condition granted by some social contract nor a gratuitous privilege; freedom was grounded in the moral autonomy of the individual and was thus inalienable” (Iyer 5). Recognizing the apparent disconnect between the State and the people was Thoreau and Gandhi’s first step toward social change. Later, Gandhi’s subsequent work in both South Africa and India and his determination to seek a human solution to problems that appeared endemic had massive effects on his communities and provided a more concrete example to support Thoreau’s philosophical inquiry.

King first read Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” as a freshman at Morehouse College. In his autobiography, he explains that here he made his “first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance” (King 14). His response was poignant, and he remembers rereading the work several times, for he was “fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system” (King 14). In many respects, this was the beginning of the nonviolence strategy of the Civil Rights Movement, for though King had no leadership position at the time, he “became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good” and credited Thoreau with fostering this idea in him, adding, “no other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau” (King 14). Again, like Gandhi, King realized that the impetus for civil disobedience was an evil system, not a reaction to evil people, and he too sought to separate the State from the enforcers of state
rule in his attempts to create a Beloved Community without segregation.

To do what the individual thinks is right, even in conflict with the state, is where Thoreau concentrates the majority of his essay. He famously states, “the only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right” (Thoreau 2). He acknowledges the problems that the individual faces in doing so by saying, “a few – as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men – serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it” (Thoreau 3). Having experienced this treatment firsthand, Thoreau remains adamant that civil disobedience, nonparticipation in an oppressive system, is the most appropriate mode of conduct, and he goes on to specifically defend his views in the context of slavery and the Mexican War. First, Thoreau refuses loyalty to a government that presides over slavery. Second, he attacks the complacency of the citizens, saying, “I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, neat at home, co-operate with, and do the biding of, those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless…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” and “this people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people” (Thoreau 4). He argues that “all men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now” (Thoreau 3). Why, he asks, is now not a time for revolution? “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?” (Thoreau 6).

Thoreau argues convincingly that one man alone can begin to make a notable difference. If that man is sincere, he says,

“I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name – if ten honest men only – ay, 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 therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever.” (Thoreau 8)

The idea is that each movement needs a leader, even one person willing to not only stand up for a cause but also to take the consequences for being a non-participant in the system. Even one individual acting nonviolently can shed light on the larger situation and draw the attention of the government, versus conforming and going completely unnoticed. He reasons that the state will come around to the side of the nonviolent nonconformist and that “a minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority…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. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood” (Thoreau 8). Speaking directly to the townsmen, he says, “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 counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn” (Thoreau 7). Lending oneself to the wrong that one condemns is the plight of the average citizen, both in Thoreau and King’s time and in ours, but Thoreau passionately flips the coin on loyalty and justice, explaining poetically that “under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison” (Thoreau 8).
The strength of the individual and of each individual participant in the group is an idea that resonates in the efforts of both Gandhi and King. Gandhi noted that “civil disobedience is the inherent right of a citizen. He dare not give it up without ceasing to be a man” (Iyer 3). He often advocated for the quality of his protestors, not the quantity, and he was especially concerned with the idea of truth and satyagraha in those who followed his example. For Gandhi, “civil disobedience was…not an exhilarating or emotive response to injustice, but a solemn undertaking only to be attempted with calm deliberation and a clear resolve to benefit others” (Iyer 4). Hence, Gandhi spent a great deal of time thinking, writing, and meditating on plans of nonviolent non-cooperation. Perhaps his most famous example of noncompliance took the shape of his famous Salt March, wherein he led thousands of Indians two hundred forty-one miles to the sea in order to harvest their own salt rather than paying the severe tax that the English had imposed upon them. As Fischer explains, “The Salt March and its aftermath did two things: it gave the Indians the conviction that they could lift the foreign yoke from their shoulders; it made the British aware that they were subjugating India” (Fischer 102). Rejection of an evil system, in this case a tax that was financially crippling Indians, simply by refusing to honor the monopoly, led eventually to the emancipation of India from English rule and exemplifies Gandhi’s interpretation of “Civil Disobedience.”

When King prepared to follow in the footsteps of Thoreau and Gandhi, he paid homage by stating, “we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest” (King 14). He honored the legacy of each as he organized bus boycotts, lunch counter sit ins, freedom marches, and mass meetings to ensure voting and housing rights. Relying on the concept of civil disobedience, he said of Thoreau, “I became convinced that what we were preparing to do in Montgomery was related to what Thoreau had expressed. We were simply saying to the white community, “We can no longer lend our cooperation to an evil system” (King 54). As nonviolent protests gained momentum and success, King reflected more holistically on the trajectory of civil disobedience in the struggle for racial justice in America. Though the specifics of the movement necessarily varied from pre-Civil War politics to Civil Rights desegregation, King argued that the teachings of Thoreau were more relevant in the mid-20th century than they had ever been in Thoreau’s own time. He explained, “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, these are outgrowths of Thoreau’s insistence that evil must be resisted and that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice” (King 14).

