

Are the Transcendentalists Relevant?

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Readings

from *Life Without and Life Within*, and from *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, both by Margaret Fuller:

One sacrifice of the temporal for the eternal day is the grain of mustard seed which may give birth to a tree large enough to make a home for the sweetest singing birds. One moment of deep truth in life of choosing not merely honesty, but purity, may leaven the whole mass.

May truth, unpolluted by prejudice, vanity or selfishness, be granted daily more and more as the due of inheritance, and only valuable conquest for us all!

from “*On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*” by Henry David Thoreau:

There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the war (*with Mexico*), who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free-trade...

They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret...

There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man...

Sermon

Among my copies of Thoreau’s *Walden* and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* are two paperbacks that show the wear of fifty years of reading and re-reading, covers torn, corners of pages turned down, passages marked. At one time or another I carried these handy paperbacks in my back pocket – and it shows.

On the other hand, the first copy of Emerson’s essays that came into my possession, a gift from my parents, is made of sterner hardback stuff and would not have fit in any back pocket of pants I’ve ever owned. But all those years ago I read in those pages as much as in the pages of *Walden* and *Leaves of Grass*.

Clearly these books were relevant to me then; just as clearly they were relevant to thousands of readers when they were first published.

In what ways were they relevant? And are they relevant still?

Here's the short answer.

Each in their own way, these writers, along with all the others we know as the 19th century Transcendentalists, were seeking to wake up to a fuller experience of the miracle life... including to wake up to what they sometimes called the "higher law" – conscience.

Then they sought to live accordingly, and through their writings and lectures and examples they sought to encourage and inspire the rest of us to do the same.

Sounds relevant to me – not only to their times, but to our time or any time.

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately," Thoreau famously wrote, "to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Implicitly of course he was inviting us, his readers, to undertake the same experiment – not for all of us to go to the woods (he only spent two years there himself, and in any case spent parts of most days back in the village of Concord), but one way or another, whether in the classroom or operating room, carpenter's shop or kitchen, office or pulpit, he was inviting us to be on the same quest.

Then there was Walt Whitman inviting us to join him not in sitting by the side of a pond in the woods, but in traveling the "open road" – similar spirit though, or so it seems to me:

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

Then we have Emerson who invited us to trust ourselves: For "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, - that is genius..." because (paraphrasing only slightly) when the "oversoul" (as he called it) breathes through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affection, it is love...

What's not to like in such sentiments? Or in this thought from Margaret Fuller which we heard earlier:

May truth, unpolluted by prejudice, vanity, or selfishness, be granted daily more and more as the due of inheritance, and only valuable conquest for us all!

Well, these are all bracing words! But *do* they express the truth of our lives? *Are* they helpful? If so, in what ways are they helpful?

To begin with, this idea of the “higher law” is implicit in greater or lesser degree in all the passages I’ve just read. And the assumption throughout the writings of the Transcendentalists is that each one of us has access to this universal higher law... if we pay attention, if we seek to wake up to what it means to be alive, to be a human being in community with other human beings and with life.

In community. You see, the Transcendentalists were not just inwardly turned solitary, individualist, mystics, and not just going for long wandering walks in the woods. They were also frequently engaged in conversations with one another (including on those frequent walks) as well as in circles of friends, whether in Emerson’s parlor or Elizabeth Peabody’s Boston bookshop.

Further, the higher law, conscience if you will, called them into the wider world.

Whether it was Bronson Alcott opening his experimental school... or Margaret Fuller becoming the first female newspaper foreign correspondent for Horace Greeley’s “New York Tribune”... or Unitarian minister Theodore Parker taking up the cause of just about every reform movement of the day... or pretty much all the Transcendentalists becoming ardent abolitionists, speaking out in lectures and essays, participating in civil disobedience, breaking quite publicly the Fugitive Slave Law... agreeing with Thoreau that “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison.”

And not incidentally, as I’ve recently been learning (from the recently published *Fighting for the Higher Law: Black and White Transcendentalists Against Slavery*, by Peter Wirzbicki) many abolitionists, Black as well as white as the title affirms, were inspired by the higher law principles of the Transcendentalists; and the Transcendentalists were moved by their own principles to become abolitionists. For the point was that slavery was not just about physical injury to those who were enslaved, terrible as that was; slavery was also a moral injury: to those enslaved above all, as well to all who were complicit in the industrial cotton economy – which included, by the way, many in the New England Unitarian churches of that time.

So... relevant then? Surely. Relevant now? Just as surely.

For how shall we live? – a preeminently Transcendentalist question – is ever a relevant question. And the moral dimension of this question never changes; for the essence of the moral universe never changes; only the circumstances in which we are called to awaken to life and to heed the higher law change.

Neither, of course, does the spiritual dimension of our lives change.

And when I read Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman fifty years ago, what woke me up initially was not the moral dimension of their writings or of their lives. It was what we might call the spiritual or mystical dimension manifest in the exuberant attention the Transcendentalists paid to the utter strangeness and miracle of being alive, of being part and parcel of everything, of God, as Emerson put it.

Indeed, their invitation to wake up to who we really are, because “only that day dawns to which we are awake,” as Thoreau wrote, was life-changing for me, as for uncounted others over the decades.

Simply reading Whitman’s frequent invitation to me/us to be amazed by the apparently simplest of things was transformative. Listen:

To walk up my stoop is unaccountable...
I pause to consider if it really be,
That I eat and drink is spectacle enough for the great authors
and schools,
A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than
the metaphysicians of books.

This is, after all, where we begin isn't it? With waking up to the mystery and miracle of life? This never gets old! This is enduringly relevant.

Even though, as I've already been saying this morning, it is not where we end; since the mystical and spiritual are intimately related to, entwined with, the moral and indeed the political.

You can't, after all, be selectively awake; the Transcendentalists most assuredly knew this. For once we are awake to the miracle of our own life and our neighbor's life, we are inevitably awake to the suffering of not only our own, but of our neighbor's life. We are awake, in short, to the call of conscience, the higher law implanted in our hearts and souls – as the Transcendentalists affirmed, and as I would affirm.

So... awake in these ways – to life and to the higher law – can we, as Thoreau asked, merely hold our opinions about injustice of whatever sort, and *do* nothing?

If that's not a question relevant to our time or to any time, then I don't know what would be.

And – slight tangent as I draw to a conclusion this morning: Our Unitarian Universalist Principles and the Sources of our Living Tradition are, really, a sort of Transcendentalist document – inviting us to draw on whatever source of truth and inspiration in order to wake up to the wonder of life and to serve life and seek justice, each person precious in this interdependent web of life of which we are a part.

It is, after all, never irrelevant and never too late to wake up a bit more to life and then to wake up to the ways we feel called to serve life in the spirit of love as best we can. It is what the Transcendentalists strived to do. It is what we can strive to do, each of us in our unique way with our unique gifts, as well as with one another in community.

With faith, since each of us is only one, and an imperfectly, falteringly one at that... with faith that it all adds up – because it does.

Yes, never too late to wake up.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.