EMERSON AND THOREAU: THE LIFE FULLY LIVED

This seminar will take students on a personal exploration of the lives and thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, two of the most inspiring figures in American history and letters. Emerson was intensely engaged with society, ever committed to close friendships and community. Thoreau in contrast was reclusive and austere, so alone in his beloved nature that he seemed to lack human warmth. Still, despite growing contentiousness between them, Thoreau considered Emerson his most important mentor, and the older sage considered Thoreau his closest friend. Emerson was at the center of the most searchingly brilliant, progressive, and creative community in 19th century America. His friends kept diaries, wrote letters to one another, explored alternative lifestyles, and served as public intellectuals. And they strove to live fully engaged lives—“to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours,” as Emerson once exclaimed. Thoreau preferred his life alone in the outdoors and yet he too sought the fully engaged life. In his masterpiece, Walden, he implored his readers to abandon lives of “quiet desperation” and to come alive in new ways—to dare to “suck all the marrow out of life.” This course will involve intensive reading, personal and expository writing, and active participation in transformative conversation.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

Students will be evaluated on their attendance at classes, completion of assigned readings, participation in classroom discussion, and writing of a series of brief response papers and a midterm and final paper. In addition to intensive and at times quite personal group discussion we will also pay attention to the visual record of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s lives and times.

Written work and presentations

All work will be the student’s own, and follow NYU guidelines. Extensions ordinarily will not be granted. Two papers and one shorter piece of writing will explore questions of the student’s choice from the life and work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. These papers will be evaluated on a demonstration of student mastery of course content, originality, clarity of writing, personal style, and general acumen. All work will be the student’s own, and follow NYU guidelines. Extensions ordinarily will not be
granted. In addition all students will keep a personal journal during the duration of this course.

While grading involves judgment and insight into a student’s overall engagement with the course, the following schema may be helpful to those interested in knowing how their efforts will be evaluated and final grades arrived at.

Class participation (including in-class exercises and presentations) 30%
Short first paper (2-3 pages) 15%
Mid term paper (5 pages) 20%
Final paper (8-10 pages) 35%

REQUIRED TEXTS

The following books will be available at the NYU Bookstore for purchase in early September:


Richardson, Robert, *First We Read, Then We Write*, University of Iowa Pres, 2009


SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

---Week 1---
9/08 Welcome, and Introduction to the study of Emerson

---Week 2---
9/15 “Writing What we Know”
Assigned Reading: Mind on Fire, 3-72; First We Read (FWR), 1-17

---Week 3---
9/22 “Kindling the Mind”
Assigned Reading: Mind, 72-156; FWR, 19-32
Paper #1 due in class (three pages on Emerson and writing)

Kunhardt Freshman Seminar – Fall, 2016
---Week 4---
  9/29  Concord Days
  **Assigned Reading:** Mind, 157-217; FWR, 33-43; The Writing Life, 3-24

---Week 5---
  10/06  Transcendental Community
  **Assigned Reading:** Mind, 218-259; The Portable Emerson, “Nature”

---Week 6---
  10/13  Emersonian Fire
  **Assigned Reading:** Mind, 260-311; Emerson, “The American Scholar” and “The Divinity School Address”

---Week 7---
  10/20  Concord’s Sage
  **Assigned Reading:** Mind, 312-360; TWL, 25-59

---Week 8---
  10/27  “Experience”
  **Assigned Reading:** Mind, 361-429; Emerson, “Experience”

---Week 9---
  11/03  Emerson and Thoreau…and Margaret Fuller
  **Assigned Reading:** Mind, 430-489; The Portable Thoreau, “Walden” selections
  Second Paper due in class (five pages)

---Week 10---
  11/10  Writing Walden
  **Assigned Reading:** Thoreau, Walden, selections; TWL, 63-79

---Week 11---
  11/17  Thoreau and Emerson…and Walt Whitman
  **Assigned Reading:** Whitman, “Leaves of Grass”, first edition (in full); FWR, 45-57

---Week 12---  THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASS

---Week 13---
  12/01  On Fire Against Slavery
  **Assigned Reading:** Mind, 507-540; Emerson, “Fate,” “Fugitive Slave Law,” “Eulogy on Thoreau; FWR, 59-76

---Week 14---
  12/08  To Be Announced Final Paper due in class (10 pages)
---Week 15---

12/15  Endings

Assigned Reading: Mind, 543-573; FWR, 76-85; WL, 83-111

PHILIP KUNHARDT is Distinguished Scholar in Residence in the Humanities, and teaches history and biography in the College of Arts and Science. He focuses on the lives of transformative figures and has co-authored six books, including The Photographs of Abraham Lincoln (2015), Looking for Lincoln (2008), and The American President (1999). He was also writer and co-producer of more than a dozen documentary films for PBS, ABC, HBO, Discovery, and others, including the ten-part PBS series The American President (2000), and the sixteen part Freedom: A History of US. Before coming to NYU in 2010 he was a Bard Center Fellow at Bard College in Annandale, New York.