In the middle of the 19th century, Henry David Thoreau wrote *Walden*, a book that has since become an iconic American classic. Perhaps you read some of it in a high school English class. If you remember, Thoreau put himself to the test in a kind of Outward Bound experience, going off by himself to build and live in a cabin in the woods on the shore of Walden Pond. It lies about 20 miles due west of the Boston Common off of Route 2, less than a 45-minute drive if you’re not in rush hour traffic, into what Thoreau referred to as Emerson’s “bush” country around Concord in eastern Massachusetts. Concord was considered remote in Thoreau’s day. Today, of course, Concord is anything but bush country and is, instead, an affluent suburban community of Boston. Walden Pond State Reservation includes 335 acres of protected open space that surround the 102-foot deep glacial kettle-hole pond and sits amid an additional 2700 acres of undeveloped woods, a real pastoral oasis. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts had foresight to preserve it. If you visit today, you pay $5 to park, and are free to roam. You can circumnavigate the pond at a leisurely pace on a well-trod path in under an hour. Along the way, you can take a detour up a slight hill to the remains of the foundation of Thoreau’s cabin that served as his home for two years. On a warm summer day, the small beach on the eastern shore of the pond is crowded with swimmers and sunbathers, and well into late autumn maverick swimmers in wetsuits take to the clear water to swim the mile-long length of the pond. It’s a beautiful spot. One can easily imagine Thoreau’s inspiration for retreat.

A trip to Walden Pond was one of my first excursions when I moved to Cambridge for graduate school. My classmate Kari and her Dalmation, Stella, and I set out one October morning to see the “rough pines, the stones, and the clear water” that Mary Oliver describes in the poem I read a few moments ago. It was a crisp, blue-sky day, and from every vantage point on our trip around the pond the smooth water reflected crimson and burnt-orange foliage that flamed all around us. The loop delivered us up the slight rise to where Thoreau built his cabin. Not much remains: a large, flat stone at the threshold of the 10 x 12 foot perimeter of foundation, the remnants of the hearth at the far end. There’s an awesome quality to standing in the space once occupied by such a legendary person like Thoreau. Kari, a Lutheran by the way—testament to the universal attraction of this holy ground—Kari and I stood within it and looked out, wondering aloud to each other as well as to ourselves silently what it must have been like to live remotely, crudely, simply as Thoreau did for those two years. What compelled him? Meanwhile, Stella busily nosed her way around overturning decaying leaves and twigs, curious perhaps why humans gaze ponderously in the distance and overlook all that’s there to be sniffed right under their noses. As I recall this visit to Walden Pond, I think maybe Stella showed us what going to Walden is really about: stripping away all distraction, rumination, and pondering and devoting full attention to the present moment, the humus-y earth right in front of us, as if to say, “Come smell this! What more could you possibly want?” Stella was a quick study.

If one were to name a place that geographically symbolizes Transcendentalism, many of us might choose Walden Pond. Thoreau is perhaps the most famous of the Transcendentalists, which include a diverse group of thinkers and social reformers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, and dozens of other names that populate our Unitarian and Universalist history. Transcendentalist—a word hard enough to spell, let alone understand. It’s just a big word. And it packs an even bigger meaning!

As a thought movement, Transcendentalism delivers us immediately to abstract territory, the airy world of ideas, perceptions, and beliefs, but in this case, a thought movement that has surprisingly material impact for Unitarian Universalists. It’s probably not a stretch to claim that Transcendentalism may be the most influential thought movement in American culture, certainly in American religious history. But what is Transcendentalism? Who were these curious, enigmatic clergymen and un-ordained women? An aside—the first woman ordained in our tradition was Olympia Brown in 1864, but as at this time, the women were not yet ordained. And interesting though these first two questions may be, how does Transcendentalism help us understand ourselves today? This is the question I want to explore with you.

What really hooks me about Transcendentalism, and why I think it’s important for us to talk about it in church, is that it profoundly influences our way of practicing religion. It has a lot to do with varieties of religious expression we enjoy and take for granted. J. A. Saxton, a contributor to *The Dial*, which was an influential Transcendentalist publication from the 1840s, had this to say about it: ‘“All men’”—bear with the gender exclusive language of the day—‘“All men mostly, perhaps, unconsciously, believe and act upon [the spiritual principle of Transcendentalism]’” that is in the end a ‘“practical philosophy of belief and conduct . . . every man is a transcendentalist.’”[[1]](#footnote-1) At least among Unitarian Universalists, I think he’s right. Transcendentalism is a practical philosophy, a practical way of being religious that resonates with many of us.

