

“EMERSON: PROSE POET OF PARADOX”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland
The Rev. Ken Sawyer
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For many years, I have met monthly with people as together we read our way through a book or the work of an author. One can come as often or as infrequently as one chooses, and you only have to have read whatever the selection of the month is.

Back in 1981, we took on the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the group was so successful that I have given it once since, but not for a while, even as we read other Transcendentalists: Margaret Fuller and Thoreau's *Walden*, as well as Van Wyck Brooks' history of the era, *The Flowering of New England*.

This year we will take on Emerson anew, on the third Thursday of every month, beginning at 7:45 in my office. The first essay will be the first he published, “Nature.”

I know some of you are already Emerson fans, who read him for pleasure, and keep up with the unending flow of biographies published about him, while others may wonder what Emerson has to do with us, or even who he was. In what little time I have, I doubt I will edify the Emerson experts, who already know more about him than me anyway. But let me see if I can give the quickest of biographies, and then talk about his thought, his writing style, and why I think he is worth your hearing about, even if you are not drawn to go straight to the library to check out his work.

Emerson was born in 1803. The Emerson family had deep roots in ministry and in Concord, beginning with the first minister there, Peter Bulkeley, and including Moodys and Ripleys as well as Emersons in the Concord pulpit and elsewhere. One of his grandfathers had been minister of the First Parish in Concord. That minister's successor became his step-grandfather. His father William was minister of the prestigious First Church of Boston.

But William Emerson died at forty-two, when Ralph was only eight. With support from the church and its members, and by taking in borders, Ralph's mother supported the family thereafter, managing to send her sons to Harvard, where Ralph began at the age of fourteen. She was aided in raising the children by her sister-in-law, Mary Emerson, a woman with strong views about religion who had a profound influence on Ralph and his siblings.

One thing about Emerson is, all along the way, every detail of his life's story has been studied and written about, so the temptation toward tangents is strong. I will resist, but if you want, you can find much description and analysis of his relationship with Mary Moody, as well as those with his parents, his siblings, his wives, followers, and especially with his friends and neighbors – a subject that I have also preached about, including on the occasion of the publication of *American Bloomsbury* only a few years ago.

I am also skipping over other topics, like his ancestors who were Waldensians, a pre-Reformation Protestant movement begun by Peter Waldo in Italy in the twelfth century, some of whose members, Ralph Waldo's ancestors, were forced to flee Europe in the seventeenth century, coming to America with the Puritans. As a boy, Ralph signed his name R. Waldo, and while in college decided to be known as Waldo, which he was ever after. He named his first child Waldo, too.

So while it was Ralph Emerson who graduated from Boston Public Latin School, it was Waldo Emerson who graduated from Harvard in 1821, and from Harvard Divinity School four years later, there being some delay along the way because of health problems, including a time of failed vision. He was licensed as a minister the next year; and finally, after further health problems and time spent teaching, in 1829, at twenty-six, Waldo Emerson became associate minister of the Second Church of Boston, a Unitarian church also known as Old North. He became active in community affairs. He served on the School Board.

The same year, he married Ellen Tucker, a beautiful young woman of fragile health, with whom, all agree, he was deeply in love. She died of tuberculosis eighteen months later. The next year, he resigned from his ministry at Second Church. His stated reason was that he had come to believe that Jesus never intended to institute communion as an on-going practice or sacrament, and he could not in good conscience go on administering the rite, as the church still expected.

Others have offered other possible explanations, like his need to move on to some new stage in his life, beyond the grief at Ellen's death, or his growing realization that no matter what his father and grandfathers had done, ministry just wasn't for him – it involved more personal interaction than an introvert could handle.

He then spent almost a year in Europe, recovering his well being and also making important contacts. He had already been introduced to some of the new ideas being put forth by people like the poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, and the historian/philosopher Thomas Carlyle, ideas that had been stimulated by German Romantics like Goethe. It has been suggested that Emerson's objection to communion was a consequence of his reading Coleridge. Emerson had discovered a God which was both universal and personal, not to be confined to any one tradition nor requiring communal act.

As it happens, his meetings with Coleridge and Wordsworth were not very successful, but he and Carlyle hit it off grandly, and began a lifelong correspondence. Emerson returned from Europe fired with a new religious outlook, one that would become known in America, as it was in England, as Transcendentalism. And it would be Emerson who would be its first and foremost exponent.

