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Emerson's God

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I have a small 2.5" X 4" four-page card that I use as a bookmark. I do not remember when I got it, but the copyright indicates it was printed in 1983. This is odd because the date does not correspond to either of the two times I was "introduced" to Siddha Yoga. The mantra of the Siddha lineage is printed on the top of the first page: "Om Namah Shivaya." The translation appears below it: "I honor the Self within me." According to the information printed on the card:

This mantra has been handed down through the Siddha lineage for centuries. It is a powerful tool for quieting the mind during the process of meditation. When the mind is filled with the vibrations of the mantra, it is naturally drawn away from its involvement in the outer world, and effortlessly turns back towards its source, the inner Self.

This mantra has been used by the masters of the Siddha tradition and infused with their spiritual power. Because of this it is considered to be *chaitanya* or alive, and has the power to awaken the inner meditative energy called *kundalini*. Once this potential is awakened, meditation happens spontaneously and spiritual evolution accelerates naturally. Through the continued use of the mantra and the unfolding of the *kundalini* energy, you attain the highest state, realization of your own inner divinity – the Self.

Not only can you use this mantra for the formal practice of meditation, but it can also be repeated silently as you go about your daily activities. As you practice the mantra, you will begin to experience the Self within everyone and everything, and the essential unity of all creation will be revealed.

Knowledge of the Self transcends all differences of country, race and religion. This mantra is not the mantra of any particular sect. It belongs to everyone. Its goal is the Self of all.

Currently the card is holding my place in *God in Concord: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Awakening to the Infinite* by Richard G. Geldard.¹ It is specifically holding my place in order to continue to refer to page 159 for a list the author describes as a "sequence of essays [that] provides the interested reader with a chronological and systematic vision of Emerson's spiritual thought."² On the back of the card is a photo of the then-head of the Siddha Yoga lineage, Swami Muktananda. Swami Muktananda's emblematic teaching is: "Meditate on your own Self. Worship your Self. Respect your Self. God dwells within you as you."

Emerson's address to the senior class at Harvard Divinity School is on Geldard's list. In the address, delivered in 1838, the "Seer of Concord" declares the same truth as the Indian Swami from the twentieth century.

Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, "I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think."³

The first time I was introduced to Siddha Yoga was almost 30 years ago as a sophomore in college at SMU in Dallas when a professor of mine sponsored an evening of meditation on campus. The experience was profound and I hoped to recreate it by visiting the meditation center the next week. I brought along two friends who had been impressed by my story of "being breathed, rather than breathing." On the way to the center we got lost, finally giving up and turning back. Sixteen years later I was going through a divorce, retrieving traumatic memories from my childhood weekly in therapy, and mourning the loss of my best friend to AIDS. One day a co-worker sat next to me and asked if I had ever meditated. I have meditated off and on since I was about fifteen. A friend of mine had given me a copy of *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramhansa Yogananda. Coincidentally that was the year I had stopped attending church with my family. I bought a book on Hatha Yoga and taught myself various postures and how to meditate. So when my co-worker asked me that day, "have you ever meditated?" I laughed at the gentle reminder from universal mind, the "Unseen Spirit of the Universe," the Self, the "call it what you will" of Life. I laughed even more when I found out that my co-worker had been meditating at the Siddha Yoga Center of Dallas – that place I went looking for so many years before, and somehow had not been able to find.

Here is what Emerson wrote in his journal when he was just twenty years old:

Human curiosity is forever engaged in seeking out ways & means of making a connection between the mind & the world of matter without or the world of mind that has subsisted here or an uniting bridge which shall join to future ages our own memory & deeds. This laudable curiosity should not neglect the formation of a bond which proposes to unite it not to men, to matter, or to beasts, but to the Unseen Spirit of the Universe. Our native delight in the intercourse of other beings urges us to cultivate with assiduity the friendship of great minds. But there is a Mind to whom all their greatness is vanity & nothing; who did himself create and communicate all the intellect that exists; & there is a mode of intercourse provided by which we can approach this excellent majesty. That Mind is God; and that Mode is Prayer.⁴

The mode of prayer I had discovered took me away from the Christian faith of my childhood, sustained me through my darker moments, and continues to push me beyond self to Self in my constant seeking. Many UUs leave behind the Christian faith of their childhoods pushed away by ideas about God that stifle their spirits and constrict their very beings. I have often heard it said that Unitarian Universalism saves lives. I would say that my life was saved before I became a UU, but after my life was saved by the mode of prayer and the God I discovered in the discipline of Siddha Yoga, I could not return to the Christian faith of my childhood.

