



## Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

**6 November, Martin Horlacher: "Ephemeral Dymaxion: The Life and Philosophical Times of Buckminster Fuller."**

An architect, systems theorist, author, designer, environmental activist and inventor, Buckminster Fuller was also a Unitarian - and one whose powerful philosophical influence is still very relevant today.

**13 November, No service owing to Kirribilli markets.**

**20 November, Martin Horlacher: "Postmodernism."**

Postmodernism describes both an era and a broad movement that developed in the mid to late 20th century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism which marked a departure from modernism. But, just how far-reaching is its influence, and is it a good thing, or not?

**27 November, Rev. Geoff usher: "Paper Bags and Calabashes."**

All of us need the discrimination to know whether we are seeing nothing because there is truly nothing to be seen, or whether we are seeing nothing because we are unaware, insensitive, unperceptive, or lacking in spiritual insight. We need to work for the integration of the material and the ideal, our doubts and our beliefs.

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**Anyone know the rest of this song? (Learned by your editor in primary school).**

*Bright are the wattle trees with gold  
As spring comes dancing down the sky.  
Underneath the banks of maiden hair,  
The happy creek goes singing by .*



## The Oracles of Concord: Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott and George Melvin

Presented at the Quincy Unitarian Church,  
June 3, 1984, by *John W. Brigham, D.D.*  
(This sermon is based on the hymn, "It sounds  
along the ages", especially the second stanza:

From Sinai's cliffs it echoed  
It breathed from Buddha's tree,  
It charmed in Athens' market,  
It hallowed Galilee;  
The hammer stroke of Luther,  
The Pilgrim's seaside prayer,  
The oracles of Concord  
One holy word declare.)

The words with which we titled this morning's address you will immediately recognize as having been lifted out of the hymn we have just sung, "Oracles of Concord." The oracles of Concord were Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott and, I would suggest, George Melvin. William Channing Gannett, the author of that hymn, was a very close friend and collaborator with a former minister of this church, Frederick Lucian Hosmer, also a hymn writer of great hymns and collaborator with Gannett in the publication of hymnals. They published hymnals together in 185, 1894, and finally, in 1918. I call to your attention that stanza in which the phrase "Oracles of Concord" is found and the context:

From Sinai's cliffs it echoed [Ten Commandments]  
It breathed from Buddha's tree [Bo Tree and Wheel of Life]  
It charmed in Athens' market [Socrates]  
It hallowed Galilee [Jesus]  
The hammer stroke of Luther [The Reformation]  
The Pilgrim's seaside prayer [Mayflower Compact]  
The Oracles of Concord [Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott -- and I would add, George Melvin]

**One Sunday when this same hymn was used, one of our participants in the service raised the question: "What do you suppose 'IT' is?"**

"IT breathed, IT charmed, IT hallowed." You will note that the hymn writer never quite caught up with "IT" to give "IT" a clear referent. He left "IT" to the reader and the singer to fathom, to find a meaning, to give it some substance, whether solid or ephemeral.

The notes relating to this hymn tell us that the original title given by Gannett was "The Thought of God." Allowing the author his just due, "IT" is almost certainly a thought, and not just any old thought. It is the "thought of God," whether thought by Moses or Jesus or Luther or the Psalmist or those men of Concord or others whose names might come to mind, as John Hus, for instance, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or even you.

Today it is the several persons who made up the oracles of Concord, who lived for a time, the same time, in the town of Concord, Massachusetts, with whom we will consider that "IT".

Consider Concord, a settlement about twenty miles west of Boston, established in 1636 by a determined group of English Puritans led by a clergyman named Peter Bulkeley. Their leaders went to Concord and arranged a treaty with the Indians on that place and came to an agreement with them on a piece of land on which they might settle near the junction of two small rivers -- rivers that flowed through mostly low-lying valley lands; but there were several hills in the neighborhood, above the valley and the brooks. The meeting place with the Indians and the Puritans was at the junction of two rivers as they flowed around a hill called Nashawtuc, which was also the proposed location for the settlement. The conference was held on a large ledge called Egg Rock and that is where the treaty was signed. One of the brooks that flowed into the river, coming through a meadow to the south, was sufficiently fast flowing to allow the settlers to build a small dam and a mill to provide grain. So the dam was set in place across the brook, and here the main street of the little village took place, took shape, and is called even to this day, in a historic way, the Mill Dam.

