

Transcendental Wild Oats

Unity Church
February 20th, 2011

Do you ever say to yourself, I've had it! My life has just become too complicated. There are too many demands on my time and worse yet on my conscience. I need a change, a big change. I'm outa here. Such personal psycho-spiritual moments of desperation inspire what are called eschatological theologies. The slow accretion of shoulds, the long litany of ways we tell ourselves we fall far short of living lives that meet our own moral standards, that stern self-judgment we inherit from our puritan forbearers all combine insisting that we change our lives. And then what?

The year is 1843. Under the guidance of Mother Ann, Shaker communities have taken root in Northern New England. Convinced they are members of the last generation on earth before Christ comes again, they shun procreation in the interest of purity that they might be ready to go with him when he comes. In up-State New York, in the burned-over district so-named for its receptivity to evangelical passions, the vision of William Miller has spread like wildfire. Miller's calculations, based upon a close reading of the essential Biblical sources, indicated Christ would come again that very year. Tens of thousands sold or gave away everything they owned, put on robes of sackcloth and stood, with their children at their sides, out on the highways waiting. It was a year of economic turmoil. The poor were going hungry. Meanwhile, in Boston and in Concord, Transcendentalism, despite its essential vagueness, was being tried-out as well-educated people, people who did not subscribe to Christian fundamentalism, searched for answers to ease their existential hunger.

Some traditions teach that paradise is to be found only in the afterlife, that paradise is by its nature, unattainable. But the liberal church has always taught the perfectibility both of ourselves and of our world. Channing taught that Jesus was a perfect human being and that we should model our lives on his perfection. We should follow Jesus but not worship him. He was not the sole begotten son of God, for each and every one of us is a child of God. But by virtue of his discipline, his devotion and his faithfulness he became, for Channing and for liberal Christians everywhere, the greatest teacher that the world has ever known. Just as Jesus was entirely human his gospel points not to the sweet by and by of life after death but to what our friend and colleague J. Alfred Smith refers to as "the nasty now and now," this one life, this one world with all its problems and all its possibilities should be our primary concern.

Theologian, Rebecca Parker, in an essay called "This Holy Ground" published as the first chapter in, A House of Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century, tells us: Eschatology, from the Greek *eschatos* (last) and *logos* (word), is the theological term for "speaking of final things" ultimate hopes. Where are we going? What is the purpose of existence? What is the horizon to which our lives are oriented? All frameworks of meaning

involve a perspective on where it all began and where it will all end. “We are dust and to dust we shall return,” the Christian burial service says. “We travel from the Garden to the Garden,” suggest Persian poet Jalal ad-Din ar-Rumi.

For those of us for whom this one life, this one beloved world is life and world enough, those moments of psycho-spiritual desperation present a real problem. If we can't simply sigh and hope for heaven what can we do? We can work for it. We can plant the seeds of paradise right here on earth. We can live our lives as though we already live in the Beloved Community we long for. That temporal understanding of the Christian message took form over the course of the 19th century as the Social Gospel movement that has helped to transform both the Church and world in a wide variety of ways. It also inspired a number of social experiments, most notably, the Shaker communities, Brook Farm, Fruitlands and then, a hundred years later the communal movement of the 1960's. You and I know how it feels to long to live a purer, less encumbered life. Some of us have even tried it. Many of our transcendentalist ancestors shared that longing. Some even withdrew from the life to which they were accustomed to live in small communities bound together by shared values and a blazing desire to bring their lives into accord with their beliefs.

Before we head to Fruitlands, the communal farm established by the Alcott family, in that momentous year of 1843, I think a brief refresher course on Transcendentalism might be helpful. William Henry Harrison, director of the Fruitlands Museum writes in the introduction of Louisa May Alcott's sarcastic little story Transcendental Wild Oats, “The transcendental movement takes its name from a term used by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant used “transcendental” to refer to those ideas received by intuition instead of through the experience of the senses. This view was in opposition to the philosophy of Locke, who maintained that knowledge came via the senses. The “German philosophy” as it was called, was popularized in England by Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle, and was a part of the Romantic movement begun in the late eighteenth century, which spread slowly to England and America...The transcendentalist view of things, never a systematized doctrine or credo, was promulgated by adherents who made their views public through writings, lectures, and from the pulpit...A full understanding of New England transcendentalism calls for thoughtful reading of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, George Ripley and Orestes Brownson, to mention only a few, It is interesting to note that in this movement women for the first time played an honored part in an American intellectual and spiritual movement.”

Almost all of the significant figures in this movement so central to American intellectual history were Unitarians or Universalists but they were rebels even and especially to the churches from which they emerged. The liberal preachers of the time followed Unitarian, John Locke. They were rational, enlightened, scientific types with little use for anything as slippery as this so-called, intuition. This church, our church is one of the few lasting congregations founded out of the transcendentalist movement. There is an inherent tension between the centrality of individual experience which forms the heart of transcendentalism and the shared

organizational commitment required by congregational life. It's no wonder that we struggle so to find a healthy balance between personal autonomy and the needs of the church.