But first there was the matter of making a living. He moved to Concord, started work on a book, and did supply preaching, filling in when a Unitarian pulpit was vacant for a

Sunday. He preached here. He preached often in East Lexington. And he began a new career, a career that had not even existed before, a career as a lecturer.

The timing was remarkably fortuitous. Suddenly, in the 1830s, a lecture circuit sprang up. Lecture halls were built in towns all over the country, right to the edges of the moving frontier. And Waldo Emerson was just the man for the job: accustomed to public speaking, afire with ideas, and gifted with an ability to write memorable sentences.

Meanwhile, the estate of his first wife having been settled, and a second marriage approaching, Emerson bought the house in Concord in which they would live and bring up their family. It is still there, and you can tour it at certain times. Almost any day you can visit his study, which has been reconstructed in the Concord Historical Museum. A month after buying the house, he married Lydia Jackson of Plymouth, who had heard him lecture and preach. He had her change her name to Lydian.

That was 1835. The next year his first book, "Nature," was published, calling for people to seek religious truth in themselves and in nature. The next year, his Phi Beta Kappa lecture at Harvard made a similar plea on a national level, calling for an American culture, new and unbeholding to European example.

He was still attending the Concord Unitarian church, with which he had so many family connections. But just about then, a new minister was settled, one highly regarded as a minister in every way except his preaching. But preaching was the part of ministry that Emerson cared about, and he was none too happy listening to the Rev. Barzillai Frost.

Without mentioning Frost by name, Emerson turned this unhappiness into his most explosive lecture, the Divinity School Address of 1838. In some ways it was the same message as in the prior two major addresses: talking to graduates, soon to be ministers, and with their faculty sitting right there, Emerson told them to look to their own souls, their own experience, their own lives, passed through the fire of thought, as the source of religious truth, not some book from long ago or far away.

The students thought this was great, as did younger ministers in the room, like Theodore Parker, who would become one of the most important voices of American Transcendentalism, and the most controversial. But others regarded Emerson's ideas as dangerous nonsense, and his selection of that forum for an attack on the clergy to be in poor taste and uncharitable in the extreme. His style was called arrogant, divisive, fatuous, unreasonable, absurd, incoherent, and contradictory.

But Emerson was not ever trying to present a systematic theology, for three reasons. First, that would close us off from tomorrow's truth, which may be altogether different from today's. Therefore Emerson was never fazed at all by criticism that pointed out his inconsistencies and contradictions. As he famously said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," and his protégé Walt Whitman echoed, "Do I contradict myself? All right then, I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."

The job is not to confine yourself within some box to which a label can be fixed, some consistent set of ordered beliefs. The job is perceptively to experience one's life as it happens, to know it at first hand. And what arrives tomorrow may have a message the opposite of today's situation. Then we shall record that. Let there be no bounds on the self's discoveries, certainly no bounds of foolish consistency, no bounds on the living of our own special lives.

Second, he would have also rejected attempts at a systematic, rational system of belief because, while we get at truth through thought, it is thought of a particular kind, less indebted to logic than to intuition. In the language of the day, confusingly enough, he was taking the side of Reason against Understanding. In this way of talking, borrowed from Carlyle, Understanding is analytic, mathematical, sensory – in a word, empirical. How do we know anything? Because we experience it with one of our senses. This was the outlook of the philosopher John Locke; and the first generation of American Unitarians, contemporaries of Emerson's father, they believed it.

Some of their children did not. They said we know the *material* world by Understanding, but religious or spiritual truth by intuition, by the innate wisdom of the soul, discovered by inner search, awakened by Nature, expressed in poetry – the part of us that participates in the cosmic mind of which the universe is a manifestation. Their name for that was reason. Their first and primary spokesperson was Emerson.

And third, for Emerson, truth itself is contradictory. "I accept the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies," he wrote. Truth is not one thing, with falsehood as its opposite. No, truth itself is a fullness that contains opposites, and the seeker must be willing to accept both as they arrive. He repeatedly tried to find the metaphor that would make his point: there are parallel truths, he wrote, and we must live on the diagonal between them. Or competing negations are poles between which our lives are suspended.

So don't be confounded if you find Emerson making a point that seems to contradict a point he made not just a few years ago but a few pages back. He thinks they're both true, and he is going to say each one as brilliantly as he can. He liked balancing opposites. He thought the finest people were those of both sexes, and he held up Hermaphrodite as a model.

