

“An Open Heart”
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Readings:

From Jack Kornfield

Enlightenment does exist. It is possible to awaken. Unbounded freedom and joy, oneness with the Divine, awakening into a state of timeless grace—these experiences are more common than you know, and not far away. There is one further truth, however: They don't last. Our realizations and awakenings show us the reality of the world, and they bring transformation, but they pass.... We all know that after the honeymoon comes the marriage, after the election comes the hard task of governance. In spiritual life it is the same: After ecstasy comes the laundry.¹

Thoreau from *Walden*, the chapter on Solitude:

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows.

and from the conclusion of *Walden*:

...I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish to go below now.

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

¹ Quoted in Barry M. Andrews, *Emerson as Spiritual Guide*, 2003, p86.

Sermon:

We have talked about radical hospitality many times before, but we have not named it as such. We have talked about building a congregation that is flexible and can adapt to change. At the beginning of October we talked about how becoming a multicultural denomination would require openness to change, rather than simply inviting people to conform with what we have already built. Last week we talked about how we can model a vision we seek in the world through how we are together in community. These concepts are all a part of what some people call radical hospitality or radical welcome. The terms radical hospitality and radical welcome are about ways of organizing communities to welcome marginalized people and to be open to transformation. In communities who practice radical hospitality or welcome, there is an intention to open the community to change. The whole community is involved in the work of discerning how to be in community with a variety of people. In preparing for our adult religious education workshop on the transcendentalists we held today, I realized what a huge part the transcendentalists had in planting seeds in Unitarian Universalism to allow us to move toward a radical welcome community model.

The basic philosophies of transcendentalism are seeing the connections between all things, seeking mystical experience, incorporating Eastern philosophies and seeking to understand the self better. These ideas have been woven into modern Unitarian Universalism. Transcendentalist leader and educator Bronson Alcott firmly believed that if the individual was transformed to seeing the world in this way, that society would transform as well.² He believed that this would lead to social change and to justice for all people. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his essay “the Transcendentalist”, the successful transcendentalist philosopher, the *ideal* idealist philosopher, could not exist in the world. If they were to devote themselves entirely to mystical experience, were to rely on what food and shelter appeared before them, they would starve and freeze to death. There is a tension in transcendental philosophy between cultivating individual spiritual development and building community. In the beginning there were some transcendentalists who removed themselves from the political system and from activism. But it is from the transcendentalist ranks that grew some of the most ardent abolitionists in New England. There were some transcendentalists who wished to stay removed from community, where they believed they could have access to mystical experience in any moment, and there were others who came back to the well of experience, but applied their experience to justice work in their communities. This tension is still held within Unitarian Universalism. We seek to find a balance between individual spiritual growth and development and what that can lead us to, community and justice work and further, finding spiritual growth in our justice work.

The individualism that was part of the transcendentalist movement was in part able to flourish because the movement was largely born from people with privilege, especially educational privilege. There were many transcendentalists who were very poor in their lifetimes, especially because their work was marginalized by mainstream society, however they tended to be cared for by others with privilege. They were supported by the larger intellectual community and by their families.

Emerson, is an interesting example of how educational privilege worked in the early 19th century. He grew up very poor because of the early death of his father. However his father had been a prominent Unitarian minister at First Church in Boston and Emerson’s family had been a part of Boston intellectual society. Because of his family connections, Emerson entered Harvard

² Fruitlands.org

at 14. Thoreau is another example. Thoreau's family was not one of distinction, but they did own a business that Thoreau worked at on and off throughout his life and afforded him the opportunity to go to Harvard. As an adult, Thoreau was often supported by Emerson. He lived with Emerson and his family for many years and the cabin he built at Walden was on Emerson's land. Although philosophers like Henry David Thoreau sought solitude and thought it an ideal, they still needed community. In his essay "The Transcendentalist", Emerson notes that while individualism and solitude may be an ideal of transcendentalist thought, it is not a goal that every person will live this out. Rather Emerson suggests that in each philosophical age there have been thinkers who helped to push the society forward and reflect back to society what it is actually doing.

