

Earth-Centered Traditions

Lesson 3: Transcendentalism and UU Connection to Nature

10.3.2021

Objectives: Learning about Transcendentalism's connection to nature and UU faith.

Materials: Lesson attachment, bell.

Time allotments: Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins):

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- "Graffiti Wall" questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What does your family do on snowy days?
 - ▶ Do you have a favorite place in nature somewhere? Where?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: Two Truths and One Falsehood (5 minutes max)

Have youth break into small groups of three. Instruct everyone to share three things about themselves: two of them being true, and one false. The other two youth have to guess which is false. Go around the room and share any interesting truths youth discovered about each other.

2. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: *"We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love."*

Teacher reads: (from naturalist, essayist, and Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau)

"Nature is full of genius, full of divinity; so that not a snowflake escapes its fashioning hand."

3. Transcendentalism and Its Influence on Unitarian Universalism (5 minutes)

Teacher briefly summarizes and explains following four points:

- a. Unitarian Universalism is seen by many as an earth-centered tradition. In many *Credo* statements of faith delivered by Unity's *Coming of Age* youth, teenagers frequently

speak of the Boundary Waters as the holiest place they know; or that while uncertain about what/who God might be, they are certain of what nature is and means to them.

- b. Where did our sense of nature as sacred come from? Certainly, we have a respect for native and pagan traditions, but our ideas about nature primarily come from the Transcendentalists, a group of thinkers from New England who created an alternate path for Unitarians and Universalists outside traditional Christianity.
- c. Transcendentalists include Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Henry David Thoreau, Amos Bronson Alcott and Louisa May Alcott. Most high schools require reading transcendentalist essays for English and history classes, including Thoreau's celebrated book *Walden*.
- d. Among Transcendentalists' core beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that "transcends" the physical and empirical, and is only realized through the individual's natural intuition rather than through the doctrines of established religions. In nature, we can best reconnect with the sacred divine within each of us.

4. Go Outside: Agree or Disagree Activity (15 minutes)

****Make sure to extinguish the chalice before leaving the classroom (see step #7).***

Meet outside near the garden/green space (or in case of rain, a larger indoor space). Divide a stretch of ground into two halves, designated as "Agree" and "Disagree." Read aloud statements below from Emerson's essay *Nature* and see if youth agree or disagree with our Transcendentalist ancestor, by moving to the side that reflects their own beliefs. Youth caught in-between should choose side closest to their belief. Give time for youth to explain their choices.

- Nature is best experienced alone. Other people get in the way of your noticing things and finding peace.
- Nature was designed for human beings.
- Industry complements nature. It's good for people to make use of the earth's resources like wood, water, coal, etc.
- Anything natural is good.
- Anything natural is beautiful.
- Cities are nasty. They oppress the human spirit.
- Every single event in the natural world has a spiritual lesson to teach us.
- The only worthwhile similes and metaphors for poetry and language come from nature.
- Nothing in nature is inherently evil.
- If a person looks closely enough, he or she will see God in nature.

- Nature, taken as a whole, is God.
- The world's real religion will eventually be grounded in nature because everyone has the experience of nature in common.

Questions for Discussion:

- Emerson wrote *Nature* (1836) a few decades before scientists began arguing that human emissions of greenhouse gases affect the climate. If Emerson were alive today, how do you think the climate crisis would impact his ideas about nature?
- How does your understanding of the climate crisis impact your responses and ideas about nature?

5. Outdoor Meditation walk (15 minutes)

Gather youth in circle and pass out reading attachment “Excerpts from Walking.” Read aloud and slowly, perhaps dividing the reading between teachers and youths.

After reading, instruct youth to individually go for *a really, reaaaally slow and quiet walk* in which their spirit and body can come awake to the natural world (10 minutes). Inform them that you will ring a bell to begin, and ring the bell again after 10 minutes, so they can gather back in a circle. Ask them to stay within the green space, pay attention to their surroundings, and simply remain alert to the natural world around them. They should **avoid getting into any conversation. No phones or other distractions.**

6. Questions for Discussion (10 minutes)

- Invite youth to reflect and share from their experience of walking in nature.
- It's easy to see how walking is functional, moving us from here to there. But how might walking be a spiritual practice? In other words, how might walking help us feel more connected to ourselves, others, and the larger world?
- Thoreau writes, “*The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses.*” Many today would agree that we are all too preoccupied in our heads, all over the place except right here in our bodies. What makes being completely present so difficult?
- Do you think regularly being in nature and practicing paying close attention to our surroundings impacts the way people feel about and care for the natural world? Why or why not?

7. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying together: “*May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.*”

8. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets