

How the Transcendentalists Changed Unitarianism

“Standing on the bare ground - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing. I see all: the currents of the Universal Being, circulate through me: I am part or particle of God.”

This is from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s first essay called **“Nature”** . This is a drastic new way and broad way of looking at nature: nature is in him and he is in nature, but, Emerson is also saying, “So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes” and “Build therefore, your own world”

I first came across Emerson during an English class at McMaster. The course was called “American Literature. I studied this with a long time friend and for many years we made fun of the “transparent eyeball” not really understanding Emerson or the Transcendentalists. You heard the saying, “Education is wasted on the young.” ?

After many years of maturing both physically and mentally, I now appreciate the Transcendentalists and their contributions. In fact, I may have become a transcendentalist in much of my thinking. Now, if I just could remember how to spell transcendentalists.

Transcendentalism is not really a philosophy, but a collection of ideas. It grew out of a group of liberal thinkers in New England who met regularly in Concord and Boston to discuss various themes of life, such as religious, social, and political. The ideas that developed out of these discussions were eventually printed and circulated in pamphlets, called “the Dial” and were to help develop America into the nation it became.

The time period was the mid 1800’s. The two most remarkable individuals that became associated with transcendentalism were; Ralph Waldo Emerson, (1803-1882) and his disciple, David Thoreau (1817-1862). Other lesser known were the educational activists, such as Bronson Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody; literary figures, including Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and social reformers, such as Theodore Parker and Moncure Conway.

MANY OF THESE TEACHERS, WRITERS AND THINKERS WERE CALLING FOR NOTHING LESS than a remaking of society; the abolition of slavery, equal rights for women, freedom of religious thought and practice, educational reform, and attention to those aspects of experience that were essential to a good life. It is hard for us today to realize and appreciate how radical and revolutionary Transcendentalism seemed in the decades leading up to the Civil War in America.

Much of the religious thought in the churches and society of this time was Calvinistic. That is: belief in predestination, the ultimate sinfulness, and likely damnation of most human beings, the divinity of Jesus, the bible as ultimate authority, the trinity, church dogma.

Unitarianism began in America as it had in England, as a reaction against the doctrines of sin and predestination. Unitarianism offered emphasis on the divinity and social message of Jesus, but a strong denial of the trinity. The Unitarian, William Ellery Channing, a widely and respected theologian and preacher, emphasized social responsibility, charity, and moral action in his sermons and writings. In his

groundbreaking sermon, "Unitarian Christianity", he said that the Bible was "a book written for men, in the language of men" whose "meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books. This view stressed the need for rational and empirical thought in theology. He also said that predestination made human beings into nothing more than machines and that the New Testament description of God was never meant to include three distinct entities or persons.

The central issues of Transcendentalism were soon linked to this liberal form of Unitarianism that led to later ideas of secular individualism. Eventually, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such thinking emerged as agnosticism.

Theodore Parker (1810-1860) was a social reformer in the Pulpit. He helped turn Unitarianism toward a liberal theology that encouraged social activism. For him, the Bible was an ethical guide, rather than a source of metaphysical dogma. He set forth four principles of scriptural interpretation:

1. to read with reason
2. with a consciousness of its antiquity
3. with an awareness of the varying authors
4. with a feeling sympathy for the nature of the work

Parker wrote in his journal "I felt early that the liberal ministers did not do justice to simple religious feeling...Most powerfully preaching to the Understanding, the Conscience, and the Will, the cry was ever, "DUTY! DUTY!" "WORK! WORK!" They failed to address with equal power the Soul, and did not also shout, "JOY! JOY!" "DELIGHT DELIGHT!"

This is a time period which saw the struggle within the Unitarian denomination of trying to replace strict Calvinist doctrine with Transcendentalist ideas. The same struggle was evident in the trend toward ever-more- inclusive forms of democracy.

Unitarians at the time believed in "supernatural" rationalism.

