

180 years ago, on July 15<sup>th</sup>, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered the commencement address at Harvard Divinity School. His words would later become known as the Divinity School Address, and they changed not just the direction of Unitarianism in America, but the direction of secular society as well.

He was invited there by the graduating seniors of 1938. There were only seven of those fledgling ministers, but the ceremony in the chapel at Divinity Hall was filled with close to a hundred alumni, faculty members, local pastors, friends, and family. Many key figures in the Unitarian establishment were there, including the Biblical scholar Andrews Norton, Henry Ware, Jr., and Divinity School Dean John Gorham Palfrey. Recent graduate Theodore Parker made the trek from West Roxbury to hear him.

At the time, Harvard Divinity School was the stronghold of Christian Unitarianism in New England, a faith that Emerson thought had lost its way, become lifeless, lacking inspiration.

He was 35 years old when he spoke. He had started at Harvard College at the age of 14, and graduated in the middle of his class at the age of 18. After making a living as a school master for a few years, he attended Harvard Divinity School, during which period he met and married his first wife, Ellen. Upon graduation, Boston's Second Church invited Emerson to serve as its junior pastor, and he was ordained on January 11, 1829.

Like so many people of his era, he was intimately familiar with death. His father – A Unitarian minister – had died when he was eight. Three of his eight siblings had died in childhood. Two of his brothers would die in early adulthood. His first wife, Ellen, died of tuberculosis two years into their marriage.

After his wife's death, he began to reevaluate his relationship to the church, writing in his journal in June 1832, "I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers".

Other disagreements with church officials over the Communion rites and his misgivings about public prayer eventually led to his resignation from the church in 1832.

Seeking a break from his previous life, Emerson tours Europe, and in Paris he visits the Jardin des Plantes, where he is deeply impressed by the organization of plants according to Jussieu's system of classification, and the way all such objects were related and connected. It is "a moment of almost visionary intensity that pointed him away from theology and toward science", according to biographer Robert Richardson. In England, Emerson met William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Thomas Carlyle.

Returning to New England, he begins to explore the possibility of becoming a lecturer, which turns out to be the defining decision for the rest of his life, and starts his trajectory towards greatness.

On November 5, 1833, he made the first of what would eventually be some 1,500 lectures, "The Uses of Natural History", in Boston. This was an expanded account of his experience in Paris. In this lecture, he set out some of his important beliefs and the ideas he would later develop in his first published essay, "Nature":

*Nature is a language and every new fact one learns is a new word; but it is not a language taken to pieces and dead in the dictionary, but the language put together into a most significant and universal sense. I wish to learn this language, not that I may know a new grammar, but that I may read the great book that is written in that tongue.*

He remarries in 1835, to Lydia Jackson. He anonymously publishes that first essay, "Nature", in 1836. A year later, in 1837, he delivers his now-famous Phi Beta Kappa address, "The American Scholar", at Harvard College, in which Emerson introduces Transcendentalist and Romantic views to define a new way for American intellectuals to see the world, escape the binds of European thinking, and in effect, declare American independence from European critical and literary forms.

I relate all this to set the stage for the Divinity School Address, which opens with these words:

*In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart*

*with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy.*

His prose – like much prose of the era – is ornate with images and poetics. Many of the words and phrases he uses mean or intend different things than those of our modern usages. Like Channing and other Unitarians, Emerson asserts that reason is the core of religion. However, this reason is not the kind of rational analysis that we are familiar with. Rather, the closest corresponding concept we have today is that of intuition. Religious sentiment for Emerson is an intuition, universal and inherent in everyone, and accessible by every individual.

The gist of the Divinity School Address is this:

Nature and the soul are the sources of true inspiration, not tradition or text – there are no direct quotes from the Bible at all in the address. Divinity surrounds us and is within us, a pantheistic view of God as an infinite mind that penetrates and ensouls all things in the universe.

Emerson says that we realize this truth when we open our heart and mind to the sentiment of virtue and allow ourselves to delight in the universal presence of divine laws. The laws of the soul exist independent of time, space, and circumstance, and deliver their justice instantaneously. “He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled.” The existence of these laws is proof of the existence of a unifying force that pervades the world, “in each ray of the star, in each wavelet of the pool; and whatever opposes that will is everywhere balked and baffled, because things are made so, and not otherwise.”

When we perceive this truth, we awaken our religious sentiment, which “lies at the foundation of society, and successively creates all forms of worship.” As we must awaken our religious sentiment, Emerson argues our insights into the divine cannot be “received at second hand,” but rather only through personal experience. What we learn from others – whoever they may be – about religion then, we must find true in ourselves, or else reject it.

But while the capacity for divine insight is present in all, historical Christianity has obscured this capacity through two major errors.

