

Lessons on Living from Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sermon for May 23

by Lone Jensen

It is a real challenge, something like climbing a literary Mount Everest, to even attempt to write a sermon about that most famous of our Unitarian prophets, the minister, poet, philosopher and transcendentalist writer: Ralph Waldo Emerson. Two hundred and one years after his birth he is easily the most recognized philosopher this country has ever produced.

The Reverend Barry Andrews writes in his book *Emerson a spiritual guide*: *Indeed, it's hard to avoid him. As I drive to work in the morning, I pass the new wing of an elementary school, on the side of which is chiseled an Emerson quote. At the local grocery store, I pick up a box of easy-to-fix risotto with another of Emerson's sayings printed on the back: "For everything in nature contains all the powers of nature. Everything is made of one hidden stuff."* I do wonder how he would have felt about that. *Emerson was the master of aphorism and the most quotable of authors (so much so, in fact, that some of his most popular sayings were never said by him at all!) His quotations appear in greeting cards, commencement speeches, and newspaper columns and fill many pages of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations.*

Andrews is right. I have on the wall in my office a poster

with the saying ” *Beauty is God’s handwriting: A wayside sacrament.* “ and I have given away many, many refrigerator magnets, with his words on them. My current favorite in this election year is: *A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.* Refrigerator theology could be a new field. Tell me what magnets you collect and I will tell you who you are! Well, not really but when someone makes it the refrigerator door they are common property indeed. Yet as Andrew points out: *Today Emerson is more revered than read. Everyone has an anthology of Emerson but few have read more than one or two of the essays. The most frequent complaint I hear are Emerson’s language, which at times can be a frustrating experience for those who truly desire to understand him. His unfamiliar phrases and references stop the modern reader in her tracks. What’s a firkin, anyhow?* No, I won’t tell you, go find it out for yourself.

My goal today is simply to give you enough of a taste, enough of a bridge to cross over so that you may decide to tackle his writings again. And if you are already well versed in Emerson’s writings or a scholar yourself I encourage you to read him in a new way as if you were an innocent, encountering the sage for the first time.

Let us begin with perhaps his most famous quote: *I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am part and particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, - master or servant, is then a trifle or a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.*

Standing in a clearing in a deep forest this is what he felt. At one with all there is. His ego did not matter, his worries for that minute were gone and he knew that beyond the veil of our daily existence was another deeper reality. He had a transcendent moment. Now I believe that though we may use other language today most of us in this sanctuary this morning have had similar experiences when our senses suddenly are sharpened and the universe floods in upon us. I stood on a beach once on a clear and sat lit night at a clear and the heavens filled my senses. The stars, the waves, the sand beneath my feet all were infused with intense joy. There was gentle laughter too which seems to be everywhere as I knew that my own separateness was an illusion. Yes, I do understand Emerson, the mystic.

But the problem is what do we do with such experiences? Which may not be joyful at all but instead filled with awe, even fear. We may treasure them but how do they help us live better?

Such moments of intense experience are a lot like the seashells we collect on the beach. In that minute we stoop to pick them up, they are still wet from the sea foam and bathed in sunlight and seem like the most precious jewels. As children we take them home and put them in a box and are dismayed to discover when we take them out, under lamplight, dried out and put them on the kitchen table, that they seem now dead as bones. If Beauty is indeed God's handwriting, how do read the message? Can we and should we live in that state of heightened awareness. ?

Emerson felt we should to lift ourselves out of what surely must be one this century's biggest problems too. Rampant materialism. The material so predominates that the spiritual is overlaid and lost. In "Man the Reformer he wrote: *Let it be granted, that our life, as we lead it, is common and mean, that the community in which we live will hardly bear to be told that every man should be open to ecstasy or a divine illumination, and his daily walk elevated by intercourse with the spiritual world. Without a sense of depth in life, our existence is shallow and superficial.* In Works and Days Emerson diagnoses what is still our problem: *We become selfish members of a selfish society, judging everything by "the lucrative standard."* *We enjoy every convenience, "ride four times as fast as our fathers did; travel, grind, weave, forge, plant, till and excavate better.* We have consumer goods, science and tech-

nology, and mass media. *"Much will have more. Man flatters himself that his command over Nature must increase."* Indeed, our appetite appears to be insatiable.

