

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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**“How Emerson Changed Unitarianism”**

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## How Emerson Changed Unitarianism

Here is an age-old conundrum: something is wrong in your life, but that is the only clarity you have, not what to do about it. There are three approaches to making things right. First, should you make a big change – leave a job or a relationship or a religion or a home? Or secondly, should you change things enough so that you can stay, while resolving the problems? You negotiate a change in responsibilities or compensation at your job; you ask for what you need from the person you have trouble with, or you change your own behavior in the relationship; you go deeper into the religion or find a way to minimize what bothers you; you buy new curtains for the home, or plant flowers, or give away the piano and buy a new couch. And then there is the third way for making things right, besides the external changes of the first two ways – complete or partial – you could change yourself. Is this the time to learn to accept, surrender, have more patience, be more responsible, grow in compassion? Something is wrong and a change needs to happen, but which change will be best for yourself, your loved ones, the world, the future? This is a conundrum that cannot be solved without seeking the truth.

Today we honor Ralph Waldo Emerson, a great truth seeker, a Unitarian, and our keyhole look into his life will be at what he did to make changes when things were wrong for him. The first disclaimer is that we cannot really peer into his soul, though we can use his words and deeds as indicators of the essential Emerson. A few years back, the UU World magazine had a couple of articles on Emerson from scholars who knew their subject much better than I, and each presented different interpretations of the essence of

the man, so this is tricky. The changes I want to focus upon, however, are how Emerson impacted the emerging Unitarian religion through his own problems with it, and with religion in general, and the changes he made, which does lead us into soul territory – and we will tread lightly – but we will move more firmly onto the path he blazed as a legacy for our religion.

When folks have problems with their religion, they may change it, reform it, as Theresa of Avila did during the Counter Reformation of the Catholic Church in the 1500s – the Church tried to kick her out, but as she said in relief on her deathbed, “At last, Senor, I die a daughter of the Church”. Around the same time, the Radical Reformation got into gear with some of our religious ancestors, including Francis David of Transylvania, who kept changing his religion – first Catholic, then Lutheran, then Calvinist, then finally, he became the first Unitarian. David left leadership positions in each of his previous churches in order to follow more clearly his emerging faith. John Wesley, on the other hand, remained a son of the Church of England until his death, but his reforms so inspired others that the Methodist religion was born of the changes he sought in himself and for his church. Emerson stayed a Unitarian until his death, but unlike Teresa of Avila, he did not do spiritual back-flips in order to remain within the fold. He left the ministry, but not the religion. His criticisms and challenges helped bring sea changes to Unitarianism. He had changes of heart, like Francis David, and was a major force for beginning what could have become a new religion, Transcendentalism, and then he would have had more the effect of John Wesley, but he managed to keep himself and his reforms within the religion that we have inherited, Unitarianism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the son of a minister who had brought his congregation into the brand new Unitarianism, then died young. Ralph entered Harvard as a young person and did well. When he was nearly 18, he changed what people called him from Ralph to Waldo.

Emerson taught, but that was not the right career for him, so he made a change. He entered Divinity School, but dropped out at the beginning of his second year because of bad health. He began to preach for a congregation who called and ordained him. He only lasted in the ministry at Second Church in Boston for 3 ½ years. His first wife died a couple of years into his ministry, a change for him that had to affect every part of his life.

Emerson's stated reason for leaving the ministry was that he could not in good conscience administer the Lord's Supper – communion – because the dry formality of it was intolerable to him. Yet he was also uncomfortable with ministry and the demands it made upon him – for example, he didn't really enjoy the visiting with folks that was expected. Most biographers believe that he had a crisis of vocation, and decided that he was not meant to be a minister. He loved to preach, however, and in a sense he continued that aspect of ministry throughout his lifetime of lecturing.

My UU history teacher said that our religion still hasn't caught up with the inner power, radicalism and vision of Emerson, as he set people on fire with the spiritual contagion of his preaching. Here is an excerpt from one of Waldo's earliest sermons, called "Pray Without Ceasing", a phrase which is a quote from the Apostle Paul, and that has many interpretations within Christianity.

