

Transcending Boundaries

Walt Whitman writes, in the poem “Sleepers,” “I wander all night in my vision, Stepping with light feet...swiftly and noiselessly stepping and stopping, Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers.” In *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman tells his readers to “Unscrew the locks from the doors. Unscrew the doors themselves from the jambs!” In his poetry, Walt Whitman watches people while they are sleeping, watches them while they go about their daily business, watches and even joins them in the bridal bed. You can't get any more invasive than that, I would think. Whitman crosses boundaries between himself and others, but does he invade personal space? Not really. In his poetry, Whitman is acknowledging his oneness with all humanity and all of Nature. And this is what I mean by Transcending Boundaries. It is a vision of connectedness, of the dissolving of differences because we are all pervaded by the same spirit. In *Song of Myself*, Whitman calls himself a Kosmos, but then says he is “no Stander above men and women or apart from them.” He says, “I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-washed babe, and am not contained between my hat and boots.” Becoming even more grandiose, he goes on to envision himself spanning continents: “Space and Time! Now I see it is true what I guessed at—what I guessed when I loafed on the grass....My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea gaps, I skirt sierras, my palms over continents, I am afoot with my vision.” And his vision is that he transcends the boundaries of himself. His ego seems to be expanding, but, I think, he is transcending beyond his own ego. And he believes this is possible for all human beings. This is the expansiveness I have felt standing on top of the mountains at Idyllwild, overlooking the clouds. This is the expansiveness I sometimes feel when I feel close to other people. My ego is not expanding but rather diluting when I feel a connection to life outside myself.

Yes, we often hear about respecting boundaries between ourselves and other individuals, but today I'm talking about transcending the boundaries that we have made for ourselves so as to be more inclusive, to see our own part in a larger humanity and within the Universe. In a High Desert Meetup Spiritual Discussion Group, one of the members brought up the analogy of single human beings likened to single cells within one body—the analogy appearing in our responsive reading for today. She said that the analogy is meant to remind us that we are not separate beings and that we are not more special than any other part of existence, but that we are an important part of existence. We need to know our part in the greater whole—that an ego grown too large and looking out only for itself is like a cell which becomes a cancerous.

To transcend means to go beyond. To me, it means to go beyond our own egos, to recognize that we are a part of all that exists. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister and major figure in the 19th century American Transcendental Movement, (and one of the few of Whitman's contemporaries who really appreciated Whitman's “Barbaric Yawp,”) said we are not born as blank slates ; we are born as souls, infused with the Universal Spirit. In his essay “Circles” he writes, The life of a man is a self-evolving circle, which from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to more and larger

circles...The one thing we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety,...to do something without knowing how or why, in short to draw a new circle.” And yet, in my experience, this drawing of new and wider circles of experience is difficult and scary for most people. Most people seem content not to transcend their own egos, or the cultures and belief systems they were born into. Emerson acknowledges that even though humans long to transcend beyond their own narrow circles, it is not easy. He writes, “In Nature, every moment is new. Nothing is secure but life's transitions, the emerging spirit.”... Yet “people wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them...Life is a series of surprises.” I believe in the paradox that life can be more fulfilling if we are willing to risk being unsettled. We expand our circle by daring to go out of our comfort zone. This reminds me of a UU from LA County who came to our Friends of Adelanto Detainees training session, training that prepares people to visit detainees. During a sharing session, she admitted to feeling out of her element during the tour of the Detention facility. She shared the discomfort she felt on the tour. As a member of the white middle class, she was not used to being “The Stranger in a strange place.” And yet there she was at the training session, intending to participate in the visitation process—widening her circle. Vickie Mena, who attended our little UU group before attending college in Washington State, started widening her circle when she embarked upon Immigrant Studies in college. And she is still widening her circle, and helping her daughters to widen their circles too. Her seemingly unflagging energy may be part of her personality, but it may be partly due to transcending the boundaries of her own ego and upbringing.

I stole the title of this service from UU minister and history professor Yvonne Seon. I'm going to read her article which appears in *Been in the Storm So Long*, published by UU's Skinner House in 1991. This publication is a compilation of poems and essays by African-American Unitarian Universalists, and Yvonne Seon is an African-American UU minister.

