Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Individual Swaraj through Emerson, Thoreau, Gandhi, and King: A Path to Civil-Disobedience

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
Grade 10 College Prep-American Literature
Can be adapted for any high school grade

Duration of Lesson:
5-6 Days with 47 minute class periods
(Writing assessment will extend beyond the teaching of the texts)

Content Standards:
Massachusetts Common Core State Standards for ELA Grades 9-10
Reading: 9. Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific Work.
Writing: 9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.; b. Apply grades 9–10 Reading standards to literary nonfiction (e.g., “Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning”).
Speaking & Listening: 1. d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

Lesson Abstract:
In our unit on Identity students will explore the relationship between Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Martin Luther King Jr. Students will examine the way in which each of these figures articulated their own swaraj (self-rule/freedom). Upon studying their writings, students will then examine how each of these men employed the philosophy of ahimsa (non-violence).

Guiding Questions:
1) How do Emerson, Thoreau, Gandhi, and King develop their own swaraj (self-rule, self-government, freedom)?
2) In what ways do these figures’ individual swaraj lead them to practice civil-disobedience?
3) Each of these figures was influences by his predecessor, how has their legacy been realized both historically and contemporary?
Content Essay:
Introduction:

In order to fully understand, one must approach scholarship knowing that the surface is rarely the whole picture. In fact, to fully understand a person for who he or she is one must examine that individual’s journey and history. The life, work, and philosophy of Mohandas K. Gandhi, India’s twenty-first century Mahatma, is incomplete without exploring the genesis and origins of his framework. One’s ability to comprehend Gandhi’s life would also be incomplete without looking at some of the ways he has influenced future generations. Tracing Gandhian thought across the ocean to New England Massachusetts leads to the work of Henry David Thoreau, and before him, to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Gandhi states in the forward to his seminal work, *Hind Swaraj* that he cannot claim originality to his philosophy, “These views are mine, and yet not mine. They are mine because I hope to act according to them. They are almost a part of my being. But, yet, they are not mine, because I lay no claim to originality. They have been formed after reading several books” (Gandhi 10). Again, looking at the United States, it is clear that Gandhi’s life and thought inspired and transformed society through the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. Therefore, the living link, both literarily and philosophically between Emerson, Thoreau, Gandhi, and King can be examined by high school students in their scholarly study of American Literature; the journey of each of these men allowed them to discover their internal freedom, or swaraj, which ultimately led to their life’s guiding principles of respect for life through the pursuit of non-violence.

Gandhi’s Definition of Swaraj

Gandhi’s personal swaraj or self-rule/freedom did not occur to him without a windy and tumultuous sojourn, one that led him to South Africa. Having been trained in London to become a lawyer and struggling to establish a successful practice in India, Gandhi went to South Africa. During the years between 1893 and 1901, Gandhi developed his own swaraj and philosophy of nonviolence.

The complex history of South Africa created a situation in which the Indian community was taken advantage of and the justification for this was the imperialistic nature of the British Empire. Throughout his tenure in South Africa, Gandhi not only developed his philosophies, but also worked to create social change that provided justice for the Indian community. However, one of the keystones for much of Gandhi’s work is that freedom and duty begin with the individual, and only there can it spread to a community, a nation, and the world. Working with the Indian community in South Africa Gandhi emphasized the need to take responsibility which promoted the concept that “change begins at the individual level and that for social reform to take effect, one must first reform one’s ways of living” (Sethia 29). In essence, one must find his or her own swaraj before he or she can work for national social change, a cause which would become Gandhi’s life-purpose.

