

**“A NEW TRANSCENDENTALISM: 4) A NEW
TRANSCENDENTALIST MANIFESTO”**

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Call to Gather: from T.S. Eliot

I.

What we call a beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

II.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹

Readings: from *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* by Robert D. Richardson, Jr.
[This passage tells about Emerson’s visit to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris on July 13, 1833. The garden was laid out according to a new system of classification. The passage points out the importance of science to Emerson: though he talked a great deal about the importance of intuition, he also greatly valued the insights of science. During the visit he had a powerful “moment of insight into the interconnectedness of all things.”]

Emerson’s excited response to the exhibits was in large part a response to the arrangement. Classification implies connection. The debate on classification was a debate not just about how species are distributed in the natural world but about how they are connected to each other. What stirred Emerson was, first, the rich abundance and stupefying range of exotic flora and fauna gathered in one place and, second, the evident connections between the various specimens in each exhibit...

(As he indicates in his journal,) the effect on Emerson was magical and provocative:

Ah, said I, this is philanthropy, wisdom, taste...The Universe is a more amazing puzzle than ever as you glance along this bewildering series of animated forms, the hazy butterflies, the carved shells, the birds, beasts, fishes, insects, snakes, and the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient in the every rock aping organized forms.

¹ Reading #685 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

Throughout the garden and the indoor exhibits Emerson noted “how much finer things are in composition than alone.” Emerson was fascinated by the web of relation and analogy, the very stuff of classifications...

He gazed at the exhibits and saw relationships everywhere. Not only were the specimens linked to each other, they were also linked to him: “Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer...I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle, fox. I am moved by strange sympathies. I say continually, I will be a naturalist.”

Emerson’s interests now took a marked turn toward the scientific. He did not become a scientist or even a naturalist; for all his interest in the physical world his reaction to the Jardin des Plantes was not that of a scientist. But from now on he acknowledged an unbreakable tie between his own mind and the natural world, and in his investigations into that tie he never lost his interest in the methods and materials of science.²

“TranscendENTALism” by Daniel E. Budd

It is time to put the “dental” back in “transcendental.”

Friday morning. I am making my semi-annual visit to the dentist. Settling into the hygienist’s chair, I cringe guiltily as he asks, in a manner which is both light-hearted and quite serious, “Well, we have been flossing daily, right?”

Uh-oh, I think. “Well...,” I reply, “not exactly daily.”

“Humm,” he says, reaching for his shiny little kit of scraping and digging tools.

When we are finished, he once again, with the calm of a Zen Master, goes through his speech about proper dental hygiene. “The point here is that you don’t get rid of bacteria and plaque when you floss, but you disturb the process which, left undisturbed, would enable all that stuff to settle in and create problems for you.”

My eyes light up in sudden comprehension. “Disturb the process?” I ask. “Yes,” he says. “Flossing disturbs the process in which all that stuff creates problems for you.”

“Disturbing the process,” I muse, and proceed to expound extemporaneously upon the possibilities which seem to exist for an interdisciplinary approach to theology and dentistry. “You know,” I say, “One could look at religion as disturbing the process in which I and others allow our thoughts and feelings to become hard, like plaque, and then settle onto our souls and create problems.”

I am on a roll; he listens politely.

“Flossing, then, could be looked upon as a kind of spiritual discipline, a daily activity in which one not only can disturb the process of bacteria settling comfortably between our teeth, but also, by paying some equal attention to the assumptions and biases that have settled quietly into

² Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 140-143.

our thoughts, one can disturb the process of their becoming rigid and even injurious to our lives.”

He smiles.

“Here lies the interface of theology and dentistry!” I declare.

He continues to smile.³

I’ll start the sermon today with some unfinished business from last week. I meant but forgot to explore a very good question that has surfaced during the series: How do we know if our intuition is right? Emerson and the other Transcendentalists lift up intuition as central to the twin tasks of the soul: figuring out who we are, and then how to act from that foundation of self-knowledge to build a better world. But what if we misread our intuition? What if our intuition simply is wrong?

Certainly plenty of horrible acts have been committed by people who believed they were following their intuition. Hitler, for example, probably believed that his intuition was telling him to kill the Jews. Of course, Hitler probably also believed his reason led him to the same conclusion.