1. On this view, human reason became an essential guide to religious truth, and the nature around us could reveal a world beyond nature.
2. Such natural theology argued that we could understand God based on evidence drawn from the natural world. However, it still demanded varying levels of direct revelation from such sources as the Bible or God himself
3. Anyone who broke with the idea of the miraculous in revealed religion was called a Deist and was no longer seen as Christian.
4. Parker agree with Emerson, who argued against miracles, although Parker still claimed to be a devout Christian.

During this time there arrived from Germany and England the so called "Higher Criticism", an attempt to understand religion in historical and rational terms. This had a powerful impact on such thinkers as Parker and Emerson.

Its basic tenet was that the Bible was a historical document and could be understood in the same way as other historical events.

Parker's theology fit well with ideas of early Transcendentalist thinkers.

Let us take a closer look at two of the most famous and well known transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Dr. Ashton Nichols, a full professor of English and Philosophy at Dickinson University, believes that Emerson is one of the greatest thinkers that America has

produced. Emerson's ideas emerged out of European, classical, and even non-western thought. He is often compared to the great Victorian sages of England: Carlyle, Arnold and Ruskin. Emerson's ideas were as revolutionary as theirs, particularly his emphasis on the value of the individual. At the same time, Emerson is an American original, especially in his definitions of nature and self. His ideas, though often abstract, had implications that could be interpreted in practical ways by others: abolition, women's rights, educational reform.

Emerson was born in 1803 to a liberal Unitarian minister. He graduated from Harvard University and Divinity School. He was ordained at the Old North Church in Boston shortly before marrying Ellen Tucker in 1829. Three years later, after her death from tuberculosis, he resigned from the ministry, troubled by such theological doctrines as the Eucharist, that is communion; he found himself too liberal even for liberal Unitarians of the time. To recover from his spiritual crisis, Emerson traveled to Europe, where he met Coleridge, Wordsworth, Mill and Carlyle. He returned home and moved into the Old Manse, a house later occupied by Nathaniel Hawthorne and wrote there his first masterpiece, *Nature*, and wrote the Concord Hymn with its famous "shot heard round the world."

The second phase of Emerson's life began when he married Lydia Jackson in 1835 and he became one of the first members of the Transcendental Club in 1836. He and Lydia had four children while he established a steady income through lecturing and writing. Apparently, he was an amazing speaker with a powerful rhetorical style even though much of his thinking was abstract. As an example, a washerwoman who attended several of his lectures at the Lyceum said that, although she did not understand what he was saying, she liked "to go up and see him stand up there and look as though he thought everyone else is a good as he is."

A recent president of the Emerson Society, Wesley Mott, said of Emerson's lecturing style: "People went away tremendously uplifted - and had no idea what they just heard."

Emerson's life consistently and continually influenced his thinking.

1. He loved his first wife so much that he exhumed her and opened her coffin in 1832, the year of her death, to see her once more.
2. He despaired so much after the death of his five-year-old son, Waldo, that he doubted that there was any justice in the universe.
3. In 1838 his "Divinity School Address" caused widespread uproar because of its unorthodox emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, on the need for personal intuition of religious truth, and on the limitations of most ministers. Harvard University refused to allow him to speak at the University again.

Some of Emerson's ideas were:

1. He followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau in claiming that language began in names for natural objects, which then operated as spiritual symbols. Thus, every word was originally like a poem or a metaphor for an immaterial, mental truth. As Emerson says, "the natural fact transmits a spiritual fact." But over time language gets worn out and grows more and more abstract until it becomes merely arbitrary signs that remove us from our perceptions and their significance. The poet, we might now say the "creative writer," is an insightful being who can "pierce this rotten diction and

fasten words again to visible things” liberating us from the worn-out language (eg. Whitman and Dickinson).

