

## Transcendentalism and Care of the Soul

A Sermon Offered to the Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church

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From lectures on “Human Culture” by Ralph Waldo Emerson

We divorce ourselves from nature; we hide ourselves in cities and lose the affecting spectacle of the Day and Night which she cheers and instructs her children withal. We pave the earth for miles with stones and forbid the grass. We build street on street all around the horizon and shut out the sky and the wind; false and costly tastes are generated for wise and cheep ones; thousands are poor and cannot see the face of the world; the senses are impaired, and the susceptibility to beauty; and life made vulgar. Our feeling in the presence of nature is an admonishing hint. 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 man 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: outshine 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 man of feeling is not suffered to lose sight of the instant creation. The world was not made a long while ago. Nature is eternal now.

The Summer Day by Mary Oliver<sup>1</sup>

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean-  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

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<sup>1</sup> from *New and Selected Poems*, 1992 Beacon Press, Boston, MA © 1992 by Mary Oliver.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

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Over the course of my ministry I have learned that, when I am flying, it is best for me to lie if my neighbor asks me what I do for a living. Otherwise, I wind up having to play the role of Church Apologist for the rest of the flight. I don't know of any other professionals who suffer this way. You'd think, when people find out you're a clergy person, they might just say something polite like, "Oh, that's nice." But, no. Instead, what I, and other colleagues, usually get is a long and unasked for list of all the reasons they currently do not attend church. And I suppose this would be OK if ever, just once, I heard someone describe a church that looked anything like to ones I've been privileged to serve. But instead, what I hear are diatribes against "the church", or "organized religion" as if we are all alike, which of course, we are not. But most of these folks wouldn't know that because they've either never actually been a part of a religious community, or it's been 40-50 years since they last were.

The first couple of times I encountered this response to my profession, I took it as an opportunity for some progressive evangelism. And most of the time I was pretty successful at it. Most of my discussions with the "un-churched," or the "nones" (those who indicate "none" in response to the question of religious preference) – most of those conversations ended with them saying something like, "Well, if I lived near you I'd come to your church."

"Great! But my church isn't that unique!" There's a bunch of us across the country and even beyond!

In the beginning, I saw these conversations as good opportunities for evangelism, but after awhile, I found myself just getting bored. Bored by the self-centered notions of the "nones" about what it means to be religious. As in, "I think a person can be a good Christian without going to church, or a good Jew without attending Synagogue."

"Far out! Because I'd like to be recognized as the worlds leading woman golf professional. And if what your saying is true, than maybe I don't even have to learn how to play the game!"

And then there are my personal favorite non-religious types...the “spiritual but not religious” who will tell you, as if it’s the first time you’ve ever heard this, that they “find God in nature.”

“Wow! Really? What a great idea? I wonder why we’ve never thought to look there? We who are the inheritors of the transcendentalist movement of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Channing, Alcott, Parker and Fuller to name just a few. How could we have missed that? We who read the poetry of the psalmists, and Dillard and Oliver, we who covenant to affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence which we recognize we are not just stewards of but part of as well. We who are leaders in the Green Sanctuary Movement...God in nature. What a lofty and creative idea!”

Over the course of my ministry I have learned that, when I am flying, it is best for me to lie if my neighbor asks me what I do for a living. Otherwise, I wind up trying to play the role of Church Apologist while I do serious battle with a snark factor of monumental proportions. But enough about me! Let us turn now to the actual subject of this sermon for today – Transcendentalism and Care of the Soul – what the impact of this historic transformation within our movement has to offer us, and those beyond our walls, in this time of post-modernity.

Let’s start with a little history.

Transcendentalism in America actually began as a revolt within the ranks of Unitarianism against what many perceived as an over emphasis on the intellect. What many of these early Transcendentalists found missing from first-generation Unitarianism was an emphasis on the soul. In his Harvard school address, Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to the intellectual religion of our Unitarian forbearers as, “pale negations,” “corpse-cold,” and “lifeless.”<sup>2</sup> Theodore Parker wrote of this Unitarian Orthodoxy:

*I felt early that these 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!”*

Channing, who Emerson called “our Bishop,” had been a great champion of the soul. He placed great emphasis, “on the spiritual capacity of the soul and the importance of cultivating the seed of divinity within each individual.”<sup>3</sup> It was Channing’s notion of something he called “self-culture” that captivated the imaginations of the Transcendentalists. “This notion held that the goal of religious life was the culture or cultivation of one’s inner spiritual nature, or soul.”<sup>4</sup> Broadly speaking, it was the goal of

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<sup>2</sup> Andrews, Barry M. Thoreau as Spiritual Guide. Skinner House Books: Boston © 2000. Pg.3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pg. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pg. 1.

self-culture to make it possible for moments of spiritual transcendence to characterize days, as it were; to develop a sense of spirituality in every day life.

