

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

## “Transcendentalist Roots of Justice”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore November 28, 2021

### Call to Celebration

The foundations and supporting walls for our faith were built by ancestors we have never known face to face. We may have biographies to gain appreciation of their lives. We may have their diaries, poems, essays, sermons, art they created, and artifacts they touched. Their descendants might personify some of their values and beliefs. Scholars write histories from the traces they leave behind.

Today I'd like to bring you a few traces of our Unitarian and Transcendentalist nineteenth century ancestors. We inherit a living tradition of Unitarian and Universalist faith from them. That faith wasn't received in a revelation from God, though it certainly was shaped by Christianity. Many of them would consider themselves Christians. Yet the Transcendentalists were the first break from the Christian fold to begin to create a religious identity independent of just one teacher or revelation.

And though Transcendentalists were not unique in feeling called toward social reform, their faith moved them to become reformers. Something in their Unitarianism as articulated by their leading light, William Ellery Channing, that, when combined with the German idealism and Romanticism sweeping across the Atlantic, energized them to make their world better and more humane.

May this exploration of our spiritual ancestors this morning help you connect more deeply to our faith and bring new energy to your action in the world.

### Reading

From the Introduction to Rev. Dr. [John Buehrens book \*Conflagration: How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice\*](#) that are an inspiration for my words this morning.

Many of us first met the Transcendentalists in literature classes in high school or college. This gives us the impression that we should think of them primarily as writers. We read some Emerson: a few poems and essays, probably including “Self-Reliance.” Thoreau's *Walden*, about going to the woods to live more deliberately, is now the most read American book written before the Civil War. We then come to see Transcendentalists as centered in rural Concord, asserting their individualism against the demands of society. Perhaps it does not help that our meeting with them often comes in our own adolescence, when the drive to self-differentiation, individuation, and idealism is natural.

History provides another perspective, focused less on their writings than on their lives and deeds. Many Transcendentalists and their followers were also fervent activists, sparking the intellectual, spiritual, moral, and political struggle in America for racial, gender, social, and environmental justice that continues to this day. They also were far more religious and urban than most people realize. This is because history also has a tendency to erase many lives and the places associated with them. Here we will lift up less well-known Transcendentalists who were courageous in challenging

tradition and injustice. Rather than being pushed around by history, they were great souls who instead tried to shape it—toward a more just, hopeful future. ...

To a degree often overlooked, Transcendentalism was a movement almost entirely within the congregational churches of the Boston area that had become Unitarian. It was a spiritual and moral renewal movement among ministers and laypeople in those churches.

It is also almost impossible for many readers in our secular culture to realize how influential churches were in mid-nineteenth-century America, especially in Boston, the epicenter of its dominant religious culture, although historian Sidney E. Mead once wisely called us “The Nation with the Soul of a Church.”

The Transcendentalist movement called forth efforts to make liberal religion more genuinely democratic and more effective in bringing about the many reforms needed to make society more democratic as well.<sup>1</sup>

## Spoken Meditation

The Presence By Jones Very (1813–1880)

I SIT within my room, and joy to find  
 That Thou who always lov'st art with me here,  
 That I am never left by Thee behind,  
 But by thyself Thou keep'st me ever near;  
 The fire burns brighter when with Thee I look,  
 And seems a kinder servant sent to me;  
 With gladder heart I read Thy holy book,  
 Because Thou art the eyes by which I see;  
 This aged chair, that table, watch and door  
 Around in ready service ever wait;  
 Nor can I ask of Thee a menial more  
 To fill the measure of my large estate,  
 For Thou thyself, with all a father's care,  
 Where'er I turn, art ever with me there.

## Silent Meditation

### Sermon

For over two hundred years, social justice and reform have been encoded into our Unitarian and Universalist DNA. They are integral to our way of doing religion. This morning I'd like to sketch some of the reasons why based in our theology and in our history. Fasten your seat belts because I'll be speeding across deep waters that have much under the surface. My hope is to stimulate your interest in going deeper. My hope is you'll then discover an even greater appreciation of our religious tradition and find out more about the inspirational ancestors who have guided us toward becoming who we are today.