And my goodness, the contradictions he contained himself! He said he hated preaching, and spent a lifetime at it, in a way, on the lecture tour. He castigated ministers like the Rev. Frost for not sharing more of their personal stories in their addresses, and shared almost none in his own. He opposed the injustices of society and most projects to correct them. He favored a socialist view called union, and said it could only come from less government and more individualism. He was an idealist who inspired the founders of the communal experiment at Brook Farm, and a practical Yankee who could see no future in the project. He championed passion, and was criticized for his own "cold intellection."

So tips for reading Emerson include, do not expect consistency; understand he was a Transcendentalist, so he believed that the material world is but a representation and symbol of a spiritual reality, an over-soul, in which all goodness, beauty, and right are one; and know that when he speaks of reason, he means intuition.

A few more tips, these regarding his writing style, which many people find cloudy, clumsy, redundant, rambling, and difficult. Even a sympathetic critic (John Morley) conceded that “There are pages that to the present reader, at least, after diligent meditation, remain mere abracadabras, incomprehensible and worthless.... Nothing is gained by concealing that not every part of Emerson’s work will ... bear reduction to honest and intelligible English.”

But the style relates to his goal, which is to trace the truth as he glimpses it in his life. For Emerson, truth is captured by just the sort of poetic, evocative prose he employs. Emerson always saw himself first as a poet, and his poetic skills infuse his prose. He uses prose to do what poetry attempts: to find in just the right words a rendering of experience at its deepest.

He tries to find the imagery that will put a point across, and he tries several times, offering images of a variety of sorts, visual, auditory, tactile, intellectual, this one and that. If four out the five images miss the mark for you, perhaps the fifth will hit home in a way that will open up a glimpse of truth deeper than clear logic could have achieved.

It is a style well suited to the lecture tour, where all his essays had their trial runs. A lecture cannot be so terse and tightly reasoned that a listener cannot wander off on a thought and return unable to catch up. A lecture has to move at a different pace than a written essay, which allows you to ponder a point without the text moving on.

As important a tip as any in reading Emerson is, relax. He is going at his own lecturely pace. He is trying to say something that may be wonderful to hear when he finds the expression of it that resonates in you. In the meantime, relax; he’s finding ways of reaching the people around you, and not getting too far ahead of the crowd.

I think that that’s as much as I hope to accomplish today. At one point this week, straining hard to keep the sermon as short as I could, I had one that went thirty minutes. Obviously, there is more I might say and maybe will before the year is out, especially as those of you (in the study group or not) interact with Emerson and each other and me. There are criticisms of Emerson to acknowledge in time, not just the mystical murkiness of his language at times, but his over-emphasis on the individual, his under-emphasis on community and tradition, his over-emphasis on life’s positive aspects, his under-emphasis on suffering and evil, and then what Whitman as an older man, no longer a protégé, would refer to as Emerson’s “cold and bloodless intellectuality.”

And yet, so long after, Emerson retains the power to stir up and to stir with his faith in everyone’s inner self, his call for all of us to believe in our own worth, our innate wisdom, our personal experience, and the integrity of our own minds. After all, ironic as

it may seem, here we are, still thinking about Emerson, singing his hymns and reading his words, in some ways following in his footsteps, even though his message was, don't do that, but find out your own truths. "Why should we grope among the dead bones of the past?" he asked. "The sun shines today also.... There are new lands, new men [and women], new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship."

But that is just what we do. We are not bound to Emerson's beliefs, while we remain inspired by his spirit. As Whitman wrote, "The best part of Emersonianism is, it breeds the giant that destroys itself. [The question,] Who wants to be any [person]'s mere follower lurks behind every page. No teacher ever taught, that has so provided for his pupil's setting up independently...."

So here we are, independent souls, in a movement blessed with a reverence for the individual, with a love of personal integrity and the quest for private truth, which were willed to us in no small part by a teacher who as he teaches sets us free. To most of us, he offers not so much the particulars of his theology, but the spirit in which he held it, tentative, open-minded, curious, vigorous, self-reliant, and devoted to the search.

Whatever Emerson's failings may be, there are few voices that offer so many "inspiring hints," as they were called by James Russell Lowell, so many provocative glimpses of one person's effort to discover religious truth. Few voices call us more urgently to join in our own personal journeys of the spirit, our own quests for the deepest truths of our lives.