King also learned to embrace Gandhi’s particular emphasis on the role of love in nonviolent resistance. He explained that as he “delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, [his] skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and [he] came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform” (King 23). He said, “my study of Gandhi convinced me that true pacifism is not nonresistance to evil, but nonviolent resistance to evil” (King 26). In one particular example, he attributed the strength of nonviolent resistance in particular homage to Gandhi, saying, “the people of Albany had straightened their backs, and, as Gandhi had said, no one can ride on the back of a man unless it is bent” (King 168). Again, a focus on the strength of the individual, and groups of individuals, to make a difference is the second essential component in Thoreau’s essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,” and these ideas come alive in the nonviolent protest movements of Indian Home Rule and Civil Rights Movement America.

After moving from a philosophical response to the structure and power of all governments to a narrower debate treatise on American, pre-Civil War apathy, Thoreau takes an anecdotal
approach and explains how he willingly accepted consequences for his actions in defiance of the government. This willingness, as a participant in government who is consciously choosing to defy its rule, is essential to the concept of civil disobedience. Therefore, Thoreau first explains that “some years ago, the State met me on behalf of the Church, and commanded me to pay a certain sum toward the support of a clergyman whose preaching my father attended, but never I myself. ‘Pay,’ it said, ‘or be locked up in the jail.’ I declined to pay. But, unfortunately, another man saw fit to pay it” (Thoreau 10). Thoreau would have gone happily to jail to defend his cause, just as he explains in a description of the now famous incident regarding his poll tax, where he says, “I have paid no poll tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night…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. I felt as if I alone of all my townsman had paid my tax” (Thoreau 10). Here, Thoreau defends one of his mantras, which is, “I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion” (Thoreau 11). Namely, he will breathe easy only when he knows that he has followed his conscience and not when he has been coerced into following a system in which he has no faith or belief.

Again, Gandhi and King both modeled this commitment in their movements, each not only spending considerable time in jail but also taking physical punishment in their quests for freedom. Gandhi was jailed often, spending a total of almost six years in Indian jails and 249 days in South African prisons (Fischer 148). He did this cheerfully, without complaints or ill will, expressing that jail for him meant “relaxation and achievement [while] for others it meant suffering (Fischer 172). Iyer explains that Gandhi’s “refusal to resist arrest testifies to his loyalty to law, just as civil disobedience bears witness to injustice” (Iyer 3). Fittingly, it was in jail where he studied “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” and copied Thoreau’s words, “I did not feel for a moment confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar;” “the prisoner’s soul…was free” (Fischer 38).

King, as well, felt a connection to Thoreau that extended beyond the philosophies of “Civil Disobedience” and into the realism of being thrown in jail by a friend for not paying a tax. In the fight for Civil Rights, King, too, was often in jail, and though he went willingly and often refused bail, which meant remaining for longer periods in terrible conditions, he feared being alone in jail and gained strength from the followers of his movement who were often with him. While incarcerated, King wrote one of his most famous pieces, “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” which enumerates the wrongs perpetrated against the African American citizens and the need for mass nonviolent action to continue in full strength. In all cases, King displayed a great deal of courage, but he was no doubt bolstered by the examples of two of his heroes in civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi.

Thoreau concludes his essay by saying, “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 its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor” (Thoreau 16). He thus plants the seed of civil disobedience, of nonviolent resistance, and of the need for America and Americans to align themselves with their “Declaration of Independence” in espousing that all men are equal. No country that lives under the shadow of slavery, or even of segregation, can call itself just, nor can men claim to respect each other who participate in an unjust system. Ultimately, King’s inspiration was two
fold, first through Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” and later reflective of the massive success of Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent resistant movements in India. Thoreau, however, was the starting point, as his ideas resonated with Gandhi and helped him see the power of the civilian in protest movements. Conclusively, King reflected on the inspiration he received from one of America’s first advocates of nonviolent resistance by saying that “the teachings of Thoreau came alive in our civil rights movement; indeed, they are more alive than ever before” (King 14). The universality of these claims creates a segue from Thoreau’s initial disgust with a government afraid to take a stand on slavery to British imperialism and back to an American government that looked the other way from the practice of segregation in the 20th century South.

Massachusetts State Content Standards: (English/Language Arts):
Reading and Literature:
9 – Making Connections - 9.7: Relate a literary work to the seminal ideas of its time.
11 – Theme - 11.7: Analyze and compare texts that express a universal theme, and locate support in the text for the identified theme.
13 – Nonfiction - 13.26: Analyze and evaluate the logic and use of evidence in an author’s argument.
13.27: Analyze, explain, and evaluate how authors use the elements of nonfiction to achieve their purposes.
15 – Style and Language - 15.9: Identify, analyze, and evaluate an author’s use of rhetorical devices in persuasive argument.

Materials Needed:
Texts
Computer with Internet, projector
Notebook, writing utensil

Suggested Teaching Activities:
Ask students to define civil disobedience and discuss any examples that they know of, historically or in contemporary society.
Close reading and discussion of Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.”
Close reading and discussion of excerpts from King’s Autobiography, including “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Discussion of the connection between the works.
Watch the famous March on Washington on UTube. Discuss this with photographs of King, bus boycotts, lunch counter sit ins, and the march to Selma.

Assessments:
Informal Essay about how “Civil Disobedience” can be used in the life of a contemporary American teenager.
Research Essay that analyzes a situation where one revolutionary inspired another who then created a social, political change. This must be based on a nonviolent moment.
Informal/Formal Essay based on the Gandhi quotation “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Works Cited: