

# The Transcendent Within

BY JACO B. TEN HOVE, CO-MINISTER, CEDARS UU CHURCH,  
BAINBRIDGE ISLAND AND NORTH KITSAP COUNTY, WASHINGTON

In a small but intriguing book called *Religious Integrity for Everyone*, my colleague Fred Campbell noted how “transcendence” implies “larger than.” He explained that “Communities are larger than individuals [and] God is a word used to point to some inclusive reality much larger [still].” With such a helpful frame, one can understand the meaningful arc of a life path, using whatever language resonates within.

Perhaps you can recall early life moments when your world was enlarged. When I was a child, my parents arranged through the American Field Service program to have a series of foreign college students come live with us for semesters at a time in our home in suburban northern New Jersey. I vividly remember two young women, from Japan and Italy, living in our home, but I only recall the name of Sam Elad from Cameroon in Africa, perhaps because he came back for a second stay with us.

What I remember was that Sam was a cheerful, kind, round-faced fellow with a beautiful accent, who had lots of animated conversations with my mother. Every now and then he would dress up in his really colorful Cameroonian finery and go off to some event and my eyes would bug out of their skinny young sockets at the look of him. The Japanese exchange student also had stunningly different kinds of clothes that she would wear periodically. My eyes and my world widened at the very look of these good folks.

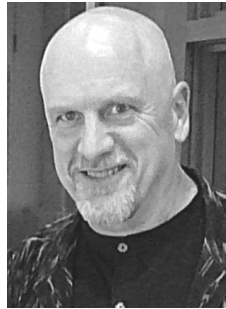
This was a formative era in my life, when I began to transcend the boundaries of my own family unit and, in Fred Campbell’s words, “participate in the larger process of creativity that permeates our universe.” My worldview grew because of living day-to-day with folks from other cultures who were willing to step out of their worlds into mine. I knew and was known by these guest residents and I learned a lot about their homelands. The expansive planet became much less of an abstraction for me.

In a very real way, these encounters helped me to learn to transcend first my self, then my family unit, and then even my country—to understand that there was a lot more of value out there beyond my own immediate world. I then internalized that broader perspective and took to heart a wider reality shown to me through my wider relationships.

I developed a sense of what I call the Transcendent Within, by which I mean an internalization, a psychic integration 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 there was more of this larger creativity going on beyond my own personal view and that I could embrace this wider reality and grow with it without being unduly threatened. This was, I believe, the interpersonal grounding that enabled me to be open to global thinking and interfaith relations as I matured.

Later, in high school, I applied to and became vice-president of a small group called the Domestic Exchange, an annual program that connected with another high school in some different part of the United States, and traded weeklong visits in the spring. Each of a dozen of us paired with a “brother” or “sister” from the other school and lived with that family during an exchange week in each locale.



# Quest for meaning

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All peoples are  
members of the same  
body, created from  
one essence.

—Saadi

A monthly for religious liberals

## ABOUT TRANSCENDENCE

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In early 1968 we traded visits with an all-Black high school in New Orleans and had a great time together on both ends. In March, I slept on the couch at my brother Frank's house down there, and borrowed an umbrella as we went to his school together and all toured that marvelous city. In late April Frank and his group came up and stayed with us and we showed them New York City.

Between the two exchange weeks, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. We relied on the relationships we established in March to help us all process that tragedy in April, although, truthfully, we probably did just the bare minimum of that, and kept busy with the sights. But my own sense of that moment in history deepened immensely because of this opportunity to stay connected with people from way outside my own local community.

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. This sounds pretty straightforward, maybe even obvious. But, as Lloyd Stone's lyrics in the hymn "A Song of Peace" remind us, it is all too easy to forget that, "other hearts in other lands are beating, with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine."

In this increasingly crowded and complex world, we desperately need to find productive common ground, and our civilization shrinks when we ignore the human connectedness that transcends local affiliations. I can sense incredible opportunities for leaps in human consciousness that are already emerging in this 21st century, but our too-often self-absorbed, violent human nature is certainly an obstacle.