Another way to frame this question is by asking if intuitive knowledge is all relative? Are there any absolute moral truths, or is morality purely a matter of each individual person intuiting what is right and what is wrong?

My sense is that Emerson believed there are some absolute moral truths. He came to the conclusion, for example, that slavery is an absolute wrong. Absolute moral truths reside in our individual souls, which are one and the same with the divine “It” I’ve been talking about in this series. If our intuition is authentic—if we truly have come into direct contact with our soul (the It that resides within us)—then our intuition will be congruent with these absolute moral truths. If we fall short of direct contact with the soul, chances are very good that the actions we choose will not be congruent with absolute moral truths.

The trick for us as ever-fallible human beings is to do our best to discern if we are really in touch with our soul or if we are in touch with something more superficial. Doing soul work takes great care, time and intention, as well as complete honesty. It takes using every gift we have: our feelings, our mind, our memories, our understanding. It is tricky work: denial, for example, so easily and destructively masquerades as intuition. We have to constantly ask ourselves: Are we really in touch with the Universal Soul, or are we just in touch with our small, individual, ultimately superficial self? Emerson, that prophet of the individual, had no use whatsoever for the whims of the individual self: “That which is individual and remains individual in my experience is of no value,” he concludes.⁴ Returning to the example of Hitler, when he decided that Jews should be exterminated, he was not in touch with his true soul or with the It. The only thing he was in touch with was his small self, chock full as it was of insanity and hatred.

I think Emerson would also say that we should never assume with certainty that a particular action we choose is based on encountering the Universal Soul within us. As fallible human beings, we will never know for sure. For this reason, it makes sense to be cautious in acting on our intuition, especially when our actions might harm others. This

³ Daniel E. Budd, “TranscendENTALism,” originally published in *First Day’s Record*, reprinted in a Response by Marlin Lavanhar to the Prairie Group, November 2003, p. 6.

⁴ Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003), p. 65, 168-169.

was why Emerson, though not a pacifist, was ever reluctant to decide that killing another person for a cause—even the abolition of slavery—is the right action.

Now let us turn to my main focus today: a New Transcendentalism. As I look at Unitarian Universalism today, I believe there are two central problems facing us. I have talked a lot about the first problem, less about the second.

The first problem is that too many Unitarian Universalists for too many years have categorically excluded Christian and other more traditional Western religious experiences from our faith. My colleague Marlin Lavanhar shares a story that powerfully illustrates what this exclusion can mean. It is the story of an extremely bright young woman who grew up in his UU church and then converted to the Southern Baptist fold:

She said that she never felt comfortable expressing her inner feelings of connection to God in our youth group. She had never heard anyone at church talk about having such experiences and she often heard people ridicule Christians for their comments about feeling the holy spirit within. The summer of her junior year in high school she was invited to a Baptist summer camp where she found all the people talking openly about their feelings of connection to God and the feeling that there is something much bigger that they are a part of and that they feel is actively at work in them. Her peers at the camp explained that it was Jesus and the holy spirit she was feeling and she accepted it. She was so thrilled to find others who understood and had similar experiences and who could explain to her what was happening.⁵

I can say without a doubt that variations of this story have unfolded here in recent years, and more than once.

The irony of this story hits me like a beam in the eye: this young woman felt out of place in Unitarian Universalism even though her inner feelings of connection to God are no different really than the Transcendentalists' experience of the It within their souls. Yet Unitarian Universalism of the last hundred years has somehow made her experience Other, outside the circle of UU orthodoxy. In doing so, we have sent many of our own like this young woman packing. At the same time, we have closed our door to millions of Americans who have had mystical experiences of the divine and view them in more traditional terms. In the last few years we have made some progress in re-opening our door a bit, but we have a long ways to go.

