

Love Fulfilled
A sermon for Hedge's 200th birthday

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Astrophysicists speak to us of the unfolding of the universe, from the Big Bang forward it has been a process of complexification offset by entropy, a dance of energy rising to ever higher levels and yet ever balanced against the lassitude of growing quiescence. I mention this emerging understanding of the nature of the universe as a backdrop against which I would like to introduce you to process thought, an exciting 20th Century attempt to reconcile modern physics with ancient religious beliefs, and then to use that as a lens to look at what Frederic Henry Hedge and Ralph Waldo Emerson were attempting to accomplish with transcendentalist thought in the 19th Century. For like Alfred North Whitehead in the 1920's, responding to the shattering of his worldview entailed by Einstein's theory of relativity, Frederic Henry Hedge and others evolved transcendentalism in the 1830's & 40's in response to the existential angst evoked in the early 19th Century by the emerging German Higher Criticism as expressed by Goethe, Immanuel Kant, and Schleiermacher. So sit back on this glorious Sunday, enjoy the ride through space and time, as we examine changing worldviews.

Process Thought was first developed by Alfred North Whitehead, and later developed further by other scholars, many of whom are UU's, and not an insignificant number of whom are UU ministers, to try and make sense of traditional religious beliefs in light of the emerging understanding of the universe coming from the leading edge of physics. If all began as one interpenetrated reality, and if the concept of entanglement means that any two things that have ever been interpenetrated will always remain in some sense deeply interconnected, then we have a universe which is a unity: you and I may feel separate and distinct but we share this original inter-connection with all being: we are an intimate part of emergent life on this planet, and in this universe: we are one with all that is! This is at least the answer provided by many modern UU's to the metaphysical angst caused by the displacement of Newtonian physics by Einsteinian physics in the mid-part of the 20th Century.

Transcendentalism had a similar genesis in America about 100 years earlier. To fully understand American Transcendentalism, one must first understand Frederic Henry Hedge, a man born 200 years ago tomorrow, he appears to be the first person to have used the term and he was recognized in his day as central to the emergence of transcendentalism in America. Frederic Henry Hedge was born December 12, 1805, the son of Levi Hedge, Harvard's Alford Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity. Levi decided to home school his young son since he felt no one knew as well as he did what the boy needed to learn!

Young Henry was an intellectual phenomenon: at the age of seven he had mastered Virgil; by the age of ten he was reading Homer; and at the age of twelve he passed the entrance exam to enter Harvard College. Now his father thought that young Henry might benefit from exposure to the emerging existential thought in Germany, and since every scholar in that period needed fluency in German, and the Professor had a beloved young graduate student, George Bancroft, who was headed to Germany to study, he sent the young Hedge with his tutor to study in German schools.

So at the age of twelve this young man was tutored in German by Rev. Oppermann, the pastor in Gottingen, and then enrolled in the nearby gymnasium or parochial school called Gotha. This school was in an old monastery, classes were conducted entirely in Latin, the rooms were unheated in winter, and if you came in late at night you needed to proceed through the church crypt to get to your bed. Hardly the ideal place for a bright, awkward American teenager. By the age of 13 young Henry was academically advanced but depressed, bitter, rude to his teachers and fellow classmates, and no longer welcome as a temporary scholar from savage America. So at 14 he was transferred to the gymnasium at Ilfeld in Hanover, considered the best preparatory school in Germany, where he flourished academically but was often disciplined and reprimanded for his American boyishness. I can certainly identify with this young man! At 16 he transferred to a Prussian High school in Saxony where he thrived! Still a risk taker, he nearly drowned trying to swim across a raging river in springtime. He survived and returned to the US the following year to enter Harvard, where due to his German studies he entered as a Junior. Two years later he graduated from Harvard as both valedictorian and class poet.

While at Harvard he met Margaret Fuller at a Cambridge house party, he was 18 and she was 13, and it is said that they used to talk German and

metaphysics for hours. A few years later Margaret introduced Henry to Lucy Pierce, Margaret's good friend and the daughter of Rev. John Pierce, the longtime minister in the then sleepy village of Brookline Massachusetts, which Henry was happy to find was within walking distance of Cambridge. After much walking back and forth, at the age of 23, Frederic Henry Hedge married the beautiful Lucy Pierce. It was also during this period when Hedge was studying at Harvard Divinity School that he met the young Ralph Waldo Emerson and they too became life long friends. All of these young scholars in their 20's were captivated by the new thought coming out of Germany, new ways of thinking about religion and meaning making in our lives.

Our readings today, all of which are from Hedge's writings, give you some sense of what these young people were talking about. As Hedge wrote: "There is, in all men, something deeper than themselves, -- than the conscious self of their experience. It is the elder, aboriginal self, which no consciousness can grasp... Blind mystery envelopes our origin, as it does our end. No man quite possesses himself. The self which he seems to possess is growth from a root which bears him, not he it." It is Hedge's consciousness of the importance of being deeply rooted, to protect and cause one's fruit to flourish, that will ultimately lead to his split from Emerson, Parker and Thoreau, when they seek to enjoy the fruits of transcendentalism while leaving Christianity behind. Hedge chose to transform Christianity rather than to abandon his roots. He felt that true religion ought to encompass all that is true!

