

**Meditations with Emerson**

Rev. Amy Freedman  
Channing Memorial Church  
August 9, 2009

Reflections before the Service:

*“Be not the slave of your own past. Plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep and swim far, so you shall come back with self-respect, with new power, with an advanced experience that shall explain and overlook the old.”*

*“All things with which we deal, preach to us.”* —Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 –1882)

REFLECTION: *Meditations with Emerson*

This morning’s service is inspired by the thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson who is venerated as a Unitarian saint. Only in true Unitarian Universalist style, Emerson is not depicted with any sort of halo, his feet are flat on the ground and we love him not only in spite of his quirks but perhaps because of them!

Emerson had a close relationship with William Ellery Channing, native of Newport and father of American Unitarianism for whom our church stands as a Memorial. When Emerson was a student at Harvard College, he attended the Federal Street Church in Boston where Channing served as the minister. Once Emerson decided to pursue the ministry himself Channing gave him a reading list of books to study in preparation for Divinity School and met with him weekly.

In fact, Emerson only served as a parish minister for four years. Before his resignation from First Church in Boston, Emerson confided in his journal “I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry.” Certainly his subsequent writing and lecturing allowed him to reach a much wider audience. He became part of a group of radical thinkers known as the Transcendental Club. Emerson valued his friendships with this circle and their meaningful conversations gave rise to many new ideas and publications.

Even though he is highly thought of today, Emerson was not considered “a good Unitarian” during his lifetime. In 1838, he spoke before the Senior Class of Harvard Divinity School. The students had invited Emerson themselves and the soon-to-be ministers, predominately young men and a few women filled the hundred seats of the chapel of Divinity Hall along with members of the faculty. Although Emerson delighted the students by presenting a new vision of religion and spirituality, he shocked and outraged the faculty by critiquing and challenging the established order. Emerson asserted that the Unitarian church was decaying from lack of feeling and was “corpse-cold”. The wisdom that Emerson imparted to the students and that continues to influence our religious movement today is that the purpose of religion is to “convert life into truth”.

For the Transcendentalists, God, Nature, and Humanity are all part of a greater unity. Emerson asserted that each person is essentially a spiritual being and “part and parcel of God”. He wrote that “The world is a mirror of the soul”. The beauty and power of Nature is a reflection of our inherent goodness and capability. Emerson described this mystical unity as the Oversoul. Let us turn to the back of our hymnals to reading #531, entitled *The Oversoul*. Please read responsively.

RESPONSIVE READING #531, *The Oversoul*, Ralph Waldo Emerson

READING Emerson’s Words, Beth

The following passage is from *Self Reliance*, published in 1841:

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all - that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense. . . Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. The great have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being . . .

MEDITATION, Amy

According to Emerson and other religious thinkers, truth resides in our own hearts if only we only take time to apprehend it. Let us take time now to focus inward. Take a deep breath. Place both feet on the ground. Feel your head supported by the column of your spine. Take another deep breath and release it allowing your breath to come easily, without effort. If it is comfortable for you, allow your eyes to close or for your gaze to soften. Let us bring into awareness the truth in our private hearts. What place has divine providence found for you? What is the connection of recent events? Is there some latent conviction as yet unexpressed? Let us join in a time of silent meditation.

[Silence]

“To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you is true for all—that is genius.” Blessed Be.

READING Emerson’s Words

*Nature* was Emerson's first published work. This passage is a keystone of Transcendentalist thought and practice.

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to one another; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth are part of his daily food. In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man in spite of real sorrows....

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

REFLECTION: *Learning to See With New Eyes*

On the cover of your order of service is a caricature of Emerson that was drawn by the Rev. Christopher Cranch. It is an illustration of the passage that Beth read from his essay *Nature*. In it, Emerson describes the ultimate transcendent experience. He writes that walking through the woods allows him to return to reason and faith. The beauty of the natural environment restores his sense of well-being. The burdens of other people's opinions, personal challenges, and grief fall away. With his feet flat on the earth, bathed in fresh air and his vision uplifted, "all mean egotism vanishes". Becoming a transparent eyeball is how Emerson describes the mystical sensation of being at One with the Universe.

