



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“From Cambridge to Concord”

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Centering Thoughts

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds. Ralph Waldo Emerson

Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads. Henry David Thoreau

In all ages, from the dawn of time to this moment; in all families of man, the spirit of God, his energy, and substance have flowed into the soul, as the rain falls in all lands. Theodore Parker

Sermon

Cambridge, Massachusetts, counts Harvard College perhaps its most notable claim to fame. Harvard can claim that it trained most Unitarian ministers up to the 1900s. Harvard was founded in 1636 as a school for training Puritan ministers, those who dissented from the Church of England and favored a reformed theology that stressed congregational independence and Biblical truth over church tradition and authority. They are our direct American Unitarian ancestors.

We broke away from the Puritan faith for several reasons. First, we found the idea that God was a trinity, or three persons, with Jesus one person of God, had no basis in scripture. God was a unitary God.

Secondly, during the Age of Reason new discoveries in fields like biology, astronomy, and archaeology, contradicted traditional biblical teachings. The new discipline of Biblical criticism also revealed scripture's multiple-authorship and a variety of editorial purposes which contradicted Bible's inerrancy. Since God endowed humans with reason and logic, and since our ancestors valued educational achievement, they dismissed traditional orthodox views.

Thirdly, with Universalists we found untenable the Calvinistic belief that even before you were born God had determined whether you would be saved for eternal life or be damned to Hell forever. Unitarians felt humankind too good for God's damnation.

Lastly, the Calvinistic Puritans were experiencing Great Awakenings, spiritual revivals that celebrated highly emotional conversions. Tent revivals and charismatic itinerant preachers

marked this evangelical movement. The rational, well-educated Unitarians rejected this. Unitarian minister Charles Chauncey said at the time, “religion is a matter of the head and not the heart.” (Indeed!)

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and others who would be called Transcendentalists, grew up amidst this hyper-rational Unitarianism centered in Boston and Cambridge. By the time Waldo, as he preferred to be called, matriculated in 1817, Harvard’s professors and students overwhelmingly embraced Unitarian theology. While still at Harvard, in 1825 the American Unitarian Association officially formed. It consisted of 125 churches, 100 in Massachusetts—and most of those within a 40-mile radius of Boston.

Waldo was born in Concord, roughly eighteen miles from Cambridge. At the town’s establishment in 1635, his great-great grandfather, the Puritan Rev. Peter Bulkeley, was Concord’s first parish minister. Nearly one hundred years later, Waldo’s grandfather William became minister. Waldo’s own father served as Unitarian minister of Boston’s First Parish Church. Following family tradition, upon graduation, Waldo accepted a call as the minister of the Second Parish Church in Boston.

The Unitarianism practiced in Waldo’s day was not uniform. Some people were more orthodox in their liberal Christianity, others more radical. They accepted the oneness of God, but they considered themselves fully Christian, meaning they followed the teachings of Jesus and their worship followed typical Christian norms, with scriptural readings, communion, and hymns about God and Jesus. Although they didn’t consider Jesus God, their ideas fell along a spectrum between Jesus being slightly less than God as God’s special son, to Jesus being fully human and a model of human perfection.

When Waldo began his ministry he conformed to his congregation’s expectations. The historic Second Church was considered a plum position and they paid him well. But within three years from his call, in 1832 Waldo resigned. In his resignation letter he said he could no longer in good conscience administer the Lord’s Supper, or communion. Since Unitarian theology didn’t consider Jesus God and since the Bible made no mention of communion as a sacrament, Waldo believed the practice meaningless.

Waldo’s congregants didn’t appreciate his conscientious objection. They refused his resignation and told him to keep celebrating communion. Waldo stood firm. In truth, communion was not all Waldo objected to. He hated making pastoral visits to people’s homes. More importantly, he was beginning to feel all Unitarian worship empty of meaning. Life in fact was empty.

During his brief pastorate Waldo married Ellen Tucker, but eighteen months later she was dead from tuberculosis. Waldo was devastated. With some inheritance money from his wife’s family to support him, Waldo left his troubles behind and sailed for Europe. He met and discussed ideas with many of Europe’s intellectual and artistic luminaries. A year later he returned to America.

Out of funds, with no job prospects, and a widowed mother and brother dependent on him, Waldo packed his family and caught a train back to Concord. His charitable step-grandfather, the Rev. Ezra Ripley, had agreed to take them in. Ripley not only had married his grandmother after his grandfather's death, but he had also become First Parish's next minister. Along with a wife and a church, Ripley gained the parsonage known as the Manse, built by Waldo's late grandfather, and where Waldo visited as a child.

Unbeknownst to anyone at the time, the center of liberal religion was moving from Cambridge to Concord along with this failed minister.

Last summer I followed Waldo's exodus. I went on a mini pilgrimage to the historic village once home to Waldo, Henry David Thoreau, Ellery Channing, Louisa May Alcott, her father Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Ripley, and other visitors drawn to these amazing people. I went to see the land, touch the buildings, bow my head, and breathe the air of this sacred place. I wanted to imagine what this exciting American renaissance period might have been like. The Sage of Concord, one of Waldo's many names, had given me and Unitarianism an authentic, natural spirituality I treasured. He also inspired a uniquely American form of art, literature, philosophy, and even environmentalism.

