



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### The Buddy List

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October 9, 2011

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I would guess that Ralph Waldo Emerson is the most famous Unitarian of all time - as a Unitarian that is. Jefferson is up there but it is not so clear that he was really one of us - he belonged to no church, there being no Unitarian churches in his lifetime in Virginia or Washington, or Paris for that matter. John Adams was a Unitarian, belonged to the church in Quincy, MA but he is more famous as a politician.

Thoreau is up there too, but he never joined a church and never identified himself as a Unitarian. Darwin was as well, but there aren't a lot of Unitarians in England - then or now - and Darwin is famous for other things - for that theory with the gaps in it. Dickens was a Unitarian too but who thinks of him as that? Maybe Susan B Anthony or Mariah Carey, Dave Chappelle perhaps? Anyone for Melville, or Tim Berners-Lee [credited with inventing the internet] or Frank Lloyd Wright, maybe Rod Serling or P.T. Barnum or Buckminster Fuller; how about Florence Nightingale, or Fannie Farmer or Bela Bartok.

Lots of choices but I bet that Emerson is the most famous for being a Unitarian. Would that many of those on the Christian right who want to claim that the Founders were Christians or that we were established as a Christian nation [confusing the colonies and the nation in that] do some actual research or thinking and read the lives of Jefferson and Adams, or Benjamin Rush [a Unitarian], or Franklin or Madison [probably atheists or agnostics] - ah well. Facts are pesky things.

So let's stick with Emerson. Not a bad choice, in any case. Emerson was the grandson and son of ministers, the son of a Unitarian minister, and went to Harvard Divinity School and was ordained as a Unitarian minister himself.

His life was touched by tragedy early. His father died when he was eight; two brothers died young from TB. His first wife died at age twenty from TB, and Emerson went into a dark period after her death. He visited her grave every day for two years, then dug up the coffin and opened it to gain some kind of closure to his grief.

He was ordained and served as a minister for about two years but left the church writing later: "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."

He loved the preaching but not the other parts. [I love many of those other parts - the preaching too!]  
He said this about church going:

We come to church properly for self-examination, for approach to principles to see how it stands with us, with the deep and dear facts of right and love. At the same time it is impossible to pay no regard to the day's events...We are not stocks or stones, we are not thinking machines. And it were inhuman to affect ignorance or indifference on Sundays to what makes our blood beat and our countenance dejected Saturday or Monday. No, these are fair tests to try our doctrines by, and see if they are worth anything in life. The value of a principle is the number of things it will explain; and there is no good theory of disease which does not at once suggest a cure."

Emerson read widely as a child and continued his reading as an adult, and also started to write. He never stopped. You have to wonder what Emerson would have been like in the age of Steve Jobs. His journals take up about 3 feet on a shelf. He seemed to have met everyone in the US and in Europe, from John Muir in California to William Wordsworth in England. He had an astonishingly curious mind; Emerson was unfailingly interested in just about everything, and everyone.

After leaving the ministry and traveling to Europe, he returned to Concord, MA and began giving lectures and so became the Emerson we know. In 1838, he delivered the Divinity School Address at Harvard. Students loved it; faculty hated it and he was not invited back to Harvard for over thirty years - a poisoner

of young minds he was called. He began to read in Indian scriptures – the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita. He met Melville – who thought little of his thinking – too sunny and optimistic, Melville thought.

His influence has been enormous, perhaps the most influential American thinker and writer to date. And he is ours. How many of you have read Emerson lately – or ever? I don't think he is often read in school; I don't think I ever read Emerson when I was in high school. I did in college; we read his essay 'Nature' in our freshman year.

Emerson is not always easy to read – he does go on and on, but there are always diamonds to be found, and it is striking how alive his mind is to the possibilities of the world and the attempt to understand it. He is worth the effort.

And one of the things about Emerson – and to the point of at least the title of today's sermon -is that he had tons and tons of friends; it seems like everywhere he went, he made friends. He knew everybody. His Facebook total would rival whom? You pick.

