

## Visionary Radicals

Rev. Tim Temerson

March 9, 2025

It is a great joy to spend some time this morning exploring Transcendentalism with you. I don't think it's an exaggeration to suggest that Transcendentalism was one of the most important and influential spiritual, philosophical, and literary movements in the history of this country and its impact and influence traveled well beyond national borders.

Although I am by no means an expert on the Transcendentalists and have only read a very small fraction of their voluminous writings, I could easily take the next few hours talking about the impact their ideas and insights have had on my spiritual journey as a Unitarian Universalist. You see, although I had heard of Emerson and Thoreau in high school and read a little of both in college, it was only after Carol and I became Unitarian Universalists that I really delved into Transcendentalism. And what piqued my curiosity was the fact many of the leading Transcendentalists had also been Unitarians. Some, like Emerson, had been Unitarian ministers. Of course, a number of Transcendentalists, Emerson among them, became disenchanted with the Unitarianism of their day. He once characterized the preaching he experienced at the Unitarian church in Concord, Massachusetts as "corpse cold," and let me say I hope you will not leave today's service feeling the same way!

Now I can imagine you may be wondering why, if so many Transcendentalists criticized Unitarianism, why do UUs today quote them so frequently and even preach sermons about them. And the simple truth is that while Transcendentalism was inspired by the corpse cold religion of the mid 19th century, over time, that critique took hold and transformed how Unitarians and today Unitarian Universalists understand theology and spirituality, religious truth and experience. The argument between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism is long over and there can be no doubt that the Transcendentalists prevailed and we UUs are, in my view, so much the better for it.

Any discussion of the connection between Unitarian Universalism and the Transcendentalists must begin with Ralph Waldo Emerson so let me begin with the sage of Concord. Emerson was born and grew up in Boston, attended college and seminary at Harvard, and lived most of his adult life in Concord, which today is a busy and bustling suburb of Boston but which, in Emerson's time, was mostly farm land and forest.

While Emerson's father and grandfather had both been ministers and his mother possessed a keen interest in spiritual matters, he was most influenced by his extraordinary aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Mary Emerson is one of most under-appreciated and yet most influential thinkers and voices in the history of American literature and culture. Sadly the only avenue available through which she could share her brilliance and originality was the influence she had on her famous nephew. Emerson himself once called his aunt "the finest writer in Massachusetts" and would have wholeheartedly agreed with one historian's characterization of Mary Emerson as "a vigorous theologian, an original religious thinker, and almost a prophet" although I'm guessing Emerson would have removed the "almost" and simply called his aunt a prophet.

And one can certainly see Mary Emerson's influence throughout her nephew's work. For one thing, she possessed a deep appreciation and I would even say spiritual reverence for nature. And her love of nature led Mary Emerson to see truth and wisdom not simply in traditional sources like the Bible but in everything and in every moment. Truth was found in the words of Jesus and in the sounds and movements of goslings on a pond near her home. Truth could be experienced, as her nephew once wrote, in the growing grass, in the bursting buds, and in the "almost spiritual rays" pouring forth from the night sky.

And this understanding of religious truth led both Mary and her nephew to recognize the importance of spiritual experience that is direct, unmediated, and authentic. In her many letters to the young Emerson, Mary distinguished between the kind of religious life Emerson's father and grandfather had preached and a spiritual life that was meaningful and deep. Far from the very intellectual and rational brand of spirituality one found in much of New England Unitarianism, Mary Emerson yearned for authenticity and depth - for experiences that enabled her to connect with truth and that would touch the heart and stir the soul.

As I mentioned a moment ago, Emerson himself was a graduate of the Harvard Divinity School and was an ordained Unitarian minister. But he served a congregation for only three years before resigning to pursue writing and lecturing full-time. Preaching suited him but he chafed at what he saw as the mindless adherence to tradition and ritual that characterized many Unitarian congregations at the time. Much like his Aunt Mary, Emerson yearned for something different - for an experience of truth that was beyond the bounds of tradition, beyond the bounds of dogma - beyond the bounds of all that stood in the way of a direct, unmediated experience of spirit and the divine.

And if I could point to one idea, one contribution Emerson and the Transcendentalists have made to Unitarian Universalism it would their belief that spiritual truth exists in every moment, that it is always unfolding, and that one must experience and

discover truth for oneself and accept it in one's own heart and mind. Truth is not the sole possession of one person, one sacred text, or one religious tradition. Truth was not revealed in one moment of history or in one place and time. Truth lives in all people, in the bursting buds and in the night sky, in sacred books, in religion, in art, in culture, in science,...in everything.

Although the sources of truth are multi-faceted and seemingly limitless, Emerson insisted that they all point in a single direction and flow from a single source. He believed that truth is ultimately the product of one will, one mind, one spirit. In the midst of all the variety of life, there is, in Emerson's view, an underlying unity. As Emerson wrote some years after he delivered the Divinity School Address, "Every chemical substance, every plant, every animal teaches the unity of cause and the variety of appearance." So for Emerson, truth is about unity and diversity, transcendence and individuality, oneness in the midst of the blooming and buzzing variety of life.

And it is experiencing and intuiting that combination of unity and diversity, oneness and variety that Emerson calls "the religious sentiment." To be human is to seek, to explore, and to strive to live in harmony with the underlying unity and oneness of existence. And how does one do that? By paying attention, by experiencing the beauty and wisdom in nature, by listening to one's own heart and mind, and, as Emerson famously said, by "trusting thyself."

