

The Transcendentalists in Action

In the 1830s, Ralph Waldo Emerson broke away from traditional religious thinking in New England. He founded a new religious, philosophical, and literary movement called Transcendentalism.

In the late 1700s, a group of Christians split away from New England's Puritan Congregational Church. Calling themselves Unitarians, these religious reformers rejected the traditional Christian "trinity." This is the belief that there are three divine elements of God: the father, the son (Jesus), and the holy spirit. They also rejected the Puritan belief that God had already decided who was predestined for heaven and hell. The Unitarians believed that individuals had the free will to work for their salvation.

Three decades later, religious division erupted within the Unitarian Church of Boston. Different factions disagreed over the divinity of Jesus. Others disliked what they called the "corpse-cold" forms of worship. Some leading Unitarian ministers, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, finally left the church to seek a more meaningful religious experience.

After resigning his Boston ministry in 1832, Emerson moved to nearby Concord and began to lecture and write about religion and the individual. In 1836, he formed a discussion group with dissenting Unitarians and others. These men (and a few women) debated topics of the day. They often disagreed with one another, but seemed to accept Emerson's core idea that truth "transcends" (goes beyond) what people observe with their senses in the physical world.

Called the Transcendental Club, Emerson's group of Boston and Concord followers soon established a new religious, philosophical, and literary movement. At first focusing on the "inner self," many Transcendentalists eventually become deeply involved in social reform.

Emerson's "New Views"

In 1838, Emerson delivered a shocking speech to new Unitarian ministers who were graduating from Harvard College. Emerson attacked the Unitarian Church for promoting a lifeless form of Christianity. He also questioned the miracles of Jesus, preferring to concentrate on Jesus' moral teachings. Emerson argued that individuals could discover truth and God within themselves without belonging to a church or holding a particular set of religious beliefs.

The Unitarian establishment in Boston reacted with horror and accused Emerson of blasphemy and atheism. Harvard banned him from making any more speeches to its students.

Emerson continued to expand his "New Views" through lectures, essays, and poetry. He incorporated ideas from European thinkers like Immanuel Kant as well as from Hindu, Persian, and Chinese writings. By 1840, he had developed the main ideas that defined Transcendentalism.

Universal Spirit: Emerson found divine energy in all living things. At different times, he called this energy the universal spirit, universal consciousness, over-soul, or God. In his way of thinking, this universal spirit gave all life meaning and purpose. From it came all truth, beauty, and goodness. In nature, Emerson said God appeared "in every moss and cobweb." In humans, God dwelled in everyone: man and woman, rich and poor, free and slave.

Self-Reliance: Emerson counseled his followers to seek God by looking inward. "Through me, God acts; through me, He speaks," Emerson wrote. Thus, individuals should rely on their own heart and moral "inner light" to guide their lives. To grasp the truth, he advised, "Trust your intuition," since the source of this insight was God.

Self and Society: Emerson rejected the old Puritan doctrine that humans were born as sinful creatures. He held a much more optimistic view that all men and women possessed a natural capacity to do good and for society to progress. Emerson taught, however, that individuals would first have to reform themselves before they could change society. The Transcendentalists disagreed over this. Some argued that persons of conscience had an immediate moral duty to improve society and fight injustice. These were the Transcendentalist reformers.

Alcott and Education Reform

Bronson Alcott was one of the first Transcendentalist reformers. (His daughter was the writer Louisa May Alcott.) A self-educated farmer's son and schoolmaster, he believed all children had equal moral and intellectual potential.

In 1834, Alcott opened a school for 30 boys and girls in a Boston Masonic Temple. He designed his "Temple School" in ways to draw moral and spiritual truths from his students through their intuition and reasoning. He discarded memorization and appealed to the interests of children. He and his teachers read aloud stories and poems and discussed their meaning with the students.

Alcott involved the children themselves in maintaining classroom discipline and provided time for physical exercise. The Temple School lasted only a few years and closed after Boston ministers condemned Alcott for teaching Christianity from a Transcendentalist point of view.

