


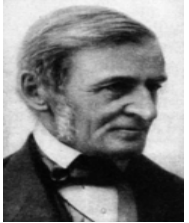



5 - The Transcendentalists

	Welcome and Chalice lighting
	Now that we have the Unitarians and the Universalists completely separate from the orthodox church of their day (and from each other), let's stop and take a look at how they got here. By the way, the notes from the first four sessions of this class are posted on the Emerson website, under Adult Ed Curriculum.
It Started With	Remember that this section of religious history began with Jesus of Nazareth in a small section of the near East called Palestine
	<p>But very soon after his death, his message had spread way beyond Palestine to the whole Mediterranean area. And people began to argue about what he had preached and what it meant. Many, many off-shoots claimed to be the real teachings of Jesus such as the Essenes, the Gnostics and Ebionites. Someone had to take charge .</p> <p>In 325 ce, at the Council of Nicaea, the Doctrine of the Trinity – that Jesus was the same substance as God -- was made the orthodox policy of the church, and 55 years later, this form of Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire. By 393 C.E, the Bible was essentially canonized. “This Book contains all the truth and we are the ones who will tell you what it is.” And , if you will, religion was firmly fixed on the right side of the spectrum</p>
	<p>In 1453 Guttenberg invented the printing press. As a result, the Bible was made available to everyone, and mumblings began about what it really said – and meant -- became louder... In 1517 Martin Luther protested the sale of indulgences and ended up being excommunicated. He retaliated by spear heading a movement that changed forever the religious scene. The Protestant Reformation. And religious thought moved left.</p>
<p>One God!</p> 	<p>Martyrs such as Servetus and educated theologians such as Socinus, Francis David and Joseph Priestly read the Bible for themselves and could find nothing to support the Doctrine of the Trinity. Hmmm, they mused. Might that mean that Jesus was not the same as God? And so theology inched again to the left.</p>
	<p>Unitarianism developed in the United States, primarily from the Congregational churches in New England, almost apart from the older movement in England. But as in England, Trinitarism gave way to Arianism (a belief that Jesus was not God, but was not quite human and was above all humans. Gradually through the preaching of William Ellery Channing and others, that thought changed to see Jesus as the chosen prophet of God, fully human, but exalted above all other Prophets, and theology again moved left. Both Unitarianism and Universalism of</p>

	<p>this time were still very much in the Christian camp. They practiced communion and baptism, believed in the Scriptures, including heaven and hell, and saw the miracles and supernatural events as necessary evidence of God’s election of Jesus as his spokesman. A Sunday sermon typically would be a learned examination of a passage of scripture, but very little about how that scripture should pertain to daily life</p>
	<p>In the late seventeenth and 18th centuries, The Enlightenment swept over Europe and eventually to America. It actually started with Copernicus back in 1543, and accelerated with the work of Newton and the philosophies of John Locke and John Milton. Enlightenment challenged only automatic authority, not religion itself, but the results were the same: men began to question the tenants they had been taught by Calvin and others, and the results pushed accepted theology again to the left. The Great Awakening of 1754 nudged it back a bit, but the genie was out of the bottle for good.</p>
<p>Transcendentalists</p> 	<p>Then, in the early 1800’s, a group of well-educated men and women <u>shoved</u> accepted theology to the left. ?What was the central idea that held all those authors and poets and philosophers together so that they deserved this categorical name, Transcendentalists?</p> <p>I’ve always had trouble understanding what “transcends” and its derivatives mean. So I googled it: . It is based upon the concept of transcendence, the rising to a state beyond sense experience, which was developed by the Greek philosopher Plato. Within his concept of transcendence Plato affirmed the existence of absolute goodness that he characterized as something not describable and only knowable through intuition.</p>
<p>More Well-known Transcendentalists</p> 	<p>The Transcendentalists can be understood in one sense by their context -- by what they were rebelling against, what they saw as the current situation and therefore as what they were trying to be different from.</p> <p>One way to look at the Transcendentalists is to see them as a generation of well educated people who lived in the decades before the American Civil War. These people, mostly New Englanders, mostly around Boston and many neighbors, were attempting to create a uniquely American body of literature. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller and Walt Whitman met monthly to read each other’s work and then went on to publish volumes of popular poetry and prose.</p>
<p>Impetus for Change</p>	<p>We want to look at the Transcendentalists to see them as a generation of people struggling to define spirituality and religion in a way that took into account the</p>

new understandings their age made available.

