

Agatha Wozniak

Choosing A Life with Principle **(Civil Rights Movement)**

Objectives

- Explain Henry David Thoreau's views on the concept of civil disobedience and how those views evolved over time.
- Explain Henry David Thoreau's views on on living life with principle.
- Describe the March on Washington and the various groups that organized it.
- Explain how John Lewis' views towards the government and the current civil rights bill differed from the other speakers.
- Explain why John Lewis revised his original speech and the impact it had on the march.
- Evaluate if the March on Washington was a positive outpouring of interracial nonviolent spirit or if it revealed the deep fractures in the Civil Rights movement.

Essential Questions

- How can we lose ourselves in society and become distracted from what is important?
- What causes society to lose its moral compass?
- What is Martin Luther King Jr.'s concept of non-violent resistance?
- What role does civil disobedience have in the Civil Rights Movement?
- To what extent is it acceptable to hold extremist views? To change viewpoints from one extreme to another?
- Why do some turn to violence in a democracy?
- Should burning the Constitution or the American Flag be an acceptable form of protest?
- To what extent should a person conform their views to the majority?
- How much of your own views are you willing to compromise for the perceived greater good?

Materials Needed

- John Lewis' speech during the March on Washington - original text and actual, delivered speech
- "Civil Disobedience" - Henry David Thoreau excerpts
- "A Plea for Captain John Brown" - Henry David Thoreau
- "Life without Principle" - Henry David Thoreau
- Students should have background on the Civil Rights movement up to the March on Washington (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owDU-oYQNo4>)

Lesson 1 - Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, and Life with Principle.

- 1) Have students respond to the following question in writing:
 - a) Explain what you believe is a just law or rule in your life? An unjust one?

- 2) Have students share their answers to the question in small groups. The groups should define what makes a rule or law just or unjust. Bring the class together, have the groups share, and together create working definitions.
- 3) Pass out the excerpts from “Civil Disobedience”. Have the students read silently in their groups then come together and discuss what Thoreau believes is the role of an individual in society. Have students cite examples in their groups of where they have seen individuals perform this role in what they have studied about the Civil Rights movement.
- 4) Pass out the next set of quotes taken from “A Plea for Captain John Brown” and have the students repeat the above activity.
- 5) As a class, discuss the evolution they observed of Thoreau’s thinking. Have students individually then answer the following questions:
 - a) What do you consider an extremist view in society (past or present)
 - b) Do you agree that turning to violence may be necessary to fight injustice? Why?
- 6) Before asking students to volunteer to share, remind students that the Civil Rights movement protests were seen as extreme to some but not others. Also mention that in Thoreau’s time, abolitionists were perceived as extreme and that Henry himself participated in a rally that incited debate partially due to the American Constitution being burned - [July 4th Rally - Framingham](#)
- 7) Have students “Take a Stand” and line up according to how much they believe it could be necessary to turn to violence to fight injustice. One hundred percent necessary (extremist) would be one corner of the room, one hundred percent not (pacifist) on the other.
- 8) Have the students share and debate their stances -- after a few minutes, have students adjust their location if desired.
- 9) Wrap up by having students write a reflection on the activity and readings.

Lesson 2 - March on Washington, John Lewis, Life with Principle

- 1) Have students respond to the following question in writing:
 - a) How much should you adjust your views or speech to please those around you or your audience? How much WOULD you adjust your views...
 - b) Have student share their responses in a whole class discussion.
- 2) Have students read excerpts from “Life Without Principle” then discuss with a partner what Thoreau believes is the role of an individual in society -- intellectually, what is their responsibility? Does Thoreau approve of adjusting your views to please others? Have pairs share their conclusions with the class.
- 3) Show students a clip on the March on Washington - create a list of what the purpose of the March was and what were some of the fears. Remind students of the multiple groups that participated in the event, even though it is often associated with MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech.
- 4) Pass out the original and actual texts of John Lewis’ speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial. Inform students that due to pressure from Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and other civil rights leaders at the rally, Lewis toned down the speech and eradicated some of his angry, revolutionary rhetoric.

- 5) In pairs, have students read through the two texts side by side and compare them.
 - a) What language was changed? Why was it changed? How did it change the tone of the speech?
 - b) Do you agree Lewis should have changed it or did he compromise his principles by doing so? What could have happened if the more revolutionary speech was delivered?
- 6) Share conclusions as a class and have students then discuss whether the March on the Washington was in fact a positive event or just a watered down, tame version of what Civil Rights leaders were striving for.
- 7) Have students silently reflect in writing on the idea of compromising personal principles for the perceived greater good. Should one's individual views always be shared, regardless of the audience? Share and discuss as a class.

“Civil Disobedience” - <http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html>

[3] 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? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy *is* worse than the evil. *It* makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and *do* better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus (2) and Luther,(3) and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

[4] One would think, that a deliberate and practical denial of its authority was the only offence never contemplated by government; else, why has it not assigned its definite, its suitable and proportionate, penalty? If a man who has no property refuses but once to earn nine shillings for the State, he is put in prison for a period unlimited by any law that I know, and determined only by the discretion of those who placed him there; but if he should steal ninety times nine shillings from the State, he is soon permitted to go at large again.

[5] 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 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.