Tantalus, who in old times was seen vainly trying to quench his thirst with a flowing stream, which ebbed whenever he approached it, has been seen again lately. He is in Paris, in New York, in Boston. He is now in great spirits; thinks he shall reach it yet; thinks he shall bottle the wave. No matter how many centuries of culture have preceded, the new man always finds himself standing on the brink of chaos, always in crisis.

We still are, or seem to be, as a nation, as individuals in crisis and in chaos. Much of our media coverage is based on this assumption. And yes, we have changed. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote with a quill pen, in longhand. But his experience was not that unlike ours. He lived in the most divided and brutal period in this country's history before and after the civil war, in an age of slavery and poverty. The nation's soul then and now seemed in peril from brutality and acts against our better natures. Abu Ghaib prison may seem far from the Concord, New Hampshire but what better prophet for these days than the one who wrote about self-reliance and following your inner guide, as in your conscience. *Contrary to what many of his critics have believed, self-reliance doesn't mean unbridled individualism. More genius*

does not increase the individuality, but the community of each mind. Universal truth emerges from speaking our minds, our personal truth.

In his personal life Emerson suffered greatly. On April 10, 1834, at the age of thirty-one, Ralph Waldo Emerson spent the afternoon at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He came to be with the dead among the grassy knolls and green canopy of trees. Writing in his journal the next day, Emerson described his experience:

I forsook the tombs, and found a sunny hollow where the east wind would not blow, and lay down against the side of a tree to most happy beholdings. At least I opened my eyes and let what would pass through them into the soul. I saw no more my relation, how near and petty, to Cambridge or Boston; I heeded no more what minute or hour our Massachusetts clocks might indicate-I only saw the noble earth on which I was born, with the great Star which warms and enlightens it. The pines glittered with their innumerable green needles in the light, and seemed to challenge me to read their riddle. The drab oak-leaves of the last year turned their little somersets and lay still again. And the wind bustled high overhead in the forest top. This gay and grand architecture, from the vault to the moss and lichen on which I lay-who shall explain to me the laws of its proportions and

adornments?

Three years earlier, his wife, Ellen, had died of tuberculosis at the age of nineteen. In his grief he resigned his pulpit at Second Church in Boston. Besides he could no longer give communion in good conscience. He had lost his profession, his beloved and was thrown into an existential crisis: *"I wish I knew where and how I ought to live."*

How often have you asked yourself that? In what seems to me to be an age where so many people feel powerless I believe we need an antidote to this hopeless, helpless disease. Oh, I am not immune to it either and of course some of it is always true. What can we really control? I can't stop the war in Iraq or even save the baby quails in my garden. Yesterday they made me smile as those feathery fuzzy balls of hope rolled across my lawn, parents watching carefully. But they are fewer chicks now than a week ago. My neighbor's cat following her nature's call considers them to be popcorn candy. *The way of Providence is a little rude. The habit of snake and spider, the snap of the tiger and other leapers and bloody jumpers, the crackle of the bones of his prey in the coil of the anaconda, these are in the system, and our habits are like theirs. Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean*

shirt and white neck cloth of a student in divinity."

It helps me to remember that though there is much we cannot control still we have a choice. *"We are incompetent to solve the times: the only question that matters is, "How shall I live? The dilemma that we face in every era is how to reconcile freedom and fate.*

Emerson was the ultimate seeker. He believed that we must free ourselves from dogma, from outdated religious systems. In religion freedom was essential, conformity deadly. *"Religion must always be a crab fruit it cannot be grafted and keep its wild beauty."* Each of us can choose to live a moral and spiritual life, *based on an intuitive perception of the laws that "pervade and govern" the universe, omnipresent in every atom in nature. When we learn to act out of an intuition of moral laws and not out of a fear of others approval we are free. In our definitions we grope after the spiritual by describing it as invisible. The true meaning of spiritual is real: that law which executes itself, which works without means, and which cannot be conceived as not existing. Men talk of mere morality as if to say poor God with nobody to help him!*

