

Opening Words: USH July 29, 2018

Let's let Henry David Thoreau give our opening words this morning, he says:

*I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily without getting there in spirit. The thought of some work will run into my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses.*

We don't use the word fain anymore and I had to look it up. It means happily or gladly.

Sermon:

Picture this, if you will. It's a summer Sunday morning in 1826 and you are sitting in a Unitarian church in the Boston area. The Declaration of Independence is only 50 yrs old. The street outside the church is dirt. The trusty brown horse you rode in on is tethered to a hitchingpost. You come to church every Sunday out of habit but mostly of out fear because for all of your life you have been scolded from Calvinist pulpits about hellfire and brimstone. Religion, however flimsy a rope, is your only hope of avoiding eternal damnation.

Here in this Unitarian church, Ralph Waldo Emerson, just 23 years old, takes the pulpit. He's a charismatic speaker, in the tradition of his illustrious elder, the great Unitarian theologian, William Ellery Channing. At first Emerson echoes Channing's message: *reason needs to be brought to religion, and it's not reasonable that God be both loving and damning. Don't worry about hell. God is entirely benevolent. Furthermore God is not out there in heaven on a cloud somewhere. God is everywhere..immanent in the world, even in you. God is Love and we Unitarians stand on the side of Love.* These reassuring words soak into the congregation like water putting out the hellfire.

But then, with the disarming ardor of youth, Emerson leans forward and changes his tone: *Channing hasn't gone far enough in breaking with those fearful Calvinist tenets*, he says. *It is not only reason that needs to be brought to religion but also the senses. The body is spiritual too, a trustworthy conduit for inspiration.*

Emerson is advocating for a radical new idea – an embodied spirituality where both the mind and the senses can be a path to the divine within. As this idea sinks in, you get a little squirmy on the hard pew. Love is one thing, even immanence...that's not so hard to swallow, but isn't the body hardly more than a curse we need to put up with until we get to our heavenly reward? What is this young man talking about? In spite of your initial misgivings, you are an open-minded Unitarian so you are curious to hear more.

Now, I invite you to hold that historical perspective to the side for a bit while we take a look at what Emerson preached and why it is a meaningful spiritual path even today.

Emerson loved plumbing the depths of his consciousness for inspiration. Then he would write sermons, talks and lectures firing up his audiences with new ideas and helping them to see the world in the novel ways. He was unusually successful. In a world without radio, TV and the internet, going to an Emerson lecture was both entertaining and educational. He traveled widely and sold his books at his talks. He made a good living and built a lovely home 15 miles west of Boston in Concord that still stands today as a museum. But, alas, Emerson didn't last long as a minister. His embodied spirituality message was a hard sell but the real deciding factor was that he was not cut out for tending the flock. As hard as it might be for us gathered here to believe, he had no enthusiasm for fund drives and pot luck suppers.

Soon a group of people gathered around Emerson, mostly liberal Unitarians, a group that today we might call cultural

creatives. This group included Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott and his family, including his famous daughter Louisa May, the early feminist journalist Margaret Fuller, and Walt Whitman.

This group called themselves Transcendentalists because they believed that, with the right perspective, you could transcend or go beyond ordinary reality to deeper, more satisfying states. Let's look at three of the core tenets of Emerson's philosophy and my own takeaways.

- The first thing Transcendentalists did was to reassess the bible. The bible was written by people, they reasoned, therefore it is not to be taken as the word of God. Since God is everywhere, and the godforce is in us, there is no need for a second hand religion. It's better to trust your own direct experience, sensed in your body/mind as truth. Mystical experience, or a strong sense of connection with something greater than ourselves, is available to anyone who seeks it, not just to biblical figures.

My takeaway here is that if we are looking for a spiritual connection, it's not out there somewhere, it's in every one of us.

- Secondly, the Transcendentalists were strongly influenced by the first ever translations of the Hindu sacred text, the Baghavat Gita, and they adopted the idea that there is only One Supreme Consciousness and, like waves in the ocean, each of us as an individual wave, is a part of a great ocean of entirely benevolent god-like consciousness. Emerson called this One Consciousness the oversoul.

My takeaway here is that we have very limited power when we try to operate under our own steam, but when we establish access to the spiritual ocean within, our power and creativity increase exponentially.

- Third, Transcendentalists acknowledged the importance of the thinking self, but they believed we humans are

ever so much more than our minds and egos. We do not come into this world as a blank slate. We come in connected to the oversoul or One Consciousness and we can, to our great benefit, go beyond our ordinary thinking mind and ego to experience that greater consciousness and its many non-rational (but not irrational) ways of direct knowing.

My takeaway here is why settle for ordinary reality when we humans are capable of so much more?

So how does this philosophy translate into real life for them and me?

