

**“The Legacy of Transcendentalism” - Speaker: Richard J. Grzywinski**

**February 6, 2011**

**Description:** "We are a club of the like-minded... no two of us think alike." This statement, and others like it attributed to the American transcendentalists of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, could very well describe our own congregation today. How has transcendentalism shaped our UU faith? As we begin our search for a new UUCSJS minister, what can we learn from those early Unitarians like Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau that can help us understand our challenges and shape our expectations?

### **The Legacy of Transcendentalism**

A few years ago, in the late fall of 2006, I had an epiphany. Now that's quite a claim, isn't it, a personal epiphany?! But it was..... a sudden, life-changing perception. I haven't spoken to many people about it - certainly I did to my wife Cynthia and I think maybe one or two people in this congregation.

I was driving alone in my pick-up truck, in the very early morning, going west on Route 49, about where Cape May, Cumberland and Atlantic Counties meet. I had just crossed the black water of the Tuckahoe River. The highway was spread out before me like a welcome mat, no other vehicles at that early morning hour, the sun was still low, the air was cool and moist, and the leaves on both sides of the road were beginning to reveal their autumn colors. I could see and smell a beautiful fall day unfolding in front of me. It was inspiring.

I was cruising along, unusually slowly as I recall, windows down, feeling pretty good, and taking it all in. I was on my way to Bridgeton, NJ where I was beginning construction of a new project that I was really looking forward to.

And then..... the epiphany.

I had a moment of what I can best describe as unusually clear moral insight or understanding. It was like a burst of light, a blink in my mind's eye. It seemed like it lasted only a second. There were no words or voices involved (thankfully!), nothing sensual, no burning bushes or strokes of lightning – only keen understanding, what some might call a “Eureka!” moment.

I felt that I finally understood something that I comprehended only vaguely or abstractly before. But now I understood it clearly.

I could achieve total happiness in my life simply by loving more and loving better – caring more for others no matter who they were or how they may have hurt me in the past, doing good works, helping others, being kind, giving of myself freely to the needs of others.

Maybe to some of you, this is what you might call obvious, or a no-brainer, but for me it was a revelation.

As I considered what had just happened, I felt unabashed, unfettered love of life and everything about it. It was an all-too-brief moment of euphoria. If I was a Christian, or even believed in a personal god, I would have concluded that God, at that very moment, was speaking directly to me. But I know that wasn't what happened. At least I don't think so.

I had had a transcendent moment, although I didn't think of it in those terms then or recognize it as such. But that's what it was, a transcendent moment. A personal truth was revealed to me then. It did not come from another person, or something in particular that I had read, or by some lengthy process of reasoning. It came from within. I had reached an intuitive understanding about life and existence and meaning. Some may say that I received a message from my soul. It may be so. But what I believe is that somewhere in the other self contained in my brain, my subconscious mind had been hard at work digesting all of life's lessons over the first 60 years of my life and had finally concluded with a message of simple love. That moment of peace and "driving meditation" allowed that conclusion to enter my conscious self.

I've tried to execute that spiritual directive ever since then, but I confess I've been only marginally successful. There is, unfortunately, a very large chasm between knowing what you should do and actually doing it. As the Bible tells us in Matthew 26:41 "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And my flesh seems a little weaker than others!

So what do I, or we, mean by a transcendent moment or experience? As Unitarian Universalists we claim that our UU faith draws upon six sources, and the first of these, right out of the UUA Handbook, so to speak, is the following:

“Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

What a rich, powerful and wonderful statement. I believe these transcendent moments can sneak up on us unexpected, as mine did, or they may come by invitation through meditation. And we must face them squarely and courageously, because they might cause us to change long-held views. For example, when I spoke here a few months ago on the subject of our cosmic origin and the beginnings of life, in a moment of deep contemplation about what I was to say here, I admit that I came perilously close to losing my atheism.

God forbid!

We do have to be prepared.

Last March, I presented a talk entitled “All Creatures Great and Small” for which the subject was animal rights. I described the events in a poem entitled “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” wherein the subject mariner experiences just such a transcendent moment. He is alone, and surrounded by dead sailors, a tragedy for which he was the cause by killing an innocent bird, an albatross. At that moment of solitude and reflection, he suddenly realized the beauty of the sea creatures surrounding the ship whom he had earlier referred to as “a thousand slimy things”. Now, he said:

*“.....A spring of love gushed from my heart,  
And I blessed them....”*

The character experienced a life-changing transcendent moment that directed his behavior until the end of his days.

