

Some Transcending Ideas

Sunday 18th November 2012 by Lyanne Mitchell

I greatly enjoyed attending the Unitarian Music Society Summer Conference at Hucklow. It was an uplifting experience - not only for the shared enthusiasm for music but also for the Sunday service held in the tiny Hucklow Chapel, led by Roy Wain.

I found his service - '**Introducing the Transcendentalists**' most inspiring and am sincerely grateful to him for allowing me to use some of his readings and material from that service.

**In the mid-19th century, a movement sprang from America
Unitarianism, whose adherents became known as the
Transcendentalists.**

I am only too aware that I may be like a schoolgirl with standard grade Physics lecturing at the Royal Society ! because I know this is a well known theme and has been the subject of quite a few previous, well researched services here at GUC. I would hate to try to 'teach my granny to suck eggs'! - but I hope I can offer something even to the experts amongst us.

Roy Wain, used as a source for his service in the summer, a book called **Emerson among the Eccentrics** by American scholar Carlos Baker. The Emerson of the title is Ralph Waldo Emerson, American philosopher, writer and one time Unitarian Minister. The "Eccentrics" are various writers, poets and philosophers most of them with a Unitarian background.

In 1829 Emerson was appointed Minister of the Second Unitarian Church in Boston. By 1832, just 3 years! - he was no longer Minister, having resigned because he felt no longer able to administer, or to receive, the elements of the Holy Communion.

This tells us a lot about Unitarianism in the early part of the 19th century. It was definitely Christian, but without the doctrine of the Trinity. Emerson had some difficulty with some Christian teaching but he still firmly believed in the teaching and the personality of Jesus.

Emerson had become disillusioned with the Church – he called Unitarianism "ice cold", he criticised the evangelicals as being without reason, in the sense

of not thinking about their faith, rather accepting what they were taught without question.

He criticised the protestant Churches for thinking that they could preach or teach people into belief. For him, belief was *intuitive* – it was dialogue between God and the individual human soul, there was no place for intermediaries.

Emerson had other fish to fry too – he sought to encourage American literature. So, we have a disillusioned Unitarian Minister seeking to encourage American writers, and at the same time suggest a more personal approach to religion. The outcome was that Emerson held ‘open house’ at his home in Concord to any who he felt were worth encouraging as writers and who were prepared to listen to his views, and to share discussion with him. Those who came were the “Eccentrics” of Baker’s book, most of them with Unitarian connections, some Ministers, and the list of names reads like a Who’s Who of American Literature.

Bronson Alcott and his daughter Louisa May, (Little Women)
Henry David Thoreau
Margaret Fuller
Nathaniel Hawthorne
Theodore Parker
Emily Dickinson
Walt Whitman

All of this activity is wrapped up in that word “Transcendentalism” but it is quite tricky to really claim to understand what Transcendentalism is and a dictionary definition doesn’t really help - except when it says:

Transcendentalism – the American reaction to puritan prejudices.

I suppose it is essentially what comes to the human spirit from *within* rather than what is gained from experience. For Emerson the religious experience was *intuitive* – the human spirit in direct communion with God, but he also emphasised the experience of nature as a means of understanding God.

The problem with the intuitive approach to belief was, and still is, that it becomes too easy for the believer to feel that he or she has a personal private ‘handle’ on what God is all about! It is not an approach which encourages working in a team, or working to support ministry within a place of worship. Reading some of Emerson’s essays, one meets criticism, sometimes quite harsh, of the trappings of organised religion. Some might say “Good!”, others realise that to maintain a living, working church, requires men and women who don’t escape behind the curtain of intuition!

It may be tricky to pinpoint exactly the beliefs of a Transcendentalists, but it is not difficult to understand what Emerson and his “Eccentrics” brought to Unitarianism in the middle of the 19th century. here is my summery :-

1 - They saw the beauty and order of nature as evidence of the hand of God, and, therefore, there is a responsibility to cherish and protect the natural world.

2 - They realised that there is truth in other systems of belief and in other scriptures than those of the Judaeo-Christian traditions only. Hindu scriptures particularly found favour, especially the writings of Tagore - but all the major religions were given credence.

3 - Magaret Fuller was writing about feminism long before the word had even been coined. Louisa May Alcott and Julia Ward Howe later joined the battle.

4 - Abolition of slavery was high on their agenda. Perhaps it is here that we may find a clearer attempt at a definition of transcendentalism: Henry David Thoreau, writing about the great abolitionist fighter, Captain John Brown who was hanged in 1859 - wrote that he was :-

..... ‘a Transcendentalist above all, a man of ideals and principles...of unwavering purposes, not to be dissuaded except by an experience and a wisdom greater than his own.’

Emerson, in a lecture in Concord on 7th November said of Brown:

...’. that new new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer execution, will make the gallows glorious like the cross.’

The pro-slavery lobby attacked this as blasphemy!

Back to our summery :-

5 - With the advent of Walt Whitman into Emerson’s circle, there came a more tolerant understanding of homosexuality - although it is unclear whether Whitman ever truly embraced Transcendentalism but rather saw Emerson as a useful literary agent!

6 - Emerson was said to have had a positive view of Evolution. However, when Darwin eventually published *On the Origin of Species*, Emerson regarded the Darwinian approach as materialistic and not spiritual.

There is no doubt that Emerson and the “Eccentrics” – the Transcendentalists – changed Unitarianism in America and laid the foundation for it to become what it is today - the UUA. Their ideas also influenced British Unitarianism .

We spend a lot of time talking about schemes whereby our movement might grow. I receive many discussions about this on two Unitarian Face Book sites. In my view, the General Assembly’s initiatives and decisions can only influence and guide local congregations to a limited extent. Local Churches don’t grow much from committee decisions made by the GA. Local churches need to be open to their local community, offering service for whatever the needs of that community are. I hope that the leadership changes we are considering here at GUC, which we’ll be discussing after this service, will actively help that process here in Glasgow.

If we are going to survive as a religious movement we are going to survive because men and women like you and me continue to work in our Churches, to make them as attractive as we can, to be as welcoming as they possibly can be. We are going to survive because local Churches make themselves available to local communities. We are going to survive because Unitarians live their faith where they are. We are going to survive because local Congregations offer, through the ministry of the pulpit, and ministry of the pew and Team Ministry, a message that people will be attracted to hear.

We need a central organisation to support those local initiatives , but a central organisation is not going to make one jot of difference in Great Hucklow or in Glasgow without the Churches and the Congregations being active in those places.

Emerson and the Eccentrics were very critical of the structures of Unitarianism, and other denominations, but they were not critical of men and women of faith in those congregations. I believe we should all strive to be Transcendentalists, as defined by Thoreau, to be :

....'above all, men and women of ideals and principles...of unwavering purposes, not to be dissuaded, except by an experience and a wisdom greater than our own.'

Recently, we have made this place of worship much more attractive..... we have been debating and defining our Unitarian identity..... and I hope we are now about to move into a new year and a new chapter - embracing a refreshed style of Team Leadership, which will attract new members from the wider community of Glasgow, who may be searching for a Fellowship like ours - and like the one described in David Dawson’s anthem (which we sang earlier in the service) may it be ; a house of freedom, inspiration, truth, vision and most of all, a house of peace.

Thank you for listening.
