

Sermon: Transcendentalism 101: An Idiot's Guide to Emerson and his Posse

I have a former girl-friend I knew in Chicago, originally from Baltimore, who now lives in San Jose. Every three or four months or so now we touch base and at the end of the conversation it has become a custom that she grabs a pen, so I can slowly recite to her a timely relevant but obscure Baltimore sports reference to slip into conversation with her father.

If its baseball season I say, ask your dad "How's (fill in the latest local Baltimore oriole who was traded) followed by something baseball like... "Wasn't he up for a cup of coffee with the Rangers before he got traded to the Cubs."

Or in the fall football season, I say tell your dad "That if the Raven's don't start playing more 3-4 D, they'll never stop the run."

She, mostly clueless as to its meaning, writes it down, and then drops it into conversation with her dad over the phone.

All three of us love the absurdity of it all.

So today, if you don't know anything about Transcendentalism, and you are not inspired too, you can drift off, stare down quietly into your silenced phone, as I have invited you to do before,
And in that same spirit, when we are headed towards a real gem of a quippy sound-bite, you can drop into conversation at coffee-hour or GA. I will warn you.

You can use these phrases either to impress...or to get you out of uncomfortable conversations.

That's up to you.

Ok, enough silliness...

To understand the Transcendentalists, a big slice of how our heritage got shaped in its infancy you must understand the context of the early to mid-nineteenth century.

In addition to the feeling we captured in our meditation that culture was shifting, in the early 1800's, the populations of towns in and around Boston had grown enough, that most good-sized towns are either having or contemplating having more than one church.

And that reality pushed forward a split about who we were as Christians. Currently, everyone was a Christian. Well, anyone Unitarian's were thinking about.

Were we, as most conventional Christian's believed...and many still believe, depraved by nature, and made acceptable only when saved by faith? Or as Channing suggested, are we redeemable in large part by the knowledge, discipline, and character we can... in the right circumstances, develop?

Churches in and around Boston began to divide over this, and whether Jesus was more mentor than savior.

The cultural divide emerging in and around Boston at that time was not unlike the split we face today in America, over whether we are in this together, or we are separate.

That tension is the soil that this faith tradition was born in.

Ok, wake up, we have reached our first cool sound-bite. To make it look like you know what you're talking about.

“Yes, I'm a UU, but really- I'm more of a Channing Unitarian, -you know what I mean, an old school achieve your salvation by your character Unitarian”

That ought to get you out of being asked to be the Treasurer.

Ok, now imagine yourself about twenty years into this debate and division, by the way a debate that was still exclusively Christian, and a mere twenty years after Unitarians have been bold enough to go public that transcendentalism, comes along.

Rather than restrict the popular theological debate to a war of competing scriptural references, as had been the religious norm before our friends like Emerson and Thoreau and Fuller came along, Transcendentalist thinkers, began to expand the questions being asked.

At this time many good Unitarians, who had just ten or twenty years earlier broken from their pilgrim brothers and sisters, were cringing in the background, pleading “please shut-up”

The small crowd of initial transcendentalist's. met in one other's homes- mostly Emerson's- and were for quite a time called the Hedge club, largely because the meetings often took place when Henry Hedge a minister from Maine came to town.

Let's visit.

I want you as UU's to feel what it would be like to be a fly on the wall, or a ghost with the crowd that shaped these ideas in Emerson's living room (distance and direction from church) Some hundred and Seventy-five years ago. Feel free to close your eyes for a second.

Monzingo, STOP SNORING!

Bronson Alcott who is a little eccentric comes in and whacks the snow from his boots on the door jam. You have your back to him.

He enters Emerson's house after a long carriage ride out starting a school in Boston.

Like Janet Kissner might walk in and tell Darcy what Marisa was up to in Maryland, Bronson mentions that his daughter Louisa May has taken up writing. (You want to tell him that she would go on to write the absolute classic "Little Women," ---but you resist)

Bronson proceeds to make fun of Thoreau, for "roughing it down at the lake" all the while taking his clothes home to get washed. He asks teasingly, "Hey, Henry who fixed your pant holes, the squirrels?"

Margaret Fuller who is sitting by the fire looks over her shoulder and welcomes Bronson. Waiting for the meeting to start she is thumbing through the notes Emerson has written in the margins of a work by the German Romantic scholar Goethe. It is a book that they are all reading.