It became Gandhi’s mission to work toward a free and independent India, an India who has recognized her own swaraj as a nation. India’s independence was necessary because the British Empire, not necessarily the British people, had been exploiting the Indian people on their own land. But again, it is first necessary for Indians to free themselves, as individuals, first. As Gandhi lays out in his seminal text *Hind Swaraj*:

If we become free, India is free. And in this thought you have the definition of Swaraj. It is Swaraj when we learn to rule-ourselves. It is therefore, in the palm of our hands. Do not consider this Swaraj to be like a dream. Here there is no idea of sitting still. The
Swaraj that I wish to picture before you and me is such that, after we have once realized it, we will endeavor to the end of our lifetime to persuade others to do likewise. But such Swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself. (Gandhi 71)

For Gandhi, the way in which India was going to become free was through the individual swaraj that each and every person needed to discover for him or herself. Individual swaraj is found when a person discerns for him or herself what is right and just, by being able to rule over him or herself. Fortunately, Gandhi laid out how this must be done.

Another fundamental tenet of Gandhi’s philosophy was that of nonviolence. He asserted that the ends do not justify the means, rather the means must justify the ends. It was in Gandhi’s own development as a human being and as a thinker that he came to this conclusion. During a disagreement between Gandhi and his wife, Kasturba, Gandhi almost forbade his wife to stay out of their home (Sethia 34). It was during this episode that Gandhi reflected and came to the realization that the means by which a person achieves his or her goal need to be met by just means. “Means must be worthy of their ends. In driving home to his wife the message of oneness of all humanity, Gandhi’s means lacked compassion, and he forgot his own responsibility to his wife in those moments of anger” (32). It is important to note that Gandhi’s assertions of personal swaraj and nonviolence come after his own journey of self-discovery. Just as it was a journey for Gandhi to come to his own swaraj and philosophies, it is necessary for each one of us, including students, to take this journey. For Gandhi, the means by which one must achieve his or her swaraj, and therefore national swaraj, is through just acts—ahimsa or nonviolence.

Gandhi’s adherence and profession of nonviolence is rooted deeply in his own swaraj. Additionally, Gandhi teaches the reader in Hind Swaraj that the results are a direct connection the means by which one obtains them. He uses examples such as planting weeds and expecting a rose is not practical or possible (Gandhi 79). Gandhi then cites the Biblical passage from the gospel of Matthew, “we reap exactly as we sow” (79). Therefore, a nonviolent/passive resistance reaps a better result than that of brute force. Passive resistance requires the use of “soul-force,” which, according to Gandhi is “matchless. It is superior to the force of arms. How, then, can be considered only a weapon of the weak? Physical-force men are strangers to the courage that is requisite in a passive resister” (91). In order to be courageous, virtuous and just, it is necessary to sacrifice only of oneself and engage in nonviolent actions to achieve one’s goals. Gandhi’s engagement with nonviolence took the form of fasting, marches, and acts of civil disobedience. Gandhi’s belief in self-rule/freedom and nonviolence were certainly pivotal in the results that ensued, namely India’s independence. However, it cannot be ignored that these ideals stem from other sources, many of which Gandhi’s acknowledges in his texts. Most notably, Henry David Thoreau had a deep impact on Gandhi. Digging even further it is clear that those ideas have roots in Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Transcendental Origins: Emerson and Thoreau’s Swaraj

Gandhi states early in his forward to Hind Swaraj that the ideas he espouses have come from other sources. Some of those sources are the New England Transcendentalists who preceded him in their thinking. Anthony Parel writes in his introduction to Hind Swaraj that Gandhi read Emerson’s essays, and probably read them “very carefully” (Gandhi lix). Parel goes further to tell readers that Gandhi wrote that he saw “the teaching of Indian wisdom in a Western garb” (lix). Often cited as the intellectual father of American Transcendentalism, Emerson wrote essays that emphasized the importance of being a unique individual, one that takes the
responsibility of not only determining what is right or wrong, but asserted the theme that every individual needs to do that for him or her self. Emerson, as he develops his own philosophy, one that became known as Transcendentalism, leads him to a deep relationship with nature, one that is based on love and respect, rather than exploitation and violence.