My first stop was the Old Manse, where Waldo had gone back to live. Although he arrived out of work, he was not without occupation. Inside his head he was cogitating on new ideas about the nature of the divine. A prodigious journal writer, Waldo wrote down his ideas. His first essay, *Nature*, was published in 1836 and set out some of his beliefs and ideas. He wrote,

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. [but] Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? ...

Here, he's directly challenging the Bible as the only source of revelation. He further wrote:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity which nature cannot repair. Standing on the base ground, —my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, —all mean egotism vanishes. ... I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

This is direct experience of the divine, the awe and wonder named in the First of our UU sources.

Waldo also began lecturing. The popular circuit allowed him to preach without any congregational obligations. He'd found his true calling.

His writings and lectures were so successful, he could afford to marry, start a family, and buy his own home. He chose a stately house just off the town center but on the main road so passers-by could visit and engage in lively discourse.

Waldo Emerson's growing reputation led the graduates of Harvard's class of 1838 to invite Waldo to deliver their keynote address. This failed minister delivered a scathing speech to the newly minted clergy that challenged the accepted, ultra-rational Unitarian religion of the day. He called that religion 'corpse-cold', for it had no life. He encouraged the new clergy to bring more spirit to their ministry and to pay attention to their personal experience of the divine, to their intuition, to the voice of God within, and to the evidence of God in the natural world. Nature, he explained, was not fallen, not profane, but divine. Nature's miracles, the miracles of life, were the only miracles needed to prove divinity. With these words, Emerson discarded the entire Biblical Word and orthodox faith!

Emerson's ideas resonate with many of us now. But then, this was heresy upon heresy. It was bad enough Unitarians denied the trinity. Now he encouraged we deny Jesus' miracles and find God everywhere. Isn't this pantheism?

Outraged, Harvard blacklisted Emerson. He wasn't invited back for another 30 years. Ministers like Theodore Parker who agreed with Emerson, Thoreau and others, were shunned by more conservative Unitarians. Fortunately, Unitarian leaders understood the problem created by the Transcendentalists required a delicate response. How could they accuse Emerson of heresy, when they experienced accusations of heresy for denying the trinity? Unitarianism could not afford to be hypocritical in the face of their own demand for free religion and right of conscience. In time, the Transcendentalists came back to Unitarianism. Emerson affirmed his membership in the First Parish Church of Concord long before his death. Today, we more likely revere than revile their contribution to Unitarian Universalist spirituality.

The Transcendentalists were the first 'spiritual but not religious' movement. The name means 'beyond' because their ideas went beyond traditional ideas about God. The irony of the name is that its advocates wanted us to look within and around for God, not beyond. Their genius showed us how to be spiritual without religious orthodoxy. We who experience awe and wonder and the miracles of nature as the only miracles we need, we owe much to Waldo, Henry and the rest. Halleluiah!

As to my Concord pilgrimage? I saw, I touched, and I felt the spirit of the Transcendentalists.

I went to the old Manse for a tour. As I waited for it to begin, another couple arrived. They asked the guide if they could be shown the attic, not normally on the tour. Hmm. What's in the attic?

After viewing the home's kitchen, parlor, study, and bedrooms, we finally made our way up the winding wooden stairs to the unfinished attic area. First was a tiny bedroom for a servant girl. There were a couple of other unfinished rooms without furniture or charm. Then we came to the Guest Minister's room. This was a small room with one wall formed by the brick chimney of the kitchen fireplace. Guest preachers would stay in this room because the chimney's heat kept it warm in winter. Waldo slept there when visiting, as had other preachers. He'd even written his

name on a wall. No strangers to graffiti, when Nathaniel Hawthorne rented the house with his wife, they scratched brief notes in downstairs glass windows with her diamond ring. They're still visible. But back in that cozy attic room was a special closet. According to the guide, preachers would use the closet to practice speaking their sermons. He invited us to try it out. I hadn't revealed I was Unitarian minister, but carrying my secret with me, I entered the closet. Aloud, I greeted the ghosts of the ministers there before me to practice our shared craft. I imagined Emerson beside me. I wished I'd been alone to commune with his ghost. But after determining the acoustics weren't much to brag about, I left the tiny space.

I visited other house museums, but most moving was Sleepy Hollow Cemetery where Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott, Hawthorne and others rest. Pilgrims before me placed pens by Louisa May's tombstone. At Thoreau's, rocks, shells, and other items from nature were laid in homage. Emerson's headstone sported an American flag. I took pictures but left nothing of my own. It was enough to spend time with the ancestors and give thanks for their gifts to me and the world.

May they continue to rest in peace on Author's Ridge in the remarkable village of Concord. And may we promise to care for the world of nature that I, and perhaps you, believe is filled with the spark of the divine.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Do you experience feelings of wonder and awe? Please describe what evokes this response.
2. If so, is this experience an encounter with an idea of God or the divine? Why or why not?
3. What is your primary source of spirituality or religious feeling or understanding (such as reason, intuition, personal experience, or something else)? Please describe.
4. Do you relate your spirituality or religiosity with your Unitarian Universalism? Please explain.