

Opening Words

We are here
on a warm day in late summer
to worship, to weave our lives
into the tapestry of our rich heritage
remembering that each one of us, too,
creates history by how we live our lives.

And so we say:

Mindful that a growing vision of a just world calls us together, that a community of commitment, courage and care sustains us, and that a life transformed by depth of spirit may illumine our way, we kindle this light as a sign of our circle of life and love.

Sequence

A great blue heron on some August Sunday
might see itself
and all the morning's caravan of clouds
reflected in the still surface of the pond
in which it stands.
What might I see when I gaze at the heron?
Or at the clouds?
Or if I focus on a bowl of dahlias?
The wild-carrot flowers of summer, they say,
look like the fancy lace Queen Anne
once wore around her neck.
But when Queen Anne once saw the same flower, did she see herself? Or was she reminded of
even earlier Cleopatra's necklace instead?
When I read Emerson's essays,
and they speak of the miracle that is
"one with the blowing clover and falling rain,"
do I cringe when I hear the word "miracle,"
or relax and greet the flow of mystery
into me, as a lake might welcome
the flowing streams?
O Mystery that I am and all is!
When I look into the still pond called silence,
in which I, like a Sunday heron, now stand, what is it that I see? You, or me? Or You and me?

silence

When I look into the still pond of my heart, what do I see reflected back?
The faces of all those who brought me to this day, the living and the dead, the helps and the
hurts, the loves and losses.
As I offer the names of those who press into

my heart of hearts on this day, whispered aloud
or in continuing silence, may I remember
also to be glad for this day, this hour,
this moment of communal peace.

naming

When the music of Brahms thrills me, what do I hear? Something written when Emerson was alive? Or something that is being written right now on the parchment of my heart?

Readings

The First Reading *is excerpted from the Divinity School Address of Ralph Waldo Emerson, given on a warm summer day in a room one sixth the size of this room in the year 1838.*

In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of pine and new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness, the stars pour down their almost spiritual rays.

These facts have always suggested the sublime creed that the world is not the product of manifold power, but of one will, and that one mind is everywhere active, in each ray of star, in each wavelet of pool; and whatever opposes that will is everywhere balked and baffled, because things are made not otherwise. For all things proceed out of the same spirit, which is differently named love or justice, just as the ocean receives different names on the shores which it washes.

The perception of this awakens in the mind the religious sentiment, and that which makes our highest happiness. It makes the sky and hills sublime, and the silent song of the stars IS it. Through it, the soul first knows itself. It corrects the capital mistake of the infant, who seeks to be great by *following* the great, and hopes to derive advantages from another, by showing us that *each individual* is an inlet into the deeps of Reason. It cannot be received second hand.

The *absence* of this primary faith is the presence of degradation. The doctrine of inspiration is lost, the base doctrine of the majority of voices usurps the place of the doctrine of the soul. Miracles, prophecy, poetry, the holy life all exist as ancient history merely, not in the aspiration of society.

So let me admonish you to go alone, to refuse the good models, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. Imitation cannot go above its model. Cast behind you all conformity. Live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind.

By trusting your own heart, you gain more confidence.

The Second Reading *comes from the essay of Catherine Albanese on the Spirituality of the American Transcendentalists, written exactly 150 years after Emerson delivered his famous address. (edited)*

First, the worldview of the Transcendentalists led people to think of the nature of the universe as fostering a reverence for the divine order. Second, it implied that the way to learn the truth about human life was to look at the cosmos, taking note of what it said and what time or rhythm it kept. Third, *if* human life could be illuminated by viewing it from a cosmic perspective, then it also acquired greater “reality” because it was grounded on the *prior and greater pattern* of the cosmos. Finally, because this human reality was simply a small-scale replica of the larger cosmic reality, it followed that there was no radical break between the sacred and the profane, and that therefore all human life was religious.

Sermon

About twenty-five years ago, my dear colleague Diane Miller took me on a tour of her alma mater, Harvard Divinity School. For three hundred years or so, this school has been preparing individuals to serve as ministers of largely liberal congregations, especially Unitarian and Universalist ones. Diane herself was minister at the Belmont Church back then. I was staying with her for a few days on a jaunt to Boston, so we thought this tour over in nearby Cambridge would make a nice summer’s morning outing.

The classic old brick buildings charmed, to be sure, in their historic Cambridge setting, just down from Harvard University, past the beautiful Swedenborgian Church. But when we climbed to the third floor of one long building on the campus, and we came to a room which I assumed was simply another classroom, I had a surprise coming.

“This room is the chapel where Waldo Emerson gave his famous Divinity School Address.”

“This?” I said, with complete disbelief. “This tiny little room with an almost miniature podium and a few old pews?”

“That’s right,” she said. “That’s the very lectern from which Emerson held forth.”

“But it’s so tiny!” I offered.

“Yeah, I know, “ she said. “Every Unitarian Universalist seminarian or minister from the West Coast thinks the same thing when they see this place. You and I both know how far and wide Emerson’s address affected religious life in the 19th century, so I suppose it’s natural to imagine that such a big talk must have happened in a big cathedral of some sort, or at least an old meeting house that could seat a thousand people or so.”

