

“Emerson: his life and times”

Probably the most famous Unitarian, and certainly the most famous Unitarian minister, *so far*, is Ralph Waldo Emerson. We get to know him though his plentiful writing. Even in the essays which I always expect to be shaped more by intellect than passion, we can feel his sensuality, his heart and his love for this world. The more I search for Emerson the person who did the writing, the more I feel his warmth and kindness.

I read quite a lot on Emerson this summer, other sermons, essays, excerpts from Richardson’s 600 page book, The Mind on Fire and what turned out to be the most important writing to prepare for this morning’s conversation about him as a human being, Mary Oliver’s lovely essay about him in her book Long Life, within the section “Artist’s of the beautiful.”

Emerson himself is absolutely still worth reading. Here is a taste, from the first paragraph of his essay “Nature” cut down just a bit. (I also changed the word “man” to the word “person.”) He clearly believed that paying attention and spiritual awakening is the great work of our lives.

To be alone, “a person needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not alone when I read and write, though nobody is with me. If a person would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give a person, the perpetual presence of the sublime. . . . If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would we believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile. “

Think about Emerson the next time you look up at the stars.

Here is his description of a moment of unexpected joy:

“Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.” *I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.*

Haven't we all had these moments and don't we wish we could cultivate more? Emerson profoundly believed in the importance of such moments. He lived in the world, he let sorrow crack him open to the depths of beauty and he found that what abides is joy.

Here is the famous "eyeball" quote from that same essay, "Nature"

"In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."

I think it is such moments of belonging, of peace and joy, the dissolution of the small self, that spiritual traditions point out to us, from the ideas of "oneness" of the early Greek monists to today's process theologians.

Here is another snippet from Mary Oliver: "The best use of literature bends not toward the narrow and the absolute but to the extravagant and the possible. *the extravagant and the possible* . . . This is the crux of Emerson, who does not advance straight ahead but wanders to all sides of an issue; who delivers suggestions with a kindly gesture-who opens doors and tells us to look at things for ourselves. The one thing he is adamant about is that we should look-we must look-for that is the liquor of life, that brooding upon issues, that attention to thought even as we weed the garden or milk the cow." (end quote)

Emerson believed that human beings once awakened would be inclined to (quote) "turn all the heavy sails of life to a moral purpose."(end quote)

He believed in our essential goodness and our unlimited capacity for development. He held this positive, this cheerful expectation of our moral longing and potential goodness throughout his life. It comes through to us now in our first principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person. Emerson believed in our inherent worth and our ability to know God, or the ultimate, without mediators, without ministers or even the church. He even said, "I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching."

No wonder he found being a church minister a bit hard.

But I am ahead of myself.

He was born on 25 May 1803 in Boston and in the parish house of First Unitarian Church where his father was the minister. He was born into a line already seven long of Unitarian ministers. He had access to the classics at the Boston Latin School and Harvard College and finally Harvard Divinity.

I thought about that and about Margaret Fuller, his contemporary and perhaps best friend, and how she had to struggle for access to education. Emerson's family though not especially well off, was "intellectually ambitious" and being a male child, he had easy access to books and institutions of learning. For Margaret, in spite of her brilliance, such access was difficult and often denied. She was always expected to put the needs of family first and the ever present duties of running a house and small farm ahead of reading. Why did women even need to learn the classics? Most people back then believed we were incapable of such studies. No church was ordaining women in Emerson's day.

Emerson was the fourth child of eight with two sisters and five brothers. His father died when he was 8 years old, the first of a terrible number deaths in his family. Both girls and one boy died in childhood; three other brothers William, Edward, and Charles survived only into early adulthood. The only remaining brother to live a life of full length was Robert who was described as a "man of childish mind."

Early on, young Waldo, as he like to be called, started keeping journals. Later many of these early observations were worked into essays like the one I quoted from earlier, The second sermon I am planning on Emerson will focus more on his writing. That one is scheduled for January 25th.

All through school, young Waldo was evidently more popular, than brilliant. After school, he took up preaching at the Second Church (Unitarian) in Boston.

That same year he married the beautiful but ailing Ellen Tucker. It was a match of love. Emerson seems to have adored her. When she died of

tuberculosis a few years later, he all but collapsed into mourning. He was then twenty-nine years old.

