

Walden, the Humanities, and the Classroom as Public Space¹

by Kristen Case

I want to begin by saying that this essay is not a “defense of the humanities.” I am not going to use this space to argue for the intrinsic value of the study of literature, philosophy, and related disciplines, although I happen to think the humanities are intrinsically valuable. I’m also not going to talk about the fact that employers want to hire humanities majors, that the humanities are valuable in an economic sense, although any number of recent articles and studies demonstrate that this is true.² The reason I’m not going to make those arguments, the reason I’m not going to defend the humanities, is that I don’t really believe they are in peril. The humanities are going to be just fine. Literature will keep getting written and read; people will continue to learn other languages, to ask questions and read books about ethics and experience and existence, and students will continue using what they learn in humanities classrooms in their post-college professional lives, as they always have. None of these things are really in danger.

What is in danger is public access to the kind of work done in the humanities, and especially, public access to the space of the humanities classroom. I want to use this essay not to defend but to describe the kinds of practices that take place in humanities classrooms, to think about how these practices are connected to the possibilities of our broader social life. I want to argue for the humanities classroom as a compromised, beleaguered, fragile, and ephemeral, but nonetheless vital space of *actual* freedom, and further, to suggest that the question of who gets to access this space is one that should be of concern to all of us. My interest in this question arises not only from my current position as an English professor at the University of Maine at Farmington, the liberal arts campus of the University of Maine system, but also from my own undergraduate experience at an elite private institution, a place where discussion-based humanities classes were considered the cornerstone of a liberal arts education, the value of which was, and still is, considered self-evident. This interest also emerges from conversations with my students, for whom the value of education is a live

concern, a question in which they have much at stake. That I have had these conversations at all is a function of the kinds of relationships humanities classrooms and discussion-based teaching make possible. It is also, I think, a function of the fact that I regularly teach Thoreau’s *Walden*.

It might at first blush seem a stretch to invoke Thoreau, the failed schoolteacher and frustrated Harvard student, in an essay about the value of the humanities classroom in the public university. But I want to argue that the practices of the humanities classroom—the physical, discussion-based classroom—can be understood as an extension of the *Walden* experiment: an experiment constituted principally by the gesture of removal. I say *removal* and not withdrawal because Thoreau understood himself to be going somewhere, not just leaving Concord, and moreover because *re-moval* suggests the kind of continual mobility that caused Thoreau not only to move to Walden but also to move away from it, to become “a sojourner in civilized life again,” and to write a book for his neighbors. At the end of *Walden*, he writes:

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. (Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 579)

The first definition of removal is “to take something away or off from the position occupied.” For Thoreau, the position occupied was a rapidly industrializing and expanding hub of mid-nineteenth century New England life and its urgent social pressures and economic demands. But Walden was no remote wilderness, it was the woods on the edge of town, less than two miles from Concord center, and Thoreau retained regular contact with friends and family in the village during his entire two-year stay. A group of friends even helped him build his house. This regular contact, sometimes pointed to as evidence of

Thoreau's hypocrisy, was in fact central to his self-appointed task: "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, in order to wake my neighbors up." *Neighbor* is one of *Walden's* keywords, continually used to describe residents of both the town and the woods, and its ubiquity in the text reminds us that Thoreau understood his task at Walden (and in *Walden*) to be, in the end, a social one: getting lost, as he writes, in order to find himself again and "to realize the infinite extent of his *relations*" (p. 459). It's worth noting that Thoreau spent nearly four times as long on the *Walden* manuscript than he actually spent at the cabin—it went through eight drafts and almost ten years of writing and revising.

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Walden was for Thoreau a space apart: close to, but in important ways separate from, everyday village life and its habitual modes of both thought and being. The kinds of questions Thoreau went to Walden to ask could not be asked from the confines of village life because they concerned the very foundations of that life:

When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. (p. 329)

The great and difficult gift of *Walden* is its persistent, provocative, sometimes frankly irritating undermining of the power of habit.

