

“On the Occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Ralph Waldo Emerson”

A sermon delivered at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

(just down the road from Concord)

by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

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In the early years of Unitarianism in the United States, it was sometimes referred to as the Boston religion or with a reference to William Ellery Channing, as a person in Cincinnati might speak of attending Dr. Channing’s church locally, though Channing was a minister in Boston. Channing had that kind of importance. The leading preacher of his day, he was the one to declare in 1819 that he accepted the name Unitarian, accepted that he and other liberals of his day believed something other than the traditional faith of Calvinist New England. He helped create the American Unitarian Association in 1825.

Yet in a recent issue of our denominational magazine, *UU World*, it was not Dr. Channing who is cited as “the most recognized and revered figure in the Unitarian movement,” a quote from the UU Historical Society. No, that would be Ralph Waldo Emerson. My colleague Forrest Church, writing in the same edition, notes that “Ralph Waldo Emerson memorably said, ‘Every institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.’ Unitarian Universalism is too multidimensional to fit neatly within a single shadow, but if any reflection were protean enough to encompass us it would certainly be Emerson’s.”

This was in the edition with a sketch of Emerson on the cover, in anticipation of the two hundredth anniversary of his birth this coming week. A variety of exhibits and events have been taking place in Concord and Boston and environs in recent months and will continue to for a while, including a three-day conference in Concord beginning July 1, put on by the Emerson Bicentennial Committee. There is a listing of all the events on an Emerson spot on the UUA website.

All this for someone whose relations with Unitarianism were sometimes tenuous and sometimes troubled.

Things seemed to begin smoothly enough. His father was a liberal minister of the First Church of Boston, from a family that had produced many ministers over the years. William Emerson died when Waldo was still a boy, but with work, determination, and help, Waldo’s mother saw that Waldo and three of his brothers made it through Harvard.

His brother William Jr. started toward the ministry. After all, their colorful Aunt Mary Moody Emerson had declared that there should always be a Rev. Mr. Emerson in Boston. But William decided on law instead, and Waldo became the minister of his generation, graduating from Harvard Divinity School and becoming the associate minister – and then the [senior] minister -- at the Second Church of Boston.

But he didn't actually much like the job, especially calling on people. And his life was kicked akimbo when his young wife died in the second year of their marriage. Before long, an issue arose in the church over which that Emerson felt he should resign, being unwilling to administer communion, as was the congregation's custom. Emerson saw no justification for the practice, since as he read Jesus' words to the disciples in the Bible, Jesus was telling them to take bread and wine in memory of him, but the instruction only applied to them, the disciples. Once they all died, the practice was over. Or so it seemed to Emerson.

The congregation was sorry to lose him, but the parting was amiable. The only hymn Emerson ever wrote (as opposed to the several hymns we sing that were also written by him that were originally written as poems) he composed for the installation of his successor. It's the final hymn we'll sing this morning.

A few months later he set sail for Europe for his health. In his months abroad he became acquainted with people and ideas that fed his interest – indeed, his passion – for the Romanticism or philosophical Idealism that had become popular on the continent and in Britain in the aftermath of Goethe and other German writers.

Upon his return, Emerson does not take another church, but he regularly preaches at Unitarian churches in the area, most often at the church in East Lexington. But he finds a new niche for himself as a lecturer, which he develops into a successful career of its own, supplemented by sales of collections of the essays he wrote to deliver on his lengthy lecture tours, which included trips back to Europe and to California.

Sensing a lack of levity by now, I pause here to share the playful report of the Unitarian minister in San Francisco, Thomas Starr King: “Emerson gave us last Monday evening the most brilliant lecture I ever listened to from any mortal. It was on the identity of the laws of the mind with the laws of nature. He proved conclusively that man is only a higher kind of corn, that he is a squirrel gone up into the first class, that he is a liberated oyster full educated, that he is a spiritualized pumpkin, a thinking squash, a graduated sun-flower, and an inspired turnip. Such imagery, such wit, such quaint things said in a tone solemn and sublime! I have the most profound respect henceforth for every melon-vine as my ancestor (*melancholic* thought). I look upon every turtle as of kin. Tonight he lectures again. I fear I may lose it.”

We'll get back to some of those ideas, but just to complete my little survey of Emerson's relationship to the Unitarianism of his day, it became somewhat distant for a while, as he had remarried, settled in Concord, and found the preaching by the minister of the First Parish there, Barzillai Frost, insufferable. And he voiced his distaste for dull, impersonal preaching in an address to the graduates of the Harvard Divinity School, with the faculty and local clergy present.

This occasioned quite a fuss, with many folks upset with Emerson, but with some of the young ministers like Theodore Parker delighted to have someone voice their desire for a religion that was less heady, less Bible-centered, more lively, more personal, than they regarded established Unitarianism to be.

For a long time, the majority view seemed to be that Emerson had begun as a Unitarian -- brought up in his father's church, he joined it when he was twenty and still teaching school, before he went to Divinity School -- and he even served as a Unitarian minister, but after that he left us behind in frustration.

Recently there have been a lot of reappraisals regarding Emerson, and one of them involves a recovered appreciation for Emerson as a lifelong Unitarian, albeit one in the avant

guard who was not very present at services for a long while. But the family owned a pew, which was how things were done then, they did attend some, Waldo included, and in his later years he attended more regularly. Of course, by then his own radical views had long since become, if not universally accepted, definitely an accepted voice in the Unitarian conversation.

