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“Mind on Fire”: The Life & Legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Yesterday was the 199th anniversary of William Ellery Channing’s famous “Unitarian Christianity” sermon, delivered at what is now the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore (Maryland) on May 5, 1819. Back then it was known as the First Independent Church of Baltimore. And Channing’s sermon helped catalyze a movement toward forming the American Unitarian Association six years later in 1825. I will likely focus on Channing’s historic sermon more directly around this time next year on the sermon’s bicentennial, but each year the anniversary of Channing’s “Baltimore Sermon” is an opportunity to reflect on the *Unitarian* half of our heritage.

In previous years, I’ve preached about Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Parker, Joseph Priestley, Henry David Thoreau, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. And in future years I look forward to telling you about many more of our famous Unitarian forebears. But this morning, I would like to invite us to reflect on another name who almost always shows up on lists of famous UUs: the writer, public intellectual, and leader in the mid-nineteenth-century Transcendentalist movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson was born more than two hundred years ago in 1803. His father was a theologically liberal minister who served the prominent First (Unitarian) Church in Boston. Emerson’s father was also one among quite a few of our Unitarian forebears who were both theologically liberal and politically conservative (Richardson 20). Other prominent examples include William Howard Taft and John C. Calhoun.

Ralph Waldo was one of eight children—and, to be honest, during his early years he was by all indications the “least interesting, least enterprising, and least promising” of his siblings (34-35). Although his name was later to become synonymous with a fierce individuality,

For the first thirty years of his life, Emerson did little to distinguish himself from respectable mediocrity. He took the predictable steps for a local minister’s son headed for the same profession: Boston Latin School, Harvard College, a stint of schoolteaching, Harvard Divinity School, socially desirable pastorate at Boston’s Second (Unitarian) Church, member of the Boston Schools Committee and Chaplain of the Massachusetts Senate like his father before him, marriage to the daughter of a well-to-do merchant who had been his father’s parishioner.

Graduating in the exact middle of his college class of fifty-nine, **he was reckoned—and reckoned himself—less promising than his three Harvard-attending brothers.** (Buell 13)

In retrospect, however, there were seeds being planted that would bear fruit in ways that no one could foresee at the time, even Emerson himself. For instance, during his years as an undergraduate, “His extracurricular reading was at least three times as extensive as his reading for courses, and he was already in the habit of getting up at 4:30 or 5 in the morning to tend his correspondence and write in his journals” (Richardson 6). These practices didn’t help him thrive academically in school, but since he lived to be seventy-eight years old, these lifelong habits of extensive reading and writing are how we came to have eight volumes of his Letters, ten volumes of his Collected Works, and *sixteen* volumes of his Journals. His “vast system of personal notebooks and indexes—including indexes to indexes—eventually reached over 230 volumes, filling four shelves of a good-sized bookcase (43). If you want to dive deep into Emersonian studies, the primary sources are ready and waiting.

And it is clear from Emerson’s journals that he read in a highly idiosyncratic, personal way. He was always looking for “phrases, details, facts, metaphors, anecdotes, witticisms, aphorisms, and ideas” that particularly resonated with him (43, 67). And looking back, it is clear that all of that effort was laying the groundwork for his own

original writings. Over time, Emerson felt inexorably drawn to be not merely a collector of other people's writing—or even a commentator or critic—but also an author in his own right (56).

Of equal importance to his wide reading habits:

There were whole categories of books that he would not read. He would not read theological or academic controversy.... He disliked books intended to comment on other books. In a blunt moment he called them "books by the dead for the dead." He wanted original firsthand accounts—travel books, memoirs, testaments, statements of faith or discovery, poems. **He would read your poem or your novel, but not your opinion on other people's poems or novels.** (220)

To understand how Emerson came to take such a strong stance, I need to tell you about his relations to his first wife. On Christmas Day of 1827, the twenty-four-year-old Emerson met the sixteen-year-old Ellen Tucker. They were engaged a year later and both fell deeply in love with the other (84). Less than a month after their engagement, Second (Unitarian) Church called Emerson to be their assistant minister (88-89). And his life seemed to be on a solid, if somewhat conventional, course.

There were, however, early signs of future discontent. We have, for example, a letter that he wrote to oldest brother that **refers to his upcoming ordination as his "execution day"** (90). Given his personality, Emerson was right to be worried. He treasured his privacy, but his job—even though it paid extremely well ("more than a full professor would make at Harvard a decade later")—required him to serve in many public, institutional roles (91).

And perhaps if life had turned out differently he might have grudgingly persevered in that public role of prominent minister. But tragically, Ellen suffered from tuberculosis (91-92), and died at age twenty. They were married only two years (109-110). Emerson was devastated, and took up the practice of making a pilgrimage—a few miles by foot—to visit her grave every day (116).

Before Ellen's death, Emerson had questioned traditional theology and religious practices, but after her death his questioning was increasingly unrestrained. A few months after her death, he began his first serious study of the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred

scripture from the Hindu tradition, that Emerson quickly came to view as of equal value to the Christian scriptures (114-115).

