

What does Transcendentalism have to do with us?

As it turns out – a lot

It's key to our understanding of our faith and also of how Unitarians changed the culture of America.

And that's what we'll explore this morning.

Few movements in American social and intellectual history have been as influential as the cluster of ideas that we have come to call transcendentalism.

From Ralph Wald Emerson's "self-reliant soul" to Henry David Thoreau's "different drummer," To Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass," Transcendentalism changed our ideas about individualism, literature and democracy. And profoundly changed Unitarianism

So what is transcendentalism, who were the transcendentalists? And how has transcendentalism ideas shaped modern America?

Transcendentalism (not an easy task – no neat definition ii it's a collection of ideas)

Transcendentalism was not a unified system, but rather a series of reflections that produced a wide-ranging philosophy.

A philosophic, religious, social reform, literary and educational movement.

Stressed self reliance and the liberty of each individual.

Transcendentalists believed in a universe where God in nature is present in all things – that ALL are equally divine and can experience divinity in a walk in the woods and in contemplation.. that all events are material and spiritual. And unlike enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke -- believed that truth could be found not only through the senses but through intuition.

The movement was about a group of people and a collection of ideas, to create a new philosophy and a new religion to serve a new nation – certainly a reaction to New England Calvinism and it's emphasis on sin and damnation.

In the 1830s America was a country in transition from a loose confederation of ex-British Colonies to a growing democracy – freeing itself from religious ties

America was focused on its manifest destiny a push for more land and industrial expansion

Both political parties ignored rights of women, native Americans, African Americans (slavery was defended as economically necessary)

US needed a sense of its own uniqueness . . . separate from European culture.

Who were the transcendentalists?

Organized by Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Transcendentalism movement consisted of Unitarians and others that met in members' homes in the Boston Area from about 1830- to 1860. . Called the transcendental club, and published a journal "The Dial" with articles from its members. The Dial's first editor was Feminist Margaret Fuller.

Well, they were Unitarians – or at least they started out as Unitarians ... but most of them had discarded main-stream Unitarianism of the 1830s that believed in the divinity of Christ – but not the trinity – the absolute truth of the bible and practiced the Eucharist

The two persons most connected with Transcendentalism were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. The group included Branson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, Theodore Parker, Emily Dickinson and William Ellery Channing

Emerson (1803-1892)

Ralph Waldo Emerson is considered one of the greatest thinkers America has ever produced.

He grew up in a Unitarian family – father was a Unitarian Minister - Went to Harvard and became a Unitarian Minister but left the ministry and the Unitarian Church after his first wife's death to devote his time to writing and speaking.

Emerson's ideas emerged out of European, classical and non-western thought from the writing of others --- including introducing Hinduism and Confuciousism philosophy to America. His essays presented a series of ideas that shaped a new vision of America.

In his Divinity school address (1838) he emphasized the humanity of Jesus and the need for personal intuition of religious truth and on the limitations of all ministers.

"I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching." In other words, I don't need the old world, I need the new one.

He believed in Self-reliance--- that the Conscience should override the dictates of any religious practice

Like Socrates, Emerson believed the "inner voice" was the guide to this intuitive knowledge

And Discarded Calvinism with its ideas of inherent depravity and dogma-- For voluntary ethical conduct and the ability of the intellect to discern what is ethical.

This was radical theology

Emerson was a prolific writer and essayist . . . his essays presented a series of ideas that shaped a new vision of America and Americans. And changed American writing

Henry David Thoreau—An American Original

He was born in 1817 went to Harvard and lived a solitary – but eventful --- life. Died of tuberculosis in his 40s.

Thoreau gave us a new way of living and a new view of each American individual.

The idea of nature was central to his thinking—not an abstract idea of "nature" but a wild nature beyond humans.

Thoreau helped to create the idea of the *power of place* in America and inspired a powerful strain of American sensitivity to the natural world. He encouraged us to "simplify, Simplify, Simplify"

Like many transcendentalists, he was an eclectic thinker, drawing on such sources as ancient Hindu and ancient Greek texts or to cite his own experience – as evidence of truth.

Thoreau gave up on the church in any form but was baptized a Unitarian and buried in a Unitarian cemetery.

