

THE ROOTS OF UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SPIRITUALITY IN NEW ENGLAND TRANSCENDENTALISM

by Dr. Barry Andrews

It is my impression that most Unitarian Universalists feel that their religious heritage, in spite of all its excellent qualities — a rational approach to religion, an openness toward other religious faiths, a commitment to liberal values and social change — is nevertheless not a particularly spiritual one. At the same time, it seems to me, ever-increasing numbers of Unitarian Universalists have expressed a desire for more spiritual depth in their lives and their churches. Accordingly, these people — ministers and laity alike — have gone to other religious traditions in search of spirituality: Zen Buddhism, Creation Spirituality, Taoism, goddess religion, paganism and Native American religions, to name only a few.

This phenomenon suggests three things to me. First of all, it is a testimonial to the inclusiveness of our own religious tradition. It affirms that part of our “Statement of Principles and Purposes” which speaks of drawing “wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our...spiritual life.” Secondly, both the impulse and the encouragement to draw spiritual inspiration from these traditions is historically an outgrowth of the religious movement I will be describing in this paper; namely, Transcendentalism. But — and this is my third point — this is done largely in ignorance of the fact that there exists a uniquely and authentically Unitarian Universalist spirituality. As Unitarian Universalist scholar David Robinson expressed it in the 1989 Henry Whitney Bellows 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.”

Robinson argues in another lecture that Unitarian Universalists today suffer from a disturbing malaise. On one hand, we are “troubled by a sense of the vagueness of our religious identity and hold an uneasy conception of ourselves as marginal perhaps among the established American denominations.” On the other hand, he observes that Unitarian Universalists, like many other Americans, are looking for a greater sense of spirituality in their lives (and churches). In Robinson’s words, this spirituality is a “feeling or hunger for a deeper inner life and a more profound experience of the world that we share. We’re haunted by the spectre of our own superficiality, the uneasy feeling that life is sliding by and leaving no deep mark on us, that we’re being cheated of some version of real experience that would add marrow to the dry bones of our daily routine. We’ve fond ways of dealing with this hunger, of masking it, but we’ve found it has a curious persistence.” Both of these conditions are linked in Robinson’s mind with a collective amnesia or ignorance concerning our own very rich and compelling spiritual heritage.

The heritage of which Robinson speaks is, of course, that of American Transcendentalism. The Transcendentalists were a group of men and women, most of whom lived in New England during the first half of the 19th century and pursued vocations as writers, ministers, educators, and reformers. The nucleus of the group were members of an informal “club” that included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Elizabeth Peabody, James Freeman Clarke, Frederick Henry Hedge, George Ripley, William Henry Channing, and a number of others. In spite of the diversity of interests represented in the group, almost all of them were Unitarians and most were ministers or former ministers. According to one count, of 26 who were closely associated with the group, 17 were Unitarian ministers — all but four, that is, of the men. This was no coincidence, since the movement — in spite of all its literary, philosophical, and political dimensions — was essentially a religious one, an outgrowth of early 19th century Unitarianism.

In many respects, Transcendentalism was a generational revolt from Unitarianism, which itself had split off from Calvinism only a generation before. The liberals had broken with the Calvinists on largely rational grounds. And now the Transcendentalists were protesting a lack of religious feeling and enthusiasm among the Unitarians because of an exaggerated rationalism. As Theodore Parker expressed it, “I felt early that the liberal ministers did not do justice to simple religious feeling; to all their preaching seemed to relate too much to outward things, not enough to the inward pious life... Most powerfully preaching to the Understanding, the Conscience, and the Will, the cry was ever, ‘Duty, Duty! Work, Work!’ They failed to address with equal power the Soul, and did not also shout, ‘Joy, Joy! Delight, Delight!’” “Pale negations,” “corpse-cold,” “lifeless,” added Emerson to a growing chorus of complaints among the Transcendentalist Unitarians.

Dissatisfaction with Unitarianism’s lack of piety was part of a larger concern, however. The Transcendentalists rejected everything formalistic, authoritarian, or doctrinaire in religion, as well, preferring a first-hand experience of reality and the divine unmediated by church or clergy. As Emerson declared in the opening sentences of his Transcendentalist manifesto, *Nature*, “The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we through their eyes. Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight of not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?”