I suspect that if you examine almost any strife-ridden sector of our world, including in the US, you'll likely find conflict driven, at least in part, by the inability of some people to transcend

their individuality and immediate community. Individual egos take control. Threats and insults, perceived and/or real, rise up to obscure the bigger picture of our common humanity. Relationships either get severed or never existed in the first place, which exacerbates the tension and allows a sense of separation to dominate. The "other," then, can be easily dismissed and demonized. This is the familiar storyline in almost every war, large and small.

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### We often forget and neglect the broader levels of transcendence that can unite us across narrow, near-sighted boundaries.

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And religion, of course, is frequently a large player in such a scenario. If your God is absolutely sectarian—promoting your religion's interests over others—you can be led to do horribly destructive things in the name of that individual God. Rigid dogma seems to intentionally prevent its followers from acknowledging the validity of other theologies.

How much greater the odds for at least peaceful coexistence if there were a willingness everywhere to see that even if another culture understands the divine differently, it is a parallel construction of transcendent meaning—not necessarily better or worse, just another way to do the same, unifying thing, which humans have been doing since the beginning of consciousness.

But we often forget and neglect the broader levels of transcendence that can unite us across narrow, near-sighted boundaries. Sometimes our language gets in the way. The name God, for instance, is just not big enough to encompass the full, transcendent creativity of the Universe, and its exclusive use just does not allow "religious integrity for everyone." Fred

Campbell suggests that "God" could usefully be replaced by "transcendence." I think the ancient Hebrews had the right idea when they refused to specify any name for what is essentially ineffable, indescribable.

"Religious integrity for everyone," points, I think, accurately toward peace. But it is, of course, the standard liberal position, open-minded and willing to meet others halfway. How often do we get our outstretched hand slapped by those more interested in separation from and power over anyone who doesn't believe the way they do?

I've done enough interfaith dancing to see that the partners most willing to share the dance floor with me are usually the least dogmatic of the pool of religious leaders out there. The diverse and often challenging music we can hear in common seems to drive away others who are only comfortable if their particular theme song is playing.

How, you might well ask, can we individual religious liberals participate in a grand scenario toward a greater peace? I have two suggestions:

First of all, we must hold our own elected leaders accountable to the ideal and heritage of compromise amid diversity. Unilateral belligerence, if it was ever appropriate, is certainly an untenable activity today, and some people need help realizing this. Those of us in the US can appeal to the example of our own American history. We liberals need not cede one iota of patriotic ground when we call for political proportion and peace-mongering. Our collective 21<sup>st</sup> century well-being just cannot afford the crippling costs of diplomacy that leads with a fist.

Even as we might endeavor to transcend individual egos, our individual voices matter, and can urge a broader perspective on leaders and neighbors alike. Find your voice and sing out a "song of peace for lands afar and mine." Cross-cultural collaboration is

demanding, but we can see all too clearly what the alternative brings.

And secondly, let me suggest that the “spiritual spaciousness” of our broader religious landscape is a reflection of the spiritual spaciousness inside each of us. Do you feel like you have enough room inside you to at least acknowledge other religious perspectives that do not come easily or naturally to you? Can you take to heart the diversity within your own local groups, let alone the growing diversity in your region and the country/planet?

This is a 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge before us: to internalize our vaunted principles so they are more than lip service, so that they are modeled by our consistent behavior, behavior that bespeaks peace. To the extent that we can move our culture forward in ways that honor the individual, but also transcend our very human egos and seek commonality, we will be ambassadors of peace, locally and globally.

Take a deep breath, and another, and imagine that with each such breath, you can intentionally expand your inner boundaries and create a growing capacity for spiritual spaciousness, an internal engine of loving spirit that contributes your life energy to the greater goal “of peace for their land and for mine.”

The circle of mutual creativity grows with our increasing centeredness, as we both locate ourselves in the larger transcendence of an interconnected world and take that experience to heart. Let us strive to be as aware of our transcendence as that notable Buddhist monk ordering a hot dog—“Make me one with everything.”