Another recent reappraisal challenges the tradition view of Emerson as antisocial, an introvert who avoided company. Actually, though he certainly had an introvert's need for time alone, he had a lot of friends, he and his wife entertained, he served on town committees, he was a pretty public figure in Concord.

Still another reappraisal has undermined the vision of Emerson as disengaged from the larger social issues of his time. Yes, he was slower than some to take up the cause of the abolition of slavery, but then he did, and devoutly. Scholars have been spending time on his sermons and public addresses and finding a feisty crusader for social causes underreported before.

This is all part of a renewed interest in Emerson in general. And it should hardly surprise us that the picture of Emerson that is emerging is more complex than ever, because he was that way himself, an astonishing combination of contrary impulses and opinions, which only get harder to simplify as the years go on and he writes or acts or speaks again. As Forrest Church said, Emerson was protean, making his shadow broad enough to cover a movement as diverse as ours has been and is. That's just how Emerson was, too.

But in a few ways, his message, the gist of his thinking, is consistent over the decades. One of his ongoing interests, his Transcendentalism, has caught the fancy of quite a few UUs and others of late, who love it that he believes in forms more real than their embodiment, in a moral law that governs the universe and equally everything in it, and in sources of knowledge besides the senses, like intuition, like perceptive observation of nature as emblemizes moral law.

Of course, any UU today who describes herself or himself as a Transcendentalist might define it altogether differently, and as it is, I bet it's not entirely clear to everyone what my own little rendition means. Well, that's the way it was with Transcendentalism when Emerson was its chief spokesperson, too.

But he was sure that the Unitarianism of his day was missing something by sticking to the Bible and what we would now call reason. Understanding Emerson on this point is hugely complicated by the word he uses to describe our extrasensory ways of knowing. He calls that Reason, as opposed to understanding.

But philosophical complications aside, Emerson is on your side if you're for more attention to the soul and spirituality. And if you need someone to assure you that the most important person you can be is yourself. "Trust yourself," he says, be yourself, go with your instincts, you own finest thought. The same God that vivifies this universe is alive in you as well – get in touch with it. Let nature help you do so. Jesus can help, too, and other geniuses. But it's your own soul that's sacred.

We keep those thoughts alive in our movement, along with a critical, skeptical, no-nonsense strain that helps maintain a balance. Just last week on the UU Historical Society chatline, someone [David R. Burton] wrote that "reading Emerson, as opposed to reading about Emerson, poses an almost insurmountable challenge because once you get past the sentimentality and nice turns of phrase, his substantive points are usually either contradictory, incoherent, unoriginal or vacuous."

And it has to be conceded, reading Emerson you have to be prepared for the contradictions. He'll say one thing and then the opposite, but often he'll make both points so brilliantly you're glad to be offered the choice. Then there are other times when he is ... if not incoherent, at least not easy to follow.

And I don't share some of his outlooks myself, his philosophical Idealism in particular. But I do like to read him, and it pleases me when others enjoy him, too. So I'm going to close with an extended quote from the playwright, Tony Kushner. This is the end of his commencement address at Vassar last year:

"The first time I had to give a commencement speech I was so nervous, I'd been dating this guy, ... a nice guy, a grad student in Victorian literature -- here's another piece of advice, only date people who have read a different set of books than you have read, it will save you lots of time in the library -- and I told him I didn't know what to say in this commencement speech and he said 'You ought to look at Emerson's commencement address to the Harvard Divinity School,' and I said, 'Oh of course, I love that' -- and here's my last piece of advice, never admit to not having read something. So I went home and read it, and it's so beautiful and so true that I was blocked from writing for several weeks; it's so beautiful and true that after Emerson delivered it, Harvard refused to let him back on campus for thirty years.

"The Address begins so beautifully I must to read it to you:

In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never more happily displayed.

"And even in rough tough butch Poughkeepsie, even under stormy skies, one hundred and twenty seven years of additional environmental despoliation later, we still know what Emerson is talking about.

"And then he goes on to say many many extraordinary things, and you should all read Emerson, all the time, talk about a soul divided, talk about a bright soul living in darkness; but I thought this would make a perfect way to conclude; for what better advice could one offer to graduates, to citizen souls, than this: 'But speak the truth,' says Ralph Waldo Emerson,

and all nature and all spirits help you with unexpected furtherance. Speak the truth, and all things alive or brute are vouchers, and the very roots of the grass underground there, do seem to stir and move to bear you witness. Good is positive. Evil is merely privative. It is like cold, which is the privation of heat. All evil is so much death and nonentity. Benevolence is absolute and real. The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul. The dawn of the sentiment of virtue on the heart, gives and is the assurance that Law is sovereign over all natures; [But speak the truth] and the worlds, time, space, eternity, do seem to break out into joy.

"It's time to stop talking. Oh it always goes like this, I start out not knowing what to say and before I know it I can't shut up. So commence already! A million billion mazels to you and your parents and your teachers and Vassar for having done so self-evidently magnificent a job. I

am certain you are aflame. Hurry hurry hurry, now now now, damn the critics and the bad reviews: the world is waiting for you! Organize. Speak the truth.”