"I know not the first letter of the alphabet," Thoreau (p. 400) writes at the end of "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," and the demand that he makes throughout *Walden* is that we, too, relearn to read, relearn, in particular, the meanings of words. Thoreau's most characteristic stylistic gesture is the use of a word to signify the opposite of its conventional meaning: "I see young men, my townsmen," he writes "whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms" (p. 326). The pressure here falls equally on the words *misfortune* and *inherited*, which in their

unexpected association, suddenly bring the whole system of values in which they are embedded into question. Recognizing that our language is inextricable from our values, our assumptions, our economy, Thoreau seeks everywhere to make us question how and what words mean. "The greater part of what my neighbors call good," he writes, "I believe in my soul to be bad" (p. 331).

Reading the way Thoreau wants us to read, allowing for the redefinition of even the simplest words and the modification of values that such redefinitions suggest, is strenuous work. Thoreau's is the kind of writing "we have to stand on tiptoe to read" (p. 406). The style—particularly when compared to that of contemporaries like Emerson or Melville or Alcott—is direct, simple, seemingly straightforward. But Thoreau's particular stylistic genius was to combine this simplicity of diction with subtle philosophical complexity, making the most common language seem, under the slightest pressure of attention, suddenly strange.

Consider this sentence, from the conclusion of *Walden*: "The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement" (p. 580). We begin with the idea of truth—but not a fixed, immortal truth like Plato's forms, rather a *volatile truth*: a truth that is changeable, erratic, impossible to contain. This mercurial thing, *the volatile truth*, belongs to *our words*. It is the volatile truth of *our words*. Our words possess a kind of inner wildness that is their truth, and this wildness, when we are writing as Thoreau thinks we should, *betrays*—that is, reveals, discloses, but also, is disloyal to, breaks faith with—*the inadequacy of the residual statement*, that which remains after the essential thing is gone, the residue or husk. The residual statement (the material form of the sentence, printed on the page) thus exists in conflict with the volatile truth of our words (the wild essence of our meanings). But *statement* and *words* are also obviously inseparable: if the truth belongs to one it must also belong to the other. The double meaning of *betray* captures the way that words can both reveal and resist their own inadequacy, their failures to contain their own wild meanings. To read *Walden* with this sentence in mind is to imagine the physical text as a series of residual statements that must be reanimated, brought back to their volatile truths by a reader sufficiently awake to perform the task.

For Thoreau, writing during the explosion of the industrial age and at the height of westward expansion in the decades leading up to the Civil War, the question

of what we mean by our common words, by terms like *value*, *labor*, *solitude*, *poverty*, *weakness*, was not a private but a public question: a question for a nation to answer. About the largest technological innovation of his time, the railroad, Thoreau (p. 365) writes, “though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts ‘All aboard!’ when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over—and it will be called, and will be, ‘A melancholy accident.’” Here the word Thoreau asks us to reconsider is *accident*: it is only by our collective failure to reckon predictable costs that the casualties of the railroad can be written off as accidental. The lazy repetition of the phrase, “a melancholy accident” in the wake of the death of a dozen railroad workers, reflects an acceptance of such things without thought, without choice. Thoreau sought to make such words strange to us, and in this act of estrangement, to prompt us to redefine ourselves as a culture.

It was Thoreau’s physical and spiritual removal to Walden Pond, a perspective he retained even after returning to the village, that enabled him to articulate a set of questions about individual and social life that we are still struggling to answer. This brings me to the public humanities classroom. Let’s say the literature classroom in the public university. Perhaps the one in which I taught this morning, 205 Roberts Learning Center, at the University of Maine at Farmington.

The architectural style is frankly Brutalist. Roberts has no oak seminar tables, no marble fireplaces like the one that graces the seminar room in Harvard’s Barker Center, home of its English department. The space itself is uninspiring—cinder block walls, florescent lights. Because it’s Maine, the floors in winter are, in spite of the diligent efforts of the facilities department, pretty continually streaked with mud. The building is either insufferably hot or impossibly cold (sometimes at the same time!), and class is punctuated by the sound of logging trucks shifting gears as they climb the hill on the stretch of Route 4 that sometimes seems to cling to the building.

