

# Nothing Gold Can Stay

Sermon by Audette Fulbright  
Sunday, November 26, 2017  
All Souls Church, New York City

Robert Frost's poem, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" is a meditation on the nature of reality – things change. To his point, nothing beautiful or joyful or truly precious can persist, but then again, so, too, does nothing horrible or sorrowful. All experience is transient. Another summary is, of course, that "this, too, shall pass."

In uncertain times, I believe, there is a more urgent hunger for deeper and more moving forms of "spiritual engagement." In our religiously diverse Unitarian Universalist circles, it can be difficult to discern what exactly this means, for one person's answer is surely not another's. Additionally, most of us are aware and grateful for the humanism that is integral to our movement, and we want to maintain a place for those whose path leads them to an entire disbelief in "things unseen." All are welcome into this circle of love and community; to the degree they embrace our Unitarian Universalist purposes and principles.

Going back to the oft-described "spiritual hunger" that arises in people's hearts, to discern the spiritual course of their lives and to share, in community, some sense of divine communion, many of us search other faith traditions for practice and meaning, and then bring bits and pieces back to our churches. So I might be a Unitarian Universalist with a Zen Buddhist sitting practice, or a Unitarian Universalist with a contemplative Christian prayer practice, or a Unitarian Universalist member of a Wiccan coven whose rituals commune with the Goddess. This is all fine and well except or up to the point where we do this because we believe we have to; because we're unaware of our own rich, Unitarian Universalist heritage and distinct theological roots and practices. Today I want to talk about part of that heritage, so we are clear on what is ours by rights, and we have no doubt that there is a Unitarian Universalist well from which we can drink, if we so choose.

Before I go any further, I need to acknowledge my debts for this sermon, most particularly to Robert D. Richardson and his magnificent *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, and to Dr. Barry Andrew's monograph, "The Roots of Unitarian Universalist Spirituality." As I always mention in my history sermons, I stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before in more ways than one!

Modern Unitarian Universalism owes an incredible amount to the movement now known as Transcendentalism. This was a movement that caught fire in the early 1800s, and most clearly typified by the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Peabody, James Freeman Clark, George Ripley, Frederick Henry Hedge, and William Henry Channing.

For those of you who hope for in a sermon something to relate to your own lives, I believe with conviction that the basic tenets of Transcendentalism provide a wide and generous anchor for one's spiritual, ethical, and practical life. Those basic tenets are these:

- First, that the individual human life is the best measure and method of discovering God or the transcendent;

- that the individual is always and inescapably a part of a larger whole, call it God, community, OverSoul, or any other name – and one has responsibilities to that greater self or whole;
- that Nature is itself God’s clearest language to us;
- that revelation is not sealed, not merely something that happened in the past but is available in every moment to the awake and aware individual;
- that humans do not need an intermediary in their relationship to the Divine – no preachers or doctrine can interpret God to us, but only direct experience and communion will ever suffice;
- that there are two important faculties, both necessary to human life – one, a rational basis by which to make sensible determinations, and the other, an intuitive basis by which we come to know moral truths and all beauty
- and lastly, that a moral and spiritual life requires action in the world, to address injustice and inequity in all its forms.

These beautiful and briefly stated principles are most of the foundational ideas of Transcendentalism, but I hope to bring them to life by showing a little something of the people who helped flesh them out for us; those people whose stamp upon history made our own movement today possible and open.

The Transcendentalists were a group of women and men who lived in New England in the 1800s, and who were close companions, writers, social reformers, teachers, ministers. Indeed, 17 of the 26 men in the Transcendentalist circle were Unitarian ministers. However, Transcendentalism is best understood as a breakaway kind of reform movement from the Unitarianism of the day. The Transcendentalists felt that Unitarianism was too “rational.” Theodore Parker put it this way, “I felt early that the liberal ministers did not do justice to the simple religious feeling; all their preaching seemed to relate too much to outward things, not enough to the inward pious life... the cry was ever ‘Duty, Duty! Work, work!’ They failed to address with equal power the Soul, and did not also shout ‘Joy! Joy! Delight, delight!’”

