

The Colonizers of Dreams:
Theodore Parker and the Transcendentalists

We are raised to honor all the wrong explorers and discoverers—
thieves planting flags, murderers carrying crosses.

Let us at last praise the colonizers of dreams.

– Peter S. Beagle

Mid- nineteenth century Boston was a hotbed of radical idealism and rebellion, the scene of an epic conflict between the forces of religious conservatism and the forces of change. Sort of like the Iowa Caucuses, except it was all happening within the newly formed Unitarian Association.

On the one hand stood the established Unitarian ministers of the churches in and around Boston, who had separated from the Puritan Church of the Standing Order in the early decades of the century and founded the American Unitarian Association in 1825. On the other hand danced a gang of younger Unitarian writers, ministers, and intellectuals who believed the reformers had not gone far enough.

Transcendentalism both grew out of and was a rebellion against the Unitarianism of its day.

Proper Bostonian Unitarians of, say, 1830 considered themselves Enlightenment Christians and valued stability,

harmony, rational thought, progressive morality and classical learning. Ralph Waldo Emerson called it “corpse- cold Unitarianism.” The Transcendentalists yearned for more passion, more spirituality, more intensity. They held intuition higher than reason, placed the individual in the spiritual center of the universe, and declared the entire natural world a miracle.

From 1832, when Emerson resigned his Unitarian ministry because he was no longer able to administer holy communion, until 1855, when Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* and 1859, when Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species*, idealistic men and women whom we call Transcendentalists searched for truth and established a spirit that has lived on to influence the civil disobedience of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., the dissent and anti- materialism of the beat generation of the ‘50’s, and the anti- war and anti- work- ethic sentiments of the ‘60’s and ‘70’s.

Their times were in important ways like our own: they struggled with the impact of technology and industrialism on the natural world, with the secularization of modern thought,

with the irrelevance of organized religion to questioning young minds, with the imperatives of logic and a flood of new knowledge for those who take ideas seriously (Reuben, Paul R. “Chapter 4: American Transcendentalism: A Brief Introduction,” *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature—A Research and Reference Guide*. URL: <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/4intro.html>).

What better time to celebrate this idealistic, contrarian, romantic, and individualistic strand of our heritage than at the change of the year, when the old gives way to the new, the known to the unknown. Happy New Year!

January brings a return to our normal routine after weeks of celebration—this last week I’ve been getting back to regular life after several weeks of holidays, feasting, visiting and being visited, seeing family, avoiding family. Cleaning out the fridge. Putting away the presents. Taking down the tree and packing away the menorah for another year. Picking up the tasks laid aside for the winter holidays.

Each of us comes into the New Year in our own way. For many, it is a time of review and resolution, deciding what to keep and what to change as we remember the year past and look forward to the year to come. The holiday break in our routine can give us a fresh perspective. Coming back to everyday life is a welcome relief and also a shock. So *this* is what I do. So *this* is how I spend my days. Is this what I want now?

What lasts? What activities and relationships and dreams are worth hanging on to? How shall we focus our hours, our days, our year? What, in Mary Oliver's phrase, shall we do with our "one wild and precious life?" ("A Summer's Day"). These were urgent questions for our Transcendentalist forebears.

Coming into a new year can be an epiphany moment, a time when we have a "sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of [life]...an intuitive grasp of reality ...an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure..." (Webster's Collegiate, 11th ed, "epiphany").

Epiphany, from the Greek *epiphaneia*, means an appearance or a manifestation. It's the eureka! of the New Year.

In Christian orthodoxy, the festival of Epiphany is celebrated on January 6 to commemorate the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus, the time when Jesus was first revealed to the gentiles. God come down to Earth in the form of a newborn child.

Among contemporary Unitarian Universalists, the divine may be found under every rock and bush, in the heavens where the stars burn so brightly these cold winter nights, or nowhere at all.

To our Transcendentalist forebears, the divine was in every person and in every experience. They were generous and expansive in their vision, which privileged the intuitive over the scientific, the inspiration of the individual soul over institutional religion, and envisioned an ideal and spiritual reality beyond the world of space and time. Some lived communally in a utopian experiment called Brook Farm, and others farmed collectively in a place called, incredibly, Fruitland.

Rebels, heretics, loners, and malcontents: Henry David Thoreau holed up on Walden Pond; Ralph Waldo Emerson at Harvard Divinity School disparaging the established Unitarian

clergy in his commencement address; Theodore Parker scandalizing his fellow clergy with his unorthodox theology and then refusing to resign from the Boston clergy association when they demanded it.

Parker may be less well known than Thoreau, Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and some of his other Transcendentalist brothers and sisters, but he embodies the passions of the age: cast out, shunned, wildly popular among his followers, a lifelong activist for social justice.

He was a learned and eloquent man, born in 1810 on a farm in Lexington to a large family, most of whom died of tuberculosis while Parker was still in his 20's. He was admitted to Harvard College but unable to afford the tuition, and read the entire Harvard curriculum on his own, studying Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German, theology, church history, and biblical studies.