In spite of their disagreements with conservative Unitarians on these and other points, the Transcendentalists also inherited and built upon much of what “orthodox” Unitarianism had to offer. One key concept linking both generations of Unitarians was that of self-culture. Self-culture was an outgrowth of the liberal views of human nature that characterized the Unitarianism’s parting of ways with Calvinism. More important, really, than their disavowal of the Trinity was the Unitarians’ belief in the ability of human beings to contribute to their own salvation. Their essential optimism about human nature led them to believe that they could achieve salvation by living exemplary moral lives. However, this required an ongoing process of regeneration and the building up of moral character.

Articulated most eloquently by William Ellery Channing, the notion of self-culture held that the goal of the religious life was the culture or cultivation of one's inner spiritual nature. As Channing described it in his address on "self-culture," "To cultivate any thing, be it a plant, an animal, a mind, is to make grow. Growth, expansion is the end. Nothing admits culture but that which has a principle of life, capable of being expanded. He, therefore, who does what he can to unfold all his powers of capacities, especially his nobler ones, so as to become a well-proportioned, vigorous, excellent, happy being, practices self-culture." Quite apart from the way the word is understood today, culture in Channing's time still had primarily horticultural associations, in keeping with an agrarian economy and outlook. And, in contrast to the more narrowly psychological concept of the self we have now, self was then essentially equated with one's spirit or soul. Very simply, self-culture mean spiritual growth.

Self-culture introduced a developmental or progressive view of the spiritual life, replacing the notion of conversion as a single, decisive event with that of religious growth as an ongoing process. However, just as the potential for spiritual growth is limitless, a correspondingly endless self-discipline is necessary to achieve it. Moreover, this self-discipline required that inward spiritual aspirations be manifested in outward ethical behavior. In other words, introspection was necessarily wedded to social action.

It was Channing's emphasis on the spiritual capacity of the soul and the necessity of cultivating the germ of divinity within each individual that had tremendous appeal to the Transcendentalists. Virtually all of them were engaged in one way or another with the pursuit of self-culture, and it accounted for everything from methods of spiritual discipline, to experiments with alternate lifestyles and efforts at social and religious reform. As Margaret Fuller noted in her *Memoirs*, "Very early I knew that the only object in life was to grow. I was often false to this knowledge, in idolatries of particular objects, or impatient longings for happiness, but I have never lost sight of it, have always been controlled by it, and this first gift of love has never been superseded by a later love." Bronson Alcott published a treatise on "The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture," in which he wrote: "Human Culture is the art of revealing to a Man the true Idea of his Being — his endowments — his possessions — and of fitting him to use them for the growth, renewal, and perfection of his Spirit. It is the art of completing a man. It includes all those influences, and disciplines, by which his faculties are unfolded and perfected ... It seeks to realize in the Soul of the Image of the Creator — Its end is a perfect man. Its aim, through every stage of influence and discipline, is self-renewal."

The gospel of self-culture was at the core of Emerson's preaching as a Unitarian minister; even after he left the ministry self-culture continued to be the central concern of his lectures and essays. In an early series of lectures on "Human Culture" he maintained that "[man's] own culture, the unfolding of his own nature, is the chief end of man. A divine impulse at the core of his being impels him to this." According to Emerson, the self or soul did not need to be cultivated in keeping with criteria external to the soul itself, but simply encouraged to develop spontaneously, according to the promptings of its own nature. Self-culture, for Emerson and the Transcendentalists

generally, was a natural development of the soul in response to which all that is required is “to remove all obstructions and let this natural force have free play.”

There was another divergence of views between the conservative Unitarians and the Transcendentalists concerning epistemology and spiritual knowledge. As Parker explained it, there were two schools of philosophy, the sensational philosophy of John Locke (and the “orthodox” Unitarians) which held that there was nothing in the intellect that was not first in the senses; the other, the intuitive philosophy attributed to Immanuel Kant which held that “man has faculties which transcend the senses; faculties which give him ideas and intuitions that transcend sensational experience... This is the transcendental school.” According to Parker the deepest religious and moral truths — the existence and nature of god, the difference between right and wrong — could not be demonstrated empirically. They could only be known intuitively, by faculties that *transcend* the senses. Hence the term Transcendentalism.

