

## **The Reluctant Legacy of R.W. Emerson**

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The invitation he had unknowingly been waiting for finally arrived. It was March of 1838, and Ralph Waldo Emerson had just done the thing he had both hoped for and dreaded for the past few years; he had finally resigned from Second Church in Boston. Emerson had been a Unitarian minister, inspired in no small part by his father who had been among the first liberal ministers in Boston to have broken away from the Calvinist church. Both Emerson and his father had been inspired by William Ellery Channing's vision of a more authentic church. A church that did not deny human reason, but attempted to accommodate it so that the full individual could come to church and not deny any part of themselves.

That had been the plan. However as time had gone on, doubt was creeping into Emerson's mind and heart about his call to ministry. At Harvard Emerson had been inspired by new ideas and new thinkers from Europe. He wanted to spread this new philosophy of life wherever he could. He figured that the ministry would be the best opportunity to do

this, since it would demand of him a regular schedule of reading, reflection, and preaching. Unfortunately he was in for a rude awakening. Ministry is about more than the one hour we spend in worship. One of the running jokes among my family, mostly from my little brother, is that I work 20 minutes a week during the sermon. One would have hoped that Emerson, as the son of a Unitarian minister, had not been so naïve. But it was the other aspects of the job that began to wear on him; visiting the sick and dying for example. As the years wore by, and his desire to simply preach became more acute, Emerson decided that it was enough. He tendered his resignation citing that he could no longer administer the sacraments, communion, with integrity. I am sure that was true, but the general consensus is that that was merely the issue he chose for his resignation—the problem he had with the ministry was much deeper than that.

Which makes the invitation that arrived in March of 1838 all the more ironic. It was from his alma mater, Harvard College, and it was inviting him to speak at the graduation ceremonies of the Divinity School in July. Emerson had been stewing and mulling for months on the problems and limitations of the ministry. His journals reflect some of his early thoughts on the subject. Despite having only left the ministry days before, Emerson accepted the invitation, and on July 15, 1838 he delivered what has come to be known to history as “The Divinity School Address.”

As you might imagine, this was a sermon that had some passion behind it. Emerson was speaking directly to the teachers of the Divinity School, who were the founding generation of Unitarianism in America, as well as to the next generation of Unitarian ministers who were about to embark on their newly chosen careers. There were about 16 students who heard the address, among them the noted minister, and firebrand in his own right Theodore Parker. Emerson's speech would ignite a debate about who are we as Unitarians, what is it that we believe, and can we tolerate a bunch of nutcases like Emerson and Parker in our churches?!

Well, what is it that Emerson said? What was his message that alternatively inspired the next generation of Unitarian ministers to make Transcendentalism a theological force to be reckoned with in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century or defend the status quo with a passion and zeal that was not unlike the Calvinists who had opposed the early Unitarians?

At the risk of oversimplifying things, in essence his message was that human experience of God or the Soul is more important as a source of religious authority than the Bible is. Emerson is quite critical of the Bible as a reliable source of knowledge about God. One of the big points of contention that later critics would latch on to was that Emerson denied the validity of Jesus' miracles as related in the New Testament. The "old school" Unitarians wanted to affirm the miracles. Emerson believed that every minute we are alive and can think should count as a miracle.

In fact he takes this even further. He says that Jesus' connection with God is something we all potentially have access to. All of us are connected to that spiritual reality in a much deeper way than we give ourselves credit for. Instead of intellectual debate and analysis of Biblical texts and sayings, we would be better off getting in touch with our creative self. In later writings Emerson would elaborate on poetry as a possibility, such as Whitman. Elsewhere he would talk about getting in tune with nature as Thoreau did.

To contemporary Unitarian Universalist ears, Emerson's message may not sound all that radical or even unusual. However to his audience, who had just spent a number of years teaching their students how to rationally analyze the Bible, it sounded like Emerson was undoing their whole curriculum in one fell swoop. For Emerson, the minister should not provide lectures and facts on biblical passages or try to provide some intellectual justification for things like Jesus' miracles. Rather, he says quite pointedly, that the job of the minister is to inspire people—mostly through preaching. And the main way they are to do that is to share a bit of their own spiritual reflection, their own inspiration, their own poetry of the soul.

In a famous passage, Emerson describes an experience he had attending worship. He didn't name the preacher in the story, but everyone who heard it knew immediately who he was talking about. Emerson says that this preacher was droning on and on about something

or another in the sermon. Meanwhile, a snow storm was going on outside and Emerson started to pay more attention to the snow storm than he did to the minister. “The snow storm was real, the preacher merely spectral.” Ouch! That is the 19<sup>th</sup> Century version of “flaming” someone!

Emerson describes the problem with this type of minister, and holds out a new possibility. He writes, “The capital secret of his profession, namely to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. 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 [of his sermon], that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he [or she] deals out to the people his [or her] life,—life passed through the fire of thought.”

