

## Renegade Ancestor: Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Unitarians

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small  
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist  
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When my wife Julie Wormser was five years old, she confided a problem to a friend. She knew that brides were expected to take the last name of their husbands, and she also knew she would never change her name.

But Julie, ever practical, had a plan.

“Well,” she said. “I’m just going to have to find someone named Wormser to marry!”

As it turned out, Julie did not find a husband named Wormser. But she didn’t change her name, either.

When Julie and I married 16 years ago last spring, we each took the middle name Emerson, which is her mother’s maiden name—the one *she* had given up when she married a man named Wormser. A distant cousin of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Julie’s great-grandfather at age four bounced on the knee of the Concord sage.

So Julie not only kept her own name—she got her mom’s name back. And our daughter Lucy is Lucy Dao Lin Emerson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson—philosopher, poet, lecturer, essayist, activist, and Unitarian minister—changed the course of our religion. And he changed the way Americans think about God, about nature, and about ourselves.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born into privilege. His ancestor the Reverend Peter Bulkley purchased from its indigenous inhabitants the area then called Musketaquid—and renamed it Concord.

Emerson’s life was shadowed by death. His father died two weeks after his eighth birthday, plunging the family into genteel poverty. Four of Emerson’s siblings died in childhood or young adulthood. His adored wife Ellen died of tuberculosis at age 20. His first son Waldo did not survive his sixth year. His most influential mentor was his aunt Mary Moody, a woman of brilliant and broad-ranging intellect who wore a shroud by day and slept in a coffin at night to be ready for the Lord.

His young wife’s death broke Emerson’s heart.

In his desperate grief he found his way to the Bhagavad Gita, the mystical jewel of the Hindu scriptures. Like nearly all his western contemporaries, Emerson had dismissed eastern religions as primitive superstition. The Gita was a revelation. It confirmed Emerson’s growing sense of the unity of all existence and of a fundamental justice and equilibrium belying appearances and transcending death. From then on, he revered the Bhagavad Gita as equal to the Christian scriptures.

This eastern influence is most evident in Emerson’s assertion of the interdependence of all things. Emerson’s famous essay “Self-Reliance” gave him a reputation as a solitary individualist. But the self-reliance he advocated was not an atomized autonomy but rather the courage to find one’s own path to spiritual truth.

For Emerson, that truth was always relational. “Nothing but God is self-dependent,” he said. “Every being in nature has its existence so connected with other beings that if set apart from them it would instantly perish. . . . Insulate a man and you annihilate him. He cannot unfold, he cannot live without a world.”

Emerson's deep affection for friends of his own choosing did not translate into effective ministry. Called to Second Church in Boston, the 25-year-old proved a comically awkward pastor, setting off on house calls without directions and ending up having tea with complete strangers with the same last name as a parishioner. Even if he found his way, he could be at such a loss that one parishioner gently ushered him out, saying "if you don't know your business, you had better go home."

After three years, Emerson wrote glumly in his journal: "Finny can preach, and so his prayers are short. Parkman can pray, and so his prayers are long. Lowell can visit, and so his church service is less. But what shall poor I do, who can neither visit, nor pray, nor preach, to my mind?"

Nagged by growing doubts about serving communion, Emerson proposed that his church discontinue it. Not surprisingly, church leaders were unwilling to eliminate this traditional sacrament, and Emerson resigned. But even had the congregation acquiesced, given Emerson's restless intellect and discomfort with pastoral duties he would doubtless have found some other excuse to leave parish ministry.

The following year, Emerson began his career as a lecturer. He would become the most popular speaker in America. Before radio and television but as railroads began to expand the possibilities of travel, Emerson was the closest thing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to a rock star.

A reporter for the Boston Transcript once asked a washerwoman who faithfully attended Emerson's lectures at Faneuil Hall if she understood them. "Not a word," she replied. "But I love to see him standing up there thinking everyone else is just as good as he is."

Emerson's egalitarianism prompted him to invite his servants to join the family for meals. They declined. Not wishing to hold himself above manual labor, he tried gardening and yard work but found himself too tired to write. "The writer shall not dig," he concluded. (I haven't tried this line on Julie yet.)

On August 31, 1837, 175 years ago next month, the 34-year-old Emerson ascended the pulpit of this meetinghouse to address the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Cambridge. In his remarks, which would become known as "The American Scholar," Emerson decried intellectual dependence on Europe and called for creation of a uniquely American literature. James Russell Lowell, then a Harvard student, called Emerson's electrifying talk "an event without former parallel in our literary annals." But another listener, the Rev. John Pierce, found it "incoherent and unintelligible." (Personally, I'm relieved to know I'm not the only speaker from this pulpit to provoke a broad range of reaction.)

In 1838, Emerson was invited to Harvard Divinity School, where he had studied, to address the graduating seniors—all six of them. Emerson's address to the tiny audience of seminarians and their families, friends, and teachers changed Unitarianism forever.

