

**Theme for November - Transcendence:  
*The Practice of Embodiment***

*“There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us.  
Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson  
“The Oversoul”*

**Introduction**

About two hundred years ago a revolution known as “Early American Unitarianism”, “Transcendentalism” and “The Enlightenment” claimed to bring God down from above the world into the world itself. A key figure in the Transcendentalist movement was William Ellery Channing, who said in his quest for wisdom and spiritual depth that personal growth, or transcendence, comes from times of wisdom and from times of extreme. Channing’s beliefs are the foundation of the Transcendentalist movement and our American UU faith tradition. Historically, we Unitarian Universalists have been the Transcendentalists- concerned with finding transcendence in this world. The fact that our “this-worldly” theology was called Transcendentalism may seem somewhat paradoxical.

Growth and transformation may come as a result of extreme experiences of joy, fulfillment and success as well as a result of extreme suffering. Extreme experiences can lead us to form meaning and new images of our relationship between ourselves and the universe. What we embody and what we transcend in the process helps us form these relationships. Some may describe this as an integration of the mind, body and spirit.

To transcend is to lie beyond the scope of something, while to embody is the idea of the spirit made physical. One may give his or her body over to a feeling in order to transcend it. For example, imagine your anger as a stone in your hand, then allow yourself to drop it and get beyond it. We may need to focus on our body to get beyond an experience, while also being fully in it and aware of its rawness. Meditation involves following your breath, a form of embodiment, while the experience of meditation may allow the mind, body and spirit to transcend.

When do you feel that something more is taking place, that you are experiencing transcendent moments? One way to understand transcendence is to think of it as an intersection between the ideal and the real. Somehow in these moments, which may be like any other yet like no other, there is a greater fullness, a richness of experience. Think of falling in love with someone, viewing a special sunset, or taking in a beautiful musical piece; these kinds of awakening experiences help us be more fully present, more aware, and more open to the here and now.

Are we somehow supposed to transcend from this world to some other? Or is some other outside force intervening in order for us to know a different or better world? This is how “the transcendent” is often considered. The words of our theme have a yin/yang quality- the physical to non-physical (transcend) vs. the non-physical to physical (embody). As you reflect on these important concepts and questions, we offer readings, quotes and additional questions for further inquiry and larger discussion. In the words of Rev. Terry Sims, “Stay open to the transcendent moments. Watch for them and drink them in deeply when they happen.”

**Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, around the table, or with each other:**

1. How might you imagine transcending?
2. What practices set the stage for transcendence?
3. Are there things in your life you would like to transcend? If so, what are they?
4. Are there things in your life you would like to embody? If so, what are they?
5. Do you find yourself ‘staying open to the transcendent moments’? Please describe.
6. How do you know if you've transcended something? How does it feel?
7. Where do dreams fit with transcendence and embodiment?
8. What if the only way to transcend one thing is to embody something else?
9. How does Unitarian Universalism embody religion?
10. How does our faith community help you to feel open to transcendent moments?

**Reading and Quotations:**

***“And I Have Felt a Presence,” by William Wordsworth, 1770-1850***

And I have felt a presence  
That disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts;  
A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

***“The Rainbow,” by William Wordsworth, 1770-1850***

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A Rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!  
The Child is father of the man;  
And I wish my days to be  
Bound each to each by natural piety.

***“The Oversoul,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson***

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds.  
As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, cease, and God, the cause, begins.  
I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call

mine.

There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us.

Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable.

It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur.

The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception.

For ever and ever the influx of this better and more universal self is new and unsearchable.

Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.'

### ***"To See the World." By William Blake***

To see the world in a grain of sand,  
And a heaven in a wildflower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
And eternity in an hour.

### ***William Wordsworth's description of God in "Tintern Abbey"***

A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man: a motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things."

### ***Albert Einstein***

Although I am a typical loner in daily life, my consciousness of belonging to the invisible community of those who strive for truth, beauty, and justice has preserved me from feeling isolated. The most beautiful and deepest experience a person can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavors in art and science. Anyone who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious. To me it suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure of all that there is.

### ***Poem By Alfred Noyes***

Knowledge, they say,  
drives wonder from the world;  
they say it still, though all the dust's ablaze  
with marvels at their feet,  
while Newton's laws foretell  
that knowledge one day  
shall be song.

We seem like children wandering by the shore,  
Gathering pebbles colored by the wave;  
While the great sea of truth, from sky to sky  
Stretches before us,  
Boundless, unexplored.

*From "Passage to India," by Walt Whitman*

O Thou transcendent!  
Nameless—the fibre and the breath!  
Light of the light—shedding forth universes—the center of  
them!  
Though mightier center of the true, the good, the loving!

Thou moral, spiritual fountain! affection's source! thou  
reservoir!  
Thou pulse! Thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,  
That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,  
Athwart the shapeless vastness of space!  
How should I think—how breathe a single breath—how speak—  
if, out of myself,  
I could not launch, to those, superior universes?

Passage to more than India!  
Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?  
O Soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like these?  
Disportest thou on waters such as these?  
Soundest below the Sanscrit and the Vedas?  
Then have thy bent unleashed.  
Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!  
Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!  
You, strewn with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never  
reached you.

