

Are You a Transcendentalist?

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Have you ever had a eureka moment, perhaps on a tramp in some remote part of the South Island, watching the gannets feed their newly hatched chicks on the cliffs above Muriwai beach or looking into the face of your child or grandchild for the first time? It would be one of those moments when you are given a glimpse of what really matters. What life's real meaning is. They are moments of extreme clarity that transform us. We can never "unsee" it once seen. We are changed. Another thing we can never do is explain the experience adequately to others. Like a dream it seems ephemeral. It quickly starts to slip away between our fingers.

That is what my task is like today. At our last service auction the Mason family were the successful bidders for choosing a sermon topic this year. They (by "they" I mean Jonathan) wanted a sermon on Transcendentalism.

Swell! A history lecture I could do on Transcendentalism. I would love to go in depth about how a small group of Unitarian intellectuals connected to Harvard challenged the liberal thinking of the day. But a history lecture isn't a sermon in itself.

I could also do a philosophy lecture beginning with an explanation of how German philosopher Emanuel Kant introduced the term Transcendentalism. He used it to describe a spiritual realm that underpins the physical world and his belief that human beings are born with an innate moral capacity that allows us to know right from wrong intuitively. His thinking greatly influenced the Transcendentalists, who included Ralph Waldo Emerson, David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller. And I could go on to tell you how their emphasis on the divine in nature, the value of people, the right and the ability of people to access the sacred directly without the help from religious authorities, and the importance of intuition as the means to spiritual experience influenced the likes of Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. But again an in-depth philosophical paper is not a sermon in itself.

Doing a sermon on Transcendentalism is a wholly other undertaking. Ideally, such a sermon is less about Transcendentalism and more about encountering it.

So what is it? Trying to define Transcendentalism is like trying to describe an ice cube while holding it in your hand. No sooner have you grabbed it than it begins changing shape. And the longer you think about it and talk about it, the more it changes until you have nothing left.

Transcendentalism defies any clear and consistent definition. It was a philosophy in constant transition. When confronted by some theologians about this lack of consistency in Transcendental thought, Ralph Waldo Emerson responded with one of my favourite quotes:

"A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesman and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do."

Nineteenth century humourist and journalist Charles Godfrey Leland said,

“Nobody knew what it was, but it was dreamy, mystical and crazy...”

Henry David Thoreau remarked: “If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good by defining Transcendentalism, I should run for my life.”

So perhaps, I should spare you and stop here.

More seriously, and to the point, Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay *Nature*, described transcendentalism by describing his experience during a walk in the woods:

“In the woods, we return to reason *and* faith... 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 eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.”

It might be helpful to understand the context in which Transcendentalism came into being to get a better feel for it. It is the story of three sermons that made history. Sounds exciting already doesn't it?

The first of this trio of sermons came two decades before the Transcendentalists. In 1819, one of the foremost Unitarian ministers of Boston, William Ellery Channing, was invited to preach at an ordination in Baltimore. His sermon entitled, “Unitarian Christianity” would change the religious landscape around him. It became the most widely circulated written tract since Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, which explained why the colonists should seek independence from Great Britain. Channing's sermon was no less seditious.

As a manifesto of liberal religious principles, Channing's Baltimore sermon in 1819 charted the new waters that rational religion would sail and it signaled the start of the first “Unitarian Controversy”. He gave a uniquely American voice to the new Biblical criticism that was fomenting in Europe. The principal innovative thrust of Channing's sermon was to promote a positive vision of human value.

This heretical view of humanity flew in the face of prevailing Puritan Calvinism that preached about our fundamental depravity, original sin, and the need for salvation by atonement—or else! There had been precious little alternative to this harsh religion in New England—until now!

Despite much pulpit-pounding against it, Channing's rational and more optimistic view caught on. His statement of a positive and progressive “Unitarian Christianity” became so

popular that more and more New Englanders were converting to this still heretical but nonetheless enticing idea. In the 1820s, many Congregational churches officially converted to Unitarianism, which meant that the remaining Trinitarians had to leave and start new Congregational churches across town. This was quite a tumultuous process.

So these liberal religionists, a generation before the Transcendentalists, forged what they declared was a rational Christianity. This was quite a healthy departure, and quite representative of the Enlightenment spirit that was helping to shape much of this new country.

But there was a downside. The members of these new Unitarian churches were for the most part the Boston aristocracy and they were quite enmeshed in the status quo. They were very comfortable with their intellectual rationalism. Thank you.

So into this liberal religious milieu—with its fragile structure and smugly rational theology—emerged the Transcendentalist generation, most of them Harvard-educated like their fathers, but with expanding convictions about what an expanding religion can be. And when they were not long out of Harvard they started biting the theological hands that fed them.

Among the 26 Unitarian figures that comprised what was loosely called the Transcendentalist Club, 17 were ministers and 5 were women. Their early standard-bearer was Emerson.

Emerson discovered early on he did not have the temperament for the ministry. He resigned his post at Boston's Second Church in 1832 to devote himself to a writing career. That took off with the publication, in 1836, of a small but powerful book called *Nature*.

The elders at Harvard might not have approved, but the senior class invited Emerson back to give the annual Divinity School Address in the summer of 1838. It became the second of the three great sermons. While now recognized as the most prophetic of the Golden Era of Unitarianism, at the time, it was heresy and drew instant and vituperative fire from many of those elders.

