

"EMERSON'S LEGACY"
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Reading: "Nishmat" by Marge Piercy[1]

As a young adult, Ralph Waldo Emerson could not decide whether he wanted to be a writer or, following in the footsteps of his father, a Unitarian minister. Thinking that writing sermons would satisfy his desire to write, he entered the Unitarian affiliated Harvard Divinity School at the age of twenty-one. Four years later, in 1828, he accepted the call to be minister of Boston's prestigious Second Church.

His skillful writing quickly became evident in his sermons. He was also an effective speaker. He wasn't so talented in other aspects of ministry, particularly pastoral care. Biographer Robert D. Richardson, Jr., writes about one story of failure:

Attending the deathbed of an old revolutionary soldier named Captain Greene, Emerson could think of nothing to say. Seeing a collection of medicine bottles on the table beside the captain's bed, he began to talk about glassmaking. "Young man," said the not-yet departed hero, "If you don't know your business, you had better go home." [2]

Partly as a result of such failures, Emerson began to question his call to the ministry. Something even more powerful than occasional ineptitude caused him to question his call: he found himself challenging the conventional beliefs of most of his fellow Unitarians. Most Unitarians still held many traditional Christian beliefs--about such things as the miracles of Jesus, the afterlife, the role and structure of the communion service, and the ultimate authority of the Bible. Very early in his ministry Emerson began challenging these beliefs--at first privately in his journals, eventually in the pulpit. Just three-and-a-half years after being called to Second Church--and a year-and-a-half after the shattering death of his beloved wife--matters came to a head in a dispute over the communion sacrament. Emerson had by now rejected communion as meaningless: God, for Emerson imminent in Nature and in our individual hearts, could not be reduced to a presence in bread and wine. Probably hoping to pick a fight that would result in his resignation, Emerson sent a letter to members of his church expressing his desire to change radically how communion was administered at Second Church. As he expected, church leaders turned down his proposed changes and Emerson resigned his first--and only--ministerial call.

He was not completely finished with Unitarianism or ministry, however. Though he poured more and more of his energy into writing and lecturing, he continued frequently preaching in Unitarian churches. From 1835 to 1838, he preached regularly at a Unitarian church in Lexington. On Sundays out of the Lexington pulpit he usually attended the Unitarian church in his hometown of

Concord. The Rev. Barzillai Frost, a particularly boring and rigidly orthodox minister at Emerson's Concord church, helped finally push Emerson once and for all out of the ministry. Just as his attacks against the Rev. Frost in his journal reached a crescendo, Emerson decided to quit preaching in Lexington. Fuming about the Rev. Frost, Emerson wrote in his journal, "I ought to sit and think, and then write a discourse to the American Clergy, showing them the ugliness and unprofitableness of theology and churches this day."[\[3\]](#)

Only a few days later, Emerson found a way to do just that. The graduating seniors at Harvard Divinity School invited him to address them, their families and the faculty "on the occasion of their entering upon the active Christian ministry." Emerson accepted the invitation, and on July 15, 1838, delivered what has become known as his Divinity School Address. Distributed widely through the United States afterwards, this controversial address helped make Emerson famous. Steeped in transcendentalist philosophy, the address is an eloquent, powerful protest against the conventional Unitarianism of his day.

In his address, Emerson took aim at not only at the Rev. Frost (whom he didn't name) but also at conventional Unitarian beliefs and the Unitarian clergy in general. Emerson, for example, took the Unitarian rejection of Jesus's divinity a crucial step beyond Unitarian orthodoxy. He summarized Jesus' core message this way: "I am divine. Through me God acts; through me, he speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think."[\[4\]](#) Did you catch the twist there: see God not just in Jesus, but in yourself. Jesus, he continued:

spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the character ascends. But the word miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches [and Emerson included Unitarian churches in this category], gives false impression; it is a Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain.[\[5\]](#)

The miracle, Emerson declares, is life itself, and it is in life--the "ray of the star" and the "wavelet of the pool" and the human soul--that God exists. Jesus was notable for pointing to this incredible, unparalleled miracle.

Emerson did not mince words about the spiritual poverty of the church or its ministers. "The soul is not preached," he said. "The Church [again, he certainly included Unitarians in this category] seems to totter to its fall, almost all life extinct." Thinking no doubt of the Rev. Frost, he said:

I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more...A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet there was not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history...It seemed strange that the people should come to church. It seemed as if their houses were very unentertaining, that they should prefer this thoughtless clamor.[\[6\]](#)

Don't fall into this trap, Emerson advised the rookie preachers in his audience that day. Don't talk about other people's words or writings about God; talk about your own knowledge of God. Talk about your own experiences. Authority is not in scripture or teachers or prophets. It's in you. "Let

me admonish you," he said, "...to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil." [7] "The remedy," he suggested, "...is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul." [8] The remedy lies within each person's soul.

The Divinity School Address marks the end of Emerson's career as a minister and augurs his eventual exit from Unitarianism. Ten years later, he resigned his membership in the Concord Unitarian church. His Divinity School words sparked controversy wherever they were read. Emerson's attack--launched at the celebration of graduates entering the Unitarian ministry--offended many on the Harvard faculty and the established Unitarians in Boston. Not surprisingly, the policy of allowing the graduating seniors to select the speaker came under examination.