An important source we must encounter first is the reasoned rejection of the Puritan version of Calvinism by our Unitarian founder in America, William Ellery Channing. We would not be who we've become without his expansive and penetrating thought, analysis, mentorship of young ministers and leadership from the Federal Street Church pulpit, to which he was called in 1803.

The critique Channing made famous in his "Unitarian Christianity" sermon at the 1819 ordination of Jerad Sparks in Baltimore, Maryland was about the nature of God, the nature of Jesus, and human nature. Rather than a vision of a God above justice that could send people to hell by condemning them to that destination before they were born, Channing recognized God as the perfection of justice, mercy, benevolence, and morality guiding us toward virtue. Channing envisioned a God who defers punishment and endures our transgressions to allow us to discover, and rediscover, our duty to moral action.

Crucially important was Channing's understanding of Jesus. Apart from seeing Jesus as a created being without a Triune nature, Channing recognized Jesus' purpose was to bring about a moral, a spiritual deliverance of humanity from our suffering and to bring us to a state of everlasting purity and happiness. This could be done through his example and his instruction we receive in the scriptures. God is revealed through that process. Through that process God will take hold of our hearts and guide our actions.

Rejecting the Calvinist doctrines of Original Sin and atonement, Channing didn't believe Jesus' purpose was to change God's mind about fallen humanity. I might add, it's a little hard to believe his Son's execution by Roman torture and terrorism would make God look more favorably on humanity at all. Channing thought the traditional Christian approach, focused on paying a debt to God for our sin with Jesus' life disparaged focus on good works and the cultivation of human virtue. In Channing's words from that famous sermon:

We believe that all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of [humanity], that is, . . . in the power of forming [our] temper and life according to conscience. We believe that these moral faculties are the grounds of responsibility . . . and that no act is praiseworthy [unless] it springs from their exertion.

To summarize the birth of Channing's Unitarianism:

- God is one.
- Jesus is God's messenger to reveal God's nature, God's expectations of us and God's love for us.
- Our response should be:
  - to know God's nature and expectations through hearing and learning the message;
  - to feel that love by knowing we are created in the divine image, and
  - to respond by following the guidance received and abandoning our rebellion against God's love as understood through Jesus' life and death.
- No Original Sin needs to be resolved;
- No angry God to be appeased with sacrifices;
- Only a divine love needs to be received and reflected back.

In the eighteenth century, before Channing began formulating his views on Unitarian Christianity, German theologians and philosophers were beginning to undermine the European Enlightenment views of reason as our guide to truth. Immanuel Kant was writing his 1781 book *Critique of Pure Reason*. Rather than the tool that will reveal the truth of the Bible, reason has a much more limited scope. Kant argues, that can't help us outside its appropriate spheres such as science and mathematics. It is particularly limited in metaphysics.

Kant's idealism helped usher in Romanticism in the early 1800's with the writings of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Shelley, William Blake and Mary Shelley. Idealism (or idea-ism) was the beginning of subjectivism. We know objects subjectively rather than having one and only one correct way for objects to be known. The actual properties of a thing, independent of the mind witnessing it, are unknowable, thus subject to individual interpretation. How I see a tree or hear the wind in its leaves or touch its bark will not be the same as others might know it. It's the blind men and the elephant problem.

The Transcendentalists took hold of this way of knowing as an extension of Channing's thought in a way that he didn't immediately appreciate. Rather than the Bible and the example of Jesus as our mediator with God, I as individual subject could potentially have a direct encounter with the divine through my inner knowing, my subjectivity, my intuition. The church no longer was needed for them, they potentially had direct access to the divine. Not consistently or reliably, however, but rather an invitation to open to one's subjective ways of knowing. Channing's development of character could happen immediately and directly through individual subjective contact with the divine; the more emotionally intense and awesome the experience, the more authentic. This was far more attractive to the passionate young Unitarian ministers than the subdued rational analysis of Biblical text by their elders.