“It is not only when we audibly and in form, address our petitions to the Deity, that we pray. We pray without ceasing. Every secret wish is a prayer. Every house is a church, the corner of every street is a closet of devotion.” When he really gets warmed up, he goes on to ask his congregation these fiery questions. “And is it by this paltry counterfeit of ignorance that you would disguise from yourselves the truth? And will you really endeavour to persuade yourself, that, God is such an one as you yourself, and will be amused by professions, and may, by fraudulent language, be kept out of the truth? Is it possible, that men of discretion in common affairs, can think so grossly? Do you not know that the language of God is perfect and immense; that it breaks down the fences of presumption, and the arts of hypocrisy; that night, and artifice, and time, and the grave, are naked before it; that the deep gives up its dead, that the gulfs of Chaos are disemboweled before him; that the minds of men are not so much independent existences, as they are ideas present to the mind of God; that he is not so much the observer of your actions, as he is the potent principle by which they are bound together; not so much the reader of your thoughts, as the active Creator by whom they are aided into being; and, casting away the deceptive subterfuges of language, and speaking with strict philosophical truth, that every faculty is but a mode of his action; that your reason is God, your virtue is God, and nothing but your liberty, can you call securely and absolutely your own?”

If you did not understand that completely, if your eyes glazed over, be comforted, you are not alone. There is a story often told of Emerson, in several forms, that may be apocryphal, but certainly portrays the preacher well: A washerwoman always went to hear Emerson’s lectures at Faneuil Hall in Boston. When asked if she understood Mr.

Emerson, she replied, “Not a word, but I love to see him standing up there thinking everyone else is just as good as he is.” As to the early sermon I just quoted from, I hope that it washed over you, reminding you that truth and you and the Divine, or the Sacred, are all one, and there’s not much way of avoiding that reality, at least according to Emerson. But of course, Emerson kept learning about prayer and truth and himself and the Divine his whole life through, and what he kept discovering remains relevant for our time. Emerson wrote, “Is not prayer also a study of truth – a sally of the soul into the unfound infinity? No man ever prayed hard without learning something.” And this: “Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view.”

Emerson’s emerging sense of prayer as Truth-seeking guided not only him, but our religion. Truth is not malleable, but it is known and understood differently as we come to a fuller revelation of the truth. Emerson valued Truth-seeking and religion, and did not understand them to be separate. He needed a religion that respected his mighty mind, which held both great intellect and flowing poetry, but he needed a religion.

Instead of accepting the theological points of early Unitarianism as being crucial in and of themselves, a typical religious approach – you have a core set of beliefs – Emerson understood that the study and questioning and seeking that arrived at those early Unitarian conclusions about one God, and universal salvation, and free will instead of predestination, were at the heart of this religion – the study and questioning and seeking, not the theological conclusions.

Emerson moved the Unitarian religion forward with his own ideas, but also with his reverence for the Truth. For example, Emerson believed that Jesus was remarkable and did miracles, but that life is a miracle, and not a proof that Jesus is Divine. He

believed that we ought to have a faith like Christ's, perhaps the first time that Unitarians thought of Christianity as being a faith of Jesus, not a faith about Jesus or a faith in Jesus.

Emerson's address to the Divinity School class in 1838, in which he put forth these thoughts on Jesus, and more, was so radical that it caused a huge controversy. Another religion would have probably ex-communicated him, or tried him for heresy, but the Unitarians took it as an opportunity to explore the faith further together.

The first wave of Unitarians studied the Bible diligently and critically. The next generation, led by Emerson, studied Hinduism and Buddhism and Confucianism, translating texts and considering these scriptures important to their religious understanding – the first time world religion made a serious impact in the United States. Emerson said, “In the matter of Religion, men eagerly fasten their eyes on the differences between their own creed and yours; whilst the charm of the study is in finding the agreements and identities in all the religions....” Emerson, more than anyone else, in his need to change his own faith in the light of Truth to a worldwide universal spirituality, changed the Unitarian religion to one that not just honored, but embodied, multiple faiths – a sea change in the way religion was done anywhere.

No conversation about Emerson would be complete without at least a brief look at Transcendentalism. By all rights, it should have become its own religion, the way Methodism and Universalism came out of Anglicanism. Some call it a philosophy, but we know it as a deep strand of our religion. And now I will attempt to define Transcendentalism, not a clear thing to do, especially as the Transcendentalists did not define it themselves.

At the heart of Transcendentalism is the belief that we can perceive the sacred, God's revelation, by intuition or insight, not just by sensation, experience, reason and reflection, as was believed at the time; that we are "wired for religion" as we might say today. Transcendentalism had beliefs in the essential unity of all creation, the innate goodness of humanity, the supremacy of insight for the revelation of the deepest truths, and was very at home in Nature.

Transcendentalism was a breath of fresh air, dismissing the formalism of the past and embracing the fire of the spirit. Of course, not everyone saw it that way. At a commencement in Middlebury, Vermont, Emerson gave the address, and afterwards, a minister concluded the service with this prayer, "We beseech thee, O Lord, to deliver us from hearing any more such transcendental nonsense as we have just listened to from this sacred desk."

Emerson's writing about the Over-Soul illuminates something about Transcendentalism that I believe resonates with folks today. He said, "We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul...." Amen.