

Living Intentionally

October 2, 2005

By Rev. Jim Sherblom
First Parish in Brookline

We were born not for activity, but for joy in the living of our lives. We have forgotten who we are, or perhaps we never knew! We, the children of stardust, remarkable beings in this expanding and evolving universe, yet we have allowed ourselves to be sucked into mundane reality, our lives too often reduced to mere activity. We have our jobs to do, meals to cook, errands to run, yet we are more than just this, our lives have deeper meaning than merely doing. Scientists increasingly remind us that all life on this earth is a remarkable unfolding of the universe expanding into time and space, we are no more than dust, yet also the crown of creation! How do we live our lives intentionally with such knowledge? How do we extract this deeper experience of living our lives fully?

A remarkable group of men and women explored this question in this very place between 150 and 200 years ago. It was a deep and transformative time in western intellectual culture. Theologians in Germany were re-translating the ancient sacred texts in the Bible, concluding that much taught about them was incomplete or wrong. Immanuel Kant was rethinking what knowledge itself meant for us.

Frederick Schleiermacher translated Kantian thought into what became modern liberal theology. Poor parochial New England Calvinism came under an onslaught of new criticism as a result. Schleiermacher was one of the young German theologians who felt that Christianity, to remain relevant, must be transformed by these new translations and this new understanding of the nature of God.

Christianity, around the western world, was split asunder between those who felt that a living God could only be truly explained by this new thought, and those who clung to the faith of their fathers.

Another liberalizing trend occurred as a result of the British Empire's conquest of India in the late 18th Century, which led to the first translations of the Hindu holy books: the Bhagavad-Gita and Upanishads which became available in English for young intellectuals at Harvard and European

Universities to explore. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his diary that for him the Upanishads represented the sum of all wisdom. Henry David Thoreau wrote that if he had to choose just one book to read and reread for the rest of his life, it would be the Bhagavad-Gita. Margaret Fuller saw in these new texts a new liberation for women making them the equal once again to men in the life of the mind.

For some these new translations breathed new life into Christianity, making it broader and more inclusive, for others it made Christianity no longer relevant to their search for meaning. These led to a reawakened sense of the importance of experience.

This philosophy became known in America as Transcendentalism, and it transformed the new Unitarian movement, which had only recently split from New England Congregationalism, into a more open and diverse religious movement, of new hope and promise. Transcendentalism centered on Boston, and in many respects Concord, MA, and is thought the first truly American philosophy.

In his essay on the *Essential Principles of Religion*, Emerson writes: “We talk of the variety of influences, of the variety of characters, of the conflict of principles, of the education of all the virtues, and life looks large, duty manifold, the future confused. Is it that there is some conspiracy to disconcert and embarrass us, and hide the simplicity of life? For really, as we grow older, we are struck with the steady return of a few principles. We are always finding new applications of the maxims and proverbs of the nursery: One old Bible is still enough to enunciate all the commandments for the most complex life in this giddy and arrogant century. Nay, a very small part of the book – a few chosen pages, a few golden rules – suffice for the guidance and comfort of the most advanced and advancing genius.” Emerson goes on to quote the Greek Stoic, early Christians, a Hindu, a Quaker and Swedenborg, to tell us that simply experiencing life deeply, intentionally, and with integrity is the heart and soul of all the great religious traditions. Emerson would have approved of our use of Islam’s Triple Filter Test, don’t pass along what you hear unless you know it is true, good, and/or useful to another. True community demands as much. Living intentionally, in community or alone, is the essence of wisdom and all true religion!

Hence Henry David Thoreau’s emphatic statement which we read responsively: “I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of

life. I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not when I come to die, discover that I have not lived... I wish to live deep and suck out all of the marrow of life.” I, Jim Sherblom, wish to live deeply, sucking the marrow from the experiences in my life. This is what the Transcendentalists called living life with intention.