We need all this background to appreciate how the foundations of Channing's Unitarianism and Romantically oriented Transcendentalism combined powerfully to energize their commitment to social reform.

First and most important is the foundation of God's love for God's creation and the will for us to be redeemed. Jesus, the messenger brought an example and guidance about how to get there. Not just for a few Elect but for all of humanity. There were no disposable people headed to hell and not worth our effort or concern. All of us would benefit from the moral uplift of Jesus' example and guidance. How could that be offered to the less socially privileged? Unitarians asked. The message was for them too: the homeless, the beggar in the street, the orphan, the prostitute, the disabled, the reprobate.

Transcendentalists also had a commitment to the practice of spiritual friendship that frequently transcended gender, race and class.

That ideal stemmed from the conviction that only by helping others realize their moral, spiritual, and creative potential can one fulfill one's own; and that only through mutual concern can just communities begin to emerge.<sup>ii</sup>

Their social concern extended to the whole community, the whole nation. Their idealism on abolition, education and women's suffrage drove them to organize aid associations. Though they

were driven by new enthusiasms and passions attributed to Transcendentalism, they also inherited the passion for building a just community of their Congregationalist ancestors.

Churches took on this reformist passion as part of their mission. A prominent Transcendentalist I mentioned two weeks ago, James Freeman Clarke, made that central to the Boston Church of the Disciples he organized. Twice a month:

...they discussed practical social ministry projects. When they discerned a need to shelter women fleeing domestic abuse or prostitution, they established a pioneering “Home for Temporarily Destitute Women” on Kneeland Street, directed by Rebecca Clarke. They raised funds for the black-led New England Freedom Association, to aid fugitive slaves.

The motivation for their work had a distinctive Transcendentalist flavor:

they emphasized the spiritual basis—a deep and abiding change of heart—for effective, lasting social reform. It also provided a forum for moral reflection on the pressing social issues and politics of the day.<sup>iii</sup>

Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, disciple of Channing and Transcendentalist Theodore Parker, encouraged education hosting Margaret Fuller’s “Conversations for Women” started in the fall of 1839 in her home. Later in life she promoted early childhood education bringing the German kindergarten movement to America. She also encouraged Horace Mann. Mann was dealing with grief from the loss of his first wife, his father and his brother. Trained as a lawyer and serving in the Massachusetts senate, he turned away from politics eschewing a run for US Senate or to become Governor. Instead, he became the first secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Elections. He was charged with improving education and making it more widely available and accessible, staffed with professionally trained teachers. His work, as we might say today, went viral, nationwide.

This reformist spirit also infected Dorothea Dix. She worked as a governess for Channing while he took a winter rest in the Virgin Islands in 1831. She suffered emotionally within the limitations of women’s roles in those days until she discovered a way to develop a vocation. In Buehrens words:

A Unitarian student minister had tried to teach a class for women in the Charlestown jail, and felt he had failed. Dix took over, quickly seeing that many of those incarcerated were there not for crimes but only because they were unable to care for themselves due to some mental handicap. Channing and others arranged for her to spend a year with reformers in Britain. Her Unitarian hosts there, the Rathbone family, acquainted her with new and more humane approaches to the care of the mentally ill. After her return in 1840, Dix spent a year inspecting nearly every jail and poorhouse in Massachusetts. Most towns, she found, dealt with those unable to care for themselves by contracting with farmers to board them. The system was underfunded, unregulated, and rife with abuse. Many of the mentally ill and disabled were treated like slaves, if not worse. In early 1841, she prepared a fiery report or “memorial” to the legislature, declaring, “I proceed, Gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of Insane Persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience.” Eventually she went on to replicate this advocacy for the mentally ill in nearly every other state in the Union and

took part in the founding or the expansion of some thirty public hospitals for the mentally ill.<sup>iv</sup>

