

# “Thoreau and Indians”

Shown with “Thoreau the Futurist and the Emerging Human”

## Video Transcription

"Thoreau and Indians" with Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., visionary Thoreau scholar; Richard Smith, Thoreau impersonator/interpreter; Arnie Neptune, Penobscot Elder and Connie Baxter Marlow – clips taken from "THE AMERICAN EVOLUTION: Voices of America" DVD Series

Presented: Sunday July 10, 2011 at the Thoreau Society Annual Gathering Concord, MA along with the Performance Piece “**Thoreau, The Futurist and the Emerging Human.**” with Richard Smith, Thoreau scholar and impersonator/interpreter as Thoreau and Maria Girouard, former head of Penobscot Nation Cultural Heritage Preservation as Joe Polis. both reading from “Thoreau’s Indians” 1000 References to the Native American compiled by Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D. Commentary by Connie Baxter Marlow

This video and the DVD series THE AMERICAN EVOLUTION: Voices of America may be seen on [www.YouTube.com/TheAmericanEvolution](http://www.YouTube.com/TheAmericanEvolution).. For more information: [www.TheAmericanEvolution.com](http://www.TheAmericanEvolution.com)

### **Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

#### **Part 2**

My name is Brad Dean. I’m basically a Thoreau scholar. I’ve been studying Thoreau for close to 30 years. I hate to confess that, but it’s been about 30 years since I first encountered Thoreau. Basically, my area of expertise with Thoreau is his manuscripts. I reconstruct his manuscripts to come up with works that he never lived to publish. That’s basically who I am and what I do. What I’m working on right now is Thoreau’s notebooks on the Native Americans. Basically, in about the period of time right after Thoreau left Walden, in 1848, he began working on a large project that involved reading everything he could find about the Native American cultures. And he had access to Harvard’s incredible library. So he read practically every important history or account of Native Americans, all the expeditions, all the archeological studies that were being conducted at that time by the Smithsonian Institute and the American Association for the Advancement of Science and so on. He kept notes. There are a little over 500 sources.

He seems to have been intent on studying like a scholar would study indigenous cultures to try to find the embodiment of the wild. Thoreau has a famous quotation from his essay Walking, “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” Civilization entails a certain amount of self consciousness and I think Thoreau was trying to step away from that with his idea of wildness. I think for Thoreau the red man, as he called them, was the wild man in the best sense of the term. So he wanted to see if he could understand the way the Native Americans related to their environment before they learned how to relate to their environment from the white folks who were coming over. And it’s a very interesting experiment and yielded these twelve notebooks. And these notebooks that I’m working on now - I’m editing twelve manuscript notebooks, about 4000 manuscript pages - basically his reading notes from that project.

### **Richard Smith, Thoreau Interpreter**

#### **Part 2**

And you can see a lot of Native American attitude in his writings. The way that they respected the land, he respected the land in the same way. And that was from a very early age. There’s even a brief journal entry when he’s younger, I think in his teens, where he’s writing in fake Indian language, you know, “me love ‘em”

type stuff. But he's not doing that because he's being a racist, he's doing that because he really admires the Native American spirit and the Native American mind. And that was the way it was for his entire life.

### **Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

#### **Part 2**

The evidence of Thoreau's early interest in Native Americans pretty much is that. It's a very stereotypical, romantic sort of view. It's the Hiawatha syndrome, "me Tonto" that sort of thing. It's not very sophisticated. It's what you would pretty much expect a young man in early or mid nineteenth century America to have kind of an unsophisticated attitude toward Native Americans, a sort of romantic attitude toward Native Americans. What you see throughout his life is a much, much more increasingly sophisticated interest. His interest toward the end of his life is very, very...even beyond scholarly. He wants to know. He's adamant about getting his mind around what Native Americans are really like and Native American culture in addition to the way they actually were in mid-nineteenth century America, but also anti-Columbian, before Columbus discovered the New World.

