

Transcendentalism Our Roots in Reform

By
Rev. Annie Holmes

Last summer on the way back to Chicago for my daughter's wedding, I was just coming out of the bathroom at O'Hare airport when I heard my name and spun around to see one of my fellow students from the Lutheran School of Theology walking toward me. "I saw you go into the bathroom and wondered if it could be you." After we chatted a bit about our lives, he asked the question, you know that question above all questions for UUs, "So," he said with a smirk, "what church are you with now?" I hesitated, I remembered him, as he had been one of the outspoken conservative Lutherans in seminary. My mind began racing, "what can I tell him in a few minutes so that he will still like and respect me and I would still feel like I had told him of this incredible church home I had found with the UUs."

Have you ever felt like that, trapped between wanting to share the genius, the uniqueness and the love and freedom you have found in a UU setting, but still afraid that if you explain who you are now as a religious person, the other person will think you are just nuts or have joined a cult? Just as I was about to talk, he put up his hand, "Wait," he said, "I know what you are today, you are a Unitarian minister." Startled, I just looked at him incredulously. Then he smiled again and said, "I saw your ex-husband at a Lutheran conference, and he told me." Ha-ha, I thought. And I was thinking maybe my UUism so showed on my face, my demeanor, my very essence, oh well. Or did I have on a nametag...to continue the story...

I soon found my voice and my footing after a minute and I did what I have been taught to do, and that is work from the positive of who we are in language that he could accept. Then, as I was talking, I realized that it really didn't matter if he liked or accepted me or even respected me after I had explained. Rather, that the biggest lesson I was learning was to articulate my faith in the 7 Principles and to be firmly rooted and grounded in who I was as a UU, was the most important thing for me, and he could either accept that or reject it.

Well, when I was finished, he smiled a self-knowing smile, like he had me pegged and nodded and waved goodbye. But instead of feeling like I hadn't reached him or maybe have him even understand, I felt like I had taken a risk in sharing who I was and that one never knows what the outcome of that will be at any time. And, that that was ok. It was important for me to share this church's love of freedom, diversity, acceptance of our religions and democracy in our churches. Think about it people, that is really all we have to give, our love for our way of doing church, our community, world religions, how we love and take care of each other, our love of reason in religion, and you know what, the more I think about it and share it with others, that is quite a lot.

Because, believe it or not, that is what people are looking for, searching for, people who are willing to scatter and nurture the seeds of evolving religion.

Never feel, because people who come to ask you about your church and your faith, and you realize that all you have to offer is that this is a church of honoring all religious paths isn't

enough, because it is and has been for many generations. Love is the kernel, the gold, the only thing of real and lasting value. And we as a faith will grow if that is what we share when we see people outside of the bathroom of O'Hare and asked where we are going to church right now.

In 1928 the 18th amendment was added to our constitution making the selling or purchasing of alcohol a federal offense. This lasted until 1933 when prohibition was repealed. As a country what did we learn? One lesson we have learned is: You can't legalize morality.

From 1867 to 1973 it was crime to have an abortion. Many women in dire situations sought inadequate health care for an unwanted pregnancy and died from abuse by butchers who took their money and their lives. When all that invasive morality was forced on people, what did our country learn? You can't legalize morality.

In 1968 Congress passed a law that said it was a federal offense to burn, mutilate or in any way destroy the American flag. Whether one's individual civil rights are diminished by such a law is another question, but what we have learned from this legislation is that making a law and putting it on the books and even punishing people for breaking the law does not create love of country or love of the flag in the minds and hearts of people.

Hate crimes against Blacks and Jews and Gays have been at an all time high in the last 15 years.

Over 10,000 people of Muslim descent and of the Islamic faith have been harassed, detained or jailed since Sept. 11th 2001. Is hate a crime or is it a disease, a sickness of the soul that is better treated in other ways than courts and prison?

Because legislation had to be made to protect a woman's right to have an abortion, those fighting that right of a woman have not helped those seeking abortions to stop doing so. I can't think of a single incident where the protesters against abortion have converted those seeking abortions to turn around and change their minds or want to have a baby they have already committed not to have.

