

Streams of Emerson
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship
October 9, 2005

I happened to mention to Bettina the other day that I had noticed that there is substantially less cell phone use here in Thunder Bay than in the States. I had interpreted this as a rather enlightened response to materialistic and technological pressures, though Bettina wondered if it was not just an indication of Thunder Bay's cultural lag time. If such a 'slowness' exists, I might rather call it bucolic simplicity, or hearty practicality, or even progressive passive resistance to unnecessary clutter. But let me assure you, any real or imagined cultural lag time is no way responsible for the fact that we are today commemorating Ralph Waldo Emerson's 200th birthday, which actually happened two years ago! At any rate, I'm sure he would approve of our search for meaning in the study of his life, however delayed, because education, in whatever form and at whatever time, was central to his world and his philosophy of life.

Emerson conceived of culture and education, which for him always involved intuition, as coming to us in streams of emanation... that which flows out of God/spirit emanates into Nature and then into us and through us to others. "...he will be filled with the divinity which flows through all things. He must emanate; he must give all he takes..."¹ This says to me that what I share today is part of that stream. It humbles me to consider myself as a receiver and then a conduit, for I have taken understanding, partly from Emerson, partly from those who have studied him, and partly from my own insights, created a stream, and I offer that, in turn, to you.

Emerson said of Virgil that he is "a thousand books to a thousand men." In other words, he believed that we draw from this stream that which means the most to us. Learning has to "fasten to some reality in our secret experience, or we shall learn nothing rightly."² He read probably hundreds of biographies, gave biographical lectures, and was convinced that he could always find some link between his own life and life of any great person. Emerson believed that in finding the links, he could connect with universal truths, so that ultimately each study of another's life became something of an autobiography of himself.³

And this has been my experience as I have looked at Emerson's life. I found bits and pieces of things that I could draw from the stream of his teachings, things that mean a lot to me, that I could fasten those in some way to my life, to give my life more meaning.

¹ Richardson, Robert D., Emerson: The Mind on Fire (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995), 350

² Richardson, 321

³ Richardson, 190

It is actually pretty easy for me to ‘fasten myself’ to Emerson, to find windows into his soul which lead into my own, because Emerson was a minister, and we both came to question the form and object of the churches in which we were raised, albeit in very different ways. He became a minister when he was young, but soon after resigned his pulpit because he could no longer conform to the constrictions of tradition. Ultimately, Emerson very directly influenced the path and evolution of Unitarian Universalism; he helped to create a new stream of thought, a stream that continues to nourish us. This divergent path is most evident in the Divinity School Address, delivered in 1838 to the Harvard graduating class, an address that is considered one of the modern day ‘scriptures’ for Unitarian Universalism. It is from this address and from his essay on Self-Reliance that I draw my thoughts for today.

First I want to give you a brief overview of Emerson’s context...Waldo (as he was called) was born in 1803 (202 years ago) in Boston, one of eight children. His father died when Emerson was only 8, leaving the family poor....not desperately poor, but rather poor people within the intellectual class. The family took in boarders and had to sell the father’s library in order to make ends meet. Education, reading, self-improvement were basic tenets of this family, and dedication to these principles was manifest in his very quirky aunt Mary Moody...highly intelligent, a free-range reader and searcher, a great though unsung writer...a woman preoccupied with death, who wore a shroud and slept in a coffin in order to be prepared. She both inspired and haunted Waldo...she is the one who encouraged him into the ministry and who also was bitterly disappointed when he left his church.

Emerson was a voracious reader. He kept extensive journals of his thoughts and notes on those readings (perhaps something like Del’s journals), and developed an extensive cataloguing system in order to find those notes when he needed them. The Enlightenment of the 18th century had found fertile ground in New England, and Boston had become the ‘thinking’ center of the country. Because of this, Emerson had the academic world at his fingertips... Hume and Coleridge and Montaigne and Plato and the Bhagavad Gita ...all found as his local library. The population was just itching to be educated and to learn, and henceforth the Lyceum Movement was born. These public lectures later gave Emerson a perfect venue to disseminate his thoughts.

All of this renewed interest in literature, the classics, and science had its effect on theologians and religious thinkers. As education increased, so did the individual’s ability and desire to rely on his/her own mind and ideas. This new-found self-reliance was rather upsetting to the religious community. A major controversy in the churches was over the question of human will...are people predestined/chosen for salvation (the Calvinist position), or do we have the power

to choose? If in fact we have the ability to choose, then the question of morality, or *how we choose* to live, becomes more important. And here, in this post-Enlightenment world, culture and education were becoming the preferred means of achieving a moral life. Interestingly enough, here we see religion take a very earthly view; education was essentially viewed as key to a person's salvation.

And Emerson's religious context...well, as you know, the people who initially settled America were Puritans and Calvinists who were fleeing religious persecution and who were searching for religious freedom. Paradoxically, they managed to set up communities with only one church, where everyone was expected to attend and apparently also to *believe* the same thing. The one church in the center of town was supported by taxes, and it was these congregational-type churches that came to be known as "The Standing Order." In 1819, just six years before Emerson enrolled in Harvard Theological School, William Ellery Channing, who was the minister at Waldo's church, delivered a sermon entitled "Unitarian Christianity" which split those Standing Order churches down the middle. He claimed the liberal wing (those who felt human beings *do* have free will), named it as Unitarianism, and essentially forced people to choose.