A closer look at his prominent works, “Self-Reliance” and *Nature* indicate both Emerson’s own self-rule/freedom, and its relation to Gandhi’s own beliefs. Emerson tells readers in his essay “Self-Reliance” that “Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist” (Emerson 362). It is imperative for people to avoid conforming to those around them as well as to the dictates of society. In order to find out what it is that separates an individual from those around him or her, that person must, according to Emerson, “trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string” (362). Tara Sethia writes in her biography of Gandhi that “swaraj literally means self-rule. Swaraj here connotes self-discipline, self-restraint, and self-control over one’s passions such as greed and aggression…it is also the spiritual freedom of the individual that opens the door to self-realization—the realization of one’s higher self or pure self” (Sethia 64). It is clear that Emerson, who predates Gandhi, is suggesting that each person much identify for him or herself what is just and right for him or herself and act accordingly.

Both the Emerson and Gandhi have emphasized the imperative nature of obtaining individual swaraj. Emerson states that it is from relying on the self that one makes decisions over what laws are important for him or her to follow and what is good and bad. “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it” (Emerson 364). For Emerson, the laws that governed his life included respect and admiration for nature and the environment. It is in the natural world that Emerson suggests “all mean egotism vanishes” (364). Human beings do not consider themselves superior to the earth and its creatures, but rather as equals. This manifests itself in a nonviolent respect for nature. Emerson enters into a relationship with nature, one in which he finds pleasure and joy. In *Nature* Emerson writes, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them” (Emerson 366). The mutual respect with which Emerson and nature engage in is that of ahimsa as a result of Emerson’s swaraj.

In many ways Ralph Waldo Emerson influenced and inspired Henry David Thoreau to discover his own swaraj. According to Amy Belding Brown, Emerson, the older of the two, served as a teacher to Thoreau: “Contemporaries of Thoreau claimed that he went through a phase when he walked, talked, and even combed his hair as Emerson did. Emerson quickly recognized Thoreau's genius and enjoyed Henry's blunt honesty and sense of humor. Emerson's early influence on Thoreau was clear in [Thoreau’s] view of and affinity for the natural world” (Brown). Though intensely influenced by Emerson, Thoreau developed his own swaraj, which is evident in the way in which he lived his life as well as in his writings. In order to become reliant on himself, he went to live in the woods in Concord, Massachusetts stating, “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, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (Thoreau 374). Certainly Thoreau was interested in his own development as a human being, but also advocated for each person to follow his or her own path to self-discovery. He asserted that each person needs to “step to the music which he hears” regardless of how unique it is to what others are hearing (378). For Thoreau, he was the nonconformist Emerson called people to be; he rejected and defied laws by employing “civil disobedience” or nonviolent approaches to enact
social change. He decided not to pay taxes because he did not support the Mexican-American War, for which he was imprisoned. He espoused that the government would more readily make a change under the pressure of imprisoning a “just” minority, rather than continue with its “unjust” action.

Both of these men, but in particular Thoreau, deeply influenced Gandhi and his swaraj. In the introduction to Hind Swaraj, Parel explained what fascinated Gandhi:

[Gandhi] was heartened to read that conscience, not majorities, should have the ultimate say in judging what is politically right and wrong, that while it is not one’s duty to eradicate evil, it is certainly one’s first duty not to give support to it, that even one person’s action counts although the multitude may be opposed to it, that in an unjust political regime the prison is the right place for a just person. (Gandhi lviii)

Emerson wrote that people must judge whether a law is right or wrong for themselves, while Thoreau practiced this and went to jail because he did not support the war through his taxes. Gandhi continued to develop this for his own swaraj, and used it was a model for his own civil disobedience. Gandhi directly acknowledges the influence of Thoreau in his newspaper the Indian Reporter saying, “Thoreau was a great writer, philosopher, poet, and withal a most practical man, that is, he taught nothing he was not prepared to practice in himself. He was one of the greatest and most moral men America has produced” (Gandhi).