Fuller and the "Women's Sphere"

Margaret Fuller, one of Alcott's Temple School teachers and a member of the Transcendental Club, was also a writer, linguist, literary critic, and journalist. She believed women should discover themselves through learning and reflection.

Fuller called upon men to "remove arbitrary barriers," like barring women from college, which prevented them from achieving their full potential. Her motto was, "What were we born to do? How shall we do it?"

Between 1839 and 1844, Fuller led seminars on the role of women in society and on other social reform topics. Meeting mainly in the Boston bookstore of a female friend, Fuller called her seminars "Conversations." Her purpose was not to teach, but to promote understanding through readings and discussions among the women (and occasionally a few men) who participated.

Fuller rejected the prevailing view of the "women's sphere," which limited the role of females to that of housewife and mother. She argued that women should be involved in any activity they were capable of performing. Above all, Fuller insisted, women should have ways to exercise their minds.

Margaret Fuller heavily influenced Emerson, who spoke at a women's rights convention in 1855. He called for the full equality of women in education, employment, the professions, the ownership of property, and marriage. He also argued for women to have the right to vote and run for public office. If the government denied women these rights, he said, they should not have to pay any taxes. These were radical ideas.

Ripley and Brook Farm

Like Emerson, George Ripley resigned his position as a Boston Unitarian minister. A year later, in 1841, he formed a company to finance a Transcendentalist utopian settlement a few miles from Boston. The goal of the Brook Farm Institute for Education and Agriculture was "to combine the thinker and the worker."

For the first three years, the hundred or so members of Brook Farm lived in a relaxed cooperative community. They all labored on the farm, including author Nathaniel Hawthorne (who later wrote a novel, *The Blithedale Romance*, satirizing the experiment). The members set up schools for the children, ate in a communal dining hall, and participated in discussions on social reform.

The men, women, and children of Brook Farm also enjoyed a variety of entertainments, such as plays, dances, and games. Ripley tried to recruit Emerson, but he declined and later described the early carefree years at Brook Farm as a "Transcendental picnic."

In 1844, Ripley suddenly reorganized Brook Farm to reflect the principles of the French utopian socialist Charles Fourier. Ripley organized all workers into numerous agricultural, domestic, and mechanical job groups.

Under the new system, workers chose the jobs for which they had a "passion." This conformed with Fourier's attempt to enable workers to labor according to their likes and abilities instead of becoming mere human cogs in an industrial machine. Fourier called his way of organizing work a "Phalanx."

Ripley combined the separate family houses of old Brook Farm under one roof known as the "Phalanstery." Unmarried men and women lived close together much like in a college dormitory today, which shocked Brook Farm's Puritan neighbors. The Phalanstery also included rooms for dining, discussions, entertainment, and other communal activities.

Things ran smoothly for a while. But an influx of poorly educated workers led to social conflict with the more intellectual Transcendentalists. Even with new blood, Brook Farm never included more than 150 adults. Fourier had envisioned 2,000 people for his Phalanx. Finally, after the Phalanstery burned down in 1846, Ripley abandoned his Brook Farm experiment.

Thoreau and "Civil Disobedience"

Henry David Thoreau, the son of a Concord pencil-maker, graduated from Harvard in 1837. He worked a short while as a schoolmaster, but then began writing poetry. He soon joined Emerson's circle of Transcendentalist friends.

At first, Thoreau agreed with Emerson's teaching that reform begins with the individual. In 1845, he built a hut at Walden Pond on property owned by Emerson. For the next few years, Thoreau lived simply off the land, meditated, and wrote about nature.

In 1846, the United States declared war against Mexico. Thoreau and other Northern critics of the war viewed it as a plot by Southerners to expand slavery into the Southwest. Thoreau had already stopped paying his taxes in protest against slavery. The local tax collector had ignored his tax evasion, but decided to act when Thoreau publicly condemned the U.S. invasion and occupation of Mexico.