Channing had been a great champion of the soul, but it took the Transcendentalists to develop this idea and apply it to every facet of human activity. They looked primarily to nature as a source of revelation concerning the spiritual life, and to see the impact of this, let's draw a line from Thoreau's journal, first published in 1854, to the piece by Mary Oliver we read just a few moments ago, published in 1992. Thoreau wrote: *My profession is to always be on the alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking places, to attend to the oratorios, the operas in nature... To watch for, describe, all the divine features which I detect in nature.*<sup>5</sup>

Oliver wrote:

*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.*

God in nature...indeed! As if the "God" the "nones" find in nature is somehow different from - divorced entirely from - the Divine Spirit of Creation we religious encounter in nature. The real difference between us and them is this: because those who came before us used the power of religious community to **amplify** what they encountered in nature and to pass what they found in nature **through the fires of religious discernment**, we can take this Divine Impulse found in nature and find it elsewhere as well. We can find it in one another, we can find it in joy, we can find it in sorrow and we can find it in the call to build a just world. Because we are the inheritors of this great transcendentalist tradition, among others, we have been given tools that enable us to find God, the Spirit of Life, the Divine Impulse, the Eternal Mystery, the Core of Truth, (however you know and name that which you seek), we have been given the tools to find it everywhere, in everyone, and amidst everything and here lies the possibility of our gift to the world.

But listen up church, because the possibility of our gift to the world will never manifest itself without discipline – religious discipline. The cultivation of souls, of our inner-natures, takes work primarily because it is on-going in nature. If self-culture in our Unitarian Universalist movement replaces the notion of "conversion" in other faith practices, of a one time experience that is salvific in nature, if the potential "for spiritual development is limitless, a concerted effort at spiritual discipline is necessary to achieve it."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pg.5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pg.2.

Because, it is not enough to be satisfied with having wholesome inner aspirations without the concurrent manifestation of outward ethical behavior, and this is where we have it head and shoulders above those who **think** they are thriving in a realm of personal, private, exclusive, often self-focused and self-serving “spirituality” that never finds real expression in the world. Introspection, according to our transcendentalist brothers and sisters, is necessarily wedded to social action. And while the Great Cathedral of God’s creation is an awesome place to gather insight and inspiration – while nature is a wonderful source of revelation – absent the presence of religious community to reflect and hone the experiences we have there, absent the presence of religious community to help us with the outward manifestation of this revelation, these experiences amount to, not much more than, an inwardly focused spirituality of self-satisfaction that I don’t seem to have a great deal of patience for. Not at 34 thousand feet strapped in next to some stranger who thinks themselves to be at the forefront of a new cutting-edge thing, not in the established mainline congregations of our day, not in our seminaries, and most especially, not in our Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

Friends, the challenge before us is this. We live in a time in which the “nones” constitute the fastest growing “denomination” in these United States of America. Many of them have never been part of a faith community, and neither were their parents. In many cases today, neither were their grandparents. So we are looking at a sea of humanity that is now 2-3 generations out from having been part of a faith community. They have no idea about the range of options that are available to them vis-à-vis faith communities. In fact, most of what they know about “church” comes from what they read or hear in the mainstream media, and I’m pretty sure at this point the mainstream media has no idea that the words “progressive” and “religion” can actually be combined. Additionally, many if not most of these “nones” are also millennials, or “gen-Y’s,” those born between 1980 and 2000, and it turns out these folks are somewhat anti-institutionalists.

The sum total of these parts could easily spell disaster for our churches. In fact, the front edge of this decline is already being felt by many congregations across the mainstream, ours included. But here’s the good news. Most of these “nones” identify as “spiritual.” They say they are “spiritual but not religious” because they don’t know there’s a religion out here that has the capacity to bless and receive them regardless of **if** or **where** they find God. What’s more, they have no idea that the “spirituality” they have found alone is only the beginning of the spirituality they could experience if they would only allow themselves to be in a community that can nurture the outward expression of their inner spiritual manifestation.

So, here’s the rub. If we’re going to get the word out about who we are and why more folks might want to join us, I guess I’m going to have to quit lying about what I do for a living. But you, friends, you’re going to need to acquire some knowledge and some language with which to explain Unitarian Universalism in this twenty-first century to all those “spiritual but not religious” types. And along the way, I’m guessing we’re all going to need to become a bit more patient, with ourselves, with

those who will come to join us, and with those alongside whom we can build partnerships for a brighter tomorrow.

Our Transcendentalist heritage is rich. It's emphasis on matters of the soul and the outward manifestation of that deeply spiritual life have so much to teach us still, and what's more, to teach those "spiritual but not religious" types beyond our doors. As the good Vicar of East Oxford, John Huntley Skrine wrote so very long ago:

*Though the path be hard and long, still we strive in expectation  
Join we now their ageless song one with them in aspiration  
One in name, in honor one, guard we well the crown they won  
What they dreamed be ours to do, hope their hopes and seal them true.*

May it be so.

Won't you pray with me?

(Adapted from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "A Person Will Worship Something". #563 STLT)

Spirit of Life and All Creation-

At the days end we come to learn that we all worship something.  
It is folly to believe that our tribute could ever be paid in secret, in the dark recesses of our hearts – yet, we know we are capable of deceiving ourselves in this way and sometimes we do.

On our better days we realize that what dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives and our character.

So today we hope and we pray to be careful consumers in matter of what we worship, because we know that what we worship, we are becoming.

Rank by rank we stand with those who have gone before us and illuminated our way.

May their words and deeds and hopes and truths become finely etched upon our hearts, and through us may their life's work live on.

Amen.