Let our next steps bring us closer to each other and to the goal of religious integrity for everyone. ■

## The God Beyond

BY KAAREN ANDERSON,  
PARISH CO-MINISTER,  
FIRST UNITARIAN  
CHURCH OF ROCHESTER,  
NEW YORK



I want to start out with two stories.

The first—ancient—is about Abraham, the father of faith for Christians, Muslims and Jews. In biblical accounts it's difficult to discern what Abraham actually believed. He doesn't possess a certainty of faith. He is regularly confused and asks many questions, often without receiving very satisfying answers. But this patriarch of the three great western traditions did indeed possess at least one marvelous religious experience.

He's sitting outside his tent on a hot day. Sweat drips from his temples. The tribe is resting, trying not to stir during the baking slowness of the day. He barely moves; his wrist clicks back and forth, as a large feather fan swishes hot air across his face. And there on the horizon appear three strangers. In ancient times, as is often true today, the stranger was not always the easiest person to invite in. As violent as our own culture is, Abraham's day was worse. Strangers often represented a threat rather than an opportunity.

But what does Abraham do? He pulls himself up off the blistering ground, brushes sand from his robes and walks toward them. He offers a greeting, inquires as to their well-being. Instead of being on guard, anticipating a potential threat, he sets out the best he can offer. He spreads extravagant dining cloths, prepares and serves the guests an elaborate, plentiful meal. He offers comfort and solace. They converse and swap stories. And it happens quite slyly, without fanfare or oracle, that one of these strangers is Abraham's God.

And so it is that Abraham's act of practical compassion leads to an encounter with the divine. It was in Abraham's lived experience—in the choice to transcend a focus on his own needs—that the divine was ushered in.

The second story is a modern one.

A couple of years ago my friend, Marcy, and her boyfriend, Brian, were having dinner at a Chinese restaurant. As they enjoyed a plate of lo mien, engrossed in conversation, a hand reached down and scooped up their plate of noodles. A voice, quick and agitated, mumbled “Sorry!” and a thin, poorly dressed woman left the restaurant with their plate of lo mien.

In astonishment, they watched her walk down the street, holding the ceramic plate with the flat of her hand, stuffing noodles in her mouth so rapidly that they slapped sharply against her face. The owner realized what had happened and darted out the front door, chasing after the noodle thief. He stood firmly in front of her, blocking her way and grabbing a side of the plate. A struggle ensued, and noodles slid uneasily from one side to the other, slopping over the edge. He surged forward and pulled with a heroic strong-arm attempt to retrieve his plate. The woman's fingers slid from the plate. Noodles flew, then flopped pathetically on the sidewalk.

Left empty-handed, with soggy, contaminated noodles at her feet, the woman stood with arms dejectedly at her side. The owner walked victoriously back to the restaurant with the soiled plate in hand. My friends were given a new heaping plate of lo mien, although they had already consumed half of the stolen plate. A stream of apology in Chinese came from the proprietor. Unable to eat anymore, they asked to have the noodles wrapped up and set off to see their movie.

A block later they came upon the lo mien thief. The woman was hyper-

charged. She simultaneously cried, convulsed and shouted at a man, who rapidly retreated from her side. My friend, unsure about what to do, listened to her boyfriend's plea to just walk away. But she didn't. Instead, she walked over to the thief and said, "Ah, we haven't formally met, but about ten minutes ago, you were interested in our noodles. They gave us some new ones. Are you still hungry?" The woman nodded and extended her bony arms. She took the Styrofoam container in her hands, and bowed ever so slightly.



Marcy told me this story as an atheist, with an awareness that something she described as moving and real had happened in the exchange. She did not use traditional theological language. Yet once again, her act of practical compassion led to a holy encounter. It was in Marcy's lived experience—in her transcending a focus on her own needs—that the holy was ushered in.

Two stories, two different theologies. One the experience of a theist—Abraham; the other the experience of an atheist—Marcy. But what I find interesting is, how separate are they? If you asked them each about their belief in god, they would be far apart in their definitions or lack thereof. But if you ask, *How do your beliefs make a difference in your life?* they would both point to a transcending of self.

