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## *Healthy Systems: Literature, Nature, and Integrity*

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### **Abstract**

*Our interactions with everyday objects inform our understanding of the world; yet today much of what we use is tossed immediately. Items made in haste, used in haste, and made into waste belie the values that, for centuries, humans have taken for granted. What do our consumption practices teach our students today? I suggest that apathy, loss of agency, lack of integrity, and disconnection is often a result of our incomplete understanding of what lasts and where things go when we're finished with them. Fortunately, the literature classroom, which can introduce students to texts such as "God's Grandeur," *Grapes of Wrath*, and *Frankenstein*, among others, offers educators an opportunity to challenge our throwaway society and reverence what lasts.*



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## Healthy Systems: What Students Learn from Consuming and Producing

Every human belongs to many systems—social, environmental, economic, to name a few. We impact them for better or for worse. Like a tree, for example, which consumes carbon dioxide to produce oxygen or takes up yard space to increase property value, we are called to act as healthy parts of the whole, consuming what we need to survive and producing what the systems need to thrive. We do neither well. Instead, we devour unhealthy foods and practices. Then we produce little but waste, of no value to any system. We have ignored basic responsibilities, and it's catching up with us, our kids, and the planet.

Thankfully, we're in the midst of a great awakening, examining the hidden results of decades of immature diets. Movies like *Supersize Me* and *Food Inc.* authors like Michael Pollen and Eric Schlosser, and celebrity experts like Dr. Oz and Jamie Oliver have revealed unintended consequences of our consumption: poor health, an unhealthy food industry, and a suffering ecosystem. Are we as aware of what we're giving back? Do we know what we're contributing to our ecological, educational, social or economic systems? These questions are crucial, and they relate to the literature classroom in primal and demanding ways. An array of familiar poems, short stories and novels travel these paths; for example, William Wordsworth (2005) in "The World Is Too Much With Us" bemoans our "getting and spending" by which we "lay waste our powers." In other words, we take without giving. As a result, "little we see in nature ... is ours." Our disconnection from the natural cycle may be less obvious to students than it was to Wordsworth, but it's no less disastrous. Blind to the duties and demands of a healthy system, many teenagers just don't know that what they do and say both matters and lasts.

These are overwhelming issues—nothing less than the life of the planet is at stake. But it's also where we as teachers can be most compelling. We can inject the literature, the practices, the discussion and the questioning into our students' days. It's exhilarating to know that many modern problems can be solved through education; we can shake the systems: "The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perception, and values .... It is an educational challenge" (Orr, 2004, p. 27).

### What We Consume

Recently, food activists have lifted the veil: our diets are deadly. Obese, diabetic, enervated, addicted Americans are almost anything but nourished by food. We are the most obese nation in the world. According to the Center for Disease Control, almost two-thirds of U.S. adults are overweight, and a third are obese. Furthermore, "15% of all teens aged 12 – 19 ... are obese, a three-fold increase in a 20-year period" (Seiders & Petty, 2004, p. 153). It's an epidemic, and it's becoming the number one cause of preventable death: "At a time when the nation is close to a civil war over health-care reform, obesity adds \$147 billion a year to our doctor bills" (Walsh, 2009, p. 15). None of this would surprise the authors and philosophers of the past who had ranged the uneven terrain of human nature. Although Huxley, for instance, did not foretell that we'd become fat in *Brave New World*, he did predict the lazy, addicted consumer who pursued "[s]elf-indulgence up to the very limits imposed by hygiene and economics" (Huxley, 2004, p. 212). Ultimately, our diets are not sustaining us physically or ecologically.