Here is a short list: Thoreau above all [more on that later], Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, Thomas Carlyle, Nathaniel Hawthorne [Hawthorne and his wife lived with the Emersons for a few years, as did Thoreau – though not at the same time], Ellery Channing [William's nephew], Elizabeth Peabody, Theodore Parker, and many more.

He had the ability, apparently, to engage others. An uneducated woman, at one of his lectures was asked whether she understood what Emerson was saying. She replied that she had not understood a word but loved the lecture as Emerson had a way of making everyone feel taller, as 'he thinks everyone is just as good as he is and that he is not better than any one of us.'

If you read Emerson, you will discover how much he saw the purpose of religion as the improvement of the self; religion, he argued, was not so much about what we believed as about who we become. Note that, not who we are but who we become. He thought life was dynamic, not static, the mind ever open to new experience, the past always past and the future always open. He exemplified that central principle of ours – the non-dogmatic, non-creedal element of a free faith.

Two key friends of Emerson's are perhaps responsible for the final fullness of his thought. It is obvious that at the heart of Emerson's thinking is the individual – he disliked authority, both of tradition and of institution. On the other hand, Emerson found enormous inspiration in society, in relationships, in friendships.

The two that may matter most are Henry David Thoreau and Elizabeth Peabody. To get a wonderful take on Thoreau, read Emerson's eulogy of him. From Thoreau, Emerson got a unique view on life, a realization that everything anyone needed was close at hand. Thoreau saw the whole universe in Concord. He famously stayed at Walden Pond for two years – though he went into town nearly every day, and he lived extremely frugally – his footprint was about as small as it could be. Thoreau was an original; he indeed marched to the best of a different drummer

Above all, Thoreau valued his freedom and independence, and from this Emerson was confirmed in his belief that the self was central and that the task in life was to cultivate and improve the self.

But Emerson knew there was more to life than just the self, and this is where Elizabeth Peabody comes in. There is a wonderful book by Meghan Marshall titled 'The Peabody Sisters' that I recommend. Marshall grew up here at Neighborhood, and she tells the story of the three Peabody sisters, Elizabeth, Mary – who married Horace Mann, and Sophia – who married Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Elizabeth, as much as anyone, began the transcendentalist movement. Friends with William Ellery Channing, and Theodore Parker, and with Emerson, as well as Margaret Fuller, Peabody encouraged 'conversations' amongst the other which laid the ground for the transcendentalist movement.

What she did for Emerson – she also, along with Margaret Fuller, was perhaps the first of American feminist leaders, and also led the kindergarten movement in the US - was to help him understand that the self does not exist alone, but in society, and that it is in relationships with others as well as in relationship to nature that our best self can be developed.

So, let me step aside here from Emerson for a bit. The theological theme for this month is friendship. Our music today surrounds that theme; last week our intern minister Christina Shu talked about soul friends, and my guess is that everyone here understands that friends matter, that we want friends and are blessed when we have good friends. We are social creatures after all.

It is the main reason people come to Neighborhood – people are looking for community. The president of our denomination, Peter Morales, regularly cites data about how isolated Americans are – perhaps the most isolated people who have ever lived. Studies suggest that most people have between zero and one person – other than a family member – with whom they can share intimate thoughts.

We no longer stay in the communities of our childhood or youth; we move around, go away to college or graduate school, pick places to live because of the place rather than because of the people. We rely on social networking – I think this is both good and not so good – to experience that need for closeness. But we are, as a people, lonely and isolated. My guess is that the number is even lower when it comes to the number of people with who you can share important thoughts – whether spiritual or philosophical. The popularity of book clubs points to the yearning for this.

This is the importance of Emerson's life. His friends appear to be those who challenged his thinking, with whom he could share ideas, friends he imagined could help him become a better person and perhaps return the favor. These relationships, born of love and a commitment to honesty, to mutual caring, were central in Emerson's life, and maybe they are in yours, too. They have been in mine. Whether we have many friends or few friends, we need each other.

And a part of friendship is the willingness to forgive and be forgiven, to recognize our vulnerabilities and failures, to believe that love grows deeper than mistakes.

So, on this weekend of atonement, of Yom Kippur when we put ourselves right with each other and with all that is holy, let's celebrate our friends, give a shout out to our friends. A blessing on friendship! Go Waldo!