Until recently I have had a difficult time reconciling my spiritual practice with what I perceived as the rationalism of our tradition. Led by Emerson, the Transcendentalists confronted the rationalism of the nineteenth century with an appeal to intuition and emotion. Specifically, Emerson looked to the “God Within” as a basis for his faith. But, Richard Geldard contends that this is not what makes Emerson unique. The idea of the God Within and the notion of striving for perfection in imitation of the perfect deity, “if not considered totally orthodox by Christian standards, are nonetheless ordinary by thoughtful theological standards.”⁵ Geldard wants more. He wants to know how Emerson’s thought guides us to our own personal vision that then directs our way of life.

David Robinson, the author of *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer*,⁶ sees Emerson's theology firmly rooted in American Unitarian Christianity, rather than in opposition to it. He brings up a critical question about the nature of Unitarian theology to which I will return later.

Yet if the concept of underlying divinity of the soul, or of the God within the individual, helps to explain the positive experience the Unitarians linked with self-examination, the concept itself raises another important question. Is it accurate to regard this concept as based upon the kind of experience of the divine which Western thought has usually regarded as mysticism? What may give pause at this idea is, of course, the long historical association of Unitarianism with rationalism. ... Reason notwithstanding, there is an undeniably experiential basis to Channing's talk of the "divine monitor within," or Ware's description of the ecstasy of the soul in contemplation of itself. Champions of rationalism, the Unitarians were also champions of religious experience. It is this uniquely complete merger of reason and experience in theology that both sets Unitarianism apart historically in American religion and explains, to an extent, the brevity of its vitality. The synthesis it attained could not hold together in the ferment of the early nineteenth century.⁷

Before I examine the need for the synthesis of reason and experience in today's Unitarian Universalism, I want to look at how, as Geldard puts it, "Emerson's thoughtful pursuit of the nature of the Infinitude serves as a rational guide to discovering a more coherent and personal vision, one that informs intellectual understanding as well as the conduct of life."⁸ In other words, what of Emerson's thought is *chaitanya* or alive for us, serving as a sort of mantra to awaken the God Within and thus awaken our reason as well as our experience?

Geldard gives us a place to start. He lists ten essays that outline Emerson's spiritual thought. The list starts with "The Introduction from *Nature*," which includes questions like: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?"⁹ These are two questions that many of us ask prior to finding ourselves in a UU church for the first time.

In the book *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, Christian theologian Kenneth Cracknell writes of a phenomenon called “passing over” in which someone of one faith tradition, for a time, experiences another faith tradition. Much is gained from this “passing over” but eventually, according to Cracknell, we must come back to “our mother tongue.”

Our mother tongue is the medium we use for our deepest expressions, our ultimate perceptions: in moments of ecstasy or crisis, we cry out in our own tongue. However much we pass over into the other linguistic frames of reference, ultimately we come back to that which grasped us and moulded us from the beginning of our lives. In the same way, however much Christians enter into the worship, culture, literature and community life of people of a different faith they remain rooted in their own tradition.¹⁰

As Unitarian Universalists, Christianity may be our first language but we are not only exploring other linguistic frames of reference from other faith traditions. We are also creating a new language. As Emerson might put it, we are learning the language of the Soul.

In “The Divinity School Address” Emerson criticizes the church, then offers the remedy: “We have contrasted the Church with the Soul. In the soul, then, let the redemption be sought. ... None believeth in the soul of man, but only in some man or person old and departed. ... They think society wiser than their soul, and know not that one soul, and their soul, is wiser than the whole world.”¹¹ When we listen to the wisdom of Emerson’s soul we hear that “There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word.”¹² The temptation, then, in discovering what is alive in Emerson’s thought, is to rely on Emerson’s thought alone and to elevate it to the same place that tradition has always occupied. Ours must remain a living faith. For my faith to remain vibrant and alive I must continue to rely on the God Within. I wrestle with Geldard’s assessment that this concept is “ordinary by standard theological standards.” It may be ordinary, but it is seldom practiced.