For his part, Emerson likened this intuitive faculty to what he called the moral or religious sentiment. In his “Divinity School Address,” Emerson describes the religious sentiment as a direct intuitive grasp of ethical and spiritual laws which can only be experienced at first hand. Every person possesses this sentiment, he said; it represents the indwelling spirit in all men and women, and it is the universal essence of religion.

The Transcendentalists also distinguished the two schools in terms of a distinction between Reason and the Understanding — meaning by these two terms almost the opposite of what they signify today. Reason was an *intuitive* faculty; understanding a *rational*, intellectual process. As Emerson described them, “Reason is the highest faculty of the soul, what we mean by the soul itself; it never reasons, never proves; it simply perceives, it is vision. The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues; near-sighted, dwelling in the present, the expedient, the customary.” Emerson identified the Understanding with the intellect and Reason with the moral sentiment, and argued that it was through the latter, intuitively, that we have access to the realm of the spirit.

Reason and Understanding were complementary notions, and Emerson frequently maintained that they were interdependent. In spite of their emphasis on Reason and the intuition, the Transcendentalists generally were quite interested in science and scientific developments. Moreover, they typically believed that there was no scientific discovery or law that did not also have moral significance. Nevertheless, the distinction between Reason and the Understanding implied a dualism of spirit and matter, each with its own appropriate mode of knowing. Reason provided intuitive knowledge of spiritual realities, whereas the Understanding produced empirical knowledge about the material world.

Because matters of the spirit were primary in their thinking, the Transcendentalists tended toward philosophical idealism. They sometimes asserted — Emerson more often than the others — that the world is a product of Mind or consciousness. For them, the Understanding saw only the material world with its solid object and events, whereas Reason fathomed the spirituality reality underneath. In Emerson’s view,

“mind is the only reality, of which man and all other natures are better or worse reflectors.” “All that you call mind,” he went on to say, “is the shadow of that substance which you are, the perpetual creation of the powers of thought.” If the Transcendentalists had an epistemology in the distinction between Reason and Understanding, in Universal Spirit they had a metaphysics.

The Transcendentalists may have differed among themselves regarding the relative substantiality of the physical world, but they were completely in accord with the view that at the heart of things there was an ineffable spirit that animated all creation, a divine energy immanent in nature and human beings providing a sense of meaning, purpose and direction. This spirit was variously referred to as the Over-Soul, Universal Mind or Spirit, Highest Law and God. Alcott described it as, “that power, which pulsates in all life, animates and builds all organizations, shall manifest itself as one universal deific energy, present alike at the outskirts and centre of the universe, whose centre and circumference are one; omniscient, omnipotent, self-subsisting, uncontained, yet containing all things in the unbroken synthesis of its being.” Parker put it more simply: “The fulness of the divine energy flows inexhaustibly into the crystal of the rock, the juices of the plant, the splendor of the stars, the life of the Bee and Behemoth.”

The Universal Spirit is characterized by flux, polarity, and a correspondence between physical and moral laws. “There are no fixtures in nature,” Emerson wrote; “The universe is fluid and volatile.” Nature was ecstatic, he insisted; it was bursting with creative energy. There was an inexhaustible power in the universe which had a tendency to overwhelm and transform everything it encountered. Likewise, polarity was evident everywhere. “An inevitable dualism bisects nature,” Emerson observed, “so that each thing is a half and suggests another to make it whole; as spirit, matter; man, woman; odd even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay.” The qualities of flux and polarity appear in every part of nature as well as in nature as a whole. “The entire system of things gets represented in every particle.” Every atom is a microcosm containing all the powers and laws of the macrocosm, the universe, within itself.

Finally, there is a correspondence between physical and moral laws. For the Transcendentalists there was nothing in nature that did not have a moral significance. “The Moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference,” wrote Emerson in *Nature*; “It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process. All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel?”

It would be going too far to suggest that Transcendentalists were mystics, and yet there is a strong mystical strain in all their writing. Theirs, after all, was a religion of insight and not of tradition. And in light of the distinction they made between Reason and Understanding it is not surprising that religious truth was revealed to them in moments of mystical awareness. Again, this is perhaps most pronounced in Emerson, but it was characteristic of the other Transcendentalists as well. Emerson describes such a moment in a well-known passage: “Standing on the bare ground — my head

bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I seem all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of parcel of God.”

