

MR. EMERSON ON DEATH
Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
January 18, 2009

Reading: Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters.

He revives my soul and guides me along right paths for his Name's sake.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.

Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The story is told of two families living in a small town in Illinois. The first family is in the process of moving to Florida. The wife is closing up their house in Illinois and making sure that the movers have everything packed. The husband is driving to Florida to open up their new house and receive the moving van.

The second family is that of a Methodist minister who has just died and his funeral has just been observed. An 89-year-old widow survives him.

The man in the first family arrives at his new house in Florida on the evening of the Methodist preacher's funeral. He calls home to his wife, but by mistake dials the widow's phone number. The widow answers the phone

to hear a voice say, “It’s really hot down here, but I’m looking forward to seeing you in a couple of days.”

Death is our constant companion, darting in and out of our daily shadows. And yet we are surprised when death casts its own silhouette over us and there is a cold chill that runs through our bones. We have felt that dread wind these last few weeks, and we need to speak of death. We need to speak of those clouds that gather round the setting sun, the staccato of mortality’s footfall stalking us on the byways of our lives. It is a theme that I will turn to several times over the year, hoping to share with you sources of insight, strength and inspiration. This morning I will begin with one of America’s spiritual giants, Ralph Waldo Emerson. And lest you think that Mr. Emerson wrote of death only as an American romantic prose writer, let me share with you the reality of his own experience.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the son of the Reverend William Emerson and Ruth Haskins Emerson. Born May 25, 1803, Ralph was their third son. There would be eight children born into this family, three of whom would die in childhood beginning with their first child, Phebe. The oldest son, John Clarke would die at the age of eight. Mary Caroline was born in 1811, the same year that the Rev. William Emerson died of tuberculosis. Mary would die in 1814. When the Rev. Emerson died, he left his family in

virtual poverty, and they survived only by the sheer hard work of their mother and the charity of friends and family. This burden was made heavier by the fact that one child, Robert Bulkley, was mentally ill and required institutionalization from time to time. By the time Ralph Waldo Emerson was 33-years-old his two younger brothers would die, Edward at the age of 29 and Charles at the age of 26.

Ralph Waldo Emerson married Ellen Tucker on the 30th of September 1829. She was eighteen years old. Four months after their marriage, Ellen began coughing up blood. Entering their nuptials Emerson knew that she was consumptive. He never imagined that she would be dead by the 8th of February 1831. Emerson stood vigil with his brother Charles on the night she died. Charles wrote in a letter to Aunt Mary Moody Emerson of Ellen:

“She spoke this afternoon very sweetly of her readiness to die. She saw no reason why her friends should be distressed – it was better she should go first and prepare the way – She asked Waldo, if he had strength, to read her a few verses of scripture – and he read a portion of the XIV chapter of John – Waldo is bowed down under the affliction, yet he says ‘tis like seeing an angel go to Heaven.”¹

¹ John McAleer, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Days of Encounter*; Little Brown & Co., Boston: 1984, pp. 106-107.

Two hours later Emerson would also write Aunt Mary,

“My angel is gone to heaven this morning & I am alone in the world & strangely happy. Her lungs shall no more be torn nor her head scalded by her blood nor her whole life suffer from the warfare between the force and delicacy of her soul & the weakness of her frame...I have never known a person in the world in whose separate existence as a soul I could so readily & fully believe & she is present with me now beaming joyfully upon me, in her deliverance & the entireness of her love for your poor nephew.”²

Ellen was buried in her father’s tomb at a cemetery near Roxbury. Emerson visited her tomb every morning in an effort to “commune with his saint.” On the 29th of March he even opened the casket to view her face again. Emerson would keep Ellen’s memory alive but he never gained a sense of her presence or any sense of communion with her. Emerson versed in his blotting book on the 19th of September 1831:

She never comes to me
 She promised me a thousand times
 That she would dearly dearly love me
 That in sickness & in health
 Others present others absent
 Whilst air was round & heaven above me
 She would be present as my life
 My holy gentle tender wife

² Ibid., p. 107.