Harvard Divinity School accepted him in 1834, a patron helped pay his tuition, and he prepared for the Unitarian ministry. A voracious reader, he became an assistant instructor in Hebrew, and for a time taught himself a new language every

month (Dean Grodzins, “Theodore Parker,” *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography*).

Parker is the author of famous words we remember and attribute to others. In a sermon published in 1851, he wrote: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I can I am sure it bends towards justice” (“Justice and the Conscience”).

Martin Luther King, Jr. read Parker’s sermons and reworked from this one a line he used in many of his own sermons and speeches: “The arc of the universe is long,” King said, “but it bends towards justice.”

President Abraham Lincoln read Parker’s sermons as well, and in 1863, incorporated these thoughts from one of them into his Gettysburg Address: “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (*UU World* May/June 2003 p. 1).

After graduating from the Divinity School, Parker was called to serve the Unitarian parish in West Roxbury, a small congregation that allowed him plenty of time for his scholarly

work and writing. He developed a reputation as an eloquent writer and heartfelt preacher and hoped to be included in the elite inner circle of well-known Unitarian clergy, but his studies were leading him to a theology that was radically different from those established clergy.

In 1841, Parker delivered a sermon at the ordination of the Rev. Charles Shackford in South Boston that stunned his contemporaries. In “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity” he argued that Christianity could change, that Christian practice and belief were impermanent, that they had been different in the past and would be different again in the future. True religion, Parker said, transcended forms and creeds and was permanent. It was revealed in love towards others, in an intuitive perception of the holy, and in ethical behavior.

His colleagues responded to this heresy by shunning Parker.

When he refused to resign from their association, they denied him access to the publications that had been publishing his work and also stopped exchanging pulpits with him for fear

that their own congregations would be infected with his radical ideas.

Parker's own congregation in West Roxbury supported him, and the notoriety made him famous. He was invited to preach to huge congregations of supporters in a rented theatre, and in 1845, his supporters founded the 28th Congregational Society of Boston and installed Parker as their minister. The crowds who came to hear him grew until they numbered 2000; services had to be moved to the Boston Music Hall to accommodate them. Thus Parker became a symbol of the free pulpit and a free faith.

Parker's legacy also includes his passionate support for social justice. He championed abolition, women's suffrage, universal education, efforts to alleviate urban poverty, and to reform the criminal justice system. He led the opposition in Boston to the Fugitive Slave Act, a Federal law requiring northerners to surrender slaves who had escaped to the free states. "Parker served as the abolitionist's Minister at Large to fugitive slaves in Boston...providing fugitives with material aid, legal assistance, and help in eluding capture" (Grodzins, 7).

Parker hid runaway slaves in his home and at one point in his career came into the pulpit with a sermon in one hand and a pistol in the other. Criticized for being confrontational and divisive as well as for his unorthodox theology and radical political views, Parker died without ever being accepted by the Boston Unitarian leadership. When he was sick in 1859 with the tuberculosis that killed him the following year, the annual meeting of Harvard Divinity School alumni refused to vote on a proposed resolution of sympathy (Grodzins 8).

To me Parker is a hero because he stood his ground in the face of professional rejection, insisted on his right to find his own theological way, and continued to serve his congregation and the larger community despite the failure of his colleagues to support or understand him.

So we ask ourselves, what shall we keep? What is permanent in our values, our beliefs, our politics, our relationships, our activities from day to day? What is transient? How can we live, as Thoreau said, we must, “deliberately”?

Thoreau would say the essential thing is not to live unconsciously, not to let life happen to us but to create the life

we most believe in, the life in which our values shine forth. “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away” (*Walden*).

Emerson would urge us to intellectual openness and humility: “The best read naturalist who lends an entire and devout attention to the truth will see that there remains much to learn in his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility. He will perceive that there are far more excellent qualities in a student than preciseness and infallibility; that a guess is often more fruitful than an indisputable affirmation, and that a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments” (*Nature*).

Parker was a great apologist for what he understood to be the pure Christian faith. In “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity, he wrote, “To turn from the disputes of Catholics and Protestants, of the Unitarian and the Trinitarian,

of Old School and New School, and come to the plain words of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity is a simple thing; very simple... Examine the particular duties it enjoins; humility, reverence, sobriety, gentleness, charity, forgiveness, fortitude, resignation, faith, and active love; try the whole extent of Christianity so well summed up in the command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself;" and is there anything therein that can perish? No, the very opponents of Christianity have rarely found fault with the teachings of Jesus."

Theodore Parker continued to grow and change his beliefs his entire life, and so he would also urge us to enlarge our experience by continually testing it against our understanding of human nature and the nature of the universe. "The problem of transcendental philosophy is no less than this, to revise the experience of mankind and try its teachings by the nature of mankind, to test ethics by conscience, science by reason; the creeds of the churches, the

constitution of the states, by the constitution of the universe”
(*Works* VI:37).

As we approach 2008, let us celebrate this luminous thread of passionate conviction that has been woven through two hundred years of our history. May we take inspiration and hope from these independent, freethinking women and men, the New England Transcendentalists.

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