Now, if you think about it, in a sense its impossible to do that, of course, because you have to rely on oral traditions in the Native American cultures. There are archeological digs. There are the early accounts, and for Thoreau's purposes, the most important source was the early explorers' accounts of the discovery of the New World. So Thoreau read Smith, and all the early explorers, did quite a bit of work in very early Canadian history. If you've read Cape Cod, you know he read all the exploring and presented his account in Cape Cod of the earliest explorations in New England.

### **Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

#### **Part 2**

He made three trips to the Maine woods and on his third and final trip, he met a gentleman named Joseph Polis who was a member of the Penobscot tribe and was fairly prominent in the tribe. He was kind of like a leader of the Penobscot tribe. Thoreau hired him to be the guide. They went into the woods for a period of time, quite a long period to time, and Thoreau got to know him very well. So well, in fact, and so impressed was Thoreau with him that towards the end of his life, it became very clear that Thoreau had three heroes. One was Walt Whitman, one was John Brown, the famous abolitionist of Harper Ferry fame, and the other was Joe Polis, this Native American guide. In his book, The Maine Woods, he writes about his relationship with Joe Polis, and it's a fascinating relationship.

One of the interesting things to speculate is what was it about Joe Polis that Thoreau found so fascinating, so intriguing, that put him in the top three people in his life? What was it that caused Thoreau to like Joe Polis so much? I think it was that Joe Polis embodied a kind of a synthesis of Native American cultures and white culture; that Joe Polis was able to succeed and flourish in the white community. He was able to be a leader not only in the Native American community, but also in its interactions between the Native Americans and the white community. But also, was able to go out into the woods and behave, you might say, as a Native American, very successfully. Could keep himself alive in the woods and even comfortable in the woods. And Thoreau was very impressed by that.

Arnie Neptune, Penobscot Elder

#### **Part 5**

I say Quay. Quay is hello. My name is Arnie Neptune. I'm a member of the Penobscot tribe of Indians who have been in the State of Maine for about 12,000 years.

*What could have driven Henry David Thoreau to spend much of his life seeking the true nature of the Native American Indian?*

**Connie Baxter Marlow, Photographer/Writer**

**Part 2**

What we're going to do tonight is to ponder the mystical nature of a mountain and the mystical nature of Henry Thoreau and the mystical nature of the Native American Indian.

**mystical** *adj.* 1. Of or stemming from direct communion with ultimate reality or God. 2. Of or having a spiritual reality or import not apparent to the intelligence or senses.

The future is the key. And I have a sense of the incredible potential of the love in the human heart and the love in all of creation. I ask you to ponder the pieces of the puzzle we're going to offer you here tonight and see if there might be a perspective from which we can open our hearts and minds and become peace and justice and freedom. All these things that we're carrying in this flag that we're waving these days. Gandhi said, "We must become the change we wish to see in the world." Albert Einstein saw the world as a puzzle meant for deciphering. Roger Rosenblat, in his 1999 Time magazine article, The Age of Einstein, stated "Einstein understood that the world was a puzzle created for deciphering and more; that a person's place in the order of things was to solve as much of that puzzle as possible. That is what makes us human. This, and the governing elements of morals and humor." When Thoreau wandered around Concord and he found the arrowheads all over Concord, he picked those arrowheads up and he said, "Here is a character that has yet to be deciphered."

**Arnie Neptune, Penobscot Tribal Elder**

**Part 2**

There is a great love that exists from the Creator, who created the Father Sun and the Mother Earth, and that is generated and shown to us. This is the love that the Creator has for all people and all things and all life in the universe.