Margaret Fuller describes a similar experience in her *Memoirs*. She had been despondent, feeling that the world had no place for her and that the church did not offer any spiritual comfort. Pausing beside a stream at the end of a long walk, she had a mystical experience: “I saw there was no self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought the self real that I suffered; that I had only to live in the idea of the all, and all was mine. This truth came to me, and I received it unhesitatingly; so that I was for that hour taken up into God. In that true ray most of the relations of earth seemed mere films, phenomena.”

And Henry David Thoreau notes in his *Journal* a mystical experience he had when he was a youth: “I can remember how I was astonished. I said to myself — I said to others — “There comes into my mind such an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure, a sense of elevation and expansion, and I have had nought to do with it. I perceive that I am dealt with by superior powers. This is a pleasure, a joy, an existence which I have not procured myself. I speak as a witness on the stand, and tell what I have perceived.”

These moments gave rise to what Emerson called “double consciousness,” a heightening of the contradiction between Reason and the Understanding: “one prevails now, all buzz and din; and the other prevails then, all infinitude and paradise; and with the progress of life, the two discover no greater disposition to reconcile themselves... Presently the clouds shut down again; yet we retain the belief that this petty web we weave will at last be overshot and reticulated with veins of the blue, and that the moments will characterize the days.” This is an awareness that mystical states are transitory, and yet of such intensity and value that the rest of our life seems shallow and superficial by comparison.

Broadly speaking, it was the goal of self-culture to make it possible for the moments to characterize the days, as it were; to develop a sense of spirituality in every day life. The Transcendentalists sought this in a variety of ways. First and foremost, they looked to nature as a source of revelations concerning the spiritual life. Thoreau, who of the group came closest to being a nature mystic, noted characteristically in his *Journal*: “My profession is always to be on the alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas in nature... To watch for, describe, all the divine features which I detect in Nature.”

Emerson also looked to nature for spiritual insight and moral instruction. As he observed in one of his lecture on “Human Culture,” “We divorce ourselves from nature; we hide ourselves in cities and lose the affecting spectacle of Days and Night which she cheers and instructs her children withal. We pave the earth for miles with stones and forbid the grass. We build street on street all round the horizon and shut out the sky and the wind; false and costly tastes are generated for wise and cheap ones; thousands are poor and cannot see the face of the world; the senses are impaired, and

the susceptibility to beauty; and life made vulgar. Our feeling in the presence of nature is an admonishing hint. Go and hear in a woodland valley the harmless roarings of the South wind and see the shining boughs of the trees in the sun, the swift sailing clouds, and you shall think a man is a fool to be mean and unhappy when every day is made illustrious by these splendid shows. Then falls the enchanting night; all the trees are wind-harps; out shine the stars; and we say, Blessed by light and darkness, ebb and flow, cold and heat, these restless pulsations of nature which throb for us. In the presence of nature a man of feeling is not suffered to lose sight of the instant creation. The world was not made a great while ago. nature is an Eternal Now."

According to his own account, Thoreau spent half of each day in the out-of-doors. Frequently, fellow Transcendentalists accompanied him on these outings. Most of his books and essays were occasioned by "excursions," as he called them, to Canada, Maine, Cape Cod, and up the Concord and Merrimack Rivers to New Hampshire. These writings are a treasury of spiritual insights occasioned by his encounters with the natural world. Thoreau regarded the time he spent in the out-of-doors as a spiritual discipline. In this context, periods of motion and activity — that is, excursions — alternated with interludes of rest and reverie, or contemplation. And if the excursions were often undertaken with companions, contemplation was usually pursued in solitude. The two years he spent at Walden Pond were an especially contemplative period for him, and he describes one of this mornings there in the following manner: "Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken by accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like the corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works.