But it is, nevertheless, our space. During the 10 minutes before class while I ready my notes in my office across the hall, I hear the sounds of tables and chairs being dragged into a circle. I arrange the furniture this way on the first day of class; the students do it every day after that, without my asking. I have no idea if it’s the same person every time, or different people, but the room is ready when I walk in. Nothing in the physical atmosphere of the Roberts Learning Center commu-

nicates to my students that what we’re doing is important, is valuable, is part of a venerated and venerable tradition. No names etched in marble greet them, as they greeted me when I entered Columbia’s Butler Library as an undergraduate. But the students seem to know anyway, even without those things, even with mud on the floor and cinderblock walls. They arrange the furniture, they take out their books. They drive from an hour away or trudge from their dorms, they come even though they worked a late shift at McDonalds or the snack bar, even though they’re going through a divorce; they come even if they didn’t understand the reading, and even if they can’t register for next semester’s classes because they haven’t been able to pay their most recent tuition bill. They come even though their car is in the shop and they had to walk. They come even though their aunts and uncles and sometimes their parents ask why they’re wasting their time studying English.

That sound—the sound of the furniture being dragged across the floor, no doubt disturbing the class in the room below, making the professor raise her voice as she throws out parting words and the students shuffle for their coats and bags—that sound has become for me a sort of echo across time of the sound of Thoreau and his friends raising the little cabin in the Concord woods. (“No man was more honored in the character of his raisers than I,” he wrote; “They are destined, I trust, to assist in the raising of loftier structures one day” [p. 358].) It is the sound of a space being both claimed and prepared, made ready for an experience, a collective activity, that even without marble and oak and in spite of massive cultural and economic pressures pushing them in other directions, our students continue to show up for.

Today we are reading *Walden*, and a student is struggling with the sentence, “By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves will break through and steal” (p. 327). Caleb, whose father is a minister, tells us the old book is the Bible and refers us to Matthew 6:19–21, but this leaves us with the trickier first part of the sentence, and we take some time with it, sitting in silence, our books open, the sound of the trucks suddenly louder in the quiet, a few pages turning. Then a hand: Angela, who seldom speaks in class because she thinks she “isn’t good at English,” but whom I often notice leaning slightly forward in discussions as if participating silently in her head. She speaks quietly. “*Seeming fate* sounds like you think you’re doomed, but you’re really not,” she

says. Another hand: “but why is fate commonly called *necessity*?” More silence, more trucks, more pages turning. Angela: “Okay, I’m probably wrong, this is probably wrong, but maybe it’s like, you say its necessity, but it really isn’t?” Some nodding as this gets absorbed by the room. Then another hand: John, a secondary education major who has been struggling with Thoreau, who resists the injunction to “Simplify!”, but for whom the sentence suddenly resonates.

He’s animated, excited—he feels but can’t quite express the idea. He spends a few seconds stammering, trying to get it out. We wait.

“It’s like, we say we *need* to do things, we need to go to class, or we need to buy something, or we need a new cell phone—but we don’t actually need to do any of those things. That’s why it’s only a *seeming* fate. Nobody’s holding a gun to our head.”

This is met by nodding all around, both because the sentence now genuinely makes sense and also because there’s a shared feeling of silent appreciation for John and Angela, who did something hard, who risked public vulnerability for the sake of our common enterprise, our collective work. I can see in his face that John is absorbed by the idea he has just articulated: he’s thinking about what it would mean to exercise the freedom suggested by Thoreau’s redefinition of *necessity*. It’s true. *Nobody’s holding a gun to our head.*

My favorite moments in the classroom are these, the moments in which students are both urgently compelled to speak and at a loss for words. I love these moments because they signal to me that the student has discovered not a new thought but a new way of thinking, something that so overturns her habits of thought that she cannot immediately say what it is she’s discovered. If a new thought is a new piece of furniture, this kind of crisis in thought is like discovering a room one hadn’t known was there (in the movies such hidden rooms, appropriately enough, always seem to be hidden behind bookcases). I value these moments not only for the intellectual growth that they signal, but also because each time a student comes to a new way of thinking she also learns to be less afraid of future revolutions in thought.