Instead, what we consume sustains another system: the food industry grows fat on our diets. Economically, obesity and addiction make sense: "What is demonstrably good in the sphere

of economics may be far from good for men and women as ... human beings” (Huxley, 2004, p. 278). Most of our food is processed by multi-national corporations. When we feed them, we starve family farms. Whereas in the past the American hearth and heart was on a farm, during the twentieth century, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “total nonfarm employment has grown by about 100 million since 1939” (Bureau of labor statistics, 2010, “Employment,” para. 2). In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck’s (1972) faceless brokers and their machines devour powerless farmers: “They came in closed cars, ... and sometimes they drove big earth augers into the ground for soil tests. The tenants, from their sun-beaten dooryards, watched uneasily when the closed cars drove along the fields” (p. 32). Banks “don’t breathe air, don’t eat side-meat. They breathe profits, they eat interest on money. If they don’t get it, they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. It is a sad thing, but it is so. It is just so” (p. 33). Currently, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, while family farms make up 90 percent of all farms, the remaining 10 percent—large-scale farms—produce 70 percent of the food we eat. Once we’d been entwined with our farms, desperate for the seed, the harvest, the meal. Now we drift through food courts and strip malls, where the lifespan of a burger is brief indeed.

We have separated ourselves from the cycle as much as possible, with dismal results. Our ecosystem is groaning under the weight of our diets. The damage is astonishing: “The U.S. agricultural industry can now produce unlimited quantities of meat and grains at remarkably cheap prices. But it does so at a high cost to the environment, animals and humans” (Walsh, 2009, para. 2). Our food system eats up 19 percent of our fossil fuels, “more than any other sector of the economy” (Walsh, 2009, para. 2). Furthermore, as the demand for meat grows, emissions increase: “The trillions of farm animals around the world generate 18 percent of the emissions that are raising global temperatures, according to United Nations estimates, more even than from cars, buses and airplanes” (Rosenthal, 2008, para. 6). What and how we eat is hazardous to the environment and to us.

Although it’s easy to be staggered by the need for change in industrialized food, we must be wary of not just our diets but our lifestyles. Daily, we also consume entertainment, electronics, and advertising. So do children. In fact, “more than a third of children under the age of 5 have a television in their bedrooms, as do two-thirds of children, pre-teens, and teenagers” (Rosen, 2010). Dished out on each television screen, pop-culture, fashion, trends, and ads are digested by adolescents and children. Our youth “have 145 conversations a week about brands” (Hein, 2007, p. 48). Everything they consume is quick and easy, so they’ve come to expect everything they consume to be quick and easy. Two years ago, my colleagues and I hunted for the perfect book for summer reading. In the fall, I asked students whether they would recommend it for the next year. They wrote their anonymous answers on slips of paper. Here is one response from a student who did not read: “I read Sparknotes, but I would recommend [the book] for next year. It was cool.” Like fast food instead of a multi-course meal, study guides are quicker and, to an unrefined palate, just as good.

Additionally, high-schoolers on average spend six to 8.5 hours per day communicating electronically (Rosen, 2010), even though research shows that increased internet use leads to depression, anxiety, and loss of focus. Constant texting disables thumbs, increases anxiety and depression, and inhibits healthy sleep (Hafner, 2009). One 15-year old admitted to me that he can’t stop filling every free moment with Xbox, even though he feels like he’s “wasting” entire days. Just like gorging ourselves on food isn’t good for us, a rapacious appetite for entertainment and technology doesn’t serve us well. Sure, there are many benefits to being technologically savvy, but a healthy approach begins with moderation.

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We may believe we helping our children by structuring their play, giving them electronics, and keeping them entertained, but we're actually stuffing them with stuff. Fortunately, there may be some solutions.