He spent the next year in Europe meeting great thinkers and writers among them Coleridge, Wordsworth, and John Stuart Mill. His meeting with Thomas Carlyle began a deep friendship. Carlyle had already left Christianity and was struggling with the scientific and political changes that were shaping a new social order. Their letters went back and forth across the Atlantic until Emerson died.

About two years after Ellen's death, he formally left his pulpit. He was deeply grieving, frustrated with the ministry, and unsettled in his own beliefs. His studies at Harvard Divinity including German higher criticism of the Bible, and Hindu and Buddhist poetry and his friendship with Carlyle probably seeded his critique of traditional Christianity. He had come to believe that communion was only an act of remembrance and that Jesus was a great teacher, perhaps the most exceptional teacher in all of history but a human being. This was not the commonly accepted belief even in our churches. His congregation cared about him but were probably glad that he resigned.

He married Lydia 'Lidian' Jackson about three years later. She was slightly older than he, both were about 32 and they had four children: Waldo, Ellen, named after his first wife, Edith, and Edward. They settled in Concord where they entertained widely: artists, poets, authors, and the folks we know as the Transcendentalists including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bronson Alcott and Alcott's daughter Louisa May. Henry David Thoreau built his Walden Pond cabin on Emerson's property and watched over Emerson's family when Ralph Waldo traveled. Walt Whitman considered Emerson a mentor.

But, tragedy continued in Emerson's life. His first son "Waldo" died at age five.

Still the house was often full of friends, and talk. Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel's son, then a young boy, remembers him sitting in the parlor, "legs crossed and-such was their flexibility-with one foot hitched behind the other ankle. Leaning forward, elbow on one knee, he faced his guests and held converse." There was an evening when his daughter Ellen called him away to talk to the butcher about mutton. He (quote) "rose mildly to do as he was bid."

There is another telling story found in his journal, "Now for near five years I have been indulged by the gracious Heaven in my long holiday in this

goodly house of mine, entertaining and entertained by so many worthy and gifted friends, and all this time poor Nancy Barron, the mad-woman, has been screaming herself hoarse at the Poorhouse across the brook. I still hear her whenever I open my window.”

He really did not enjoy traveling but he needed the money and so he went. He lectured in Boston and New York, as far west as Missouri and in England. He used the lecturing as a way to work on his essays for publication.

Harriet Martineau, British journalist and abolitionist, when she met him and heard him speak wrote: “His influence is of a curious sort. There is a vague nobleness and thorough sweetness about him, which moves people to their very depths, without their being able to explain why. The logicians have an incessant triumph over him, but their triumph is of no avail. He conquers minds, as well as hearts, wherever he goes; and without convincing anybody’s reason of any one thing, exalts their reason, and makes their minds worth more than they ever were before.”

I appreciate that description. It captures the part of his affect that made him so loved.

Toward the end of his life, his home which he so enjoyed, burned down. Friends paid for him to travel overseas while they secretly rebuilt it. When he returned, he was quite astonished, grateful and lived there until his death in 1882.

He became quite absentminded in his last years and developed a cold while walking coatless and hatless on rainy, chilly April day. The cold became pneumonia and at seventy eight, he died.

His death was marked by the pealing of the bell at First Parish. The funeral was elaborate because he had become well known. A private service was conducted at the home, which is, by the way, now a museum. A horse drawn hearse carried the coffin through the streets lined with people brought in by special trains to Concord for the final public service at First Parish. The body was then transported to Sleepy Hallow Cemetery. Following an Episcopal service there and the dropping of flowers into the grave by his grandchildren and the schoolchildren of Concord he was buried on Authors’ Ridge near Thoreau, the Alcotts, and Hawthorne.

Let me close with one of his short poems:

Mine are the night and morning,
The pits of air, the gulf of space,
The sportive sun, the gibbous moon,
The innumerable days.

I hide in the solar glory,
I am dumb in the pealing song,
I rest on the pitch of the torrent,
In slumber I am strong.

Blessed be

Benediction:

In his journal Emerson wrote:

I have confidence in the laws of morals as of botany. I have planted maize in my field every June for seventeen years and I never knew it come up strychnine. My parsley, beet, turnip, carrot, buck-thorn, chestnut, acorn, are as sure. I believe that justice produces justice, and injustice.