



SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Transcendental Justice

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The Unitarian Church in Westport

Like so many of us, I grew up with the literature of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson's essay on Self-Reliance moved me deeply in my late high school years, colluding as it did with my own adolescent emergence. Thoreau's classic work On Walden Pond became a touchstone for me in my twenties as a primer on the beauty of living simply. Indeed Thoreau, who was a brilliant writer and is worthy of reading for his prose alone, echoed my sentiments that the planet was in danger of over-consumption and led me to my first career as purveyor of solar energy systems in the Midwest. I truly believed in the gospel of a sustainable future and near steady state economics.

Beyond my naivety and innocence, came the hollow fact that I did not understand these authors for more than great writers echoing my individual impulses to create my own destiny and a mission to save the planet. What I didn't know is that Emerson and Thoreau were part of a much larger and dynamic movement which changed our world. For these men were just two of the leading lights of what would become the Transcendentalist movement, so named for their belief that nature and the laws of nature transcend the pages of any sacred text or any laws of men. What I would learn later is that the Transcendentalists were not only philosophers of our American impulse towards self-determination, but prophets who announced and fought against some of the greatest justice issues of our times; racism, imperialism, sexism and environmental degradation. As John Buehrens, the former president of the UUA will explain on Tuesday evening in his new book talk: "They saw self-transcendence both as evident in an evolving natural world, and as a moral/spiritual imperative for humans trapped in unjust social structures." (Conflagration: How the Transcendentalists Sparked the American Struggle for Racial, Gender, and Social Justice Beacon Press: 2020)

And these prophetic forbearers were not all men and not all ministers: Margaret Fuller who championed women's rights and gender fluidity long before the Suffragists; Elizabeth Peabody, whose bookstore provided the home for the transcendentalists and championed free inquiry; Charles Follen and Rev. Theodore Parker who supported the abolition of slavery decades before the Civil War and who themselves worked on the underground railroad and joined others in financing John Brown's failed raid on Harper's Ferry. Louisa May Alcott, one of the first female authors whose classic Little Women portrayed the sexist reality of American culture, and the precariousness of poverty. Little Women is based largely on the life of the

Alcotts, themselves staunch reformists, who were threatened more than once with eviction. Thomas Higginson, who radicalized the abolitionist movement and brought Frederick Douglas into the mainstream of the Northern resistance to enslavement. Thoreau himself, who expanded his influence after resisting the poll tax that was used to fund the Mexican war that would annex half of Mexico to the United States, and who was partly responsible for the concept of civil disobedience as it was practiced by Gandhi and King. In fact, Gandhi would credit Thoreau, who never left New England, with his formulation of ahimsa, or non-violent resistance.

Transcendentalists were at the foundation of most every social justice cause we hold to be true and right. Sadly, it took me forty years to discover this, trapped as I was in the fallacy that the Transcendentalists were only concerned with self-improvement and spiritual freedom located within the confines of Concord and its vicinity. John Buehrens' book uncovers the radical truth of who these forbearers were. I strongly recommend you find a way to come on Tuesday night.

But the greater tragedy for us perhaps is the separation our mistaken understanding of Transcendentalism has left us with. As has been the culture of this church since its inception, this sanctuary of glass is seen as spiritual but not political. Within these walls we have worshipped the poetry and prose of the individual as worthy above and beyond the world in need of our privilege. Not always, but often enough. Indeed, this sanctuary built on transcendental values of looking to nature for our sacred solace has perhaps betrayed a greater calling that the real transcendentalists took to be as their life work. Beyond the poetry celebrating the sublime and the sunny, beyond the faith that we were sheltered here from the storms of the world, is a farther and louder calling. A calling that the architect of this building saw in its design; two hands praying but apart to let the light of truth through. But what is that truth? Is it that “all will be well”? Or is it that we are to be fed and emboldened in order to go out into the world beyond this glass and take up the causes that our transcendentalist forbearers were actually calling us to? In fact, if our hands are slightly apart and the light of God is shining through, should we close them in prayer or open them in service? Is it possible that we have gotten it wrong? Is it possible that what we thought was the purpose of our church to inspire has falsely entrapped us in the soothing balm of staving off the world and not engaging it? Not for all of us, but for some. In other words, friends, perhaps this is the year for us to truly step out of our glass chapel and engage in the world of justice, votes and politics, to “UU The Vote” as the UUA President Susan Fredrick Grey has called on us to do.