The Gandhi Effect: King’s Swaraj

The influence of Emerson and more clearly that of Thoreau does not end with Gandhi, rather the ideas of acting as a nonconformist and civil disobedience returned to the United States, inspiring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to promote civil rights for all. The connection between these men is clear, yet each of them realized his own swaraj. According to Dr. Nick Gier in his article, “Gandhi and King: Saints of Non Violence,” he acknowledges the connections, but points out that Gandhi and King further develop Thoreau’s philosophy. “Both Gandhi and King would take Thoreau’s one night in jail against a poll tax far beyond what Thoreau would have had the courage to do” (Gier). King read the work of Thoreau, but it was Howard University president, Mordecai Johnson, who sparked the fire that led King to travel to India and study the life of Gandhi. When he returned to the United States King formed the Institute for Nonviolent Resistance which was designed to help people study Gandhian philosophies and to become trained for nonviolent action (Sethia 166). It was Gandhi who inspired King to become the nonviolent activist for civil rights that he became. According to Sethia, “Gandhi helped King to overcome his skepticism about the power of love…King developed a unique philosophy of nonviolent resistance that informed the civil rights campaigns, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1956), the Lunch Counter Sit-ins (1960), the Freedom Rides (1961), the Albany Movement (1961-1962, the Birmingham Campaign (1963) and the Drive for Voting Rights (1964-1965)” (167). King was able to meld his affinity for Gandhi’s core principles with his own Christian values to discover his own swaraj, one that also led to nonviolence in order to resist the injustices of racism and segregation in the United States.

King’s work and texts reflect his swaraj. After being jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, King responds to criticism he has received from a group of Christian ministers. In his reply he lays out the purpose of nonviolent protests in order to explain the reason why he is in prison. He describes the purpose as such, “Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored” (King). It brings to
the forefront the issue at hand that has been ignored for too long; in this case the issue was injustice against the African American community. Not only does King explain the purpose of nonviolent protests, he does so after outlining the preconditions. He states in his letter that, “In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self purification; and direct action” (King). Again, like Thoreau and Gandhi before him, King finds himself passively resisting what he feels is an injustice in a nonviolent manner.

Conclusion
Beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s influence on Henry David Thoreau, the seeds on nonviolent resistance were planted. Continuing to Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. their individual swaraj, or freedom, led to social change. The influence of these men continues to live on today. In an article published by POLITICO, Nirupama Rao asserts that the legacy of these men continues to inspire people, “in today’s world, Gandhi and King continue to inspire the leaders of nonviolent freedom struggles, from Nelson Mandela in South Africa to Aung San SuuKyi in Myanmar. Their lives and legacies — and King’s journey to India — still offer new paths to global peace and human progress” (Rao).

Bibliography:
**Teaching Activities**

*Day 1-Introduction to Swaraj and Civil-Disobedience*
- Students will be given a series of quotations from Emerson, Thoreau, Gandhi, and King and, after reading through them, they will participate in a free-write on one of them.
- Debrief in small groups then as a whole class.
- Synthesize major themes in the discussion and quotes
- Define Swaraj (self-rule, self-government, freedom)

*Day 2-Emerson-The Leader of Transcendentalism*
Core Text: Excerpts from “Self-Reliance” & *Nature*
- Student will brainstorm how they define the word “reliance” and will then identify three ways in which they are reliant.
- View video clip from *Dead Poets Society* on non-conformity.

*Day 3-Thoreau-Difiant Non-Conformist*
Core Text: Excerpts from *Walden* & “Civil Disobedience”
- Students will brainstorm how they would go about creating social change.

*Day 4-Gandhi-Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change*
- Students will make a list of all that they know or have heard about Gandhi.
Core Texts: Excerpts from *Hind Swaraj* and the “Talisman.”

*Day 5-King-Dreamer of Civil Rights*
Core Text: “Letter from Birmingham Jail” & “I Have a Dream” Speech

Assessment-Students will write an essay based on the NPR program, “This I Believe” where they will express their own personal beliefs and philosophies on life.

**Materials Needed**
- Notebooks & Pens
- Projector & Laptop with internet access
- Video-Dead Poets Society-[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sd09gy8Vv9E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sd09gy8Vv9E)
- Video-“I Have a Dream”-[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smEeqnklfYs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smEeqnklfYs)