

The Spirituality of the Transcendentalists
Sunday, March 26, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

I was raised an evangelical Christian. There is much from that tradition I have rejected. I no longer believe the Bible is a book different from other books with words more holy and special than the Hindu Vedas or the Tao te Ching or a piece of modern poetry or a Dickens novel. I no longer believe that Jesus was born of a virgin and that a star led magi to the place where he was. But I have not given up all that the faith tradition of my youth taught me. I was taught to listen to my own heart. I was taught that I could hear Jesus or God or something sacred and holy there. That idea I have not given up.

As I was writing this, I thought of an old Sunday School song I was taught back then. It was "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in the depths of my heart, down in the depths of my heart, down in the depths of my heart. I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in the depths of my heart to stay." It had other verses- I've got the peace that passeth understanding, etc. I looked up the song on Google, and Wikipedia told me that, "The song was written by George Willis Cooke... He was a Unitarian minister, writer, and editor and is well known for his landmark history of the Unitarian movement in the 19th century and for his work on Transcendentalist writers and publications.." I did not know I was being influenced by Unitarians even in my childhood.

One of our nineteenth century Transcendentalist Unitarian forebears Theodore Parker used to tell this story from his childhood. When he was not quite four, he went with his father around the property of his family's farm, but as his father stopped to inspect a broken fence, a particular cow, a particular sheep, another particular sheep, young Theodore got bored. He asked his father if he could please go back to the house. The house was a long way off, but the not quite four Theodore stood tall and said he knew his way back. He was big enough. His father smiled at him and let him go. Theodore in his boredom watching his father had picked up a stick as young boys will do. He had been swinging it, drawing in the dirt with it, sword fighting with it. He still had it with him when he headed back to the house. On his way home something caught his eye as he passed the pond. It was a little striped turtle sitting on a rock enjoying the sun. Theodore crept up on the turtle raising his stick high over his head preparing to bring it down on the small turtle as he had seen some other boys hit small animals. But then he heard a voice saying, "It is wrong." He heard it again, "Wrong." He looked around. He didn't see his father or his mother. He didn't see any of his ten older brothers or sisters. He didn't see any of his neighbors. Young Theodore dropped his stick. The turtle crawled safely into the pond, and Theodore ran the rest of the way home and into his mother's arms. He told her about the stick and the turtle and the voice. He asked her who that voice was. His mother told him that some people called it conscience but that she called it the voice of God. She told the young Theodore that if he listened to it, it would become clearer and clearer all through his life like the tolling of a bell, but if he stopped listening to it, it would grow quieter and quieter until he would not be able to hear it at all. This experience obviously remained with him throughout his life for it is only through his telling of it in his adult ministry that we know of it. Both Parker in his adulthood and I in mine continue to believe the voice of the Holy can speak to us from within.

A number of our Transcendentalist ancestors described such experiences. Ralph Waldo Emerson - "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 seem all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God."

Margaret Fuller - "I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought the self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the idea of the all, and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God..."

Henry David Thoreau - "I can remember how I was astonished. I said to myself-I said to others- There comes into my mind such an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion, and I have nought to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by superior powers. This is a pleasure, a joy, an existence which I have not procured myself. I speak as a witness on the stand and tell what I have perceived."

Dr. Barry Andrews, who we heard earlier speak of Margaret Fuller and the collection of her writings he edited, wrote an essay a number of years ago titled, "The Roots of Unitarian Universalist Spirituality in New England Transcendentalism." In the essay Andrews writes, "In many respects, Transcendentalism was a generational revolt from Unitarianism, which itself had split off from Calvinism only a generation before. The liberals had broken with the Calvinists on largely rational grounds. And now the Transcendentalists were protesting a lack of religious feeling and enthusiasm among the Unitarians because of an exaggerated rationalism. As Theodore Parker expressed it, "I felt early that the liberal ministers did not do justice to simple religious feeling; to all their preaching seemed to relate too much to outward things, not enough to the inward pious life... 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!'... As Emerson declared in the opening sentences of his Transcendentalist manifesto, Nature, 'The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?'"

The Transcendentalists did not just wait for such insight to come to them. They prepared themselves to receive it by a variety of spiritual practices. Just taking time to be in nature was one of those spiritual practices. Andrews writes, First and foremost, they looked to nature as a source of revelations concerning the spiritual life. Thoreau, who of the group came closest to being a nature mystic, noted characteristically in his Journal: 'My profession is always to be on the alert to find God in nature, to know (God's) lurking places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas in nature... To watch for, describe, all the divine features which I detect in Nature.' Emerson also looked to nature for spiritual insight and moral instruction. As he observed in one of his lecture on 'Human Culture,... Go and hear in a woodland valley the harmless roarings of the South wind and see the shining boughs of the trees in the sun, the swift sailing clouds, and you shall think a (person) is a fool to be mean and unhappy when every day is made illustrious by these splendid shows. Then falls the enchanting night; all the trees are wind-harps; out shine the stars; and we say, Blessed by light and darkness, ebb and flow, cold and heat, these restless pulsations of nature which throb for us. In the presence of nature a (person) of feeling is not

suffered to lose sight of the instant creation. The world was not made a great while ago. Nature is an Eternal Now.”

The Transcendentalists also took time to be quiet and simply contemplate. Andrews writes that, “The two years (Thoreau) spent at Walden Pond were an especially contemplative period for him, and he describes one of his mornings there in the following manner: ‘Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like the corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the (Eastern sages) mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works.’

