

The Power of Poetry

Polly Peterson, Feb. 4, 2018, Northboro

We UUs make a special place for poetry in our services. It appears far more often than scripture as the foundational message around which the service is built, and we can find many beautiful poems among the readings at the back of our gray hymnal, such as the one by Mary Oliver that we read together.

I believe that we can trace this strong connection with poetry back to our 19th-century Transcendentalist forebears. It grew out of their rebellious spirit. By now it's deep in our bones.

To help you understand what I mean by the Transcendentalist rebellion, I'm going to take you on a quick spin through Unitarian history. As you probably know, we UUs started out as Puritans. In the early decades of our commonwealth, every town in Massachusetts had a Congregational church that was the center of both religion and government. Sunday services, morning and afternoon, were very long and, by our lights, very dreary. Our Puritan ancestors were deeply suspicious of earthly pleasure and wanted no beauty in the church —no art, no flowers, no stained glass, no musical instruments—for fear it might distract people from thinking only of God and the Word. The grimness gradually loosened up; and during the Enlightenment period of the late 1700s, many New England Congregational churches began quietly disregarding certain doctrines of their traditional Calvinist faith. By the early 1800s, many Massachusetts ministers had stopped describing the horrors of Hell altogether and had stopped teaching their congregations that all but a very few of them were predestined to go there.

For a while, varying belief systems were tolerated within the established church, but at last, disagreements between the old orthodoxy and the new liberalism became a pitched “pamphlet war” between opposing groups of ministers. The result was an official split in the Massachusetts Congregational church, and the birth of a uniquely American form of Unitarianism. Twenty of the twenty-five oldest Congregational churches in Massachusetts aligned themselves with the Unitarian branch during the 1820s. This Northboro church soon joined them.

The American Unitarian Association was founded in 1825, but it wasn’t very long before it, too, was rocked by rebellion. Along came the Transcendentalists. This new wave of young intellectuals found inspiration in such influences as European Romanticism, new discoveries in science, and an exploration of foreign religions.

In Adam’s fall,/ We sinned all.

For more than a century, New England children began their reading instruction with those lines. The rhyme taught little Puritans the letter *A*. It also taught them the doctrine of **original sin**, which was deeply ingrained in their religion. Children were widely regarded as sinners in need of strong authoritarian repression to correct their evil nature.

Contrast that view with these lines from “Intimations of Immortality” by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Ah, poetry! Wordsworth's poem, published in 1807, countered the doctrine of original sin with an entirely different view of human nature and helped to inspire the educational reforms of Bronson Alcott—whose Temple School in Boston (founded in 1834) was the first visible manifestation of the Transcendentalist revolution. He believed in the innocence of children, and he created a school designed to cultivate and draw out the goodness that was in them rather than to force traditional thinking into them through rote learning.

Meanwhile, Ralph Waldo Emerson was shaking up the Unitarian clergy, who seemed to him to be too intellectual, too hamstrung by tradition, too disconnected from heart and spirit. Although Emerson had given up his own ministerial position a few years earlier, the graduating Harvard Divinity School class of 1838 invited him to deliver their commencement address. Emerson began with the words I read as our opening words this morning:

"In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life."

Emerson had recently published a small book entitled *Nature*, a sort of Transcendentalist manifesto, and his Divinity School Address was built on those same ideas. In describing what the Unitarian ministry could and should be, he was scathingly critical of the traditions and rituals of the church, and he urged the young aspiring ministers not to depend on the words and dogmas of the past but to form their own individual and direct understanding of God. Jesus, he told them, was not a demigod to be worshipped, but a man who had demonstrated how to live an authentic life guided by the God within. “The time is coming when all men will see, that the gift of God to the soul is not a vaunting, overpowering, excluding sanctity, but a sweet, natural goodness, a goodness like thine and mine,” he said.

“In how many churches, by how many prophets, tell me, is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God?”

You can imagine how the established Unitarian clergy felt about that address. Decades passed before Ralph Waldo Emerson was ever invited to speak at Harvard again.

But Emerson had many admirers.

Emerson and his Transcendentalist friends were young people struggling to find a truer expression of what religion could be in their time. They wanted to express a faith that embraced both science and mystery, one that celebrated life, one that was based on joy rather than fear. And what they discovered was that when you recognize the divine presence inside you, you pay attention to the universe in a new way. You are more in touch with beauty, wisdom, tenderness, more in love with the natural world.

Emerson aspired to be a poet himself, but strangely, he never was able to live up to his own advice. Most of his poems seem conventional and even dull to us now—unlike his prose, which can still electrify us with its beauty and originality. “For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,” [he wrote] “—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.” Emerson’s real contribution to poetry, it seems to me, lies not in his poems, but in the poets he inspired. “I was simmering, simmering,” said Walt Whitman, “and Emerson brought me to a boil.”

I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil,
 this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and
 their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Many critics were scornful of the brashness and unconventionality of Whitman’s poems, but when Emerson first read them, he knew that he had found the poet of “insight and not of tradition” that he had been seeking. “I greet you at the beginning of a great career,” he wrote to Whitman, the mysterious stranger who had mailed him a copy of *Leaves of Grass*.

Meanwhile, Emily Dickinson, a young poet growing up in Amherst, Massachusetts—also a reader of Emerson—dared to defy her family’s God-fearing, church-going orthodoxy—and to write about it.

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
I keep it, staying at Home –
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
I, just wear my Wings –
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I'm going, all along."

"You do not have to be good," says Mary Oliver.
"You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves."

I think Emily Dickinson would have loved that poem.

In a book called *The Wild Braid*, the poet Stanley Kunitz, in his late nineties, reflected upon his parallel experiences working in the garden and writing poetry. Here are a few of his insights.

"One of the great delights of poetry," he says, "is that when you're really functioning, you're tapping the unconscious in a way that is distinct from the ordinary, the customary, use of the mind in daily life. You're somehow cracking the shell separating you from the unknown. ...

“The unconscious is very much akin to what, in other frameworks, I call *wilderness*. And it’s very much like the wilderness in that its beasts are not within our control. It resists the forms, the limits, the restraints, that civilization itself imposes.”

“After you’ve written a poem and you feel you’ve said something that was previously unspeakable, there’s a tremendous sense of being blessed.”

“When people say they are moved by a poem, they are saying that they have been in touch with the untouchable.”

[For the poet] “the path of the poem is through the unknown and even the unknowable, toward something for which you can find a language. It is that struggle, of course, that gives the poem its tension. If the poem moved only through the familiar, it would be so relaxed that it would have no tension, no mystery, nothing that could even approximate revelation, which is the ultimate goal of the poem. I’ve been grounded all my life to believe in the mystery of existence itself. Can there be any possibility of completely understanding who we are and why we’re here or where we are going? These are questions that can never be answered completely so you have to keep on asking... .”

And isn’t this exactly what Unitarian Universalists do? One of the Transcendentalist heresies that most alarmed establishment Unitarians was questioning the literal truth of the miracles in the Bible. But it is in questioning that we awaken to new insights.

I think of Walt Whitman’s poem “Miracles,” in which he asks “Why, who makes much of miracles? As for me, I know of nothing else **but** miracles.”

He ends the poem like this:

To me every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the
 same,
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same.

To me the sea is a continual miracle,
The fishes that swim—the rocks—the motion of the waves—the
 ships with men in them,
What stranger miracles are there?

Poems help us probe life's deepest mysteries and grapple with difficult emotions. They provide a way to express our grief, our ecstasy, our sense of humor, our most astute observations, our playfulness, our awe, our doubt, our shared humanity.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Amen.