It is in this context, a time when the churches were reeling from conflict and scism, that Emerson begins his ministry. He was inspired and impressed by William Ellery Channing, but by 1832, just twelve years after Channing's landmark sermon, Emerson had moved considerably in his theological thinking. In this year, he resigns as the minister at Second Church Boston, and effectively ends his ministerial career. At this time, he wrote a poem, which begins:

I will not live out of me
I will not see with others' eyes
My good is good, my evil ill
I would be free.⁴

Six years after this, in 1838, he gives the Divinity School Address to the graduating class at Harvard Theological School in which he lambastes the religious establishment for what he considers to be formalism in the pulpit and a universal decay of faith.⁵

There were two major currents in Emerson's thinking at that time and they underlie everything he has to say in the Divinity School address. The first is that each person has direct access to the divine. The second is that the divine is not a fixed or knowable quantity...god is always being discovered anew. And so, Emerson structures his talk around two perceived 'faults'

⁴ Richardson, 127

⁵ Wright, Conrad, Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker (UUA:Boston, 1986), 27

in Christianity that contradict his beliefs. First, he claims that there has been an exaggeration of the person of Jesus. Since each person has direct access to the divine, Jesus is not necessary as a mediator. He makes a strong claim for Jesus as a *person*, and dares the young new ministers to love God without mediator or veil. Second, since god continues to reveal, those staid and stagnant traditions of the church that focus on revelations long ago given simply won't do. To look only to the past, he thinks, is to imply that god is dead. Emerson encouraged his listeners to find God anew in themselves. One biographer has called the Divinity School address, appropriately I think, a 'solvent for orthodoxies'.⁶ As you can imagine, this did not find favor with those churchmen serving a tradition that Emerson therein labeled as false, noxious, vulgar, and "groping after it knows not what."

Emerson's purpose was not to destroy religion. He cared about it deeply and passionately. His purpose was to vivify religion, to rescue it from oppressive conventions. He wanted to transform it, a sentiment that is evident in these quotes... "A minister should acquaint men first-hand with divinity." "They call it Christianity. I call it conscience."⁷ "Christianity must be validated by life experience or not at all."⁸ John-Charles Duffy sees Emerson as a "radical restorationist," who neither breaks with Christianity, nor continues with it. Rather, he says, Emerson's thought "erupts out of Christianity, in a direction very different from that of the mainstream."⁹

Not immediately, and certainly not on that evening in Cambridge in 1838, but eventually, Unitarians followed that eruption, and for this reason, Emerson remains one of the major figures in the development of Unitarian Universalism. His thinking led us in a wholly new direction.

Self-Reliance, an essay written not long after the Divinity School address, I see as Emerson's personal religious credo. In it, he explores and divulges his 'findings' about how to access what he calls the 'moral sentiment' that is the essence of all religion. Emerson's scripture is 'nature', which he defines early as that which is 'not me' and later as 'the other me'. In other words, nature is everything that is not the self, and we must study it all, because he believed that what is beyond nature is revealed through nature. Nature is God's voice scattered into rays of light, into souls, and into the roses under our windows. Alfred Tauber says that for Emerson, nature, if properly engaged, becomes the means to our personal salvation, the encounter by which meaning

⁶ Wright, 33

⁷ Richardson, 292

⁸ Richardson, 97

⁹ Moon, Rebecca, Webtext for The Divinity School Address, Virginia Commonwealth University www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/dsahyp.html

and significance emerge.¹⁰ Here again, there is a direct implication that our salvation, if not actually in our hands, lies all around us, within our own reach.

Emerson has, perhaps most fundamentally, ‘found’ through his witness of and reflection upon nature, that the self is all that we have. The self is all that we have in which to explore our lives and our world. The self is all that we have through which to experience the divine, and in turn, that self exists as an attribute of that ‘Supreme Cause’ we strive to experience. We are, then, both a part of the whole, and able to connect with that whole by using the part we have, the self and our reason. The self is the place that “divine providence has found”¹¹ for us. You are the locus of your own experience. He goes so far as, as he sketched out his thoughts that would later become part of his book *Nature*, to say that “the purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself.” If this is our philosophy of life, how can we not trust ourselves?

This is not an easy thing to do. In fact, to be able to believe our own thought is genius, he says. It “demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motive of humanity.” It is difficult because we don’t give enough credit to ourselves; we dismiss our thoughts without notice. It is difficult because society conspires against us, demanding that we be conformists. Yet, there is always the assurance in Emerson... “tell men that with the exercise of self-trust...new powers will appear.” Emerson loved Shakespeare, and I’m sure he often read these lines in Hamlet:

This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

The other thing that blocks us from our self-trust is our own consistency, says Emerson. Just as the churches have created orthodoxies out of the past, so we tend to form habits that keep us stuck, quoting sages and saints, as if we were dragging about a corpse. But such looking backward blocks access to the motions of our own unique souls. Don’t worry, he says. Don’t be afraid to try something new because that’s the only way we can know what we can do. Consistency is the obstacle, not inconsistency. Don’t worry that you will be misunderstood or perceived to be flip-flopping, because ultimately we cannot violate our own nature. Change is not a betrayal, but a deepening awareness.