So, if legislation and protesting and laws and courts and time in prison do not create morality or care for others in people, what does? The only thing that has ever done any good in the hearts of people is love. The only long lasting transforming force in anyone's life is love. Oh, we may learn from our mistakes and we may be wiser because of certain abuse, but love is always the grand, final, lasting transformer.

Now the big question in the religious world is, where does this love come from? In many traditions of course it comes from outside the person, from heaven above, and of course the opposite comes from hell. Love in this worldview comes from a supreme being and it is a gift. You can't earn it. But, there has been a small voice all throughout history saying there was more, so much more. What they were saying is that there was a power, an authority, and a strength that came from nowhere else than within a person's soul.

In the first and second centuries were a religious group called the Gnostics said, "Knowing yourself was the greatest knowledge of all." They were hunted down and all but destroyed by

the end of the second century. Their truth of sharing ministry with women and men equally, their truth of believing everyone has within them a divinity was all but silenced.

Until 1840 their little light was stuffed under a bushel basket. Then the truth of a human's inner divine power was once again a tiny match spark, then a flicker and soon a whole flame.

Many of us would not have recognized the Unitarianism of the 1830's and 1840's. They were sadly in need of reform. The American Unitarian Association had set up, in its years since 1805, when the Harvard Divinity School turned liberal, its theology as a very tight Christian Unitarian system. The leaders who had broken away from the Congregational church were not ready for more reform; they were as opposed to change as their Congregational church leaders had been when they had asked the Unitarians to leave. But change was bound to come and a conflict arose in the Unitarian ranks.

Ralph Waldo Emerson looked at the religion of his day and said Unitarians were "God's frozen chosen." He called his church "corpse cold." Margaret Fuller who from her own monetary resources and widespread knowledge put together a newspaper called "The Dial." This periodical served as the vehicle by which this new group called the Transcendentalists was able to get their ideas across.

The great minds of Theodore Parker, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, Fredrick Henry Hedge, Henry Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and James Freeman Clark gave not only the transformation of Unitarianism of their day what they needed, but also gave us the foundation of the liberal faith we profess today. We are who we are as a church because of their genius and bringing back to life an old and ancient idea, humans carry within them the spark of the divinity. This spark doesn't exist in heaven, or the bread and the wine, or in the priests, it exists within each one of us.

I could share my church's love of all religious paths to my Lutheran colleague because of the reforms made by the Transcendentalists. They brought with them the thought forms of romanticism and philosophical idealism. In other words positive thinking. We were not sinners in the hands of an angry God. We were not useless, evil beings only good for punishment and hell. They gave us a rational optimism about life. They borrowed from Eastern/Oriental religions and literature. They refused to see non-Christian peoples as heretics, or infidels or heathens, or people who were going to hell because they were not Christian. They actually believed that these peoples and their faith had something to teach the world, rather than seeing them as people who needed to be converted.

Imagine what a controversy that created! They believed that it was important for people to explore human nature and destiny. We were not depraved people who were the playthings of the devil and sinful to the core. They stressed how consistently each person must rely on a naturalistic, earth-based basis to inspire the individual and therefore fortify self-reliance. They were the original back to nature people. Imagine, they believed that the earth was not God's footstool as so many churches had taught. They changed the idea that the earth was simply here for our use, abuse and able to be thrown away.

They said knowledge of self was the foundation of all knowledge. Not like John Calvin who said we were so depraved as human beings, so full of hate and pity and sin that God's salvation was so magnanimous that it had to be predestined or he would surely throw us all into hell the minute we were born!

Transcendentalists stressed strong individualism, never saying that only in belonging to a church, and a particular church would you ever be able to go to heaven. Church going in their day was very much tied to status, rank and position. One made sure that one was going to the correct church in order to be seen and noticed. The Transcendentalist said enough of that. They did much to secularize the whole of American culture. They wanted to go beyond the Judo-Christian traditions and mostly wanted to shift the heart of religion from creeds and dogmas to life within.