“My God,” I said, “he could have easily reached out and tweaked the noses of the graduates sitting in the front row. This is somehow so...I don’t know, disappointing. Disheartening.”

“Well,” Diane said, “Look at this way. You could say it’s just the best of all possible illustrations of the old adage ‘Good things come in small packages.’”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” I said. “But boy, this sure was a shock.”

The shock I felt, however, was nothing compared to the reaction in the religious world about Emerson’s famous address to the graduating class of 1838 at Harvard Divinity School.

It caused an intellectual commotion that didn't die down for years, all over New England. Emerson himself, of course, had been ordained a Unitarian minister, after graduating from this very school. He had served a congregation in Boston, but, shy man that he was, found the pastoral work increasingly difficult. But that is not why he resigned his ministry six years before this momentous speech.

Emerson, you see, was something of what religious sociologists used to call a classic mystic. He wanted to be free to experience the divine, the sublime, the ultimate reality, call it what you will, personally and directly within his heart, without the merely inherited prompting of the external forms offered by the church. By that I mean the various rituals, like the ceremony Protestants call the Lord's Supper. Today, sometimes, people will offer the proverb "I am spiritual, not religious," to mean something of the same thing, although in Emerson's days, as you might have been able to tell from the excerpts I offered you, the word *religion* did not have the negative meaning that proverb seems to imply. In fact, in those days, the word "religion," used without any modifier, meant almost exactly all the things which folks today mean when they use the word "spirituality."

The English language in Emerson's day diverged from modern usage in other ways too. When, in his summer graduation address, he uses the word Reason, as in his watery metaphor "each individual is an inlet into the deeps of Reason," he is not talking about Reason as the later Humanists would speak of it, meaning rationality and logical thinking. He was using the word the way some of the ancient Greek philosophers used the word, to mean something which in other places he calls "soul" or "spirit" or even "God."

Now, even though Emerson is known for his philosophical thinking, his essays and pithy sayings, he was not just some ivory tower intellect hovering above the very real and sometimes traumatic experiences of life.

Waldo Emerson (and that's the name he preferred, dropping Ralph when he went to college) was a man who experienced not just the sublime natural world of "the refulgent summer" with its bees and meadows and spinning stars. He also experienced some of the worst sorrows anyone *can* experience.

His father died when he was eight. He lost three of his brothers way before their time. The great love of his life, his first wife, Ellen Tucker, died when she was a mere twenty years old, and her death is probably the most substantial emotional reason behind the abandonment of his calling to parish ministry. His older son died at age five, an event that almost understandably paralyzed the man with deep, jagged grief for years.

Oh, he married again, this time to a woman named Lydian Jackson. He fathered other children, and knew some happiness and even fame in his life, but later, after traveling around the country and offering over 1500 lectures, his life of loss continued. His well-loved house burned to the ground. And from that day on, Waldo began to lose the most precious thing of all, his memory, the identifying script of his own soul. He finally died of pneumonia in 1882.

Waldo Emerson was a man of sorrows. But he was not known for his tears, but for his lectures. And for a man of that era, he was a well traveled lecturer indeed. He spoke at my former church in San Francisco, and also in the Oakland church across the Bay, only a few blocks from where I used to live. Just getting to California in those days was no mean feat. He even visited Yosemite,

which is four hours from Oakland by car even now, so I can't imagine how long it took him to get there by stage. He lectured in Canada too, and all around the nation, although he always remained a New Englander, through and through.

People liked the way he spoke. They didn't always understand his arguments or follow his line of thought, but he seems to have had a completely engaging speaking style, which drew in sufficient crowds to provide him and his family with a pretty good income.

Emerson, along with Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller, and George Ripley and Bronson Alcott was what we learned in High School to be a Transcendentalist. It's a fancy word to be sure, with five syllables, and to my mind, the word "transcendent" is not often the clearest of words.

But for the Transcendentalists, the meaning was basically this. Based on their study of philosophy, both Scottish, English and German, and based perhaps, on their own temperaments, as well as their experiences of the freedom afforded by the culture of this young land, Emerson and his comrades considered the tradition of the Christian, that is, dominant American Protestant church, to be an obstruction to authentic worship and religion rather than a liberating source of it. Emerson in particular, influenced by the life of the Quaker George Fox and the rather fanciful mystical teachings of Immanuel Swedenborg, came to think of religion as entirely an inward event, the fountain of the moral consciousness rising from each individual insofar as they allow themselves to open up at their depths, and allow themselves to be taught by not just the liberally understood ancient scriptures, but by the great text of the cosmos itself, the larger pattern on which the smaller human community was entirely based. And he clearly saw the universe as a pattern, a design, although please, please, do not imagine for one moment that the Transcendentalists were the earliest students of the modern educational distortion called Intelligent Design. They most decidedly were not.

