

Emerson: Mind on Fire

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)

November 9, 2003

Reading:

from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on "Self-Reliance"

I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men -- that is genius ...

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know, until he has tried.

Sermon:

If you've been hearing a lot about Ralph Waldo Emerson this year, it is because the year 2003 is the 200th anniversary of his birth. Moreover, he is arguably the most influential thinker in our movement's history, so we seem to be paying a lot of attention to this anniversary. Yet Emerson's effects weren't only felt in our own movement. At one point I heard, and it may still be the case today, that he was the most quoted person in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*. Not only was his thought piercing, challenging, formative, but poetic and quotable, too.

Emerson was born in Boston in 1803, the son of preacher William Emerson, who served the First Unitarian Church in Boston and who was part of a long line of clergymen. When Ralph Waldo Emerson was 8 years old, his father died, and although he was able to attend both Harvard College and its divinity school, Emerson did so on a very frugal budget. It didn't seem to bother him too much, for all he seemed to want to do was read.

All his life Emerson was a prodigious reader, and steeped his mind and his life in books. Moreover, he took his books seriously and shaped himself by the ideas he found therein. Emerson would come to live the mandate "Trust yourself," and repeat Coleridge's exhortation to learning, *Quantum scimus semmus* -- "We are what we know." Knowing how important books were to understanding Emerson, Robert Richardson Jr. -- whose biography, *Emerson: Mind on Fire*, I read (at least parts of) in preparation for this sermon

-- is reported to have read all that Emerson claimed to have read as preparation for writing the book.

Interestingly enough, Richardson opens his biography of Emerson not with Emerson's reflections on a text or an idea, but with a strange visit the man made to his wife's grave. Emerson was 28 years old at the time and his young wife, Ellen, had died only a year-and-a-half before from tuberculosis. Emerson had married Ellen when she was 17 and he was 26, and the two had been blissfully in love and well matched in their passion for life and literature. She considered herself a poet, and by all accounts, the young girl was as gifted a poet as her much older husband, who also spent much time steeped in the writing and reading of poetry. She and Ralph Waldo Emerson both had TB when they were married, but hers was considerably worse. Indeed, they spent their entire, brief married life under the shadow of death. After she died, Emerson was devastated, and every day for a year or more walked from Boston out to Roxbury to her grave to visit her.

This particular day, Emerson was not just visiting the grave, but he had chosen to have her coffin opened. Why he chose to do this, Richardson cannot say for sure, for Emerson never disclosed a reason in any existing letter or journal entry. Emerson did say that for months after Ellen's death, he heard her footsteps and her voice and spoke with her. So it is possible he did so to make her death real. No matter why he did it, however, Richardson points out that the act itself is emblematic of the man whose hallmark and passion would be "a powerful craving for direct, personal, unmediated experience." This moment in his 29th year is but the starkest example of how pervasively this need played itself out in Emerson's life.

Much of Emerson's life seemed worthy of this passion for direct experience. His story is laced with characters who are captivating and larger than life. For instance, during a trip south as a young man, Emerson met and befriended a young landowner, Achille Murat. It turned out the man was a nephew of Napoleon's -- none other than the son of Napoleon's youngest sister and one of the Emperor's favorite generals. Achille was fond of calling himself the Prince of Naples, as indeed he had been before Napoleon fell. Later in life, while traveling in Europe, Emerson would seek out and become good friends with Carlyle, meet and spend time with Coleridge and Wordsworth. He would befriend a young Thoreau, who would live with Emerson and his second wife, Lydia, for more than a year.

Another wonderful character in Emerson's life was the dynamic preacher Edward Taylor. Taylor's ministry in Boston's north end was just beginning at Seaman's Bethel Church when he and Emerson met. Taylor was what was called a Shouting Methodist -- as far from Unitarianism as could be found -- but despite their theological differences, he and Emerson became good friends. According to Richardson, it was said of Taylor's meetings that they were "conducted in a marvelous way, by surprises, battery-shocks, hitty, witty, wise suggestions and illustrations, flashing, burning, star-thoughts of faith, hope, and love, Jesus, holiness, and heaven, never to be forgotten." No one ever said that of Emerson's services! This man Taylor would later become the model for Father Mapple, the sailor-preacher in Universalist Herman Melville's famous novel, *Moby-Dick*.

As an interesting aside, once when other ministers were complaining about Emerson's ideas leading the youth to hell, Taylor is said to have remarked, in a quote that shows his loyalty and his respect for Emerson: "It may be that Emerson is going to hell, but of one thing I am certain; he will change the climate there, and emigration will set that way."

Emerson's career was also quite dramatic. Shortly before he married Ellen Tucker, the young bride whose grave he would later visit daily, Emerson accepted the call to the Old North Church (or Second Unitarian Church) in Boston. This was a respected pulpit with a handsome salary. By virtue of its prestige, he would be asked to be chaplain to the state senate and enter the circle of moral and civic leaders of the city.

