

Ralph Waldo Emerson by an Amateur

By Rachel Carroll on May 3rd, 2009

Welcome everyone and thank you for allowing me the pleasure of facilitating this service and speaking before you today. When I am called or more commonly when I volunteer to speak to a group I wrestle with two pathways I can take: First to speak about a subject that I am familiar with – a field in which I am an expert of sorts. I could talk about the abolition of the death penalty or rural community development for instance. My second path is to choose to speak about a subject that I've been interested in exploring, in learning about; a subject that will take some effort to prepare for and to which I will be intimidated about being questioned on, but a subject non-the-less that I can bring before the group so that we may learn together. The temptation to choose the well worn path of familiarity is great, but the challenge of passing it by and beating the bush of the game trail is too grand. And so today, I'm here to speak about Ralph Waldo Emerson, . . . as an amateur.

I think it is important to go over a more general history of Emerson before taking an analytical look at a selection of his poems. Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1803 to Ruth Haskins and Reverend William Emerson, a Unitarian minister. The Unitarian Church of the day was at the center of the growing liberal religious movement in the United States and Emerson's father was involved in preaching thoughts on political and religious liberty that were part of the developing revolution. At the time the Unitarian and Universalist churches had yet to be joined and the prior was focused on free will and potential goodness in people, and the latter on God as love. This was the religious environment that the young Emerson was raised in, but without his father who died before the boy turned eight. He was, in turn, raised by his mother and other intellectual and spiritual women in his family, including his aunt Mary Moody Emerson.

Like most other Unitarian ministers of the early Nineteenth Century, Ralph Waldo Emerson was a graduate from the liberal Harvard Divinity School. In 1829 Emerson met his first wife Ellen Louisa Tucker and moved to Boston where he had been invited to serve as the junior pastor at Boston's Second Unitarian Church. Ellen had been ill since their meeting and passed away from tuberculosis less than two years later. Right after the death Emerson began to more publically disagree with the church's methods, conformity, communion service, and public prayer. Emerson

resigned from the Church in 1832 to write and be a public speaker who gave what he called “lay sermons”. And I thought it was impossible to be a heretical Unitarian. Emerson spent a short time touring Europe where met William Wordsworth, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Carlyle. Upon his return to the States he moved to Concord, Massachusetts to live with some family. There he married his second wife Lidia Jackson. The two had four children and lived a financially conservative lifestyle.

In 1826 in Concord, Emerson and other like-minded intellectuals founded the Transcendental Club, which served as the center for the cultural and religious movement called Transcendentalism. The movement is also referred to as the “New England Renaissance.” The Transcendentalists were rebels, but not of action, rather they were rebels of thought. Their search was for literary independence from England to replicate the political independence of the U.S. revolution. Religiously the Transcendentalists challenged the ideas of the trinity and predestination. Spiritually they were inclined away from the rational and toward a more intuitive, nature centric, experiential and passionate spirituality. Emerson is considered by some as the unofficial leader of this group of radicals. He was a rock star in his day, in fact, though his hits were ideas, the chief idea being reform and the chief hope for reform being in the youth- a person he called the American Scholar. His essay under the title “The American Scholar” is referred to as the nation’s intellectual declaration of independence. Emerson referred to Transcendentalism as “Idealism” and today the movement is considered the beginning of a naturalism that centers religious understanding in the everyday life experiences of regular people. Emerson wrote, for example, that nature was the stuff of everyday life, that which we use to build our homes, which is outside our office window and where we grow food, all the physical world taken at once. An idea that was brought up during the Earth Day service was central to Emerson, nature is all around us, it is that which we are constructed from not something we go out to and find elsewhere.

Transcendentalists stressed the unity and miracle of daily life that transcends the dualism of spirit and body, heaven and earth. Reform and true sight required for Emerson a cultivated awareness of the life around you, everywhere around you. Nature was not the Sierra Club calendar photo version, but something that each of us has a bond with, even when it is less than extraordinary. He said that, “The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.”

Emerson, like many of his fellow intellectuals of the time, were constantly challenged to marry their admiration for individualism and their need for community. Emerson wrote about balancing “Society and Solitude” and like John Stuart Mill, he saw the strength of the individual as the key to the strength of society. Our UU faith today struggles with the same problems of our early thinkers; we seek to reconcile the love of individual freedom and autonomy, with the necessity of church structures.

