



Neighborhood Unitarian
Universalist Church

Transcendentalism for Today

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December 27, 2009

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Let's begin this morning with a trip down memory lane. Do you remember that certain book you read when you were younger, perhaps in early adulthood, that book that completely changed how you understood life and your place in the world? That book that you loved so much because you felt like it enlightened you, made you privy to important knowledge. What book from years ago do you still think about, refer back to, look at life through the lens of?

When I was 13, that book was J.D. Salinger's Catcher In the Rye. It was so funny to me! Holden Caulfield, a young man, criticizes everything about society with sharp wit, particularly all the expectations of the upper middle class - doing well in college, social climbing, marriage. To him, everything and everyone was so *phony*. Yeah, I thought when I was 13, I *agree*. I didn't want to have to work hard to be "popular" in school, I didn't want to work hard to earn A's in my classes either. Holden Caulfield was an awkward middle schooler's HERO.

Holden Caulfield affirmed my teenage tendencies toward what sociologist Robert Bellah called "expressive individualism." That was one of the other chunks of reading that left an indelible impression on me, which I read Spring semester of my Freshman year in college. I was a Sociology major, ready to learn how I could save the world, or at least look darn good trying to. Robert Bellah and his team of sociologists published Habits of the Heart in the mid 1980's, a reader-friendly book about how our American values of individualism are impeding on our sense of commitment to public life, to being responsible, civic-minded citizens, and how the kind of church we go to plays a role in this.

Bellah was critical of the Unitarians in this book, associating them with the historical/cultural tradition of "expressive individualism." He refers to Transcendentalist figures like Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne, who he said "put aside the search for wealth in favor of a deeper cultivation of the self." But it was Walt Whitman, Bellah said, who most epitomized the American cultural tradition of "expressive individualism."

Bellah wrote, "For [Walt] Whitman, success had little to do with material acquisition. A life rich in experience, open to all kinds of people, luxuriating in the sensual as well as the intellectual, above all a life of strong feeling, was what he perceived as a successful life."

I have this quotation hi-lited in the copy I kept from college. In the margin, is an arrow pointing to it with the word, "Yeah!" I was all for Whitman when I first read this. I remember all the students in this class greatly resisted the ideas in this book, such as it being questionable to want a life rich in experience, that it's something to be reconsidered or discouraged altogether. We took it out on the professor, who we labeled a "stodgy nerd with bad breath." I know that in those years, I wanted to do everything that reeked of Whitman's definition of "rich experience." I wanted to travel the world, learn about exotic cultures, back pack in the far reaches of the wild, fall madly in love, run in a field of wildflowers, skinny-dip in Lake Michigan - whatever was popularly qualified as romantic experience I went after, and did.

Thankfully, my sociology teacher was a gifted educator, and through his lecturing I finally got the main message of this book: to be an "expressive individualist" is, well, rather selfish. It's self-serving, self-absorbed, but most importantly, it limits the self since the self can only be actualized within community, within a broader mode of being and acting in larger society. What does this mean? It means that the smaller our scope of attention is in the world, the smaller our sense of connection to humanity becomes, and essentially the smaller we are. If I only focus on myself and what feels good, then the less I actually participate in the world, contribute to the common good, and serve that which is larger than myself.

While all those expressive things aren't bad in and of themselves - the traveling, the hiking, smelling the roses - I realized that this was only one part of what life is supposed to be about, of what is truly challenging and enriching, of

what is character-building. Those things are good for MY soul - but they have limited connection to the WHOLE soul of humanity.

I didn't figure this all out right away, but I eventually came to realize that it's only through serving the common good that my life becomes "rich in experience," or "a life of strong feeling." Paradoxically, it's only when I forget myself that I can finally become myself. We can only become our best selves in a community of people who know us and trust us and like us. We become known when we work with others in the spirit of what is good for a shared community. Ultimately, becoming known in this manner is what makes you healthy.

It seems that people are the most miserable when they can't see beyond their own perceived needs. Self-absorption frustrates healthy relationship to others. Perhaps the best way to counter this isolation and separateness is to engage in my interpretation of Emerson's "Oversoul," which we read in the Responsive Reading:

"Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One."

Emerson is not explicit of HOW one can engage this luminous reverence of life, however. He seems to imply that it is an individual experience. While undoubtedly we've all experienced individual moments of grace that seemed rooted in the divine, I would argue with Emerson that such experiences cannot fully speak to what is at the center of the sacred.