If Channing's Baltimore sermon two decades earlier was a liberating manifesto declaring for a rational "Unitarian Christianity," Emerson's "Divinity School Address" was a broadside on what that rationalism had become. He condemned what he saw as "corpse-cold" Unitarianism that had become overly reliant upon an irrational intellectualism. Channing had indeed affirmed Reason, but used it to hold onto the miracles of Jesus. Emerson went the next step and denied the miracles. His was suddenly the loudest of voices raised against using the miracles as a basis for Jesus' credibility, and he didn't mince words about his poor opinion of the general state of church life, either.

Emerson did have positive things to say in this landmark sermon, especially about the value of the natural world, and about how the life of religion must be recreated anew in the soul of each new person, not just absorbed from previous authorities, like a hand-me-down.

The *Oversoul*, as he would call it, shines like an eternally new dawn in succeeding generations. The elders would have been okay with this idea, but then he said that the individual's intuitive awareness does not require mediation by various forms of the church. (This notion was very new.)

It was a very radical suggestion, that every person could develop a personal intuition of the divine without considering church authority. It promoted new faith in the individual's ability to Reason—a Reason not in contrast to feelings of the heart, but in contrast to external authority that was often unreasonable. And this is the essence of Transcendentalism, really:

that pure religion transcends any particular church doctrine, and individuals can intuitively seek their own original and direct connection with the divine.

Well, perhaps you can imagine how some of those “previous authorities”—“corpse-cold” but nonetheless powerful Unitarian elders—received this good news from the upstart Emerson, all of 35 years old at the time. The new round of controversy that this address ignited was primarily within Unitarian circles, and it got fierce fast.

After Emerson’s Address, which one Harvard professor called “the latest form of infidelity,” the pulpits and periodicals that carried much of the mainstream comment of the day were suddenly closed to the Transcendentalist crowd. So they started their own publications. Most notable was the *Dial*, a quarterly magazine edited by Emerson and by early feminist and brilliant intellect Margaret Fuller that printed their explorations for four fertile years.

But as the fur began to fly, Emerson quickly checked out of the debate—he wasn’t equipped with the right temperament for it—and went off into his own realm of deeper reflection and writing, which frustrated his pursuers no end. Soon, however, they had a whole band of budding Transcendentalists to engage with, as Emerson’s clarion call had inspired other radicals who were more eager for the fray, people like Theodore Parker, who authored the third in the series of significant sermons I’ll discuss in a moment but, first no discussion of Emerson can be complete without discussing his relationship with Henry David Thoreau, the most prolific of the Transcendentalists.

Like Emerson, Thoreau preferred quiet contemplation to debate. Like the other Transcendentalists, he attended Harvard but had no desire to attend Divinity School. He returned to his native Concord where he lived in Emerson’s household. Emerson’s property included Walden Pond. His experience of living alone there, described in his masterful work, *Walden*, focused on a key component of Transcendentalism: discovering the transcendent through nature, through quietude, and through simplifying one’s life.

Thoreau was among the youngest of the Transcendentalists, and his and Emerson’s relationship and influence on one another would be hard to quantify. They often walked together and shared ideas; and their writings would often reflect similar themes, at the same time. Still, Thoreau was more of a crusading reformer: there is a long-cherished UU story about the meeting between Emerson and Thoreau when Thoreau was in jail for refusing to pay a tax supporting the Mexican War, which he saw as an attempt to extend slavery. Emerson entered the prison, and seeing Thoreau behind bars, exclaimed, “Henry! What are you doing in there?” To which Thoreau replied, “What are *you* doing out *there*?” It was that experience that led to his writing *Civil Disobedience* which would later greatly influence Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

Now returning to Parker: three years after Emerson’s Divinity School Address, Parker presented an even more controversial thrust into heresy. His sermon called “A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity” was delivered at an ordination. Parker carried the Transcendentalist position one giant step farther than Emerson, who was content to elaborate mostly in abstractions. Parker got specific, using logic encouraged by the freethinking Transcendentalist Club. What was permanent, he declared, was the pure religion taught by Jesus: the values, the morality, the love.

And what were clearly transient were the varying forms and doctrines that Christianity had taken on over the centuries. Well, this much was okay, so far. But then he came right out and declared that because interpretations of the Bible have changed, it is not to be trusted. In fact, worship of it is idolatry. Further, since understandings of Jesus’ authority have also changed, he, too, is not essential to one’s “instinctive intuition of the divine,” proposed by Transcendentalism. Jesus was, maybe not irrelevant, but certainly a transient and not

permanent feature in the understanding of pure religion.

That Jesus was not essential incensed religious authorities and one group of his disapproving Unitarian colleagues demanded he resign his ministry. He didn't oblige.

So far I have only given some of the history and context of Transcendentalism and related some of their philosophical and theological conclusions. I doubt that was sufficient to provide you with a transcendental experience this morning. In truth it was an impossible task I set for myself. I hope you won't want a refund Jonathan. It is not surprising that the Transcendentalists inspired a legion of poets, but few preachers. The likes of Whitman, Dickinson, Coleridge and, more recently, Annie Dillard and Mary Oliver can provoke a transcendent experience. Such an experience is not accessed through the intellect or reason. It is felt through your engagement with the world around you. It is grounded in your experience. My only hope for this sermon is that you might have become more aware of your innate spirituality that the Transcendentalists attempted to uncover and describe.

My hope will be realized when you experience the Divine in nature. When you forsake and even challenge external authority about what is truth, choosing instead to trust your inner authority and intuition. When you forsake your ego to experience your oneness with all creation. When you intuitively understand that the Divine is in you and you are in the Divine. When your overwhelming sense of connection to everyone and everything motivates you to challenge those who oppress others or destroy our environment. With your awareness of these things you have not only discovered your spiritual being but have become the latest embodiment of Transcendentalism.