



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

**SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

**The Wisdom of Transcendentalism**

*The Rev. Dr. John Morehouse*

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It is good to connect with you all virtually today. A lot happens in a week, much less 24 hours. Just two weeks ago we were together as a congregation although avoiding physical contact as much as possible. Now we are learning so much about how to connect virtually. No, it's not the same as being together in a room but it is surprisingly more powerful than I think many of us thought.

I have been contemplating what kind of message to bring to you today. I find myself reaching back to our Unitarian ancestors for answers. Emerson, who is better known for his peons to individualism and self-reliance, also valued friendships above all else. He had this to say about staying connected in kindness:

“We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken. Barring all the selfishness that chills, like east winds, the world, the whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether. How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to, whom yet we honor, and who honor us! How many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom, though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with! Read the language of these wandering eyebeams. The heart knoweth...The emotions of benevolence ... from the highest degree of passionate love, to the lowest degree of good will, they make the sweetness of life.” (From Essays)

I know that not all humanity is capable of this sense of connection and love especially now when we can't even get to the street. Should we find ourselves without lifesaving medicine or food we will revert to our most base and selfish instincts. However, I don't

believe that we are as Rousseau once quipped “just brutes in naked skin.” While we might be driven to pillage and plunder, it is not our natural social state. Our natural social state is to behave with a modicum of civility, kindness and attention to one another. I can’t tell you how many times in my brief interactions with commercial establishments, grocery stores, banks, etc., in the last few days, that one or more of us stop and look at one another and ask us all to “take good care.” It’s as if we see in one another our humanity and wish that all of us will survive this terrible pandemic.

Part of the wisdom of the transcendentalists such as Emerson, Thoreau and Margaret Fuller is in their embrace, indeed elevation, of the better impulses of our humanity. As the name suggests, our transcendent theology, a theology based in civic responsibility and common sense, implores us to transcend our more base instincts and emotions which I spoke about last week and rise to greater heights above the valleys of fear. In his poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” Whitman sees the higher purpose of humanity above the working people he travels with:

We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate  
 henceforward,  
 Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold  
 yourselves from us,  
 We use you, and do not cast you aside-we plant you  
 permanently within us,  
 We fathom you not-we love you-there is perfection in  
 you also,  
 You furnish your parts toward eternity,  
 Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

We are better than we believe, which isn’t to say we won’t revert to violence, but given a certain baseline of security, most of us will treat one another with compassion. And that is truly transcendent in these very scary times we are living in.

We all have the capacity to transcend our fears. In the Hebrew story of Jacob, the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham, Jacob stole the blessing of his father from his older

brother Esau. Because of his deceit he fled his father and his older brother and found himself with his uncle Laban who promised him his daughter Rachel in exchange for seven years of hard labor. Seven years turns into fourteen and so when God told Jacob it is time to return home, he is more than ready. Jacob left with his wives, servants and children headed back to the Promised Land, quite anxious about how he would be received by his older brother after cheating him so many years ago. The family arrived at the bank of a river and Jacob sent his family across the river but decided to stay the night, not entirely sure he could yet come out to face his brother. Exhausted from the journey he put his head down and prepared to sleep. As he slept, an angel came upon him and began to wrestle with the wily Jacob. They were evenly matched and as dawn came upon them, Jacob asked the stranger's name, to which no reply was given, instead Jacob was wounded in the thigh bone, an ancient symbol of intimacy. Jacob held the stranger and demanded that before he let him go the angel must bless Jacob. The angel said, "your name has been Jacob" (which means "to grasp" by the way) "but from now on your name will be 'Israel', for you have striven with God and prevailed" .

Jacob was a changed man. Until then he had been a passive player in the drama of his destiny, the mama's boy, the trickster, worried about his older brother, ignored by his father, tricked by his father-in-law, trapped in a darkness of soul in which his life held little purpose. (See Naomi Rosenblatt's Wrestling with Angels; Doubleday, 1995 for an excellent discussion of this motif.)

