

**“Everything Is Holy Now:
The Religious Legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson”**

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How do we know what is true?
Religion everywhere is always answering that question,
and questioning again, and re-answering, and questioning yet again.
How do we know what to believe,
how do we know how we’re supposed to live,
what kind of people we’re supposed to be?

Many religions say, we look to a sacred book.
Our Christian and Jewish and Muslim neighbors all do.
And, in fact, that’s just what our ancestors did.
The earliest Unitarians looked to the Christian Bible
as the most important guide they had.
In 1819, William Ellery Channing preached his sermon
“Unitarian Christianity,” the sermon that staked out Unitarianism
as a new and independent tradition in this country.
In that sermon,
he summed up the beliefs of his whole generation of Unitarians,
saying, first of all, he and they believed in God,
and second, they believed reading the Bible
was the most important way to know God’s will.
He said, we are open to different ways of interpreting the Bible,
we are open to discussing what it means,
but once we figure that out,
whatever we think the Bible is telling us to do,
however it tells us to live,
that’s what we’re going to try to do.

That isn’t a bad way to be.

But it is no longer the way of our tradition.
For generations now,
we've been convinced that the voice inside of us,
our conscience,
our inner light,
the wisdom that comes to us, both through struggle
and through those grace-filled moments of insight
that come as sheer gift—
we have been convinced that our inner voice
is our best and truest guide,
more reliable than any book, or any minister!

And the person who did more than anyone else
to move us to that new place
was Ralph Waldo Emerson,
known to many of us as a philosopher, a writer, a poet—
but also a Unitarian minister.
It's ironic that back in 1819,
Emerson was actually one of Channing's parishioners in Boston.
Emerson was 16 years old then, a student at Harvard,
and he thought Channing was absolutely brilliant.
Well, Channing *was* brilliant—
but he also was limited by his own perspective,
his own world view, his generation, just as we all are.

And in the 20 years after Channing preached his “Unitarian
Christianity” sermon, things were changing.
For Channing, the Bible was one sacred whole.
He believed all the different books of the Bible worked together
to create one harmonious message.
He was deeply uncomfortable with the new scholarship
coming out of Germany
that began to show how the Bible was full of inconsistencies and even
flat-out contradictions.¹

¹ Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 49.

He was afraid it would weaken people's faith in the Bible.

And in fact, he was right—it did!

Younger Unitarians who heard these new ideas
found their faith in the Bible seriously shaken.

But they were excited by what they heard.

It seemed the time had come for a new way of being religious,
and they responded with incredible creativity.

They began talking about the spiritual equality of women.

They committed to the abolitionist movement with incredible fervor.

They began to study world religions,

Hinduism and Buddhism, with respect and interest.

And they began to say something quite new about their own religion.

They said we all have within us an intuition

that points us toward moral virtue and religious truth—

and this intuition is more reliable than anything else,

more reliable than scriptures, churches, or tradition.

They said, this intuition leads us to a great realization

that the natural world is filled, permeated with divine spirit,

that we are part of it all,

we can communicate directly with the divine,

no barriers, God speaking directly to our intuition

in great flashes of insight and power.²

These Transcendentalists, as they came to be called—

Emerson and Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, the Alcott family,

and many others—

told us to look for God not in a book,

but in the mountains, in the falling rain,

in the faces of our neighbors,

in the stillness of our own heart.

Their ideas are with us still.

But in 1838, when Emerson accepted the invitation

² See Jeff Wilson, "The Self-Reliant and the Social Reformers," *UU World*, Summer 2008, p. 56.

of the Harvard Divinity School graduating class
to give their commencement speech,
this kind of religion was still new. It was shocking.

What he said to these brand-new ministers,
trained to look to the Bible as the rule of their lives and their work—
what he said to them was this:

The most precious sacred book there is,
the holiest fount of wisdom,
isn't any book at all;
it is our *life*—
a life in which everything is filled with holiness
if we just open the eyes of our soul.

On that hot summer night in July,
Emerson spoke of the beauty of the natural world,
the mystery of summer's abundance.
And he told his listeners, we all have within us that same abundance—
we are all capable of responding to the call within us
to do what is right, to serve the cause of virtue.
He said to them:

[T]his homely game of life we play,
covers, under what seem foolish details,
principles that astonish.
The child amidst his baubles,
is learning the action of light, motion, gravity, muscular force;
and in the game of human life,
love, fear, justice, appetite, man, and God, interact.
These laws refuse to be adequately stated.
They will not be written out on paper, or spoken by the tongue.
They elude our persevering thought;
yet we read them hourly in each other's faces,
in each other's actions,

in our own remorse.³

And if we submit ourselves to these great laws, fully and freely—
if we devote our life to truth, to virtue, to integrity,
if we open ourselves to intuition
and embody goodness in our daily living,
we become like gods—marvelous, noble, boundless.
“If a man is at heart just,” said Emerson, “then in so far is he God.”

This sounded very strange to a lot of people.
But in Emerson’s view,
this was exactly what Jesus had been preaching 2000 years before.