The author of that poem is Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He is considered by most to be the earliest inspiration to the transcendentalist movement, even though he died in 1834 as the movement was just beginning to take hold. His book entitled

“Aids to Reflection,” published in New England in 1829, set in motion the Transcendentalist movement. It was a treatise on defining the difference between Reason and Understanding.....the source of knowing. The Rev. William Ellery Channing, an intellectual and spiritual force in American Unitarianism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a great work entitled “Unitarian Christianity” which, if you haven’t read, let me recommend it to you. (Kindle for \$3.99) Early transcendentalists referred to him as “our bishop.” Channing claimed that he owed more to Samuel Taylor Coleridge than to any other philosopher.

So just what is Transcendentalism? I had dinner with members of our congregation on Friday evening, and one of the attendees remarked that she had studied transcendentalism and existentialism in college and will admit that she has never quite figured out what they mean.

Well, Coleridge’s poem certainly points the way. I think that trying to define transcendentalism is like trying to describe a cube of ice while holding it in your hand. No sooner have you grabbed it then 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 defied any clear and consistent definition. It was a philosophy in constant transition. When confronted by the some theologians about this lack of consistency in Transcendental thought, Ralph Waldo Emerson responded with this memorable line:

“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.”

Charles Godfrey Leland, the Philadelphia born 19<sup>th</sup> century humorist and journalist 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.”

More seriously, and to the point, Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay “Nature”, described transcendentalism by describing the transcendental experience during encounters with the natural world. For example, during a walk in the woods:

“In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. 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”

I could read the paragraph over again and again and never tire of it!

In their transcendentalist philosophy, there was the principal dependency upon the self as the source of knowing. It was a revolt against pure reason and logic in art, literature, and religion. It was a philosophy of reliance upon our human nature, listening to our hearts, breaking the bonds of rationalism as the only source of truth, relying additionally on our moral intuition and the inherent goodness of humanity. It was about gender relations and fairness and race equality. It was about our relationship to the natural world. It was about understanding what other religions can teach us about ourselves. And it was about removing the elitism of the caste of religious professionals who shielded human beings from having a direct relationship with the universal, or with god. Transcendentalism found god to be in mankind and nature, and mankind and nature to be in god.

My gosh, it does sound like Unitarian Universalism doesn't it?

One particular example of Transcendentalist thinking at the time was their approach to the interpretation of biblical scripture. Unitarians at this point had already rejected the divinity of Jesus Christ but some viewed him as divinely connected. In that regard, they still held to the idea of miracles as evidence of

Jesus' supernatural connection to God. They also continued holy communion, the taking of bread and wine as the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The transcendentalists could not agree to a literal interpretation of the Biblical texts, the source of miracles and communion, but rather viewed these texts as allegorical, figurative, poetical, or story-telling which must, at least be interpreted knowing, as best we can, the history and culture of the time at which they were written.

Rev. William Ellery Channing said in his book "Unitarian Christianity" that Christians at the time chose certain passages which supported their views, and selectively ignored contradictions, as a way of overcoming the ambiguity and making the Bible serve their own selfish purposes. He said:

"Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men, and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books.... With these views of the Bible, we feel it our bounden duty to exercise our reason upon it perpetually, to compare, to infer, to look beyond the letter to the spirit, to seek in the nature of the subject, and the aim of the writer, his true meaning; and, in general, to make use of what is known, for explaining what is difficult, and for discovering new truths."

And so, they denied the existence of miracles based upon new biblical interpretation. On this point the Transcendentalist departed again from Unitarian theology but eventually, the transcendentalists won this particular point and in this, and so many other ways, forever changed Unitarian theology.

As a final example, I think one particularly remarkable document is Emerson's essay entitled "The Lord's Supper" where he addressed the sharing of bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. Through rigorous analysis of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, he concluded the following:

"Having recently given particular attention to this subject, I was led to the conclusion that Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for perpetual

observance when he ate the Passover with his disciples; and, further, to the opinion, that it is not expedient to celebrate it as we do.”

Rather than continue with what he called this “noxious exaggeration on the person of Jesus” he resigned his position as pastor of his church.

Transcendentalism was a revolution... a revolution of spirit, a *cop d'état* against the existing intellectual elite, and it was conceived and driven by our Unitarian ancestors: ministers and lay people. They preached and lived in the area around Boston and Concord, and most all were associated, in some way, with the Harvard Divinity School which was, by that time, a stronghold of Unitarianism.

