

## “The Shifting Tide: Transcendentalism”

Rev. Meghan Cefalu

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I'm sure some of you know a whole lot about Transcendentalism, and probably more of you know a little about it. I'm sure there are a good handful of you who have heard the term and will recognize some of the more well-known figures: William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Henry David Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott. (Quiz: four of the rooms in our building were named for these people. Do you know which ones they are?) I would guess that most people don't really know very much about the thoughts these people put forward nor why those ideas were and are so important.

I have to admit that it was rather ambitious to try to preach a sermon about an idea as vast and nebulous as Transcendentalism. We could be here for a few hours. (I'm kidding!) Today I mainly want to introduce the main characters and give you a sense of their ideas, especially why their thoughts were so earth-shaking in their day. But above all I want you to have an appreciation for how much these ideas, that came from a couple dozen people – mostly Unitarian ministers - out of a very small area in Boston around one hundred and seventy years ago, have become so integrated into our own way of seeing the world now that they are like the air we breath.

For one thing, consider this: If you were not sitting here in this room this morning, but instead were in a pew in just about any Christian church in the United States you would have heard someone read from the Bible. In the United Methodist tradition, the church in which I grew up, all pastors are assigned a specific set of passages from the Bible each and every week to serve as a basis for his or her sermon. An assigned topic, as it were, every week.

The passages being read in hundreds of thousands of churches this morning are: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9.

We may well have also heard these readings in all of our Unitarian Universalist churches across the country this morning if not for the impact of the Transcendentalist movement. It was an earthshaking force of thought that shifted Unitarianism from its course and brought it in an entirely new direction.

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In the early 1800's the Unitarians in New England were just beginning to define themselves apart from the Calvinist Congregationalist churches. The dominant theology preached by most Congregationalist ministers at the time proclaimed that men and women were basically as lowly as worms. As one preacher put it people were “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”. The Calvinist theology said that only the elect would go to heaven and the rest were doomed to an eternity in the fiery pits of hell. And that there was no way for anyone to know who was going to end up where so everyone ought to be frightened.

The early Unitarians were put off by the dramatic hellfire and brimstone histrionics and took a much more reasoned view. They rejected that image of a vengeful God and emphasized

instead the capacity for human goodness and perfectibility. They read the Bible with a new eye for literary criticism and decided there was no such thing as original sin.

In 1819 William Ellery Channing wrote a radical sermon called “Unitarian Christianity” that helped the Unitarians to redefine themselves against the Calvinists. In the sermon Channing had the audacity to say 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.” (His groundbreaking ideas inspired and paved the way for the Transcendentalists who would follow a decade later.)

These early Unitarians stressed self-culture which meant a life of learning, education, and study. And instead of a Biblical trinity they declared the trinity of freedom, reason and tolerance. They exhorted a life of duty and work.

When the children of these early Unitarians grew up they rebelled against their parents’ intellectual religion declaring it cold and lifeless. Ralph Waldo Emerson was among this new generation. He was ordained as a Unitarian minister in 1829 when he was 26 years old. He served a church in Boston but resigned after only three years because he found himself too liberal even for liberal Unitarianism of the day.

Emerson and his friends found the emphasis on social conformity stifling. They were in search of a living, direct experience of truth and beauty and unlike their parent’s dry, dull church services, they wanted to honor intuition, connection with the world of nature, and each individual’s potential for direct experience of the divine. Like young adults of any generation, the Transcendentalists wanted an experience of the really real.

Emerson’s friend Theodore Parker wrote,

“I felt early that the liberal ministers did not do justice to simple religious feeling; all their preaching seemed to relate too much to outward things, not enough to the inward pious life...the cry was ever, 'duty, duty! work, work!' They failed to address with equal power, the Soul, & did not also shout, 'Joy, Joy! Delight, Delight!'”

The group of young people who became known as the Transcendentalists yearned for preaching and worship which connected with the outside world, which connected the preacher's life, that “passed through the fire of thought” - with the reality of people's day to day lives. They wanted preaching that challenged them, not just exhortation to fulfill moral duty. In Emerson's words “A preacher should be a live coal to kindle all the church” (Journals, 12/10/1836).

In his famous Divinity School Address to the graduates of Harvard Divinity in 1838 Emerson wrote:

“I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more...A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real, the preacher merely spectral, & the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, & then out of the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain .... He had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love,

had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted we were none the wiser for it.”

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Emerson became one of the first members of the discussion group that would come to be called the Transcendentalist Club. This group was formed really in protest to the intellectual order of the day, especially found at Harvard, which insisted upon merely studying what others have previously said or thought. As Emerson put it,

“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?”

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If the protestant reformation was about rejecting the idea that priests were needed to mediate between God and people, then the Transcendentalist movement was about rejecting the idea that even scripture was needed to mediate God. They were instead affirming that everyone could have a direct relationship with the Divine.

