

Notes on Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government"

Thoreau's ideas can be summarized as follows:

1. Thoreau asserts that personal principles, called "higher laws," are more important than the laws written by the state, whether local or federal. These are moral laws, formed by upbringing and contemplation of the truths found in living.
2. There are times when an individual's higher law may come into conflict with the law of the state. Government's often make decisions and carry out policies which are anathema to an individual's principles.
3. When an individual's higher law and the law of the state come into conflict, one must follow his or her higher law. Thoreau counsels individuals not to waste their time on petty laws; he asserts that the winds of time will wear away such annoyances. Only those laws dealing with injustice deserve the full attention of the individual.
4. When an individual follows the higher law of conscience, it is imperative that he or she assume full responsibility for the consequences of breaking the state's laws. Punishment for breaking the law cannot be dodged.
5. By accepting the consequences of refusing to obey the unjust laws of the state, an individual may be able to bring the kind of attention and discourse that can result in getting the unacceptable law changed.

Thoreau thus outlined his belief in the power of non-violent protest against unjust laws. In doing so, he has delineated a system by which an individual can refuse to obey a law that causes him or her to become an agent of the injustice perpetrated by the law itself.

Thoreau's ideas can be seen in literature as old as Sophocles' play, *Antigone*, in which a young woman refuses to obey the unjust law decreed by the king. She dies rather than submit to the state's authority when it requires her to deny her religious and personal beliefs. The law is changed, but only after Antigone is dead. Both in Sophocles' 400 B.C.E. tragedy and in Thoreau's much more recent essay, there is no guarantee that an act of civil disobedience will be honored or that the person refusing to obey an unjust law will even survive the experience. Only morality can be seen as the victor.

Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience was the precursor for the developments of nonviolent mass action, which made an important force in the history of the 20th century. Mohandas Gandhi, Alice Paul (an American suffragist leader), Martin Luther King, Jr. and their followers used nonviolent protest to force changes in government and society.