For Emerson, to be a minister is to practice what you preach; or at least preach what you practice. The minister’s life and the minister’s actions must be congruent. How can a minister expect the members of their church to live an authentic life if they themselves are not doing so? It is not hard to imagine how this message could be both intimidating and inspiring depending on who the hearer is. While this might be a tall order for those going into the ministry, it is also a very empowering

message. Each of us have the possibility of getting in touch with the same spiritual insight that called to Jesus and other great men and women throughout history. That is a far cry from the Calvinist emphasis on our inherent sinful nature. Emerson had a very positive view of human nature. The challenge of the religious life is to authentically live by that creative power within us all.

Given what had happened to Emerson, it is more than a little ironic that he should have such a rosy view of human life. Robert Richardson, in his seminal biography of Emerson, opens his book with an episode that happened seven years before the Divinity School Address. In 1831 Emerson was himself a newly minted Unitarian minister when one of the saddest events of his life happened: his beloved wife Ellen died of Tuberculosis. At the time, it is estimated that half of Boston had Tuberculosis! But just a few years into their marriage, and while she was still in her twenties, Ellen died of the dreaded disease. Emerson, who kept extensive journals for most of his life, was beside himself with grief. In those very journals he would write to her as if she were alive a year and a half after her death. He had to get closure. So Emerson went to his wife's tomb, entered it, and opened her coffin! Richardson notes that Emerson had to directly experience something if he was ever to get over this loss.

This episode in Emerson's life is heart-breaking to hear. Ellen's death is probably the beginning of Emerson's downward spiral that

eventually lead to his disillusionment with the ministry and the Unitarian church. Yet despite the soul-wrenching nature of his journals of this period, Emerson would write essays on Astronomy. His rosy description of human nature never really engaged what we might call existential angst or take seriously human loss and suffering. His devoted commitment to optimism seems to have hidden this shadow side.

Emerson was the grand prophet for authenticity in Unitarian Universalism. While not the first one to preach about authenticity, he bumps it up to one of the highest moral and spiritual values in Unitarian Universalism. Arguably, it still is. Yet when you preach authenticity that powerfully as he did in the Divinity School Address, you set a high bar for yourself. After hearing about the death of his wife and how deeply it affected him, we cannot help but wonder why he didn't import some aspect of that experience into his doctrine? Why not tell us about how his heart ached and his soul burned without her in his life? Authenticity is a wonderful thing to value. I believe it is at the center of our Unitarian Universalist faith. But even the grand master of authenticity comes up against its limit.

I think what Emerson came up against was something akin to Ken Phifer's essay on practicing what we preach; only Emerson wasn't as self-aware as Ken was. Ken Phifer experienced that chasm between what we know to be good and what we actually do. This is of course as old as Paul writing to the Romans in 7:15, "I do not understand my own

actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” I suppose if we were devoted disciples of the ultimate supremacy of authenticity as a religious virtue, then we might respond by saying that the religious life is simply a matter of practicing what you preach; period. That is Emerson’s message after all.

But Phifer puts an important asterisk next to authenticity. Yes strive to have your beliefs and your actions come in line with each other, but also don’t fool yourself that you can ever do this perfectly. St. Paul was on to something there in his observation of human will and behavior. I would not go to his extreme and proclaim ourselves unrepentant reprobate sinners. Rather I subscribe to Ken Phifer’s more nuanced and realistic approach.

We are not perfect and never will be in our quest for authenticity. That Paul got right, and Emerson too naively proclaimed. But Paul took it too far. It is our attempt to live the authentic life, to bring our actions and our beliefs in line that gives our life purpose and meaning. If we were perfect, or could become perfect, then life would become extraordinarily boring. There would be no change, no need to vary anything. All of the things Emerson notes that were missing from the sermon during the snow storm would not be interesting if we were perfect. Rather than kid ourselves about being perfect, the challenge to lead an authentic life in which our words and actions come together, leads us to self-improvement. Perfect may not be possible, but better



often is. Besides I suspect the journey is more important than the destination here. Perfect harmony between our beliefs and actions will probably always elude us, but trying to get there gives our life meaning.

I know I for one take comfort in not having to be perfect all of the time. Both Emerson and Ken Phifer talk about preachers specifically; I guess because my profession requires us to state aloud what we believe. Most people may privately realize that their beliefs and actions are not in line, but for us preachers it is in black and white on the website or on the video tape. And I think at least one of Emerson's points in the Divinity School Address is salvageable: a minister who struggles to authentically practice what they preach, be they successful in that endeavor or not, can be a sort of witness or model for one's people. I hope that if nothing else my ministry might give you the chance to say, "I may not be perfect but at least I am better than that guy!" It's an important pastoral role I play.

May we all strive for authenticity in our own imperfect ways. May we be compassionate with ourselves as we strive for greater authenticity. And may we as a church be blessed in our efforts. Amen Blessed Be.