Their slogan was deeds not creeds. They advocated reading literature from other countries and other religious traditions. I believe today we UUs have such a passion for World Religions because of the tradition brought to us by these brave individuals who looked beyond one religious tradition as normative, one sacred text as authority.

This is all so easy for us to see in our church and accept as normative, but 200 years ago, in its day, it was proclaimed as the latest infidelity. And many of the original 26-member group was asked to leave their churches and pulpits. One spokesperson came through though, and popularized these ideas and beliefs using literature, and she was Louisa May Alcott when she wrote "Little Women."

Transcendentalism was a logical outgrowth of Unitarianism. They asked, what is religion all about, if not about the individual? They said religion is a matter of intuition, emotion and faith. All the things the Puritans, Methodists and Baptists wanted to remove from religion. They saw that their organized religion had degenerated into the custodian of a dead faith. They were abolitionists. They were unafraid to say they were pantheists, meaning they saw God everywhere. They emphasized popular literature rather than scripture or dogmatic theology. They desired to "transcend" the dead religion of their day, hence their name transcendentalist. And they were called infidels, heretics, troublemakers, never reformers.

But their reform took root, it flourished, it lasted and we have been the beneficiaries of their vision today. In the church of their day there was a resistance to new ideas, and a need to make religion personal and yet worldwide in scope. The church of the 1840's may have been corpse cold, but the church of the 2000's is also in need of help. These top 5 problems found in our UU churches were agreed upon by the UUA's minister's association:

1. We, as UUs are steeped in a culture of scarcity, a belief that there is not enough time, money or energy to go around in our UU churches for growth.
2. We deny and do not understand our own privilege and power as UUs nor do we believe in our ability to affect change in our families, our neighborhoods, our churches, our city, our town, our nation or the world. We are still so surprised when people agree with us; we stand with open mouths, rather than expecting it because it is such a refreshing religious message.
3. Racism, classism and ethical bias in our churches and our hearts, handicap us.
4. Fear of zeal and reluctance to evangelize have dwindled our numbers. We have as a

national church have a “no-growth” mentality.

5. Excessive individualism has hampered us from believing the power and the pain, the struggle and the healing can all happen in the dynamic setting of community church. If a church or committee, or minister or board doesn't play ball my way, we often don't believe in hanging in there with the church for the long haul. Our commitments are often solely to ourselves, not in making the community strong by our presence and working it through the problems or conflicts.

These are some of the weak points of our church today, and some reasons that we are not as an association growing as large or as strong as we could be in a world that needs our message so badly. We are in need of a reformation. But, we don't need to reinvent the reformation wheel, we've been shown how to do it, why to do it and the power we all will feel once it happens. As we struggle to let our little light to shine and define this illusive faith of ours we could:

1. Develop a culture within ourselves and our churches of generosity and abundance. As we speak about our church to others and even when we talk about our church with each other what language do we use? Do we say constantly, there is never enough? Do we feel like there just isn't enough money, people or energy to do what needs to be done? Or could we start using language that speaks to what we do have, resources, gifts and possibilities. Sometimes I believe that as UUs we can be the most grouchy and complaining people. What I hear in most in churches is what we don't have. But what about what we do have and how we have been blessed and work from there?
2. We become more willing to talk about what our UU faith means to us, in this church setting first and then in our not being shy to share with others the utter joy and openness of this individual affirming faith. People around us who are not a part of us need to hear from us of the depth of our spiritual power in the diversity of our own spiritual discipline.
3. We need a greater creative use of our Sunday morning time to include diverse faith systems, and different ways of worshipping.
4. We could be the ones who gather people together from all faith systems and hold some forums, panels, or discussions in order to address the needs of this community.

Theodore Parker in 1835 said, “We need not think alike to love alike.” The Transcendentalists affirmed that people are by nature religious beings, as well as morally and intellectually prone to do well. They were a witness to a new truth, well not so new, but certainly needed to be said again and in a unique way. Truth and love do not lie in the courts or legislation or even church doctrine, they lie within the heart of every individual human being. It is our truth, is it our little love light shining for the world. Oh, please, oh please, with all those you meet this Holiday season, let it shine!

