

Trailing Clouds of Glory

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Perhaps because we are a small (but mighty) faith tradition, we Unitarian Universalists tend to claim famous people as our own.

For instance, we often call Thomas Jefferson Unitarian, but though he vocally admired our tradition, he never seems to have actually claimed it as his own.

Some are eager to highlight that President Obama was a UU for about eight months when he was ten years old and attended Sunday School at a UU church in Hawaii.

Or that Mariah Carey's parents attended a Long Island congregation for a while

Recently Emma Watson, you know, Hermione Granger, from the Harry Potter movies, took to twitter to say she didn't believe in Hell, and I heard a few folks call her Unitarian Universalist as well, though I doubt she's ever heard of us!

But there is one group of 19th century celebrities that truly do belong in our great cloud of cultural saints – women like Margaret Fuller and Louisa May Alcott – men like Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker.

Whether you've escaped with Thoreau to Walden pond, or read about the Oversoul in an English Literature class, many Americans have spent time with this group of writers, thinkers and reformers known as the Transcendentalists.

Many of these men and women did indeed stand in the Unitarian tradition and much of their thought represented a strong critique of the Unitarian orthodoxy of their time, to the extent that some left the faith altogether.

In fact Transcendentalism, as well as being an important cultural movement in it's own rite- sometimes called the first truly American intellectual movement - can also be seen as an important reforming movement in the Unitarian Tradition.

As Jackie Clement and Allison Cornish write in their curriculum "Faith Like a River," "Where the liberal Christianity of the time [represented by the Unitarians] took reason, tradition, and biblical scholarship as its foundations, Transcendentalism made personal spiritual experience and individual conscience its guides. Viewing the Unitarianism of the day as cold and dry, the Transcendentalists wanted a

religion unmediated by priest or church, one that allowed for a personal connection to the Divine.”

Indeed, Emerson in his controversial Divinity School Address, his shot across the bow to the orthodoxy, described the standing-order Unitarian churches as hollow, dry, and creaking with formality. He exhorted the preachers of his day to leave the text behind and instead preach “life, passed through the fire of thought.”

The Transcendentalists were idealists, in several senses of the word.

In the historic sense, the Transcendental club – that group of scholars, clergy, writers, and reformers who mark this clear period of American intellectual history – were heavily influenced in their work by an intellectual movement that we now call German Idealism.

The German Idealists, particularly represented by theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, believed there is a realm of ideals that can be accessed not by our physical experience or even by rational thought, but by our intuition and inner feeling, a generalized internal spiritual sensibility. Schleiermacher described the basis of religion as an internal feeling of ultimate dependence on God, a feeling that sprung not from without, but from internal wellsprings of religiosity within each of us.

As historian Philip Gura puts it in his book *American Transcendentalism*, this notion of “universal divine inspiration – grace as the birthright of all – was the bedrock of of the Transcendentalist Movement.”

Emerson’s passage on “the Oversoul” in the reading we shared this morning puts this philosophical position into poetry. “That the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.” And “within us is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.”

“The highest dwells within us.” This position of philosophical idealism – this idea that we can know God and the good by our very own intuition translated into a kind of idealism as we might define it today - idealism as an optimistic hope.

Because they believed in the divine spark and moral sensibility within, Transcendentalists had an extremely hopeful view of human nature and our ability to improve our circumstances.

Indeed, the bedrock of Transcendentalist thought was the understanding of human nature as naturally good, attuned to the holy, and trustworthy. In the words of William Wordsworth, whose brand of English Romanticism also influenced the Transcendentalists, “trailing clouds of glory do we come, from God who is our home, heaven lies about us in our infancy.”

We arrive on this earth not just ok, not just good enough, but trailing clouds of glory.

These thinkers believed in our inborn nobility of spirit, and they sought to build upon that internal sense of the holy and the good through their actions and activism.

These leaders of Transcendental philosophy were early proto-feminists like Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody. They were abolitionists like Theodore Parker. They were educational reformers like Bronson Alcott. They were dissidents like Henry David Thoreau, who provided a theological and philosophical argument for civil disobedience upon which decades of powerful justice work would be based.

They were dedicated to their idealism to the extent of centering every aspect of their lives around their vision. Henry David Thoreau went away to live in the woods at Walden, though it should be noted that his cabin in the woods was only about a mile from his parents' house. Margaret Fuller created salons of conversation and liberation for the elite women of her day. Bronson Alcott create a school around his transcendental ideas of education.

