

UU Identity & History

Lesson 6: The Transcendentalist Turn

11.6.2022

Objectives: Explore Transcendentalism as an encompassing framework.

Materials: Worship programs, lesson attachments, paper, pencils, clipboards.

Time allotment: Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service (end class 9:50/11:50 to begin chapel 9:55/11:55).

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:
 - ▶ Why is protecting nature important? Is there something divine or spiritual about nature?
 - ▶ From your most recent worship (likely Story Sunday, Oct 30), what’s one thing that you remember as interesting or meaningful?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.
- **Please take a few minutes to invite reflections from youth about their recent worship experience. Use copies of worship programs as helpful reminder.**
- Skip UU Timeline today.

2. Opening Activity: Continuous Line Contour Drawing (5 minutes)

Drawing is a way of thinking. The Transcendentalists valued thinking, art, and play.

- (a) One teacher put youth in pairs while another teacher pass out blank paper, pencils, clipboards (teachers should participate, at least to make an even number).
- (b) The task is for everyone to draw a continuous line contour portrait of their partner (both people in pair should draw)! Youth can look back and forth from their partner to their paper, but the challenge is **not** to pick up their pencil from the paper. The drawing should be one continuous line.
- (c) After 2-3 minutes, invite youth to show their partner their portrait.
- (d) Ask: In one-to-three words, how would you interpret or describe your portrait?

Remember: this activity is intended as a silly way to practice drawing, “good” contour drawings come in all shapes and sizes!

3. **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 Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau)

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”

4. **Transcendentalism: A cluster of ideas!** (20 minutes)

Teacher’s note: Transcendentalism is a challenging philosophy to pin down for anyone, encompassing many strands of thought, beliefs, and values converging at this point in history. It’s helpful to think of as cluster of ideas! Please take time to review the attachment “Key Transcendentalist Ideas and Figures,” so you can articulate in your own words.

(a) Teacher summarizes: Let’s review! In the early 1800’s the Unitarians (and the Universalists) in New England were defining themselves apart from the Calvinist Congregationalist churches that had a very low view of human beings as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The early Unitarians rejected that image and emphasized instead the capacity for human goodness and perfectibility. They read the Bible carefully and decided there was no such thing as original sin.

Remember the time travel play we read aloud a few weeks ago? With Channing and Emerson?

William Ellery Channing, in 1819, wrote a radical sermon called “Unitarian Christianity” that helped define Unitarians against the Calvinists. In the sermon, Channing had the audacity to say that the Bible was, “a book written for men, in the language of men” whose “meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books,” stressing self-culture and self-cultivation supported by a life of learning, reason, and freedom.

When the children of these early Unitarians grew up, they rebelled against their parents’ intellectual religion declaring it cold and lifeless, rejecting social conformity for a more direct experience of truth and beauty.

(b) Hand out “Are YOU a Transcendentalist?” and have youth take a fun little quiz that outlines some of the major tenets and traits of Transcendentalism.

- The total number of marks is their score (see score box).
- Briefly, invite sharing.

(c) Hand out “Key Transcendentalist Ideas and Figures,” teachers and youth volunteers alternate reading aloud biographies and key points.

5. **Cartoons and Quotes: Core Tenets of Transcendentalism:** (25 minutes)

(a) **Teacher talks:** The boundaries that these figures and ideas transcended can be organized in six core tenets. These core tenets of Transcendentalism have powerfully shaped American history and culture, and we can find their impact everywhere today.

(b) One at a time, place each core tenet card in the middle of the table and ask youth to briefly share what the word/phrase brings to mind.

- ▶ Nonconformity
- ▶ Self-Reliance
- ▶ Confidence in one's Spiritual Intuition
- ▶ Sacredness of Nature
- ▶ Freedom of Thought
- ▶ Civil Disobedience

(c) **Small group activity:** Divide youth into 3-4 groups and hand out copies of "Quotes and Cartoons with a Transcendental Twist." Give groups ~5 minutes to read as many cartoons as they can and discuss which core tenets of Transcendentalism can be found in each cartoon.

(d) Come back together to talk through each quote by Thoreau and Fuller and how their ideas relate to the neighboring cartoons.

(e) **Questions for discussion:**

- What tenets or values of Transcendentalism connect with your own beliefs and values?
- What connections do you see with our modern UU faith?

6. **Extinguish the chalice**, saying together: *"May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts."*

7. **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