

The Concord School of Philosophy & Literature

Introductory Words by Stuart-Sinclair Weeks, Founder, The Center for American Studies at Concord

1879. It was the Indian Summer of Transcendentalism. The mills along the Merrimack River were gearing up, adding their insistent hum to the clang of the anvils and hissing of the forges of the “Industrial Age.”

In the city of Boston and in its celebrated centers of learning, Harvard and MIT, the tide of science was equally on the rise, an increasingly modern materialistic science that would pose its brusque, self-assertive challenge to religion and the humanities, to humanity itself.

“*Man, Know Thyself.*” The ancient dictum that had been inscribed above the portals of the centers of learning of old was falling on increasingly deafened ears Know thyself in Spirit, Soul, and at last, least, BODY. *Man as Animal*, the research that same year by the German psychologist, Wilhelm Wundt, heralded the new age.

In a small town in Middlesex County, Massachusetts, the confluence of three streams, which drew from the depths of American culture, rose to the surface, overflowing the banks of the Concord River: the “Neo-Platonists” of Illinois, the “Aristotelians” of St. Louis, and the New England “Transcendentalists.” The adherents of each stream – along with their fluent tributaries – shared the unshakeable conviction in a “Higher Power” that created and sustained not only the universe but also all who took part in it.

So it was. The accompanying proclamation of “self-reliance” was nothing more, and nothing less, than a reliance on that higher SELF in every human being, our divine birthright.

A man is the façade of a temple, Emerson wrote, wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him

do we not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his actions, would make our knees bend.
“The Over-Soul”

In the summer of 1879, The Concord School of Philosophy & Literature opened its doors in Orchard House, in the former study of its “Dean”, Amos Bronson Alcott. Born out of the lap of four little women and their beloved mother — a veritable Philo-Sophia — the Concord School was the life-long dream of Alcott. From its seeds in Alcott’s “Temple School”, the idea of such a concordium lived in the minds of Amos Bronson, Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and their spirited circle of friends, ripening through the decades of the 19th century.

At the heart of the Concord School of Philosophy & Literature lay a commitment to “Conversational Philosophy.” For Alcott, conversation was a cultural impulse, whereby like minds strove together toward insights greater than any one individual alone could attain. So it proved to be. Newspaper reports of the sessions of the Concord School noted that the conversations – spirited and engaging -- that followed the presentations themselves were a highlight.

The program that first summer, 1879, was, indeed, an historic one. Over 400 people were in attendance (one quarter from Concord), representing 18 states of our union.

On July 15th, Mr. Alcott stepped up to this podium to greet those who had gathered, before turning to his own offering. *“Mr. Alcott, whose 10 lectures are to be on ‘Christian Theism’ ”*, wrote an editor for the *Boston Journal*, *“then began in earnest the work of the summer by asking, ‘What is expressed by each one of us, so far as we can explore our consciousness, when we say, ‘I, myself?’”*

Was the “Dean” drawing from the same bounteous source that had not only inspired, but filled, the opening draught of *Walden*, his beloved friend’s masterpiece?

In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism in the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the

first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives.

William Torrey Harris, the leader of the St. Louis School, future US Commissioner of Education, and a devoted colleague of Alcott, spoke on the theme: "How Philosophical Knowing differs from all other forms of Knowing."

The editor for the *Boston Journal* continued: "*The chief object of his life, said Mr. Harris, had been, since he first heard Mr. Alcott several years ago, to find a logical road to personality. The mind in these days desires to put its hands on something stable, and very many people grasp at the idea of correlation of forces. **If the first and highest principle is unconscious** [emphasis added], we may be sure that it will finally swallow us up. Hence the importance of finding whether there be a conscious personality.*"

Ednah Cheney took up the subject of art. The Illinois Platonist, Dr. Hiram K. Jones, addressed the theme *The Immortality of the Soul*. David Wasson gave a lecture on *The Political Spirit of 1776*, followed by the celebrated mathematician, Charles Peirce, who challenged the philosophy of American "Pragmatism" with his address, *Ideality in Science*.

The birth of American Literature was the subject of a talk by T. W. Higginson, before Thomas Davidson turned the thoughts of those gathered back to ancient Athens and to an earlier revelation of the 3 streams noted at the outset, as depicted in this picture of Raphael's *School of Athens*, which hung here in the "Hillside Chapel" during the summer sessions.