**Richard Smith,  
Thoreau Interpreter**

**Part 1**

I think the main thing that attracts me to Henry Thoreau is his rebelliousness; his ideals that he wants to question all authority. Throughout his life, he was always questioning the church, the government, the press and he was really trying to make people accountable for the way that they acted in real life. He hated hypocrisy, he hated stupidity, and he really wanted to try to question everything that he could and make people be aware that there's more to the world than just what we see. He was an incredibly spiritual person. Everything that he wrote came from a spiritual base. So, he was trying to get people to wake up, to wake up to the fact that we are part of the world, that we are part of nature, that God created that tree and He created us and that we all have to live in harmony together. Nature was something that you needed to respect. Nature wasn't just for us to use, just to cut down trees for firewood, but nature was something that we have to learn to get along with because it's part of us. And if we lose a tree or if we lose a species of animal, or what have you, that takes a little bit away from us as well. So, as a spiritual person, he really wanted people to wake up to that fact

that we are all part of the universe, that we are all a part of God's world, and that we need to act accordingly so that we're more aware of our place in the world as spiritual human beings.

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**  
**Part 2**

Thoreau's attitude about what we now call science, and in fact, Thoreau himself called science, Thoreau had a different attitude about something he called natural history or on occasion he called it natural philosophy. Thoreau's attitude about science was that he was generally was antithetical to science...generally. In March of 1853, he received a letter from Spencer Fullerton Baird (Baird was the Secretary of the American Association for the Advancement of Science). After thinking about getting this letter, Thoreau wrote in his journal that evening:

*“The American Association for the Advancement of Science requested me, by a printed circular letter from Washington the other day, to fill the blanks against certain questions among which the most important one was what branch of science I was especially interested in, using the term science in the most comprehensive sense possible. Now, though I could state to a select few that department of human inquiry which engages me and should rejoice at the opportunity so to do, I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing stock of the scientific community to attempt to describe to them that branch of science which specifically interests me, in as much as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law .”*

Higher law would have a particular historic context in this sense. It was often used in the slavery debate, for instance, with Seward talking about the higher law, the laws of conscience, as opposed to the constitutional law. So, in a sense, that's the kind of a context for what Thoreau means about a higher law.

*“So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand. The fact is I am a mystic, a Transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot. Now that I think of it, I should have told them at once that I was a Transcendentalist. That would have been the shortest way of telling them they would not understand my explanation.”*

Here's what he wrote: . In “branches of science in which a special interest is felt,”

*“The manners and customs of the Indians of the Algonquin group previous to contact with the civilized man.”*

I read this to Ed Wilson one time and he couldn't believe it. He said, “What do you mean? Thoreau wasn't an ethnologist at all.” Well, in fact, he was. Nobody knows about it yet.

**Arnie Neptune, Penobscot Tribal Elder**  
**Part 5**

Way in the past, when there was magic, when the people could do magic, they could transform themselves into different creatures. They were shape shifters. They could make things happen. They could make things out of nothing. They could change themselves. They could make themselves disappear. They could create things as the Creator does. They could speak to the animals, speak to the trees, speak to the plants. They would ask the plants what medicine they would be good for, what could they heal for the human race.

I know that legend has it that my grandfather could transform himself into a giant eel and go with the eels for teachings, for learning and so forth.

**Arnie Neptune, Penobscot Tribal Elder**  
**Part 2**

We put tobacco down for everything we thank the Mother Earth for what we get. A lot of people think they're things or plants, but there's medicines in everything you see around here and this is how the Creator took care of us and took care of our people and showed us how to live and not be in want of anything. And we didn't. We were never in want of anything because the medicines were there to heal us, the animals were there to feed us and clothe us, the trees were there to shelter us, and that's how our people lived for thousands of years...thousands of years.

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**  
**Part 2 & *Realizing Freedom***

Thoreau, famously, stayed at Walden Pond for two years, two months, and two days between 1845 and 1847. Almost exactly half way between the period of time, if you take both ends and meet in the middle, about half way during Thoreau's stay at the pond, he went to the Maine Woods; his first trip to the Maine Woods, kind of like a vacation, half way through his experiment at Walden Pond. And the high point of that trip for him was his climb of Mount Katahdin, which he wrote about later in an excursion or an essay that he wrote called, simply enough, Katahdin. The summit of the essay is Thoreau's fairly well know passage. Basically, Thoreau's account of going from Concord all the way up to Maine and then the climb of the mountain.