But as Catherine Albanese tries to help us understand in the second reading, they *did* feel that the larger pattern of the universe was itself deeply spiritual, and that the spirit of the individual conscience might, through what Emerson called "intuition," experience this sense of the sublime design within their own souls, from within their very depths. There was no need for external "forms" like sacraments (which they called ordinances), or prayers, or even the traditional theological sermon which lifted up the aspects of Christ. The great contribution, Emerson said, of the Christian tradition was none of these, but rather, only two things: the quiet rest of the Sunday Sabbath, which he delightfully called "the jubilee of the whole world"; and the personal sermon, where the preacher, in Emerson's words, didn't bring up abstract theology, but spoke of his or her life "passed through the fire of thought."

Does the Transcendentalist notion of intuition and spiritual forms seem difficult to understand? I know I sometimes find it very difficult myself, and when I read Emerson, I sympathize with the folks who found him sometimes difficult to comprehend, argument for argument.

But let me put it this way. If you asked Emerson about Jesus, he would have told you that Jesus was a human being who boldly intuited the presence of Reason, or what he called the Oversoul, or yes, God, within his own depths. But *not*, mind you, as someone special, but as an ordinary human being. And that each of us, when we give up the notion that some people are more divine than others, can discover that same divinity within ourselves, since each of us, like Jesus, can

eventually be, in the words of a modern thinker I like, “remarkably free” persons, (which to me is much clearer way of talking about inward “divinity”).

Emerson was worried that religion was degraded when people simply moved like crowds, thinking that theologians and synods have authority over them, and are wiser than them by nature, and can tell them what to think, do and feel. “The base doctrine of the majority of voices,” he famously wrote in his address, “usurps the place of the doctrine of the soul.”

Now by doctrine of soul, he is not talking about that theological doctrine of “the soul” as sort of the “real me” that simply wears the body like clothing. Rather, I think his usage was closer to the modern African American idea of “soul”...not some *thing*, but rather a pervasive quality of liveliness, richness and depth.

But what does Emerson the Transcendentalist have to do with me and you? Yes, he is by far the most well-known figure, I think, associated with our heritage (with the only possible exception being Rod Serling of Twilight Zone fame, who’s only known worldwide because the near-universal reality of television). Most of us, I’ve discovered, had to read Emerson in high-school, usually his essay Self-Reliance. And his pithier sayings are found threaded through sermons and essays everywhere.

But where Emerson touches *my* life, at least, has to do with his humanity. The death of his father, wife, son, brothers, the loss of his beloved house...these are what connect him to *my* soul, at least in *this* refulgent summer, 169 years after his famous address. Since I spent the summer facing the sure coming loss of my parents, the severe illnesses of beloved colleagues, the social calamities of dear friends out of work, out of home, out of hope, I am connected to Emerson more by the ligament of grief than by any philosophical agreement. What I do note about Emerson is that all of his life, he wrote and thought and preached and lectured with intellectual rigor, yes, but always rooted in the shaking ground of human loss. He was some-times numb from grief, but in the end, that grief made up part of that “soul” that deepened him day by day.

The Transcendentalist idea of the soul, of the correspondence of the external universe of stars and flowers with the inner cosmos of conscience and creativity was Emerson’s way of making sense of these realities of life.

We might each be different in many ways, but as Emerson finally figured out, we are all at least united by the reality that life and loss are a seamless whole, and that somehow, we have to come to terms with that, so that we might live a life of joy, courage and compassion, despite the shifting ground of our days.

Transcendentalist responses to this question shone forth from a surprisingly small room in Cambridge MA in 1838. Unitarian answers came forth in 1819 during W.E. Channing’s sermon in Baltimore, and Universalist answers came forth from Hosea Ballou in Gloucester MA in that same year. The Humanists responded to this same reality in the 1920s and 30s, the religious feminists and African-American liberals in the 1970s. In our own days, responses have become more eclectic. The words “spiritual” and “religion” have taken on new meanings and nuances. But still, like Emerson before us, we flow in the stream of a great living tradition that encourages us to face the realities of life with answers that make sense to us in our deepest and most fiercely honest soul. What makes sense to you? What grounds you? What empowers you?

I assure you, whether or not you agree with Mr. Emerson, you are no less important to this living stream of spiritual life called Unitarian Universalism than he was.

Offering

There is no sky without an earth.
There is no ocean without a bed.
There is no river without a bank.
There is no house without a foundation.
There is no congregational home
with the reliable, firm support of those
who make spiritual community here.
The offering for that home will now be given and received by the pledging community.

Aestival Prayer

Clouds floating in a pond, salve my wounds.
Sparrow bobbing in the grass, soothe me.
Warm air draping my arms, comfort me.
Buzzing bee singing amid Queen Anne's lace,
sweeten my days.
Consciousness of destitution and want
made more visible in the summer sun,
challenge my more comfortable inner soul.
Summer sun, bright and beautiful,
shine on all things, flood my whole
being, get in my eye and wring out the tears,
and in this warring world,
reach inside me, and offer a glowing portrait
of peace that will illumine me night and day.