

Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Unwilling Unitarian Saint: FINAL

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I. Introduction

Have you ever heard the phrase “Hitch your wagon to a star”? *Civilization*.

“Life is not so short but that there is always time enough for courtesy” *Letters and Social Aims*.

Or “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.”? *Self-Reliance*.

What about “In skating over thin ice our safety is our speed.” *Prudence*.

Or one of my personal favorites: “Time dissipates to shining ether the solid angularity of facts.” *History*.

These aphorisms—nuggets of wisdom and wry humor—were all penned by Ralph Waldo Emerson, pithy phrases like shining gems taken from his essays and lectures. Many people recognize them, never knowing it was he who wrote them. May 25, 2003 marks the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Emerson, who lived in Massachusetts from 1803 to 1882. He is known for a great many things—he was a poet, a philosopher, an essayist and lecturer, called the Sage of Concord and the American Plato, he was an historical figure esteemed to the stature of cultural hero and American icon, some say he was the founder of the environmental movement, some deem him the only Unitarian Saint—yet the aspect of his biography which makes him particularly relevant to us here today, as we honor his anniversary and welcome new members in our in-gathering service, is that he was, briefly, a Unitarian minister, and beyond inspiring subsequent generations of the modern Unitarian Universalist tradition, his insight and vision about mystical experience, spiritual practice and religious affiliation can be significant to each individual who is consciously choosing a spiritual path or community. His inscription in his Essays reads “EVERYMAN, I will go with thee, and be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side.”

He wrote:

Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes*; for that forever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to shame, confounds the saint with the rogue, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside.

This moment—of choosing, acting, becoming—was of utmost interest to Emerson. As part of our Membership and Outreach efforts here for the Petaluma fellowship a series of bookmarks have been put together as aesthetically pleasing and low-key marketing. The quote I just read is on one. When I took the bookmarks to Copperfield’s, the manager was positive about having them in the store, but said she didn’t think anyone was all that interested in Emerson any more. To be honest, I hadn’t known about the anniversary through any devotion to Emerson: my true connection to him is through my grandmother, who some of you may have heard me mention. As the name plate in a hymnal one of you is holding will attest, my 95 year old grandmother,

Margaret Harris, is my Unitarian Universalist inspiration; it is she who has come to re-read yearly several of Emerson's essays, and she who informed me of his upcoming bicentennial and sent me articles to read and books to pursue. Once I started looking, it was obvious that, Copperfield's aside, Emerson's Anniversary is calling forth a certain amount of fanfare. Certainly in the circles which claim him, mainly the Unitarian Universalists, Harvard University, and Massachusetts, but libraries, universities, historical societies and museums across the country are commemorating the anniversary as well.

II. History and Early Influences

Before I go any further it needs to be said that the topic of Emerson is immense. In these last few weeks, as I have been reading his work and those about him, I have been vacillating between feeling eager and anxious about adequately presenting him in a brief glimpse. Literary and religious scholars spend lifetimes amidst his ideas and writings. I arrived at the only possible aspiration: I hope to whet your mental whistles with my impressions. I will give mention of his history, and summarize aspects of his mature theology and philosophy, and then end with considerations of why he is relevant to each of us here today. A more in-depth consideration will be available on our UUP website.

Emerson was a passionate intellectual with a vibrant, spiritually motivated mind. He read voraciously, and worried away at the profound questions of religious and human experience. He wrote with a questing deep inner need, which became a certitude emerging as a voice of his era, and enduring as a point of reference to be either earnestly emulated, respectfully acknowledged, or critically eviscerated ever since. Educated at Boston Latin School and Harvard University, in his early adulthood, he was an expressive seeker, not hiding his uncertainties, self-doubts, and internal struggles. His voice did not emerge with any confidence, until his early thirties. A phenomenal synthetic thinker, he expressed understandings of diverse pursuits, including comparative religion, natural science, literature and art, filling thousands of pages of journals and notebooks, which would later become raw material for his many essays, lectures, poems and books. In this energetic digestion of the universe of thought Emerson was teaching himself, learning of himself, integrating and crystallizing his own ideas and sense of reality through the catalysts of others. Throughout his adult life he continued this ever-expanding collaboration of ideas, reading and conversations.