Emerson challenged the students to offer their congregations not dry instruction out of dusty books but the liberation of indwelling spirit. "In how many churches," he asked, ". . . is man made sensible that he is an infinite Soul; that the earth and heavens are passing into his mind; that he is drinking forever the soul of God?"

Religion, Emerson declared, "cannot be received at second hand." Faith must be primary, personal, and proven by one's own experience and no one else's. The Supreme dwells in all of us, he insisted, and he condemned as "perversion" any doctrine by which

“the divine nature is attributed to one or two persons, and denied to all the rest, and denied with fury.”

Christianity, Emerson charged, was guilty of two idolatries. It worshiped the myth of Jesus’ miracles rather than the truth of his teachings, and it worshiped scripture instead of “the eternal revelation in the heart.” Christianity’s “noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus” had turned this “friend of man” into “the injurer of man.” According to Emerson, Christianity was right to say that Jesus was divine but wrong to say that you and I are not. “That is always best which gives me to myself,” he said. “That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen.”

Unfortunately, Emerson had recently endured a dreary sermon by the new assistant minister in Concord. While Emerson named no names, he minced no words: “I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more. 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 true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life,—life passed through the fire of thought.”

Redemption cannot be found in the Church, Emerson insisted, but in the soul. He did not condemn old religious forms. “Rather,” he said, “let the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing. For, if once you are alive, you shall find they shall become . . . new. The remedy to their deformity is, first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul.”

Emerson’s call to reformation rocked the Unitarian establishment. Five weeks later, Andrews Norton, Harvard’s most distinguished theologian, denounced Emerson’s address as an “incoherent rhapsody” and an “insult to religion.” “Highly respected officers” of the university, he reported, were disgusted by the speech. Norton’s barrage unleashed a hail of fire from Emerson’s defenders and detractors in newspapers, magazines, and religious journals. Though Emerson regretted not a word of what he’d said, he was pained by the public censure and felt cut off from Harvard and the Unitarian church. A generation would pass before he was invited to speak at Harvard again.

Because Emerson’s faith in the potential of the individual was stronger than his faith in collective action, he spoke about politics reluctantly. But he was a powerful advocate for peace and justice.

In 1838, as the United States was waging a bloody war against the Seminole Indians, Emerson addressed the American Peace Council in Boston. Calling war “an epidemic insanity,” he labeled support for it “a juvenile and temporary state” for humanity. He looked forward to a “congress of Nations” to settle international disputes.

Later that year, when the army brutally relocated the peaceful Cherokee from Georgia to Oklahoma, Emerson joined the clamor of protest. In a public letter to President Van Buren, Emerson despaired, “How can we call the conspiracy that should crush these poor Indians our government, or the land that was cursed by their dying and parting imprecations our country any more?” In his journal, he confessed his efforts “ineffectual blows.” Yet he spoke out, he wrote, “for the sad reason that . . . if I do not,

why it is left undone. The amount of it, to be sure, is merely a scream, but sometimes a scream is better than a thesis.”

In 1844, Emerson delivered a fiery speech in Concord demanding the abolition of slavery. Seven years later, when an African-American was captured in Boston and returned to slavery in Georgia, Emerson was outraged. At every opportunity, he exhorted his fellow citizens to defy the Fugitive Slave Act. He opened his own home to the underground railway. He befriended and raised money for John Brown. The anti-slavery cause roused in Emerson the greatest passion of his public life.

He also spoke in favor of women’s rights, but with greater moderation and some ambivalence.

Despite leaving active ministry before he was 30, Ralph Waldo Emerson exerted more influence upon Unitarian Universalism than anyone else in our history. Without his eloquent championing of the right and duty of each individual to find their own spiritual path, many of us might not be sitting here this morning.

Emerson’s voice echoes throughout our seven principles, most resoundingly in our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, encouragement to spiritual growth, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Emerson himself might have written the first source from which our living tradition springs: “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 that create and uphold life.” He personally exemplified the second source: “prophetic women and men [who] challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” And he helped introduce into our tradition its third source, “wisdom from the world’s religions.”

Emerson’s biographer Robert Richardson calls him “a complicated, energetic, and emotionally intense man who habitually spoke against the status quo and in favor of whatever was wild and free.”

Emerson’s intellect was so vast, so subtle, so dynamic it could never be parsed or pinned down. As Walt Whitman said, “They never could hold him; no province, no clique, no church.”

Two centuries later, the circles of his influence continue to ripple outward, touching us all. So I leave to Emerson the last word, from his magnificent essay “Circles”: “Our life is an apprehension to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn: that there is no end in nature, that every end is a beginning, that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep another deep opens.”

Amen and Blessed Be.

### **Benediction**

May we see in ourselves an infinite Soul,  
the currents of the Universal Being circulating through us,  
earth and heavens passing into us,  
part and particle of God.—Ralph Waldo Emerson