

## **Ralph Waldo Emerson: America's Greatest Unitarian Thinker**

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in 1803. He entered Harvard College at the age of 14. He graduated, taught school children, and then entered Harvard Divinity School. He graduated and was ordained a Unitarian Minister.

At the age of 26 Emerson married his first true love. She died less than 18 months later. Emerson was bereft. After serving three years at a Unitarian Church in Boston, Emerson resigned. He traveled in Europe for a year.

In 1833, at the age of 30, he left the ministry to pursue a career as a lecturer and author. He wrote poetry, essays and lectured on philosophical subjects. He married Lydia Jackson and settled in Concord, Massachusetts, where they had four children. Their eldest son died at the age of five.

Emerson gathered around him a circle of kindred spirits who became known as Transcendentalists. For forty years, 1838 until 1878, he was on the forefront of progressive thinking. He was widely read in both America and Europe. Emerson died in 1882.

Today, Emerson's essays are taught in universities around the world. His poetry is included in any major anthology of American verse. His impact upon western thought has been remarkable. His impact upon Unitarianism was transformational.

Emerson's most famous essay was entitled "Self Reliance". In it he wrote: "To believe your own thought, to believe what is true for you in your private heart...that is genius." He said: trust your self.

Emerson's self reliance is not isolation or narcissism. It is self reliance in relationship with nature and with other people. In his second most important essay, "Nature", he wrote:

"We creep out of our close and crowded houses, into the night and morning, and we see what majestic beauties daily wrap us in their bosom... The tempered light of the woods is a perpetual morning... The trees begin to persuade us to live with them... Here no history, no church, no state,

is interpolated on the divine sky or the immortal year. We are led in triumph by nature.”

For Emerson, nature is sacred. We belong to nature, not that nature belongs to us. His poem Hamatraya teaches that greedy dominance over nature will lead us to ruin. Self reliance does not dominate nature, but rather, finds within nature a Divine Beauty. In his poem “Each and All” he wrote:

“As I spoke, beneath my feet  
The ground pine curled its pretty wreath  
Around me stood the oaks and firs  
Over me soared the eternal sky  
Again I saw, again I heard  
The rolling river, the morning bird  
Beauty through my senses stole  
I yielded myself to the perfect whole.”

For Emerson, self reliance is trusting your own experience of nature, and there in, discovering the Divinity of the natural world. In his poem, “Thine Eyes Still Shined”, he wrote:

“This morn I climbed the misty hill  
And roamed the pastures through  
How danced thy form before my path  
Amidst the deep eyed dew.  
When the red bird spread his sable wing  
And showed his side of flame  
When the rose bud ripened to the rose  
In both, I read thy name.”

For Emerson, every tree, hill, cloud, lake, and rose is an invitation to experience the Sacredness of Being. The Sacred within the human meets the Sacred within nature.

Emerson also encourages us to trust our own experience in relationship other people. In his essay “The Poet”, he writes that the poet is a prophet of beauty and truth, but this can only be actualized in the connection between poet and listener. In his essay “The American Scholar” he urges writers to be original in their thought and then be in dialogue with other people. In his

later essays, Emerson expounds about the place of appropriate human customs and manners. It's all about authentic relationship. The Sacred with one person meets the Sacred within another.

Emerson's themes of self reliance and the divinity of nature were a challenge to traditional Christianity. Emerson appreciated the moral and spiritual example of Jesus, but he stepped beyond the Christian tradition. In 1838 he spoke to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School, and gave an impassioned plea for self reliance in religion. He proclaimed:

“Whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every person, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition, this namely: it is an intuition. It cannot be received second hand.”

In short, you must experience the Divine for yourself – you must experience God for yourself - without any book, teacher, or creed as an intermediary. Jesus can give us an inspiring example, but he cannot do it for us. You must do it for yourself – by trusting your deepest intuitive experience and knowing.

Emerson's philosophy became known as Transcendentalism. Emerson borrowed a word from the philosopher John Locke, transcendentalism, and made it his own. It meant, for Emerson, the immediate experience of the Sacred – the Holy. You can experience the Sacred, here and now, in your ordinary life. The experience is an intuition - an inner knowing. It is available to every one. Emerson called it Reason (with a capital “R”). Not the reason of the mind or of the emotions, but the Reason of our deepest intuitive knowing. Each person can experience the underlying Oneness of creation, the Life Force within everything, the Beauty and Love which sustains human life, what Emerson called “the Over Soul”.

In his poem “Woodnotes” he describes the One, the “Over Soul”, which gives rise to the many:

“Older am I than thy numbers wot  
Change I may, but I pass not  
Hitherto all things fast abide  
And anchored in the tempest ride  
Trenchant time behoves to hurry  
All to yearn and all to bury

All the forms are fugitive  
But the substance survives

Ever fresh the broad creation  
A divine improvisation  
From the heart of God proceeds  
A single will, a million deeds”

Emerson stepped beyond traditional Christianity, to celebrate the One which gives rise to the many: one God – many religions, one earth – many life forms, one humanity – many cultures. He helped Unitarianism to become a universal tradition. It is said that for a generation in America there were two books on a Unitarian pulpit: the Bible and Emerson’s Essays. Today, all books of wisdom can be on a Unitarian Universalist pulpit, and it was Emerson who provided the bridge from one book to many.

Emerson encouraged self reliance in relationship with nature and with other people. He said we can all know the Divine, here and now, for ourself. You can experience the Sacred in the middle of your ordinary life. Just take a walk in nature. Just look into the eyes of a friend. Just smell a rose. It is all there. You do not need an extra book, creed, or teacher to do it. You just need to trust in your own deepest intuitive knowing.

For Emerson, this experience of being fully your self, in relationship to the world, was the experience of love: universal, selfless love. So I close with his poem entitled “Give All to Love”:

“Give all to love, obey thy heart  
Friends, kindred, days  
Estate, good fame  
Plans, credit, and the muse  
Nothing refuse  
Give all to love

Tis a brave master, let it have scope  
Follow it utterly, hope beyond hope  
High and more high, it dives into noon  
With wing unspent, untold intent  
But it is a god  
Knows its own path  
And all the outlets of the sky  
Give all to love

It was never for the mean  
It requireth courage stout  
Souls above doubt  
Valor unbending  
It shall reward  
You shall return more than you were  
And ever ascending  
Give all to love.”

I invite you now to join in a time of meditation. After a minute of quiet I will offer a guided meditation.

Trust your own experience.  
Your experience right this moment  
Of your body, thoughts, and feelings  
Is Sacred

Feel the energy in your body.

It took the universe 14 billion years to make your body.  
It is precious. It is life.

Feel yourself breathing.  
You are intimately connected with nature.  
You are the universe aware of itself.

You are experiencing the Sacredness of Life right this moment

Trust your own experience.  
The Sacred is in the ordinary.

Bring to mind the people that you love.  
These relationships are precious. Nurture them.  
They are Sacred.

And expand that love to all life.  
Give every human being dignity  
You are Sacred – and each person you meet is Sacred.

Trust your own experience.  
In relationship with nature and other people.  
In your deepest intuition  
You can know God for yourself.

Amen.