All of which leaves me with a number of questions. Is belief in God the key to a spiritual experience, or a description of it? Might theists and atheists be talking about much the same thing? And which is the more important religious question: *What do you believe about a supreme being?* or *What state of being do you seek to embody?*

Indeed, interestingly enough, what religions have commonly used as a litmus test for experiencing the holy, whether non-theist or theist, is this understanding that when we transcend

ourselves, when we are engaged in experiences that contribute to something larger than ourselves, then the divine is present, whether or not we call it divine.

Karen Armstrong writes, in "The God of All Faiths":

*All the major traditions that I have studied teach that one of the essential prerequisites for true religious experience is that we abandon the egotism and selfishness that hold us back from the divine. They all teach in one way or another that we are most fully ourselves when we give ourselves away. It is ego that diminishes us, limits our vision and is utterly incompatible with the sacred. But it is very hard to rid ourselves of egotism. Much of what passes for religion is in fact an endorsement of the selfishness that we are supposed to transcend in the ecstasy of faith. People want their prayers answered; they want to get to heaven. They go to church, synagogue or mosque not to cultivate self-abandonment but to affirm their identities.*

She further articulates that all the world's religions, whether non-theist or theist, insist that the single test of any theology or spiritual practice is whether it offers a practical application of compassion. This alone is the test. You pass if your theology, if your vision of the divine, makes you kind, patient, selfless. You fail if your theology, if your image of that which is holy, makes you bigoted, self-righteous, unkind or dismissive of others.

One great example of this is a story about Rabbi Hillel, an older contemporary of Jesus. It is said that a pagan told Hillel, that he would convert to Judaism if the rabbi could sum up the whole of the Jewish teaching while standing on one leg. So Hillel stood on one leg and said: *Do not do unto others as you would not have done unto you. That is the torah. The rest is commentary. Go and learn it!*

Armstrong reminds us that it's important to note that God wasn't mentioned. Nor was Mount Sinai, the laws of *kashrut*, or other values inseparable from mainstream Judaism. Instead, he summed up the guts of Judaism by pointing to the nature of the experiences we engage in.

So here it is. I'm putting it out there. We need to get over ourselves. We have spent far too much time arguing over whether or not it matters that we use God language or we don't. Atheists need to grant that ideas of divinity aren't silly, and theists need to grant that the holy is accessible to atheists. Both sides could benefit from agreeing that the question of religion is not how we speak of God, but how we transcend ourselves. Are we giving ourselves away, are we serving the greater good, are we giving compassion, offering kindness, withholding judgment?

In my office sits a statue of Quan Yin, a representation of the Buddhist image of compassion. For months now, when my daughter Neva walks into my office, she stops, looks at the religious artifacts, goes to the coffee table, takes a tissue from the box, climbs onto the chair next to Quan Yin and wipes the statue's nose, and then wipes her own.

Her first instinct is not to ask *What is this?* or *Who is it?* or even *What does it mean?* Her first instinct is to reach out, as if born with an intuition that the sacred question is not *What do I believe?* but rather *Who is in need?*

I think all of us are born with this instinct. And my hope in watching her is that the future will hold a world united in the effort to reach out to one another rather than one divided into tribes based on beliefs.

May we, my friends, help to carry this intuitive question forward, so that the generations that follow us are helping address the needs of the world as they live out their religious calling, no matter what they believe. ■



## Transcendent Giving

The charitable role that you play at the CLF ensures that we are here for you and those all around the world who seek this unique and special spiritual home. Make a gift to the CLF and give and receive joy.

Your offerings are easily given with the enclosed envelope or our website, [www.QuestForMeaning.org](http://www.QuestForMeaning.org). Monthly and quarterly donations can be arranged via electronic fund transfers (EFT) from your checking or saving account. The CLF is thankful for the generosity of our friends and supporters in all of its forms. ■



## Notice of Annual Meeting

**Notice to all members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist**

Per Article VII, Sections 1 and 2, of the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) Bylaws, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting will be held via conference call and screen-sharing on June 27, 2012, at 6:00PM Eastern time.