Ironically, this sermon became one of what one historian calls "the three great classic utterances of American Unitarianism", one of the three addresses included in the informal canon of Unitarian scripture. [9] How could an address that in some ways marks Emerson's rejection not only of the ministry but also of Unitarianism be so important to Unitarian Universalism today? Because Emerson's transcendentalist protest, arguably more than anything else, has given shape to Unitarian Universalism today. Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists led the first and most important reform movement within Unitarianism--barely ten years after the formation of the American Unitarian Association. The echoes of their efforts still reverberate today.

According to his biographer Robert Richardson, Emerson "lived for ideas, but he did so with the reckless, headlong ardor of a lover." [10] He loved ideas--as long as they were grounded in real human experience and not merely abstract. Two ideas dear to Emerson have particularly helped shape Unitarian Universalism today.

First, Emerson rejected the orthodox Christian idea that divine revelation can only be found in the Bible. If only the Bible, written long ago, contains truth, then God is dead today, he suggested. [11] For Emerson, revelation is an on-going process. He discovered profound insights about life as readily in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and Sufi mystical poems and romantic poetry as in the Bible. He found insights about life even more powerfully in Nature. And most powerfully of all, he found insights about life in his own experiences and within his own heart. Revelation moves from your heart to your head. "My own mind," he writes, "is the direct revelation I have from God." [12] "Make your own Bible," he instructs in a letter. [13]

Emerson was not afraid to seek revelatory experiences. Two of his most compelling experiences must have been opening the coffins of his wife and son long after they died. "Be it life or death, he had to see it for himself," his biographer writes. He entered the family vault and opened his wife Ellen's coffin fourteen months after she died. Though he simply noted in his journal "I visited Ellen's tomb and opened her coffin," it must have been an extraordinarily powerful experience. Obsessed with death in the aftermath of his wife's tragic death, his sermons suddenly started focusing on life after he opened her coffin. As his biographer writes, "He would no longer live with the dead...Before the year was out, Emerson had resigned his pulpit, moved his mother, sold his household furniture, and taken ship for Europe." [14] He opened the coffin of his son Waldo, who died at the age of five, sixteen years after Waldo's death. [15] Emerson wasn't morbid; rather, these experiences helped him understand in his heart and mind death--not just abstractly, but the death of people he loved. And opening those coffins undoubtedly gave him perspective on the precious fragility and brevity of life.

Emerson and the other transcendentalists moved the home of authority from the Bible and authoritative ministers to each individual. Over time, Unitarianism embraced this move. And with this shift, radical freedom of conscience became the necessary guiding principle in our congregations. This, perhaps more than anything else, paved the way for Unitarianism to encompass more than Christianity. The dizzying assortment of theologies we have in this Fellowship--evident today in our earth-centered baby dedication--is the result of the shift of authority's home to the individual.

The second great impact of Emerson on us today is his belief that interdependence lies at the core of life. The profound life experience behind this insight was his visit to a vast garden in Paris. The garden was laid out to illustrate a recently composed system of classification. He was powerfully struck by the web of relationships he saw exhibited in the garden.^[16] Later he writes, "Every natural form to the smallest, a leaf, a sunbeam, a moment of time, a drop, is related to the whole, and partakes in the beauty of the whole."^[17] The Hindu idea of a fundamental unity underlying life's resplendent diversity became increasingly attractive to Emerson.^[18] Our Unitarian Universalist affirmation that we are part of a great interdependent web of all life is not some new fad or a rip-off from Native American spirituality. Its roots are over a hundred and fifty years old, in Ralph Waldo Emerson's experiences and mind. Along with our radical freedom of conscience, our belief in the interdependent web is our greatest contribution to religion. Emerson, though he rejected Unitarianism during his lifetime, is very much a living, integral part of our UU faith today. His legacy is huge!

There is a great irony in this sermon today: In focusing on Emerson, I am talking not about my own experiences or insights but about his. Emerson, no doubt, would say, "Don't talk about me! Talk about yourself. That's where God is!" I fear he would lump me in the category with the despised Rev. Frost. Thankfully unlike the Rev. Frost, I am not competing with the snow falling outside the window today! But this point of Emerson's must be the one that, finally, lingers: Emerson ultimately leads us to our own souls, to the here and the now of our own unique lives. That's where the search for life's meaning begins for each one of us. That's where God can be found.

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^[1]Marge Piercy, *Available Life* (New York: Knopf, 1988), pp. 122-123.

^[2]Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 91.

^[3]Conrad Wright, editor, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1986), p. 26; Richardson, p. 287.

^[4]Wright, p. 97.

^[5]Wright, p. 97.

^[6]Wright, p. 101.

^[7]Wright, p. 108.

^[8]Wright, p. 111.

^[9]Wright, p. 3.

^[10]Richardson, p. xi.

^[11]Wright, p. 100.

[\[12\]](#)Richardson, pp. 112, 117.

[\[13\]](#)Richardson, p. 241.

[\[14\]](#)Richardson, pp. 3-5, 119.

[\[15\]](#)Richardson, p. 540.

[\[16\]](#)Richardson, pp. 140-143.

[\[17\]](#)Richardson, p. 222.

[\[18\]](#)Richardson, p. 146.