He matured in this evolution in his mid-twenties when he took several developmental leaps, intellectually, professionally and emotionally. Intellectually, he had been struggling with what he saw as the reigning rationalism of his contemporary Unitarian church, concluding that the world's most esteemed thinkers were anti-enthusiastic "cold and prudent Christians." He assailed what he saw as the "pale negations of Boston Unitarianism," a faith which he found to be a "a nonreligious Unitarianism, (a) rational science oriented but churchy deism that was more social cement than inspiration."

Professionally, while developing these insights, Emerson began to give sermons in his father's church. You can see his moment of choice emerging. He was well received, but found himself bargaining with accepting the institutions which shaped him. He was torn between the poles of his being: one entailed upholding tradition, gaining approval and respectability, and maintaining a much-needed income; the other held his experience of poetry and philosophy, pursuing

originality, living life from personal feeling and enthusiasm, and having the freedom to think as he wished. A familiar human dilemma.

In the portentous time of this intellectual and professional development, Emerson fell in love. He met Ellen Tucker, his first wife, when he was 24, she 16, and they were engaged within a year. This, on another bookmark, is from his Essay *Love*:

Love is a fire that, kindling its first embers in the narrow nook of a private bosom, caught from a wandering spark out of another private heart, glows and enlarges until it warms and beams upon multitudes of men and women, upon the universal heart of all, and so lights up the whole world and all nature with its generous flames.

Soon he was ordained, and became the minister of Boston Second Church. He functioned with increasing difficulty in his pastoral role, favoring an unpopular non-literal reading of the bible, a non-dogmatic Christianity. He was ordained only a decade or so after Channing had rallied theological liberals, and Unitarian ministers were still defending themselves against charges of heresy from even Congregational colleagues. Emerson was daily faced with choosing between his cohering personal sense of inner value, and the external standards of outer success which felt increasingly stultifying and wrong. Meanwhile Ellen suffered from terminal tuberculosis and their lives and love were constantly confronted with impending loss; they “live(d) as to be ready to die.” The transition to his following his inner light took the three years it took Ellen to die. Her death was simultaneous to, and contributed to, the height of his spiritual crisis. Before her death, his biographer reports, he was a rationalist fascinated but not wholly convinced by the truth of idealism; after her death he believed completely, implicitly, viscerally in the reality and primacy of the spirit. After a protracted congregational debate about his opposition to the communion ritual, he resigned, and quickly rejected the formalism of Christianity. He wrote that “the loss that darkened his life also freed him.” This lesson of grief was part of the pattern of Emerson’s life from an early age: he lost parents, siblings, spouses, deep friends. Some have criticized his seeming unwillingness to be cowed by grief, others merit his tradition of processing his grief in his voluminous writings, calling this resilient quality not mere stoicism but “optimism fired by grief.” His characteristic response, even when deep in grief, was to praise: “is it not better to intimate our astonishment as we pass through the world if it be only for a moment ere we are swallowed up in the yeast of the abyss? I will lift up my hands and say Kosmos.” This is the poem he wrote when he resigned his ministry:

I will not live out of me
I will not see with others eyes
My good is good, my evil ill
I would be free.

He was subsequently denounced as “the latest form of infidelity.” Now of course the philosophy building at Harvard is named after him, and his are basic ideas of Unitarian Universalism. He later summarized that “My entire success is composed wholly of particular failures.” His success grew out of his ability to fail at others’ standards and dictates. Forty productive years followed. By the 1870’s and 80’s Unitarians began to see Transcendentalism as part of their heritage, by 1890’s he was reclaimed.

In assessing his place in the world, Emerson self-identified as a poet, he said “of a low class without doubt, yet a poet.” He has had a huge literary and cultural impact, credited with being the intellectual basis of America’s great tradition of rugged individualism, and pilloried for this American individualism run amok. As Emerson himself said, “To be great is to be misunderstood” (*Self-Reliance*), and he even stopped using the phrase “self-reliance” soon after he coined it to avoid its confusion with an insular self-sufficiency. However, despite being the “most recognized and revered figure in the Unitarian movement... more people admire Emerson because of his moral character, his reputation for brilliance, or his nobility in the face of loss than understand what he actually believed and wrote.”

III. Theology and Philosophy

What then did Emerson actually believe and write? My grandmother, wise hierophant, regularly returned to the heart of his mind through two of his multitude of writings, focusing on his ideas in the essays *Self-Reliance* and *The Over-soul*.

