

# Our Mr. Emerson

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“In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life.”

So begins Emerson’s Address to the Harvard Divinity School on July 15, 1838, when Emerson was a young man, his first child just two years old.

And in this cold winter of 2017, his address is as fresh as ever.

In addressing the graduating seniors of the Divinity School, young men about to embark on careers as Christian preachers, Emerson says that historical Christianity is dead and without soul, and what is needed from these new preachers is new revelation. He admonishes them to “go alone, to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imaginations of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil.” (*Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, p. 108)

This is classic Emerson. But it was also so controversial, he wasn’t invited back to Harvard until after his children were grown.

Emerson is probably the most famous thinker of our Unitarian Universalist tradition, with the possible exception of his friend, Henry Thoreau. Over the years he has fallen out of favor, then fallen back in, and perhaps out again, but his influence is unquestionable, both on our national character and on our Unitarian Universalist faith. And though his writing often sounds awkward to us these days, there are real gems to be found in his essays – places where the spirit soars and inspires. I consider a collection of his essays to be the closest thing we UU’s have to a holy scripture.

Emerson was born and grew up in Boston. He was known as “Waldo” to his family. His father died when he was only eight, leaving his mother to raise a large family on her own. His Aunt Mary Moody Emerson was a great influence on him. She was a well-read woman who introduced Emerson to the Hindu scriptures and Neoplatonism, among other things.

Emerson’s father and grandfather were both ministers, and when Emerson had been out of college for a short time teaching, he decided to go into the ministry. It was expected of him. “Aunt Mary stressed that there always had been a Reverend Mr. Emerson in Boston.” On finishing his degree at Harvard, he became the associate minister at Second Church in Boston, which was Unitarian. He then married Ellen Tucker, and within the year he became the senior minister of the church. Tragedy struck when his wife died of tuberculosis just a short time later.

Emerson resigned his pulpit not long after that. It was officially over the issue of communion. Emerson said he could not serve it in good conscience because he understood it differently than he knew his congregation did. But there may have been other reasons as well. There is plenty of evidence in his journal to suggest he didn’t enjoy or feel like he was good at the pastoral aspects of ministry.

He still preached for a time at the Lexington church, but gradually developed a career as a lecturer. In the days before TV or movies, people went out to hear lectures. In this way, Emerson managed to make an illustrious career out of preaching, the part of ministry he was good at and enjoyed.

He bought the house in Concord, Massachusetts that he lived in the rest of his life, and he married Lydia Jackson. The next year he published his first book, *Nature*. It didn’t sell a lot of copies, but it made a big impression on the few who did read it. It set out his philosophy of

idealism and established his career.

That same year a group of young Unitarian ministers and others began meeting, and Emerson was seen as their leader. The group was called the Transcendental Club, and they met to discuss theology and philosophy. They published a journal called the "Dial." His good friend Margaret Fuller edited it at first, then Emerson took it over. It contained writings by the Transcendentalists and their friends.

Not long after *Nature* came out, Emerson was asked to give the Phi Beta Kappa speech at Harvard. Called "The American Scholar," it has been called "America's Intellectual Declaration of Independence," because it calls for American scholars to stop relying on European inspiration and to be original.

Then Emerson was asked by the seniors at Harvard Divinity School to give the class address, where he calls for the newly minted preachers to stop relying on biblical inspiration and to be original.

As the years went on Emerson gave more and more lectures, and traveled more and more as well. His travels took him as far west as Kansas, which was the frontier in those days, and he published many essays. By the end of his life he had become quite famous, probably one of the most famous men in America. He had a direct influence on such figures as Unitarian minister Theodore Parker and the poet Walt Whitman. He was still traveling and lecturing till close to the end of his life of 79 years.

He was an active supporter of women's and native American issues. He was always a firm abolitionist, but didn't get really involved until the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. This law said that people were required to return escaped slaves to their "owners." Emerson was so outraged by it that he was moved to speak out against it, urging civil disobedience against an unjust law.

He was always called Mr. Emerson, even by those close to him. He was a good neighbor and friend, helping others out when they needed it. It was on his land on Walden Pond that Thoreau built his famous cabin where he lived for two years and wrote *Walden*. People generally liked Emerson, and liked to hear him speak. A woman at the Lexington church where Emerson had been doing supply preaching for two years was asked why they didn't call a new minister. She said, "Oh, Miss Peabody, we are a very simple people here; we cannot understand anybody but Mr. Emerson."

Though he gave up the ministry, Emerson remained a Unitarian throughout his life. In those days, Unitarians were still Christian. Though he often spoke against Christianity—he actually felt that religious institutions were perhaps unnecessary since we each have a direct connection to the divine—yet he regularly attended the Unitarian church in Concord. And he influenced Unitarianism immensely.