We will post all the necessary documents and contact information to the CLF website ([www.QuestForMeaning.org/annualmeeting](http://www.QuestForMeaning.org/annualmeeting)) by June 15, 2012. You can download the materials, print them, fill out the ballot, if it's necessary, and send it along to the CLF office at 25 Beacon St., Boston, MA 02108. Or call the CLF office at 617-948-6166 and request a paper copy.

The purpose of the meeting is to elect a moderator from among members present to preside at the meeting, and to elect, if contested, from the slate of candidates presented on the ballot, three members to three-year terms and two members to one-year terms on the board of directors, and the clerk and the treasurer.

**Lucia Santini Field, Clerk, May 1, 2012**

## Transcending Boundaries



When I was a child, I would stand and gaze at the starry firmament and contemplate infinity. As I stood there, the boundary that is

time dissolved; I expanded my Spirit to fill the boundary that is space. My being stilled and all fear, anxiety, and anguish disappeared. Forgotten were the chores, the homework, the ordinary around me.

Transcending boundaries was fun in those days. But, as I reached adulthood, it became more difficult. More and more, the world was with me as I did chores and homework. More and more, my own fears were with me as I encountered others. More and more, I was aware of the boundaries of race, class, age, and sex. I felt myself cringe as the bantering youth in the street came nearer. I felt myself become tearful as I encountered a senior citizen living with pain or the limited choices of a fixed income. I felt myself become angry as I was subjected to the indignities of being rejected by others because I

am Black, because I am a woman, or because of the blind person or the openly gay person I was with. I felt myself become unwilling to acknowledge my oneness with the addicted person who is my friend or the homeless person sleeping on the benches in the park.

Today, transcending boundaries is hard work. For one thing, I've created more of them since I was young, and I've built them higher and stronger than they once were. For another thing, I'm much more self-righteous and much less humble than I was then. Sometimes, when I am at my best, I remember that the "other" I distinguish myself from could be me in another time, another place, another circumstance. Then, I remember the words of a colleague who observed that it is "my racism, my sexism, my homophobia" that I am called upon to address. So, I take a few deep breaths and begin to release the fears that are the boundaries between me and my fellow humans.

*by Yvonne Seon, published in*  
*Been in the Storm So Long, 1991 by*  
*Skinner House, edited by Mark*  
*Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James* ■

## Oppression

Is a question of strength,  
of unshed tears,  
of being trampled under,

and always, always,  
remembering you are human.

Look deep to find the grains  
of hope and strength,  
and sing, my brothers and sisters,

and sing. The sun will share  
your birthdays with you behind bars,  
the new spring grass

like fiery spears will count your  
years,  
as you start into the next year;  
endure my brother, endure my  
sisters.



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*by Jimmy Santiago*  
*Baca, published in*  
*1993 by W.W. Norton*  
*and Company in*  
*Against Forgetting:*  
*Twentieth Century*  
*Poetry of Witness,*  
*edited and with an introduction by*  
*Carolyn Forché.* ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE  
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I am talking to a man whose wife has just told him she loves someone else. *I need to go to the ocean*, says this Midwesterner, *to see something bigger than my pain*.

I am on the phone with a woman whose sister is dying. Her sister's young child is inconsolable. *Even here*, says the woman on the phone, *there is beauty. There is joy. Even here, there is something beyond the pain*.

I am reading a letter from a prisoner, behind bars for more than half of his 37 years on the planet. *I have to work hard*, he says, *to see things to be grateful for. But they are always there, and my spiritual practice is to notice them*.

Theologian Tom Driver put it: "Radical immanence is transcendence."

Transcendence does not mean that the holy exists separately from the beauty and heartbreak of life on earth, which pulses in our bodies and daily lives (immanence). Rather, divine mystery is woven throughout every moment of time, every cell of our aging and imperfect bodies, every interaction and choice. Our spiritual practice is to remember to see it!

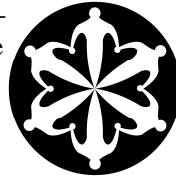
I don't know a God who is a big abstract perfect God...a being in the sky, removed from life on the earth. Sky and earth are as inseparable from one another as breath and body. This is not some remote abstract principle. Try holding your breath and see how long you make it!