But do we have time to ponder such questions? The most common complaint I hear these days is we have so little time we work so hard. Yes, I would like to encounter my soul but can you

give me a quick and easy way of doing it? Like in 20 minutes on any given Sunday? Well, the truth is I cannot give you anything when it comes to your soul. I can open the door a little perhaps, I can issue an invitation but you have to cross the threshold. But these demands for instant enlightenment are merely signs of the times. Next to powerlessness the urgent issue of these days seems to be the scarcity of time. And I too am caught up in this illusion, I too say; I don't have time. I'm late; I'm late, for a very important date!

*Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.
To each they offer gifts after his will,
Bread, kingdoms, stars and sky that holds them all.
I, in my garden, watched the pomp, Forgot my morning wishes,
hastily
Took a few herbs and apples, and the Day Turned and departed
silent. I, too late,
Under her solemn fillet saw the scorn.*

Every day comes to us as a gift. They all have 24 hours. How we use those hours make all the difference, obvious, sure but I forget it at least once every day. Emerson reminds us, "*We ask for long*

life, but 'tis deep life, or grand moments, that signify." The measure of time should be qualitative, not quantitative. "Moments of insight, of fine personal relation, a smile, a glance,-what ample borrowers of eternity they are!" Eternity culminates in the present. Andrews writes how: When someone remarked to a chief of the Six Nations of New York that he had not enough time, the Native American replied, "Well, I suppose you have all there is:' We always have all the time there is. It's up to us to make the best use of it.

Albert Schweitzer who also left the Unitarian ministry and scholarship to tend the illnesses and wounds of the native population in Congo wrote: *You know of the disease in Central Africa called sleeping sickness. . . . There also exists a sleeping sickness of the soul. Its most dangerous aspect is that one is unaware of its coming. That is why you have to be careful. As soon as you notice the slightest sign of indifference, the moment you become aware of the loss of a certain seriousness, of longing, of enthusiasm and zest, take it as a warning. You should realize your soul suffers if you live superficially.* Schweitzer is right. How easy it is for me too to come home tired and quiet that hunger of the soul with an abundance of distractions, with remedies that do not heal. One of the latest reality show is called extreme makeover and involves plastic surgery. Well you can work all your life on

how you look on the surface and still not feel as if you are enough. Because it is a dammed lie that you only have value if you look good enough or work hard enough or follow any other surface remedy. Every one of us are already enough. Trust your soul.

My last advice may seem surprising. Go surfing! Ride the waves! No Emerson he was not a beach boy in the cold New England waters but he heard from a foreign scholar who visited the young Ralph "how the Hawaiian natives delight to play with the surf, coming in on top of the rollers, then swimming out again, and repeat the delicious man oeuvre for hours. We should follow the example of native Hawaiians. Human life is made up of such transits. There can be no greatness without abandonment. Just to fill the hour, that is happiness. Fill my hour, ye gods, so that I shall not say, whilst I have done this, "Behold, also, an hour of my life is gone;"-but rather, "I have lived an hour." ***"It is the depth at which we live and not at all the surface extension that imports. Time is but the flitting surface; with the least acceleration of thought we pierce through it to eternity."***

How much of what you do each day do you do for the joy of it? How many wayside pulpits of desert brush and rosy sunsets do you pass by without ever reading the handwriting? It is eternity now. We are in the midst of it. Your faces, this sanctuary, my tired voice, your patient ears, our common fate, our beloved community,

this whole congregation and the Arizona sunshine are all part of it. *He only is rich who owns the day. There is no king, rich man, fairy or demon who possesses such power as that. The days are ever divine. They are of the least pretension and of the greatest capacity of anything that exists. They come and go like muffled and veiled figures, sent from a distant friendly party; but they say nothing, and if we do not use the gifts they bring, they carry them silently away.*

May we use our time wisely and ride the waves though they around here be dunes of sand. Amen.