

Without Mediator or Veil

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What an honor to have our Music Director compose such a beautiful piece of music to the words of one of the great voices of our religious tradition, just as he did for “Time is Singing” by one of our members and “Rejoice in the Light” by our first minister here in Eugene, Rev. Stephen Peebles. At the concert last night, after Tom read from the text to “Rejoice in the Light,” I enjoyed telling Wendy that about half of the religious leaders in whose light Rev. Peebles “rejoiced” were Unitarian ministers on whom I would be preaching in the next year. As our church celebrates its centennial this year, we celebrate not only this particular congregation but also our larger Unitarian and Universalist heritage.

I taught this class before, using an excellent curriculum from the Unitarian Universalist Association. In studying the words of the man known for individualism, we came to revelations, inspiration, and I believe some measure of intimacy with the sacred. For a class so large, we had some good silences. I found it interesting that a class on Mr. Self-Reliance -- Mr. Highly Verbose Self-Reliance -- such intimacy, community, and silence occurred. But this is less surprising when we consider that Emerson’s Self-Reliance was more specific than most people realize: the “Self” he invites us to rely upon is not our usual, everyday, perhaps selfish self. The Self that is truly reliable is something deeper. When Emerson encountered and lived from this deeper Self, he didn’t call it Ralph or Waldo; he called it “God.” Intimacy, community, and silence are natural responses to encounters with this deeper spiritual reality, whatever we call it.

Like many other teachers of the soul, Emerson emphasizes personal experience, revelation as it happens in the moment. But where he stands apart from other teachers may be in the fearlessness with which he faces life and God, as well as his well-honed skill in provoking through his words jolts of divinity in his listeners and readers.

Robert Richardson’s biography called *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* begins with this story:

On March 29, 1832, the twenty-eight-year-old Emerson visited the tomb of his young wife, Ellen, who had been buried a year and two months earlier. He was in the habit of walking from Boston out to her grave in Roxbury every day, but on this particular day he did more than commune with the spirit of the departed Ellen: he opened her coffin...

Opening the coffin was not a grisly gothic gesture, not just the wild aberration of an unhinged lover. What Emerson was doing was not unheard of [at the time, yet] the act was essential Emerson... Some part of him was not able to believe she was dead... He had to see for himself.

[Richardson, p. 3]

Emerson went alone, without mediator or veil. He had to see for himself. The bedrock of his faith was direct, personal experience. Even though he was a phenomenally well-read man, for Emerson, direct, raw contact with life itself – and sometimes with death – was the heart of religious experience.

Emerson believed in God within. He was greatly moved by George Fox, the founder of the Friends (also known as the Quakers) who taught of the light within. Like his mentor William Ellery Channing, Emerson believed that the human soul bears a likeness to God, that we carry traces of divinity within ourselves.

But Emerson took Channing's insights further, infusing them with a sense of personal greatness. After he left the Unitarian ministry, Emerson became a public lecturer, beginning with a series of biographies of great thinkers: John Milton, Martin Luther, George Fox, Michelangelo and others.

He was particularly taken with, and now I quote from Richardson, "the spirit of the deal Michelangelo offered the Pope for his rebuilding St. Peter's in Rome: 'no fee and no interference.'" [Richardson, p. 195]

We might say, "What hubris!" "Some attitude!" But then again, Michelangelo did a fine job of it, didn't he? One of the most beautiful demonstrations of human greatness and beauty began with the artist insisting that he be allowed to follow his Muse wherever it would take him. I hope to go to the Sistine Chapel someday, and when I do, I'd like to try out the words, *God is, not was* in that space. To Michelangelo this must have been true.

Emerson did not engage in this biography series to place great thinkers onto a pedestal, or encourage worship of the past for its own sake. At this time in his life he was alive in the present and looking to the future: he was newly engaged to the woman who would become his second wife, Lydia Jackson, a woman with whom he shared a wonderfully energizing meeting of the minds. With the biography series Emerson sought to commune with the great minds in hope of awakening greatness in himself and in his audience.

This may sound odd for one so taken with greatness, but the human tendency Emerson spent his life fighting was idolatry. Idolatry and diminishment are partners in crime. People see Michelangelo's paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and think: now *This* is God. And who can argue with that? But if the image becomes frozen in our mind, it is death. The real presence of God is not in the painting itself but in the religious vision, dedication, and artistry that produced the image, and in what the painting evokes in us. The real magic and power lies not in the static image, but in the creative process moving from the painter's mind and spirit to our own. *God is, not was*.

The same thing is true of religious leaders such as Jesus. In "The Divinity School Address," Emerson argues that Christianity had abandoned Jesus' "doctrine of the soul" and instead focused with exaggeration on "the *person* of Jesus." Again and again, we deify the messenger and ignore the message. To Emerson, this is equivalent to killing the messenger and ignoring the message.

Hence, Emerson says, *Dare to love God without mediator or veil*. The mediators of God are Jesus and Michelangelo and your grandmother and anybody else who experiences a strong connection with a religious dimension and invites us along. Emerson does not say we should do without these guides altogether. Throughout his life, he turned to Plato and his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson and other guides. But he says, again and again, if you want to experience God truly, you must be ready for something altogether fresh and new. Others may provide you the map, even inspiration and some sustenance, or guide you by the hand. But the journey is yours.

Dare to love God without mediator or veil.

Let's play with that veil. Who wears veils? Brides and mourners. Religious artifacts. We put a veil over joy, beauty, grief, and holiness. Perhaps we need to veil them, to enhance the beauty or the holiness, and protect the grief and even the joy.