Emerson had very little affection for mainstream Christianity
at this point in his own life.
In 1838 he had just left the ministry.
He’d found he was uncomfortable relating one-on-one
with his congregants.
You would probably never find a better preacher anywhere,
but he just wasn’t a very good pastor.
So when he spoke to the divinity students, he had just left the ministry.
But he had an enormous respect and love for Jesus as a man.

We heard what he said about Jesus in the reading earlier:

Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man.
One man was true to what is in you and me.
He saw that God incarnates himself in man,
and evermore goes forth anew....
[Jesus] spoke of miracles;
for he felt that man’s life was a miracle,...
and he knew that this daily miracle shines,
as the character ascends.

³ All quotations are from Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” republished online at <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>.

Emerson went further;
he said Jesus called us all to do what he did,
to be what he was—
a man who embodied God
through the strength of his character and the depth of his wisdom.
And he said, we need a religion that helps us become that.
He had no patience for a Christianity in which
“the divine nature is attributed to one or two persons,
and denied to all the rest, and denied with fury,”
a Christianity that put Jesus on a pedestal
and told the rest of us we were helpless sinners.
“That which shows God in me, fortifies me,” he said;
“That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart....”

He calls on us all to seek truth and spirit ourselves:

Truly speaking, [he says,] it is not instruction,
but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.
What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject;
and on his word, . . . be he who he may,
I can accept nothing.

Our story today spoke of a budding artist
whose first lesson is to go and look at the flower she wanted to draw.
If you don't really look at the flower and see it,
you have no business drawing it.
This is what Emerson is telling us about religion—
go and live, test out what you hear,
look inside yourself and feel what spirit is like for *you*.

Emerson had no interest in preaching doctrines
without any basis in real life.
But he believed the world would always be thirsty
for spiritual teachers and preachers

who have drunk of the wells of spirit—
not to *tell* us what to believe,
but to show us what they have found through their own living.
He told those young ministers:

The man on whom the soul descends,
through whom the soul speaks, alone can teach.
Courage, piety, love, wisdom, can teach;
and every man can open his door to these angels,
and they shall bring him the gift of tongues.
But the man who aims to speak as books enable,
as synods use, as the fashion guides,
and as interest commands,
babbles. Let him hush.

And now we come to a passage which almost everyone in our ministry
has read with fear and trembling. Let me share it with you now—
and remember, again, this is Emerson speaking to brand-new ministers:

I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say,
I would go to church no more.
Men go, thought I, where they are wont to go,
else had no soul entered the temple in the afternoon.
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 was there 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.
The true preacher can be known by this,
that he deals out to the people his life, —
life passed through the fire of thought.

Let me say, first, a word of compassion
for the minister Emerson was speaking of.
His name was Barzillai Frost,
he was the Unitarian minister in Concord, Massachusetts,
and even his friends admitted he was a terrible preacher.
But he was a faithful parish minister who did his job as best he could.⁴
I'm reminded of some words of Flannery O'Connor,
the Catholic writer:

It is easy for any child to find out the faults in the sermon
on his way home from Church every Sunday.
It is impossible to find out the hidden love
that makes a man, in spite of his intellectual limitations,...
his lack of strength,
give up his life to the service of God's people,
however bumblingly he may go about it.⁵

⁴ Conrad Wright, Introduction to *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 25.

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *Habit of Being, Letters Edited And With An Introduction by Sally Fitzgerald* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), pp. 307–08, quoted in George H. Niederauer, "Flannery O'Connor's Vision of Faith, Church, and Modern Consciousness," lecture, September 28, 2007, San Francisco, manuscript p. 11, available online at <http://www.usfca.edu/lanecenter/pdf/NiederauerOConnorLecture.pdf>.

So I don't want us to think so very badly of Rev. Frost.
Emerson was not at his kindest in this moment.
But then, he believed in speaking truth and saying what had to be said.
He believed preaching could be worth something—
he believed it could inspire people
if only it was rooted in life and truth—
“life passed through the fire of thought.”

Today, this is what I'm trying to do
when I get up every Sunday and preach to you,
and I know it's the same for my colleagues—
we're trying to give you something true,
something real.
No matter how much we screw it up
or struggle for the words, imperfectly,
we're trying to speak the truth as we have seen it and lived it.
Emerson's words are with us still.

He had a vision of what the church could be,
which I share and I believe you do too—
the vision of a revitalized church,
a church that preaches the hidden divinity in every person,
a church that inspires everybody, not just ministers,
but every single person, to find the truth within their own hearts.

Because, to draw on Emerson's words one more time,

all men have sublime thoughts;
...all men value the few real hours of life;
they love to be heard;
they love to be caught up into the vision of principles.
We mark with light in the memory
the few interviews we have had,
in the dreary years of routine and of sin,
with souls that made our souls wiser;

that spoke what we thought;
that told us what we knew;
that gave us leave to be what we inly were.

Emerson's great gift to our tradition
is his vision of a religion
which understands the mind and nature are one,
both manifestations of one sublime wisdom;
a religion which preaches the dignity of the human spirit
and boundless potential of every person,
a religion which calls on each of us
to embrace virtue,
to find our own wisdom, our own beauty,
to "live after the infinite Law that is in [us]."

His vision calls to us still,
fresh as the blowing clover and the falling rain.
May we answer with the truth of our lives.

Amen.