

The Ongoing Story of The Society  
a homily by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
for the 140th Annual Meeting of  
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
22 May 2021

The story that First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis tells, and has told in its 140 years of existence, is the story of one of America's greatest ideas: Transcendentalism.

#How is it that an explicitly Humanist Midwestern congregation has carried a nineteenth century religio-philosophical movement into the twenty-first century?

Well, that's quite a story.

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines "transcendentalism" a couple of different ways:

*1. an idealistic philosophical and social movement which developed in New England around 1836 in reaction to rationalism. Influenced by romanticism, Platonism, and Kantian philosophy, it taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, and its members held progressive views on feminism and communal living. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were central figures.*

*2. a system developed by Immanuel Kant, based on the idea that, in order to understand the nature of reality, one must first examine and analyze the reasoning process which governs the nature of experience.*

As some of you know, Emily Dickinson is my go-to poet when I need inspiration. No poet is as concise and precise as Dickinson in thought or in language. Her poem numbered #236 well summarizes the Transcendentalist spirit, even though she herself was not part of that movement.

And that's one of the points I want to make today: #First Unitarian Society is one of the keepers of the Transcendentalist spirit because we are way more radical than those nineteenth century radicals, and we're way more radical in our thinking than most Unitarian Universalists and liberal church folks today.

The poem goes like this:

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.

Now, Emily was an introvert, admittedly. Even more of an introvert than I am. Which is saying something. But as the weeks turned to months this past year, and the Society's building stayed shut, I couldn't help thinking of this poem, and how Emily phrases it:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—  
I keep it, staying at Home—

#We Humanists don't go to church out of obligation. We don't go to please a god. We go because we don't plan on

getting to Heaven, at last -

because we are indeed,

. . . going, all along.

During these pandemic months, I've heard a lot of horror stories from my fellow ministers of various traditions. And I have to admit when hear the horror stories from the pandemic, that I don't have any horror stories. That's because you—the people of First Unitarian Society—are unique. Self-selected, unique, and amazing human beings. Inheritors of the Transcendentalist spirit: you don't need anyone—especially an old guy like me—telling you how to live, move, and have your being. That's not why you are a part of The Society—it's something else. It's about responsibility.

You, like Emily Dickinson, prefer to hear a bird's song to the pealing of a church bell.

We Humanists—and I think Dickinson fits into this category as well—#we Humanists aren't worried about how to be more holy or even more fully human. We know that all human beings are already holy and fully human.

Rather, #we explore ways to find meaning, purpose, and *fulfillment in being* human. We don't need to dress in what Emily calls "surplice," church vestments. Because we know how to wear our wings.

Rather than searching for salvation, we are looking for ways to live and to love for fully.

We look for beauty and truth not in some far off etherial realm, but right here, right now. As Dickinson puts it,

God preaches, a noted Clergyman -  
And the sermon is never long . . .

We can hear nature speaking. And those words are not boring; not pressing us into a world we can't inhabit or understand.

#What Americans don't think we have is time. Time to reflect; time for remorse and forgiveness; time to change our minds; time to study the past and see our way to a better way of doing.

#What we Americans destroy in our mad pursuit of time; what we justify in terms of cruelty and waste in our mad pursuit of time—these losses are our failure as a people. And as individuals who justify our cruelty and waste and haste because "everyone else is doing it."

#This is the great call of the Transcendentalist tradition: slow down; listen; take responsibility—personal responsibility. As Dickinson phrased it:

So instead of getting to Heaven, at last -  
I'm going, all along.

It's quite a story that we are telling here; quite a story that each of you is living. It's the essence of whatever it is that progressive American religion has been about all these years.

And we go on telling it, expanding it, living it.

That's our story. Your story.