Our Puritan ancestors devoted much of their time and energy to the development of their interior lives. They adhered to a practice of daily and evening prayer that was similar to the traditional Catholic daily office. This practice reflected the sense of the cycle of death and rebirth found in the Christian pattern of worship. Private piety complemented public piety; Sunday worship was supposed to work together with private worship practices in order to strengthen their lives as Christians. In breaking with some of our Christian piety as a faith tradition have we lost this connection between a disciplined private spiritual practice and our public worship practice? If we have, and I think some of us have, we can regain this connection through spiritual practices offered by other traditions. My private spiritual discipline is Yoga, but there are many other traditions that can serve our congregants such as Buddhism, Jewish mystical traditions and Neo-Paganism. We can also look to the Transcendentalists in our own faith for inspiration.

A common criticism of a theology that celebrates the God Within can be found in this quote by G.K. Chesterton: “the most horrible is the worship of the god within.... That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones.”¹³ This criticism lacks “holy imagination” - the sort of imagination that is needed to understand that Jones’ self is intrinsically bound up in Self. The only way to have knowledge of Self is to have knowledge of self. In the essay “Self-Reliance” Emerson remarks:

I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make a valued advisor, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On me saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested, -- “But these may be impulses from below, not from above.” I replied, “They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.” No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or to this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it.¹⁴

Worshipping the God Within is not a selfish act, but certainly can lead one away from church. Emerson left preaching for various reasons, not solely, as is usually reported, because he disagreed with his parishioners over the meaning of the Lord's Supper. He left the church because it was not his true vocation. He himself warned against an inner focus that lacks connection to "rough experience." Geldard offers an interesting analysis of this, commenting that the renewed interest in Emerson and Thoreau in the 70s was a yearning for the inner focus that Eastern meditation techniques offer. Emerson's knowledge of the ancient Hindu texts certainly influenced his vision of divine reality as Unity. However, his hesitation to promote the sort of "experience" that sends seekers to a disciplined spiritual practice may be out of place in a world teeming with "rough experience." I agree with Geldard when he states, "When Emerson warns us that 'metaphysics must be perpetually reinforced by life,' we are tempted to answer that now life has overwhelmed us with its pervasive intrusions and floods of data."¹⁵ And so balance must be sought, but we must not forget Emerson's call to find a deeper meaning in "rough experience" along with the meaning that comes from the more mystical experiences that are revealed to us by listening to the God Within.

It is difficult to write of Emerson's God without constantly quoting Emerson. While doing research for this paper I discovered a small treasure originally published in 1939 called *The Gospel of Emerson*. Editor Newton Dillaway inserted very little of his own thought into this slender volume of excerpts from Emerson's works including his journals, essays and lectures. Dillaway assembles a series of thoughts to round out this gospel from "The Coming of the Spirit" to "The Voice at Eve" all the while understanding that Emerson wanted to "bring men [sic] 'not to me, but to themselves.'" Dillaway's objective, stated in the Forward to the book, was to "open up the inner life of the sensitive reader."¹⁶ We hear from him again at the end of

Emerson's gospel - it is difficult to discern if this was originally written in 1939 or revised for the sixth edition printed in 1949, which I read. Certainly the world had changed between 1939 and 1949, but somehow Dillaway managed to remain optimistic:

We are passing into a New World. The Spirit will be enthroned in the heart of man. Then will come a philosophy of insight and out of that the transformation of genius into practical power. Then a new economics, a government based on morality, an education that develops the whole man [sic], a humanized science and a religion that is Religion.¹⁷

It is easy to understand Dillaway's optimism when you read these words from "The Over-Soul":

Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment. How dear, how soothing to man, arises the idea of God, peopling the lonely place, effacing the scars of our mistakes and disappointments! When we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence. It is the doubling of the heart itself, nay, the infinite enlargement of the heart with a power of growth to a new infinity on every side.¹⁸

These words are certainly *chaitanya* or alive, and have the power to awaken the inner self and enlarge the heart of the seeker.