The new Biblical Criticism in Germany and elsewhere had been looking at the Christian and Jewish scriptures through the eyes of literary analysis and had raised questions for some about the old assumptions of religion.

The Enlightenment had come to new rational conclusions about the natural world, mostly based on experimentation and logical thinking. The pendulum was swinging, and another way of thinking -- less rational, more intuitive, more in touch with the senses -- was coming into vogue

This new generation looked at the previous generation's rebellions of the early 19th century Unitarians and Universalists against traditional Trinitarianism and against Calvinist predestinationarianism. This new generation decided that the revolutions had not gone far enough, and had stayed too much in the rational mode. After all, they argued, God gave humankind the gift of intuition, the gift of insight, the gift of inspiration. Why waste such a gift?

Added to all this, the scriptures of non-Western cultures were discovered in the West, translated, and published so that they were more widely available. The Harvard-educated Emerson and others began to read Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, and examine their own religious assumptions against these scriptures. In their perspective, a loving God would not have led so much of humanity astray; there must be truth in these scriptures, too. Truth, if it agreed with an individual's intuition of truth, must be indeed truth.

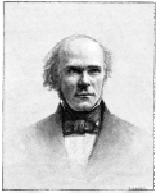


Emerson's Harvard Divinity School Address of 1838 has been cited as a gauntlet thrown down to the Unitarian clergy of the day. "Corpse-cold" Emerson called the previous generation of rational religion. **"The stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed; the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man; all these indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology. It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God IS, not was; that He speaketh, not spake."**

And speaking to the newly graduated ministers: **"Yourself a new-born bard of the Holy Ghost: Cast behind you all conformity and acquaint men at first hand with deity."**

Emerson is probably the best known of the Transcendentalists and Laura will be talking about him from the pulpit May 31, so add that date to your calendar. I'd

like to introduce you to Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller and the Alcotts as representatives of the group.



Theodore Parker is a pivotal figure in Unitarian History. He was only 9 years old when William Ellery Channing, the accepted leader of the older Unitarians, had preached the Baltimore sermon protesting the Calvinist idea of man. Parker, together with Emerson, ushered in this new era in the development of Unitarianism, more radical and a greater departure from traditional Protestant Christianity. The conservative Unitarians, he said, **were aristocratic, exclusive and smug, proud of their small choice numbers. A church of old men goes to its grave; one of young men goes to its work.**

And work was what Parker thought the church should be about. His sermons, while grounded on solid scholarship, were fearless in discussions of serious issues. He spoke to the conscience of the community on the social evils of the time: low wages, bad housing, inadequate schools and a press subservient to its advertisers. With the years he grew more radical but not less religious, and increasingly threw himself in social reform, urging greater freedom for women, temperance, prison reform and preaching against capital punishment and war. He urged churches to take a stand against slavery, and was threatened with a jail sentence for his part in the underground railroad. Theodore Parker, more than any other of the Transcendentalists, turned Unitarian thinking away from orthodox religion and toward the fulfillment of its liberalizing mission. Above all, he stood for freedom for the human spirit, from all outside authorities and indignities, except the duties to God and man.



Margaret Fuller, (May 23, 1810 – July 19, 1850) was a journalist, critic and women's rights advocate. She was the first full-time female book reviewer in journalism. Her book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is considered the first major feminist work in the United States. She became the first editor of the transcendental publication *The Dial* in 1840 before joining the staff of the *New York Tribune* under Horace Greeley in 1844. By the time she was in her 30s, Fuller had earned a reputation as the best-read person in New England, male or female, and became the first woman allowed to use the library at Harvard College.. A year after publishing her book, she was sent to Europe for the *Tribune* as its first female correspondent. She soon became involved with the revolution in Italy. She also met Giovanni Ossoli, with whom she had a child. All three members of the family died in a shipwreck off Fire Island, New York, traveling back to the United States in 1850. Fuller's body was never recovered.