I invite you to remember a time when you had a strong sense of this greater Unity with the world around you. As we are in Newport, perhaps it is the ocean instead of the woods that returns you to reason and faith. In some of the most challenging periods of my life, I have walked the beach to remember that the world does not revolve around me. No matter how heavy my responsibilities or sorrows may seem, "the currents of Universal Being circulate through me."

I agree with Emerson that often times I have a very superficial seeing of the world around me. Often my mind is so full of future plans or reviewing the past that I am blind to my environment.

As most of you know, I have an eight-month old daughter named Liza. Liza takes delight in everything and everyone she encounters. As Emerson writes, "The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and heart of the child".

In preparation for this service, I went on the Cliff Walk several times this week. Each day Liza becomes more aware and responsive to her surroundings, so while unloading her stroller I imagined that she would enjoy seeing the ocean waves and feeling the sea breeze. In fact, Liza did enjoy the Cliff Walk. However, what she enjoyed was not the clear blue water or the sailboats on the horizon. She leaned forward smiling and connecting with all the people and dogs who crossed our path. Even more surprising, her little hand reached out from the stroller to feel the hedge as we went by. For me, hedges are nothing more than a nuisance, reminding me of the hedge that needs trimming at home. I followed her example and brushed my open hand against the hedge as we past. The tiny thick leaves were cool and soft; sensuous as velvet.

Communion with the divine is possible in nature. Liza reminds me that it is not necessary to travel long distance to exotic locations for this transcendent experience.

Certainly, I have felt awe on the colorful cliffs of Aquinnah and surrounded by the great redwood trees of Muir Woods. But as Emerson writes, “The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to one another; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.” Liza recalls me to this sense of wonder and awe when she notices the play of light on a wall, the feel of grass through her fingers, the exhilaration of a rainy day.

As a former preschool teacher, I am familiar with the developmental stages of two and three year olds. As the youngest in my family, I am less familiar with the development of babies. So, I am fascinated to experience how Liza is growing and changing in her capabilities each day. She is trying hard to crawl and the way she lifts herself on all fours and rocks back and forth, it will not be long until we will be chasing her.

Lately, she has also begun to complain when one of her parents leaves the room. This is a change from her disposition at birth where she was more than content with whoever held her at that moment. Liza recovers quickly from this separation anxiety and I hope that she will always take delight in an extended community of people. However, this has made me think of one of the principles of Buddhism, that above all it is our attachment and clinging that causes suffering.

In a poem entitled, “Each and All”, Emerson writes of a man who is so enraptured by the beauty of nature that he desires to possess it for his very own. In hearing a sparrow sing, he captures the bird in a cage. He collects seashells from the shore. He picks flowers along a woodland path. However, in taking these living things from their natural settings, he discovers that each loses their beauty. The sparrow sings but without the river and the open air, the song is not as sweet. The seashells are ugly and dry without the bright sunshine, sand, and tumbling waves. The beauty of the violets is somehow less without the dappled sunlight through the trees.

I too have found that the shells and rocks that I’ve carried home from the beach are often disappointing when they tumble from my pockets at home. Like the poem, these “sea-born treasures” become “poor, unsightly, noisome things” for they “had left their beauty on the shore/ With the sun and the sand and the wild uproar.”

The poem concludes, “Beauty through my senses stole;/ I yielded myself to the perfect whole”. As Emerson declares in Nature, “nothing is quite beautiful alone; nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace.”

If there is something in human nature that causes us attachment and clinging, it is even more essential that we take the time to open our minds and hearts to our wider connection. Let us make it our religious practice to spend time in Nature not to capture it or collect it as our own but to remember that the whole “world is a mirror of the soul.”

Then perhaps we can do as Emerson suggests and “Write it on [our] heart[s] that every day is the best day in the year.”

#### CENTERING PRAYER

In Nature, Emerson wrote, “Is not prayer also a study of truth, —a sally of the soul into the unfound infinite? No man ever prayed heartily without ever learning something.” In this spirit, let us pray:

Dear God of our understanding,  
awaken us “to see the miraculous in the common”.  
May we not slumber, unaware of the blessings of our lives.  
Instead of as recreation or as a commodity  
or even viewing a beautiful scene as entertainment,  
may our religious practice become opening our minds and hearts  
to the truth that we are intimately connected  
to the environment and all living beings.  
Let us practice our religion by  
connecting with the Divine in nature as part of our daily food,  
becoming ever more conscious that our lives are part of the whole.  
Amen.