

Wisdom Circles 2012
May

What Does It Mean To Transcend?

The Oxford American Dictionary defines “transcendence” as “beyond or above the range of normalcy or merely physical human experience.” When the word refers to God, it describes God as “existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe.” The transcendence of God is often contrasted with the “immanence” of God, where God is “permanently pervading and sustaining the universe.”

Unitarian and Universalist theologians, as well as liberal theologians in general, have mostly been of the latter persuasion. Whatever might be referred to as ‘God’ exists *within* nature and its laws. God is not seen as a personality or presence that exists beyond the physical universe. They employ depth metaphors not height metaphors.

The Unitarian movement that has had perhaps the most profound impact on American thought, Transcendentalism, was misnamed. It would have been more accurate to name the movement ‘Immanentalism’, because for the Transcendentalists revelation of divine truth was to be found in nature itself. And since persons are a part of nature God’s truth can be sought within, as well. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Within man [*sic*] is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is related; the eternal ONE.... This deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.”

Paul Tillich describes God as the “Ground of Being.” Today most academic Unitarian Universalist theologians are part of a movement called ‘Process Theology.’ In Process Theology God is not all powerful

and there are individual entities with wills of their own. For the Process Theologian, God is that creative integrating principle at work that acts to bring harmony to chaos and healing to hurt. God changes and becomes with the evolving universe. God is more of a verb than a noun, one might say. And of course the new atheists, such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, deny any greater order at all beyond the material laws of nature. For UUs and God—“Transcendence—not so much.”

Yet anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists have documented that one drive of human beings is to feel one is a part of something that is beyond the self—be that a religion, a political movement, a nation state or, for the most evolved, humanity as a whole. Jonathan Haight, a social psychologist, thinks that this phenomenon is easy to explain: “When the self melts away, experience is ecstatic.” People will even give up their very lives for this higher identity. One reason that combat veterans have a hard time re-adjusting to civilian life is that combat, while horrible, is full of experiences that take the combatant beyond the self, with a deep connection to one’s comrades.

We need times when the self melts away. We seek them. It is within our nature. There are many unhealthy ways that humans do this—war and violence, jingoistic patriotism, and drugs and alcohol. Some people seek extreme sports. Healthier ways are through romantic love, dancing, ritual, time in nature, the creating or enjoyment of art and music, and in compassionate service to others and to humanity as a whole.

With love,
Arvid

Our Spiritual Exercise:

This month, find a time when you can be by yourself to directly experience the immensity of nature. You may want to go to the ocean, or to a place where you can experience the night sky, or sit by a running stream, or experience a mountain view. Go by yourself and be still and just let yourself experience whatever you experience. Don't take music or reading or anything to get between you and the natural world. If you want to journal about the experience, do it afterward. Don't expect any particular results or experiences. Just open all your senses as much as you can and try to be in the moment as much as you can. Do this for at least a half hour.

What did you experience?

Questions To Wrestle With:

These are for you to think about *all month*. We will discuss them together in our groups, but don't wait until your group meets to think about them. As always, the gift of Wisdom Circles is that it asks us to think about things that rarely get attention in the rest of our lives. So pull these questions out early. Let them break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts.

These questions deal with experiences of transcendence. What are referred to here are experiences where your sense of self melted away, or you forgot your sense of self, or perhaps you had an experience of submerging yourself in a greater group or cause.

1. Think back to a positive experience of transcendence in your life. Remember where you were, who you may have been with, what you were doing and what happened. What did this experience mean to you? How did it impact your life?
2. Think back to a negative experience of transcendence. Perhaps it was an experience that seemed positive at the time like a drug experience, being part of a religious cult, some experience that seems negative to you in retrospect. Or it can be an experience of transcendence of when you found yourself in a situation of mortal danger. How did that experience impact your life? Are you still living with the harm of that experience? Did it benefit you in any way?

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

As always, these are not “required reading.” We will not analyze or dissect them in our group. They are meant simply to get your thinking going--and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking. Consider them to be companions on your journey.

WISE WORDS

“To have humility is to experience reality, not in relation to ourselves, but in its sacred independence. It is to see, judge, and act from the point of rest in ourselves. Then, how much disappears, and all that remains falls into place.

In the point of rest at the center of our being, we encounter a world where all things are at rest in the same way. Then a tree becomes a mystery, a cloud a revelation, each man a cosmos of whose riches we can only catch glimpses. The life of simplicity is simple, but it opens to us a book in which we never get beyond the first syllable.”

— [Dag Hammarskjöld](#), *Markings*

To recognize one's own insanity is, of course, the arising of sanity, the beginning of healing and transcendence.”

— [Eckhart Tolle](#)

“Who would then deny that when I am sipping tea in my tearoom I am swallowing the whole universe with it and that this very moment of my lifting the bowl to my lips is eternity itself transcending time and space?”

— [D.T. Suzuki](#)

Sometimes
I go about pitying
Myself,
While I am carried by the wind
Across the sky. ”

— [Frances Denmore](#)

There is a yearning that is as spiritual as it is sensual. Even when it degenerates into addiction, there is something salvageable from the original impulse that can only be described as sacred. Something in the person (dare we call it a soul?) wants to be free, and it seeks its freedom any way it can. ... There is a drive for transcendence that is implicit in even the most sensual of desires.”

— [Mark Epstein](#), *[Open to Desire: Embracing a Lust for Life - Insights from Buddhism and Psychotherapy](#)*

“People will find transformation and transcendence in a McDonald's hash brown if it's all they've got.”

— [Patton Oswalt](#)

BOOKS, ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

Chris Hedges, War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning

This book by a long time war correspondent talks about how destructive war is, why we do it anyway and other ways we can transcend the self.

(Excerpt) <http://bit.ly/yKOWkb>

Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be <http://bit.ly/HyBzlp>

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays <http://bit.ly/HIq864>

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Oversoul” <http://bit.ly/HzAUhf>

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” essay <http://bit.ly/tYI4cb>

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Divinity School Address

<http://bit.ly/th4Eq1>

Theodore Parker, The Transient and Permanent in Christianity

<http://bit.ly/uzBQ32>

William Ellery Channing, Unitarian Christianity

<http://bit.ly/sSxrKy>

William Ellery Channing, “Likeness to God” essay

<http://bit.ly/gf0p8s>

William Ellery Channing’s “Baltimore Sermon” on Unitarian Christianity (1819) <http://bit.ly/sYCYih>

William Henry Channing, “This is My Symphony”

<http://bit.ly/estjcE>

William Channing Gannett, “Things Most Commonly Believed Among Us” <http://bit.ly/sj6oPc>

Online Videos and Audios:

Jonathan Haidt’s TED talk on ecstasy and self transcendence

http://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_humanity_s_stairway_to_self_transcendence.html