Self-reliance is grounded in a belief in the primary wisdom of Intuition, or what Emerson alternately refers to as Reason. Reason (and by this he does not mean brainwork) connects us, each of us if we dare use it, with the deep source, the core self which exists in communion with the rest of nature, a core self that exists without an individual or unique identity.¹² In other places Emerson

¹⁰ Tauber, Alfred I., “Emerson and the Irony of Self-reliance: An American Response to Nihilism, 3

¹¹ Emerson, Self-Reliance

¹² Tauber, 4

calls this core self the Eternal Laws, the Nature of things, the Over-Soul, or God. He claims that we “lie in the lap” of this immense intelligence and that we all can be receivers of its truth. In this essay, Emerson seems to locate this ‘source’ somewhere under us...we literally walk upon it, it is larger by far than oceans, and it underlies the present, the future and the past, life and death. In the Divinity School Address, he places this essence above us...it is a beauty that instructs us if we are but open to it. In other words, for Emerson, it is all around us, accessible on many levels.

Trust yourself to open to it. You have within you all of the resources needed in order to understand the world. Insist on being yourself; never imitate. He declares that “nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.” It is because of such strong statements as this that Emerson has been accused of being too individualistic, yet as he matures (*Self-Reliance* was written quite early in his life), we come to see that the quest for self-reliance was really a search for harmony in the universe. It’s just that he believed that such harmony would be achieved by each person seeking his or her own unique means of self-fulfillment, and so this is the place where he starts. He is not talking about *self-sufficiency* and would be the first to admit the debt he owes to all of his teachers...human, animal, natural. His variety of individualism grows out of the self’s intuitive *connection* with the Over-Soul and as such is ultimately a pre-condition for true community. As we each do whatever gives us joy before the sun and moon, as we each find our own truths, we are better able to love one another, and we shall be the happier.

Emerson is not glorifying the self for self-gratification or for individual gain. Emerson is glorifying the self because he believes that freedom is rooted in the sacred truth that every man has within him the divine Reason, and this is what makes all persons equal.¹³ Emerson is glorifying the self because the self provides the vehicle through which we can discover beauty and truth and virtue. This is how we can become better persons, better able to participate in a community. As early as 1826, in a letter to his aunt, he wrote, “I know that I exist, and that a part of me, as essential as memory or reason, is a desire that another being exist.”¹⁴ In another place he says, “Every being in nature has its existence so connected with other beings that if set apart from them it would instantly perish.”¹⁵

The truth is that the soul, the self, cannot exist in isolation; we cannot “unfold without a world”.¹⁶ There is no escaping our fundamental relation to all that is around us.¹⁷ Remember,

¹³ Richardson, 185

¹⁴ Richardson, 69

¹⁵ Rzepka, Jane, “Drawing the Breath of Life”, *Quest*, June 2003

¹⁶ Small, Fred, “Renegade Forefather: Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Unitarians”

‘nature’ or ‘the other’ reveals to us that which is beyond nature, which in Emerson’s view is the core self, and the core self exists in communion with, not isolated from, the whole of existence. That which we can rely upon, the self, is but an inlet to the one mind of creation, and the core self is part of an eternal essence that is common to the entire universe. By turning inward and using our own intuition or Reason, by perceiving all of the expressions of nature and in everything/everyone around us, we make contact with the truth or the spirit that dwells everywhere in the Universe, including in ourselves. It is a matter of looking and of trusting what we see. After all, as he asks in his book *Nature* and reiterates in slightly different words in the Divinity School address, “why should we not also enjoy an original relationship with the universe?” Indeed, why should we not *contribute* our genuine uniqueness to that universe?

Emerson ministers to me by providing a stream at which I rest and drink my fill, a stream I access by looking within. “You take the way (Truth and Right) from man, not to man. All persons that ever existed are its forgotten ministers.” Emerson might have left the church, but he never left his vocation as a minister; he knew what he was called to do. He might not have been able to say exactly what God is, but he could see plain enough in what direction God lies.¹⁸ It is in this sense of a vocational calling that I can fasten myself to his life, and in so doing, can make a deeper connection with my own soul. I love these journal lines, written as he wrestled with his vocation in 1836...

"I am to new name all the beasts in the fields and all the gods in the sky. I am to invite men drenched in Time to recover themselves and come out of time, and taste their native immortal air. I am to fire with what skill I can the artillery of sympathy and emotion. I am to indicate constantly...the Ideal and Holy Life, the life within life — the Forgotten Good, the Unknown Cause in which we sprawl..."

Well, Mr. Emerson, a minister of the past you may be, but you are not forgotten. May we each look within, find our true selves, in order to, in turn, provide a stream of light for others.

Amen.

¹⁷ Tauber, 2

¹⁸ Tauber, 5