

The Living Legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson
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By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Here once th'embattled farmers stood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
And fired the shot heard round the world.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, of course. The *Concord Hymn*. What else do we know about Emerson? He was a great thinker, poet, essayist, reformer, idealist, humanist, teacher, lecturer, minister, philosopher, the prophet of self-reliance, the champion of individualism, "The sage of Concord".

This year is the 200th anniversary of Emerson's birth and an appropriate time to review Emerson's effect on Unitarianism. Emerson was instrumental in shaping both American philosophy and Unitarian theology. Today, Emerson is the most widely recognized and revered figure in our religious movement.

Emerson challenges us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. Most of all, he teaches us to think for ourselves.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in May 1803, the fourth of eight children. His family, descendants of several noteworthy New England ministers, prized education, learning, and culture.

His father died when Waldo, as he liked to be called, was eight, leaving the family without financial support. However, their history and social position assured that the Emerson boys would be well educated. Waldo entered Harvard at age fourteen, graduated in 1821 at the age of eighteen, taught school, then attended Harvard Divinity School.

His religious ideas were constantly in a state of flux, and he had doubts about institutional Christianity. Nevertheless, in 1829 he became associate minister, then minister, at Second Church in Boston.

Emerson never relished parish work, especially the "calling" he was expected to do every afternoon. He also disliked leading public prayers, and he had doubts about administering rites in which he did not wholly believe. He did, however, like preaching. His sermons were not the learned discourses typical of that day, but his congregations liked both them and him. He resigned his pulpit after only two years because he felt he could not, in good conscience, serve communion.

In the study of his Concord home, Emerson read hundreds of volumes in several languages, including the latest scientific journals and translated texts of Eastern religions, as well as works of history and literature. He was much taken with the idealist philosophy of Emmanuel Kant, especially in writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. The influence of the Hindu scriptures and Persian poetry was fully incorporated in his later thought and work.

In addition, his ideas were fed by other great thinkers and writers of his time. His close friends included Louisa May Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Margaret Fuller, as well as many European writers. In 1836, he published his first book, Nature.

Calvinism was the predominant religion of early New England. The Calvinists saw God as an all-powerful, punishing deity who had predetermined who would be saved and who would be damned forever. Calvinism seemed to deny human dignity and free will and to discourage moral development. The liberal anti-Calvinists became Unitarians. They redefined God and humans: they preached a benevolent, loving, and just God and saw humans as rational moral agents, capable of spiritual growth through active development of the inner power of the soul.

Nineteenth-century Unitarians considered themselves Christians, believing that Christianity was a divinely inspired religion based on the authority of the Bible and Christ's miracles. They viewed Jesus as the son of God—a special, divine source of revelation, the last and finest example of the perfection of human nature. Emerson moved away from this; he favored a non-literal reading of the Bible and a non-dogmatic Christianity that favored moral law and ongoing revelation. Emerson felt a kinship with other great faiths and this led him to the study of Asian religions and to their lasting imprint on his life and thought.

Unitarian dogma at that time assumed that Jesus was divinely inspired and was God's last act of revelation. It was also assumed that miracles and inspiration had occurred at some remote time in Judea but were no longer possible for modern humans. But for Emerson, miracles happened all the time and, when Jesus spoke of miracles, he meant only that all of life is a miracle. "God is, not was."

In 1838, Emerson addressed the Harvard Divinity School; he wanted to wake up his audience and to provoke the young ministers. In his address, he rejected the notion of a personal god and lashed the church for suffocating the soul through empty forms and lifeless preaching. Throughout, he insisted on spiritual freedom.

His address was both acclaimed and denounced vigorously in a storm of controversy. He said, "Cast conformity behind you, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity." His harsh dismissal of biblical miracles was meant to highlight his own emphasis on "soul", or the personal and self-evident experience of the Divine. He was criticized for heresy, infidelity, and for abandoning Christianity. Not for a generation was Emerson invited to speak at Harvard again!

Emerson's reputation flourished and so did the demand for his addresses, as the lecture circuit rapidly became a popular cultural institution. Acting as his own booking agent and speaking dozens of times each year on grueling train tours across the United States, Emerson was able to support his family, his mother and his retarded brother. Six feet tall and with erect posture and poise, he spoke with a clear, resonant voice. A reporter asked a scrubwoman who always attended Emerson's lectures whether she understood them. "Not a word," she replied, "but I like to go and see him stand up there and look as though he thought everyone was as good as he is."

Always called Mr. Emerson, even by intimates, he had been told that he could have more influence if he was more personable and warm. He replied that he had never intended to be a substitute for the stove! However, he was a successful orator because he always remained a preacher. All his addresses resolve themselves into uplifting sermons. In exchanging the pulpit of Second Church for the rostrum, he accepted a call to a much larger audience—the country.

Many of Emerson's lectures and essays were on what he called "self-reliance"—meaning to listen to and heed the still, small voice of God within. This meant self-mastery, especially of the passions and temper. He regarded the true self, or the ideal self, as innately capable of a natural experience and knowledge of the Divine, present in all creation. He preached the god within, not the God of authority and tradition. These

essays were given in a non-church context, but, as Emerson said of all his lectures, they were still about religion, the relation of the soul to “God”. He combined his ideas of “soul”—the person—with a strong ethical message, a prescription for how we can live saner, healthier lives.

Emerson challenged his audiences to think for themselves. He said that sometimes what people need is not sympathy, but, instead, “truth and health in rough electric shocks, putting them once more in communication with their own reason.”

Emerson’s individualism is a protest against social conformity, but not against society. Emerson’s self-reliant individual is a person who understands that his own consciousness is his only window on the world, a person who is interested in self-rule, a person who acknowledges his equality and his necessary connection with others.