2. All of us are responsible for our own growth and development. This is what self-reliance means: individuals answer to a private inner voice, and individuals make their own religion.
3. From his essay “Self-Reliance”, 1841, “What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think”.
4. Emerson never actually approved of the word “transcendentalism”. He preferred the word “idealism”. He once said that Transcendentalism was simply a protest against dogmatic religion, not a philosophy but a spiritual outlook.
5. Spirit was immanent in matter: matter could and did reveal the spirit within.
6. Emerson, like the philosopher Immanuel Kant, emphasized the divine in nature, the value of the individual and of human intuition, and a spiritual reality that “transcends” sensory experience, while also providing a better guide for life than purely empirical or logical reasoning.

Now Let’s take a look at Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau met Emerson at Harvard University and was impressed with Emerson and his ideas. Thoreau is often referred to as Emerson’s disciple but, he indeed was his own man. For some reason, I have always liked Thoreau. Maybe it’s because he reminds me of being like a Canadian loving the woods and nature.

In 1845 Thoreau built a small cabin for himself on property owned by Emerson, that surrounded Walden Pond. He spent more than two years here although it was during his first year that he recorded most of his observations of nature, life and inner thoughts in his major work, “Walden”. Although many people believed Walden Pond was deep in the woods, in actuality he often walked the two miles to Concord and visited Emerson.

Thoreau was baptized and raised as a Unitarian but left it as a young man when he wrote a note to the town, rather than signing off from the church, and made it clear that, “I do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined.” For that reason, Schmidt, the American religion scholar at Washington University, said Thoreau is a “forebear” of the “spiritual but not religious” cohort.

There is a paradox in Thoreau as a progenitor of liberal religion. He was deeply antagonistic to formal religion. He rejected the church, including his own, not because it stood for religion, but because he believe it did not. Thoreau wrote, “We check and repress the divinity that stirs within us, to fall down and worship the divinity that is dead without us.” Thoreau was, in fact, religious to the bone. As his writing shows, he had sense of the holy and a deep knowledge of the Bible and Christian poetics. An innate religiosity shaped his thoughts, but he hesitated to write about it except in letters and his journal. Religion, he said, “is that which is never spoken.”

One tenet of Thoreau’s liberal religion that spread through the culture and then in Unitarian Universalism is the free and independent search for religious truth. It is also reflected today in the rise of the so called “nones”, the one in five Americans who choose no one religion in particular.

Many of Thoreau's ideas, although not immediately accepted, are now embodied in modern culture and in many UU's principles. "The interdependent web of being" that Thoreau described in all but name in *Walden* "is just one of the connections he made that we now take for granted." Others are: his concern for the environment, his critique of an economy that he saw as having gone off the rails with consumerism, his interest in world religions, his concern for the individual's rights and responsibilities, his concern for women's rights and his ideas on how to escape "lives of desperation"

Thoreau thoroughly believed in the individual and his connection to a higher power. Therefore, the individual had a right to protest any law that went against the higher good. In his famous writing "Civil Disobedience" he expressed these ideas which were later put into actuality by Ghandi and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in their non-violent resistance movements.

In a society today ruled by technology, Thoreau provides insights into the moral dilemma of contemporary life, from the intrusion of screens, to global warming, to the consumerism and corporate greed - "mills produce clothing," he said, "not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched" - and his criticism has become only more important today. His ridicule of Americans' zest for trivial sounds so relevant that it is hard to remember that his only inkling of the internet, and smartphones were the telegraph and transatlantic cable.

Who would disagree that life is moving too fast or that people have become slaves to their jobs. Thoreau wrote in "Life Without Principle", "It would be glorious to see mankind at leisure for once. It is nothing but work, work, work. There is nothing ... more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business."

Thoreau basically is talking about how to live life with less, and paying attention to what's really important in life. "Simplify! Simplify!" he wrote. To that end he is very modern.

This ends my quick look at the transcendentalists . Those great visionary men and women whose ideas helped change our world.