A few things to note about this experience. First, it happens live, in person, in the room. Shared space matters. Physical proximity matters. The silent nodding matters, the moments of silence, the expressions, the stammering, the moving of the furniture—they all matter. We need the protection of the space and the distance from external pressures afforded by it. We are,

fleetingly, but also regularly (twice or three times a week, in this familiarly imperfect space) a community. The care of the space demonstrated by the students moving the furniture each day is one manifestation of this; their willingness to risk articulating new thoughts is another.

I’d like to propose another historical analogue to this space, this one going a bit further back: Anne Hutchinson’s sitting room. In the mid-seventeenth century, Hutchinson, a midwife, nurse, and mother of 14, perceived that the Calvinist insistence on *grace alone* as the key to salvation, coupled with the Puritan understanding of the experience of grace as immediate and unmediated, undercut the spiritual authority of the all-male Boston ministers who also wielded political power in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The meetings she held in her Boston home were for her neighbors, at first only women, later both women and men, and their very structure, informal meetings for discussion, reflected the belief that grace—the immediate apprehension of divine truth—doesn’t observe class or gender or social hierarchies; it can happen to anyone, and carries its own authority. Understood as an immediate experience that could be known only to the individual to whom it had occurred, grace made personal experience a ground, indeed the ground, of divine knowledge.

In thinking about the humanities classroom as public space, I want to draw not only on Thoreau’s principle of removal, but also on the tradition of radical egalitarianism implicit in Hutchinson’s understanding of grace, which, in opposition to a doctrine of works, stressed the inward nature of the experience of the divine, an experience that, in Hutchinson’s view was unobtainable except as freely given by God, and that could neither be arrived at nor proven by good works. I’m not a religious person, and even if I were I wouldn’t subscribe to the kind of view Hutchinson had of hell or predestination, to note just two of a long list of differences—but the parallels to what I’m talking about are significant. Hutchinson’s sitting room, like Thoreau’s cabin, can be understood as a space apart, a place for removal. And descriptions of grace are analogous to the kind of knowledge that is gained from discussion-based, in-person humanities classes. In the same way that grace could not be transmitted from minister to parishioner, but had to be directly apprehended, the kind of knowledge engendered by the humanities class is not conveyed from professor to student. This is the thing about grace—it’s not packagable. It’s not marketable. It is not content delivered. It is arrived at, often, like grace, in a

flash, by the student engaged in the arduous, risky activity of synthesizing difficult new material with his or her own past experiences in the presence of other people doing the same thing. I can't make my students have this experience; I can't even say for sure in what the experience consists. Freedom isn't merely the result of this classroom practice, it is part of its process, built in. What will John do, what will Angela do with the possibilities that *Walden* has opened for them? I don't know. I can't know. The meaning of the freedom of thought that can be opened in the separate space of the humanities classroom, is that it is free, that it is not determined in advance, not bound by the demands of the market or social expectation or even institutional authority. We do not escape those things when we enter the humanities classroom, but we can remove ourselves, for an hour or two, by collective agreement, from their power in our lives. We can be in another, freer space, a space in which this kind of grace can happen.

Hutchinson's story doesn't end happily—she was accused of heresy, denounced, and banished. But by the nineteenth century she was seen as a heroine, pictured by Nathaniel Hawthorne and others as an example of principled resistance that had come to be understood as beneficial not only to the individual but to the community. This double movement of, on the one hand, removal or reliance on individual experience as the foundation of knowledge and, on the other, the return to social or community life, is central to *Walden*, which often vacillates between present and past, the solitary life at the pond and the more outwardly directed life of writing. Classrooms, too, can be places in which experience is built upon and transformed, and Thoreau seems to anticipate John Dewey's experience-based pedagogical theory when he critiques his Harvard education:

To my astonishment, I was informed on leaving college that I had studied navigation! — why, if I had taken one turn down the harbor I should have known more about it. Even the *poor* student studies and is taught only *political* economy, while that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy is not even sincerely professed in our colleges. The consequence is, that while he is reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say, he runs his father in debt irretrievably. (p. 363)