Transcendentalism is not a philosophy of insulated self-reliance alone, but a religion, our religion, of transcendental justice! A calling out as much or more than a calling in. Can you hear me on this?

And I know I have been lulled into this complacency as well. After Donald Trump was elected my preaching took a decidedly interior turn; realizing you needed strength and resilience for what has been an outrageous and numbing assault on common decency. My sermons have followed in the steps of my predecessor, calling us into our better selves, holding up the worth and dignity of you and all those who suffer, celebrating in Whitman's words "the body electric," the soul of the best of humanity as a tonic to the news cycle's toxins. What I have realized is that I fell into the half-truth of our transcendentalist faith (and as a mystic with a love for nature, I am a Transcendentalist through and through); the half-truth that transcendentalism is only about self-realization and improvement. It was easy to do this, especially after I received so much criticism from some of you that my sermons were too political, whatever that meant.

But I am telling you today that political is also the spiritual. I am reminded of what a previous intern minister Julio Torres said after being criticized for being too political in his preaching. "To deny the political in my preaching is to deny my identity as a preacher and man of color, the political is part of my spiritual identity." Yes, of course I will still preach to our inner needs, but I will also be calling us into our greater needs as a people, and as a congregation. This is where our integrity lies. For what use is the worth of one another if we are not willing to stand up for other's inherent worth; the worth of the homeless, the worth of the addicted, the worth of refugee and the immigrant, the worth of families and children, the worth of black and brown people, the worth of women and all those whose gender identities are not accepted by our society at large. Is this not our calling as well? A calling to go out beyond this walls, in the same spirit as our transcendentalist forbearers: Margaret Fuller, who died for her worth as a woman writer and mother; Theodore Parker, who was the original author of the phrases echoed by others "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" or "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice;" or Julia Ward Howe, author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic but also the founder of Mother's Day as a day of peace. These transcendental justice makers were more than the founders of the American Renaissance as John Buehrens writes, but those who started a "second American Revolution –demanding an end to slavery, greater equality for women and greater social opportunity for all." (Buehrens page 8)

Theirs to start and ours to do. Can you still hear their echoes? Because our work is not done; yes, slavery is diminished but the enslavement of black and brown bodies into a system of poverty and criminalization is far from done. Yes, women can vote, but they are still subject to unequal pay, abuse, harassment and a glass ceiling that kept our first woman from the presidency. Yes, few people in America starve anymore, but the growing gap between the rich and the rest of us has grown twice the size of the last gilded age in the last century's 20's, homelessness is on the rise, and as I know all too well from what I give out of my discretionary

fund, more than a few of us are just a paycheck away from being without a home ourselves. Do you hear what I am saying?

Beloveds, as John Buehrens reminds us, “many of us enjoy privilege The question is always ‘What do we do with that privilege?’ For the transcendentalists the spiritual method included deep and honest self-reflection, shown in their journals and books – and a commitment to justice, wholeness and creative pursuit of beloved community – the kingdom of God here on earth.” (Buehrens page 9) We remember the transcendentalists for their written words, words about self-realization and the power of Nature, but we have neglected their actions, actions imbued with just purpose. We have failed to see the integrity of the whole of who they were. Perhaps we have failed to see the integrity of the whole we are meant to be as well.

I know I have failed in this. So today, I am calling on us and leading us towards the integrated whole of our faith; self-improvement and an appreciation of the sublime, but also, connection to one another and justice in our world. In other words, I am calling us to our mission statement “to inspire” yes, and to “connect and act”. Can I get an amen?

In the closing chapter of John Buehrens' book he proffers this wider understanding: “If you care about nature as transcending yet nurturing to us all, they, too, saw materialistic greed threatening the sustainability of earth as a home for our children If you care about equality, as they did, transcending divisions based on gender, race, religion, class and wealth. If you consider the affections as well as the traditions, as important in moral discernment; if you want religion to offer transcendent ends around which to unite for human survival and flourishing ... then the Transcendentalists ... are not long ago and far away. They are actually quite near. Their hopes live in all of us who are variously inspired by their prophetic insight, courage and example.” (Buehrens page 289). They are, in fact, still us and their faith is still ours. Transcendent and just. So may we become. Amen.