Self-Reliance addresses the adamant integrity of the self, and asserts a fundamental respect for the divinity in man. Finding his echo in Plato and in Quaker beliefs, Emerson’s image for the inner voice is inspired by Socrates’ daemon, the “invisible Genius” which governed his actions. The genius is the oracle within, the final authority of the individual self, a primary Wisdom, an inner light. “We lie in the lap of an immense intelligence, which makes us organs of its activity and receivers of its truth” (*Self-Reliance*). Thus he declared “know thyself”; his is an early modern psychological spirituality, holding that “self-knowledge is that acquaintance with ourselves which shows us what we are, and do, and ought to be, and do, in order to live comfortably and usefully here, and happily hereafter.” From this Emerson is credited with coining the phrase “Self-help,” which connects with a focus on the optimistic daily quality of a spiritual life.

Emerson recognizes how difficult it can be for each person to truly believe that “mind is the creator of the world” (*The Spiritual Emerson*). Often we distrust our inner voice, ignore a calling in a different direction from the crowd. He reassures us that “genius is not a lazy angel contemplating itself and things, it is insatiable for expression. Thought must take the stupendous step of passing into realization” (*The Spiritual Emerson*). The limitation of self is sin:

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art ... teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another. *Self-Reliance*.

Self-reliance then is the adequacy of the individual, the vital importance of the active soul or spirit. The question to ask your heart is: “whence is your power?” Emerson’s answer: “From my non-conformity. I never listened to your people’s law, or to what they call their gospel, and

wasted my time. I was content with the simple rural poverty of my own. Hence this sweetness.”
Self-Reliance.

In the *Over-soul* he imbeds the divine individual in a divine world. His transcendent vision rests in that he relates a true person to all true others, to all, to nature, by this religious *feeling* of the infinite. This is religious experience, not dogma, theology, ritual, or history. God is that “unifying force or energy, (that) structure in all things.” His vision is not pantheism—seeing god in all things—but what he called theoptic—all things seen as expressions of god.

Within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist...is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. *The Over-Soul*

This is a radical Transcendentalist envisioning of God as presence, language and communication. Ideas are not abstractions but real things in themselves, they are perceptions, laws, patterns; ideas are not less real than the phenomenal world, they lie behind phenomena creating and explaining the visible world. Ideas are tangible and have force: “believe in magnetism,” Emerson insists, “not in needles.” Nature, including human nature, is the visible expression of the invisible divine.

Thus he said, while a poet has access to the power and beauty of nature, the world itself, life itself, is the great poem: “Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing, I see all.” What he was trying to describe was the ineffable, that in the rapture of the moment the self ceases to exist. And the soul is the animating function, the vast background of all aspects of our being.

A man is the façade of a temple, 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 we do not respect; but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breaths through his intellect it is genius; when it breaths through his will it is virtue; when it flows through his affection it is love...art is its action thereon, science finds its methods, literature is its record, religion is the emotion of reverence that it inspires, ethics is the soul illustrated in human life, society is the finding of this soul by individuals in each other. *The Over-Soul*

IV. Message of Affiliation for Unitarian Universalists Today

The truth is, Emerson probably would have had no or little patience for most of what I have said so far this morning. While he read, some say, most books ever written up to and within his time, he refused to read religious theoretical or academic criticism. He sought out works which were testaments, which were alive and current. Action, life, interested him. Processed writings about others, or summaries or history to him were “books by the dead for the dead.” An unwilling saint, he likely would not want to claim so much direct personal attention, and while he might be

gratified by the provocation his works afforded, he would not want to be quoted and discussed so without purpose. His words on this subject are famous: “The only reward of virtue is virtue, a reward of a thing well done is to have done it.”

So what might Emerson sanction we *use* of him? Perhaps his very personal example. Those of you joining the fellowship today, what moment of choice are you facing? And those of you who have already joined, what is your choice in today’s moment? And those of you who have not joined? What brings *you* here in this moment? Religious affiliation can meet a social and community need, certainly, but you could get that volunteering at a local organization or taking a night class. Something compelling must bring each of you here, whether it be consciously spiritually motivated or not, you have chosen a religious community in which to participate. What is the spiritual need which brings you here today? Emerson wrote “Religion in the mind is not credulity, and in the practice is not forms. It is a life. It is the order and soundness of a man. It is not something else *to be got*, to be *added*, but is a new life of those faculties you have.” A spiritual practice by Emerson’s example is dynamic life as virtue. It is a rejection of passivity, a movement to embody the substance of your personally intuited truths. His opinion is “I like not the man who is thinking how to be good, but the man who is thinking how to accomplish his work.” Or put another way, “The land does not want prayer, it wants manure” (*The Spiritual Emerson*).