Thoreau's critique of the classrooms of his day culminates with an observation about the aftermath of

education, the future it bequeaths: what happens, that is, when students leave college and move back into the community. I don't think I've ever taught *Walden* and not had students respond emphatically to the way that last sentence resonates with their own experience—the one significant difference being that it is themselves, not their fathers, who are being run into debt. The conversation that day is about their own present and future realities: the jobs they're working while in school, the kinds of choices they have to make (tuition or a root canal, tuition or car repairs, tuition or rent), their fears for the future, the kinds of compromises they've already made. It's a hard conversation, sometimes an emotional one, and invariably one that raises for them the question Thoreau was asking: is it worth it?

This is a tough conversation for me to moderate. For reasons both good and selfish, I want them to answer, "Yes." I want them to believe in the value of the class, and of their education in general. But I can't both encourage them to honestly question and at the same time hold my own answer as the final word. Here, much to my own discomfort, I represent the authority, the common wisdom, the institution to be questioned, and insofar as I believe that the value of the humanities classroom is precisely the opportunity it presents for this kind of questioning, I am impelled to stay quiet.

The collective verdict that has so far emerged from these classroom conversations has been a somewhat agonized yes. Sometimes someone says, "It is worth it because, even factoring in debt, with a BA I'll earn more than I would without one." But mostly the worth question is answered in non-quantifiable terms, in terms of books and discussions and ideas and a community that changed them. The affirmation is earnest, but somewhat ambivalent, because that inner sense of the invaluable quality of what they're learning doesn't erase the fact of debt or the anxiety it creates, an anxiety that creeps in even here, even into our place apart. The move back that is the necessary second half of the gesture of removal has become a more daunting, even fearful, prospect. And for good reason.

According to Noel Gallagher, the average amount of debt held by 2013 Maine college graduates is roughly \$30,000 (*Portland Press Herald*, November 12, 2014). Many of the students in the deepest debt are graduates of public universities, first generation college students with little or no financial support from their parents entering an economy that is especially punishing to the young. This is no *melancholy*

accident—it is a clear failure of the promise of public education, a promise that for several decades of the twentieth century corresponded to a reality. In response to a situation that no one can deny is a problem, one solution has been proposed: replace public liberal education with job training. Deliver this training as conveniently and efficiently as possible. Train students for the new economy.

I want to be clear that I'm not arguing that nothing other than funding needs to change. In light of the new economic reality for college graduates, professors and administrators have a responsibility to help students to think concretely about their futures. We have to wake up to this responsibility and take it seriously. But these conversations, too, demand proximity, demand trust and time, demand imagination and openness. We owe it to our students to help them to navigate their return to the world outside the classroom. We owe it to them to help them to find jobs. But we owe them more than that. And to forget our larger responsibility to preserve public access to spaces in which thinking and questioning can happen isn't just to cheat public university students, it is to shortchange our culture as a whole. Institutions like the Maine Humanities Council and our public libraries do what they can to foster public conversations about literature, history, and philosophy—this is essential work, and we need institutions like these. We need museums and concerts and reading groups and lectures that are open to the public. But we also need public classrooms.

The humanities aren't dying, they're just becoming a luxury good, a high-end commodity, and this is a problem, not just for those of us who work in public universities but for all of us.

Twenty-five years ago, state appropriations covered about 70 percent of the University of Maine System's education budget. That number has dropped to about 40 percent, according to the most generous estimates (*Bangor Daily News*, September 22, 2014). While declining enrollments in the University of Maine System

are certainly a significant part of the currently bleak financial picture, they are not the whole picture: it might be more accurate to describe the present crisis as one of investment, rather than one of enrollment. Maine is not unique; the defunding of the University of Maine System is part of a nationwide decline in state support for public higher education that has been acute in the last few years. In 2000, state support exceeded tuition revenue in 47 states. That number is now down to 26 states (Huelsman 2014). As we've seen at the University of Southern Maine and elsewhere, the humanities have been disproportionately targeted, and visions of a streamlined, career-oriented public university, with a business model like that of McDonalds or Netflix, have been put forth as an alternative to in-person, discussion-based liberal education. The new model calls for faster, cheaper, more efficient content-delivery.