This church holds a place in the emergence of Transcendentalism. Frederic Henry Hedge was born in 1805, the son of a Harvard College Professor of Philosophy, and he was one of those students who seemed smart for his age, smarter than most of his teachers. By the age of thirteen, he was ready to enter Harvard College in preparation for the ministry, but his father wisely thought that few congregations would want a minister still in his teens, so he sent him to Germany for five years to study philosophy and theology. Imagine this young man from the colonial frontier making his way in sophisticated Europe. Hedge returned when he was 18 and finished Harvard College in three years, graduating as both valedictorian and class poet. He immediately entered the Divinity School where he became friends with Ralph Waldo Emerson, who he so impressed with his German and his understanding of this new thought, which these young American intellectuals would eventually evolve into transcendentalism. These young men and women would gather as often as they could to speak about how these thoughts were transforming their lives, and since the group gathered around Hedge, they called the group Hedge’s Club. Imagine the excitement of feeling like you were reinventing religion, adapting it to your own experience of this life. This is the legacy of the transcendentalists to Unitarian Universalism today.

John Pierce was the minister here the first half of the 19th Century, and he went to great lengths to preserve this place from splitting as so many others were doing, yet he was delighted when his young daughter Lucy met and then married the brilliant young Hedge. And when Hedge was lured back to Harvard to teach ecclesiastical history, this congregation welcomed Hedge as their minister, and even supported his continued studies and a term as President of the American Unitarian Association. Hedge had grown from a young radical intellectual to become the respected elder of the Unitarian establishment, and like his father-in-law, but unlike Emerson and Thoreau, Hedge worked to reinterpret Christianity for moderns, to ensure that it was a relevant and living faith for people who think. He taught that “No form of Christianity is absolutely and only true. Each successive one was right in its place, and good in its season; each put forward the face, and embodied the

truth, which the time required.” Hedge taught that we should reinvent religion in every generation! That we should base our faith upon our own lived experiences, with particular attention to what makes sense in the world today. For 200 years, this is the deep theology of this place!

So what of the transcendentalists still applies to our lives today? I believe that this openness to new texts, new scientific discoveries, and new ways of being in the world, still deeply applies to us. This reinvention of religion in every generation, whether building upon an inclusive and open Christianity, or other ancient traditions, or simply engaging with nature and life as we find it, applies to us. Being truly intentional about our lives, our interests and our activities, these call us perhaps even more now than 200 years ago. We need to remind ourselves to be awake and open to our lives! To draw from the world’s wisdom, but to judge it by comparison with our own experience, never simply because it was the faith of our fathers, for our faith must be found anew in every generation!

I turned to feminist poet Martha Courtot for our Opening Words. She reminds us that “crossing a creek requires three things: A certain serenity of mind (so that we may move peacefully through the chaos of our life), bare feet (so we may safely feel our way), and a sure trust that the snake we know slides silently underwater just beyond our vision will choose to ignore our flesh which cuts through its territory and we will pass through...” We cannot pretend that the snake does not exist, or even that we will see it before it attacks, but we can trust serendipity as we make our way. She writes, “All crossings are hard, whether creeks, mountains, or into other lives...” but if we learn to trust, we will come through. Each generation embarks anew upon this unique lifelong journey.

This also is Anna Quindlen’s lesson which Carol read for us. “It is so easy to waste our lives: our days, our hours, our minutes. It is so easy to take for granted the color of the azaleas... the color of our kids’ eyes... It is so easy to exist instead of live.” We each much learn to love the journey, not the destination. Enjoying this beautiful Fall weather while we have it, feeling the warmth of the sun on our face, noticing the leaves beginning to change colors. We must learn to be happy with the life that is provided to us, as Quindlen suggests engaging “ life as a terminal illness because if you do you will live it with joy and passion as it ought to be lived.”

Anyone walking in the woods in the Fall, truly awake to their experience of living in this life, is apt to be a transcendentalist. An annual attempt by the divine to lure us into our fullness of being! What does it mean for each of us to live our lives fully and whole? Each of us could do well if we sat together each evening with our loved ones, and asked each other three simple questions about whether our lives that day had meaning: First, did we learn something, something which will help us to become the person that we are capable of being? Second, did we love someone or something deeply, such that this love truly transforms us? And third, did we do some good today, such that the world is just a little bit better for us having been in it this day? These three questions, more than all the commandments in the world, define what it means to live intentionally, and by so doing to make the most of our lives. Living such a life, we cannot long keep from singing, even in the midst of tumult and strife, for our hope springs eternal! Amen.