In 1837 Emerson befriended fellow Concord resident, the youthful, Henry David Thoreau. The two were like twin stars in the sky and Thoreau often stayed with the Emersons for whom he employed laborer’s tasks that Emerson much admired. Emerson is said by some to have been infatuated with Thoreau. Deciphering their relationship on the most intimate level is complicated, as is deciphering the intimate relationships between men or between women of their time. But, there are some who suggest that Emerson was bisexual, evidenced by the sexually charged poetry he wrote about a young freshman male at Harvard. Some gender theorists believe that the line between homo and heterosexual romantic relationships of the era was blurry and there was not a necessity to define them that there often is today. None the less, Thoreau and Emerson were tightly bonded and when Thoreau died of tuberculosis at the young age of 44, Emerson delivered his eulogy, referring to him as his best friend.

In 1838 for graduation, Emerson gave his famous “Divinity School Address” at Harvard. In the address he discounted Biblical miracles and proclaimed that while Jesus was a great man, he was not God. In many ways Emerson presented Transcendentalism as a Unitarian heresy, an alternative Unitarianism that was separate while still maintaining an overt relationship with the mainstream church. Emerson’s Address didn’t include one reference to the Bible, which was strange even for a Unitarian at that time. His focus was instead on nature and the soul as the sources of true inspiration, with the soul taking precedent. He talked about a pantheistic view of God as an infinite mind that penetrates and ensouls all things in the universe. Because of this, Emerson told the crowd that people are primarily good, and that evil is just temporary. Emerson was critical of the church institution and believed that the methods of such institutions would more often than not kill the spirit through conformity to dogma and rites. But, more specifically he believed that the problem was with “conforming to purposes that are dead to you.” Just eighteen years earlier another famous

Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, and friend to Emerson, had proclaimed the goodness of Unitarian Christianity and now Emerson was declaring the evils of Christianity in a speech to Unitarian seminarians. He felt that the primary evil was placing Christ above all others since it was one's own self that you must look to for inspiration. Secondly, he thought that by putting revelations in the past alone Christianity was wrong, because revelation is not contained in a book, but in every human heart. The speech outraged the Protestant community and he was denounced as an atheist and poisoner of young minds. Emerson made no reply and put forward no defense. He was not invited back to speak at Harvard for 30 years.

The Transcendentalists began publishing their journal "The Dial" in 1840 and in 1842 Emerson published his second book "Essays" which included his famous text "Self Reliance." Read alone the famous essay can reek of anti-communal individualism, but his aunt better described it as "a strange medley of atheism and false independence." It is evidenced by the simplified analysis this essay often gets that Emerson really is a man understood and famous for his whole body of work as a collective rather than a single piece as a representation of his ideas.

He was not a philosopher, but a philosophical poet. In 1845 Emerson wrote in his journals that he was reading the Bhagavad Gita and the Vedas. He added to the anomalous thinking of the Transcendentalists with his study of eastern texts, evidenced by his essay "The Oversoul," which we opened with today. He writes that, "within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One." He takes the amazing Hindi spiritual texts and makes them Americana enough that they can even be understood by folks like me.

In many ways the Transcendentalists were more concerned about personal reform than social reform, but they did become involved in the abolition of slavery and women's rights. They believed that those institutions that continued to foster the differences in education, self-direction, and participation needed to be reformed. For example, Women and slaves were human beings that deserved more access and ability to be educated, be self-directed, and to be fully human. In addition, and as a nod to something I do know a bit more about, Emerson was critical of the death sentence of John Brown for his failed attempt to raid the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry. He

thought that the execution would just help create a legend and make the “gallows glorious as the cross.” On slavery, Emerson criticized President Lincoln for being more concerned with preserving the Union than eliminating slavery outright, but he also expressed his renewed faith in the President after the *Emancipation Proclamation* is issued. He wrote in his journals that he had dreamed about helping to free slaves since he was a young boy. In a public lecture in Washington D.C. in 1862 he declared, “the South calls slavery an institution. . . I call it destitution. . . Emancipation is the demand of civilization.” And he wrote that “we must get rid of slavery, or we must get rid of freedom.”