So, what is it? First, some background. Follow along as you’re inclined—there’s no test. As a thought movement, Transcendentalism emerged in the early 19th century. Mainstream Unitarian clergy of the day had already distinguished themselves by adopting relatively new ideas of European theologians and philosophers who argued that the Bible is better understood as a complex mixture of history and myth, that Trinitarian theology—belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—was not scriptural, and that a rational interpretation trumps one’s emotional experience. At the same time, there was in this country, a surge in ecstatic religious experiences that in some churches were becoming litmus tests of salvation, the era of the Second Great Awakening. Unitarians were then, as some Unitarian Universalists are now, uncomfortable with demonstrative praise theology. It’s a discomfort some of us work to overcome in our services when we’re induced to hand-clapping or standing gyrating to some African beat. I’m one of those uptight white guys. The spirit’s willing, sort of, but, we subconsciously ask ourselves, “Is it OK for us to do this?”

Unitarians of the day were explicitly Christian, but within their ranks opinions about the source of Jesus’ divinity differed. Some believed Jesus was inspired in a miraculous way, and the miracle stories of the gospels were evidence. Others were persuaded that Jesus was inspired in the same way you and I might be inspired, through truth and natural law that is available to us all, and Jesus was the ultimate manifestation of this. These were the debates that were roiling in churches when Transcendentalist ideas became part of the conversation in the 1830s and 1840s.

If these seem irrelevant issues for debate today, perhaps akin to debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, this is in large measure due to the influence of the Transcendentalists. They introduced to religious Americans the idea that all people possess what historian Philip Gura calls “religious sense, the inner light, of man’s religious affections, his knowledge of right and truth, his sense of duty . . . his love for beauty and holiness, his religious aspirations . . .”[[2]](#footnote-2) All of us! In other words, people possess an intuitive capacity to directly experience the Divine, an intuition that was not dependent upon the rational mind or limited to the five senses. Indeed, this experience was not even dependent upon Jesus to mediate the salvific grace that people might feel. “Hoh hum,” speak the sighs from a Unitarian Universalist congregation in 2014, right? Such debate probably feels far removed from us. But in 1841, when Theodore Parker stood in his pulpit of the Unitarian congregation in West Roxbury, now a Boston suburb, and denied the factuality of the Bible and the miraculous authority of Jesus, these ideas rocked. This was big stuff, and in time they would change the way Unitarians and Universalists believed and practiced religion.

The 1840s ushered in a time of extraordinary experimentation in American spiritual practice, even by today’s standards. People like George Ripley and Bronson Alcott established communes, communities aspiring to utopian ideals. These communes upset conventional social order of the day, challenging norms around sexual relationships, commerce, and diet. They were the hippies of their day. We may be more likely to associate these ideas with social changes of the 1960s, but there was a precedent. People sought God in nature and all manner of phenomenal experience that was far removed from Jesus and the Bible.

I like to think that if some of these Transcendentalists visited our churches today, they would be pleased to see the durability of their ideas. For example, in a given week at the church in Albuquerque, they could have participated in a Bible study, Buddhist meditation, a Pagan celebration, folk dancing, distribution of food through a food pantry, and an Al-Anon meeting, among other activities. They would come to worship and in just one Sunday could have heard gorgeous acoustic guitar music, listened to an interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, prayed, meditated, and been moved by a rousing sermon exhorting us to reform the way we deliver public education. That this is how church looks today for us, and similarly in many other progressive churches, is the legacy of the Transcendentalists. They made the radical claim that you could have a direct, unmediated experience of God, the Divine, the Mystery, and you didn’t have to profess a creed. Or if you do, the creed is only symbolic, in the way all language is.

In 1845, Thoreau went to the woods near Walden Pond with axe in hand to build his cabin. “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.” This is one of the most famous excerpts from *Walden*. Thoreau was reared a Unitarian and from a young age had an affinity for the natural world. He became great friends with Emerson. He lives in the American imagination as a kind of nonconformist folk hero. Thoreau, like many of the Transcendentalists, was a social activist. The religious freedom unleashed in the minds of Thoreau and his contemporaries wasn’t limited to the heady circles of lecture and debate among Boston intellectuals, although there was plenty of that. The Transcendentalists applied their inspiration to the world in which they lived. They included abolitionists and teachers and pacifists. In addition to his time at Walden Pond, Thoreau is remembered for his arrest following his refusal to pay the poll tax that he believed unjustly supported the Mexican-American War. He publicly, famously lived his values, which in part explains his beloved appeal among Unitarian Universalists.

We carry this work forward in a variety of ways. When I visited here last November, I heard how some of you work together not only in creating worship but on political and social action efforts, like calling people around election time to encourage them to vote. You step into the slow and difficult trick of creating justice. Your UU brothers and sisters in Albuquerque recently commissioned a prison ministry team who travels each week not to Walden but to the Metropolitan Detention Center, the county jail, to minister to inmates and serve as public witnesses to the lives of incarcerated people who are easy to forget. Peter Morales, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, urges us to make our churches a base camp for social justice. This aspiration is a tribute to our Transcendentalist heritage.

