

Part I “Meet the Transcendentalists”

*A Sermon preached for the All Souls UU Church, Colorado Springs
By Christine Robinson January 30, 2022*

A few years ago, I was at a Ministers meeting that was held, as they often are, in the hospitable rooms of a Catholic Retreat center, and in some free time, I wandered into their library, and lo and behold, what did I find in this Catholic establishment but a book about William Ellery Channing, Unitarian minister, published by a Catholic Press in a series called “Sources of American Spirituality.”

There is no small irony in finding Channing’s essay in a Catholic library. It is the same irony as finding Ralph Waldo Emerson listed as a truly enlightened spirit in a Buddhist publication. We modern Unitarians, pleased with our freedom and our open minds, tend to go looking the world over for a theology and spiritual practice that works for us, and are not, by and large, aware of the riches we have in our own tradition. David Robinson, literary scholar who has specialized in Transcendentalism, the religious and social philosophy formed by Channing and Emerson, puts this irony this way:

Like a pauper who searches for the next meal, never knowing of the relatives whose will would make him rich, American Unitarians lament their vague religious identity, while standing upon the richest theological legacy of any American denomination.

This morning, we are going to delve into this philosophy and the men and women who developed it. It will be a two part sermon with a some treats in the middle, and surrounded by music by composers associated with the Transcendentalist movement. Transcendentalism is the third leg of our four-legged religious stool; the first two, Unitarianism and Universalism, we heard about last Fall, and the fourth, Humanism, we’ll hear about next month.

No sooner had the Unitarians settled down in a comfortable brand of Liberal Christianity than a spiritual revolution occurred to upset things. The revolution was called Transcendentalism; it arose in the pre-Civil War years in New England. Transcendentalism and Humanism are both distinctly American phenomena which arose out of Unitarian churches and was then given institutional expression by them.

The father of Transcendentalism was William Ellery Channing, who started a discussion group among Boston Intellectuals, mostly Unitarian ministers. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are the best remembered, but the group also included Louisa May Alcott and her father, educators Orestes Bronson and Horace Mann, Feminist Margaret Fuller, Reformer Dorothea Dix, and others. Together they espoused a new kind of theology which changed our denomination, and our country, forever.

You probably studied some Transcendentalism in school; in your American Lit course, perhaps, as the Transcendentalists were prolific writers.

It would be hard to overestimate the effect the Transcendentalists had on American society. Much of what we think of as the American ethos comes from these early American writers and thinkers. From “Hitch your wagon to a star” to “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer,” to the Battle Hymn of the Republic and the “Shot fired round the world,” the Transcendentalists shaped American thought and even gave us an early taste of the Feminism and Civil Disobedience which would so shape our later society. You could make the case that the Transcendentalists prodded the North to go to war over slavery, that they provided the philosophical tradition which undergirded Feminism, that their writings were an indirect but very important part of the reason that the stunning places of the West were made into national parks...we could go on and on about the Transcendentalist’s contribution to our national life. Martin Luther King was quoting Channing when he said that, “The arc of history tends towards Justice,” a belief that Americans have held and lived proudly. But our main interest this morning is religious how the transcendentalists thought about life and how they practiced their faith.

The Transcendentalists believed that the important knowledge in life comes from spiritual intuition, thought, and other interior avenues which transcend this material world. They believed that all persons were capable of this kind of intuition; that is what makes us human. For the Transcendentalists, the Mind...by which they meant what we would now call mind and heart...is all-important. The development of this uniquely human ability to look within for truth they called “self culture” or what we’d now call “self-development” and they held that out as the unique and urgent task of every human being. They really did mean ‘every’ human being, too, and that belief was a source, not only of their horror of slavery but their egalitarianism in everyday life. Someone once chided a theater cleaning lady for slipping in to one of Emerson’s lectures. “I just love listening to him talk as if we’re all as good as he is,” she said.

