

Theological Options for Unitarian Universalists
Part II: Transcendentalism
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One bright New Year's Day, I was cross-country skiing with a companion in British Columbia's beautiful Manning Park. It had been a long day of skiing, with many arduous uphill climbs, and many intimidating downhill runs. My friend was far more skilled than I, and I had struggled to keep up. By late afternoon, I was tired and ready to call it a day.

We decided to go for one last downhill run before calling it quits, and herringboned our way to the top of a hill. By then, the sun had set; it was twilight. The sky was deepening into that jewel-like blue that you get at early evening. A full moon had risen to the east.

It was quiet; most of the skiers had gone home. As I began to glide down the hill, the only sound was the crunch of my skis against the light crust of the snow.

It's hard to describe what happened next. I can't remember exactly when it began or when it ended. I don't know how long it lasted – maybe only a few seconds. All I know is that on the way down that slope, I, Sue Spencer, disappeared.

I lost all sense of myself. That is, I lost all sense of myself as a separate person. It was as though my ego had vanished, and with it, all my fatigue.

For one moment, I was totally at one with the landscape – one with the diamond-glinted snow, one with the hill, and one with the twilight sky, and rising moon. Even when I snapped out of it, a moment later, there remained a profound sense of peace.

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A few years later, I took a course in becoming a spiritual director, and had the chance to study experiences like this. What I learned is that they are more widespread than I thought – maybe even universal. Such a sense of “no-self” has been felt by people of all faiths, in all ages, in all walks of life.

It happens in the woods and mountains, but it also happens in the heart of the city. It comes to people who've been meditating for it for a long time. But it also comes in a flash, out of the blue, to those who've never expected it.

The experience has been called by many names: Awakening. Mystical experience. Cosmic consciousness. The experience of no-self. And, in the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes, “direct experience of ...transcending mystery and wonder.” The worldview to which it gives rise is also called by many names.

It's been called "mysticism" and "holy wisdom." Aldous Huxley called it "the perennial philosophy" in a book by that name. Philosophers have called it "panentheism" – not "pantheism" – the sense that God is in all things, and all things are in God.

Whatever it's called, those grasped by the experience know that their lives have been changed. They believe that somehow, they've been given a glimpse into the heart of reality.

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Unitarian Universalists don't always find it easy to talk about all this. Often, they dismiss such experiences, assuming they're weird or atypical. They may not even have a vocabulary to describe the experiences, and assume they're foreign to UU tradition. But actually, they lie at the heart of our UU heritage.

Some years after my experience in Manning Park, I read Ralph Waldo Emerson's first published work, the 1836 essay *Nature*. I learned that something very similar had happened at least once to this Yankee sage from Massachusetts. Here's how Emerson described his experience, walking in the Concord woods: "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 see all, the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God."

Before I had my own experience, I might have dismissed Emerson's description – found it overwrought, or counted it as romantic excess, especially the part about the "transparent eyeball." But once it happened to me, I knew exactly what he meant.

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Over the past couple of weeks, we've been exploring religion as process, the ways it evolves over time. Last week, we began to explore how Unitarian Universalism has evolved, from its origins as a liberal Christian movement. Such evolution has been Hegelian in nature; UUism has been pushed along by a series of controversies. A "thesis" gives rise to its "antithesis," which in turn gives rise to a new "synthesis" – from which the process begins all over again.

Emerson was the spark plug behind one of these controversies. This was the controversy around Transcendentalism - the first to push Unitarianism toward a post-Christian era. At one time or another, we may have studied Transcendentalism as a *literary* movement. What we may not have learned in our studies is that it was also a *religious* movement – perhaps primarily a religious movement.

Emerson was the son of a liberal Boston minister; later, he himself became a Unitarian minister. This was not a lengthy career; Emerson spent only three years in the pulpit before deciding that pastoring a church didn't suit him. With the death of Ellen, his beloved young wife, he sailed for Europe and never again held a ministerial post.

Nevertheless, he returned to the United States, and stayed connected to the Unitarian movement throughout his life.

There were probably several reasons for Emerson's leaving the ministry. Grief was one, temperament another, and theological restlessness a third. Emerson's developing theology was putting him on a collision course with his fellow Unitarians, most of whom were Christian. This was happening on at least two counts.

One, it threatened their faith. In many ways Unitarians were different from more orthodox Christians. But in some ways, their views were the same. For example, though they interpreted the bible differently, both Unitarians and orthodox Christians believed it was the inspired word of God, and put it at the center of their faith. When the Transcendentalists came along and said that people could know God directly, through their own experience, it was heresy!