Thoreau's powers of observation, his anti-materialism and his sense of surging energy at the center of the nonhuman world all contributed to a sensibility that has resonated throughout America and beyond over the past two centuries.

He's considered a founder of the modern environmental movement, influencing John Burroughs in New York and John Muir in California, and has been called "The father of our national and state parks." Thoreau changed the way people wrote about nature – Today, Nature writers—like Annie Dillard -- consider Thoreau a father figure.

Thoreau's belief in civil disobedience -- nonviolent resistance to unjust laws can be found in the deeds of Gandhi and King and today in the UUA Anti-Immigration protests in Arizona

And we associate Thoreau with Walden Pond. Thoreau –with the help of Bronson Alcott-- built that rustic cabin And lived alone there for just two years and wrote his best-known piece "Walden"– Actually the cabin wasn't really out in the boonies – just 2 miles from Concord and Thoreau would walk over to Emerson's house for dinner.

Emerson said of Thoreau: "He was bred to no profession, he never married, he lived alone, he never went to church, he never voted, he refused to pay a tax to the state, he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco, and thought a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun"

Branson Alcott and educational reform.

Alcott was the self-educated son of an illiterate farmer and was known for his boundless enthusiasm and optimism – and impracticality.

Alcott was a member of the Transcendentalist Club – with close ties to Emerson and Thoreau -- But is best known as an educational reformer

The Educational model in 1830s Boston was based on “breaking the spirit and subduing the will” of students and instilling rote memorization.

Alcott felt that “The child should be approached with reverence” and founded the Temple school in 1838. Corporeal punishment was eliminated.... If a student did poorly then the instructor put out his own hand to be hit. He institutes recess, physical education, and field trips for both girls and boys. He believed that students should be involved in their education by creating their own lesson plans, journal, and participate in class discussion. And enrolled an African-American student.

He also founded Fruitlands Community an early attempt at a humanist utopia.

Louisa May Alcott – Bronson’s daughter and the better known Alcott -- who authored “Little Women” a perennial best seller and an influential member of the Transcendentalist club. She worked as a civil war nurse and became a prolific author of children’s books – which allowed her to subsidize her father’s failing social experiments. Alcott was a abolitionist and feminist.

Walt Whitman—1819-1892 – Was – above all our poet of democracy. America’s poet with a unique voice. He saw himself as “the Poet” as described by Emerson in an 1844 essay.

A prophetic voice of for and by the people Brought new subjects into poetry – and in the Leaves of Grass -- The importance of sexuality and the value of human labor—that all employment was potentially noble. Part of Transcendentalist doctrine – everyone was divine, because nature is divine, that all are equal including woman (pretty subversive in the 1840s) that meant the one could celebrate themselves

First poem in leaves of grass begins;” I celebrate myself {and sing myself] /And what I assume you shall assume/ for every atom belonging to me as gad belongs to you.”

Transcendentalism’s legacy?

Transcendentalism's ideas changed America . . . contributing to reforms and ways of thinking that created modern America and are still with us today – liberal theologies, the rise of the periodical press, creation of the non-fiction essay, utopian and religious experiments, school reform, human rights ----- women's rights, anti-slavery, native Americans ---civil disobedience and non-violent protests, and the environmental movement.

Emerson and Thoreau each brought new voices into American letters. Walt Whitman almost invented modern American poetry – under the pressure of Emerson's desire for a "Poet" of the entire nation.

And by now you can see that transcendentalist theology has become the basis of our own seven principles. The inherent of everyone, the interconnected web, democratic principles . . .

At his one-hundredth lecture before the Concord Lyceum in 1880, Emerson looked back at the heyday of Transcendentalism:

(Quote)

"It seemed a war between intellect and affection; a crack in Nature, which split every church in Christendom into Papal and Protestant; Calvinism into Old and New schools . . . brought new divisions into ;politics; as the new conscience touching temperance and slavery. The key to the period appeared to be that the mind had become aware of itself. Men grew reflective intellectual. There was a new consciousness v. . . The modern mind believed that the nation exists for the individual, for the guardianship and education of every person These Ideas, roughly written in revolutions and national movements, in the mind of the philosopher had far more precision; the individual is the world.