But that experience, that connection, that understanding of spirit and truth cannot simply be learned like one would learn mathematics or a language. One cannot simply read it in a book or listen to it in a sermon. Spiritual truth, as Emerson so famously said, is an intuition. It is true because it speaks to our heart, our mind, our soul. I can't simply receive the truth from another; I must experience it and know it for myself. Spiritual truth cannot be taught; it must be caught. It cannot be dictated; it must be discovered.

And directly experiencing and discovering truth is precisely what Margaret Fuller describes in her mystical moment with the sunlight beaming through the trees. After enduring yet another dull and deadening church service, she takes a long walk in the woods and encounters beams of sunlight among the trees. In that moment she realizes that there is no self and, for the first time in her life, experiences connection to what she calls "the All." As Fuller says so beautifully, in that moment she was "taken up into God, dwelling in the ineffable, the unutterable."

I have to say that as much as I admire Emerson and Thoreau's well known descriptions of their spiritual experiences in nature, Margaret Fuller's speaks most closely to those moments in my own life when I have experienced deep connectedness to something greater than myself. And when I am blessed with one of those sacred moments, my

breathing slows, my anxiety calms, and all of my burdens seem to fade into the background. As I stand on a beach looking out over a vast ocean, gaze up on a clear night at a seemingly infinite number of stars, or sing a moving hymn with all of you, I become lost in the beauty of what I am feeling and experiencing. In that moment, as I think Fuller also experienced, there is no separation, no division, no us vs. them or me against the world. There is only beauty, there is only love, there is only connection as I awaken to the fact that I am part of that endless ocean, part of that awe-inspiring night sky, and part of that beautiful hymn.

Let me say a word about the Transcendentalist's use of the word God. I know the concept of "God" can be problematic and even hurtful, and may conjure images or ideas that look and feel very different from what Margaret Fuller experienced that day. While there can be no doubt that while the Transcendentalists believed in the existence and the reality of something they frequently called God, they most certainly did not find God in doctrines, dogmas, or creeds. They didn't believe in a God who judges or excludes, who exists over and above humankind, or who looks like an old white guy with a long white beard. Instead, what the Transcendentalists called God is that overarching and sometimes overwhelming sense of connection and oneness - a oneness that takes our breath away and that transformed the despair and anguish Margaret Fuller was feeling that day into peace, serenity, and joy.

And let me add that it was their insistence on seeing truth as an intuition rooted in our experience that made Transcendentalism so controversial. Think about it. Claiming that spiritual truth is an intuition rather than a belief, that spiritual truth is found in experience rather than doctrine or scripture, called into question the absolute truth claims of religion, including what Emerson called Historical Christianity. In fact, Emerson had many unkind words to say about the Christian tradition, and especially what he felt Christianity had done to twist and distort the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Listen to these words from the Divinity School Address.

"Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with an open eye the mystery of the soul....and he estimated the greatness of man. But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer! He spoke of miracles; for he felt that life was a miracle and he knew that this daily miracle shines...But the very word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is a monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain." Is it any wonder that the Harvard Divinity School never invited Emerson to speak again and that the Divinity School Address remained unpublished for many years?

And it is precisely Transcendentalism's insistence on spiritual self-reliance and authenticity, and on the truth and wisdom that lives in every moment and in every living thing - it is those convictions that inform Unitarian Universalism's understanding of truth, of

spirituality, and of, well, most of our faith tradition. Rather than dictating what you must believe or where your life's journey ought to take you, Unitarian Universalism celebrates who you are. When you come through those doors or join us for an online service, you don't have to wear a theological mask or pretend to believe or be someone you're not. We strive in everything we do to invite and inspire you to search and to grow, to question and to learn, and to develop an understanding of ultimate reality that is, above all else, meaningful for you.

I know it may sound trite to say that the Transcendentalists bequeathed to Unitarian Universalism the conviction that human beings should be themselves and trust themselves. But as Emerson and the Transcendentalists made clear and as far too many still experience today, our authentic selves are not always who it is safe or acceptable or welcome to be. Think for a moment about all the voices and all the messages telling us who we are is not good enough, that we are a failure or a disappointment, or that we are going to be deservedly punished by an angry God or an unjust social order. Whether these voices are coming from our friends or our adversaries, from political leaders or organized religion, far too many people find themselves weighed down by a terrible burden of judgment that tells them that they aren't good enough or acceptable enough to be loved.

I am so grateful that the Transcendentalists called bull\_\_\_ on the conformity of their days and on anything that seeks to control or dictate to the human heart and conscience. And it is that clear and uncompromising acceptance and celebration of our true and authentic selves that is the most important legacy of Transcendentalism and that is at the heart of Unitarian Universalism.

Loving, accepting, and celebrating ourselves and loving, accepting, and celebrating others. That's the vision and those are the values Unitarian Universalism seeks to affirm and promote. I don't know if sharing our vision and our values will convince people to become part of our faith tradition or this congregation. I hope it does but, ultimately, that's not really the point. Perhaps our core mission is to share a vision of life that puts love and authenticity at the center and that is free from the fear, the judgment, and the exclusion that is currently doing so much harm. Perhaps our purpose is to let people know that no matter who they are or where they come from, there are people in this world who love and care for them. And perhaps our calling is to affirm in everything we do that for all of the many challenges and struggles in our world, we are ultimately one human family, journeying together, on this marvelous planet that is our home.