The second problem facing Unitarian Universalism today is a kind of mirror of the first. While we've too often closed our doors to more traditionally Christian experiences and views, we've opened our doors wide to just about everything else. We now welcome such a wide variety of other religious viewpoints: Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, agnostic, humanist, New Age, and earth-centered to name just a few. This is good, but our more theologically diverse congregations—certainly including this one—now have so many disparate strands of belief present that it can feel overwhelming. What's tying it all together? Sometimes it feels like nothing is: the strands feel disconnected. Sometimes it feels like the center might not hold, that we don't really even know what the center of Unitarian Universalism is anymore. Our congregations can seem like cacophonous menageries, like mini-Towers of Babel where the theological divides that separate us sometimes make it feel like we're not even speaking the same language.

⁵ Lavanhar, pp. 3-4.

Well, I believe a New Transcendentalism can help us address both of these problems. We don't have to look elsewhere for tools to address these problems: they're right there within our own UU heritage. For too long we have overlooked this rich legacy. The UU scholar David Robinson put this well in a 1989 lecture:

Like a pauper who searches for the next meal, never knowing of the relatives whose will would make him rich, American Unitarians lament their vague religious identity, standing upon the richest theological legacy of any American denomination. Possessed of a deep and sustaining history of spiritual achievement and philosophical speculation, religious liberals have been, ironically, dispossessed of that heritage.⁶

I say: it is time to claim our heritage—especially its crown jewel of Transcendentalism—and use it to address the problems of our contemporary situation.

Here is the thesis of this entire series: A New Transcendentalism provides a way to pull together the seemingly disparate and disconnected strands of contemporary Unitarian Universalism, tie them together, and anchor the whole wild and beautiful thing in the sturdy foundation of our own UU heritage. A New Transcendentalism is elastic enough to embrace the dizzying array of spiritualities and philosophies present in UU-ism today, yet remains grounded in our own heritage. It also opens the door of welcome again to people who, like the young woman in the story, have direct experiences of the divine It within. Importantly, a New Transcendentalism, like the Transcendentalism of old, also is positive: it helps us articulate what we believe rather than what we don't believe.

What are the key foundations of Transcendentalism upon which a New Transcendentalism for the Twenty-first Century can be built? The first foundation is pluralism. Nineteenth Century Transcendentalism contains within it the seeds of pluralism. It is the point in Unitarian history where scripture became scriptures.⁷ It is the point where Unitarians decided that truth can be found not just in Christian and Jewish scripture, but also in the sacred scriptures of other world religions, in nature, in poetry, and within our own souls. The Transcendentalists cultivated and valued great theological diversity among their group.

The Transcendentalists' lively parlor conversations are wonderful prototypes for today's UU congregations. Listen to Diana Eck's definition of pluralism: pluralism is "the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences."⁸ This is the process engaged in by the Transcendentalists in their parlors, and by us in our sanctuaries (as well as classrooms and living rooms) when we are living our principles. We engage with one another in and through our deepest differences.

We believe that we can learn more and go deeper in our spiritual journeys by conversing with people who have different spiritualities. That's what we do here! We believe that these conversations grow our souls. And growing our souls helps each one of us be more effective in our efforts to build a better world. It's also worth mentioning that in the process of conversing, we find and celebrate the commonalities

⁶ Quoted in Barry Andrews, "The Roots of Unitarian Universalist Spirituality in New England Transcendentalism," *1992 Selected Essays*, Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, p. 23.

⁷ Diana Eck makes this point about American culture in general in *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. 95.

⁸ Eck, p. 70.

that tie us together, too. The UU minister Frederic Muir suggests that in pluralism we can find “the gift of wholeness.”⁹ This is the point of pluralism: it cultivates wholeness in the individual, and wholeness in the community. A New Transcendentalism’s pluralism can transform the cacophony of disparate sounds into a wonderful symphony. It transforms one of our greatest current challenges into our greatest strength.

A second foundation upon which a New Transcendentalism can be built is soul. The Transcendentalists recognized the importance of each individual soul, and that the world’s problems can only truly be fixed one soul at a time. Transcendentalism was all about making each soul healthy and whole, and each soul reaching out to other souls. And Transcendentalism was about liberating souls—our own and others. A New Transcendentalism, like the Transcendentalism of old, must preach first, soul, second soul, and forevermore, soul.

Another foundation of a New Transcendentalism is nature. Cherishing and protecting the environment is even more essential today to our individual and our planet’s well-being. Our core belief that we are part of the interdependent web of all life is firmly anchored in nineteenth century Transcendentalism’s abiding appreciation for nature.