On his way up Katahdin, he was going with a party that he was with and the other members of the party fell behind and Thoreau continued up through the clouds, went on up to a table land. We don't know for sure if he actually achieved what we now know as the summit. But, nonetheless, he thought he was at the summit. And he was standing there looking at this very strange landscape. If anyone's ever been up there, I think it's fair to say it looks other worldly. It's very unusual landscape. This experience of seeing that landscape under the circumstances that he saw the landscape caused certain feelings in him.

Thoreau is up there and he has this almost out-of-body experience, but I would call it an other worldly experience. He, in a sense, lifts the veil from his perceptions and is able to have a direct relationship with the environment and to see the miraculous and the commonplace. And I want to put it in a particular context. In Walden, Thoreau says that he went to the woods to live deliberately and front only the essential facts of life. And at the end of the paragraph, he says that once he had fronted the essential facts of life, if he found them sublime, he would write them up in his next excursion. And the next excursion he wrote after he wrote that paragraph was Katahdin. So, in a sense, it's somewhat fair to say, that this passage is one of the essential facts that Thoreau learned when he was at the pond.

*“I stand in awe of my body. This matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me, I fear not spirits, ghosts of which I am one that my body might, but I fear bodies. I tremble to meet them. What is*

*this titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries, think of our life in nature, daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it. Rock, trees, wind on our cheeks, the solid earth, the actual world, the common sense. Contact. Contact. Who are we? Where are we?"*

For Thoreau, this is kind of a seminal experience, an experience that you have out in the world that gets you down to some of the most foundational, fundamental questions; questions that even involve who you are. Questions of identify, epistemology, again, some of the most philosophically basic questions.

**Arnie Neptune, Penobscot Tribal Elder**

**Part 2/ *Realizing Freedom***

The Spirit of the Mountain is always there. It draws people there. It draws people there who are non-Indians and they don't know why they are drawn there. They are drawn there because of the Spirit, the Spirit of the Mountain.

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

**Part 2/ *Realizing Freedom***

You have Thoreau on Mount Katahdin, you have Moses on Mount Sinai. There's a correspondence between the two. And Thoreau is attempting to leverage that correspondence to basically make his own essay a scripture.

Thoreau through Richard Smith

"As a human being, as a person on this earth, I have a certain ingrained divinity, a certain truth that is inside every living creature. You can call it Truth, you can call it Conscience, you can call it Intuition, you may call it what you will. It is that Divine spark inside all of us. And we all know basic truths. We all know truth, we all know beauty, we all know love. Even if we are deaf, dumb and blind we would know what those things are.

**Arnie Neptune, Penobscot Tribal Elder**

**Part 5/ *Realizing Freedom***

The Creator has put this Spirit in all of us, it seems to be more pronounced and prevalent in the Indian ways, but everybody has it no matter what shape, color, form you may be, you have that. That's how this body holds it.

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

**Part 2**

In Thoreau's studies, this is a very controversial passage. It's been written about by many different scholars. Most of the scholars who read this assert that Thoreau here is traumatized by what he sees on top of the mountain. I happen to think that they're dead wrong myself. MISSING IMPORTANT PART HERE "The carefully crafted prose of the "Contact" passage reflects not emotional turmoil, but the finer frenzy of Thoreau, the Transcendentalist profit, straining the capabilities of language to describe what Emerson called the original relation to the universe, Thoreau experienced atop the mountain. This important passage is Thoreau's attempt to articulate the ineffable, for Thoreau on Mount Katahdin, like Moses on Mount Sinai, had beheld God or Spirit and Nature or Matter face to face."