These thinkers are non-conformist and thus show society to what they are conforming. Emerson points out that as much as any trade or calling in a community, society also needs people to do this reflective work, and therefore they should be supported by the society.

Transcendentalist men like Thoreau and Emerson sought to be transformed with new understandings of philosophy, God, and the meaning of life. Emerson wrote: "I have been writing and speaking what were once called novelties, for twenty five or thirty years, and have not now one disciple. Why? Not that what I said was not true; not that it has not found intelligent receivers, but because it did not go from any wish in me to bring men to me, but to themselves."³ Because of the reflective work they did, many of the transcendentalists became strident abolitionists and worked for equal rights for women. A balance was struck between looking to an ideal of solitude and mystical experience and how as Kornfield wrote in our reading earlier, "after ecstasy comes the laundry." Their work and their community's work to fight slavery and bring equal rights and education to women are vital to the fabric of the history of the United States. Their work as individuals led them to conclusions about the rights of people and how they should be treated.

Transcendentalists held the tension between radical individualism and doing justice work. They did not stay in the place of seeking transcendent experiences but got to the work of applying what they had learned about themselves and the nature of human experience. Over time, this also changed the American Unitarian Association. You may recognize the language of transcendentalism all through our hymnal and worship services. But equally important to the soul of the denomination was the work that transcendentalists did to further the rights of women and for abolition. The Unitarian community was committed to free inquiry, so although the transcendentalists had opposing views on slavery to many upper class Unitarian leaders, they were welcomed into the Unitarian community here and there. Through that welcome, over the course of 50 years, they helped to transform Unitarianism from simply a difference in theological understanding and biblical interpretation, to a group of people who stand for justice and stand with the oppressed. This is why, as Emerson pointed out, non-conformist philosophers are as vital to community development as bricklayers and teachers. The transcendentalists helped lead us to be an association of congregations who could possibly offer a radical welcome to marginalized people.

Radical hospitality is not about growth or diversity, rather a community in a process to open itself to new possibilities, people, and ways of being together. Unlike some diversity work which attempts to bring people into an existing structure, a community practicing radical welcome trains its members on adapting the structure. For a really concrete example that would not apply to this congregation, a community that worshiped in a space that was not handicapped

³ Quoted in Andrews p vii

accessible, while it might be diverse or open in many ways, could not really say it offered a radical welcome, as whole segments of the population could not enter the building. That being said, there is of course no perfect welcome or congregation. Congregations that undertake this work commit to a *process* of learning and potential transformation.

Many of you read Emerson's "Divinity School Address" in our adult lifespan religious education class in the fall. In this speech, Emerson railed against the boring intellectuals of the day who were stuck in their heads and not moving their philosophies forward. The transcendentalists looked to mystical experience to first change them as individuals and then to change society. After all the mystical and transformation work, there is still the stuff of daily life that must be attended to, the laundry and, as Thoreau said, building foundations for our castles in the sky. There is the practical. This is also true in the work of welcoming and transforming congregations. There is mystical and transcendental experience that calls us to be open to many types of seeker. And then there is the laundry. There is the practical figuring out of what that means for a particular congregation, the work of training and learning how to hold space for change.

This is true in the work of building congregations, radically welcoming or otherwise. We need people to be visionaries, to invite us into direct experience of transformation and development, and we need community to work together to fulfill that vision. The American Unitarian Association was changed by the transcendentalists, bit by small bit over 50 years. Can you imagine what kind of change might have happened if the Unitarian leaders had been intentionally open to transforming the community?

Who are our Unitarian Universalist visionaries? Who are our visionaries in this congregation? In the larger community? What do they reflect back to us about our community? What will radical hospitality look and feel like in this community? We have the foundation of the work of radical hospitality and welcome in part through the work of our transcendentalist foreparents. My hope for this congregation is that we will become radically welcoming. We are on the path. May we have moments of transcendent wonder, practical planning, and transcendent planning. May we build a sustainable and sustaining community together.