First, students must learn that not everything is ephemeral; things last. Literature, specifically, has stood the test of time and continues to cast light on modern issues across vast distances. *Frankenstein*, for example, highlights our inability to truly control the things we create, while *Grapes of Wrath* demonizes the nameless corporations that provide most of our goods—both incredibly relevant issues. Furthermore, books which spark imagination and demand quiet settings provide relief from the easily consumed, plugged-in electronics that dominate our children's landscapes: "In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, or by any other act of contemplation, for that matter, we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas. Deep reading ... is indistinguishable from deep thinking" (Carr, 2008, para. 32). After we read excerpts from Emerson and Thoreau, for example, I challenge students to spend forty-five minutes outside for homework and then write about it. They hunger for such engagement. One wrote, "Not only did I forget about my problems, I also forgot about myself. I stopped focusing on me and on what nature could do for me, but focused more on just nature itself: 'Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanished' (Emerson)." Genuine interactions with literature beg for a more active involvement and a quieter pace. One young man wrote in an anonymous survey about my class, "Now I read more on my own just because of this course." Slower and subtler than video games, movies, and the internet; literature can reconnect us with ourselves.

Second, students must reconnect with nature. In his important study on Nature Deficit Disorder, *Last Child In the Woods*, Richard Louv (2008) suggests that spending time in natural settings counters many of the symptoms of over-consumption: "new studies suggest that exposure to nature may reduce the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and that it can improve all children's cognitive abilities and resistance to negative stresses and depression" (p. 35). Nature is especially restorative to our most vulnerable young people, Louv finds (p. 51). Even still, we are confronted with an uncomfortable truth: that our youngest generation is largely not at home in nature: "...the bond is breaking between the young and the natural world" (Louv, p. 3). Our kids are indoors a lot of the time, and when they are outside, it's often under strict conditions and in un-natural settings, such as manicured fields or artificial turf (Louv, p. 31). Although controlled settings diminish the benefits that nature provides, nature's restorative powers are irrefutable.

If literature and nature are so good for us, why aren't we consuming them more? Unfortunately, we've learned that consumption should be undemanding, entertaining, and immediately rewarding, like a candy bar or video game. After all, while reading can be uniquely meaningful, it can also be arduous. As for nature, well, a cynic might suggest that modern society encourages us to consume manufactured goods rather than the free and wild outdoors: "In recent years American businesses have started reaching out directly to public schools to affect the buying habits of young people for everything from potato chips to sneakers," and, although the link between obesity and soft-drinks has been established, "[i]n the highly competitive soft drink market, some schools have signed contracts agreeing to exclude a competitor's product in exchange for cash payments" (Swoboda, 1998, para. 5). Years ago in a meeting, the principal told the faculty to "drink Coke" because the Coca-cola corporation had helped pay for a scoreboard.

Clearly, we must encourage our students to consume healthy foods and practices, including spending time in nature and reading thoughtful literature. Connections with the natural world reduce anxiety, obesity, and depression, and may create a new generation of people willing to work hard to conserve the green places: “A widening circle of researches believes that the loss of natural habitat, or the disconnection from nature even when it is available, has enormous implications for human health and child development. They say the quality of exposure to nature affects our health at an almost cellular level” (Louv, 2008, p. 43). Similarly, connecting to literature strengthens our understanding of the world and of human nature; reading slows our pace and quickens our imagination. Of course, we must compete with the millions of dollars spent developing and advertising new foods, technologies, entertainment, consumables, but that has always been the onus of adulthood: protecting the young from dangers that inexperienced eyes cannot see.

### **What We Produce**

As a result of puerile consumption practices, Americans suffer unexpected physical, mental and social ailments. However, we do more than consume. We also produce. In fact, it might be time to question what we *do* produce each day. As far as tangibles go, most of us make only trash and emissions—absolutely valueless, at best, but not negligible. They impact us in veiled but vital ways. I suggest that our waste defaces our students’ social and mental systems as well as our ecosystem. As teachers, we must explore the littered landscape: what do our students take away from what we throw away? Ironically, this waste-land is virgin territory; nothing in history has prepared us for modern consumerism.