“Contemplation was a spiritual discipline for Emerson as well. In his lectures on ‘Human Culture’ he offered this recommendation: ‘In your arrangements for your residence see that you have a chamber to yourself, though you sell your coat and wear a blanket.’ A silent stream of thoughts descend to us from above, and the spiritual seeker ‘keeps (one’s) religious eye turned to this upward light,’... The simple habit of sitting alone occasionally to explore what facts of moment lie in the memory may have the effect in some more favored hour to open to the student the kingdom of spiritual nature. (One) may become aware... that every fact is magical; every atom alive, and (one) is the heir of it all.”

Reading was also seen by the Transcendentalists as a spiritual discipline. To quote Andrews again, “Emerson and Parker were known for their extensive libraries. Margaret Fuller was a discerning reader and book reviewer. Alcott and Thoreau compiled lengthy lists of the books they had read. Mostly, they read for spiritual insights, or ‘lustres’ as Emerson called them. Again, Thoreau speaks for himself and the others when he writes: ‘How many a (person) has dated a new era in (one’s) life from the reading of a book! The book exists for us, perchance, which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones.... (The Transcendentalists’) reading included poetry, philosophy, mythology, history, science and biography. They were especially attracted to the sacred texts of other religious traditions, including those of India and China. In *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist publication edited by Fuller and Emerson, was a column devoted to ‘Ethical Scriptures’ from the world’s religions. They were inspired by these, and found that they confirmed the truth of their own spiritual views. Because they felt the Universal Spirit present in all times and places, they looked for — and discovered — evidence of it in all religious faiths.”

Writing too was a spiritual practice for the Transcendentalists. Andrews says, “...most of them kept a journal or diary. Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott are especially noted for having kept journals. Certainly, the best of Alcott is in his journal, and many people feel the same about Thoreau. Emerson began writing his journal at the age of seventeen, when he was a student at Harvard. And it was with Emerson’s encouragement that Thoreau began his own journal in 1837. In addition to contemplation, journal-keeping was another spiritual discipline which Emerson recommended in his lectures on ‘Human Culture:’ ‘Pay so much honor to the visits of Truth in your mind as to record those thoughts that have shone therein.... It is not for what is recorded... but for the habit of rendering account to yourself of yourself in some more rigorous manner and at more certain intervals than mere conversation or casual reverie of solitude require.’ Alcott kept his journal for over fifty years, amounting to approximately five

million words.” I have to admit that journal writing is a spiritual practice that I personally have very occasionally attempted but never kept to for long.

The last of the spiritual practices of the Transcendentalists has been easier for me than journaling. It is conversation. I find that speaking with others of you about topics of faith has helped me to clarify my own thoughts and put into words my own feelings. Andrews writes, “Alcott rejected traditional instructional teaching methods in favor of conversations as a pedagogical tool... He describes his views in the following Journal entry: ‘My theory of Conversation as the natural organ of communicating, mind with mind, appears more and more beautiful to me. It is the method of human culture. By it I come nearer the hearts of those whom I shall address than by any other means. I reach the facts of the case. I am placed thereby in the simplest relations. There is nothing arbitrary, nothing presuming. Conversation must be my organ of address to the public mind.’ ...Margaret Fuller also led conversations, primarily with groups of women, as a means of producing income and promoting self-culture. For a period of five years Fuller conducted conversations on such topics as mythology, education, women’s issues and universal religious ideas. Typically, between 25 and 30 women subscribed to these sessions. She would begin each one with a brief introduction, invite questions, and ask a few questions herself as a means of drawing the others out in a discussion of the subject.”

Andrews says, “These spiritual disciplines — excursions in nature, contemplation, reading, journal writing and conversations — represented the means of cultivating the self or soul. But, in keeping with the doctrine of self-culture, these means were never ends in themselves. The Transcendentalists believed that spirituality required an outward manifestation of inward aspirations. In other words, the moral and the spiritual are necessarily interrelated. (Think back to Parker’s story of the voice he heard at 4.) Accordingly, the Transcendentalists sought to achieve a congruence between spiritual insights and ethical actions in all areas of their lives. This was most notable in their experiments in simple living and their involvements in social and religious reforms....Accordingly, the Transcendentalists were singly and as a group more active in social and political reforms than their Unitarian opponents and critics. The ethical consequences of their Transcendentalist ideals impelled them into a wide variety of causes and reforms: the educational reforms of (Bronson) Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody; the Christian socialism of William Henry Channing; Margaret Fuller’s feminism and involvement in the Roman Revolution of 1848; Thoreau’s civil disobedience; George Ripley’s Brook Farm; abolitionism and women’s rights. These were not accidents or deviations, but logical consequences of the Transcendentalist social ethic. They were the inevitable outcome of a belief in a common human nature and the desire to integrate spiritual aspirations and moral behavior. Transcendentalism, for all its emphasis on spirituality, led its adherents into the world more often than away from it.”

Our Transcendentalist forebears had their faults as we all do, but they still have much to teach us. I believe that in developing our own spiritual practices we, like they, will find that we are led into not away from the world, and we will continue the Unitarian Universalist heritage they left to us of spirituality and work for social justice.

[THE ROOTS OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SPIRITUALITY \(wordpress.com\)](http://www.wordpress.com)