

FFYS191Hist 8: Nature Writing



Fall 2018
Wednesdays, 1:25-2:15
Herter 202

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This first-year seminar offers you the opportunity to read and discuss some classic writing about human relationships with the natural world, and to make your own contribution to this literature. It also offers a chance for 50 minutes each week to work with your attention by turning off your cell phone, tablet, and laptop; by putting aside your personal concerns and the pressures of school; and to experience what is in front of you in the present moment. Many of the exercises we will do are adapted from an on-line course called "Working With Your Attention" developed by Gregg Krech at the ToDo Institute in Monkton, VT (<http://www.todoinstitute.org>)

This is a pass/fail course. All you need to do to pass is to show up every week, follow simple directions, write an entry each week in your journal, and participate actively in class discussions.

The following books are available for purchase at Amherst Books, 8 Main Street, in downtown Amherst. These and other readings are also available on-line; the electronic version of the syllabus on the course Moodle site has links to them.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walking*
Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

"So far as seeing things is an art, it is the art of keeping your eyes and ears open...Power of attention and a mind sensitive to outward objects, in these lies the secret of seeing... things. Can you bring all your faculties to the front, like a house with many faces at the doors and windows; or do you live retired within yourself, shut up in your own meditations? The thinker puts all the powers of his mind in reflection: the observer puts all the powers of his mind in perception; every faculty is directed outward; the whole mind sees through the eye and hears through the ear. He has an objective turn of mind as opposed to a subjective. A person with the latter turn of mind sees little. If you are occupied with your own thoughts, you may go through a museum of curiosities and observe nothing."

From John Burroughs, "The Art of Seeing Things," *The Century Magazine* (December 1899): 188-93.

Schedule of Topics/Readings/Activities:

Wednesday September 5: Your Environmental Autobiography

- Please answer these questions in your journal, and bring it to class.
 - List the locations of each house where you have lived, including location (name of city, town, neighborhood); setting (urban, rural, suburb); and type of house (single family, triple-decker, apartment).
 - On a separate page, draw a picture of your favorite childhood place.
 - Write a paragraph describing the place that you drew, including where and when it was, your age at the time you described, and the emotions and feelings that the place evoked then and evokes now.
 - List one or two other significant environments in your life, past and present.
 - How you think these places might have influenced your ideals and values concerning the environment?

Wednesday September 12: Seeing Nature

- Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to one of the following six places on campus. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. Write a list in your journal of things that you see during your walk that are the color blue, and bring this list with you to class. If your mind starts to wander, look for blue.
 - Agricultural Learning Center
 - Sunwheel
 - William Smith Clark Memorial
 - Durfee Conservatory and Garden
 - Montague House
 - Orchard Hill Observatory
- In your Academic Planner, write in the time when you intend to take your nature walks each week during the semester.
- Today we will be discussing Annie Dillard, "Seeing," from *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). Please finish reading it before class, write a reaction to it in your journal, and bring a copy of it with you to class.

Wednesday September 19: No class (Yom Kippur) Make-up class Weds November 14?

- Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to a different one of the six places listed under September 12. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. Write a list in your journal of what you hear during your walk, and bring this list with you to class on September 26. If your mind starts to wander, listen to what is around you.
- This week, many are reflecting on their relationships with various individuals over the previous 12 months. Write a letter to one person expressing gratitude for something specific that they did for you during the past year.
- Begin reading H.D. Thoreau, "Walking" (1862) for class discussion on September 26.

Wednesday September 26: A Walk in New England

- Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to a different one of the six places listed under September 12. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. If you did not do this the previous week, write a list in your journal of what you hear during your walk, and bring this list with you to class. If your mind starts to wander, listen to what is around you.
- In your Academic Planner, write down the time and place of each of your professors and TAs office hours.
- Today we will be discussing H.D. Thoreau, "Walking" (1862). If you do not want to purchase the book, you can borrow a library copy, or print one out from (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/>). Please finish reading it before class, write a reaction to it in your journal, and bring the book or your print out with you to class.