In describing this, it’s worthwhile to lift up an important distinction that the Transcendentalists made between Reason and Understanding. To the Transcendentalist, these two terms meant almost the opposite of the common conceptions we have of them today. Reason was an intuitive faculty; understanding a rational, intellectual process. As Andrews explains, Emerson described the difference in this manner, “Reason is the highest faculty of the soul, what we mean by the soul itself; it never reasons, never proves; it simply perceives, it is vision. The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues; near-sighted, dwelling in the present, the expedient, the customary.” Emerson identified the Understanding with the intellect and Reason with the moral sentiment, and argued that it was through the latter, intuitively, that we have access to the realm of the spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

The Transcendentalists, therefore, were eager to have a more full, emotional relationship with each other and with the Divine. In believing passionately in the worthiness of individual growth and self-development, they were also “completely in accord with the view that at the heart of things there was an ineffable spirit that animated all creation, a divine energy immanent in nature and human beings, providing a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction. This spirit was

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<sup>1</sup> “The Roots of Unitarian Universalist Spirituality in New England Transcendentalism,” by Dr. Barry Andrews: <https://philontheprairie.files.wordpress.com/2011/11/the-roots-of-unitarian-universalist-spirituality.pdf>

variously referred to as the OverSoul, Universal Mind or Spirit, Highest Law, and God. Bronson Alcott would describe it as, “that power, which pulsates in all life, animates and builds all organizations, shall manifest itself as one universal deific energy, present alike at the outskirts and centre of the universe, whose centre and circumference are one; omniscient, omnipotent, self-subsisting, uncontained, yet containing all things in the unbroken synthesis of its being.”<sup>2</sup>

The Transcendentalists believed that we not only could but must experience the Transcendent directly, that Nature was God’s finest expression of natural law, that our relationships with that OverSoul and one another mattered. Joy and beauty feed and sustain us, but more, they urge us in the direction of what is best. The Transcendentalists also deeply held that humankind must be motivated by a moral sense - that must be ever attentive to our own moral growth and common cause.

What if we took seriously the demands of this heritage and religious vision? What if we deeply engaged one another in a passionate communion yet lived into an awareness that we shared a purpose and direction? What would that look like in our context, in the United States in 2017, when we have an alleged child molester running for Senate, alleged abusers in Congress, the Senate, and the White House, when our State Department is being systematically dismantled so that diplomacy is undercut and the tools of war the only ones we have near to hand, and our long-held principles of plurality and democracy undermined daily? What do we mean to one another when we live in the tensions of a nuclear and climate changed age, when urgency nips individually at our heels but we have not yet fully embraced our collective power nor understood our powerful religious identity?

One thing I was surprised and frustrated and delighted by this week was discovering that *Atlantic Magazine*, whose long-form reporting has, perhaps, never been more critically needed, was founded in 1857 by a handful of Unitarians. From “The Atlantic: A History”:

... this concern ...brought a handful of men together, at about three in the afternoon on a bright April day, at Boston's Parker House Hotel. At a moment in our history when New England was America's literary Olympus, the men gathered that afternoon could be said to occupy the summit. They included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, [all Unitarians] and several other gentlemen with three names and impeccable Brahmin breeding—men from the sort of families, as Holmes once noted wryly, that had not been perceptibly affected by the consequences of Adam's fall. By the time these gentlemen had supped their fill, plans for a new magazine were well in hand. As one of the participants wrote to a friend the next day, “The time occupied was longer by about four hours and thirty minutes than I am in the habit of consuming in that kind of occupation, but it was the richest time intellectually that I have ever had.”<sup>3</sup>

Whether founding *The Atlantic*, marching for women’s suffrage, publishing the Pentagon Papers, responding with humanity to the AIDS crisis and fighting for marriage equality, or any

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> **The Atlantic: A History:** From a presentation given in 1994 by the magazine’s managing editor

- [Cullen Murphy](#)
- [November 1994 Issue](#)

of the innumerable other historically engaged acts that we have done, Unitarian Universalists have rarely failed to respond to the call of the moment. It is true nothing gold can stay. Beauty fades, and glory recedes into memory. And yet every single day presents its own call to show up and live our faith out loud. Let us be the worthy inheritors of this living tradition, by both knowing our own religious history and identity, and living into it. We can - and must - be the ones who meet the challenge of our day together, trusting in a larger Love that holds us all and responding to the call of justice as it sounds in our own day. We are the ones we've been waiting for. Let us step forward, together.

*Amen.*