His philosophy has long been taken to imply that institutions and society hinder the individual, and are somehow more lowly. Indeed, he did not shrink from laying bare his impression of the spiritual dessication of society, including religious institutions. But my impression is that he did not glorify the individual to the exclusion of a necessary society of individuals. Quite the opposite, Self-reliance is not so much autonomy as authenticity. Another bookmark:

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the Eternal was stirring at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. *Self-Reliance*

So, to the question of what is it you are choosing when you choose your religious community, your society. I have heard from many that the Unitarian tradition, following the tenor of Emerson and others, can be off-putting or at least not warm, inviting, or accessible. It can seem overly intellectual, or too civic or politically oriented. However my assessment is that much goes unspoken. I imagine that much of the reverence which calls people to it is private and closely protected. It is as if a tacit compromise had been made to resolve this tension between the individual and the institution: the intensely personal Gnostic experience which underlies the Unitarian faith, and the optimistic egalitarian understanding which underlies the Universalist, makes for an unspoken spirituality, a silence on these deeper matters. Unitarians do not like to utter the name God for it has as many names as individuals in the fellowship. Words, with their reality as substantive meaning, words matter to Unitarians: do not make me utter a word I feel is untrue. I personally literally almost hyperventilated, really, when I felt compelled by good manners meeting my new mother-in-law to participate in a traditional Christian service. Unitarians embody a philosophical spirituality as opposed to a formal religiosity. It requires each

person to define for him or herself the nature of the world in which we each live. No dogma will be handed to you. Thank God. If you are able to have the courage and fortitude to live this way, life opens to you. If you cannot, life constricts. This is the modern psychological relevance of Emerson: “Know then, that the world exists for you....What we are, that only can we see....build, therefore your own world.”

It is fascinating to note that the American generation most influenced by the acceptance of his thought—my grandmother’s—has a much lower incidence of depression than later generations. If you see mood disruption as being influenced by spiritual issues—issues of meaning, place, and relation in the world and in the larger context of being—which I do, this makes sense. When my grandmother lost her central vision at 93 I asked her how she was managing with this huge loss. She said, characteristically, “oh, don’t cry over spilt milk.” What an amazing response! Hers is a daily choice for the positive, a moral choice, showing her character, the New England pragmatist, the Emersonian stoic. She is not denying her loss, to the contrary, she feels it deeply, but she is recognizing the impact and moving on. As it was for Emerson, possibly, hers is optimism fired by grief, by a deep recognition of what has been lost and an appreciation of what is still present.

This choosing to pursue a moral life lived directly from a personally intuited sense of wisdom is, simply, a daunting responsibility. Emerson judged that “The reason why the world lacks unity and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself.” Culturally, we have many challenges, many distractions, many realities to draw us away from this path of truth. Acknowledge fully for a moment the insatiable ubiquitous power of the media driven constraining world, the materialism, the consumerism, the image consciousness. Society at its worst can be a powerful controlling force. But what is society at its best? How do we struggle to be faithful to ourselves, and to live from this place of integrity to ourselves, and to the all, to parent from this place, to act as a friend and citizen from this place?

Emerson’s sense of affiliation is to choose your own path, which can then be acted upon in society. He admitted “We are imprisoned in this life in the company of persons powerfully unlike us,” yet we can resolve this painful existential reality through a larger discovery. He asks “Can you believe that you may relieve yourself of this perpetual perplexity of choosing, and by putting your ear close to the soul, learn always the true way?” Anyone who has felt ambivalence, who has been torn between externally derived opposites and life’s dilemmas of choice, knows this yearning for internally blossomed conviction. Ours is a quiet potential victory. “O What is heaven” Emerson imagines, “but the fellowship of minds that each can stand against the world by its own meek but incorruptible will.” Now, in our in-gathering, we join these wills in fellowship, perhaps inspired, unknowingly, by the example of Ralph Waldo Emerson.