Following Davidson, Alcott's friend and neighbor, Emerson, stepped up to this lectern to deliver an address, *Memory*, aided by his daughter, Ellen:

Memory is... the thread on which the beads of man are strung, making the personal identity which is necessary to moral action.

The aging “Sage of Concord” was followed, in turn, by the lanky Franklin Sanborn, Treasurer of the Concord School, whose themes were *Social Science* and *Philanthropy*. Cyrus Bartol devoted his thoughts to education, before the first summer session concluded with a reading by Harrison G. O. Blake from the manuscripts of Henry David Thoreau, who had “journeyed on” to the beat of his own drummer.

In between sessions, the visitors stretched their limbs, partaking themselves to Concord’s celebrated sites: the *Old Manse*, *Wayside Inn*, *Sleepy Hollow Cemetery*, *Monument Square*, the old North Bridge that “arched the flood”, the *Concord River* amidst a sortee of canoes, and *Walden Pond* itself, for a buoyant “baptism.”

At the close of the first session, Mr. Alcott wrote in his journal:

Emerson greets me cordially and speaks of our Summer School as a ‘brave thing’, successful beyond all reasonable expectation... So it may have been, as my friend says, ‘a brave thing’ truly.

And so it was in the eyes of Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson, one of the attendees from NY City, who noted with a keen eye and ear that a good bit of the discussion centered around the issue of women’s rights. Her contribution of \$1,000 allowed this school in which we are sitting, the “Hillside Chapel”, to be built. Elizabeth Peabody spoke of her friend, Mrs. Thompson’s connection with the school at the beginning of an address that Miss Peabody gave on childhood:

In a noon-day nap, just after she had been listening to one of our lecturers, Mrs. Elizabeth Thompson dreamed that in the place of this chapel on the hillside she saw a great white throne; to which many broad marble steps led up; and on the throne sat a majestic form with the rainbow folded around his head, as a crown. He was gazing meditatively on an infant child lying upon his lap...

The next summer, 1880, Rev. William Channing again stepped to the lectern to deliver an address on *Man's Four-Fold Being*, followed by his associate, Rev. Andrew Peabody, President of Harvard, who spoke on *Conscience & Consciousness*. Julia Ward Howe concluded her stirring lecture, *Modern Society*, with an even more stirring rendition of her *Battle Hymn of the Republic*: “**Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!**”

In the audience, local farmers, merchants, and craftsmen took their place alongside celebrated poets, scientists, philosophers, and the presidents of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and the University of Wisconsin on the rough-hewn benches and chairs. All were heartily invited by the school's Dean to contribute their thoughts to the conversations that followed each address.

In 1881, Rev. Henry Hedge, the brilliant scholar of German literature and thought, spoke on the philosopher Kant. In the summer of 1882, Dr. R. G Hazard gave a lecture on *Man as a Creative Power*, followed in 1883 with the lecture, *Novels*, by Julian Hawthorne, son of Nathaniel. In 1884, the title *Psychology* appeared on the program. The speaker was William James. That same summer a series of fourteen lectures was given on *The Genius and Character of Emerson*, who had “taken up” after his beloved friend, Henry David, marched on high to the beat of his own drummer...

At the conclusion of the summer session, an editorial by Harpers noted:

At the time when Germany itself is overpowered by the influence of Mill, Spencer, and Darwin, and the genius of materialism is getting so strong a hold everywhere, it is interesting to find that the Concord School reasserts with breadth and penetration the supremacy of mind . . .

The human spirit.

In 1885, a similar series of lectures was given on Goethe, with an emphasis on his qualitative scientific studies, and in 1886 on Dante.

Audience members included Lydia Marie Child, Lucy Stone, Daniel

Chester French, Wendell Phillips, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, and Emma Lazarus, whose vision of *The New Colossus* was arising on our shores: "*Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free*"

The good and the great

Following the fourth session, on October 24th, 1882, Bronson Alcott suffered a paralyzing stroke that laid him low throughout that autumn, winter, and spring of the following year.

And then, as the sun ascended to the heights of the solstice season, Bronson's good and great spirit lifted him back onto his feet. Though new life filled the "Dean's" limbs, he was unable to attend the subsequent sessions of his summer school, until 1885, when "The Master", Goethe, was celebrated, with a particular focus on his qualitative scientific works.

Nearly crippled, the Dean – brilliant conversationalist and inspirer of the school – took up his post, as a silent listener, witness, for the final three sessions of his beloved School of Philosophy & Literature. In July of 1888, the "Hillside Chapel" closed its doors, following a memorial service to its founder, Amos Bronson Alcott, in Emerson's words, "the most extraordinary man and the highest genius of the time."