This winter, I’ve been thinking a lot about Thoreau’s experiment on Walden Pond. He built his cabin with an asceticism that might make many of us wince—a 10 x 12 foot room with a stone fireplace for heating and cooking at one end, a cabin built from logs hewn by his own hand. *Walden* includes a detailed account of the source of materials and their costs. These practical details lend an authenticity and relevance to his experiment, for we, too, understand economy at this level. We live with budgets and limited means. But I wonder what those long, cold winter days and nights were like, especially if he experienced anything like the bitter, snowy winter our friends in the north lived through this year. Although his cabin was within long walking distance of settlements in Concord, it was by standards of the day remote. He lived those days mostly in solitude. He wrote,

I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life in to a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

There’s almost a frenetic, manic quality to Thoreau’s mission that’s a little jarring, isn’t it? Driving life into a corner, reducing it to its lowest terms, getting the genuine meanness of it. He sounds like a determined suitor, and yet I think we understand that, too. Our tradition exhorts us to quest for truth that sometimes delivers us to hard realities. Unitarian Universalists embody a deep conviction to speak the truth, mean or sublime, as Thoreau frames it, as we forge ahead.

I confess some romantic attraction to his venture. Many of us have probably felt the tug. There’s something about testing ourselves in wilderness and through adventure that speaks deeply to our souls. It’s probably what draws some of you to the mountains for snow shoeing in the winter or camping in the summer. It’s what sends some of us on meditation retreats for an afternoon or a month. I think it is, in part, what attracted me to volunteer with Peace Corps and live on the outskirts of a small village in Ghana. It’s no doubt what drew some of you live here in Taos. Driving home from the church in Albuquerque each day to the house where I’m living in Placitas, I have a sense of journeying into the wilderness, up into the foothills, learning about a new and to me strange land, and learning about myself in it. I’ll take my central heating over Thoreau’s any day, but there is a romantic appeal to the solitary journey Thoreau describes. We’re drawn to circumstances that require us to live sturdily, to sift out the chaff of our life and know it on its most essential terms. Transitions in our lives often work on us in this way—divorce, death of a loved one, retirement, or illness. These experiences are sometimes invitations to travel to the heart of spiritual work, and, like Thoreau’s winters on Walden Pond, can be uncomfortable and lonely.

Even if we haven’t been to Walden Pond, most of us know something about this kind of excursion. The fact that you rose from your beds to come here this morning—to worship, to be in community, to say comforting words to each other, perhaps yearning to hear a prophetic word to steel you for another week—the fact that you’re here may be evidence that you, too, feel a call to go to Walden, to live deeply and get to the marrow, the life-giving source of life. Our Transcendentalist forbearers beckon us down this path, having already cut a broad swath, freeing us to explore the divine mystery in the many ways we do, through poetry, for example. But we don’t have to travel as far to do this work.

It isn’t very far as highways lie.

I might be back by nightfall, having seen

The rough pines, and the stones, and the clear water.

Friends argue that I might be wiser for it.

They do not hear that far-off Yankee whisper:

How dull we grow from hurrying here and there!

Many have gone, and think me half a fool

To miss a day away in the cool country.

Maybe. But in a book I read and cherish,

Going to Walden is not so easy a thing

As a green visit. It is the slow and difficult

Trick of living, and finding it where you are.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What Thoreau and Mary Oliver are saying to us, what the Transcendentalists empowered us to do, is go deeply within. John Weiss, a classmate of Thoreau’s at Harvard College, wrote that the United States, as a democratic society, was uniquely poised to “base religion in the sacredness of the individual, as God intended.”[[4]](#footnote-4) It is how we have constructed our modern UU tradition, acknowledging that each of us assumes responsibility for his or her search. Go deeply. Go within. This authority to travel deeply within is uniquely Transcendentalism’s contribution to American religion.

Go to Walden, if you wish. Seek out the green visit, the pines and stones and water. It’s well worth the trip. Whether you travel or not, go beyond what your rational mind and five senses are telling you about where you are. Don’t discount their input, but don’t stop there. Enter fully into the slow and difficult trick of living your life and trust your innate, inseparable connection to the Divine, the Mystery, nature, God.

**Benediction**

If, here, you have found freedom,

take it with you into the world.

If you have found comfort,

go and share it with others.

If you have dreamed dreams,

help one another,

that they may come true!

If you have known love,

give some back

to a bruised and hurting world.

Go in peace.

**Readings**

The first reading this morning is an excerpt from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*:

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. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life in to a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

The second reading is Mary Oliver’s poem, “Going to Walden.” Thousands of people visit Walden Pond every year, and in this poem Oliver reflects upon what such a visit means for her:

It isn't very far as highways lie.

I might be back by nightfall, having seen

The rough pines, and the stones, and the clear water.

Friends argue that I might be wiser for it.

They do not hear that far-off Yankee whisper:

How dull we grow from hurrying here and there!

Many have gone, and think me half a fool

To miss a day away in the cool country.

Maybe. But in a book I read and cherish,

Going to Walden is not so easy a thing

As a green visit. It is the slow and difficult

Trick of living, and finding it where you are.

1. Gura, Philip F., *American Transcendentalism*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gura, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Oliver, Mary,  *New and Selected Poems, Volume* One. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gura, 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)