

## TWEETING THOREAU

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On or about the 23rd of July, 1846, Henry Thoreau walked to Concord from his cabin at Walden Pond to pick up a shoe that had been mended. Once in town he encountered his friend, Sam Staples, the local jailer and tax collector. Sam reminded him that he hadn't paid his poll tax that year, amounting to a dollar and fifty cents.

Thoreau said he had no intention of paying the tax, and was indignant when Sam offered to pay it for him. "Then," Sam said—half in irritation and half in jest—"I shall have to lock you up."

"Now is as good a time as any," Thoreau said. Sam escorted him to the local jail and put him in a cell. Word rapidly spread around town that Thoreau had been arrested, much to the embarrassment of his family. In the evening, a woman in a veil—probably Thoreau's Aunt Maria—went to Staples's house and paid the fine. However, by that time Sam was resting comfortably at home and chose not to go out again. Thoreau could spend the night in jail.

His refusal was a form of resistance. Thoreau was adamantly opposed to slavery. Earlier that year Congress annexed Texas to the Union. Three months later, the U.S. declared war on Mexico. The annexation of Texas

opened the way to the extension of slavery farther west. The war with Mexico was a war of aggression fought to seize the Southwest from Mexico to further American dreams of Manifest Destiny.

Thoreau's refusal to pay his taxes that July was in direct response to these developments. His friends and neighbors—including Waldo Emerson—thought his protest was peevish and inconsequential. And yet, out of his refusal to pay a modest tax and the night he spent in jail as a result, has come change on a world-wide scale. Who could have known at the time what an impact a little-known citizen of a small New England town would have on history in the one-hundred and seventy years since.

Today we face an existential crisis such as Henry Thoreau did then. It may be unfair to compare the current situation with the injustice of slavery and the immorality of foreign conquest, but these are perilous times, my friends.

Who knows what threats to life and liberty lie ahead?

- Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments threaten draconian measures to wall-off, incarcerate or deport thousands if not millions of people.
- Tariffs and trade wars threaten jobs and livelihoods.
- Reckless foreign policies threaten further wars and international instability.
- Refusal to admit and own up to the persistence of racism threatens the lives and futures of African Americans.

- The assault on women's rights and the rights of gay, lesbian and transgendered people threatens continued oppression and discrimination.
- Willful ignorance of scientific evidence of global warming threatens the extinction of life as we know it.
- The election of a President so narcissistic, so autocratic, and so manifestly unfit to serve exacerbates all of these threats.

What can we do? What can any of us do? Arguably, it was not his refusal to pay his tax or the night he spent in jail that accounts for Thoreau's influence, but the speech he gave in defense of his actions. He had gotten a lot of criticism for his peculiar form of protest. In response he drafted an essay entitled, "Resistance to Civil Government," otherwise known as "Civil Disobedience." What does this essay have to say to us today?

Thoreau's essay was addressed to three groups of people. One of these were people who were apathetic. They were more concerned about their families and their livelihoods than they were about sectional and national issues. They didn't pay much attention to politics and didn't bother to vote.

We have plenty of people like that today. Ninety-three million people sat out the last election. Donald Trump was elected by only twenty-seven percent of the eligible voters.

Another group were law-abiding people who believed that laws should be obeyed. The Constitution sanctioned slavery, and while the importation of slaves was banned, slaves were legally bought and sold at slave markets. They might not have wanted slaves themselves. They might even have

wished that we didn't have slavery. But slavery was a part of the fabric of American life. For most people it was normal.

We have plenty of people like that today. They believe that Trump was legally elected, even though he got almost three million fewer votes than his opponent. They think he has every right to ban people from Muslim countries and build a wall between Mexico and the U.S. No doubt, they will go along with pretty much everything he decides to do because, thanks to the Attorney General and the Supreme Court, everything will be legal. And, as time goes on, all of it will become normalized. If you want to change anything, they say, you'll need to wait until the next election.