Glancing back over the proceedings, a second editorial by the *Boston Herald* summed up the striving of the participants in the Concord School and, thereby, set the tone for our ongoing labors:

To barely exist through these years was something; to gain a hearing was more; to adhere steadily to a high and heroic purpose was more; to be spiritual, without being religious in the sectarian sense, was still more; and, through all these years, to do honest work, to steadily uphold the interests of intellectual and spiritual truth, in the larger sense, has been to do what has never before been done in the history of American thought and letters

So it was. Mr. Alcott's life-long dream had come true. The Concord School of Philosophy & Literature in which we convene had provided a platform for some of the greatest minds of its day.

Over that decisive decade, 1879-1888, virtually all of culture – philosophy, literature, drama, religion, mysticism, history, biography, the arts, architecture, from ancient times up to the present, were, along with politics, economics, the physical, natural, and emerging social and para-sciences, as touched on in Rev. Hedges presentation on *Ghosts and Ghost Seeing* (with the “shades of all the good and great for company”) – *all of world culture* was given articulate and inspired voice in this unassuming “Hillside Chapel”, this ascending “throne” in which we gather. And illuminating and quickening the offerings was the demanding, oftentimes daunting, promise of conversation, conversational philosophy:

“Men quarrel with your rhetoric.” Emerson noted in his journals, “Society chokes with a trope, like a child with a croup. They much prefer Mr. Prosae, and Mr. Hoarse-ascrows, to the dangerous conversation of Gabriel and the Archangel Michael, perverting all rules, and bounding continually from earth to heaven.”

The abundant “harvest” of the lives of Alcott, Emerson, and those kindred spirits from across the land, who placed their offerings on the altar of this chapel, succeeded in slowing down, for a time and a half, the advance of the “Industrial Age” – a reprieve of inestimable value that allowed a precious “seed” to be sown in our soil and established the school as a beacon in a rapidly darkening age and a milestone in the intellectual and cultural history of America.

“The aim of this school”, stated Rev. William Channing, “is eminently practical. A new cosmos is coming out of this chaos, a new development of man’s mind and heart from contact with the life of the universe. No sham or lie is to be tolerated here. The greatest movement represented by Goethe and others in Germany was the spring morning. After this came the grand scientific movement, and this includes the tendency to a higher form of religion There is a new age for man, a revelation of the sacredness of human life. Our object is to take up this

movement, as it was left by the great German leaders, and organize it anew in the interests of human liberty. Something better than Transcendentalism is yet to come..."

What was yet to come was, I suggest, glimpsed in the first fruits of a "Science of Reason", as articulated by George Howison, Professor of Logic & Philosophy of Science at MIT, upon his return from travels and research in Germany. In his lectures, Dr. Howison stated that the spirit of German Idealism had all but vanished from the curriculum of German universities, having been usurped, as noted, by the spirit of English empiricism. A First World War, itself, between the two lands to follow.

The promise of a "Science of Reason" ripened throughout the decisive decade – an aspiring discipline that would carry the physical, natural, and social sciences on to their blossoming in what we can speak of in our time as a spiritual science, a science of the spirit.

In *A Week on The Concord & Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau, addressed this "new cosmos":

"I am not without hope that we may, even here and now, obtain some accurate information concerning that OTHER WORLD, which the instinct of mankind has so long predicted . . . Surely we are provided with senses as well fitted to penetrate the spaces of the real, the substantial, the eternal, as these outward are to penetrate the material universe."

The demarcation of such a fully realized science, that would unite reason and faith, the head and the heart, the earth and the very heavens themselves, had been the task that Emerson had devoted his life to. In his book, *Nature*, the "Sage of Concord" speaks to such a promise:

The reason why the world lacks unity and lies broken and in heaps is because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand as perception. Indeed, neither can be perfect without the other. In the uttermost

meaning of the words, thought is devout, and devotion is thought.

*Deep calls upon deep, but in actual life the marriage is not celebrated. **There are innocent men who worship God after the tradition of their fathers, but their sense of duty has not yet extended to the use of all their faculties. And there are patient naturalists, but they freeze their subject under the wintry light of the understanding.*** [emphasis added] *Is not prayer also a study of truth – a sally of the soul into the unfound infinite? No man ever prayed heartily, without learning something.*

But, when a faithful thinker, resolute to detach every object from personal relations, and see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time, kindle science with the fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation.

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