Emersonian individualism is not a blueprint for selfishness or self-aggrandizement, nor the subjection of other persons or viewpoints. Emerson says, “To believe your own heart, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men is genius. At the deepest, most important level, we must believe that what is good for us individually is good for us all. If we require freedom, love and meaningful work for ourselves, then we can deny these things to no one.”

This is the social and ethical imperative of American Transcendentalism. Individual liberation is important—crucial even—but it is only a starting point. Emerson’s Transcendentalism is more than a set of beliefs. It is a way of life with social as well as personal implications.

Emerson expressly repudiates the exercise of power over others. What he cared about was moral and spiritual energy. He wanted people to take over the running of their own lives. Emerson’s most important religious insight was that the power of the individual to seize his own life is the same as the creative power of nature.

Emerson was ambivalent about participating actively in social reform. He liked his role as a “Designated Thinker”. He felt that the office of a scholar was to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts among appearances.

However, as Emerson learned, “It is not possible to extricate oneself from the questions in which your age is involved.” Capitalism, industrialization, massive immigration, urbanization, and the unequal distribution of wealth were reshaping America and called forth a variety of reform movements. The decade of the 1840’s has been compared with the 1960’s; both were turbulent periods that defined a generation, when inherited truths seemed no longer to fit and when young idealists hoped to reinvent society’s terms.

Emerson’s calls for reform of institutional religion, education and selfhood were part of the larger social movement, which included temperance, women’s rights, poor relief, treatment of the insane, non-resistance (the peace movement), abolition, socialism, simple living, vegetarianism and many others. He preferred to believe that reform begins with the individual.

However, a more pragmatic Emerson did become involved in social issues, including his protest against the removal of the Cherokees to Oklahoma and a lecture for the American Peace Society in 1838; his support of the women’s rights movement; and especially his attacks on the major social issue of his day, the institution of slavery in a nation founded on the ideal of liberty.

In his anti-slavery writings, Emerson served as a spokesman for American idealism. He appealed to Americans' moral sense, their inherent beliefs in basic human rights—to life, liberty, and justice for all—and challenged them to think for themselves rather than meekly bowing to government law that protected slavery and criminalized those who helped runaway slaves gain their freedom. Emerson believed that an unjust law must be disobeyed.

It was the United States' passage of the Compromise of 1850, with its Fugitive Slave Law, that outraged Emerson and forced him to a more radical stance, as shown in his writings and speeches from 1851 to 1854, which drew on the abolitionists' anger of that time. Emerson was a supporter of John Brown, even having him as a guest in his home. Emerson was highly criticized, especially for calling Brown "a new saint" and for his vitriolic attacks on Daniel Webster, who had supported the Compromise. Nonetheless, others claimed that Emerson served as the conscience of the nation during this difficult time.

In other contexts, Emerson urged greater freedom in worship and championed women's educational and economic rights. He also held forth for more freedom and scope in university education and for purer methods in politics and trade.

Nature was a recurring theme in Emerson's essays and lectures. He told of his experiences of oneness with nature. God was seen as the creator and teacher through nature; its fundamental unity comes from the Universal Spirit. At the center of his insight was a vision of nature's intimate relationship with the human and the divine. In his essay, *The Conduct of Life*, in 1860, he called for altars to "the Blessed Unity which holds nature and souls in perfect solution". With Emerson, nature itself replaced divine judgment in limiting human freedom. Characteristically, he found a unity that embraced both freedom and fate.

Nature, both materially and spiritually, was basic to Emerson's religion. He felt that a purely scientific understanding of our physical being does not preclude a spiritual existence and that nature embodies a divine intelligence. Through his writings about nature, we can watch his intellectual and spiritual growth from early manhood to maturity. The themes endure while the approach shifts and develops over time.

Emerson's writings are filled with theological language and an emphasis on spirituality, but he has been claimed by the secular world. Where does he fit in?

God was at the center of everything, Emerson said. Whatever his subject, the real theme was always religion—the connection between the individual—the soul—and God. Emerson had moved far beyond the wrathful, controlling God of the Puritans and even the more benevolent God of the Unitarians of his day.

As part of his basic message about thinking for ourselves, Emerson wanted to help us re-image God—to find new images that would convey the modern concept of God as immanent reality. God is one name for an eternal consciousness that Emerson also calls "The One Mind, the Infinite Absolute, Infinite Being, the highest law, the ground of being, and vast flowing vigor".

Everything is the result of the same spirit; every individual has a direct connection with this One Mind through his or her own mind. Emerson's point was not that we should adopt his images, but that we should find our own—think for ourselves.

In his essay, *The Over Soul*, Emerson offers many beautiful images of our human connection with the source of our being: "Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I

call mine." Emerson challenges us to continue to re-image God—for, after all, as he well knew, humans can experience God only in their consciousness. And in re-imagining God, we are also re-imagining ourselves.

Scholars see Emerson as a founding father of American literary culture. He wrote and spoke in the context of an interactive relationship with the physical environment, which greatly influenced the future writing of memoirs and of essays on nature.

Emerson was also an important American poet who rejected the poetic formalism of his day and helped pave the way for poets like Walt Whitman.

We, of course, see Emerson's influence on our Unitarian faith. His works preached individuality, but also a harmonious spirituality. That spirituality enhances our prospects for interdependence by fostering a reverence for all life.

One could say that Emerson's life project was to discern and unlock not his own potential—morally, spiritually, creatively—but to help all people do the same. The Calvinists taught that we are fundamentally inadequate—that our minds and hearts are darkened by sin. Emerson taught just the opposite—that our intuition, choices, and actions are the resources we need to understand the world. Through self-development, we can discover ourselves and unite with others in a shared creation of common moral goals.