The key to Emerson's thought is what we know of as our first source of our Unitarian Universalist living tradition, namely: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

Emerson had experiences that we could call mystical or religious; experiences where he felt connected to a divine source of creation. He describes one in his early work *Nature*: "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." He goes on to describe them more generally. "In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, . . . In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a

decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. 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 or parcel of God. . . . The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me.” (Nature, p. 4-5)

Elsewhere Emerson speaks of emptying the mind as we do in meditation. He says, “Whenever a mind is simple and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away, -- . . . teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour. All things are made sacred by relation to it.” (Self-Reliance, p. 188) And he says, “there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences.” (The Oversoul, p. 205)

Emerson believed that everybody is capable of having such experiences. This is the great equalizer for him. This, not money or social status or anything else, is the avenue to all that is worthwhile in life. Since all of us have equal access to the divine through our own minds, all are naturally equal for Emerson: slaves, Indians, the poor, even women. As the reading said, “it comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud.” (The Oversoul) A reporter once noticed that a washerwoman always went to hear Emerson’s lecture at Fannueil Hall. He asked her if she understood Mr. Emerson. “Not a word,” she replied, “but I love to see him standing up there thinking everyone else is just as good as he is.”

Direct experience of transcending mystery is by its very nature ineffable. It is beyond words, it can’t be described directly. Because of this, we always interpret when we try to describe the truth that is revealed in it. And we tend to use the symbolism and metaphor we have at hand. So, for example, Christian mystics describe their experience in language that sounds quite Christian, Sufis, or Islamic mystics, use language from their culture and religion, and so forth.

Emerson’s belief in the importance of direct experience led him to reject some major aspects of Christianity. In particular, he objected to the *historical* nature of Christianity -- that our faith could be based on some writings from long ago in a foreign land. He says, “Men have come to speak of the revelation as [something] long ago given and done, as if God were dead.” He also says, “The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?” (Nature, p. 1) For Emerson, the inspiration of Jesus is in the example he set; the idea that, like the man Jesus, we all have access to God. But he finds his main inspiration in Nature, and feels that the divine is all around us in the here and now, not in the past.

Emerson’s belief in the importance of direct experience also led him to a fierce individualism. The experience of the divine is personal and private; it cannot be taught or imitated. “We must go alone,” he says. We must listen within ourselves, withdrawing from others, rejecting authority, standing on our own. Truth, says Emerson, “is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand.” (Div School Address, p. 95) We must trust our own intuition.

It is also not possible to have this kind of experience if you are concerned with how others think of you. You may have heard the famous quote: “Whoso would be a man, must be a non-conformist.” (Self-Reliance, p. 178) In the Divinity School Address, he says, “cast behind you all conformity, . . . look to it that fashion, custom, authority, pleasure, and money, are nothing to you,” “and acquaint men at first hand with Deity.” (p. 108)

Emerson has been accused of an excessive individualism, and is sometimes held partly responsible for the selfish pursuit of individual gain that today counts as individualism. But his belief that each of us must go our own way, must follow the beat of our own drummer, is based in his belief that this is the only way to connect with the divine, with the highest in ourselves and in the universe. Far from leading to selfishness, this connection leads to our being more connected, more noble, more caring.

Biographer Robert Richardson says, “Self-trust or self-acceptance is a liberation from the . . . tyranny of the past, and from the injurious superiority of the great and famous. Emerson’s lasting importance is as a liberator. In poetry, in politics, in personal ethics, he teaches the possibility of self-emancipation as the necessary first step toward an autonomous, free life.” (*Emerson, Mind on Fire*)

The way Emerson lived his life pointed to the importance of community. Unitarian Universalist minister Barbara Wells says, “Despite Emerson’s vaunted individualism, his life was lived deep in the middle of community. The town of Concord, his group of friends, even the church that he sometimes scorned were important communities of people to whom he remained attached and committed throughout his life.” (*Articulating Your UU Faith*, p. 46)

Emerson’s individualism comes out of his recognition that he only experiences his deepest connection with the underlying unity of all when he is in solitude. And so, far from rejecting community, he recognizes and affirms our connection with each other, and with all of nature. Emerson believed that each individual is connected to the whole. Nothing is separate. He says that “Every being in nature has its existence so connected with other beings that if set apart from them it would instantly perish.” It is in holding fast to this connection and living in harmony with Nature and with each other that we have access to the world’s power and beauty.

The most recent objection to Emerson’s individualism comes from Rev. Fred Muir in his essay “The Church Revealed” in the book, *The Turning Point: Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism*, which a number of you have read. Muir feels that Emerson’s individualism became a dogma in both Unitarian Universalism and the United States, and that it is “corrupting both,” leading to self-centeredness and a focus on individual rights over community. He also traces our exceptionalism (“We’re the best!”) and our anti-authoritarianism to individualism. These are values that cannot sustain institutions like a religion or a nation. As Muir says, “Individualism will not serve the greater good, a principle to which we have committed ourselves. Little to nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved community.”

And he is right. Yet I believe we don’t need to throw the baby out with the bath water. Emerson’s individualism, which Muir calls “individuality” to distinguish it, doesn’t necessarily lead down the road of anti-communal values. Emerson preaches against an unhealthy dependence; he believes that the truest religion is that which is experienced directly, and that through that experience we become aware of how deeply we are connected to all. He doesn’t use this language, but it is an intuition of the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, our seventh principle.

If you can get through the difficult language he uses, including the fact that he uses “man” and “men” to refer to all people, Emerson still has the power to inspire. His message is as relevant today as ever, and as Unitarians we can be proud to claim “Our Mr. Emerson.”

Let us be inspired by the Concord Sage to trust our intuition, to trust our own deepest Selves, to go within and find the connection to the source of all. On this day, let us go out into Nature and allow our small, egotistical selves to fall away as we experience ourselves to be spiritual beings at one with the glorious universe.