She promised in my secret ear
 When none but God & I could hear
 That she would cleave to me forever
 There was one will between us
 There was one heart within us
 And God upon his children smiled
 As we the hours with love beguiled

And now I am alone
 Unheard I moan
 She never comes to me
 Sits never by my side
 I never hear her voice
 She comes not even to my dreams
 O Ellen ...

And comes she not
 Ask thy heart, Waldo
 Doth she break her word
 Doth not her love embrace thee yet
 Even from the Spirit's land?³

In the fall of 1832, Emerson resigned his position with the Second Unitarian Church in Boston. In December he set sail for Europe on the brig *Jasper*. When he returned it would not be as a Unitarian minister, but as lecturer, author, and naturalist. Emerson would marry Lydia Jackson in 1835. She became known as Lidian because Emerson constantly referred to her as “my Lydian Queen.”⁴ She would always call him “Mr. Emerson.” When their first daughter was born, Lidian named her Ellen Tucker Emerson. She knew that Ellen would always be Emerson’s first, and

³ William H Gilman, et.al. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*; Belknap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge: 1963, Vol. III, pp. 285-286.

⁴ McAleer, p. 205.

perhaps only, love. But as John McAleer points out, “they were living in times when love’s idyll more often than not was shattered by death’s sudden advent, leaving behind a chastened survivor who felt his or her world never could be whole again.”⁵

The closest that Ralph Waldo Emerson ever came to wholeness after Ellen’s death was the birth of his son, Waldo, October 30th, 1836. As the boy grew older he was constantly in his father’s mind. Emerson saw in the deep blue eyes of his son the future, and he cherished the potential that his son carried within his bright, observing mind.

Waldo was struck with scarlet fever on the 24th of January 1842. Just five years old, he died three days later with his father holding his hand at his bedside. Emerson would later write, “He gave up his little innocent breath like a bird.”

Nine-year-old Louisa May Alcott was sent by her family to inquire about Waldo’s health. She recalled, “My first remembrance is of the morning when I was sent to inquire for little Waldo, then lying very ill. His father came to me, so worn with watching and changed by sorrow, that I was startled, and could only stammer out my message. “Child, he is dead!” was his answer. Then the door closed, and I ran home to tell the sad

⁵ Ibid. p. 204.

tidings...That was my first glimpse of great grief, but I never have forgotten the anguish that made a familiar face so tragical..."⁶

The little boy dearly loved Henry David Thoreau who often made him wooden toys, tops, and whistles. The Emerson children loved Thoreau because he would go to their house and pop popcorn in the fireplace. They report that he smelled like pine trees. Mr. Emerson asked Thoreau to build Waldo's casket. Henry's brother, John, had just died on January 11th of lockjaw. Thoreau wrote to Lucy Brown, "As for Waldo, he died as the mist rises from the brook, which the sun will soon dart his rays through. Do not the flowers die every autumn...it seemed the most natural death that could happen. His fine organization demanded it, and nature gently yielded its request."

Writing an elegy, known as a threnody, Emerson wrote of his black despair,

"The eager fate which carried thee
Took the larger part of me:
For this losing is true dying;
This is lordly man's down-lying,
This his slow but sure reclining,
Star by star his world resigning."⁷

⁶ McAleer, p. 371.

⁷ Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson*; Penguin Books, New York: 1981, p. 397.

Several months later in a conversation with Sampson Reed the question of “the other world” was raised by Mr. Reed. “Other world?” exclaimed Emerson, “there is no other world; here or nowhere is the whole fact; all the Universe over, there is but one thing, this old double Creator-creature, mind-matter, right-wrong.”⁸

Eleven years since the death of his beloved Ellen, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s understanding of death and immortality had radically shifted. He no longer expected to be able to maintain a communion with his beloved save that of memory. He abandoned all popular forms of Christian theology that hoped for a heaven that mirrored life on earth.