Contemplation was a spiritual discipline for Emerson as well. In his lectures on "Human Culture" he offered this recommendation: "In your arrangements for your residence see that you have a chamber to yourself, though you sell your coat and wear a blanket." A silent stream of thoughts descend to us from above, and the spiritual seeker "keeps his religious eye turned to this upward light," attending to it, he says, "with lowly expectation. The simple habit of sitting alone occasionally to explore what facts of moment lie in the memory may have the effect in some more favored hour to open to the student the kingdom of spiritual nature. He may become aware that there around him roll new at this moment and inexhaustible the waters of Life; that the world he has lived in so heedless, so gross, is illumed with meaning, that every fact is magical; every atom alive, and he is the heir of it all."

The other half of Thoreau's day was spent in reading and writing. In fact, all of the Transcendentalists were voracious readers; so much so, that reading was for them another form of spiritual discipline. Thoreau wrote the following in his chapter on "Reading" in Walden: "To read well, that is to read true books in a true spirit, is a

noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object. Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.”

Emerson and Parker were known for their extensive libraries. Margaret Fuller was a discerning reader and book reviewer. Alcott and Thoreau compiled lengthy lists of the books they had read. Mostly, they read for spiritual insights, or “lustres” as Emerson called them. Again, Thoreau speaks for himself and the others when he writes: “How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book! The book exists for us, perchance, which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered. These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life.”

Their reading included poetry, philosophy, mythology, history, science and biography. They were especially attracted to the sacred texts of other religious traditions, including those of India and China. In *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist publication edited by Fuller and Emerson, was a column devoted to “Ethical Scriptures” from the world’s religions. They were inspired by these, and found that they confirmed the truth of their own spiritual views. Because they felt the Universal Spirit present in all times and places, they looked for — and discovered — evidence of it in all religious faiths. This impulse led to some of the earliest efforts in comparative religious studies, including James Freeman Clarke’s two volume work, *Ten Great Religions*.

Writing was yet another spiritual discipline for the Transcendentalists. Virtually all of them wrote, lectured or preached, and most of them kept a journal or diary. Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott are especially noted for having kept journals. Certainly, the best of Alcott is in his journal, and many people feel the same about Thoreau. Emerson began writing his journal at the age of seventeen, when he was a student at Harvard. And it was with Emerson’s encouragement that Thoreau began his own journal in 1837. In addition to contemplation, journal-keeping was another spiritual discipline which Emerson recommended in his lectures on “Human Culture:” “Pay so much honor to the visits of Truth in your mind as to record those thoughts that have shone therein. I suppose every lover of truth would find his account in it if he never had two related thoughts without putting them down. It is not for what is recorded, though that may be the agreeable entertainment of later years, and the pleasant remembrances of what we were, but for the habit of rendering account to yourself of yourself in some more rigorous manner and at more certain intervals than mere conversation or casual reverie of solitude require.”

Alcott kept his journal for over fifty years, amounting to approximately five million words. In it he recorded his moods, thoughts and the events of a busy life. In the “Introduction” to his edition of Alcott’s journals, Odell Shepard indicates the manner in which they were used to promote Alcott’s own self-culture: “...they show his long struggle toward the integration of his experience and thought and mind. They record

his patient search for the One that lies forever hidden in the Many. Believing that every life has an emblematic meaning and is an epitome of ultimate truth, he laid up these abundant materials against the time when he himself, no longer sunk and bewildered in blind activity, might hope to discern the Whole, comprising all the parts. And in this effort he did not entirely fail. He made his Journals a mirror, however flawed and beclouded, not only of his times but of himself.”

Aside from keeping a journal as a means of promoting his own self-culture, Alcott made the concept of self-culture the basis of his theories and methods of education. His treatise on “The Doctrine and Discipline of Human Culture” was written as a rationale for his work with children at the Temple School in Boston. Later on, he applied the concept to the education of adults by means of what he termed “conversations.” Alcott rejected traditional instructional teaching methods in favor of conversations as a pedagogical tool. These conversations were more akin to Socratic dialogs. He describes his views in the following *Journal* entry: “My theory of Conversation as the natural organ of communicating, mind with mind, appears more and more beautiful to me. It is the method of human culture. By it I come nearer the hearts of those whom I shall address than by any other means. I reach the facts of the case. I am placed thereby in the simplest relations. There is nothing arbitrary, nothing presuming. Conversation must be my organ of address to the public mind...” Education was a process in which all parties were engaged in recollecting what, in some sense, they already knew; or, as he put it, “drawing truth from the facts of common experience rather than from the history of opinions as set forth in the systems of philosophy or creeds of theologians.”