However, from the moment he took the pulpit, Emerson was conflicted about life in the ministry. He was drawn to scholarship and preaching, but lousy at pastoral care. He was renowned for not taking addresses and directions with him on his pastoral visits, probably a sign of his resistance to making such calls, and so more often than not ended up visiting complete strangers on his rounds. However, over time two things seemed to rub in the ministry most of all. For one, Emerson found himself not feeling free to speak the original ideas that occupied most of his thought and private writing. When he did grow comfortable speaking his ideas and drawing from the sources he found most compelling, he was criticized for not quoting enough from Scripture. Added to this tension was Emerson's growing resistance to the administration of the sacrament of Communion.

What got in the way of Emerson's willingness to administer Communion was his evolving theology. He came, over time, not to see Christ as redeemer, and therefore to reject the sacrament of Communion as a means to our own redemption. Instead he saw Christ as a fellow sufferer and friend, but that was not all. His theology was becoming more unconventional in other ways as well. Emerson also rejected the idea of God as a being and began to see God instead as "the individual's own soul carried out to perfection." Indeed, Emerson began to believe that all of Christianity was at peril for ceasing to be a way of life and being and becoming instead a philosophy, a theory. He loved the fervor of Paul in his letters and longed to feel his own religion as strongly as Paul felt his. Moreover, he wanted to be able to declare such first-hand experience of religious fervor possible and not merely be doomed to report on it for ages to come. "Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past," Emerson lamented. "The sun shines today also."

What Emerson found, however, was a ministry that seemed universally content with teaching *about* religion, and concerned with furthering tradition, not espousing a living faith. This was not the religion Emerson felt destined to teach or to live, nor a ministry he could lead and still keep faith with himself.

So he raised his concerns about Communion, and the members of the Old North Church, though they didn't want to lose the young preacher, voted on whether they were willing to give up the sacrament. They decided they could not. Emerson resigned and, after a trip abroad, embarked on a new career of lecturing.

Free from the inherent constraints of ministry and the expectations of congregants, Emerson was now free to write and speak as he felt called. One of his first essays, published anonymously, captured one piece of the first-hand religion that Emerson wanted so desperately for the world to take hold of. In this essay on "Nature," Emerson described the sense of mystical union that he thought anyone who has been in nature has experienced: "(B)athed in blithe air and uplifted into infinite space," he wrote, "all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."

Such experiences, he believed, give us first-hand knowledge that we are part of God and God is accessible to us through creation. So the implication is we need not seek God outside ourselves, but in our own experience of the world. It is this direct connection to the holy, most obvious in and through nature, that is at the heart of Emerson's theology. Later it would be the heart of the Transcendentalist movement that Emerson helped found.

Emerson believed religion was written in the hearts of all men and women. For all his voracious reading, he would refuse to read commentary or theology, but instead take up only first-hand accounts of thought. He would read anybody's poetry, Richardson writes, but no one's commentary on someone else's poetry. He wanted what was unmediated or as close as he could get.

Emerson didn't believe in imitation. "Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight ... and not the history of theirs." "There is no history," he would write in his journal on March 28, 1839, "only biography ... [Each] new individual must work out the whole problem of science, letters and theology for himself; can owe his fathers nothing. There is no history; only biography."

It was an amazingly American perspective that, I am sure, is part of why Emerson's writings have had enduring draw for us. We are a people that cast off great tracts of history and roots to set sail for new lands. We are a people that has felt free to question authority and inherited truths. Emerson's writings were a clarion call, in part, not to forget that spirit as we, as a nation, became settled in to our new life on these shores. Moreover, his was a reminder that this responsibility to be pioneers of the mind and heart is also part of what it means to be human and religious. His implications for the religious venture couldn't be more at the heart of the Unitarian movement. We believe in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning in our lives. That revelation is ongoing.

Emerson's challenge that we take up first-hand living and cast off the familiar and the inherited requires incredible discipline and courage. In many ways, Emerson paid the price for taking up such a life. His family never understood his resignation of the prestigious pulpit at Old North Church, nor did they approve of his rejection of the ministry that had called so many generations of Emersons before him. His address to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School, in which he essentially called Christianity dead and named its ministers the grim reapers of the faith, earned him a 30-year exile from that institution. Many a fellow clergyperson and good Christian, Unitarian or

otherwise, thought him a heretic of the first degree. But his work founding the Transcendentalist movement, his challenge to subsequent ages to live according to one's own truths, his inspiration to poets and philosophers alike (poets like Whitman; philosophers like Thoreau) -- these legacies far outweigh the price he paid for his independence of mind and spirit. Plus, one gets the sense that Emerson could not have been or done otherwise, no matter what price he paid for such independence of thought.

In his essay on "Self-Reliance," Emerson wrote: "We are parlor soldiers. We shun the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born," and then he invited us to be otherwise. "Trust thyself," he wrote. "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 ... we [who] are now men, ... must accept ... the highest transcendent destiny; [that we are] not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides redeemers and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark."

It is a timeless challenge to us all to keep our religion alive, lived, to be true to what resonates most deeply inside each of us, having the courage to follow it where it leads. May we do so and know it is a path others have walked at great price, for sure, but with even greater satisfaction, *and* leaving genius and inspiration to others in their wake.

Amen.