As a teenager, I was lucky to glimpse a more sustainable lifestyle when I visited my grandparents in the north of England. Having lived in the U.S. since age three, I was intrigued by Nana’s ways: walking with cloth bags to the market, buying meat and veggies from different vendors, choosing only what could be eaten in a day or two because Nana and Granddad didn’t own a freezer. It was amazing how much thought was required for a grocery run. Of course it was worth it; everything tasted fresh, even though at times too red in tooth and claw for me. (The milk took me aback because it had “bits” in it, and I stopped eating cow tongue after I learned what it was.) At our second meal together, Nana astonished me by handing us our used napkins from the night before, rolled in individual rings. I asked if we had to keep the same ones all week. Nana chuckled; she didn’t want to do laundry after every meal, so yes, we’d reuse them. Any mess I mopped up would remain with me, so I ate with care.

By contrast, I recently asked a junior in my class how often he threw away his eating utensils or plates. He didn’t understand the question, so he said, “Never.” I probed, “You wash your plates and forks after each meal?” “Oh, no!” he quickly clarified, “I always eat out. I’m a fast-food fiend!” Although at first he claimed to throw nothing away, upon reflection he conceded that virtually every item he used in a meal was tossed in a trash can. His waste had been so absolutely jettisoned that he couldn’t even recall it. For millennia, parents have taught children how to care for valued objects, but today many students simply ball up a wrapper and it disappears.

Disposability means quick, careless meals. So kids throw stuff away—so what? Well, a culture in which nothing lasts—out of sight, out of mind—is immature. It denies a basic foundation of developmental psychology, object permanence. An object with permanence is whole; it has integrity (the root is “integer”). Children who learn that unseen objects last lay the

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foundation for integrity. Eventually, children find out that people with integrity act and speak with permanence. On a fundamental level, they don't change, and their actions and words are consistent throughout time. Integrity creates reliable relationships, which form reliable communities and, eventually, a stable society. Because people with integrity understand that actions and words have a lasting impact on the system, integrity is the foundation for sustainability.

If sustainability is critical, then so is integrity. Yet it's difficult enough to teach concretes like nouns; how can we teach integrity? As psychologist and author Madeline Levine (2008) wrote in her "seminal...must-read" book, *The Price of Privilege*, the way young children manage simple tasks informs how they will cope with vital ones in adolescence: "Just as it was critical for the toddler to fumble with her shoelaces before mastering the art of shoelace tying, so is it critical for the adolescent to fumble with difficult tasks and choices in order to master the art of making independent, healthy, moral decisions that can be called upon in the absence of parents' directives" (p. 9). The toddler must learn to care for toys and plates and cups before she can learn to care for intangibles—decisions and actions that will last. But this is a generation that doesn't know how to value inconvenient stuff. We've taught children to throw away about four and a half pounds of trash per person *every single day*. We've become accustomed to convenience, even though character deepens in mundane, routine tasks: "It is almost always in quiet, unpressured moments that kids reach inside and expose the most delicate parts of their developing selves" (Levine, 2008, p. 31). We teach a generation who doesn't value integrity because, whether we like it or not, society teaches to dispose, not to sustain.

We've denied object permanence, so we only trust what we can see, touch and own. We turn everything into consumables, including education. According to a decades-long UCLA study examining why students pursue higher education, subjects in the 60s and 70s demonstrated eagerness to gain important skills, acumen, and understanding—intangibles. However, "[b]eginning in the 1990s, a majority of students say that 'making a lot of money' has become the most important reason to go to college" (Levine, p. 47). The diploma ensures a good job, which ensures a good income, while the education itself is invisible. It's not only the students but the schools who are consumer-driven; admission to for-profit universities and colleges has skyrocketed in the last decade. While traditional schools focus on "cultural heritage, critical thinking, communication skills, qualities of mind and spirit, and education for citizenship" (Morey, 2004, p. 143), for-profit schools "value convenience, quality, service and cost" (Morey, 2004, p. 135). Eighty percent of venture-capital firms who invest in higher education do so because of "potential return on investment, and the size and growth of the industry. Improving education was ranked last among reasons for investment" (Morey, p. 142). Results of this type of prioritizing include valuing outcome over process, relying on the bottom line, and following corporate rather than faculty curricula (Morey). This trend is especially notable where traditional schools are struggling. Thirteen schools closed in the 2010-11 school year alone in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, whose educational mission includes "formation of conscience."