Last year, North Carolina Governor Patrick McCrory, threatening cuts to the University of North Carolina's flagship campus at Chapel Hill said this: "If you want to take gender studies that's fine, go to a private school and take it" (Kiley 2013). To my mind, this is a more revealing statement than the more typical wholesale dismissal of the liberal arts and humanities that one sometimes hears. What McCrory says is, gender studies are fine, the humanities are fine—for people who can afford to pay. This is the gravest threat, and indeed is already more than a threat. The humanities aren't dying, they're just becoming a luxury good, a high-end commodity, and this is a problem, not just for those of us who work in public universities but for all of us.

If in the context of today's climate the idea that humanities classrooms and the liberal arts in general are a vital public good seems an extreme position, this was not always the case. It was, until a few decades ago, a matter of public consensus. Issued a few years after the GI Bill altered the social and economic landscape of the United States for the better by radically increasing college accessibility, the 1947 Truman Report declared: "It is a commonplace of the democratic faith that education is indispensable to the maintenance and growth of freedom of thought, faith, enterprise, and association."³ To affirm the social value of access to public higher education, to liberal education, was a commonplace; it was a belief held across the political spectrum that democracy requires true freedom of thought and that freedom of thought can be engendered by a liberal education.

The discourse around the crisis in public higher education sometimes makes the current situation seem inevitable, impossible to solve, as if high student debt and the elimination of public humanities classrooms are simply new realities to which we must adjust. This widespread acceptance of this “seeming fate, commonly called necessity” demonstrates the need for a removal, a vision from outside the assumptions of the present moment, of the culture as it is right now.

The story of decreased access to college and particularly to live, in-person humanities teaching is part of the larger story of the concentration of money and power in America in the past few decades, and it will take all of our collective will and intellectual power to begin to solve the problems that story presents. We need economists and policymakers to help solve them. But we also need, desperately, the collective ability to imagine a better future, to ask, as Thoreau teaches us to, what words like *necessary* and *public* and *democracy* really mean. This is a practical need. We cannot make a better future if the few spaces in our society dedicated to the hard work of imaginative thinking and radical questioning become luxury commodities.

The kinds of upheavals in thought that can take place in a space apart don't merely expand the individual's sense of the possible, they expand our collective power and enhance our collective future. This power, I want to suggest, is a *public good* that deserves not just protection but promotion, and the spaces in which this kind of thinking is not only made possible but made publicly accessible are increasingly rare.

President Obama's recent proposal to provide qualifying students with two-years of tuition-free community college represents an important shift in this conversation, a shift I believe anyone concerned with issues of access, debt, and their impact on our democracy should welcome, even if we question the proposal's limited scope and its potential impact on four-year public institutions. A more far-reaching state-federal matching proposal that covers four-year colleges has been outlined by the public policy think tank Demos (Huelsman 2014). Are these proposals cost free? No, but they are possible.

Tax cuts for the wealthy passed in 2011 in Maine have diminished state revenues by an estimated \$200 million dollars (*Bangor Daily News*, February 16, 2014). Imagine what \$200 million—or even a fraction of that amount—could do to expand access to liberal education. The humanities are becoming a luxury for

the rich, not by necessity, but by our collective choice to do nothing about it.

In “Economy,” Thoreau writes, “There is only one way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one center” (p. 331).

The truth is, I don't have the answer to the problem I've addressed here. But one of my students might. Let's give her, let's give them all, some time to think about it. 🐸

ENDNOTES

1. This essay is adapted from a lecture given at the Center for Global Humanities at the University of New England on November 7, 2014.
2. A quick summary of many of these arguments and findings can be found here: <http://www.businessinsider.com/11-reasons-to-major-in-the-humanities-2013-6>
3. The text of “The President's Commission Higher Education for Democracy, 1947” can be found here: <http://courses.education.illinois.edu/eol474/sp98/truman.html>

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