The idealism of this worldview even led a group of transcendental thinkers to create utopian communities at Brook Farm and Fruitlands in Massachusetts, seeking to create an entire society based around their lofty ideals. In these communities, the conditions were egalitarian, the work hard, and the prize placed upon personal improvement not only through work, but through pursuits aimed toward expanding one's own intellectual, cultural, and spiritual horizons. Residents aimed to share the work evenly so that all would be given the time to develop their own personality into further creativity and deeper spiritual life.

These utopian experiments failed, and some point to the extreme individualism inherent in the Transcendental worldview as being incompatible with the sense of collectivism needed for a contained and intentional community.

Certainly there are valid critiques of the Transcendental worldview, especially in our time - individualism being one of them - for Emerson and many of his contemporaries, the internal impetus for spiritual life meant that it was something you did alone. Indeed, self-reliance was lifted up as supreme goal, as another Emerson essay describes. And Thoreau left society entirely for a time, though not as fully as he might have you believe.

Yet, if the self was the only way in to the journey, it did seem that the destination was some deep knowledge of one's place in a larger whole - the oversoul not just a supernatural phenomenon, but a communion of all souls - where each part and particle is related.

Like mystics throughout the ages, the Transcendentalists sought that experience of unity - and sought it through solitary means. Margaret Fuller writes of her own mystical experience in the reading we shared this morning... "I saw there was no

self; that selfishness was all folly, and the result of circumstance; that it was only because I thought 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.”

Part and parcel with this mystical experience, seemed to be a calling to live up to its dictates: if the religious and moral sensibility live within us, then it is our job to live ever more perfectly by morality’s dictates.

I do believe we come trailing clouds of glory. But let’s be honest, we can also whip up one hell of a storm.

If moral perfectibility is the goal, time and time again our society and the heavier parts of our own souls have already taught us that we will fail.

Yet, if we can replace the moral perfectionism with an abiding sense of hope, and see that inner spring of the divine not as an unacheivable mandate but as a gracious guide, as indeed Theodore Parker did, then perhaps we can feed those wisps of glory with a sense of grace and a promise to try again when we inevitably fail.

Indeed, Parker spoke of his own failures, a time as a child when he felt the hand of violence stirring within him, only stayed at the last minute by some inarticulate sentiment. He recalls speaking with his mother of the experience and asking her what it was that had stayed his hand.

She replied: "Some men call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul of man. If you listen and obey it, then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you all in the dark and without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice."

No inevitable march to moral perfection then, but an attunement to the still small voice within, is the true nourishment of that inner spring.

Perhaps this gentler hope could have softened the rigid expectations in the Transcendentalists utopian experiments. For the expectations of ever-greater cultural, intellectual, and spiritual achievement contained within them a growing elitism that was hard to counteract.

But it needn’t be that way, for in each utopian experience came glimpses of an egalitarian spirit that attempted to give every soul room to grow as it saw fit. Indeed, perhaps planted within their vision, it would not be so hard for us to find a utopian dream based not on mutual striving, but on mutual worth and dignity.

God knows our world good use a bit of utopian dreaming. A bit of faith in the capacity of every person to hear that holy inner voice, to listen, and to live according to its dictates.

Amid today's cynicism and focus on material gain, we could use a little idealism in our lives. In our moments of despair, we could use the unreasonable but persuading power of hope among us.

I want to walk around trailing clouds of glory, to claim heaven as my birthright here on this earth. And to see everyone else trailing glory as well. As long as we acknowledge that our clouds may also carry storms.

It is ours as inheritors of this tradition to nurture an ultimate hope that takes seriously our own failings.

It is ours to maintain a faithful optimism that extends beyond the individual to our siblings of every faith in trust of the agency and morality inherent within each and all.

And perhaps it is even ours to build a utopian vision... one based not on pursuit of moral perfection, but on recognizing and enlarging the worth that is inherent to us already - one that prizes engaging with all people in non-coercive relationships of freedom, solidarity, and mutual concern.

“Within us is the soul of whole;
the wise silence,
the universal beauty,
to which every part and particle is equally related;
the eternal One.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius;
when it breathes through our will, it is virtue,
when it flows through our affections, it is love.” (Emerson)

May it be so.