A half mile or so to the south along this same brook would later be built what was to be the Emerson home, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Lydia. The house may still be seen today in Concord, rebuilt though it was after a disastrous fire in the nineteenth century. Closer to the Mill Dam, between the Emerson home and the dam itself, is the First Parish Church, the Church of the Puritans, now a Unitarian Church. It is the third building on that spot, the other two having been burnt. The present building dates from 1900. This is the Church of my own childhood, the Church in which I preached my first sermon on a February Youth Sunday in 1930 and my second sermon the following year, also on the Youth Sunday. As was said of one of my colleagues, so also might it be said of me: "I was early influenced by the effluence of my own voice."

This First Parish Church in Concord became the cause of a split within the family of Henry David Thoreau during his early adult years.

The Unitarian-Trinitarian controversy was heated in the second and third decades of the nineteenth century and it burst into Concord in the early 1820's. Henry was still a small child, three or four years old, so we may assume the storm was well above his head. However, by 1826 his aunts who lived in the family home had all left the First Parish and taken up with the seceding Trinitarian group, who were building another church; meanwhile, Henry, his mother and his father stayed with the First Parish with a majority who accepted the new heretical theology of the Unitarians.

**As for Henry David, he went off to college in the early 1830's and when he graduated in 1837 he "signed off" from the church. He no longer would pay taxes for its support. It is of more than incidental interest that Henry, in his immediate years after Harvard, was an official curator of the Lyceum for a number of years. The lyceum was at first a kind of regional development, then a national one, a type of lecture and debate community group which formed in town after town, city after city, across the country in that period. Scores of these Lyceums developed between**

**1829 and 1840, some lasting for many, many years, others only for a brief time. The one in Concord lasted for a long time. Thoreau spoke in that town forum twenty or more times by 1862; Emerson had spoken over a hundred times before his death in 1882.**

The Lyceum was set up on the principle of meetings held once a week: a debate on one week and a speaker on the following week. So there were two speakers or lectures a month and two debates a month.

When Thoreau was ten years old, he was given a task at school of writing a composition. I think it interesting that what he wrote later became available to one of his biographers. There is a hint in this of what you would later read in Walden and his Journals of his week on the Concord and Merrimac River. At the age of ten, Henry David Thoreau wrote this:

**"There are four seasons in a year: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. I will begin with Spring. Now we see the ice beginning to thaw and the trees to bud. Now the winter wears away and the ground begins to look green with newborn grass. The birds, which have lately been to more southern countries, return again to cheer us with their morning song.'**

**And so he continues with each of the succeeding seasons, a paragraph for each, concluding with winter and adding: "There is nothing to be seen. We have no birds to cheer us with their morning song. We hear only the sound of Sleigh Bells."**

As his biographer who included this in his material, Frank Sanborn, comments, "The child here is father to the man." And as one of his walking companions later was to observe of Henry, "Never eager, with a pensive hesitancy, he steps about his native fields, singing the praises of music and spring and morning, forgetful of himself."

And of him, after his death, which some might think premature, but not necessarily so, Emerson spoke at his service and said:

**“A truth-speaker he, capable of the most strict and deep conversation; a physician to the wounds of any soul; a friend, knowing not only the secret of friendship, but almost worshiped by those few persons who knew the deep value of his mind and great heart. His inexorable demand on all for exact truth gave an austerity which made this willing hermit more solitary even than he wished.”**

I am going to leave with you the enjoyment of reading or rereading the essays in Walden, and the other writings of Thoreau, which continue to be most widely read and appreciated, even though not always clearly understood. But Walden is well filled with the "IT" of Gannett's hymn, and even more so are the many volumes of his Journals, the daily garden which he cultivated, and from which he reaped so many of the passages which are to be found in his longer writing.

It is Thoreau who introduces us to George Melvin. Indeed, if it were not for Thoreau, George Melvin would undoubtedly lie in an unmarked grave in some back lot of some old cemetery and nobody would have remembered him. But thanks to Thoreau, Melvin becomes a member of the Oracle group, though in a minor key.