Wednesday October 3: Observing Nature: Poetry

- Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to a different one of the six places listed under September 12. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. Write a list in your journal of what you smell during your walk, and bring this list with you to class. If your mind starts to wander, smell what is around you.
- In your Academic Planner, write in a time next week to visit one or more of the following offices:
 - Civic Engagement and Service Learning Office (611 Goodell)
 - International Programs Office (70 Butterfield Terrace)
 - Your College's Career Center
 - An identity or community based resource (see p. 23 of Academic Planner)
- Today we will be discussing Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day" (1972) and G. Snyder, "Smokey the Bear Sutra" (1969) (handout)

- Weather permitting, we will hold class outside at a location to be determined. Bring your journal and a pen or pencil.

(Writing prompt, not on syllabus but given at beginning of class: Haiku are simple poems that capture a particular moment in time, often focusing on a specific element of nature. The syllables of a three-line haiku are 5 - 7 - 5. Traditionally, the poet is invisible in the poem. So in addition to adhering to the 5-7-5 syllable structure, please refrain from referring to yourself and your feelings, and just write about what is in front of you.)

Wednesday October 10: A Walk in the Sierras

- Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to a different one of the six places listed under September 12. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. Write a list in your journal of what textures you feel during your walk (don't be afraid to touch things), and bring this list with you to class. If your mind starts to wander, listen to what is around you.
- Today we will be discussing John Muir, "A Windstorm in the Forests," from *The Mountains of California* (1894). You can borrow a library copy, or print one out from http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/the_mountains_of_california/chapter_10.aspx. Please finish reading it before class, write a reaction to it in your journal, and bring the book or your print out with you to class.
- We are almost half-way through the semester. Make an appointment for the week of October 15-22 to meet with one of your professors during their office hours or another time. During that meeting, in addition to discussing course material, ask them what their favorite place is on campus.

Wednesday October 17: Observing Nature: Prose

- Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to a different one of six places listed under September 12, and write a list in your journal of the things that you either see, hear, smell, or touch, and bring this list with you to class. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. If your mind starts to wander, return to your senses.
- Please begin reading A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, for discussion on 10/31
- Weather permitting, we will hold class outside at a location to be determined. Bring your journal and a pen or pencil.

(Writing prompt, not on syllabus but given at beginning of class: As a transitional season, fall evokes many feelings about things such as the passage of time and the life cycles of nature. Please write a few paragraphs that start with a description of what is in front of you, and, if you so choose, transition to a discussion of how autumn makes you feel or what it makes you consider. Note: you can continue to polish this essay for class discussion later in the semester.)

Wednesday October 24: Observing Nature: Prose or Poetry

- Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to a place that is not one of the places listed under September 12. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. Write a list in your journal of the particular ways that the things that you encounter are physically connected to one another (e.g. how leaves attach to trees), and bring this list with you to class. If your mind starts to wander, look again for connecting points.
- Please continue reading A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, for discussion on 10/31
- Weather permitting, we will hold class outside at a location to be determined. Bring your journal and a pen or pencil.

(Writing prompt, not on course syllabus but given at beginning of class: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." (John Muir, My First Summer in the Sierra, 1911). Please write a few paragraphs that begin with a description of what is in front of you, and, if you so choose, transition to a consideration of how it is connected to everything else. Note: you can continue to polish this essay for class discussion later in the semester.)

Wednesday October 31: Thinking Like a Mountain

- By now you have become familiar with many places on campus and discovered your favorites. Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes and return to one of the seven places that you visited earlier in the semester. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. Write a list in your journal of what you noticed this time around that you did not notice before.
- Today we will be discussing Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (pp. 1-98), "Thinking Like a Mountain" (pp. 137-41), "The Land Ethic" (pp. 237-251), "The Outlook" (pp.261-64). Please finish reading them before class, write a reaction in your journal, and bring a copy of it with you to class.
- Registration for Spring classes begins November 5. If you have not already done so, make an appointment for the week of November 5-9 to talk to your advisor about your academic experiences this semester and your plans for next semester.

