



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

The Transcendentalists

A sermon to the Auckland Unitarian Church, 28 April 2024. © Peter Lineham

Reading

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature in The Conduct of Life, Nature and Other Essays*, Dent/Dutton 1908, 1937,

Pages 37-38 conclusion: beginning “So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes.”

So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect, — What is truth? and of the affections, — What is good? by yielding itself passive to the educated Will. Then shall come to pass what my poet said; `Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature, is the absence of spirit; to pure spirit, it is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient. Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours, a cobbler’s trade; a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar’s garret. Yet line for line and point for point, your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen. The sordor and filths of nature, the sun shall dry up, and the wind exhale. As when the summer comes from the south; the snow-banks melt, and the face of the earth becomes green before it, so shall the advancing spirit create its ornaments along its path, and carry with it the beauty it visits, and the song which enchants it; it shall draw beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourse, and heroic acts, around its way, until evil is no more seen. The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation, — a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God, — he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson knew how to upset Unitarians, for he had been one of them. Emerson was from a Unitarian family, trained at Harvard College, and his brother William was educated at Gottingen and was a minister. Waldo became minister of Second Church Boston in 1829. But he took a break, after the death of his wife, and headed to Europe. Returning he wrote this extraordinary essay, *Nature*, from which I read. He was a mystery to his fellow Unitarians. In 1838 he spoke to the Divinity Class at Harvard, in words that caused a huge controversy:

Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus. The soul knows no persons. It invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love. But by this eastern monarchy of a Christianity, which indolence and fear have built, the friend of man is made the injurer of man. The manner in which his name is surrounded with expressions, which were once sallies of admiration and love, but are now petrified into official titles, kills all generous sympathy and liking. All who hear me, feel, that the language that describes Christ to Europe and America, is not the style of friendship and enthusiasm to a good and noble heart, but is appropriated and formal, — paints a demigod, as the Orientals or the Greeks would describe Osiris or Apollo. [[Divinity School Address - The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson \(rwe.org\)](#)]

Unitarians were outraged. The American Unitarian Association was only formed in 1825, after a split in the New English Congregational Union. There were about 15 member churches. The greatest of their ministers was William Ellery Channing. (minister of Federal Street Boston Church 1803-1842). They had captured Harvard, and they believed that they were a truly rational form of Christianity. And then one of their own accuses them of being just a tradition, in love with titles, in love with ritual, and not truly open to the Spirit.

Emerson was outrageous. "*I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers*" [Sullivan, Wilson (1972). [New England Men of Letters](#). New York: Macmillan. ISBN 0-02-788680-8. p6]

What was this about? Over the next few years there grew up a new movement, known as the Transcendentalists. Emerson was the key member, but there were others in the movement, including Hedge, Putnam, and Margaret Fuller who became the "Transcendental Club". Among later members were Thoreau. There were also a few ministers including Theodore Parker, who sat on the edge of Unitarianism. What shall we make of this movement? If we read his most famous lectures at the Masonic Temple in Boston (1837) and the Divinity Hall at Harvard (1838) we would gain a little glimpse.

What exactly is Transcendentalism?

Transcendentalism is difficult to define, but in essence it was a call to abandon rationality and seek inner intuition in order to find higher spiritual truths. The easiest way to understand it is to see it in action, whether in Thoreau's Walden Pond or in Emerson's lecture on Nature.

They were Romantics. Touched by the movement that engulfed Europe – but caught up somewhat late. They were attracted to themes in Wordsworth and Coleridge although when Emerson went to meet these great men in the mid 1830s he found that they had moved on from this place. Transcendentalists moved Unitarianism beyond its Protestant roots. Quite influenced by Indian ideas, and by Platonic idealism. There was also a touch of Utopianism.

Transcendentalism as Intuitionism

It asserts firstly, that intuitions are central to our inner life. Indeed the deepest truths cannot be taught in a classroom or in a church; they must be known intuitively. They wanted to reawaken faith.

The Transcendentalists were not frightened to embrace mystical experiences. Thoreau (in Andrews loc244/527) “Natural supernaturalism” for they saw God in the world. They hated the materialism of the scientific method. (John Locke, etc). The sense of the spirituality of nature.

Transcendentalism as the Rediscovery of Nature

There was quite a profound sense of what we might call a deep sense of nature, - this is seen in Thoreau, who is often described as the original conservationist. Emerson met Henry David Thoreau in 1837. Thoreau died in 1862 at the age of 44. Thoreau was the prophet of the movement. Thoreau discovered solitude at Walden Pond. He is the original Gaia advocate, for he sees nature as alive, and seeks to find new strength in embracing it. He is never fearful of being alone.

The Exaltation of Individualism

Emerson once said he was more a Quaker than anything. He felt that organisation corrupted religion. A very American ideal of individuality. Emerson looked at the wonder of himself and looking at the world with new eyes. He wrote his famous essay in 1841 on Self-Reliance, writing, “*Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist,*” and claimed he had the right to change his mind: “*A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.*”

He sponsored Walt Whitman, whose poem “[Song of Myself](#)”, which begins “I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself”.

Consider Thoreau the great advocate of civil disobedience:

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to

die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

[Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden; or Life in the Woods*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854.]

Social Reform Transcendentalists

Some saw it as a way to go beyond Christianity to a universal brotherhood and sisterhood. They wanted to work to improve the world. Theodore Parker is the example of this. He abominated slavery. He opposed the Fugitive Slave act of 1850 and helped to hide slaves. He campaigned for peace (opposing the US war with Mexico), temperance, education and the rights of women. He died in 1860 before seeing the success of the movement to free the slaves.

Emerson was deeply influential on Lincoln, in his principled rejection of slavery. He also had a high view of the role of women.

