

# The Importance of Health, Exercise and Elevating Recreations as Expressed in the Writings of New England Transcendentalists, 1830-1855

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The period from 1830 to 1855 in America has been characterized as one of religious, social and intellectual agitation. In the intellectual sphere the movement which became known as Transcendentalism arose in New England and flourished in a small circle whose influence far exceeded its limited numbers. Like the Jacksonian Democrats, notes Arthur Schlesinger, the Transcendentalists “. . . shared a living faith in the integrity and perfectibility of man.” The American Transcendentalists of the 1830s and 1840s comprised a loosely amalgamated group of individual thinkers. They were, for the most part, middle-class, well-educated and Unitarian in background. They were basically eclectic in their views; the group never adhered to a single unified philosophy. There were, however, two important beliefs which the New England Transcendentalists shared in common: a) the rejection of what they saw to be an overly materialistic atmosphere which permeated American life; b) a firm belief in the power and sanctity of the human spirit. The questions which they raised regarding their age and their country have continued to be those which have most challenged America's best thinkers. It is both interesting and significant that the majority of the leading American Transcendentalists of the early nineteenth century were concerned with the importance of health, exercise and “elevating recreations” in their search to rediscover the soul of man.

Channing held health to a priceless blessing - a healthy and vigorous body being needed if man is to achieve his fullest spiritual potential. He declared that the schools should devote increased attention to physical as well as moral education, and recommended that people of all ages engage more fully in such elevating pleasures and amusements as dancing. Emerson saw the body to be the vehicle through which man may attain all the good of the material world. Nature is at her best, he wrote, when she “. . . puts a symmetry between the physical and the intellectual powers.” He, too, was critical of the failure of American education to devote proper care to the health and physical development of the child. Thoreau, the “man of nature,” considered health to consist of man's harmonious relation to nature. His own life-style reflects this concern, and his *Journals* are filled with descriptions of outdoor physical activities. He was critical, however, of the formalized systems of exercise which he saw developing in his times. Alcott, who conducted schools of his own and served as superintendent of schools in Concord from 1859 to 1865, was a firm

advocate of the all-round development of the child (physical, emotional, intellectual). Because in play the character of children is most clearly revealed “. . . the playroom thus becomes an indispensable appendage of the Infant School.” Margaret Fuller believed, as did the other Transcendentalists, that without a fit body one could not attain full human development. She was supportive of those beginning efforts which were being made to provide Americans with information concerning their health and need for physical activity and innocent and pleasing recreations. The *Dial*, the group’s literary vehicle, offered a few articles which attested to the importance of a healthful body, and Charles Follen, the German emigre who developed the Harvard “Gymnasium,” was associated with the Transcendental group.

Though they believed that man was more than “a body of flesh”, and sought to awaken the spiritual nature of man, the Transcendentalists did not neglect man’s physical nature. Although they sought mental and spiritual perfection, nothing was to be gained by sacrificing the body. In fact, the body could and should be cared for properly as a vital means to the attainment of higher consciousness.