Wednesday November 7: The Obligation to Endure

- By now you have become familiar with many places on campus and discovered your favorites. Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to one of those places. Do not listen to music, but you can bring your phone to use as a camera. As you walk, notice the interplay of light and shadow, and take pictures of 3-4 configurations. Write a list in your journal describing them, bring this list with you to class, and choose one image to print out on an 8.5 x 11 inch sheet of paper to show. If your mind starts to wander, look again for light and shadow.

- Today we will be discussing “A Fable for Tomorrow,” and “The Obligation to Endure,” from Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962). Please finish reading them before class, write a reaction to them in your journal, and bring a copy or a print-out of them with you to class.

Wednesday November 14 (UMass on Monday Schedule): Naikan with Nature

- By now you have become familiar with many places on campus and discovered your favorites. Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to one of those places, and write a list in your journal of anything other than your own internal thoughts that you either see, hear, smell, or touch, and bring this list with you to class. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. If your mind starts to wander, return to your senses.
- Today, in preparation for Thanksgiving, we will be practicing a form of self-reflection developed in Japan called Naikan. <http://www.todoinstitute.org/naikan.html>

(Writing prompt, not on course syllabus but given at beginning of class: In preparation for Thanksgiving, we will practice a method of self-reflection developed in Japan by Yoshimoto Ishin (1916-1988) called Naikan (Japanese: 内観, literally “inside looking” or “introspection”). Its structure uses our relationship with others as the mirror in which we can see ourselves. We reflect on what we have received from others, what we have given to others, and what troubles we have caused others. Typically, Naikan reflections are focused on a particular person. In a Naikan retreat, the first hours are devoted to reflection on what you have received from your mother, what you have given your mother, and what troubles you have caused her. Today, we are going to use the structure of Naikan to reflect on our relationship with “Mother Nature.” Under each question, simply make a list, and be as specific as you can.: 1) What has the non-human world given to me over the past 24 hours?; 2) What have I given to the non-human world over the past 24 hours? 3) What actions have I done to harm or cause trouble to the non-human world over the past 24 hours?)

Wednesday November 21: No class (Thanksgiving Break)

- There’s no class this week, but it is good to keep up your weekly practice of taking a 30 minute walk getting your body moving and paying attention to your immediate surroundings without interruption.
- Please begin preparing an original piece of nature writing for class discussion on November 18, December 5 or December 12. This could be a revised version of the piece you wrote on 10/17 or 10/24, or something new.

Wednesday November 28: Discussion of Nature Essays

- By now you have become familiar with many places on campus and discovered your favorites. Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to one of those places, and write a list in your journal of anything other than your own internal thoughts that you either see, hear, smell, or touch, and bring this list with you to class. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. If your mind starts to wander, return to your senses.
- Today one-third of the class will be sharing an original piece of nature writing they have created for the course, This could be a revised version of the piece written on 10/17 or 10/24, or something new. Please bring it to class ready to hand in, typed double-spaced using a 12 point font and a one-inch margin on all sides.

Wednesday December 5: Discussion of Nature Essays

- By now you have become familiar with many places on campus and discovered your favorites. Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to one of those places, and write a list in your journal of anything other than your own internal thoughts that you either see, hear, smell, or touch, and bring this list with you to class. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. If your mind starts to wander, return to your senses.
- Today another one-third of the class will be sharing an original piece of nature writing they have created for the course. This could be a revised version of something written for 10/17 or 10/24, or something new. Please bring it to class ready to hand in, typed double-spaced using a 12 point font and a one-inch margin on all sides.

Wednesday December 12: Discussion of Nature Essays

- By now you have become familiar with many places on campus and discovered your favorites. Please take a walk alone this week for 30 minutes to one of those places, and write a list in your journal of anything other than your own internal thoughts that you either see, hear, smell, or touch, and bring this list with you to class. Do not listen to music, or bring your phone with you. If your mind starts to wander, return to your senses.
- Today the last one-third of the class will be sharing an original piece of nature writing they have created for the course. This could be a revised version of something written for 10/17 or 10/24, or something new. Please bring it to class ready to hand in, typed double-spaced using a 12 point font and a one-inch margin on all sides.

Exam Week:

- **The final draft of your nature essay is due no later than Tuesday December 18, 5:00 pm, in Herter 637.**