It is important to note that what is perceived of as Emerson's optimism and his high estimation of humanity is an optimism born of "rough experience." It is an optimism that lives in the ever present now while freeing itself from the limitations of the past. Geldard relates what could be construed as very macabre facts about Emerson that illustrate his principles. Apparently thirteen months after the death of his much-beloved first wife, Emerson visited her tomb and opened the coffin. Twenty-five years later when the coffin of his son was being moved, fifteen years after his death, Emerson again opened the coffin. Geldard comments:

These may be morbid, forbidding facts, but Emerson treated himself severely in all matters of memory and sentimental clinging to the past. To see the waste of dead matter in this world helped to wrench him free of the domination of memory and to affirm the principles by which he wished to live his life. His fading

memories of loved ones, long gone from the vitality of the living, was for him “the other terror that scares us from self-trust.” In a similar, perhaps less gruesome way, I have felt the soft, gritty ash of a loved one soon after holding the flesh in life. It was a healing.¹⁹

I have also held in my hands the “soft, gritty ash” of a lost loved one. It is healing. It is in these moments that we recognize, “There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees.”²⁰

Emerson turns to this theme of permanence in the essay “Immortality.”²¹ He observes that we humans “delight in permanence.”²² It is in this statement from the essay that one finds something of Emerson’s Christology:

Jesus explained nothing, but the influence of him took people out of time, and they felt eternal. A great integrity makes us immortal; and admiration, a deep love, a strong will, arms us above fear. It makes a day memorable. We say we lived days in that hour. It is strange that Jesus is esteemed by mankind the bringer of the doctrine of immortality. He is never once weak or sentimental; he is very abstemious of explanation, he never preaches the personal immortality; whilst Plato and Cicero had both allowed themselves to overstep the stern limits of the spirit, and gratify the people with that picture.²³

Emerson’s Jesus would not give people a picture of immortality to gratify their need for permanence. Emerson’s Jesus does not hand out personal immortality to those who believe a certain way. The God Within gives us access to that which makes us immortal.

In an article published in *Harper’s Magazine* in 2005 author Erik Reece makes connections between *The Jefferson Bible*, “The Divinity School Address” and the Gospel of Thomas to help construct what he identifies as a uniquely American gospel:

This teacher of reconciliation was the same Jesus whom Thomas Jefferson hoped to recover through his own gospel project. And whereas Jefferson found in Jesus’ teaching an ethic for how we should treat others, Emerson found in it an alchemical light that transforms flesh into spirit. In some uncanny trick of history and geography, the ancient Gospel of Thomas combines these two visions of Jesus to give us what I would call a truly American gospel. By pulling the kingdom of God out of the sky and transposing it onto this world, Thomas’s Jesus

returns us, in effect, to Jefferson's agrarian America, where the farmer intuits the laws of God through the laws of nature.²⁴

Geldard also connects Emerson's God Within to the Gospel of Thomas by quoting one of Jesus' sayings in the text: "But the Kingdom is within you and it is without you. If you know yourselves, then you will know that you are the sons of the Living Father."²⁵ Maybe the concept of the God Within is not so unique theologically, but it has been largely ignored, possibly even suppressed. Reece ends his article by telling the story of his Baptist minister father, himself the son of a Baptist minister who preached the sort of Calvinistic original sin and eternal damnation that Unitarian Christians rejected in the nineteenth century. Reece's father committed suicide when Reece was a young boy and to escape the sort of depression he inherited from his father, Reece left his family's faith. He found hope in the Gospel of Thomas's message of the divine spark within us all. I found hope from breathing the mantra, "I honor the Self within me." We had both found Emerson's God.

I found more than just hope from my practice of Siddha Yoga. I found that a structured, disciplined spiritual practice provides tangible experiences – the sort of inner experiences that provide balance to all of the "rough experience" life throws at me from time to time. In *Apostle of Culture* David Robinson acknowledges how difficult it is to build a religion on private experience.