The third group he addressed were people—business people and financiers mainly—who were complicit in maintaining slavery. These were Northerners in the textile industry, the sugar trade and banking firms who profited from slave labor. But it also included those who bought the goods produced as a result of slave labor.

And we have plenty of people like that today. The Trump White House and cabinet are filled with Wall Street billionaires and people who have profited from questionable stock trades and massive donations from corporations and super-pacs. All of us who have investments and retirement accounts stand to benefit as well.

So, what did Thoreau have to say to these people? "Unjust laws exist," he said: "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? [People] 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.”

And if the injustice is such that you are required to be complicit with it, then, he says, “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.”

If you think your act of resistance would be insignificant and inconsequential, think again. “Cast your whole vote,” Thoreau says, “not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight.”

Thoreau didn’t have a lot of support, even for the rather modest form of resistance he engaged in. The press was critical of the abolitionists. The courts upheld the rights of slave owners. But we do have support. Not only do millions of people object to the dangerous policies of this administration, but they are also willing to do something about it. I think the recent Women’s March is proof of that.

And we have something that Thoreau didn’t have; namely, social media which act as a force multiplier in organizing opposition to the edicts issued daily from the White House.

In response to the order to stop the entry and deport Muslims from the Middle East at the nation's airports, thousands rushed to airports around the country, summoned by tweets and phone messages to protest the action. In the same way, hundreds of constituents are showing up at public meetings with their congressional representatives, insisting that they preserve the Affordable Care Act. Such actions are likely to increase and intensify in the coming months.

Another force multiplier we have are the state attorneys-general, the ACLU and other organizations that are willing to go to court to oppose illegal and unjust actions. At the moment, the courts are the only bulwark we have against the execution of Trump's executive orders. We can support these organizations financially, as millions already have in the past month.

Yet another force multiplier is the press. Not all of it, mind you. Certainly not Fox News, nor the networks that have been cowed into false notions of "fairness." There are reporters and newspapers that are committed to telling the truth and refuse to be silenced. By Steve Bannon's own admission, they are the opposition, and, hopefully, they will continue to be.

Still another force multiplier are the men and women in the government who will act as a counter friction to the baser actions of their superiors, either by leaking information, whistle-blowing or courageous acts of defiance, such as the Acting Attorney General who refused to enforce the President's Muslim ban. I think there is a great deal of resistance within the government and the military to this administration.

We cannot afford to wait until the next election. We must resist and continue to resist for as long as it takes to turn public opinion decisively against this administration. If people get arrested in the process — as surely they will — they will find in jail, as Thoreau did, that “It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find [people of conscience]; on that separate, but more free and honorable ground where the State places those who are not *with* her, but *against* her — the only house in a slave state in which a free man can abide with honor.”

We are, for the most part, law-abiding citizens. We pay our taxes. We follow the laws. We are good citizens. But there is a higher law by which we judge the rightness and fairness of the laws we are expected to follow, and that is conscience. As Thoreau says, “Can there not be a government in which majorities do not decide right and wrong, but conscience? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.” Government derives its authority from the consent of the individual, and not the other way around.

Thoreau had no way of knowing the extent of his impact. He gave his lecture a couple of times. It was printed in the first and only issue of an obscure magazine. It was largely ignored until it came to the attention of an Indian lawyer early in the twentieth century who applied its principles to mass demonstrations, first in South Africa and then in India. The essay was passed around among members of the Danish underground during the Second World War, who found in it inspiration and renewed resolve in

their resistance of Nazi occupation. It was read with interest by a young black minister who, fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, went on to become the leader of the civil rights movement. And later, a generation of college students found in it motivation to oppose unjust wars and the oppression of minority peoples.

Our resistance today is not focused only on one or two issues, but on a whole host of threats to life and liberty. We would do well to heed Thoreau's message and apply his principles to countering these threats in the confidence that conscience and truth will prevail over unjust laws and falsehoods.