The last amazing humanitarian project of both Unitarians and Transcendentalists was the Sanitary Commission. It arose out of the network of relationships between Unitarians and liberal religionists including the Universalists. Again, Buehrens:

On the Sunday after the attack upon Fort Sumter, [Unitarian minister Henry] Bellows preached a stirring sermon in support of the Union. A group of Unitarian women who wanted to help support the army asked him to meet with them that Thursday. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, an English-born Unitarian and the first woman to be a doctor of medicine in the United States, presided. She and a male colleague described the unhealthy conditions already threatening soldiers in training camps on nearby Staten Island... Within two months, Congress had authorized the commission, with Bellows as president and Sam Howe among its eight commissioners. At the same time, Dorothea Dix became the superintendent of nurses for the United States Army, the first woman ever to hold an executive post in the federal government.<sup>v</sup>

Note how women were central to the founding of the Sanitary Commission and its support. Mary Livermore, Universalist minister's wife who later became a celebrated lecturer, did fundraising events. At Unitarian Churches, Sunday school classrooms served as a place for women to gather to prepare bandages, clothing, medicine and supplies for soldiers in the field.

These are just a few of the projects of social uplift and support that grew out of the fertile soil of Unitarian and Universalist congregations in the 1800's. We haven't discussed more well known efforts for Women's Rights and Temperance that also had support outside our churches. The same for abolition.

If you'd like to go deeper into our nineteenth century heritage, the St. Lawrence Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association will be co-sponsoring with the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, a series of lectures by John Buehrens in January on Zoom. The classes will run Sunday evenings from January 9 to January 30 at 7:00-8:30pm. Be alert to your Windows on Thursday for more information.

I conclude with the inspirational words of our Unitarian ancestor, Theodore Parker speaking of the immortality of ideas:

You and I may perish. Temptation which has been too strong for thousands of stronger men, may be too great for me; I may prove false to my own idea of religion and of duty; the gold of commerce may buy me, as it has bought richer men; the love of the praise of men may seduce me; or the fear of men may deter my coward voice, and I may be swept off in the earthquake, in the storm, or in the fire, and prove false to that still small voice.

If it shall ever be so, still the great ideas which I have set forth, of [humanity], of God, of religion, — they will endure, and one day will be "a flame in the heart of all."

May the flame of the nineteenth century Transcendentalists go with us this day.

## Prayer of Affirmation

### Dryad Song

By Margaret Fuller (1810–1850)

I AM immortal! I know it! I feel it!  
 Hope floods my heart with delight!  
 Running on air, mad with life, dizzy, reeling,  
 Upward I mount,—faith is sight, life is feeling,  
 Hope is the day-star of might!

It was thy kiss, Love, that made me immortal,—  
 “Kiss, Love? Our lips have not met!”  
 Ah, but I felt thy soul through night’s portal  
 Swoon on my lips at night’s sweet, silent portal,  
 Wild and as sweet as regret.

Come, let us mount on the wings of the morning,  
 Flying for joy of the flight,  
 Wild with all longing, now soaring, now staying,  
 Mingling like day and dawn, swinging and swaying,  
 Hung like a cloud in the light:  
 I am immortal! I feel it! I feel it!

Love bears me up, love is might!  
 Chance cannot touch me! Time cannot hush me!  
 Fear, Hope, and Longing, at strife,  
 Sink as I rise, on, on, upward forever,  
 Gathering strength, gaining breath,—  
 naught can sever / Me from the Spirit of Life!

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<sup>i</sup> Buehrens, John A.. Conflagration (p. 1, 3). Beacon Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> (Buehrens, John A.. Conflagration (p. 4)

<sup>iii</sup> Buehrens, John A.. Conflagration (pp. 146-147).

<sup>iv</sup> Buehrens, John A.. Conflagration (p. 87).

<sup>v</sup> Buehrens, John A.. Conflagration (p. 230-231).