

Luxuries vs. Necessities or Traveling With Thoreau

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Every year, when I teach Thoreau to my college students at Radford University, I ask them to go to the grocery store, taking Henry David with them. I want them to apply what they've read in *Walden* about luxuries and necessities to what they see in the local Wade's or Wal-Mart. It often is the first time students really analyze the "text" of a grocery store, and it always leads to lively debate.

In class the next day, I make sure everyone understands Thoreau's views. He outlines what he considers the necessities of life: Food, Shelter, and Clothing. Without these, humans cannot "entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success." During discussion, we usually add a car to this list since many commute from rural areas. Likewise, students can't imagine life without an iPod or cell phone, so they go onto the board with question marks beside them.

"Why is he so against luxuries?" I query, and eventually someone ferrets out this quote: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries...the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor." The juxtaposition of "positive" with "hindrances" slows them for a moment, but soon they understand the basic principle: you can't be "elevated" or enlightened if you focus only on money. They might disagree, saying I have to have my computer, but they get the idea.

Then comes the fun. After opening the doors of Thoreau's little shack, we pull open the doors of the massive grocery stores. As part of the assignment, I've asked students to analyze the items for sale and guesstimate the luxury versus necessity content of the store. The ratios vary widely, anywhere from 50/50 to 95/5, with that particular student arguing that almost all of it is a waste. Class consensus usually finds that 75% of the store consists of luxury items, and customers buy about that much of luxuries also.

Next we list specific examples of necessities, and always, a vegetarian in class questions our including "meat" on this list. I point out that Thoreau agreed, asking why the farmer insisted on meat in his diet all the while laboring behind an ox who worked just fine on plant matter alone.

The luxury list fills a whole board, from ice cream and frozen dinners to candy and artichoke hearts. We tackle the issue of mangoes and bananas imported from far away and the extravagance of all the choices and packaging. A student usually asks why the frozen pizza comes in such a colorful box while the tomato does not.

Before the class ends, I question what this says about us. I'm always surprised by how succinct and upfront the answers: "We're spoiled and wasteful;" "The American Dream is all about getting stuff, and we often forget about the real meaning of life;" or this, "We're fat in body and skinny in spirit." Thoreau would appreciate this last one especially.

Are we "elevated," to use Thoreau's word? Maybe for a moment as we take a good look at our world. But our class time ends and everyone heads out to check their cell phones and snack on Nabs before the next class. I join them and drive home in my

car, Thoreau beside me in the passenger seat, marveling at how far down this road of luxury we've traveled, and wondering where it will end.