[6] As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad. A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do

everything, it is not necessary that he should do *something* wrong. It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then? But in this case the State has provided no way; its very Constitution is the evil. This may seem to be harsh and stubborn and unconciliatory; but it is to treat with the utmost kindness and consideration the only spirit that can appreciate or deserves it. So is an change for the better, like birth and death which convulse the body.

[9] Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.

[5] The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, *posse comitatus*,⁽⁷⁾ etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others, as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders, serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without *intending* it, as God. A very 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. A wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be "clay," and "stop a hole to keep the wind away,"⁽⁸⁾ but leave that office to his dust at least: —
"I am too high-born to be propertied,
To be a secondary at control,
Or useful serving-man and instrument
To any sovereign state throughout the world."⁽⁹⁾

[6] He who gives himself entirely to his fellow-men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist.

"A Plea for Captain John Brown" - <http://thoreau.eserver.org/plea2.html>

[57] It was his peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but no others. Such will be more shocked by his life than by his death. I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave. I speak for the slave when I say that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me. At any rate, I do not think it is quite sane for one to spend his whole life in talking or writing about this matter, unless he is continuously inspired, and I have not done so. A man may have other affairs to attend to. I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable. We preserve the so-called peace of our community by deeds of petty violence every day. Look at the policeman's billy and handcuffs! Look at the jail! Look at the gallows! Look at the chaplain of the regiment! We are hoping only to live safely on the outskirts of *this* provisional army. So we defend

ourselves and our hen-roosts, and maintain slavery. I know that the mass of my countrymen think that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharps rifles and revolvers is to fight duels with them, when we are insulted by other nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them, or the like. I think that for once the Sharps rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause. The tools were in the hands of one who could use them.

[58] The same indignation that is said to have cleared the temple once will clear it again. The question is not about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it. No man has appeared in America, as yet, who loved his fellow-man so well, and treated him so tenderly. He lived for him. He took up his life and he laid it down for him. What sort of violence is that which is encouraged, not by soldiers, but by peaceable citizens, not so much by laymen as by ministers of the Gospel, not so much by the fighting sects as by the Quakers, and not so much by Quaker men as by Quaker women?

“Life without Principle” -- <http://thoreau.eserver.org/life1.html>

“AT A LYCEUM, not long since, I felt that the lecturer had chosen a theme too foreign to himself, and so failed to interest me as much as he might have done. He described things not in or near to his heart, but toward his extremities and superficialities. There was, in this sense, no truly central or centralizing thought in the lecture. I would have had him deal with his privatest experience, as the poet does. The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what *I thought*, and attended to my answer. I am surprised, as well as delighted, when this happens, it is such a rare use he would make of me, as if he were acquainted with the tool. Commonly, if men want anything of me, it is only to know how many acres I make of their land, — since I am a surveyor, — or, at most, what trivial news I have burdened myself with. They never will go to law for my meat; they prefer the shell. A man once came a considerable distance to ask me to lecture on Slavery; but on conversing with him, I found that he and his clique expected seven eighths of the lecture to be theirs, and only one eighth mine; so I declined. I take it for granted, when I am invited to lecture anywhere, — for I have had a little experience in that business, — that there is a desire to hear what *I think* on some subject, though I may be the greatest fool in the country, — and not that I should say pleasant things merely, or such as the audience will assent to; and I resolve, accordingly, that I will give them a strong dose of myself. They have sent for me, and engaged to pay for me, and I am determined that they shall have me, though I bore them beyond all precedent.

[2] So now I would say something similar to you, my readers. Since *you* are my readers, and I have not been much of a traveller, I will not talk about people a thousand miles off, but come as near home as I can. As the time is short, I will leave out all the flattery, and retain all the criticism.”

[4] I hardly know an *intellectual* man, even, who is so broad and truly liberal that you can think aloud in his society. Most with whom you endeavor to talk soon come to a stand against some institution in which they appear to hold stock, — that is, some particular, not universal, way of viewing things. They will continually thrust their own low roof, with its narrow skylight, between you and the sky, when it is the unobstructed heavens you would view. Get out of the way with your cobwebs; wash your windows, I say! In some lyceums (4) they tell me that they have voted to exclude the subject of religion. But how do I know what their religion is, and when

I am near to or far from it? I have walked into such an arena and done my best to make a clean breast of what religion I have experienced, and the audience never suspected what I was about. The lecture was as harmless as moonshine to them. Whereas, if I had read to them the biography of the greatest scamps in history, they might have thought that I had written the lives of the deacons of their church. Ordinarily, the inquiry is, Where did you come from? or, Where are you going? That was a more pertinent question which I overheard one of my auditors put to another once, — "What does he lecture for?" It made me quake in my shoes.

[7] Just so hollow and ineffectual, for the most part, is our ordinary conversation. Surface meets surface. When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip. We rarely meet a man who can tell us any news which he has not read in a newspaper, or been told by his neighbor; and, for the most part, the only difference between us and our fellow is that he has seen the newspaper, or been out to tea, and we have not. In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while.

[8] I do not know but it is too much to read one newspaper a week. I have tried it recently, and for so long it seems to me that I have not dwelt in my native region. The sun, the clouds, the snow, the trees say not so much to me. You cannot serve two masters. It requires more than a day's devotion to know and to possess the wealth of a day.