Once we recognize the presence of private experience in a system of thought, such as this conviction of the ability of self-examination to reveal an inner presence of God, we set a limit to the extent of an intellectual inquiry into the system. Such an experience can be asserted, described, or compared, but never fully explained.²⁶

Perhaps that is why a religion that has as its first source: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life," remains small. I have to admit that I squirm

a bit when I read Emerson's famous "transparent eyeball experience": "Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."²⁷ But, my heart sings at the thought of "I am part or particle of God." I can never fully explain how it is that the *kundalini* energy circulates through me confirming that I am part of God. And I must confess that I sometimes find myself worshipping external gods. I have practiced some type of meditation off and on for more than thirty years, but I can make no claims to having reached and maintained "the highest state, realization of your own inner divinity – the Self" as is promised on my bookmark. It is as if I am still driving to find the meditation center: sometimes I get lost, and sometimes I am reminded exactly where it is. I do know that when Lora worships the God Within she definitely does not worship Lora. This inward turning both refreshes me from the onslaught of "rough experience" and it motivates me to be of service in the daily sphere of that "rough experience."

Lastly, I would like to return to Robinson's conclusion that the synthesis of reason and experience could not survive the ferment of the nineteenth century. I would propose that today's Unitarian Universalism needs this synthesis of reason and experience in order to be a vibrant, growing religion. Transcendentalism is not just a controversy from our past that has been absorbed into who we are as a movement. Emerson, along with other Transcendentalists, provides us with language that is *chaitanya*, alive. This language can awaken in us an inner life that sustains us in our daily lives and inspires us to be of service in the world. And as we witness to this inner life that so many yearn for, we might even attract a few more seekers to our shared journey. It is interesting to note that the association's "Now is the Time" campaign is not just about growing our numbers. (Emerson might roll over in his grave if the campaign was just

about numbers.) The campaign recognizes that our religion needs to become more diverse, our leadership must be better developed, our souls must be nourished and our faith must be witnessed. In this effort to promote growth we must be careful not to give in to the temptation to worship external gods. Here are Emerson's words again:

As long as the soul seeks an external God, it never can have peace, it always must be uncertain what may be done & what may become of it. But when it sees the Great God far within its own nature, then it sees that always itself is a party to all that can be, that always it will be informed of that which will happen and therefore it is pervaded with a great Peace.²⁸

We must trust in our ability to be a religion that synthesizes reason and experience. This sort of "practical mysticism" is a gift to a world peopled by those who are tired of seeking an external God. The message may not be a new one, but it is one that is uniquely ours.

¹Richard G. Geldard, *God in Concord: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Awakening to the Infinite*, (Burdett, New York: Published for the Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation by Larson Publications, 1999).

²Ibid, 159.

³Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address" in *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emerson-Parker*, 96-97.

⁴The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson (JMN), Vol. 2, 87, as quoted in Richard G. Geldard, *God in Concord*, 48.

⁵Geldard, 61.

⁶David Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

⁷Ibid, 20.

⁸Geldard, 62.

⁹Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Introduction to *Nature*," RWE.org - The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. (Established: December 8, 1997-updated continuously). New York, NY: Jim Manley [jim@rwe.org], Web Designer/Author. Retrieved 12/1/2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.rwe.org>.

¹⁰Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Cleveland, Ohio, The Pilgrim Press, 2006, first published in 2005 by Epworth/United Methodist Publishing House, UK), 130.

¹¹Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," 107.

¹²Emerson, "Spiritual Laws," Retrieved 12/2/2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.rwe.org>.

¹³Quoted in Geldard, 108.

¹⁴Emerson, "Self-Reliance," Retrieved 12/1/2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.rwe.org>.

¹⁵Geldard, 161.

¹⁶Newton Dillaway, editor, *The Gospel of Emerson*, (Wakefield, MA: The Montrose Press, sixth edition 1949, first published in 1939), vii.

¹⁷Ibid, 78.

¹⁸Emerson, "The Over-Soul," Retrieved 12/2/2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.rwe.org>.

¹⁹Geldard, 166.

²⁰Emerson, "Circle," Retrieved 12/2/2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.rwe.org>.

²¹Emerson, "Immortality," Retrieved 12/2/2007 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.rwe.org>.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Erik Reece, "Jesus Without the Miracles: Thomas Jefferson's Bible and the Gospel of Thomas" in *Harper's Magazine*, December 2005, 41.

²⁵Geldard, 88.

²⁶Ibid, 20-21.

²⁷Emerson, "Nature" as quoted in Geldard, 112.

²⁸Emerson, as quoted in Geldard, 87.

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Compensation

The Introduction from *Nature*

The Over-Soul

Self-Reliance

Spiritual Laws

Circles

Demonology

Immortality

Worship

Natural History of Intellect

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