Transcendentalism began on September 8th, 1836, at Harvard's bicentennial celebration, where four young ministers: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederic Henry Hedge, George Putnam and George Ripley met at Willard's Hotel in Cambridge to discuss plans for a symposium of like-minded thinkers, to discuss the new ideas of the times, and seek to develop deeper and broader views into theology and philosophy. This gathering of young Unitarian ministers and scholars would meet irregularly for four years from 1836 to 1840, and because Hedge was called to be the minister in Bangor Maine, they mostly met when Hedge came to Boston, mostly at the parsonage of Rev. George Ripley, at Boston's 13th Congregational Church, which was on the wharf made famous by the Boston Tea Party in the American Revolution. These heady liberal religious thoughts, if un-rooted from the beliefs of their congregation, were not positive for the careers of these young ministers: Emerson had already resigned his pulpit at Second Church in

Boston in 1832 over disagreements with his congregation about miracles and the meaning of communion. George Ripley would similarly be asked to resign his pulpit in 1841 when congregants complained of his liberal views, and he went on in the 1840's to found Brook Farm here in West Roxbury as a short lived utopian commune. Hedge and Putnam however used these new thoughts to develop a deep theology of broad church Unitarianism, where all are welcome.

George Putnam, who served First Church in Roxbury throughout this turbulent period, from 1830 to 1878, explained in the 1860's why his liberal religious views didn't cause the same consternation with his parishioners: "My oldest parishioners, those who have listened to me all these thirty years, will bear me witness that I have done and said almost nothing to identify them or myself with any...sectarian sympathies... I have loved to regard what is called Unitarianism, not so much as a body of opinions, as the principle of liberty of opinion; not so much a distinct organization of men and of churches, as an assertion of the independence of churches and of individual intellectual freedom." This too is how Frederic Henry Hedge approached his ministry, helping to build multi-faith congregations in an emerging interfaith world. This became known as the Broad Church movement in Unitarianism, which Hedge along with Henry Whitney Bellows and James Freeman Clarke developed into a way of honoring the roots from which this religion had sprung, even while encouraging new thoughts and ways of being, religion could spring afresh in every generation.

Hedge served his Bangor congregation for 15 years, then a congregation in Providence RI for another 6 years, and finally came to Brookline, where his beloved wife Lucy had grown up and was so well known and loved by this congregation, where he happily spent his last sixteen years in active parish ministry. So what does Hedge have to teach which is still relevant 200 years after his birth? He taught that "the universe is newborn continually, birth everlasting out of the bosom of self-existent original being... life welling forth in measureless efflux, fresh from the heart of the living God, a beginning-less, endless process of self-communicating Love." This transcendental view of the divine still serves us well here at the beginning of the 21st Century. He writes: "I look within, and there I meet [the divine] 'in eternal day'. Every process in nature is the going-forth of the Everlasting on his messages of love, and every event in my experience is a message of love fulfilled in me." In passages like these, Hedge not only explicates the transcendentalist's experience of the divine within and in nature, but even

prepares the way for later Process Thought, where every act in our lives is part of the unfolding of the universe, where joy represents our union with the divine, and we experience in our best moments, in our truest selves, love fulfilled.

Like Emerson, Fuller and Thoreau: Hedge tries to communicate the experience of living life fully, of knowing the interconnection of all things, of transcending mundane reality through the vivid experience of direct connection with the divine. Last Sunday, Rev. Martha spoke about an early mystical experience at the age of nine. I would like to recount my first at the age of fourteen. We were at a Baptist youth retreat and had spent most of the morning in a stuffy dark room watching what I remember as religious teenage educational videos. When we finally took a break late morning I shot out of the room into the bright daylight of the surrounding forest, making my way quickly up a path before anyone could engage me in conversation. Suddenly I noticed that the path was shining before me, the leaves on the trees were emitting light, the very trunks of the trees were luminous; my hands and arms were also waves of energy, and I was one with all being and at peace with all that I saw. This experience lasted for several minutes and evoked great feelings of joy in this transformed place. Gradually the light shining forth from everything began to fade back into normal reality and at the same time my sense of universal oneness simply faded. Since the grown-ups at this retreat were all Baptists and rationalists, I never told any of them about my experience.

I have always thought that the transcendentalists were trying to make sense of just such experiences of wonder when they spoke and wrote so earnestly about this amazing quality of simple being.

Hedge writes, “A process of nature is also a work of grace... a miracle of grace is each returning spring, unlocking myriad doors of life, flooding the landscape with glory and joy, everywhere bursting into flower and song... the purest manifestations of divine grace do not disdain to exhibit themselves in natural processes.” So let us remember this amazing and beloved minister, who helped to create and shape this UU movement to which we have now been drawn. Live your life deeply, for only then is love fulfilled!