I have always felt that worshipping the remote God of abstraction is similar to being devoted to a parent who is never present, lavishing the absent one with longing and adoration, while not recognizing the worth of the one who is there

day after day, preparing meals, caring for us. We can, instead, commit our lives to seeing holiness as what is right here, rather than something that we long for in some other time and place.

This shift toward "radical immanence" opens up abundance rather than scarcity as the nature of the universe. We savor the beauty of each rock or shell, rather than projecting the concept of beauty onto that diamond which we either can or cannot afford to buy. As UU musician Peter Mayer puts it, "Everything is holy now."

The seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism affirms that we are all part of an interdependent web of life, which means that each one of us is necessary for the rest of us to live. It is in that web where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, it is among that kind of interconnection, that I know transcendence.



Interdependence is also held up in the Buddhist principle of dependent co-arising, which comes as close to describing what transcendence means to me as anything.

*When this exists, that comes to be.  
With the arising of this, that arises.  
When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the cessation of this, that ceases.*  
(*Samyutta Nikaya 12.61*)

I feel the truth of that dependent co-arising in my daily life, as consciousness occurs. I am struggling with something—anxiety or rage or grief. It is right in front of me, and no amount of trying to knock it out of the way will work. It is only when I go deep, deep to its root that suddenly something bigger emerges into view. It is only when I state my intention—"No matter where this leads, no matter what I have to do, I will use this opportunity to find liberation and more freedom"—that I can see beyond the suffering. Background

and foreground shift, and I find relief from the struggle, if only for one moment. *When this exists, that comes to be.*

I feel the truth of this in my work for justice. Recently, in Florida, legislation to privatize 29 prisons looked as if it would unfortunately but inevitably pass. Those in control of the hearings were absolutely committed to swift and unchallenged passage of this measure. CLF member Donna Red Wing, though not optimistic about changing history, could not let this corrupt legislation pass without giving it her best fight. She contacted everyone she knew in Florida. They in turn contacted others. A Baptist minister found a way to be in the caucus room before the legislators went out to the floor to vote. "I want to see all of your statements about conflict of interest," he told them, citing a Florida law that demands transparency. "Are you financially benefitting here?" Because of his actions, the measure did not go to a vote. Those prisons, at least as of this writing, will not be privatized. Profits will not be made off of the suffering of thousands of people. *When this does not exist, that does not come to be.*

CLF's unique spiritual community, this congregation without walls, is a living incarnation of the interdependent web. Most of us will never lay eyes on one another. Yet knowing that we belong to each other brings real blessings, companionship on the journey, strength. *With the arising of this, that arises.*

May our days be filled with the awareness and arising of blessings. May we always know that we are held in a thread of life that extends back to our common ancestors and forward to generations we will not live to see. May we know that there is nothing we can do, no mistake we can make, that removes us from this web of life. May we care for one another, knowing that the transcendent is present in every one of us. ■

June 2012

## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Get over yourself! Or at least get *beyond* yourself. That's kind of the idea of "transcendence," our theme for this month. When you transcend something you go beyond it. A prisoner transcends his circumstances when he focuses on living a life of peaceful compassion while stuck in a setting designed to degrade the human spirit. A student transcends social boundaries when she sits at a table full of people who speak a different language or belong to a different social clique. A job seeker transcends anxiety and depression to go out and contact people who might or might not have leads on a job.

But we also use "transcendence" to talk about a fuzzier sense of something that goes beyond our ordinary reality, a feeling of something larger that's hard to describe. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes statement describes one of the sources of our living tradition as: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." Which is pretty much of a mouthful, but gets at the idea that there is a mysterious, larger something that holds us all together, that has to do with creativity and open-heartedness and growing.

That intuition—the notion that we all belong to a larger reality—is a part of our Unitarian heritage articulated, appropriately enough, by the Transcendentalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the most famous of our Unitarian ancestors were Transcendentalists, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller. They shaped American thought and literature with the idea—radical at the time—that people could directly experience this larger reality, this "Over-soul," with-



out reference to the Bible or a minister. They declared that the miracles of Jesus were not proof

of its reality, and that the teachings of Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism were just as valid a way of describing this ultimate reality as Christianity. Shocking!