But the bride's veil is lifted for the kiss, the mourner's veil is lifted when tears are wiped away, and the coverings are removed from Torah scrolls in Jewish worship. The moment of the kiss, the wiping away of tears, the reading of sacred texts – these may be touchings with God.

Dare to love God without mediator or veil. Listen to the wisdom of sages, read their maps, let them guide your first steps. But if you want to come face to face with a transformative love, know also that you will have to let go of the mediator's hand and walk on your own.

There is something in human nature that fears a touching with essence, with truth, with God. Emerson minces no words: "We are become timorous, desponding whimperers" – this was a favorite passage from the Emerson class I taught – "We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, afraid of each other". [from "Self-Reliance"]

We fear change. We fear seeing how we may have built our lives around falsehoods. We fear losing our loved ones or our future plans or even our precious identity – any and all of these can be lost when we face Ultimate Reality, a more modern image of God.

Yet we're drawn to freedom and truth and life and transcendence. We want to see it and be close enough to feel its warmth but not so close as to be touched and perhaps burned. And so we build churches and temples and follow spiritual teachers and psychotherapists and yet we often manage to avoid any real, intimate encounter with the sacred. We deify the mediators and weave new veils.

Go alone – dare to love God. Emerson is not calling us to a dramatic quest for a Holy Grail or anything external. His is a stay-at-home spiritual path: walking, observing, reading, journaling. In silence, all by ourselves, we may find a connection with the life force that created the stars and grows the irises. Truly an awesome force, yet it lives in each of us.

And what does this mean, to love God? To Emerson I believe, loving is virtually synonymous with seeing, with truly perceiving. *Dare to see God without mediator or veil.* By perceiving anything truly, even a bug-eaten, moldy leaf, or a discarded computer, we may have

an experience of love. It's the experience that fuels artists and poets. Sensing. Knowing. Loving.

The times in my life when I have felt truly loved are the times I have felt truly seen. What a gift this is, seeing. Emerson knew the worth of this gift better than most of us, since he literally lost most of his vision to tuberculosis during seminary. He couldn't read for a long time. And decades after he regained his vision, his images of God are still infused with images of eyes and of sight: his famous Transparent Eyeball. And here, the God that is known when the veil is lifted. Emerson's metaphor of sight for full perception is, like all metaphors, imperfect and limited, but it still carries great power for many.

Dare to love God without mediator or veil. Dare to see God – in front of your nose. And far away. Dare to trust that God, all Greatness and Gentleness and Creativity and Compassion you can imagine, lives within you. Dare to see God – and dare to be seen. Dare to believe you are worthy of love's attention, of its sustained gaze.

Trust your gifts. Trust even that you possess greatness. Trust that the greatness within you may serve whatever is God to you. Trust your voice to sing in harmony with its song, your body to dance to its rhythms. Trust, in the words of Melville, the "flashings forth of your mind". Know that God is, not was, and God is present in you no less than in Michelangelo's paintbrush or in Emerson's piercing words or in the laugh of an infant. As a poet who walked beyond Emerson said, *For you are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars.* [Max Ehrmann]

I invite you to join with me in a time of silent prayer or meditation. I invite you to use your own words, in silence, to evoke the deepest reality in you, that which is truly you but also is a doorway to kinship with all of life. I invite you to ask, "What are you saying to me now, what are you revealing to me?"

Let's take a minute to listen to the voice within, directly, without mediator or veil...

Amen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Many essays available in most collections. I drew most strongly from "Self-Reliance" and "The Divinity School Address."

Richardson, Robert D., Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.*

I am also indebted to Rev. Ralph (Ron) Cook's "Channing and Emerson" class at Starr King School for the Ministry, Berkeley, CA, 1994, and to the members of the class on Emerson I led in May and June of 2003, at Bell Street Chapel. Teachers learn the most!

Quotations used in the Worship Service

To believe your own heart, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all... that is genius.

The great man is he who in the midst of a crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

(from Emerson's "Self-Reliance")

Or we might say,

The great woman is she who in the midst of a crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

What a strange moment this is, a congregation gathered on Sunday morning to be carried away with the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great individualist who left behind organized religion – and, specifically, Unitarianism.

But as Emerson said himself, *To be great is to be misunderstood*. Individualist though he was, Emerson was a man whose life was shaped by personal relationships. Intuition and feeling guided him more than reason. Emerson preached an individualism characterized not by selfishness and caprice or even by cool logic. His self-reliance required faith and even, as he said, obedience to the sacred. The “Self” Emerson celebrates is the divinity within, at one with the divinity without.

I will so trust that what is deep is holy. *(from "Self-Reliance")*

As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at his need inexhaustible power.

(from Nature, 1836)

As a plant upon the earth, so a woman rests upon the bosom of Goddess; she is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at her need inexhaustible power.

from Emerson, “Self-Reliance”:

... let us not rove; let us sit at home with the cause. Let us stun and astonish the intruding rabble of men and books and institutions, by a simple declaration of the divine fact. Bid the invaders take the shoes from off their feet, for God is here within...

We must go alone. I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching... So let us always sit.

The following lines are taken from “The Divinity School Address”. In this and subsequent quotations, I have modified Emerson’s language for gender neutrality while retaining some masculine language when changing it would have altered the meaning or the poetry of Emerson’s words.

This address to Harvard divinity school graduates was perhaps Emerson's most controversial oration, and, in my opinion, one of his best!

Ah me! No[one] goeth alone. All... go in flocks to this saint or this poet, avoiding the God who seeth in secret. They cannot see in secret; they love to be blind in public. They think society wiser than their soul, and know not that one soul, and their soul, is wiser than the whole world...

...None believeth in the soul of man, but only in some man or person old and departed...

...It is the office of the true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that [God] Speaketh, not spake.

...Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil.

[emphases added]