

Journal Entries for Transcendentalism

Here are some nice journal assignments to go along with Ralph Waldo Emerson and/or "Self-Reliance:"

Journal #1:

Passage:

"What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

Preparation to Write:

Do some people watching during the school day. Closely observe the actions and appearances of your peers in study hall, lunch, classes, the student center, etc. How much of what you observe reflects a decision to follow the crowd or shows a lack of willingness (maybe confidence?) to stand out in some way? How much of what you see shows independent action or thought? What situations or circumstances seem to cause people to choose one action over the other?

Journal Prompt:

What does it mean to trust oneself? What prevents individuals from trusting themselves? When are people most likely to trust their own intuitions and not worry about what other people might think? Is this issue more difficult for teenagers than people of other ages? Why or why not? Reference some of your observations as you respond to the prompt and connect your thoughts to the original passage.

Journal #2:

Passage:

"Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness -- to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature."

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, "Spring"

Preparation to Write:

Read the article "Conserving Land, Preserving Human Health" by Howard Frumkin, M.D., and Richard Louv. Consider the benefits of contact with nature as discussed in the article. Has that been your experience? Why or why not?

Journal Prompt:

Identify a special place in nature where you have enjoyed spending your time. This may be somewhere you go to often or it may be a place you have visited only once. Give a brief description of this place, but devote most of your response to explaining why this place stands out in your memory. Consider your thoughts, emotions, and mood in this place. Did (or does) it affect you in any of the ways described in the article? Do you agree with what Thoreau has to say? Do we need the "tonic of wildness"? Why or why not?

Journal #3:

Passage:

"Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake."

Henry David Thoreau, Walden, "Where I Lived and What I Lived For"

Preparation to Write:

Make a list of the activities of your typical day. How much of what you do is routine? Does that routine create a situation where you are just going through the motions and thinking very little about the meaning of your day? Do you spend more of your time "slumbering" through life or are you "awake" and intellectually engaged? Why? At what point in your day do you feel most invigorated, most alive? What would it take to make you "fully awake"?

Journal Prompt:

Drawing on the examples from your own life and those of your peers, explain whether or not you agree with Thoreau's ideas. Are people conscious of their actions? Are they fully awake? What gets in the way of conscious, deliberate living? What does it take to get people to "wake up and move on to a more deliberate life?"