Emerson had been reading Asian sacred and historical writings longer than most Americans even knew they existed. He was especially interested in the writings that came from ancient India and he introduced these to his friends.

Reading the Bhagavad Gita had a tremendous effect on Thoreau. He said, “In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvad Geeta since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.”

Reading these ancient foreign texts expanded the group’s understanding of the relationship between human beings and the realm of the spiritual. They felt the limits of historicized religion and began to search for a truth that had been true longer than the truth of Christianity.

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If you are still trying to grasp what exactly Transcendentalism is, you are not alone. It is really hard to pin down. Rather than an organized system of thought it is really a cluster of philosophical ideas.

The transcendentalists believed in the importance of the personal self and the need for unfettered expression of individual minds. They held that there was an “inner light” that could guide every man and woman – a divine spark.

Their ideas were in reaction against the prevailing scientific rationalism and materialism that states that only what the senses can perceive is real. They were interested in ideas that transcended ordinary sense experience focusing on the intuitive and spiritual above the empirical. But Transcendentalism wasn’t anti-science. It also embodied the desire to

reconcile science and rationality with religion. You could say it was a way of understanding humanity's relationship to the divine and to the world we live in.

Lecturer Ashton Nichols says that Transcendentalism could be understood as “a divine force in each individual, a force that is also linked to nature and has the power to transform lives, as well as social institutions”.

So was Transcendentalism a religious movement? Well, it started that way. Two thirds of those who gathered to have these discussions were Unitarian ministers. But the social implications of these new ideas expanded into many different areas such as women's rights, abolition and education reform. In fact, many of the people involved in that first discussion group went on to become major reformers of society.

Here is just a sampling of the people who were involved in those transcendentalist discussions and their accomplishments:

**Henry David Thoreau** took Emerson's ideas and applied them to the practical business of living. His year living in the woods at Walden Pond was his most important experiment in simple living and self-sufficiency. He called it “applied transcendentalism.” He once said, “A truly good book teaches me better than to read it. I must soon lay it down, and commence living on its hint. What I began by reading, I must finish by acting.”

And Thoreau's later essay “Civil Disobedience” was inspired in part by his disgust with slavery. In it he argues that people should not permit governments to overrule their consciences, and that people have a duty to avoid allowing such acquiescence to enable the government to make them the agents of injustice. The essay became an important influence on such great thinkers and social reformers as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Martin Buber.

**Margaret Fuller** was a journalist, critic and woman's rights advocate. Emerson asked her to be the editor of a journal called *The Dial* that the transcendentalists published as a vehicle for their essays and religious and philosophical reviews. She later wrote “*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*” which is considered the first major feminist work in the United States.

**Elizabeth Peabody** organized discussion groups for women and went on to become an educator and advocate for early childhood education. She went to Germany to study their kindergarten program and returned to open the very first kindergarten in America. This was a time when most people did not see any value in teaching children younger than six. Peabody firmly believed that children's play has developmental value. She advocated and lobbied for years so that kindergarten would become a standard part of children's education.

**Bronson Alcott** was a teacher who was way ahead of his time. In his schools he introduced art, music, nature study, field trips, and physical education into the curriculum, while getting rid of corporal punishment. He encouraged children to ask questions and taught through dialogue and example. Unfortunately, his ideas were so radically innovative that many parents did not understand the value of his methods and his schools often failed.

His daughter, Louisa, said this about his methods: "My father taught in the wise way which unfolds what lies in the child's nature, as a flower blooms, rather than crammed it, like a Strasbourg goose, with more than it could digest."

Bronson's daughter **Louisa May Alcott** is best known for her book, "Little Women." She was also an abolitionist and a feminist advocating for women's suffrage. She was the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Massachusetts for a school board election.

A couple of members started experimental utopian communities to try to live out their transcendentalist ideals – most of which, of course, lasted only a few years. But almost all of the people involved in the Transcendentalist Club were movers and shakers and went on to improve their society in some way.

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So many of these thoughts are integrated in today's Unitarian Universalism, and even the broader secular culture, that we forget they were once ground-breaking ideas. Ideas that the older generations found tremendously threatening.

When you stop to think about it is pretty amazing that such a small group of people who lived in a only five block radius of one another in Boston in that relatively short amount of time, roughly the 1830's to the 1860's, were able to nudge Unitarianism from the far left of liberal Christianity into a whole new uncharted area of theology.

Their assertion that human spirituality could be sourced much more broadly than solely from Biblical scripture was radical and revolutionary. No longer were Unitarians tied to the Bible as the sole source of religious truth. The influence of the Transcendentalist movement blew Unitarianism wide open to influence from other religious sources beyond the limits of the Bible and even of Christianity.

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Now as I come to a close... Let us be grateful to have inherited their legacy, not only their specific ideas but the notion that our faith can be radically changed and shifted, the affirmation that revelation is never sealed and we are ever open to new ideas, new understandings.

May it ever be so.