

**“We Will Walk on Our Own Feet, We Will Work with Our Own Hands,  
We Will Speak with Our Own Minds”**  
30 September, 2007 Live Oak UU Congregation c. Rev. Erika Hewitt

**Excerpt from Emerson’s Harvard Divinity School Address (July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1838)**

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...

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...

The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, — life passed through the fire of thought. But of the bad preacher, it could not be told from his sermon, what age of the world he fell in; whether he had a father or a child; whether he was a freeholder or a pauper; whether he was a citizen or a countryman...

It seemed strange that the people should come to church. It seemed as if their houses were very unentertaining, that they should prefer this thoughtless clamor...

The good hearer is sure he has been touched sometimes; is sure there is somewhat to be reached, and some word that can reach it. When he listens to these vain words, he comforts himself by their relation to his remembrance of better hours, and so they clatter and echo unchallenged.

**Sermon:**

Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered these words to the 1838 graduates of Harvard Divinity School – all seven of them. It was July 15<sup>th</sup>, the height of what Emerson called a “refulgent summer,” when “the mystery of nature was never displayed more happily.” The graduating students had selected Emerson as their speaker themselves – a choice by which they collectively thumbed their noses at more established Unitarian ministers and teachers. It was a brave choice, and one with resounding consequences.

What those seven seminary graduates didn’t know, when they invited Emerson to speak at their graduation, was that he would deliver one of the most poetic, most stirring, and most *scandalous* speeches, or sermons, delivered in the history of Unitarianism.

It's not Emerson's crabby criticism in *this* passage that forged his new reputation among his peers and fellow citizens. (The "bad preacher" you heard Emerson describe, albeit anonymously, was the Reverend Barzilai Frost, assistant minister of First Parish Church (Unitarian) in Emerson's hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. As you heard, Emerson didn't think much of his preaching abilities.) No, it's what he did with the *rest* of his Divinity School Address that drew vehement attacks: in the words of historian Ann Woodlief, Emerson used the occasion to "calmly and confidently lay siege to some of the Unitarians' most cherished ideas."<sup>1</sup>

What were the "cherished" Unitarian ideas that Emerson assailed? What did he *say*, exactly, that was so upsetting? And why would we still care today?

To understand what happened on that July evening, we need weave a few different contextual strands together.

First, Emerson's cultural context was entirely different from ours. When he entered the Unitarian ministry, for example, the Declaration of Independence was only 53 years old. Our country was so new that it lacked a true identity, with "not much that could be called distinctively American in literature or drama. The United States was a cultural backwater, and with few exceptions, its culture was derivatively European."<sup>2</sup>

As far as religion went, this young "backwater" had staunch Calvinist roots, its churches steeped in the theology of original sin and predestination. The prevailing religious belief at the time was that human beings were "sinners in the hands of an angry God." During the 1700s, however, a slow wave of protest against Calvinism arose in New England's Congregational churches, in the guise of Unitarian theology. (Unitarianism was so new – to this country; it had three centuries of history behind it in Europe – that there were not yet Unitarian churches, in name.)

As Unitarian theology was preached from Congregational pulpits, however, its liberal ideas created division within congregations, splitting some churches down the center. Unitarian ministers simply couldn't risk their standing by being *too* liberal, and so by the time Emerson graduated from Harvard, in 1821, the Unitarian "establishment" was desperately trying to balance on a hair-thin line: on one hand, they believed in humanity's goodness and in one God; their reason called them to view Jesus as human rather than divine.

On the other hand, these early Unitarians had only "precarious control" over congregational churches – and they hadn't had it for very long. To keep their control and to be taken seriously as Christians, they needed to be as in-line as possible with the prevailing dogma: they needed to embrace Jesus as miracle-worker and messiah. "Unitarians were," in the words of one historian, "unwilling to cross the line that would deny Jesus divinity."<sup>3</sup>

These were the nervous ears listening to Emerson at Harvard Divinity School that

evening: those of a newborn religious denomination walking a theological balance beam, who needed Emerson to be a spokesperson for their interests.

By 1838, Emerson wasn't. He couldn't be – he had already left the ministry and “corpse-cold” Unitarianism. Emerson had already become the *de facto* figurehead of a new movement: Transcendentalism.

These young upstarts, most of them educated Bostonians, had bound themselves together two years earlier, in 1836. Unlike the Unitarian establishment, the Transcendentalists weren't afraid to openly reject all aspects of the prevailing culture: its religious conservatism, its “arid intellectual climate,” its literature and philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Emerson summed up their manifesto when he declared, “We will walk on our own feet, we will work with our own Hands, we will speak with our own minds.”