It stood for civil disobedience, Thoreau wrote: “Disobedience is the true foundation of liberty. The obedient must be slaves.”

And in a way it fed into utopianism, Brook Farm in West Roxbury, Massachusetts was a famous example. (Hawthorne mocked it in one of his works.)

But in the end probably this marked the end of the movement. For in the later generation of Transcendentalists followed the lead of Theodore Parker into social campaigns rather than the highly individualistic self-discovery. That awaited the modern self-focused personalism which we are very used to, in the present age.

A Critique of Transcendentalism

The Transcendentalists had little time for a religious community. Their sense of society was much more secular. Emerson shocked in his comments at the Divinity School:

Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us. We are fain to wrap our cloaks about us, and secure, as best we can, a solitude that hears not. I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more. Men go, thought I, where they are wont to go, else had no soul

entered the temple in the afternoon. [[Divinity School Address - The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson \(rwe.org\)](#)]

There is a sense in which it has sensed to have any interest in Christianity, and it drifts and floats with the tide on spiritual ideas which it dabbles in.

But recall the other side, that this insularity can become very precious, and even vain. The high feeling of spiritual transcendence is often followed by phases of low feeling. Most of us need a community, exactly for these times.

The critics of Transcendentalism included Nathaniel Hawthorne and Melville, who in his *Moby Dick* has a focus on the darker sides of humanity, and rejected the inherent goodness of nature and humanity. Edgar Allan Poe illustrates the dark side of American life.

Transcendentalism as a form of Unitarianism

Many people treat transcendentalism as a literary movement, because of the literary skills of its leaders. But actually it was a religious movement, indeed a movement to reform Unitarianism.

They almost all had a Unitarian background but they saw something damaged in their church. They watched their preachers expound the reasonable Jesus, with Jesus expounding purest John Locke. (I would have liked to be fairer to this generation, but could not find my copy of Channing's sermons.)

Unitarians took diverse views of Jesus and his role in salvation. They focused on the Calvinist view of human nature which all rejected. Mainstream unitarians believed in a Newtonian universe. But all believed in the resurrection and Jesus' miracles.

Transcendentalists rejected the proof by miracles. Christianity is true because it speaks to our highest aspirations and our deepest needs. Unitarians still believed in a revealed religion, but Transcendentalists were perfectly happy with a natural religion. Unitarians were not deists. They felt it undercut the place of Christianity in ordering society.

But they did not reject Unitarianism, although often suspected of this. Many wanted to refine Unitarianism – and some like Parker remained minister.

Unitarians had staked out a place for liberal religion in the new American republic, including a belief that the individual conscience in religious matters was paramount. But while revolutionary in theory, in practice Unitarianism often relied on dry dissection of the Bible for its arguments and tended at times to degenerate into formalism, lacking a sense of spiritual wonder. Emerson most famously described his fellow Unitarians as “corpse-cold” and wondered if they had ever lived a genuine day in their lives. (Article by Jeff Wilson in *UU World*, 23/6/2008.)

Emerson in 1832 resigned the ministry when he decided to stop holding communion services at his church. He said at the time that:

I see natural feeling and beauty in the use of such language from Jesus, a friend to his friends; I can readily imagine that he was willing and desirous, when his disciples met, his memory should hallow their intercourse; but I cannot bring myself to believe that in the use of such an expression he looked beyond the living generation, beyond the abolition of the festival he was celebrating, and the scattering of the nation, and meant to impose a memorial feast upon the whole world. [[The Lord's Supper](#)]

Emerson last officiated as a minister in 1842. Until then he was “supply minister”. But he did not pray, he offered no worship that day – since God was within. And he had seen little point of Jesus in his lecture to the divinity school. There was no religious authority. There was also no place for ritual.

Theodore Parker in an interesting case (Harvard 1834). But it was not anti-Unitarian. They wanted something more intense than the rationalism of Unitarianism. Parker dropped baptism and communion in his remarkable congregation at the Boston Music Hall. He was eager for people to grow in awareness of religion, rather than focus on Christian themes. He became deeply influential in later years. Unitarians loosened “Christian fellowship” to something liberal. They held their private faith alongside the freedom of private judgement.

In many ways Unitarianism has been profoundly reshaped by Transcendentalism. It has distanced itself from orthodox and traditional Christianity, with no prayer, sacraments, bible reading, and much about Jesus. The Transcendentalists have been deeply influential.

Unitarians learning from Transcendentalism

What is the spiritual benefit that we may learn from the Transcendentalists? I am not the person to help you with this. What I learn from the Transcendentalists is certainly about nurturing from nature and from life how to grow one's spirituality.

But I note that the Transcendentalists (apart from Parker) were not much interested in the church. What is the place of community in a church which has no doctrinal framing, and if people are on entirely separate journeys in their spirituality? I think a community is really important to help us all on our journeys. But this leaves open the possibility of tension. Maybe in all churches, the key framing is the practical side of keeping the institution going, rather than the doctrines. And that is risky. The criticisms faced by Emerson and Parker probably wouldn't happen today, at least in your Unitarian framework. But there remains the problem of the need of people to serve the institutions. I guess that Unitarians worry as much as other churches about how to attract people and how long the service is.

[Barry Andrews \(a UU minister\) in his sermons on Transcendentalism](#) has urged Unitarians to reclaim the transcendentalist heritage. He noted the longing for spirituality that is so pervasive in our society, but many people assume that there are no answers in the west. So people head off to India to find it. But rarely do the Indians have that combination of social action and spirituality which Transcendentalists achieved. You don't need Emerson to teach you a tradition of liberal religion, but you do need him to unrationalise it. To understand that there are inner longings in every human that need to grow and expand.

Meditation / Discussion starter:-

What do we need to learn from the Transcendentalists today?