The Transcendentalist writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, the Alcotts, Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing and others are believed to have directly influenced the literature of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and even the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the philosophy of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King. I think those of you who, like me, love the poetry of Mary Oliver, can clearly see the transcendental elements in them as well. They brought us the idea of kindergarten, and sexual education for children.

And so, it seems that transcendentalism is alive and well in our UU faith. I have been watching closely these last several Sundays and imagining Emerson, Thoreau and Fuller sitting alongside us. They would have marveled at the diversity of beliefs in our faith community, our acceptance of one another, our eagerness to explore and learn, and our inherent goodness.

I have had the great pleasure over the last week or so to review our congregation's response to our Congregational Survey as I prepared the summary report to this congregation. There is, in this congregation, a hunger for greater community, fellowship and belonging, inside and outside of these walls, a desire for spiritual uplifting, a thirst for intellectual challenge, a yearning for guidance on the path to truth and meaning, a heartfelt longing for social justice, and a strong recognition of the need for personal reflection and meditation, particularly in commune with nature. Who we are so mirrors the transcendentalists of a

century and a half ago that it seems irrefutable to me that it is they who have left this legacy with us, who have so greatly influenced who we are today.

We could occupy a whole year of Sundays discussing transcendentalism. I sometimes wish we could initiate a "Dead Poets Society" here at UUCSJS as in the movie of that name. I believe the characters in that movie emulated to a very large extent the behavior of those early Unitarians: the value of free-thinking, nonconformity, self-reflection, courage, and even civil disobedience. I hope our dead poets society would consist of people of all ages and genders that are eager to keep the grand mystery of life alive and pumping in their veins. Carpe Diem. Seize the day!

Now, on the minister.

Emerson could not abide preacher's who lacked imagination, who rested on reciting biblical verse, who, when in the pulpit, lost their humanity. After a particularly poor sermon, where he found his mind wandering, he later wrote in his journal:

"The next best thing to good preaching is bad preaching. I have even more thoughts during or enduring it than at other times."

He delivered an address to the graduating Class of the Harvard Divinity School in which he passionately describes the shortcomings on the ministers at the time. At one point, he addresses his experience during one particular sermon he recalled enduring. His address has become required reading for students at divinity schools.

Rather than read part of that address or quote passages to you, Jack Miller and I will dramatize a portion of that address, as if the particular preacher whom Emerson so despised was right there, in the pulpit, during his address. Jack will play the role of Emerson, and I will play the part of the minister.

**Preacher:**

*"...and so I say unto you, my friends, you shall not see God in heaven lest you repent for your sins and blah blah blah.. ." (falling off silently into background each time)*

**Emerson:**

*"A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow."*

**Preacher:**

*"....yea, and I say to you today that he who dares transgress, who fails to hear the word of the Lord God almighty, shall forever blah blah blah...."*

**Emerson:**

*"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. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth (my emphasis), he had not learned.*

**Preacher:**

*"...now let us read from Psalm 91: "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, "He is my blah blah blah....""*

**Emerson:**

*Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he*

*smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history.*

**Preacher**

*"...You shall tread upon the lion and the cobra, the young lion and the serpent you shall trample underfoot blah blah blah....."*

**Emerson:**

*"The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, -- life passed through the fire of thought. But of the bad preacher, it could not be told from his sermon, what age of the world he fell in; whether he had a father or a child; whether he was a freeholder or a pauper; whether he was a citizen or a countryman; or any other fact of his biography. It seemed strange that the people should come to church.*

*(continues)*

*....it is still true, that tradition characterizes the preaching of this country; that it comes out of the memory, and not out of the soul; that it aims at what is usual, and not at what is necessary and eternal; that thus, historical Christianity destroys the power of preaching, by withdrawing it from the exploration of the moral nature of man, where the sublime is, where the resources of astonishment and power are."*

Let me paraphrase what we just heard: The capital secret of the profession of ministry is to convert life into truth, to explore the moral nature of mankind wherein lie the resources of astonishment and power. Have you ever heard a better definition of the job of a preacher?

In our congregational survey, fully 60% of the congregation thought that Preaching was job #1, i.e., preparing and leading spiritual and enlightening Sunday services (question 15), and similarly, 75% of the congregation thought that

“presenting stimulating and challenging Sunday services” was the highest priority (question 16).

As we continue our search for a new minister, I think it unlikely that we will find someone who meets all of Emerson’s lofty expectations. It therefore follows that we must all be prepared for some degree of thoughtful compromise and balancing in order to meet the ministerial needs of the majority and minority in our congregation.