The Alcotts: Those of you who have read Geraldine Brook’s prize winning book “March” or Louis May Alcott’s “Little Women” already know a lot about the Alcotts. Bronson Alcott, the father, really did sell books and merchandise in the American South when he was 17. He returned to his home in the Boston area to become a school teacher in 1823. His Temple School, while at first fashionable, advocated self-analysis, with an emphasis on conversation and questioning rather than lecturing and drill. He taught his interpretation of the Scriptures, and finally, when he admitted an African-American child, the parents rebelled and took their children out of school. Alcott was himself an abolitionist, and pioneered the strategy of tax resistance to slavery, which Henry David Thoreau made famous in *Civil Disobedience*. Alcott, along with several others of the Transcendentalists financed John Brown, and occasionally helped fugitive slaves escape via the Underground Railroad.

Bronson, a neighbor of Emerson, was one of the original members of the Transcendental Club. He also was one of the organizers of the ill-fated Transcendental center that was conceived as a utopian socialist experiment in farm living and nature meditation called Fruitlands. It failed within 9 months, and the family moved back to Concord. Louisa May wrote about life on Fruitlands in her paper *Transcendental Wild Oats*. Bronson was a sought-after speaker in the Concord/Boston area. He often discussed Platonic philosophy, the illumination of the mind and soul by direct communion with Spirit. His teachings greatly influenced the growing mid-19th century New Thought movement.



Like her protagonist in *Little Women*, Louisa May was the second daughter of Bronson and Abigail Alcott. Her early education was from her father with lessons also from neighbors Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller, who were all family friends. Poverty made it necessary for her to go to work at an early age as an occasional teacher, seamstress, governess, domestic helper, and writer. She wrote her first book, *Flower Fables* for Ellen Emerson in 1849. In 1860, Louisa May began writing for the *Atlantic Monthly*. When the American Civil War broke out, she served as a nurse in the Union Hospital at Georgetown. Her letters home – revised and published in the *Commonwealth* and collected as *Hospital Sketches* garnered her first critical recognition for her observations and humor.

In her later life, Louisa May became an advocate for women's suffrage and was the first woman to register to vote in Concord, Massachusetts, in a school board election. Louisa was part of a group of female authors who addressed women’s

	<p>issues in a modern and candid manner. Their works were, as one newspaper columnist of the period commented, "among the decided signs of the times."</p> <p>Louisa May remained single throughout her life. She explained her "spinsterhood" in an interview "because I have fallen in love with so many pretty girls and never once the least bit with any man."¹</p> <p>Louisa May contracted typhoid fever and was treated with calomel, a compound containing mercury. Recent analysis of Louisa May's illness suggests that mercury poisoning was not the culprit in her death. Her chronic health problems are associated with an autoimmune disease, not acute mercury exposure. Moreover, a late portrait of her shows on her cheeks rashes characteristic of lupus. Louisa May died in Boston, on March 6, 1888, at age 55, two days after visiting her father who was on his deathbed.</p>
Later Years	<p>What became of the Transcendentalists and their message? The Dial, their literary magazine, lasted only from 1840 until 1844, when subscriptions no longer covered the cost of printing. Emerson quit his pulpit over the question of communion and spent the rest of his days giving lectures and writing articles that were published in the Boston area. Parker continued to expound on their theories from his pulpit until his death. Margaret Fuller became a foreign correspondent. Henry David Thoreau became a land surveyor and continued to write increasingly detailed natural history observations about the township in his journal, a two-million word document he kept for 24 years. When Thoreau was asked on his deathbed if he had made peace with God, he replied, "I didn't know we had quarreled."</p>
Accomplishments	<p>But what of their message? They were seeking a religion more immediate, more personal, more experiential, which did not depend on the accuracy of the Bible, but which grew out of a deep, internal sense of the sacred and holy dimension of existence. The message resonated with many of the Unitarian clergy of the day, especially the young ones, but was roundly criticized by the American Unitarian Association. Since, however, there was no mechanism to discipline or restrain unorthodox opinions, Parker and other continued to hold out this new personal religion and now we can say that Unitarianism took another giant leap to the left as a result of the Transcendentalists.</p>
	<p>Truth, if it agreed with an individual's intuition of truth, must be indeed truth</p>