Melvin was a native of Concord, a man of the woods and streams, and of the seasons. He had his territory -- it was on the north side of Concord and beyond into the neighboring towns of Bedford and Carlisle. This was a great, wild tract of hundreds and thousands of acres of land with an occasional wood road or track. An old lime kiln was there, a number of marshes and small ponds. It is the favorite hunting ground for George Melvin. Thoreau writes of Melvin Occasionally as he runs across him in the course of days of walking. On October 20, 1857, Thoreau met him, not hunting that day but nutting and barberrying. Nutting and barberrying. People do go nutting in many places, but they do not go barberrying except in New England. "He had two baskets plus a game bag, the game bag being hung around his neck. These were full of nuts and berries, his mouth full of tobacco." Says Thoreau: "It is pleasanter to meet him with his gun or his baskets, than to

meet some portly caterer, basket on arm, at the stalls of the Quincy Market in Boston."

On another occasion Thoreau wrote: "Saw Melvin's hound and Melvin with his gun near, going home at eve. Persistent Genius: How good of him to follow his own bent, and not continue at Sunday School all his days, He is my contemporary and neighbor. He is one tribe, I am another-- and we are not at war I am not only grateful because Homer and Christ and Shakespeare have lived; but I am grateful for Minott and Rice and Melvin and Puffer, even. (You should have known Puffer.) I see Melvin all alone," he said, "filling his sphere, in russet suit, which no other could fill or suggest. He takes up as much room in nature as the most famous."

It must be noted that there are more Melvins in this world than Homers, or Christs or Shakespeares. But let us not forget, as Thoreau reminds, they have equal space, one for one, with every other. Here again is the "IT". It is the thought of God, if you will, that among us are many tribes, but among the many it is still possible to be at peace and not at war.

**Thoreau and Emerson and Alcott all came together in this Concord. Not one of them may really merit the description of "philosopher" unless it is Amos Bronson Alcott, who established what was fondly called the "School of Philosophy," the Concord School of Philosophy.**

And it was Alcott who became a constant catalyst in his Concord years for both Emerson and Thoreau. Alcott had been a clock maker in Connecticut and a lover and teacher of children. He came to Boston out of Connecticut to teach and to become the principal of the Temple School, which had been started by Elizabeth Peabody and where children of many of Boston's finest went. The Temple School, which he headed in Boston, was, until parents discovered his totally unpuritanical nature and methods of teaching, a great success. But his disdain of physical discipline and the freedom which he allowed the children brought a slow death to the school, as parent after parent withdrew their child.

During these Boston years, Alcott had become acquainted with Emerson and with the notable Peabody sisters, one of whom was to marry Horace Mann, the founder of the public school system in this country, as well as with William Ellery Channing. So when the Temple School failed and the financial base of the Alcott family was gone, it was Emerson who arranged for the Alcott family to come to Concord and find a home there, a half mile or so down the road, out of town a little further than his own place. **This is where Louisa May Alcott and her sisters grew up, and it was the setting for her story of Little Women.** The Emersons, Ralph and his wife, Lydia, kept an eye on the family and saw to it that Bronson had survival means.

There was what Emerson called "An Alcott Fund," largely contributed to by himself, and he would accept contributions from others and later on he bought the land, fourteen acres of land, with the house on it, and then drew up his will which insured that the Alcotts would have that house and land forever, or as long as they wished, but they could not sell it. It was to be their home. He had no trust in Bronson's financial ability, Emerson didn't. But he loved the man and his family and he saw to it that they were taken care of.

Bronson Alcott spent many hours and many days with both Emerson and Thoreau -- he was perhaps particularly fond of Thoreau. During the years that Thoreau made his base for living in his hut at Walden Pond, Alcott went there on many a Sunday afternoon to share time and thought on such subjects as might come to mind. Or to sit in silence, if that was the way it was to be. Alcott said of this relationship: "You might get wine in a visit with Emerson, but you would get venison from a talk with Thoreau." In other words, there was something solid and meaty in his conversations with Thoreau. And about Alcott, Thoreau once wrote: "He has no creed. He is not pledged to any institution. He is the sanest man I know."