So you can see I have a somewhat unconventional, or different, interpretation of the "Contact" passage.

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

**Part 3**

One of the more important things that Thoreau has to offer us now days is this insight into the miraculousness of this reality. From one perspective its just commonplace, but from another perspective it's not commonplace at all. It's what Carlos Castaneda called "separate reality", a reality that is imbued with everything that all of the human traditions have called sacred as opposed to the more mundane, not necessarily profane, but mundane reality. You know, the work a day world, the world of getting and spending.

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

**Part 3**

He was looking to Native American cultures and other cultures around the world, but particularly seemed to be interested in Native American cultures to leverage the strengths and the insights of those cultures to improve upon this experimental new American culture that emerged in the New World. He wanted to keep the New World new and to do that, he drew from preexisting cultures and insights, taking those and bringing them together in a dynamic mix that worked for him. And he appears to have thought would work for the rest of the country.

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D. Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

**Part 1**

A few people, in my opinion, misinterpret what Thoreau's about by calling him an anarchist. Many anarchists say that Thoreau is sympathetic to our point of view. He wants no government when, in fact, right at the beginning of Civil Disobedience he says, "I do not ask at once for no government. I want at once a better government." So it's not that he's an anarchist. Quite clearly, I don't think anarchists can claim Thoreau. What Thoreau is basically suggesting and I think Thoreau's real view toward government is, he says "That government is best which governs least and followed out that government is best which governs not at all." And he puts a period at the end of that sentence but really to understand what he's talking about what you need to do, if you don't mind me putting a parenthesis to Henry David Thoreau, what you need to do is say, "That government is best which governs not at all (because in such a government, all the citizens govern themselves)." That's key. What Thoreau wants is self-governors. Everyone is their own king and governor and congress and senate and you do not need laws to oppress you because you have a law inwardly that manifests itself in your conduct outwardly. So, that's what Thoreau's idea of government is, not anarchism, it is basically, at the most individual level, self government.

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D., Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

***Realizing Freedom***

The exploration of the inward morning, or journey, the inward voyage, it's all inward, it's all spiritual, its all at that level of the higher law that is really important for Thoreau.

**Thoreau Through Richard Smith**

***Realizing Freedom***

When you talk about law, as opposed to conscience, what you are really talking about is Higher Laws

**Bradley P. Dean, Ph.D.,**

**Thoreau Scholar and Editor**

**Part 1/ *Realizing Freedom***

And it's an ethical awakening. He's not talking about a physical awakening and getting up in the morning and raising your head out of the bed, that's not what he's talking about. He's talking about the effort, as he puts it, to throw off sleep, moral lethargy...the effort to become truly alive.

**Richard Smith Reading Thoreau**  
*Realizing Freedom*

*“To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn.”*

In a little book called, *Mystics as a Course for Change*, and India Indian named Ghose states, “Mysticism proposes a revolution from above and by consciousness. To say technology is the grammar of the future is dangerous nonsense. Technique and transcendence must learn to work together. That would be the beginning of the total man and totality thinking. And the individuals who will most help humanity in the hour of crisis are those who recognize a willed change from within as a step to a total change in our relationship with reality, the harmony of the whole. The issue is plain. What is the true nature of things and how do we embody it in our social living?”

Well, Albert Einstein stated that no problem was ever solved in the same consciousness in which it was created. We have built a house of cards on a false foundation of false assumptions that our logical minds have, given the information we have, responded to logically and have gotten us to where we are right now. Once we have come to grasp the correct, accurate information about the nature of the universe, our logical minds will take us to peace on earth, will have us bringing heaven on earth. That's what I believe to be so.

**QUOTE WITH SUNRISE OVER WATER**

*“So, we saunter toward the Holy Lane till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall per chance shine into our minds and hearts and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on the bankside in Autumn.”*

**Conclusion of “Walking”**  
**Henry David Thoreau**