Basically, Emerson came to believe that “A great integrity makes us immortal.”⁹ Indeed, his criticism of Christianity is that it resorted to the Egyptian preoccupation with the corpus, “an affair of the body.” He believed that immortality is rather an affair of moral and intellectual reality. Quoting Benjamin Franklin, “Life is rather a state of embryo, a preparation for life. A man is not completely born until he has passed through death,” Emerson would argue that the body is but an earthen vessel that the soul will outgrow. In other words, Emerson believed that the most important responsibility of human beings is to nurture and develop the soul. If we

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Immortality,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*; Houghton, Mifflin and Co., Boston: 1904, Vol. VIII, p. 347.

nurture the embryo of our mind – the storehouse of thought and will, character and action – we will eventually outgrow this mortal existence. It is like a seed that is planted, watered, fertilized, and nurtured. Soon the endosperm and plumule break through the seed coat, sprouting roots and breaking the soil with trunk and branch. Because the great oak tree must burst the acorn into the fullness of its stature, so the human being must cultivate its moral and intellectual life. Eventually the human body is not big enough to contain such a great soul. With the ripening of the human soul the human being is completed.

What Emerson suggested is that the soul does not live for itself or its own perpetuation. The soul of the human being becomes one with God. In simple language, Emerson said, “I do not wish to live to wear out my boots.” The human mind and the Divine mind meld into one being and Emerson referred to this as *Revelation*.¹⁰ The revelation of the divine in human history is expressed fundamentally in matters of character. The individual acts of justice, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion are revelations of that greater Truth. They are the attributes of the soul that God calls us to be. The Truth of God passes into the mind of human beings and soon the two are indistinguishable. Said Emerson, “We have our indemnity only in the

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*; Houghton, Mifflin and Co., Boston: 1904, Vol. II, p. 279-282,

moral and intellectual reality to which we aspire. That is immortal, and we only through that. The soul stipulates for no private good. That which is private I see not to be good. ‘If truth live, I live; if justice live, I live,’ said one of the old saints; ‘and these by any man’s suffering are enlarged and enthroned.’”¹¹

Emerson thought that as we grow deeper and deeper into the mind of God every vestige of egotism falls away like a tattered old coat, becoming one with God, to “share the will and the immensity of the First Cause.”¹²

With the death of our body the soul slips into what Emerson called the “Great Ocean of Being.” He considered this total melding of self-identity into the Source of life as a great relief from the frustrating and unmet needs of mortal existence. Given all of the death and grief that Ralph Waldo Emerson experienced in his life, we can understand the appeal of the eternal Silence.

The image of Ellen Tucker Emerson’s death is left to us in quaint 19th Century modesty. Her noble thoughts are shared, but not the wrenching spasms of tubercular coughing and choking. Only passing reference is made to the blood she barked. We are spared the delirium young Waldo surely knew. I recall the great pain that my mother suffered as cancer spread into

¹¹ “Immortality,” p. 343.

¹² Ibid. p. 349.

her spinal cord and lungs. I remember the wrenching suffering of getting her in and out of the car for treatments. She lost all feeling in her legs and often fell down. She was incontinent. As Emerson was relieved that Ellen's body was no more torn by suffering, so am I relieved that my mother is free from the body that brought her so much pain. My mom did not deserve to suffer like that. And it was death that freed her from such suffering.

But my mother was not a tumor-riddled – diabetic - sack of flesh and bone. What I remember about my mother and the relationship that I still have with her is about creativity and integrity, will and humor and lots of wit. This was the depth of her life. These are her immortal qualities that will ring down the tunnel of time. My mother's creativity is fresh with the dawn of each new day; her integrity is writ large over the affairs of my family; her humor is cosmic, and her wit is universal. And while I remember Jane Blaine's personal character and characteristics, I understand with Emerson that they are but a reflection of the Eternal. They are but little bubbles welling up from the Spring of Life, flowing outward to that Great Ocean of Being.

So if in the end it is finally about character, and integrity, and lots of humor, I submit to you that is the future of the Obama administration. If he can hold on to those things which are immortal, such as character and moral

agency he can become a great president. These are the values to which he is calling the country. We have heard it in his campaign and on his train trip into Washington, D.C. for his inauguration. I believe that if we could distill the world's great religions, political and ethical systems down to their immortal qualities we would see that they are defined by our moral character and how we treat each other with righteous values.

Finis