Yet, somehow, through his own self – reliance he was able to come out of his old hidden self and accept his wounds (symbolized by his thigh injury) and transcend to the higher place of his true and better nature.

How many of us are in such a darkness now? Enveloped by loneliness or by some great mistake of the past, the loss of a love, a mate, a child, scared about if and how our culture will survive this pandemic? As hopeless as they may seem, we will come out of this into a sunny spring. Just as Jacob did with his angel, we will transcend the darkness

to the bright light of honesty and compassion, even if we momentarily cross over into mass hysteria. It is in this spirit of transcendence that we are in today.

This is the very reason we light a chalice each Sunday. That flame represents both warmth and light. It is deeply indebted to our Unitarian heritage: the belief that there is a God for all people who we know only through reason and honesty. Transcendentalism is the belief that we must take responsibility for our own actions, and that through our will and reliance, we can transcend the fetters of superstition and retain our freedom to question authority and our own true motifs. Transcendentalism rejects the mandates of the Bible and authorities that did not fit our faculties of reason and experience. Emerson looked to nature, brutally honest, as a guide to how we ought to live our lives: free and honestly. It is in that heritage that our religion lives; committed to a free and honest search for truth and meaning, one of our seven principles. We can only transcend darkness when we are willing to wrestle with ourselves and accept who we are, and then together we reach for our better selves. There is certainly no way I can minister to you if I can't accept my strengths and my failings. As the Christian mystic Henri Nowen once wrote, all of us are "wounded healers." The more wounded the better. This is certainly what Jacob discovered wrestling with the angel. Only when the light of day transcends night are we able to accept ourselves and move on together.

We are in such a time of transcendence today my friends. Just as we remembered where we were on 9/11 we will remember these dark days as a time of testing and resolve. We will fail some along the way. Even the transcendentalists, known for their cheery optimism, knew humanity for its aspirations and its failings. Henry David Thoreau, lamenting society as a bunch of muskrats all driven to their ends by wants, wrote famously "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions

of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that.”

Thoreau, as his experiment at Walden Pond made clear, cared little for people but was inspired by nature herself. In nature, in wildness, he found salvation. Nature balanced herself to the natural mean, without greed or excess. In fact, for the Transcendentalists in general and Thoreau in particular, the truest meaning of life was found in imitating the economy and impulse of our natural world.

There is wisdom in this, wouldn't you agree? While nature can claw for survival, most of the time, she seeks harmony. The beauty of our sanctuary is the harmony to the seasons we see, year in and out. In our time of compassionate spacing I commend this as wisdom not just for our minds but for our hearts. The one activity that we are most encouraged to do in this pandemic is to walk alone in nature. Isn't that transcendence enough for now?

But then there is another wisdom embedded in this transcendence: is this pandemic actually Nature's way of correcting our imbalance, as Pat Francek and others have noticed? Photographs from space show a decidedly less carbon-filled atmosphere over the last several months. Is this the way of wisdom our own overly-connected world has created for us? If so, the idea that the world is a living organism, a Gaia, takes on a new urgency.

No one escapes the crisis of identity that such a pandemic as ours presents to us. Will we see the wisdom in our failures and try to balance a new? I do think that such a redress is certainly a possibility.

All of us stand at the edge of the present. This present moment is an edge, like Jacob's river, "that effervescent sliver of time between past and future" as Phillip Simmons once

wrote ([UU World](#), Oct. 2000). The secret to transcending darkness, any darkness is the realization of this fact: the past is past, and our present is the only way to the future. This was the same truth Emerson taught us in his essay on Nature.

But realizations are not the same as transcendence. Understanding your problem (as any in therapy will tell you) is only half the battle. The other half is changing your life, facing your identity more honestly than before. Life wasn't suddenly all better for Jacob, now named Israel. He struggled to be accepted by the people he betrayed. He had to face his brother Esau and he was anxious beyond belief. But when the two brothers finally did meet, Esau embraced his brother rather than striking him. That doesn't always happen, but it happens more often than not.