Leading groups of adults in conversations on various subjects was a source of livelihood for Alcott. He notes in another *Journal* entry that he planned to hold a course of conversations in neighboring towns on the “Theory and Practice of Self-Culture”: “I can meet evening circles in the villages and discuss with them the doctrines of the people. I should gather all the best minds in the village, and guide their thoughts to the worthiest topics.”

Margaret Fuller also led conversations, primarily with groups of women, as a means of producing income and promoting self-culture. For a period of five years Fuller conducted conversations on such topics as mythology, education, women’s issues and universal religious ideas. Typically, between 25 and 30 women subscribed to these sessions. She would begin each one with a brief introduction, invite questions, and ask a few questions herself as a means of drawing the others out in a discussion of the subject.

These spiritual disciplines — excursions in nature, contemplation, reading, journal writing and conversations — represented the means of cultivating the self or soul. But, in keeping with the doctrine of self-culture, these means were never ends in themselves. The Transcendentalists believed that spirituality required an outward manifestation of inward aspirations. In other words, the moral and the spiritual are necessarily interrelated. Accordingly, the Transcendentalists sought to achieve a congruence between spiritual insights and ethical actions in all areas of their lives. This

was most notable in their experiments in simple living and their involvements in social and religious reforms.

It was the Transcendentalists' common goal to develop ways of living that reduced their material needs to a minimum so that they would be freer to pursue spiritual truths, moral ideas, and aesthetic impulses. The experimental quality of these efforts can be seen in Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond and George Ripley's commune at Brook Farm.

Thoreau built his famous cabin at Walden Pond in 1845 and lived there for a little over two years. In *Walden*, he gave an account of his daily life and his reasons for going there. Basically, he wanted to simplify his life and find time for writing; as he put it, "to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles." He lamented the fact that his fellow citizens were so preoccupied with material concerns that they had no time for spiritual pursuits. Thoreau was determined to redress this imbalance in his own life by practicing a voluntary poverty and cultivating spiritual awareness. As he concluded from his efforts, "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 thing behinds, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws will 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 had built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

George Ripley quit the Unitarian ministry in 1840 to found the Brook Farm Institute for Education and Agriculture. This was a cooperative community, consisting of teachers, students, and workers engaged in the labor of farming and the pursuit of self-culture. Members of the community sought a balance in their lives between field and school and between work and leisure. In a letter to Emerson, Ripley indicated the rationale for his undertaking: "Our objects...are to insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor than now exists; to combine the thinker and the workers, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to the fruits of their industry; to do away with the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life, than can be led amidst the pressure of our competitive institutions."

Although Emerson did not elect to join the others at Brook Farm, he did visit from time to time, as did Alcott, Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, and many of their Transcendentalist comrades. The commune lasted for six years, and included, in the early years, about 150 adults and children. Poets, philosophers, ministers, reformers, artists and writers worked together doing farm work. Wages were the same for all and

free time was spent in contemplation and creative pursuits. One of the Brook Farmers later recalled that most of the residents were “happy, contented, well-off and carefree; doing a great work in the world, enthusiastic and faithful, we enjoyed every moment of every day.”

In a more modest experiment, Emerson had moved to the village of Concord so that he could afford to live on his income as a writer and lecturer. And in a more extreme one, Alcott risked family and fortune on an ill-fated attempt to found the Fruitlands commune. But, modest or extreme, solitary or communal, successful or ill-fated, these undertakings represented some of the Transcendentalists’ experiments in self-culture and simple living. Another one of the group, William Henry Channing, summarized this aspect of Transcendentalist spirituality in a statement entitled *My Symphony*: “To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion; to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich; to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly; to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages with open heart; to bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, never hurry. In a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common. This is to be my symphony.”