Well when it comes to tackling big topics like freedom Emerson was an expert and as a lecturer and orator his nickname was the “Concord Sage.” He was the leading voice of intellectual culture in the U.S. Emerson liked to give what he called lay sermons, and as spoken by a lay person in a modern day UU church sermon in New England,

“Unitarians today like to claim Ralph Waldo Emerson as one of their own, and with good reason. He was as a Unitarian minister [and] Though he eventually stopped preaching, he remained a Unitarian until his death at 79. But, he cannot exactly be called one of the Founding Fathers of Unitarianism. His relationship with the Unitarian establishment and theology was never simple or very peaceful, but it makes a fascinating story. Basically, this is the story of a young liberal humanist who challenged the religious assumptions of his teachers and elders, who were themselves liberal for their time but perhaps not as humanist as Emerson was. Emerson was willing to carry their ideas to their logical ends, to say what the Unitarians were not yet ready to admit. . . Emerson was acting out the age-old conflict between generations, between tradition and the ideas that emerge from that tradition. The upshot of the controversy [he stirred] was a renewed examination of religious ideas on the part of many people who were drawn into the dispute [and into the UU faith]. As Emerson said, truth can often evolve from the repeated confrontation and reconciliation of opposed ideas, and the Unitarians weathered this storm to celebrate him as one of their great thinkers.”

[PAUSE]

And in contrast to the great thinker he was, I am humbly just an ordinary thinker, especially in my attempt to finish today with an amateur's analysis of two selections of Emerson's poems; "Elements" and "Quatrains." While in form a quatrain is a stanza or poem of four lines, "Elements" is varied in style and covers a broad array of topics. Both were published by Ticknor and Fields of Boston in 1867 as part of *May Day and Other Pieces* – a title which lead me to the selection today.

"Beauty" from "Elements" [page 202]

In the poem, Seyd is a reference to Mosharref od-Din Sa'di of Shiraz (1213-92 before common era). Seyd was a traveler and poet best known for the Persian classics *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden) and *Bustan* (The Orchard). Without this reference to an Eastern man, I might have thought the poem a description of the experiences of Jesus alone and a criticism of the why he is used for others gain, but because of the reference I believe he might be referencing the prophet Mohammad or a more inclusive notion of a prophet; a prophet that finds beauty in nature. Emerson understands and tell the reader that beauty is a synonym for the spirit or God. And he knows of prophets who can feel an earthquake as godly words and hear the ripples on the water from a thrown stone as a melody. The conclusion to the poem is that the prophet is happier to die for beauty, understood as God, than live and be used for the gains of others. The irony is that these prophets are used for the personal and organizational gains by those who manipulate their message and quash the ability to hear by ones own self, and Emerson knew it.

But, the poem is, in practicality, a recognition of Emerson's knowledge of eastern spiritual texts, which he further explores in "Unity." In "Unity" he expresses his personal interest in the concept of oneness and his frustration with the rejection of this idea by religious leaders whom he criticizes as wakov that cast orders on their followers to conform and who reject a spirituality that joins east and west.

"Unity" [page 204-205]

And in the quatrain "Gardener" Emerson marries eastern thoughts with his love of nature and his admiration for those who work the land.

"Gardener" [page 207]

In the poem he references 'beurre', which is a type of pear and what sounds like a delicious one.

Emerson wrote about finding the divine in nature and because of this understanding he had an admiration for the workers of the land, but he also believed that language was the way of connecting people to the divine and of connecting those who are not skilled with the labor's hand with nature. So, in "Orator" he compares his own skill in speaking and with language to the labor.

"Orator" [page 206]

And to round out today's exploration of Emerson is a jovial homage to the man of the forest, "Forrester" [page 208]

And so, Ralph Waldo Emerson brought to the world a menagerie of commoners' quatrains and lengthy religious criticisms. But more than that he provided a foundation for a faith and for a country in which the consistent questioning of the paradigms that mold us, conform us, and make us dispel the beauty and spirituality in yesterday, tomorrow, today is a righteous cause.