Why is transcending boundaries more difficult for an adult? I keep thinking of my studies in language acquisition. A child at six months is capable of learning any language in the world. As the child grows older, the mouth and brain become less flexible, and it becomes exceedingly more difficult to produce the sounds of a language that he/she hasn't been exposed to. I suppose this could also be true of cultures and belief systems that the child hasn't been exposed to? We become more rigid and set in our ways as we grow older. Maybe our wish to be more settled, as Emerson puts it, becomes stronger as we grow older?

Yes, transcending boundaries is hard work for adults, and yet here we are. Most of us in this room are here because we were willing and able to transcend boundaries. Some of us have felt compelled to widen our circles, having become uncomfortable within the confines of the belief systems we were born into.

I would like to mention and quote another UU minister, Jaco B. Ten Hove (Washington), who gave a sermon entitled “The Transcendent within.” For Ten Hove, transcendent means “larger than.” This seems similar to Emerson's notion of ever widening circles. Ten Hove says he was lucky to have his world enlarged when he was a child by the foreign students his parents brought into their home. He says he was able to transcend the boundaries of his own family unit. “These encounters helped me to learn to transcend first myself, then my family unit and then even my country...I developed a sense of the simple truth that life is larger than me alone. Transcendence encourages a sense of proportion that, when taken to heart, deepens both awareness and humility...I discovered that...I could embrace this wider reality and grow with it without being unduly threatened....Relationships with people who are different pull you beyond your own little circle, so that you can transcend your own ego and understand that there is indeed a much larger picture into which you fit. Civilization shrinks when we ignore the human connectedness that transcends local affiliations.” Last week we talked about the Buddhist meta meditation, in which you begin by wishing yourselves well, progressing to wishing your friends and family well, then including someone you have no special connection to, widening this circle to include wishing wellness to someone you have negative feelings toward, and finally including all living beings in your wish for wellness. To me, this seems like a good exercise for transcending boundaries and expanding your circle.

I, personally feel lucky that I was brought up without narrow affiliations with any one religion or belief system. Thanks to my parents, I have had an easier time transcending boundaries than some others may have had. My years of teaching English as a Second Language has certainly helped me expand my circle and transcend the boundaries of my own ego and my own culture, helping me to see the connection between all human beings amid the beautiful human diversity. Thanks to his parents, Jaco Ten Hove also had an easier time transcending boundaries. Thanks to Vickie Mena, her children will also be able to broaden the circles of their existence. And thanks to Vickie, I am now further expanding my circle by visiting with an Adelanto Detainee; I’m helping him feel he is not alone, and I’m learning a lot from this interesting and talented individual. All of us in this room have already gone a long way to expanding our own individual circles, transcending our boundaries, by being open to the diversity of belief systems within our own little UU group.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SOCIETY OF THE HIGH DESERT

Order of Service August 16, 2015

Announcements and Introductions

Opening Words #434

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations
and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings but connected,
in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each
other.

Lighting of the Chalice, from #448

We light this beacon of hope,
sign of our quest for truth and meaning,
in celebration of the life we share together.

Joys and Concerns

Offering

Reading of the Principles

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association,
covenant to affirm and promote:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth
within our congregations;
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within
our congregations and in society at large;
The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a
part.

Responsive Reading # 651

**I am a single cell in a body of seven billion cells. The body is
humankind.
I am a single cell. My needs are individual, but they are not unique.**

I am interlocked with other human beings

in the consequences of our actions, thoughts and feelings.

**I will work for human unity and human peace,
for a moral order in harmony with the order of the universe.**

Together we share the quest for a society of the whole equal to our needs,

**A society in which we need not live beneath our moral capacity,
and in which justice has a life of its own.**

We are single cells in a body of seven billion cells. The body is humankind.
(Norman Cousins)

Hymn # 318 We Would Be One

TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES—EXPANDING YOUR CIRCLE

Hymn # 347 Gather the Spirit

Extinguishing the Chalice, # 456

We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth,
the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Closing Words

Let us go, remembering to praise, to live in the moment,
to love mightily, to bow to the mystery.

(Barbara Pescon)