In July 1846, the sheriff arrested and jailed Thoreau for his tax delinquency. Someone, probably a relative, anonymously paid Thoreau's taxes after he had spent one night in jail. This incident prompted Thoreau to write his famous essay, "Civil Disobedience" (originally published in 1849 as "Resistance to Civil Government").

Thoreau's minor act of defiance caused him to conclude that it was not enough to be simply against slavery and the war. A person of conscience had to *act*. In "Civil Disobedience," he proclaimed an activist manifesto:

In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation, which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty, are slaves, and a whole country [Mexico] is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign

army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.

Thoreau argued that the government must end its unjust actions to earn the right to collect taxes from its citizens. As long as the government commits unjust actions, he continued, conscientious individuals must choose whether to pay their taxes or to refuse to pay them and defy the government.

Thoreau declared that if the government required people to participate in injustice by obeying “unjust laws,” then people should “break the laws” even if they ended up in prison. “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly,” he asserted, “the true place for a just man is also a prison.”

By not paying his taxes, Thoreau explained, he was refusing his allegiance to the government. “In fact,” he wrote, “I quietly declare war with the State. . . .”

Unlike some later advocates of civil disobedience like Martin Luther King, Thoreau did not rule out using violence against an unjust government. In 1859, Thoreau defended John Brown's bloody attack on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, during his failed attempt to spark a slave revolt.

Parker and Abolitionism

While Thoreau set an example for political action, the Fugitive Slave Act turned many Transcendentalists into active abolitionists. Passed by Congress, this act was part of the Compromise of 1850, which delayed the Civil War for a decade.

The Fugitive Slave Act exacted fines and imprisonment from anyone caught aiding escaped slaves. In effect, this law forced Northern states to enforce slavery by returning runaway slaves to their owners in the South. The law enraged many, including the Boston and Concord Transcendentalists. Even the inward-looking Emerson seemed to agree that civil disobedience was necessary to oppose the Fugitive Slave Act. “I will not obey it by God,” he said.

During the 1850s, Northern social reformers viewed the abolition of slavery as their most important cause. Theodore Parker, a Boston Unitarian minister who had remained in the pulpit, was probably the most radical abolitionist among the Transcendentalists.

Bostonians called Parker “Rev. Thunder and Lightning” for his fiery sermons. He preached that, like all human beings, black slaves possessed the universal spirit. He thought that their enslavement was a monstrous violation of their God-given right to freedom and self-development.

Parker called for civil disobedience against the Fugitive Slave Act. He led the effort in Boston to hide escaped slaves and move them to Canada along the “Underground Railroad.” He also helped raise money for John Brown's plot to ignite a slave revolt in the South. When the Civil War finally began in 1861, Parker and many other Transcendentalists viewed it as a great conflict between good and evil.

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As a movement, Transcendentalism had great influence. It deeply affected American literature. Writers as diverse as Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Henry Miller explored themes and ideas first broached by the movement. For example, in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman celebrated the power of self and its connection to the spirit driving America. And in Melville's *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab's quest for the great white whale symbolized both the power and destructiveness of mankind's connection to nature.

But Transcendentalism's influence went beyond literature. After the Civil War, Ralph Waldo Emerson had secured his reputation as "The Sage of Concord." "Be an opener of doors to those who come after us," he advised his Transcendentalist followers.

Theodore Parker helped push open the door for abolitionism in the years leading up to the Civil War. After the war, Susan B. Anthony and others built upon the work of Margaret Fuller to lead a new women's rights movement, centering on the right to vote. New utopian communities drew inspiration from Ripley's Brook Farm. At the turn of the 20th century, John Dewey advocated "progressive education," borrowing ideas from Bronson Alcott's Temple School. In the 1960s, Martin Luther King and anti-Vietnam War protesters revived Thoreau's arguments for civil disobedience. Thus, the Transcendentalist reformers took Emerson's advice and opened doors for many others to discover their own paths to a better America.