

## Mika's Musings on Nature

Looking back on my first two main lessons of the year, I spotted a common thread running through two very different courses: Dr. Gruhn's Zoology and Mr. Sullivan's Transcendentalism. I can happily say that both increased my appreciation for nature, or more specifically, my appreciation for the interconnection with nature that humans can enjoy if only they open themselves to the relationship. Zoology gave me intimate experience with nature on a macro and a micro scale: we went birdwatching with cameras one day and looked through microscopes at simple, live animals called hydra on another. I conducted an experiment where I put pillbugs in a basic, Y-shaped cardboard maze with two habitats to choose from at either end of the Y. By the end of the two weeks of conducting trials, I found that I'd formed a bond with the little creatures as I caught them, fed them, and gently transported them to and from containers with a dirt-filled spoon.

Zoology gave me an appreciation for the fact that we have such an extensive shared lineage with so many creatures on the earth! Humans easily fall into human exceptionalism, and while there are of course fascinating elements of the human experience that set us apart from other living beings, we miss out on an intimate and meaningful relationship with other forms of life by maintaining that we're superior to them. Studying the history of the Animal Kingdom emphasized just how recently humans have arisen on earth. There was so much time in which our ancestors were non-human. If we were raised to see other animal and even plant life as distant cousins, I wonder, would we take better care of our planet?

Asking questions and seeking the answers through journaling was the core curriculum of my next main lesson, Transcendentalism, a seminar on the American Transcendentalists of the 1800s. This was a course equally experiential to Zoology, although it was perhaps less hands-on; it was instead minds-on, in that it challenged me to question my preconceived notions about nature and reality. Mr. Sullivan had us question the widely held materialist belief that the brain is the source of consciousness and that all matter on its own lacks consciousness. What if, perhaps, consciousness resides beyond us and our brains only function to channel consciousness into us, siphoning it into individual vessels? Who can say? Additionally: Is the progression of evolution purely a matter of arbitrary genetic and environmental factors advantaging some bloodlines over others... or is there a cosmic plan at play behind all of it? While I'm not purporting to have come to any conclusions on these questions, turning them over in my head for the last few months has opened a whole new realm of thought which becomes accessible with a glance at the most banal of leaves or trees.

The Transcendentalists believed that the human soul and nature are two sides of the same coin, inextricably interconnected. They believed that a revelatory experience could be brought on if one made a conscious enough effort to mesh themselves with nature, to be out in the woods sometime, say, and more interested in the world all around than in the ego's concerns. Roughly, this constituted what Ralph Waldo Emerson called being a "transparent eyeball:" becoming nothing and seeing *everything* (this comes from Emerson's *Nature*).

With Emerson in mind, I suppose I can say that these two classes have invigorated in me a nature of being a loving, caring, and occasionally transparent eyeball, turned in the direction of everything living.



Birdwatching in my neighborhood



Dead dragonfly found while looking for birds



Birdwatching in the Yolo Bypass



Seniors on campus for a Transcendental night main lesson