When schools are built on consuming and convenience rather than character, many students simply don't "buy into" the invisible and painstaking educational process. I'm sure we all see this in our classrooms. For example, after planning evocative, imaginative lessons, I'm often asked, "Is this being graded?" What's more, I notice that although parents call me when their children earn poor grades, they rarely investigate what skill the grade assessed. Online study guides remain popular even in lieu of novels that genuinely appeal to students.

It is apparent to me that, as a result of both consumerism and disposability, we are raising children who resist integrity. On a practical, daily basis, I see students in my classroom making

decisions as if the invisibles fall away and the grade is all that matters. Cheating, from plagiarizing to installing spyware, is rampant in part because we've taught, without meaning to, that inconvenient things dissolve. Last year, I caught a junior cheating in my class. As a result, he earned a zero on the assignment, he appeared before the honor council, and he and I met with the vice-principal and his parents for an hour to discuss how the honor violation impacted his record. To me and the school, his reputation was compromised. This year, he asked me for a letter of recommendation for college. Because his grade was good, his decisions and transgressions seemed disposable to him. He consumed the consumable and discarded the rest.

When convenience is valued, values become inconvenient. We see it everywhere. Magazines flaunt celebrities' extra-marital affairs. Politicians stand firm one moment and waver the next. Young movie stars are called the brightest lights in Hollywood one month, slack-jawed messes the next, rehab successes a moment later, and comeback kids the next ... as long as they sell tickets. It's not just our icons who embrace the fleeting "now." Recently, as the smell of cheese and pepperoni wafted through the faculty lounge, my colleague pulled his lunch out of the microwave and grinned, "Hot Pocket: Nature's perfect food! Eat it and throw the rest away!" Of course, that's *not* nature's perfect food—far from it. But for many, once the consumable is consumed, the rest just disappears. Wrappers, reputations, rehab—nothing inconvenient sticks.

Here's yet another danger for children: the disposability of consumerism feels out of control. The landfills are filling up, the fish are dying, the birds are strangling, but what can we do? It's out of our hands. We've jettisoned the waste of our disposable society. It all sort of falls away from the individual and turns into a colossal political or environmental mess too big for anyone to fix. That's dangerous for the planet and for child development: according to Levine, adolescents who don't believe in their own agency or ability to act are at risk of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, and more. They label themselves "empty." It's not just our youth who wrestle with emptiness. When was the last time most of us grew our own food, or whittled our own toys, or knit our own clothes? The wicked Mustapha Mond said it best: "It would upset the whole social order if men started doing things on their own" (Huxley, 2004, p. 212). We value things that we could never make and can rarely maintain. Is it any wonder young people especially don't believe that they can impact the world? When I talk with my students about current events, they too often say the same thing: "What can we do? It's too big a problem. We have no control." Are we raising a generation of people who feel completely powerless?

## **Character in the Classroom**

The generation we teach, more than ever before, must learn to consume and produce wisely in order to develop integrity and sustain the systems they populate, primarily the environment. As teachers, we are called to engage our students in mindful discourse with us, with each other, and within their systems. We're lucky: the most crucial elements of our lessons overlap exactly with what we teach. Challenge students to read meaningful literature and reflect honestly. Challenge them to write what they mean and mean what they write. Challenge them to connect with ideas and authors from wildly remote times and places.

I've found the following activities valuable in raising awareness and promoting integrity and sustainability.

1. Call attention to daily consumption habits: not just food, but electronics, ads, material goods, and more. Questions include the following: How many televisions does your family own? What electronics are in your room? How much time do you spend on the internet?

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This year, after we read Thoreau, Emerson, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and a variety of other authors, I often brought discussion around to our own habits. The fifteen-year old Xbox addict I mentioned above was always one of the most vociferous debaters. He'd say things like, "It helps me relax," and "It's fun." During the course of the year, his own peers challenged his habits, and eventually he decided to quit playing Xbox entirely. Now, he's learning the piano, and he plays pick-up basketball with neighbors.