The experiments at Walden Pond, Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and even Emerson’s dinner table, where the servants were invited to eat with their employers, were attempts at reforming individuals in their personal and domestic lives. Typically, the Transcendentalists began with the self in their reform efforts, believing that it is through the agency of individual men and women that political change and social transformation are brought about. They aimed at setting an example of principled behavior whenever crucial moral issues, like slavery, were involved. There must be “some absolute goodness somewhere,” Thoreau declared in his essay on *Civil Disobedience*; “for that will leaven the whole lump.” Furthermore, action from principle was “essentially revolutionary” and would have profound effects on the attitudes and behavior of the majority.

It was in view of their belief in the primacy of the moral sentiment that they considered all human beings equal and related, and that they felt all efforts of reform must be directed to individuals. Parker contended that one of the great primal intuitions of human nature was the “Instinctive Intuition of the Just and Right, a consciousness that there is a Moral Law independent of our will, which we ought to keep.” It was on this basis that he participated in a broad range of social, political, and even ecclesiastical reforms.

The Transcendentalists’ emphasis on the individual basis of social reform, however, was a source of some misunderstandings. It is, for example, a common mistake to believe that Emerson was interested in the individual to the detriment of the community. All along Emerson insisted that the individual cannot be understood in isolation. Human nature is relational. “Every being in nature has its existence so connected with other beings that if set apart from them it would instantly perish.” We cannot grow or unfold apart from community. As he wrote in an early poem, “Each and All,” “All are needed by each one; Nothing is fair or good alone.”

Thus, if reform begins with the individual, it does not — or should not — end there. Believing they were possessed of one Universal Mind common to all, they subscribed to Kant's categorical imperative to act in such a way as to believe that what is right and true for oneself is right and true for others also.

Accordingly, the Transcendentalists were singly and as a group more active in social and political reforms than their Unitarian opponents and critics. The ethical consequences of their Transcendentalist ideals impelled them into a wide variety of causes and reforms: the educational reforms of Alcott and Elizabeth Peabody; the Christian socialism of William Henry Channing; Margaret Fuller's feminism and involvement in the Roman Revolution of 1848; Thoreau's civil disobedience; George Ripley's Brook Farm; abolitionism and women's rights. These were not accidents or deviations, but logical consequences of the Transcendentalist social ethic. They were the inevitable outcome of a belief in a common human nature and the desire to integrate spiritual aspirations and moral behavior. Transcendentalism, for all its emphasis on spirituality, led its adherents into the world more often than away from it.

If we limit our view of the Transcendentalist movement to the productive years of the inner core of its members, Transcendentalism did not long survive the Civil War. But its influence extended far beyond the lives and lifetimes of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Parker, Alcott, and the others. They were the spiritual mentors of a whole generation of younger followers both outside and within the confines of Unitarianism.

For years the more conservative Unitarians sought to exclude the Transcendentalists on the basis of their rejection of Christianity. While some of the succeeding generation of Unitarian ministers inspired by Parker, Emerson, and the rest chose to remain within the fold, others, including Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Octavius Brooks Frothingham joined the Free Religious Association and exercised considerable influence there. The rivalry between the Unitarians and the Free Religious Association — as well as other cultural and theological forces — led to the erosion of orthodoxy within Unitarianism and a growing tolerance, if not acceptance, of Transcendentalist views and those, such as Parker, who had espoused them. Ironically, just as Transcendentalism was becoming one of the currents within the Unitarian theological mainstream, fewer and fewer Unitarians were avowed Transcendentalists. Other theological movements and trends, including scientific theism, and, later on, humanism, developed within Unitarian Universalism.

At the same time, Transcendentalism — particularly in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau — inspired succeeding generations of Americans who were not necessarily Unitarians. The Transcendentalists have continued to appeal to all those who possess a reverential attitude towards nature, a strong ethical sensibility and a desire to live with greater spiritual intensity and depth.

There is a natural congruence between Unitarian Universalism and Transcendentalism. Indeed, contemporary Unitarian Universalism has been strongly

influenced by Transcendentalist views. At the same time, large numbers of men and women, themselves inspired by Emerson and Thoreau, have found religious home in Unitarian Universalist churches, dimly aware, most of them, of the historical connection. There is in our Transcendentalist heritage the source of a uniquely and authentically Unitarian Universalist spirituality. By putting our congregations in touch with this heritage we can offer them at once the possibility of a richer, deeper inner life and a stronger sense of religious identity as Unitarian Universalists.