The first major error is the misunderstanding and mythologizing of the person of Jesus. The life of Jesus illustrates the manifestation of the divine in the human. But when Christian churches elevate him above other humans and treat him as a god, they remove the possibility of divinity in all of us. In effect, historical Christianity no longer teaches us about the doctrine of the soul, and how we may become receptive to the moral/virtue/religious sentiment as Jesus did.

The second major error is the fetishistic worship of the Bible, which treats “revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead.” Historical Christianity in effect denies us the possibility of personal revelation and access to the divinity that surrounds us every day.

Emerson then addresses the aspiring preachers in his audience. He warns them to avoid becoming a formalist whose prayers do not uplift, and whose sermons are merely recited from memory. Such a preacher cannot express the application of the moral sentiment in everyday life to his flock. He asked this graduating class — and by extension their professors and everyone gathered — not to accept these cherished precepts without intense scrutiny. Only through their witness to a direct experience of the holy might they preach with influence to their churches, and “convert life into truth.”

He closes with these words:

*I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty, which ravished the souls of those eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also. The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures contain immortal sentences, that have been bread of life to millions. But they have no epical integrity; are fragmentary; are not shown in their order to the intellect. I look for the new Teacher, that shall follow so far those shining laws, that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy.*

While the Transcendentalist ideas Emerson espoused might seem familiar and innocuous today, at the time they were deeply controversial, if not heretical. One can only imagine the consternation and outrage that many members of the audience must have felt. To them, it was not only an attack on

their institutions and heritage, but their God. Andrews Norton called it “the latest form of infidelity”. Henry Ware Jr. responded with a sermon titled “The Personality of the Deity”, decrying Emerson’s pantheistic description of God and evoking the stern, fatherly figure of tradition.

Emerson was attacked as an atheist. The Christian Examiner, the chief Unitarian periodical of the time stated that Emerson's comments, "...so far as they are intelligible, are utterly distasteful to the instructors of the school, and to Unitarian ministers generally, by whom they are esteemed to be neither good divinity nor good sense."

Others, including Theodore Parker, were deeply influenced by Emerson’s words. The ardent young minister, himself only two years out of the Divinity School, wrote this afterwards, “He surpassed himself as much as he surpasses others in the general way. . . . I shall give no abstract - So beautiful, so just, so true, and terribly sublime was his picture of the faults of the Church in its present position. My soul is roused, and this week I shall write the long-meditated sermons on the state of the Church and the duties of these times.”

In fact, the Divinity School Address was the first injection of Transcendentalist thinking into Unitarian theology. It would be misleading, however, to say that Transcendentalism entailed a rejection of Unitarianism; rather, it evolved almost organically. By opening the door wide to the exercise of the intellect and free conscience, and encouraging the individual in their quest for divine meaning, Unitarians had unwittingly sowed the seeds of the Transcendentalist "revolt."

And in 1840, as the Transcendentalist Revolt within Unitarianism began to cause divisions among its ministers, Parker’s resolve was strengthened and he said famously, “I intend in the coming year to let out all the force of Transcendentalism that is in me, come what will come”

In the end, Emerson’s words would help lead us into our evolution as a post-Christian faith that honors spiritual insight and inspiration from every source. Indeed, some call his speech one of the three most important sermons in the history of American Unitarianism. But somehow we have lost touch with the mysticism inherent in those sentiments.

Transcendental philosophy was theological. And in the words of Christopher Baratta, "This theology did not send its priests and pastors to the pulpit though; instead, it sent them to riverbanks and mountaintops."

Transcendentalism was "a religious radicalism in revolt against a rational conservatism". The churches preached conformity and strict adherence to the word of God; Lockean empiricism limited experience as a source of knowledge to sensation or sense perceptions.; science and technology were quite literally steam-rolling the spirit of humanity in favor of commerce and material wealth.

How little things seem to have changed. While our churches no longer possess the power and influence they once did, they still preach the same conformities. Our individual experience has been elevated almost to gospel, but lacks any permanence. Commerce and materialism now dominate cultures worldwide. Nature is subordinate, being destroyed in the service of humanity.

Nature and the soul connect us to something greater than ourselves, some greater illumination, and without those connections we lose our bearings. We have become lost in a hall of mirrors of our own perceptions, our own needs and desires. Our world reeks of our separation from the divine, and our loneliness and despair from the loss.

We need Transcendentalism more than ever. As a faith, as a culture, as a species. We are not the measure of all things. We are measured and informed by them, by the depths of the soul, and the galaxy spangled expanse of eternity that stretches out past infinity.

As it was for Emerson, and Thoreau, immersion in the natural world is the first step, the defining movement towards the divine that surrounds us and ensouls us. I invite you to walk in nature as much as you can, guided by these words from Emerson, who admonishes us not to anthropomorphize the divine at the end:

*When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season, it streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come.*

**Sources:**

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