But in an appropriately Emersonian way, the crisis point for his job as minister came not over a theoretical dispute about dogma, but in a deeply personal refusal to continue presiding at the Christian ritual of the Lord's Supper. Here's a brief excerpt of the sermon he preached to his congregation about this choice in 1831:

This mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me. That is reason enough why I should abandon it. If I believed that it was enjoined by Jesus on his disciples, and that he even contemplated to make permanent this mode of commemoration...and yet on trial it was disagreeable to my own feeling, I should not adopt it. (McKanan 241)

From a theologically conservative perspective, one could argue that Emerson had too many doubts to continue in his role as minister—that he “believed too little.” But the actual problem is arguably that, “If anything, Emerson believed too much” (Richardson 125). His internal ethical standards required that one shouldn't keep doing a ritual if it felt meaningless just because it had allegedly “always been that way.” Rather, he preached, “It is my desire...to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart” (McKanan 241). If other people continue to find meaning in practicing Communion, he had no problem with that, but because he did not, he could not personally continue to preside at the table with integrity.

Another powerful example of the inner shift Emerson was undergoing at this time is that a little more than a year after Ellen's death, he wrote the following brief entry in his journal: “**I visited Ellen's tomb and opened the coffin**” (Richardson 4):

What he was doing was not unheard of.... Another Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke, once opened the coffin of the woman he had been in love with when he was an undergraduate. Edgar Allan Poe's literary executor opened the coffin of his dead wife forty days after the funeral.... Emerson had to see for himself. Some part of him was not able to believe she was dead. He was still writing to her in his journals as though she was alive.... We do not know exactly what motivated him on

this occasion, but we do know that **he had a powerful craving for direct, personal, unmediated experience.** (3)

A few months later, he resigned from his position as minister, sold his household furniture, and sailed for Europe (6). “Ellen’s death set Emerson loose. Excluded from conventional happiness, he abandoned conventional life. He redoubled his efforts, albeit with a touch of panic, to live his own life and think his own thoughts (118).

As he began the process of exchanging his pulpit for a lectern on the Lyceum circuit, he settled into a new pattern—one that felt more sustainable and life-giving than the demands of a public ministry: “In his mid-thirties he got up at six, had a cup of coffee, then worked until twelve or one. (Much later, he took up the old New England custom of pie for breakfast.) His rule was forty pages for a lecture” (195).

And it was in his lectures that he began working out the ideas that matured into his first published essay, *Nature*, which came out in 1836. I invite you to hear just the incredible first paragraph of that essay—which very much repays revisiting in full:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and **a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?** Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. **Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.** (Mikics 27-28)

What a stirring call to build a world based on what you know to be true in your own firsthand experience—set free from previous societal conceptions and values. You can see why Emerson’s landmark essay became a manifesto of the transcendentalist movement. It’s also a major reason why the First of our UU Six Sources is “*Direct*

experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

There is so much more to say about Emerson’s life and legacy, but as I move toward my conclusion, I will limit myself to sharing two more significant pieces of Emerson’s writing. The first is his “Divinity School Address,” preached in 1838, two years after *Nature* was published—and also very much worth reading in full. My favorite line encourages the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School to not spend their ministries merely passing on the traditional teachings they have been taught to memorize, but instead to open their hearts, minds, and spirits to new revelations in the present. In Emerson’s words: “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, — **cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity**” (Mikics 116). And whereas New England Unitarians were known for embracing rationality and being emotionally repressed, Emerson told these new ministers to seek the remedy of “first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul” (119).

And that urge to open oneself to creativity and spirituality connects to the final selection from Emerson’s writing that I wanted to be sure to touch on: his 1841 essay “Self-Reliance,” which has been called “**the best single key to his thought and influence**” (Buell 59). And even though this essay is vital to understanding Emerson, the entire essay is rarely read closely in full. More often, people know the title alone and misunderstand Emerson as coming from a perspective of selfishness or narcissism.

What Emerson meant by *Self-Reliance* involved both resisting the peer pressure of other “selves”—other people—hence his criticisms of conformity”—and resisting the selfish, short-term shallow impulses that your own lower-case “s” “self” might be urging upon you (65). Emersonian self-reliance is not reliance upon the self in isolation, but upon the self as part of a greater, capital-S “Self.” And because all selves are equally a part of a larger ‘Self,’ each person equally possesses inherent worth and dignity. In essence, Emerson read the first UU Principles through the lens of the seventh,” the interdependent web of all existence (McKanan 301).

Emersonian self-reliance is about setting aside history and tradition and opening yourself to whatever original creation may emerge in and through your own unique

individual expression. To Emerson, it is a “practice intended to retrieve a person from the state in which adult people usually languish, acting and thinking according to what is expected of you rather than according to what you most deeply believe” (Buell 77).

Here are just a few of the aphorisms from “Self-Reliance”:

- “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.”
- “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.”
- “Is it so bad then to be misunderstood?”
- “Insist on yourself; never imitate.”
- Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.” (McKanan 301-305)

For what it’s worth, I have not fully drunk the Emersonian Kool-Aid, and do not completely agree with the worldview outlined in Self-Reliance. But that’s part of the point. Emerson didn’t want disciples. He wanted you to think for yourself, which certainly could include disagreeing with him.

But instead of ending on a point of divergence with Emerson, allow me to conclude with a final quote from his first published essay, “Nature,” which I think of frequently when I am outside at night. This passage challenges us to see the world anew—and not take the grandeur of our place in the universe for granted. Emerson writes: **“If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore....** But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile” (Mikics 30). Emerson invites us to cultivate a practice of seeing and experiencing the world anew in each present moment.

For Further Study

- For a primary source, a manageable and affordable place to start is the one-volume book [The Annotated Emerson](#), which has excellent sidebars to give you additional insights into Emerson’s writing.
- For secondary sources, a short, accessible introduction is Lawrence Buell’s overview of [Emerson](#).
- If you want more detail, an excellent longer biography is Robert Richardson’s [Emerson: The Mind on Fire](#).