

UU Identity & History

Lesson 6: The Transcendentalist Turn

11.7.2021

Objectives: Explore Transcendentalism as an encompassing framework.

Materials: Worship programs, lesson attachments.

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:
 - ▶ Why is protecting nature important? Is there something divine or spiritual about nature?
 - ▶ From your most recent worship (likely Story Sunday, Oct 31), 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.**

2. Opening Activity: Are YOU a Transcendentalist? (5 minutes)

Distribute copies 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.

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! (15 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.

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.

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.

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|---|------------------------|
| ▶ Nonconformity | ▶ Sacredness of Nature |
| ▶ Self-Reliance | ▶ Freedom of Thought |
| ▶ Confidence in one's Spiritual Intuition | ▶ 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 5-7 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. UU Timeline (5 minutes)

- On the wall, there will be a long, blank, laminated timeline tick marked with centuries. There will also be small laminated circles listing events in our history, plus some tape for attaching those on the timeline.
- From week to week, based on the events covered by the lesson, invite the class as a whole to place historical events on the timeline as best as they know. (Remember to select only those events covered so far in the course.)
- We will keep adding to the timeline, week after week, as we cover more UU history.
- Teachers can help by referencing the actual UU timeline (last page of lesson plan).

7. 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

UU Timeline

- Earliest written evidence of Judaism, the first major religion with only one God (1000 BCE)
- Jesus of Nazareth born (around 4 BCE)
- Jesus of Nazareth executed (33 CE)
- Christian church votes to decide if Jesus is the same as God (325 CE)
- Martin Luther starts the Reformation, when Protestant churches started splitting off from the Catholic Church (1517)
- Unitarian Michael Servetus burnt at the stake for writing books that reject the idea of God as a Trinity (three persons in one) (1553)
- First official declaration of national religious tolerance (in Transylvania) (1568 CE)
- First Unitarian church built in North America (1686 CE)
- First Universalist sermon preached in North America (1770 CE)
- American Revolutionary War (1775–1783)
- First time a Unitarian minister publicly preaches that the Bible might not actually be written by God but by humans (1819 CE)
- Unitarians and Universalists work to abolish slavery (1830s)
- American Transcendentalism (about 1836-1860)
- Ralph Waldo Emerson preaches a graduation speech at Harvard in which he questions whether Jesus was any more divine than any other person (1838)
- Humanism and atheism emerge in our faith (1860s post-civil war and/or 1918+ post WWI)
- Unity Church – Unitarian built at Holly and Grotto (1905)
- Unitarian Service Committee formed to save Jewish refugees from Nazi persecution (1940)
- The Unitarian Church and the Universalist Church merge together to form the Unitarian Universalist Association (1961)
- The Seven Principles are adopted as a statement of our faiths' common values and ideals (1961, 1984)
- General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association held in Minneapolis, MN (2010)
- Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU) is formed in the wake of conversations among Black UUs at the Movement for Black Lives Convening in Cleveland, OH (July 2015)