Most of the Transcendentalists did not think of themselves as Christians. They revered Jesus as a person who did look within, rather than to established faith, for his inspiration, and the felt he was one of the world’s great sages, but the part of Christianity that insists that it is the one and only way did not sit well with them. Nor did they believe that the Bible was the last revelation of the divine to humanity. They believed that that human quest for truth would always bring new truth to light. They were the first Americans to study the sacred texts of the East and developed distinctive spiritual practices to give themselves space to be open to that truth and light. They found Christianity too small.

This was a wildly popular theology in America for a while. Ralph Waldo Emerson, after he left the Unitarian ministry, supported himself by lecturing to large and diverse audiences all over the nation. Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister so radical that not even the Unitarians would talk to him, rented the largest hall in Boston, the still-standing Faneuil Hall, and preached regularly to several thousand Bostonians...a huge congregation for the day. He shocked all of Boston by declaring that if it were discovered that Jesus had never lived at all it would make no

difference, because the truths promulgated in his name were in themselves so beautiful and so obviously true. Parker strove to distinguish the "transient from the permanent in religion," Most theologies, creeds, and religious theories, he believed, were transient. The permanent ones were: love to God and love to humanity. The rest, he thought, didn't really matter at all.

The liberal Christian Unitarians were just as shocked as their neighbors by Parker, and the gathered brotherhood of ministers came very close to making up a creed that would exclude Parker and his followers from the Unitarian circle. After a good deal of debate, they came to their senses and honored the creedless tradition that makes us, even today, who we are.

The Transcendentalists took very seriously the idea that there was worth and dignity in every human being. As far as Parker was concerned, what that chiefly meant was that slavery was an abomination. Therefore, in the 1840's and 50's he worked tirelessly for the cause of abolition. Although others laid groundwork for Unitarian involvement in social issues, it was Parker who was our first real "doer" in that area. He was particularly incensed by the Fugitive Slave law, and he, with Unitarian writer Henry David Thoreau, became an advocate of civil disobedience in the cause of helping fugitive slaves to freedom. Just as the Transcendentalists placed religious intuition above written scripture, so they placed moral intuition above written law.

In the mid-19th century, spurred by Transcendentalism, many Unitarians dropped much of the specifically Christian language of the early Unitarian churches and adopted a kind of general theism; a belief in God which could be known in many ways, not just through the teachings of Jesus. This God was personal for some folks, but pretty abstract...a sort of higher power in the universe, for others. Emerson spoke of God, but he also liked the term, "The Oversoul" for divinity. This theology is sometimes called Theism.

What is critical to remember about the philosophy of Transcendentalism is that it addressed HOW we know and understand religious truth, not WHAT those truths are. How we know is by our own thoughtful and open-hearted thinking, feeling, and reasoning, something every human individual who takes his or her spiritual life seriously, is capable of doing. The transcendentalists believed that the nature of reality was such that we could understand it, intuit it, grasp it, and form our own beliefs about it. They didn't weigh in on what the specifics of those beliefs should be. That's why Transcendentalism is a philosophy, not a theology.

Not all Unitarians were happy with this new faith...they liked the more specifically liberal Christian emphasis of 18th and early 19th century Unitarianism. But the tides of change were moving, and many Unitarians embraced these new ideas, and the worship style, teaching, and programs of their congregations morphed to serve them. Many congregations continued to emphasize liberal Christianity, and some do to this day. The transcendentalist controversy in our movement, which had its very bitter moments, helped us to see where our ideals might lead: to a truly pluralistic denomination.

Now, Kathleen is going to read to you a selection from one of Emerson's most theological essays, and then we will turn to how one might practice Transcendentalism, starting with a story for children about Henry David Thoreau's practice of "work".

Part II Practicing Transcendentalism

This second part of the sermon will address how Transcendentalism is actually practiced.

So what did the Transcendentalists DO to develop their spiritual lives, to engage in self-culture, as they called it, encouraging themselves to grow in love and spirit, wisdom and understanding which, they believed, should be at the center of a human life? Three things.

1. The transcendentalists were not afraid to think about and redefine theological words like God, divinity, deity, and Spirit to suit their developing philosophy.
2. The Transcendentalists recommended a set of spiritual disciplines which we can claim as ours: contemplation of nature, wide reading, journal writing, and spiritual conversation.
3. The Transcendentalists believed that their faith must issue in action, and they understood that action to be a part of their religious life.

The redefinition of spiritual words

The Transcendentalists were not afraid to redefine words like God and Divine. Most of the Transcendentalists believed in an abstract God...not a person in the Christian sense. Their god was the spirit at the heart of things that animates the world, giving energy to all life and thought and giving creation a purpose and a direction. Bronson Alcott described God as, "that power, which pulsates in all life, animates and builds all organizations... present alike at the outskirts and centre of the universe, whose centre and circumference are one...uncontained, yet containing all things in the unbroken synthesis of its being"

This God, this divine, does not bear much relationship to the guy-in-the-sky sort of God which the Transcendentalists, like most of us, had learned about as children. This did not bother them in the least. They went on using these words, defining them in ways that were useful to them. They wrote and acted as if this re-defining was the most natural thing in the world, and the fact that they were criticized and misunderstood didn't stop them. Emerson commented, "Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."

We modern day UU's, atheists, pagans, agnostics and other varieties of folk who don't believe in the God of our childhoods or the prayers of our parents should take courage from our forebears the Transcendentalists, who were not afraid to be misunderstood and who creatively and courageously re-defined religious words to suit their growing beliefs. We should too. Without words we are lost.

Transcendentalist Spiritual Practice

Secondly, the Transcendentalists recommended and practiced a set of spiritual disciplines which are our unique heritage and contribution to the religious world. UU's who would like to develop a spiritual practice don't need to go to the Buddhists or the Native Americans; although of course, they may...we have our own brand.

Nature

The Transcendentalists looked to experiences in nature to open their spirituality. Henry David Thoreau went into the woods to live deliberately, as he said, away from a distracting society, in a place where he could be out of doors, in nature. Emerson went out into nature to re-consider his life, as you read in the meditation, away from our usual modes of living. Getting away gives space for inspiration and new ways of thinking. He wrote, "Get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep, out into God's universe, to a perception of its beauty." I would say the same to you...and to me...

What about you? Been up to the hills or into the woods lately? Is there a bird feeder in your yard? Do you have a place from which you can see the clouds, or the fishpond, or the old tree, and do you sit there? The Transcendentalist wisdom is that no matter how hard it is to get out in nature, we have to make the time for the good of our souls. (I know that this is preaching to the converted in this crowd. In last week's discussion about the diversity of theologies among us, 100% of those attending listed "getting out in nature" as one of the spiritual practices.)

Reading, Journaling, Conversation

The Transcendentalists also practiced three related disciplines of spiritual reading, individual journaling, and conversation. The reading gave them new knowledge to grapple with, and fresh food for their contemplation. They were among the first Americans to read about Buddhism and Hinduism. They were readers of poetry, philosophy and devotional literature. The Transcendentalists teach us that we deepen our faith by exposing ourselves to new information and new voices.

Just reading is not enough, however, we must also make new information our own. The Transcendentalists did this by journaling and by conversation. Journaling is the grappling of choice for introverts, conversation for extroverts, but both methods are good for many people. Do you think of your journaling as a spiritual practice? It can be. So can your conversation, if you dare to really bring yourself and your beliefs to the table. Our churches and fellowships specialize in helping people organize to converse about their faith and values in safe ways.

Social Action

The Transcendentalists believed, as Martin Luther King later said, “A religion that ends in the individual, ends.” Their beliefs about human individuals led them to not only honor the individual search for truth and meaning, it lead them to work for social institutions and conditions which furthered that worth and dignity. It is not enough to think lofty thoughts or have interesting conversations. Religion must be expressed. What are you doing to express and further your values? That’s all spiritual work, too.

Conclusion

If these ideas and practices resonate with you, then, perhaps you are a Transcendentalist, following your own different drummer in this thoroughly American way of being faithful. If you believe that you are responsible for growing your own soul, and do it by exposing yourself to new information and ways of thinking, grappling with what you find in private and in conversation, and if you live your values in your life, then you are following the rich and fruitful path of the Transcendentalists. We’ve met them...and they are us!