Being a brilliant woman, she has already finished. Being a brash person, she hollers across the room to Emerson that he got the translation from German wrong.

Everyone is particularly excited today because Theodore Parker who almost never joins them, is here.

It was a magical time, a time, for UU's-

Imagining sitting in Emerson's parlor at a Transcendentalist gathering, is not unlike a movie buff listening in on a conversation George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese might have if they ever had dinner.

Parker who was one of the seven Harvard students to hear Emerson's famed divinity school address, chastising the traditional Christian church experience as dull; is sitting right in front of you. He was jumping between one of the seven languages he knows.

In addition to Parker being one of the staunchest abolitionist there was and preaching somewhat regularly to crowds of more than 6,000. You both respect and fear him a little cause you know he preaches with a gun in the pulpit in case anyone tries to forcefully remove a fugitive slave from his church.

Parker, begins to compare the way weather changes from passing clouds to sunshine; is like the outward, but ever-changing shape religion takes, and that the eternal laws of God that drives our religious instincts are not unlike the laws of nature that make those clouds and sunshine possible.

Turning to him you want to ask, where he got the commitment to preach nothing of religion that he had not experienced inwardly and made his own. However, being an invisible guest, at this esteemed gathering, you resist.

Parker is excited - nearly spilling his tea as he explains his position that Christianity and Jesus are true and valid only because... and only to the degree that they correspond with the deepest values and aspirations built into our hearts...and not the other way around.

Jesus is the metaphor for the best of us, and that is why he is a valid savior to Parker.

You sit for a bit digesting that.

Sitting there surrounded by UU greats you remember reading that philosophically, transcendentalist minded thinkers are part of a long intellectual line of idealist philosopher's that believe that our ideas --the software in our head-- are linked to eternal or broad universal truths that cannot be directly seen or measured.

In short- our brains and souls correspond with the wonder and beauty of creation. Thought the Transcendentalist's

It is in part for this reason that Emerson and the crew so love nature. We are made of and like, its beauty and wonder.

To the transcendentalist you are sharing this room with, humans are built to live in perfect concert with the world.

Ok, wake up Monzingo, it's time for our next sound-bite: You might say something like...this

“In keeping with the heritage of my former Transcendentalist brothers and Sisters- I have faith that the pleasure I experience at the sight of a beautiful flower is evidence of my own soul and minds connection with the broader universe.”

Try that and see how many committees you can avoid.

((Let's step away from the living room for a second))

Today the standard assumptions are that we are more inclined to believe that who we are, and how we think, is learned or culturally informed. Not divinely imprinted.

Today big thinkers, believe how we think and feel has its roots not in the heavens, but in the way our biological genes evolved.

But, remember in the 1830's, the ideas that our forefathers and mothers put out- That we are sort of miraculously in tune with the universe stood in intentional contrast, to the orthodox position that we were fallen sinners.

Sinners who best, be careful of our instincts and nature, not trustful and nurturing of it.

The idea that we were an expression of a cosmic goodness and not the fallen form locked into an imperfect animal nature was radical. Being one with the earth, back then didn't conjure ideas of organic veggies, it rang of one step away from savage and beastly.

Are you feeling the zeitgeist that Universalism, Unitarianism was born in? I hope sitting in the room you are.

As you sit around the room with these forefathers and mothers of ours. Unitarian Giants really. You realize that It is this commitment to our innate sacredness that leads transcendentalists to believe that ...

a soul trained on nature and polished by deep abiding values and high ideals;
that principles and values, more than set rules came to feel closer to what was
divine and eternal than tradition and church did; and
that there is a deep truth to the information and energy brought by
inspiration and intuition.

Parker, Fuller, and Emerson were all called infidels for this, back in the land of the
1830's.

(From your perspective as a twenty-first century UU)

You know what religion is like outside those doors in their time, and you have a
living sense both that he was brilliant and at the same time why nobody would
exchange pulpits with Parker.

Sitting there under the same oil lamps you feel their boldness as radical.

((Back to the living room scene))

And when Parker quiets, to your right is **Margaret Fuller** chiming in
You are sitting next to arguably the best educated woman in the country.
Hell, she maybe the smarted person in the country.