Zen beat poet Gary Snyder reminds us in Earth House Hold that "the (person) of wide international experience, much learning and leisure-luxurious product of a long and sophisticated history-may with good reason wish to live simply, with few tools and minimal clothes, close to nature." It was with just such a notion in mind that Bronson Alcott, elder spokesman and sometimes oracle of the Transcendentalist circle uprooted his beloved family from the inspiration and support of Concord they so loved and moved with them to a shabby farm close by the village of Harvard, Massachusetts. In describing the intentions of the founders, Louisa May Alcott quotes from a letter written by a fictional rendition of her father Bronson:

"We have made arrangements with the proprietor of an estate of about a hundred acres which liberates this tract from human ownership. Here we shall prosecute our effort to initiate a Family in harmony with the primitive instincts of man...Pledged to the spirit alone, the founders anticipate no hasty or numerous additions to their numbers. The kingdom of peace is entered only through the gates of self-denial; and felicity is the test and the reward of loyalty to the unswerving law of Love."

Louisa's appraisal of the Fruitlands enterprise was harsh. The gates of self-denial have little appeal to most grown-ups and none whatsoever to a curious, well-read ten year old. She loved and admired her father but even as a child, Louisa could see that his lofty ideals overshadowed more practical skills. I would love to sketch the little cast of characters who lived at Fruitlands. The stern exiled Englishman Edward Lane who led Alcott to wonder if the family he so cherished was in the way of his spiritual ascension. I wish I had time to tell you about Unitarian, Isaac Hecker and Universalist Orestes Brownson both of whom spent time at Fruitlands hoping to discover ways that Transcendentalism might serve a social revolution. Disappointed in the class-bound limitations of their own traditions, they both converted to Roman Catholicism, traveled to Rom and received the blessing of the Pope to found what was to become that marvelous American activist order now know as the Paulist Fathers. Or take Joseph Palmer, who sported a beard when to do so was actually illegal and who, from conviction, spent a year in Worcester's jail rather than pay a small fine. Palmer turned out to be the only man about the place with any talent for farming. It fell to Abba, Mother Alcott and the girls to do most of the work while their philosopher husband and father and his dream-tormented friends attempted to think their way through to the harvest.

It's a familiar story. Dreams straining to come true can drive us to foolhardy effort. The march to paradise is long and steep and sometimes asks of us more of us than we have to give. But still...

When I am scrubbed clean,
let a child who has searched
the barn for the perfect egg
offer it to me on her open palm
as if it were the gift of a jewel

on a velvet cushion.

Dreams so often have to be deferred. I for one admire those foolhardy few who try to do what others only dream. I want to walk with you, heavy with seed. I want to claim, and act and mingle my life, and yes friends, the life we all share in the fate of the world.

May it be so and amen.

Readings for February 20th

Dreaming of Rural America

Dreaming of rural America,
I want to unbuild my city
brick by brick, dismantling
sidewalks and smokestacks
and subways. I want
to rush to the airport where planes
line up at their gates
like cows at their stalls for milking.
And taking the first plane out,
I want to enter the ticking heart
of the country and in a rented car
drive for miles past fields scored
with the history of wind; past
silos, those inland lighthouses,
where corn smolders to golden dust.
I want an RD number and a tin mailbox
filled with flowers instead of letters.
I want to bathe in a porcelain tub
under a ceiling sloping towards heaven,
and farmyard smells will drift
through the window like notes
of pungent country music.
When I am scrubbed clean,
let a child who has searched
the barn for the perfect egg
offer it to me on her open palm
as if it were the gift of a jewel
on a velvet cushion. In the dream
of rural America, farmers have lost
the knack of despair. They do not
breathe the diesel fumes of whiskey

into the faces of their women.
They do not wield their leather belts
to erase, on the backs of their sons,
the old stigmata of failure.
And on frozen nights no daughter,
dreaming of cities, leans
out of her window to cast wishes
heavy as iron horseshoes towards
the prong of an impossible star.

from Linda Pastan

For the latter half of the year 1843, ten year old Louisa May Alcott lived with her family on a communal farm near Concord, Massachusetts. Fruitlands was a place built on high ideals and a great deal of soul-searching. Bronson Alcott, Louisa's father and co-founder of the commune, was a transcendentalist philosopher who sought to apply his spiritual principles to living on the land. As with so many dreamers, his back-to-the-garden manifesto devolved—from liberation from societal conventions, into withdrawal from society altogether. This was a progression that the adult Louisa May later gently lampooned in her "Fruitlands Diary", *Transcendental Wild Oats*.

In the diary, Louisa's father declares "... we do not rely so much on scientific reasoning or physiological skill as on the spirit's dictates. The greater part of man's duty consists in leaving alone much of what he now does. Shall I stimulate with tea, coffee or wine? No. Shall I consume flesh? Not if I value health. Shall I subjugate cattle? Shall I claim property in any created thing? Shall I trade? Shall I adopt a form of religion? Shall I interest myself in politics? To how many of these questions —could we ask them deeply enough and could they be heard as having relation to our eternal welfare—could the response be, "Abstain"?

Sowing

In the stilled place that once was a road going down
from the town to the river, and where the lives of marriages grew
a house, cistern and barn, flowers, the tilted stone of borders,
and the deeds of their lives ran to neglect, and honeysuckle
and then the fire overgrew it all, I walk heavy
with seed, spreading on the cleared hill the beginnings
of green, clover and grass to be pasture. Between
history's death upon the place and the trees that would
have come
I claim, and act, and am mingled in the fate of the world.

Wendell Berry