**It should also be remembered that in 1846 it was both Alcott and Thoreau who refused to pay the pol tax, underlining their opposition to the war with Mexico, the first of what would be many disgraceful excursions**

**and invasions by the United States into Spanish and Latin American countries of Central America -- a strange string of events which even today still ties us down with the same stupidities that Thoreau and Alcott were sensitive to a hundred and thirty-eight years ago. A fuller review of this is offered by some of our finest historical scholars, particularly Herbert J. Mueller in his volume on Freedom in the Modern World, where he discusses the imperialism of the United States vis-à-vis the Spanish-speaking and Central American countries.**

Alcott and Thoreau were often in the Emerson home when visitors came to Concord, primarily to visit with Emerson. His home was always full of persons who were arriving or leaving. They came from all over the country and from all over the world. They came to listen, they came to converse, they came to catch something of the spirit that was Emerson. Margaret Fuller came to Concord on her visit at the instigation of Elizabeth Peabody; it was to be for an afternoon, and she stayed three weeks.

It began a family friendship which lasted until her death when she, her husband and her child went down off Fire Island in the wreck of the ship they were returning home from Italy upon. But we do not want to digress too far this morning.

The Emerson home was a place of pilgrimage from many parts of the world; beyond those who actually came in person there were many who came through correspondence, from England, from France, from Germany, from Italy, as well as across the United States.

It was to Emerson that Whitman sent an early edition of his Leaves of Grass, and awaited Emerson's response with almost painful bated breath. But Emerson praised it to the skies as one of the few voices that had begun to speak out of the New World, with the voice of the New World and seeing this country in terms which none other had seen it before.

Emerson, in the same way, was the influence

which started Emily Dickinson on her poetry and which continued to enthuse her with the ideas which he offered in his essays. Emerson's communication to the world is not yet ended, though it is now somewhat one-sided since he is no longer around to speak for himself. There was, this week (June 4, 1984), for those of you who may subscribe to the New Yorker magazine, a twenty-page essay on Emersonianism in that magazine's book section by John Updike.

**This was fortuitous, since he had not told me of this essay and I had not told him of this sermon. But it does emphasize my point that the Oracles of Concord go on speaking to the generations, one way or another. In his usual style, Updike has some difficulties with Emerson, except when it comes to what I believe is the essential: Updike turns this up into the light out of his own experience in a Boston Hospital waiting room, and finds meaning in Emerson's essay, "The Over Soul." These are the lines that come to Updike's mind: "The heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly in endless circulation throughout all mankind, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one."**

**And from the same essay, Updike quotes again: "A thread runs through all things, all worlds are strung on it, as beads; and men, and events, and life come to us, only because of this thread."**

In this, as Updike realizes, he finds the focus of Emersonian beliefs, really the religion of Emerson. It was stated by Emerson in one of his essays on the French writer, Montaigne, that "Belief consists in accepting the affirmations of the soul; unbelief in denying them."

The intertwining of these men and their lives in Concord is one of the great pieces of American history and out of their lives and the interplay among them came ideas that still shake the world. Emerson's essays, "Nature", "The Over Soul", "Compensation", resound with insights and directions for reflection that still challenge every new mind that arrives at his

essays for the first time. Emerson's two addresses at Harvard, one in 1837 and the other in 1838, are benchmarks in their influence on American education and religion.

The first was a Phi Beta Kappa address entitled: "The American Scholar" which called on American educators, public schools, colleges or Universities to discover the meaning of this land and to give voice to the new language, the new ideas, the new society that had emerged on this continent, and not forever be bogged down in the language and the thoughts of the European continent.

The second address, delivered in 1838 by request to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School, was an equally trenchant call for new dimensions in religious inquiry and expression. It called for a break with the old theologies and traditions and the development of a new thinking that would be in terms of the democratic life and the free spirit.

**While the effect of Emerson rolls on, never neglect Thoreau, whose essays in Walden constitute the finest prose expression and revelation of personal involvement with nature that we have, together with his eloquent essay on "Civil Disobedience" that has carried him across all continents, translated into many languages, and led men and women to dare for human freedom in ways that were later developed by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.**

It is of more than passing importance, I think, that Emerson and Thoreau and Alcott were deeply informed on the religions of the world, the Orient, of India and China as well as of western Christianity. They sought the universal elements rather than the narrow and confining practices of creeds in each.