The Transcendentalists boldly inspired each other to develop a “uniquely American body of literature”<sup>5</sup> and an intellectual school of thought.<sup>6</sup> There was also a deep and abiding spirituality at the heart of Transcendentalism, which had a mystic flavor.

Along with a few writers and philosophers, the Transcendentalists were mostly liberal Unitarian ministers; their membership grew to include Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, Henry David Thoreau, and others. But it was Emerson who refined, and proclaimed, this new cultural message. He *lived* it, and it was this Transcendentalist spirit that filled his talk.

On that July night, in front of his audience, Emerson came out of the gates swinging...nineteenth-century style.

He began his address by glorifying, at length, the beauty of the summer – an opening that was radically out-of-step with what a 1838 religious occasion called for: scripture. A reading from the Bible.

My colleague, the Reverend Rob Hardies, puts himself in the listeners' shoes: “Why...is he talking about trees and flowers? Why is he talking about the weather?!” Rob then answers his own imagined questions:

The revolution had begun...Emerson was replacing scripture with the natural world. The world is our scripture, he was saying. Nature is the text that I will preach from today. Life is the text I will preach from. Revelation is not limited to one book written 2000 years ago. All of human life and experience is Revelation.

The “revolution” didn't get any tamer from there. Emerson then went on to describe the religious impulse in human beings; he pointed to reverence “the basic building block of all religion”<sup>7</sup> – reverence that comes from knowing, first-hand, the wholeness of the

world and our divine natures.

Already, his listeners must have been stunned. And still, Emerson continued. He then blasted "formal historical Christianity," and its "distortion" of the life and teachings of Jesus. If all human beings have a divine nature, he said, then calling Jesus the son of God denies our divinity, as humans. When Christianity holds up the Bible as unalienable truth, human beings are denied "our own firsthand revelation and the miracle of every summer day."<sup>8</sup>

Emerson's remaining barb, as you've heard, was lobbed at poor Barzilai Frost. Remember Emerson's withering assessment of this "merely spectral" preacher who was so pallid that Emerson didn't want to go back to church? Now, keep in mind how many ministers were in that room, listening to Emerson excoriate that anonymous preacher and what a miserable model of ministry he was. It must have started another flurry of furtive questions: *Who's he talking about? Is he talking about me? Who? Merciful Lord, please don't let him be talking about me!*

Helpfully, Emerson did offer his thoughts as to how religion could be saved, and restored to its potential: "Let me admonish you," he urged, "to go alone, and dare to love God without mediator or veil." You see, Emerson believed that "[people] want awakening," and that we are each called to be something, to do great things, in this world. And so he attempted to "awaken" the soul of every clergyman in that audience, saying to them: trust your own heart...deal out to people your life "passed through the fire of thought."

"O my friends," Emerson said to them, "there are resources in us on which we have not drawn...let the breath of new life be breathed by you."

As you'll hear in the next few weeks, not everyone joined Emerson's revolution...at that time. But you do have a taste of why we Unitarian Universalists love him so. As my colleague, Rob Hardies, puts it:<sup>9</sup>

I love [Emerson] for believing in us...I love him for his passionate embrace of the spiritual journey. For how he encourages us to go out into the world and discover the truth and wisdom we need for our living. I love him for entreating us to throw caution to the wind, to set behind our faint-heartedness, and dare to love God without mediator or veil....But mostly,...I love [Emerson] for his faith in us. For his faith in the inherent goodness of every person...It's such an audacious thing to believe these days, in a world so full of evil. And yet, now more than ever, I believe that it is the only faith that will allow us to overcome the evil and usher in the good. Thank you, Waldo, for believing in us.

## Endnotes

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1. In "'Tempest in a Washbowl': Emerson vs. the Unitarians," a talk delivered by Ann Woodlief to the First Unitarian Church, Richmond, VA. See [www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/ideas/onaddress.html](http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/ideas/onaddress.html)
2. "Transcendentalism" a sermon by Rev. Dr. Daniel O Connell at Eliot Unitarian Chapel, St. Louis, MO.
3. Woodlief.
4. In *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* by Robert D. Richardson Jr., p. 245.
5. In "What is Transcendentalism?" by Jone Johnson Lewis
6. "Transcendentalism" a sermon by Rev. Dr. Daniel O Connell at Eliot Unitarian Chapel, St. Louis, MO.
7. Richardson, 288.
8. Richardson, 288.
9. "Emerson: The Soul's Bard," a sermon by the Reverend Robert Hardies, All Souls Church, Washington, D.C.