Emerson's mysticism represented a second threat to the liberal Christians. It threatened their sense of reason, or rationalism. The Unitarian Christians were always trying to reconcile Christian faith with reason – and they had perfect faith they could do it. They thought that scripture, interpreted by reason, would lead a person to God. When the Transcendentalists came along and said that God could be grasped through the *intuition*, it was subversive!

What really stirred things up was Emerson's Divinity School Address, one of the landmark sermons we've been studying in the adult education class offered this fall. This address, delivered in 1838, marked the fault line between two kinds of Unitarianism. The traditionalists – who themselves had been radicals a generation earlier – were appalled.

What caused the break? It centered on some of religion's "Big Questions." First, there was the question, "Who is God?" Liberal Christians accepted the idea of God the Father. Their God was far more benevolent than the God of the orthodox, but "his" basic nature was the same. God was a personal, parental, deity. "He" was a "supernatural" being, who existed above and beyond reality.

In contrast, the Transcendentalists believed in a more impersonal and immanent God. Such a God was not called "Father," but rather "Oversoul" or "Universal Mind." In some ways, this God was more abstract and distant than God the Father. But in other ways, such a deity was closer and more intimate. The Divine was embedded in nature, and available to anyone who went to the woods and paid attention. God was accessible to anyone willing to attune his or her soul to the mysteries.

A second big question, one I've already alluded to, is one of epistemology: "What is the source of religious knowledge?" or "How do I know about God?" Liberal Christians continued to believe that the Bible was the primary source of religious knowledge. In the words of William Ellery Channing, the Bible contained "the records of God's successive revelations to mankind."

Part of the early Unitarian Christians' theology was a peculiar doctrine called "supernatural rationalism." It was their attempt to hang onto Biblical truth, while at the same time preserving reason. "Supernatural rationalists" made Jesus' miracles the centerpiece of their faith. Such miracles, they thought, constituted the proof that Jesus was the son of God.

But Emerson would have none of it! For him and his Transcendentalist colleagues, it was ludicrous to speak of "miracles" as if they had happened only in the past. For Emerson, all of life was a miracle, and focusing on the biblical miracles got in the way. Emerson put it this way in his Divinity School Address: "[T]he word Miracle, as pronounced by the Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."

Basically, Emerson was impatient with any religious knowledge that came second-hand – whether from scripture, history, or someone's personal testimony. In the Divinity School Address, he lamented that people "have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead." Declaring that "God speaketh, not spake," he exhorted his young colleagues to "dare to love God without mediator or veil." His charge to them: "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men [and women] first-hand with Deity!"

Emerson and the Transcendentalists also parted company with the liberal Christians on a third big question, "Who was Jesus?" Some Transcendentalists continued to identify as Christian, though Emerson did not. What they all had in common was a belief in Jesus as a Great Soul, rather than a savior in the classic sense. In this connection, Emerson said, "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul...Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of [humanity]. He saw that God incarnates [God]self in [humanity], and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of the world."

From this passage, it's clear that the question about Jesus is also a question about human nature. What is a human being? What is our relationship to the universe? The Unitarian Christians, in their estimate of human nature, were far more liberal than their Calvinist neighbors. But they continued to believe that human beings needed a mediator to bring them to God.

In contrast, Emerson and his colleagues saw God and humanity as part and parcel of one another. They saw, in the soul, no wall of separation between human and divine. It's not either/or, but a continuum, a matter of degree. The human task is to understand our divine nature – to grasp it, to experience it, to live it.

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Who is Emerson for us today? I am of two minds on this. One is that the Transcendentalists, can still be fresh and new for us. Emerson and his younger friend, Henry David Thoreau, are still among the saints of the environmental movement.

Speaking personally, I find that I can pick up a book of Emerson's essays, or of Frederic Henry Hedge's sermons, open it to any page, and find something that speaks to me.

When I do this, I understand that what we call "spirituality" is hardly new to Unitarian Universalism. Some UUs still speak as though spirituality were a foreign concept, imported from elsewhere. But in Transcendentalist thought, it's all there. In fact, it's one of Unitarian Universalism's distinctive contributions to the world's store of holy wisdom.

David Robinson, a contemporary historian, puts it this way: "Like a pauper who searches for the next meal, never knowing of the relative whose will would make him rich, American Unitarians lament their vague religious identity, standing on 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." Fortunately, we have the opportunity to dig into those riches, and once again make them our own.

But there's a caution here. Emerson himself would be aghast if we were to take his thought wholesale, substituting it for our own. He would insist that we apply our own experience, our own insight, our own truth.

The evolution continues – and we are a vital part of it.