

UU Identity & History

Lesson 5: The Transcendentalist Turn

3.17.2019

Objectives: Explore Transcendentalism as an encompassing framework.

Materials: Flipchart, blank cards, 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:
 - ▶ Name something of historical significance connected with Boston, MA?
 - ▶ What places are deeply spiritual or sacred to you?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: Guess Who? (5 minutes max)

Give each youth 2 blank cards to write 2 little known facts about themselves. (Teachers included, too!) For example: *I was born exactly at midnight, I am ambidextrous, I have gone hiking in the Swiss Alps.* Teacher collects and mixes cards in a basket, then draws one card at a time and reads aloud for youth to guess whose fact it is. (Please don't guess aloud if it's your own card!) See who can guess the most correctly.

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. Group Discussion on Nature (5 minutes)

- Do you think it is important to protect the natural environment? If so, what are you doing to protect it? What should our church or society do?
- Why is protecting nature important?
- Is there something divine or spiritual about nature?

5. **Take the self-quiz: 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.

6. **Transcendentalism: Hard to pin down but helpful to think of as cluster of ideas!**
(15 minutes total)

****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. Please take time to review this synopsis so you can articulate in your own words.*

Teacher summarizes: In the early 1800's the Unitarians in New England were defining themselves apart from the Calvinist Congregationalist churches just as the Universalists were doing. Calvinists had a very low view of human beings as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," as this famous sermon title indicates. 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.

In 1819 William Ellery Channing 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 mostly white, 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. **Ralph Waldo Emerson** was among this new generation, wanting to honor intuition, connection with the world of nature, and each individual's potential for direct experience of the divine. They wanted to move beyond and **TRANSCEND:**

- Transcend social norms through non-conformity, self-reliance, and emphasis on individuality.
- Transcend historical religion, especially Christianity, to include Hinduism, Buddhism, and Wisdom traditions of the world that point to Oneness and the spiritual unity of all beings.
- Transcend organized, institutional religion (i.e. church) and connect with God directly.
- Transcend the narrow emphasis of rationalism and materialism of the time, i.e. that only what the physical senses perceive plus the mind's reason is real. Rather, there is a spiritual intuition, an "inner light" in every person that would guide them. The Divine presence is inherent in both humanity and nature and can best be sensed through intuition rather than through reason.

- Transcend an increasingly industrialized society that alienates us from our own souls and foundations best found in Nature. Nature reveals the “face of God.”
- Transcendence and liberation of the *individual* meant transcending *social* barriers to women’s rights, abolition, education reform, labor reform, and more:
 - **Henry David Thoreau’s** “Civil Disobedience” and “Walden”
 - **Margaret Fuller’s** “Woman in the Nineteenth Century” and serving as editor of the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*
 - **Bronson Alcott** who introduced art, music, nature study, field trips, and physical education into the curriculum, and actually encouraged children to ask questions and taught through dialogue and example.
 - **Louisa May Alcott** who is best known for her book, “Little Women.” She was also an abolitionist and a feminist advocating for women’s suffrage.

Questions for discussion (5 minutes of total 15 minutes)

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

7. Cartoons and Quotes: Can you see Transcendentalist ideas at work? (15 minutes)

Teacher summarizes Transcendentalism by addressing each of the attached cards that name 6 core tenets of Transcendentalism, placing them in the middle of the table:

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

These core tenets of Transcendentalism have powerfully shaped American history and culture, and we can find their impact everywhere today.

Small group activity: Divide youth into 3-4 groups and hand out copies of “Quotes and Cartoons with a Transcendental Twist.” Ask groups to take just a few minutes and discuss which core tenets of Transcendentalism can be found in particular cartoons and quotes from Thoreau. Come back together to talk through each quote and cartoon.

8. UU Timeline (5 minutes)

- On the wall, there will be a long, blank, laminated timeline tickmarked with centuries. There will also be small laminated circles listing events in our history, plus some sticky-tack/clips 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).

9. Extinguish the chalice, saying together:

“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”

10. 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)