2. Take students outside in the spring and fall for independent reading time. For example, each spring I take juniors outside to read *Brave New World* or *1984*, while sophomores read *Catcher in the Rye*. They lounge in a grove of trees and feel the sun fluttering the pages of their novels—it's the best day.
3. If you can, occasionally teach outside. Louv notes that teaching outside reinvigorates student and teacher alike: "In an era of increased teacher burnout, the impact of green schools and outdoor education on teachers should not be underestimated" (Louv, 2008, p. 220).
4. Read and discuss literature about technology and consumerism, including Wordsworth's "The World Is Too Much With Us," Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper," Larkin's "The Explosion," *The Great Gatsby*, *Brave New World*, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson, *The Grapes of Wrath* and selections from Emerson and Thoreau. Recently, we were reading "God's Grandeur" by Hopkins (2005) while millions of gallons of oil leaked into the Gulf of Mexico. These lines took on undeniable significance: "And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man's smudge and share's man's smell." Afterwards, students clamored for more information, and one student wrote me an e-mail claiming it was in this class that he first realized that literature connected urgently to real life.
5. Ask students to predict how certain authors would respond to articles such as "What's Your Consumption Factor?" (Diamond, 2008) or "As Consumption Grows, Earth Suffers" (Mayall, 2009). These articles raise awareness and encourage students to challenge unhealthy trends in modern society. Diamond, for example, claims that "[m]uch American consumption is wasteful and contributes little or nothing to quality of life" (para. 15). The debate is usually heated. It's to be expected: teenagers are married to their stuff—it's how they define themselves and their peer groups. Sustained writing on such relevant and personal prompts can be very revealing.
6. Teach literature; the very definition of which includes timelessness. The idea that something lasts longer than we can even conceive is awesome. *Beowulf*, for example, still resonates with students who play *Skyrim* for hours. Shakespeare could never have envisioned the modern classroom, but his works thrive there. Furthermore, many of these older works honor honesty and reputation, key components of integrity.
7. Teach *Frankenstein*, which not only explores green themes such as the importance of nature and the dangers of uncontrolled technology; it also highlights what happens when we wish away inconvenient things. My students and I engage in heated debates about who is more to blame for the murders: Victor or his monster? Most admit that Victor has a responsibility to his creation that he does not honor. His repeated irresponsibility results in the destruction of his entire support system. We parallel this to a variety of topics relevant to my students. For example, I used to teach in inner-city schools while now my students live in predominantly upper- and upper-middle-class suburban homes. I tell true stories

about children who've never been fed a nutritious, home-cooked meal, and who lived in drug dens with adults who don't know their names. Horrified, my students demand that someone do something. They point to the parents, but I remind them that the parents may have been raised this way themselves. They point to the government or social workers, but other students ask who will pay for these programs. More relevant today than when it was written, the novel lends itself to questions of responsibility and disposability.

8. Encourage your school cafeteria to commit to reusable service items or to allow students to bring refillable cups—the act of daily caring for an item, washing it, bringing it, using it, translates to a larger understanding that things last.
9. Follow the lead of a study at University of Maryland, College Park: Challenge your students to go 24 hour without technology and blog on how they feel and what they notice (24 hours: Unplugged, n.d.). You may also want to include information on symptoms of addiction, and this activity will be especially meaningful if taught along with novels like *Feed* by M. T. Anderson or *Brave New World*.
10. Explore workers' rights and production using William Blake's (2005) "The Chimney Sweeper" and Philip Larkin's (2005) poem "The Explosion." In one, a young boy imagines heaven as a "green plain" where he and his friends can "wash in a river, and shine in the sun." In the other, workers are killed in a mine explosion; their wives imagine them shining "like gold"—a reference to the remuneration due them as a result of their loss. These issues are very much relevant to us today and can be related to topics such as child labor in China or coal mining deaths in the US.
11. Assign students to spend an hour alone in nature and write about it. Initially, students groan. They ask if they can bring their iPods. Yet almost without fail, afterwards they tell me that they feel more calm, more focused, and happier. I usually assign this after we read excerpts from Emerson and Thoreau—a fantastic launching pad for students' own experiences with transcendental experiences. Here are some excerpts from students' written reflections:

"I took a hike in the woods and sat down at the trunk of a massive tree without my cell phone or iPod. I stayed there for some time and started to feel less stressed. I noticed the different colors of all the leaves. Nature seemed more appealing, just as Emerson said, 'All natural objects make a kindred impression when the mind is open to their influence.' I was in such awe of nature's beauty. It occurred to me that this is what Emerson meant when saying, 'I am a lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.'"

"After a few minutes of quiet meditation sitting on the log, I walked past the large trees and almost lacerated my leg on a barbed-wire fence, long forgotten. The fence stretched for ten feet but fell apart past that. It served no purpose, only to hinder the growth of the brush. ...Nature can coexist with society, but as long as it is in moderation and responsibility, to create a 'harmony of both' (Emerson)."

"As I spent time with nature, escaping the distractions of society, I was exposed to a deeper, much more real reality. The things we take for granted are often the greatest pleasures in life. My transcendental experience ... made me slow down..."

Dan Bollinger's essay captures everything that I want students to get out of the assignment.

“My transcendental experience began on a bike. I was biking through my neighborhood in the rain and came to realize that our society is built against all forms of solitude. I was the only one outside as I passed my neighbors’ houses. I was surprised to see how many people seemed to be attached to their screens. I passed house after house, each overrun by technology. I then realized that we can never be truly alone. Even in the wilderness we are tracked by GPS or under surveillance by satellites; there is truly nowhere to hide. Emerson said, “[t]o go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society” (Emerson). We are always connected in some way to society. Technology is the chain holding us from experiencing the world as it is, wonderful and beautiful. People are too busy with their gadgets to realize the wonder of being outside during a thunderstorm. I had to be freezing cold and wet to realize that the only way to be alone is to be miserable. In a world of comfort, misery is the only way to break free from society, and transcend above reality. This led me to believe that nature has always been calling us away from modern society. We are built around the idea of more is better. We have everything available to us through things like the internet, so our sense of wonder has been distorted. All we see when we walk down the street is our purpose for walking in the first place. No one notices that little blue flower or that fluttering butterfly skimming across the ground. We don’t stop to appreciate what nature displays to us. Emerson once said, “[i]f the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore [them]” (Emerson). All we see is what we can use to our advantage. We don’t see trees, we see paper; we don’t see a meadow, we see development opportunities; and we don’t see the sky, we see a mixture of gasses that we depend on. Most of the time we don’t appreciate what we have until it’s gone. The only way to reconnect with nature is to become a part of it. Even if that means braving a thunderstorm.”

### **Conclusion**

We must examine what and how we consume and what and how we produce. This is the way we sustain a system, and I believe it’s the way we sustain our kids, too. Our food and material goods have been manufactured with complicated processes and hidden agendas far away from our homes; they disappear into our stomachs, our trashcans, and our air. In the world of our young people, even the simplest items are mysterious and temporary, crafted by unseen machines and with unknown materials, bound for some other place that takes care of everything we’ve thrown away. Nothing is in our hands.

As living beings within a system, both social and environmental, it is not possible to absolve ourselves from consuming and producing. But we can learn to do so more responsibly. For example, when children spend time in nature, they are calmer, more focused, and more confident. When they read well, they are more imaginative, educated, and involved. It begins with the little things: families who eat together several times a week raise children who perform better academically and make healthier decisions (Levine, 2008, p. 33). I suspect that many families who dine together do so at home with plates and forks that must be washed. We cannot overstate the importance of what these family meals, with simple cloth napkins rolled up in rings, do. They confirm that things—including words, warmth, love—last.

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