Margaret Fuller embraced this courage to transcend the darkness like none other of our transcendentalist forbearers could have done. A brilliant childhood protégé, she translated Goethe from the German at age six, she could read Latin and Greek by the time she was eight. The oldest of her family, she supported her mother and her siblings with her writing, something unheard of in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. She was a feminist before the idea even existed and her classic "The Great Lawsuit" laid the foundation for the generations of women who would follow her.

So brilliant was her writing and her outlook you would not have known that she was often depressed and unlucky in love. It was only when she was sent abroad to Europe as the first female foreign correspondent that she fell in love and married Angelo d'Ossolini and had a son with him. After covering and fighting in the Italian revolution the young family set sail for the United States only to die tragically in a shipwreck within sight of Fire Island in New York. She was forty years old. Margaret Fuller had transcended the pain of a life denied, and the pain of a society who ignored her gifts to firmly stand against the darkness of her time: war, economic calamity, tuberculosis and depression to make a world still worth living. Some of her last words were her most famous, "I

stand in the sunny noon of life. Objects no longer glitter in the dews of morning, neither are yet softened by the shadows of evening.” In other words, she saw the world as it was and still found hope. Now that is transcendence.

Transcending our darkness begins by realizing who we are and honestly facing that. Perhaps we will change the way we live after this pandemic is over. Perhaps we will be more careful with our environment and more thankful for the people we know and love. Perhaps we will stay connected in new ways that will help us transcend the ache of loneliness and alienation we sometimes feel. Perhaps our world will transcend greed and over-consumption to bring about a new era. Perhaps and perhaps not. But consider this: If we can come only part of the way there to not take one another for granted, to not own that one thing we don't really know, to embrace one another again with the thanks that we are alive, then perhaps we will have begun the transcendence of humanity to that promise of the sunny noon of life. This isn't a race to the end, it's a marathon to a promised world, a new beginning, such as Jacob now named Israel found in the arms of his estranged brother Esau. That is what I mean by transcending darkness.

In order for Jacob to prevail and cross that river to meet his brother he had to first accept who he was, accept his present, even forgive himself for his failings and THEN face his brother. I hope you hear what I am saying to you. Being here, hearing this, joining this community of light and forgiveness may be some of the most important work you will do in your life.

Just as the Universalists offered us hope, the Unitarian heritage offers us light: reasons to see the world as bigger than you, capable of moving forward, and working towards change, if not in yourself than in the world.

When Jesus struggled through the night and demons of doubt beset his soul, he had to submit to the light of honesty. Jesus was far from a Saint. He drank wine, cohorted with

prostitutes, sought out and found those who were marginal in the eyes of society, through it all he learned to forgive, “for I say unto you, it is written that you shall give an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth... but I say turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:38-42)

It is honesty, forgiveness and a willingness to start again, that lies at the heart of darkness and allows us to transcend our basest fears and impulses. The truest angel I have ever known is that part of me or any of us that believe in light even when darkness abounds. In 1927, a man stood at the edge of Lake Michigan prepared to throw himself off the pier. His daughter had died, his company had gone bankrupt, his reputation ruined. As he stared at that dark cold water, he could see his reflection and in that present moment a new answer came to him, he was free to take new risks and to do what the universe had intended for him. He stepped away from the edge, transcended the darkness, returned to life. His name was Buckminster Fuller (from The Tao of Pooh by Benjamin Hoof)

I have witnessed hundreds of us step away from the edge, turning anger, and self-recrimination into hope and gentleness. I know it can be done. It not easy but it can be done, and we are here to help. To help you transcend your darkness to the light of day. Perhaps for some it is happening today. And perhaps we are waiting, in our homes and shelters for that new day to dawn. In the meantime, dear ones, know this: You are not alone. You will never be alone.