And yet, if you talk with most UUs, this Transcendentalist notion is pretty much where a lot of us land. We find the Divine in and around us, as accessible in a forest or a mountain-top as in church—or maybe a lot more so! Our intimate connection to what is holy transcends whatever might look like it separates us.

But here's the funny part. Because transcendent means "beyond," the belief in a transcendent God can also point to what is utterly beyond this world, an all-powerful, all-knowing God who is "up there," wherever that "up" might be. Which is pretty much the opposite of the idea of the divine impulse *inside* all things, affirmed by the Transcendentalists and a whole lot of religious liberals who came

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after them. The term for that kind of understanding is "immanence." Immanence means inside, basically the polar opposite of beyond.

Which might explain why the concept of transcendence is so confusing that it seemed like a good plan for me to write a column explaining just what it might be. Unfortunately, here we are, all turned inside out in a mess of immanent transcendence that has only gotten us tangled up, not straightened out.

Okay, here's how I see it. An experience of transcendence is a reminder that you are not the biggest thing, that there is something beyond you.

What you can see is not all that there is to be seen. What you believe or perceive does not cover everything that can be known. I have had tiny moments of transcendence as I sat grumpily behind a stupid driver who was stopped in the middle of the road for no reason, only to realize that they stopped to let a pedestrian that I couldn't see cross the street. Oh. Funny thing. It turns out that I'm not the only person on the road, and my desire to quickly get where I need to be is no more important than the pedestrian's need to do the same thing—and it's a whole lot less important than the driver in front of me choosing not to run someone over!

I had a slightly larger version of this kind of perspective shift many years ago when I was called to serve a church in Chicago. The timing was perfect for me to leave the small town in Idaho where I had been minister, since my partner would only be able to pursue her career in a larger city. The universe, it seemed, was arranging things just for me!

Before I left, I met a UU minister who had moved to this rather remote area because of her husband's job. She loved the area, but was rather depressed that there were so few possibilities for her to pursue a ministry of her own. After I left, she was called as the church's next minister. And it struck me that the universe could just as easily have been shoving me around to make room for her to have what she wanted. There was, it turned out, no reason to suppose that the universe was any more interested in my personal desires than in anyone else's.

I don't know what the biggest thing is, or whether there is a God whose perspective is big enough to take in everything. That's okay. I think really all I have to know is that whatever that biggest thing is, I'm not it. There is always something that goes beyond me, beyond what I see, what I want, what I expect. If I can live in the humility of that understanding then I have a pretty good start on keeping "an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." ■





Church of the Larger Fellowship  
Unitarian Universalist

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Web Site [www.clfuu.org](http://www.clfuu.org) — E-mail [clf@clfuu.org](mailto:clf@clfuu.org) — Jewelry 617-948-6150 — Minister's Toll-Free Line 800-231-3027  
CLF Unitarian Universalist, 25 Beacon St., Boston MA 02108 USA — Telephone 617-948-6166 — Fax 617-523-4123

## Walking (Excerpt)

Tonight I walk. I am watching the sky. I think of the people who came before me and how they knew the placement of stars in the sky, watched the moving sun long and hard enough to witness how a certain angle of light touched a stone only once a year. Without written records, they knew the gods of every night, the small, fine details of the world around them and of immensity above them.

Walking, I can almost hear the redwoods beating. And the oceans are above me here, rolling clouds, heavy and dark, considering snow. On the dry, red road, I pass the place of the sunflower, that dark and secret location where creation took place. I wonder if it will return this summer, if it will multiply and move up to the other stand of flowers in a territorial struggle.

It's winter and there is smoke from the fires. The square, lighted windows of houses are fogging over. It is a world of elemental attention, of all things working together, listening to what speaks in the blood. Whichever road I follow, I walk in the land of many gods, and they love and eat one another.

Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.



by **Linda Hogan**, published in *The Beacon Book of Essays* by Contemporary Americans, edited by Wendy Martin, published by Beacon Press in 1996. ■