Perhaps what is at the center isn't blissful at all; no rapture, no ecstasy, no enchantment. Perhaps experiencing the divine is only found through a culmination of hard, quiet effort to make the world a better place, to keep life safe and sacred.

In this manner, the sacred is only accessible through commitment. It cannot exist in immediate gratification. The Transcendentalists of the 19th century seemed fixated on the idea that the sacred is easily accessible, if only we paid better attention to our senses, our thoughts, and feelings. But nowadays, that's the way things are, that's the entrenched status quo – if you look at society as a whole, it seems we are paying *too* much attention to ourselves. For us living in the post-modern world, the real challenge is to get our minds *off* of ourselves, off our personal stresses and concerns. Our self-help and self-improvement culture seems to have led to neglected civic participation.

So I propose that Transcendentalism for today is to transcend *our selves*. How can we act in and experience the world beyond the self? Imagine that who you are can be represented in concentric circles. The small circle in the middle is you. The first circle around you is your family, the next circle your friends, the next circle your church community, the next your local community, the next circle your state, then your country, then finally the biggest circle is the world. It's like rings in a tree trunk. When our lives act in those bigger circles, we become bigger, stronger, more wise. If we only act in the first tiny circle of our selves, we stay small; we don't grow.

The American Transcendentalists of the 19th century got one very important thing right. They had faith in the highest ideals of our human capacities; they truly believed that we could successfully serve those ideals. They believed that life could be rich in experience, in beauty. But the problem is that what they defined as beautiful and sublime tended to not go past their noses. It was too self-contained. They trusted in their intuition, but whether their hunches were good or bad, right or wrong, made no difference in the world around them.

The health of our individual mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual states are all very important - it is essential to heal our wounds in those areas with courage and perseverance. But our healing isn't complete until we are able to give back to the world, or learn how to give for the first time. We work to heal for the same reason we take time to grieve - so we can participate in the world again. *That's* when life is beautiful, when we can overcome or transcend our personal struggles to a place where we can give of ourselves fully once more.

Personal healing is important, but we probably don't need to worry about ourselves as much as we do. There is a concept in Buddhism called "not-doing." It means that we let things take care of themselves, we don't try to over do it, or spend too much energy on trying too hard. It's having faith that, while we live the best lives we can and continually do

the next right thing, that our personal issues and problems have a way of solving themselves. Finally we get to a point where we realize we don't need to be solved - we don't need to be "fixed." Things tend to work out when we simply continue to participate well in the world. Our flaws don't seem to matter as much when we become good at helping others.

When the Trancendentalists of the 19th century talk about trusting their intuition in terms of possessing inherent knowledge that precedes experience, I want to say, 'yes, that unconditioned knowledge is there, but I can only trust it if it doesn't have to do with myself. I can trust it and follow it if it points to the highest ideals that serve humanity.'

If we're going to pay any attention to our intuitions at all, they need to be the intuitions that come from this center, from this sacred center. Not the center of the self, but within those larger circles. Transcendentalism for today ought to focus on attending to what our center is to be; what is the circle of the largest diameter within which we can define ourselves? To what *degree* shall we transcend ourselves?

If we are the spiders and the sacred is the web, which connections with the world are we going to extend ourselves to? Which parts of the web are we going to repair, slowly, meticulously, but with great intention and purpose?

Sure life is beautiful! The Trancendentalists of the 19th century served an important historical function of their time - to counter an increasingly industrial mindset, to try to preserve nature against production and development, to uphold a mind set that dismissed an agenda of ruthless progress. That's still applicable in today's world. But we need to take more steps outward.

Today we know life has beauty to offer us; that is a given. And it's well advised that we do recharge our batteries every now and then in nature, that we do spend time just being with ourselves, star-gazing, watching the ants work. YES, there is so much beauty in the world and we are well advised to notice it. I love the line in the story *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker, when it is observed in a field of purple wildflowers that, God *does* get mad if we walk by the color purple and don't notice it.

In the Spring of my senior year of college I had to present a final project to the Sociology department. They had given me permission to spend an entire quarter writing poetry, rather than do some kind of social service internship, because I didn't want to just serve the world, I wanted to be a poet in the world, too. I remember I began the presentation to all my professors and fellow students with a favorite quotation of writer E.B. White. He said,

"It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world - and when to respond to the challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world . . . this makes it hard to plan the day."

May we transcend this quandary. May we discover that, after all - to improve the world and to enjoy the world are in fact the same thing.

May our joy be our service. May our service be our joy.