

3/21/10 Sermon

“Emerson, Visionary Prophet”
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If we Unitarian Universalists were ever to have saints, Ralph Waldo Emerson would be on the list of most revered and definitive prophetic voices of our movement and, indeed, of American culture. He served to build the foundation of our Earth-Based Spirituality. Today’s sermon will serve as a primer to his unique vision.

Throughout his life, Emerson defined a new Christianity, formulating in the process a very different Unitarian understanding of divinity. He wrote that Jesus belonged to a race of prophets – one among many, but with a unique vision – “who saw with open eyes the mystery of the soul.” Emerson saw divinity in all beings, believing that God directly spoke and acted through all of humankind, and needed not the Christian church to either intercede for man or define the experience of “a sweet natural goodness that God represented.”

Today, through the power of his intellect, Emerson is a spiritual guide not just for we Unitarian Universalists, but also for a wider, worldwide audience of people seeking to understand their place in the created order of things within the interdependent web of all existence. He understood that that struggle for identity was a religious impulse, which was both innate and intuitive in human experience. He tied this search for faith to personal experience and to nature, which he characterized as one of God’s original blessings. His radical “theology was based not on doctrine, scriptures and tradition,” writes Barry Andrews, “but an understanding and appreciation of the natural world and laws which traverse the universe and make things the way we are.”

Emerson was an organic thinker born in 1803 into a line of Unitarian preachers, philosophers and theologians. His biography reads as a “Who’s Who” of American letters. He was a renowned poet, lecturer, writer, a pre-eminent citizen and founder, along with Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott and Margaret Fuller, of the American Transcendentalist movement. Together, these great luminaries helped to open up Unitarianism to the reconciliation of science and religion, Eastern theology and naturalist mysticism.

Waldo, as he was known as by his friends, was introduced to both Hinduism and Buddhism by his aunt, Mary Emerson, who greatly influenced his thinking. Although poverty stricken due to the early death of his father, he

was well-born socially, allowing him at the age of 14, to enter and graduate from Harvard Divinity School. He loved to preach but hated "calling and the other every-day duties of being a parish minister." Ultimately, he resigned his ministry in 1832 after less than four years at the Second Church in Boston. Fortunately for us, he continued to lecture and speak publicly for the rest of his life, serving as our constant spiritual guide and voice of social justice and religious change.

Emerson was instrumental in shaping both American philosophy and Unitarian Universalist theology. He is our own pre-eminent prophetic voice whose "words and deeds ... challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love" (UUA-Source of our faith.) His life embodied a free and responsible search for truth and meaning that animates our faith. He taught us to think for ourselves and value our own experience and wisdom, which set us apart from other faiths.

Although the mid-19th Century may appear quaint from our 21st Century perspective, Emerson was concerned about many of the same problems that worry us today: the nature of our spiritual lives, the rise of materialism, the social impact of industrialization and rampant growth. He feared people were resorting to expediency over integrity, expressed concern over the erosion of individual freedoms, conformity, and the decline of basic American values such as honesty, integrity and respect for rewarding work. Taken in its totality, he dreaded that humanity was headed to a loss of "soul"; of that abiding sense of the divine within us and all of nature, the source of our being that gives meaning, purpose and direction to human life.

Against this backdrop of religious thought and heresy, Emerson defined his role in history as that of a scholar: As he put it in 1841, "No matter what is their special work or profession, [scholars] stand for the spiritual interest of the world." The one thing of value, he said in 1837, is the active soul – "The soul, awakened to its powers, acts to transform the world with justice, compassion and love." For Emerson, as for contemporary Unitarian Universalists, religion was a matter of "deeds, not creeds."

David M. Robinson asserts that "belief in the presence and power of the soul (stated most directly in Emerson's essay, 'The Over-Soul') is the core of his religious thought and the vital principle of his entire intellectual achievement."

It can be summed up this way:

"Emerson's doctrine of the soul developed in the 1820s and 1830s as he

fused the Unitarian theology of self-reliance with the spiritual and idealistic doctrines from several Neo-Platonism, Asian, and European Romantic sources. His interest was also kindled in the new scientific discoveries of his day. The doctrine of the soul blossomed into a passionate and visionary expression of the premises of Transcendentalism."

Gradually during the 1840s and 1850s, Emerson modified his religious beliefs as his ecstatic visions of the transcendent waned. This reflected his growing sense of "the importance of moral action as the fundamental end of religious experience." He was developing an increasingly more pragmatic and ethically centered theory of the religious life in which "work and worship, morals and vision, became increasingly synonymous concepts." Today, in part due to Emerson, our work for social justice is paramount to our religious identity.

For Emerson, theology and nature could not be separated. He said, "All things are moral; and in their boundless changes have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature. Therefore is nature glorious with form, color, and motion; that every globe in the remotest heaven, every chemical change from the rudest crystal up to the laws of life, every change of vegetation from the first principle of growth in the eye of a leaf, to the tropical forest and antediluvian coal-mine, every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments. Therefore is nature ever the ally of Religion; lends all her pomp and riches to the religious sentiment."
- *Nature*, Chapter 5 (1836)

This religious sentiment, this Unitarianism, was centered on what Emerson understood as the unknowable character of ultimate reality. He felt that which was spiritual and transcendent holds primacy over the material and empirical knowledge and understanding. For him, "there was only one God who was central and everywhere, reappearing with all his parts in every moss and cobweb. God was always present in every soul and deed. Our happiness then was being true to the divinity within us, called to service for the betterment of human kind and nature."

He believed that we would be judged in this world and not the next for our acts that break the moral laws of nature. He must have been a Las Vegas because he wrote that if we break these moral laws we do so at our own peril because "the dice of God are always loaded. Every act we commit against humanity or nature has unending consequences, because all acts are related and part of a whole, which can be defined as a part of nature. For Emerson, nature was both an endless source of delight of universal relations, a cathedral of woods, mountains and deserts."

If you doubt the veracity of his words just take the Tramway to the top of the mountain; breathe in and feel the cold crisp air, smell the pine pitch, view the blue of the sky, and experience the strength and permanence of the mountains.

"Nature was and is the temple where God and the mind were to be studied and adored. This was the root of the transcendentalist movement. Its name came from the philosopher Emmanuel Kant and held that there are moral laws that transcend man – that there are absolute truths as best expressed in nature and natural law. Religion for the transcendentalists was the primary sentiment in human nature, unrelated to historical facts. It is poetic, generous, devout, open to all the humanities and sciences, literature and philosophy."

He believed that God was everywhere, manifest, and not separate from us. He said, "If we reason, god is absolute reason." He said, "Stand aside, and let God think" – that is, let the divine in you shine through. "Duty [service] is taught through the voice within. We know, when we use our highest reason, what we ought to do. We need no Ten Commandments for that. Men may shirk their duty in perilous times, but they know what their duty is."

This is the essential Ralph Waldo Emerson. Through his writing, preaching and lecturing, he established an enduring theology of our place in nature. He taught us to appreciate nature as the way to an earth based spirituality. He created the framework of our principles, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the case for becoming good stewards of the planet. Through him, we are better able to feel our oneness with the splendor and beauty of nature and that moves beyond our limited human experience.

He wrote, "Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear ... 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; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me. I am part of the particles of God." As we all are.