Both Emerson and Thoreau, together with Alcott, come to accord in those thoughts which mark the opening passages of the Divinity School address, which Emerson puts in these lines:

**"When the mind opens and reveals the laws which traverse the universe and make things what they are, then shrinks**

**the great world at once into a mere illustration and fable of the mind. What am I? And what is? Asks the human spirit with a curiosity new-kindled, but never to be quenched. . . . Behold, these infinite relations, so like, so unlike, many, yet one. I would study, I would know, I would admire forever."**

When Thoreau came to deal with questions of religion in direct effort, he tended to become fussy and even uneasy with himself. He found it more comfortable to write god with a lower case "g" rather than with an upper case. He expresses his feeling underlying this when he wrote, "We are in a strange uncertainty about life, whether it is of the devil or of god, and somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of men here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever," suggesting that this may have been in error and it is really the devil we are glorifying, an uncomfortable thought, but not without some merit. And he left us a thought that should never be allowed to perish: **"What is religion?" he asked; then he answered, "That which is never spoken."**

**In another place he added: "I see, hear, smell, taste, feel the Everlasting Something to which we are called, at once our maker, our abode, our destiny, our very Selves. . . ."**

So these several persons, different from each other in many ways, were singularly in concert on one thing, namely, that each and every person has his or her own immediate relationship to the universe, to whatever power or powers are present within nature; that each person is, indeed, a natural event, and has a harmony with the greater overarching Nature. This conviction is stated by Emerson in one way, by Thoreau in another, by Alcott in his totality of being, and by George Melvin with his inarticulate devotion to the opportunities of every season. These were in tune with the "IT" of Gannett's hymn, in tune with Buddha, then, and with Moses, with Socrates, with Jesus, with Luther and the Pilgrims.

This is, I am convinced, a message of our religious faith, a message that outranges the

message of any other religious movement that I know. There is a universal note of authenticity that sounds a clear and beautiful sound above the confusions of theologies and labored rituals that identify the varied churches and religions.

**It is high time that more of us, all of us, become well informed and articulate, that we may diffuse this faith. We should not be, as too much has been our custom, merely a number of ears sitting in pews waiting to hear some message. We ourselves must be the message and the message-givers, making our own discovery of the "IT" that secures our particular and personal life to the universe, that unites us in this persuasion with every other who is engaged in this search and discovery.**

Not everyone will be an Emerson or an Alcott, or even a Thoreau, but we may very well be a George Melvin. We may even be a Margaret Fuller, though that is doubtful. This is what the Oracles of Concord saw and have reported to us. And you, as well as John Updike, can hear and understand this message.

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***"A harmony with the greater overarching Nature"* (In this case, broad beans on steroids)**



**Peter in his garden. Several members of our Fellowship are keen gardeners.**

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## KIVA loan: "Let Your Eyes Speak" Group's story

Ms Chính is 56 years old and she is a single parent with two children. She is standing first from left in the photo. In this group, her circumstance is the most difficult as her husband passed away a long time ago. Her children are learning in primary and secondary school, so she has to work hard to support them and keep sending them to school.

Chính lives in Thanh Hoa city, an urban town in Thanh Hoa province, Vietnam. Her family is a low-income household. For more than ten years she has had a bakery business, but her income is not stable.

The main hardship that Chính faces is lack of capital. She is requesting a loan to purchase bread-making materials for her bakery. In 2011, Chính joined Thanh Hoa microfinance institution to improve her business. Chính has successfully repaid five loans from Thanh Hoa microfinance institution. She is the group leader of the "Let your eyes speak", which consists of three members. With her business profits, Chính hopes for her family to be healthy and happy, for her business to do well, and for her children to find good jobs.

In this group: Chính, Vân, Canh



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### Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship?

**Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter.** Full membership \$50 concession \$20 . If you would like to join us as an active member of Spirit of Life, please ring **0466 940 461** or consult our website [www.sydneyunitarians.org](http://www.sydneyunitarians.org) . Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee. Ask Rev. Geoff Usher for an application form at the Sunday service.

***If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for Esprit.***

It would be helpful if items for publication, including articles and talk topics with themes could reach Esprit editor by the 15th of each month: [jtendys@yahoo.com.au](mailto:jtendys@yahoo.com.au) or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

***Do you have a topic of a spiritual / ethical nature that you would like to share with the congregation?*** As Unitarians, we support an "Open Pulpit" and invite members of the congregation to lead the service if they so wish. *Please see Caz Donnelly at the Sunday service*