Passage—immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!  
Away, O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!  
Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!  
Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?  
Have we not groveled here long enough, eating and drinking  
like mere brutes?  
Have we not darkened and dazed ourselves with books long  
enough?

Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!  
Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me;  
For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,

And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.  
O my brave soul!  
O farther, farther sail!  
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?  
O farther, farther, farther sail.

***“Beloved Presence,” by Mohammad Hafiz***

Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still I shall know you, my Beloved.  
Veil yourself with every enchantment and yet I shall feel you, Presence most dear, close, and intimate.  
I shall salute you in the springing of cypresses and in the sheen of the lakes, the laughter of fountains.  
I shall surely see you in tumbling clouds, in brightly embroidered meadows.

Oh, Beloved Presence, more beautiful than all the stars together,  
I trace your face in ivy that climbs, in clusters of grapes, in morning flaming the mountains, in the clear arch of sky.  
You gladden the whole earth and make every heart great.  
You are the breathing of the world.

***William Ellery Channing (Works, p.940)***

The voice of wisdom—that is, of moral and religious truth—speaks to us from the universe.  
What a blessing would it be to us, one and all, could we but really wake up to the glory of this Creation, in which we live! Most humans are actually asleep for their lifetime in this vast and magnificent world. Mighty changes are going on around them, fitted to entrance their souls in wonder and thankfulness; and yet they are moved no more than if they were shut up in a mill, seeing only the ...clatter of machinery.

***First Movement: In the Beginning  
(Transcending Mystery and Wonder)***

***From the Sources Cantata***

***Lyrics: Rev. Kendyl Gibbons; Music: Rev. Jason Shelton***

In the beginning: silence. In the beginning: wonder.  
In the beginning: beauty. In the beginning: death, death, death, death!

Kingdom of marvels, terror and splendor;  
Province of dust and breath;  
Woven in time of promise and hunger,  
Heaven on holy earth.

Curious creature, knowing and choosing,  
Risen of mortal clay,

Heartbroken pilgrim, finding and losing  
Light of the common day.

REFRAIN

Ah, source of all, again renew  
Life more abundant, life more true  
Summon these moments, sudden and few  
Joyful and tender; spirit of wonder

Dew on the lily, gem on the lotus  
Star in the summer sky  
Thundering mountain, altar of fire  
Tear in the loving eye

Holy the myst'ry, holy the journey,  
Holy the hour of pray'r  
Blessed and merciful, blessed and generous  
Sacred as simple air.

REFRAIN

On the horizon: justice.  
On the horizon: kinship.  
On the horizon: wisdom.  
On the horizon: peace.

Summoning duty, touch of compassion  
Keeper of song and flame  
Struggle and silence, praise and thanksgiving,  
Truth beyond every name

In the beginning, on the horizon...Life!

***Charles Ives' Universe Symphony***

Recently on WHRB, the DJ introduced the symphony as being the most difficult piece of music she ever played on the show. According to the composer, Charles Ives, regarding his notes on a sketch of the Universe Symphony - he was "*striving to paint the creation, the mysterious beginnings of all things known through God and man, to trace with tonal imprints the vastness, the evolution of all life, in nature, of humanity from the great roots of life to the spiritual eternities, from the great inknown to the great unknown.*"

***Kathleen Norris, 1947 -***

Learned [ones]  
of the twentieth century, armed with large  
finite numbers and radiotelescopes  
as big as football fields to measure the pulse of light

from stars beyond the range  
of human vision, conclude that this world,  
as we call nature,  
was once inside such a star.  
Heisenberg shrugs  
and says, "I am not sure what an electron is,  
but it's something like a cloud of possibilities."

### **Worship Associate testimonials**

Three specific practices set the stage for the experience of transcendence in my life. First, it is critical that I resist the urge to rush through my day and simply SLOW DOWN. I ask myself what I am trying to prove and what could possibly be gained by moving at a breakneck pace. I stop and breathe. Secondly, I remind myself to practice mindfulness in my interactions with others. That could mean reading a facial expression more carefully, extending myself in a kind gesture, or choosing my words with utmost care, a degree of restraint, and a consistent level of compassion. The third and most important practice is sitting in stillness on a daily basis. In meditation, I am present as a witness, observing the "small me," filled with wanting and resentment, slowly recede, gradually replaced by a larger, more expansive me, the me that is connected to everyone and everything.

~Rita Ghilani

I believe that what makes us transcend humanity, what makes us better people, is our relationship with others. True transcendence is the love of mutuality, and the ability to be open to the mystery that is around us at every moment. A curiousness of others and their stories, an ability to be intimate with the self and others are what set the stage for true moments of transcendence in my life. I feel open to the transcendent moments in worship services, specifically, and also in everyday moments where I give myself up to those I love. Albert Einstein's quote, "To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness" gives me comfort, as does our UU faith. My belief in God as a force of love that cannot be seen, which our mind cannot grasp, and whose workings are beautiful and merciful is ultimately what enables me to be open to transcendent moments and 'to drink them in deeply when they happen.'

~Alex Businger