Balance is another important foundation of a New Transcendentalism. At its best, Transcendentalism sought a balance of mind and heart, of individual and community, of inner soul work and outer soul work (helping other souls). A New Transcendentalism must deepen and enhance this sense of balance.

A final foundation of a New Transcendentalism is a focus on the here and now. Both the Transcendentalism of old and a New Transcendentalism are about this world and this time. Eternity can be found not in some future heavenly time and place, but right here, right now, if we pay attention to this very moment. Ours is a “gospel of the present moment.”¹⁰

A New Transcendentalism must not just be a carbon copy of its nineteenth century ancestor. It must be updated to correct the failings of its ancestor and to engage with the current times. I do not want to make an idol of Transcendentalism or to suggest that our ancestors had everything right.

I believe the most glaring weakness of nineteenth century Transcendentalism was its overall anti-institutional bent. Contemporary UU minister Forrest Church insightfully suggests that “To build an institution on a foundation laid by an anti-institutionalist (like Emerson) is a little like hiring a demolition expert as one’s architect.”¹¹ Unitarian Universalist history—including in Northeast Wisconsin—is littered with dead anti-institutionalist congregations.

While there is plenty to be wary of with institutions, I do not believe they are inherently evil. Rather, I believe strong, healthy, lasting institutions like this Fellowship can do much to help build a better world. A strong institution can do so much over a long period of time to bring out the best in its individual members. And a strong institution need not infringe on individual rights. A strong congregation—with clear vision and direction, dedicated lay and ministerial leadership, solid financial footing and a focus on soul—can co-exist with individual freedom. Indeed, I think a strong congregation can enhance individual freedom and growth far more than a weak institution that sooner or later shrivels up and dies. How much good does a dead congregation do for future

⁹ Frederic J. Muir, “Unitarian Universalist Diversity and the New Transcendentalism,” *Unitarian Universalism Selected Essays 1997* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, 1997), p. 50.

¹⁰ Robert D. Richardson, Jr., “Emerson and the Perennial Philosophy,” <http://www.firstparish.org/richardson.html>, p. 4.

¹¹ Forrest Church, “Emerson’s Shadow,” *UU World* (Vol. XVII, No. 2, March/April 2003), p. 30.

generations' spiritual search? I certainly see as a center of my call strengthening the institution of the Fellowship so that it can nurture and inspire souls for generations to come.

I want to return to Emerson's three questions, now reframed for the Fellowship as a whole. Who are we? We are a community of individuals with incredible differences and an underlying common humanity. Believing that each of our paths is incalculably enhanced by the questions and wisdom of fellow travelers, we come together here to share our individual spiritual searches. Though this isn't the only place, or maybe even the primary place where revelation happens to us, this is a great place to contemplate revelations we have received in nature and elsewhere. Being part of this spiritual community helps each of us know better who we are and what we must do. The support and challenge of our fellow travelers help each of us act in ways that truly reflect what Emerson calls the Universal Soul rather than the small, individual self. The Fellowship helps us discern our intuition honestly. Like flossing, it helps us disturb the process by which our ideas become rigid and encrusted. And the Fellowship helps us find some meaning in life; it helps us in Annie Dillard's words to "stick a nickel's worth of sense in our days."

What is dear to us? The freedom of the individual. The bonds of community. Harmony with nature. And the liberation of souls—our own and others.

What do we stand for? That the validity of our faith can be seen not in our words, but in our deeds. We believe in building a better world here and now.

Unitarian Universalism grounded in a New Transcendentalism has enormous potential to grow souls, to help us do what we need to do to build a better world. A New Transcendentalism will do much to help us fulfill the great promise of our faith. The world needs a strong, grounded and vibrant Unitarian Universalism for the 21st Century.

I will end the sermon series with these words by the Transcendentalist Unitarian minister Theodore Parker:

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;
its temple, all space;
its shrine, the good heart;
its creed, all truth;
its ritual, works of love;
its profession of faith, divine living.¹²

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¹² Reading #683 in *Singing the Living Tradition*.