This philosophy gave Transcendentalists a choice about how to operate in the world. Most of us do not feel there is any choice. We look around us and assume that this is what there is to life...ordinary reality. Outside ourselves there is a fair amount of chaos so we try to create little oases of sanity and peace. Inside us is what the Buddhists call monkey mind, a busy, noisy mind that too often occupies itself with worry and endless rounds of problem-solving, with uh-ohs, and what-ifs.

Transcendentalists did not feel confined to ordinary reality. They felt they had a couple of other viable ways to see the world. For one, they could choose to see the world from what today we'd call a mindfulness perspective. This is what Thoreau was referring to in the quote when he was alarmed at having walked a mile into the woods without fully being present. With mindfulness, we step back a bit from ordinary reality. We slow down, bring ourselves into the present, narrow our focus to what is here right now. It's a more relaxed, less judgmental, more allowing way of being that they felt was a better approach.

But there is yet another choice and this one is the jewel for anyone with a Transcendentalist bent. It's tricky to get the hang of, but the rewards for even a tiny bit of mastery are great. This jewel is to drop past mindfulness into pure

unconditioned awareness, Emerson's oversoul. It can be experienced in many different ways, ranging from a quick brush with it, which feels like grace or synchronicity, to a total lasting immersion which we call enlightenment. This oversoul or One Consciousness is a wordless state. It is spacious, unbounded, restful and restorative, consequently the perfect antidote to the chaos of too much monkey mind. I experience it as home base, a place to reset myself. It has no content. No "thing" is there but it is paradoxically a lively state. It's been called the field of pure potential. Human creativity arises from this infinite well. Intuitive insight and direct knowing bubble up from here. It's also the source of inspiration to take impassioned action.

It is an ineffable state that's beyond verbal description, but it can be experienced. The felt sense of this state is one of universal love, equanimity and acceptance. A deep experience of this state is awe-inspiring. In other words, it feels extraordinarily good to be in communion with something too big to be described but which inexplicably we are a part of.

Here's Emerson trying to describe an experience of dropping out of ordinary reality into the One Consciousness: *Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration...all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing; I see all.* The whole quote is on the back of your OOS. What's going on here is Emerson dis-identifying from his ego (I am nothing) and instead identifying with the transcendent state (I see all). The feeling is exhilaration, a very special good fortune.

In fact, this is who the Transcendentalists believed we humans are, not the small ego of ordinary reality but this grace-full being, full of exhilarated aliveness. Spirited.

So how does all this inspire my own spiritual practice? Mindfulness works for me. It slows me down and keeps me in the here-and-now, reminds me to be grateful for the

overwhelming good and beauty in the world. It's good for my physical and mental health.

But the heart of my spiritual practice, much like the Transcendentalists, is experimenting with going beyond ordinary reality and opening the valve to that field of pure potential. I do this a number of ways: reading is one way. Although all roads may lead to Rome, I take heart (and tips) from reading about others' spiritual journeys. Satsang is another satisfying spiritual pursuit for me. Satsang is an Indian term for a sacred gathering, most often an audience asking questions of an enlightened master, a person who has established abiding presence in that field of pure awareness. I don't have to leave home anymore for these; youtube is full of them.

Meditation also works for me. I meditate every morning but also do mini-check-ins throughout the day that keep me balanced and give me a sense of perspective on this crazy world we live in. I'm a lifelong learner and so I also study. My doctorate is in transpersonal psychology, the confluence of spirituality and psychology. But I am inclined to take courses with a range of inspired teachers. Perhaps all of this sounds like a lot of work, but on the contrary, I find all of these spiritual explorations invigorating. Even the tiniest bit of access to the One Consciousness is uplifting, energizing and growthful.

As a bonus I find the field of pure awareness is also practical. It delivers practical knowledge via intuitive channels without going through the usual logical sequential left brain thinking process. In other words, you are spared having to figure things out, you just know.

Let me give you an example. One beautiful summer day I found myself with a free hour and I headed for my deck. Just as I was settling into my chair, my eye zeroed in on the tree that arches over the deck. Holy cow, it really needed pruning. How could I not have noticed sooner? Forget relaxing! I should

spend this hour with the pole saw, leaning precariously over the deckrail, hacking away. My monkey mind was enjoying a fine time, full of shoulds and problem-solving opportunities. But I remembered Emerson and took his approach instead. I really wanted to see this situation differently. I closed my eyes and took a few minutes to relax dropping toward that One Consciousness. When I opened my eyes and looked at that same unpruned tree, this time, to my great good fortune, I saw it with fresh eyes. Instead of my tree that needed pruning, I saw it as if it were a tree in the forest, beautiful just the way it is, needing no more from me than any tree in the woods would need. Not only did I get to relax, I got a kick out of watching the perfectly natural but also extra-ordinary interaction between my body/mind and consciousness.

I believe this and much more was what Emerson was getting at with his Transcendental philosophy. As I put together my thoughts for this talk, I felt a deep kinship to those early New England Unitarians, and an immense sense of gratitude for the legacy they left us.

Thank you.