Margaret knew six languages before she was a teenager, and she is telling tales of
being reared by her loving but demanding father and accounting for the things she
learned at the knee of Channing.

The Editor of "The Dial" a transcendentalist paper that all these guys write for, you
know what she doesn't yet that she will become a mother to those women in the
next generation who will lead the Women's Suffrage movement.

Margaret is the first woman to edit a major newspaper, and although she has not
done this yet, she would sail off to report on the revolution in Italy. Always
inspired, rather than simply reporting on the conflict she becomes a partisan to the
revolution. She can't help but identify with the common people of Italy.

Invisible to them all, you yearn to tell her that she will fall for a passionate
revolutionary and eventually die in a shipwreck on the way home. But, like a
wildlife photographer you can't warn the groundhog the wolf is coming.

Emerson remains seated behind his desk listening.

Emerson is the most successful of the crew to make a living publishing his own books and publicly speaking. You can almost feel the mix of jealousy and love the others have for him.

Emerson would in part at the prompting of Thoreau would become a more outspoken anti-slavery advocate, and in a little time the house you are seated in would even become a stop on the under-ground railroad, but that day has not come yet.

Emerson is recounting between bites of cake the difficulty he had for the whole year after the death of his young first wife, Ellen when he was 28-years old.

He recounts how he was unable to shake his grief and felt compelled to visiting her tomb a full year after she had died and having her coffin opened just to see if she had died.

It is a rare moment to see Ralph Waldo so emotional, he usually is a little more austere.

You are warmed by the intellectual energy in the room as he talks about how; after his wife's death he quit the ministry and set off on his free-wheeling, life-long search for understanding.

Thoreau arrives. He, you notice, is a little younger and shy than the rest. He comes in telling about a 40-mile canoe trip he took and apologizes for being late.

He is talking about his year living in a cabin, you bite your tongue at Bronson's joke and struggles to resist telling him that he will, in a century, make Walden Pond famous, and he himself become an icon of simple living.

You want to tell him that soon he will get thrown in jail for war tax evasion and are a little sad that he will die at 44.

You would also like to say that you can feel the slight romantic tension that is there between Thoreau and the older Margaret Fuller; but THAT, you resist.

((Break from Living room scene))

For Hedge, Alcott, Parker, Fuller, and Emerson experience became more important than the creeds or traditions we have inherited.

In an age of new information- not unlike ours- these old friends we inherit were all intentionally engaged in the process of correcting the errors of the religious Traditions they have inherited without losing their faith and inspiration.

Can you feel how important these ideas and acts are to what we as a religious institution stand for today?

Can you maybe even feel in these ideas your own religious irreverence and impatience.

Can you see how all these ideas makes Transcendentalists, and us almost greedy to know and feel, more?...

...to tend to be impatient and romantic about the world of ideas and of human possibility.

...to be intellectually adventurous, thoughtful, bold, but not too cautious or rule bound.

How they might be fun people to go on a hike with.

But no fun to work on a committee designed to build the infrastructure of the church?

(say frustrated by laughing calling through your hands)

“Hey Thoreau? the meeting’s inside today.”

As UU’s we in large part get our commitment to the idea “that Revelation is continuous” throughout history from the Transcendentalists.

The transcendentalists both knew and could not have known, that their contribution would fuel our endless debates over church authority and facilitate our non-creedal stance that would lead us to an openness to humanism and atheism.

The edge that the transcendentalists would walk, would eventually lead to the openness to intellectual shifts, to paganism, and to gay marriage that in part define who we are today.

So, when you are stopped in your tracks by the beauty of a sunset or are inclined to stop for a minute and remind yourself that part of how you and many other moderns think outside traditional forms, remind yourself that have in part inherited that from them.

You walk out of Emerson’s parlor in Concord in their footsteps.

Remember that they are your own, ...our own out of the box Saints from your faith, and that you are called to your own mix of preserving the deepest of the old truths in new ways too.

Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller compel us fill your lives with as much exploration as we can muster. Stop traffic to reflect on sunsets and pay attention to the shards of revelation that you receive in all the ways we do.

You are called new member, old member alike, by these old friends seated around the hearth.

Hear their call. AMEN (end of sermon)

(Ok, now review the quiz.)