

**THE WISDOM OF EXPERIENCE**  
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University Congregational Church  
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**Reading: Introduction to “Nature” by Ralph Waldo Emerson**

**Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. 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? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.<sup>1</sup>**

Moses, Jesus and another guy were out playing golf one day. Moses pulled up to the tee and drove a long one. It landed in the fairway but rolled directly toward a water trap. Quickly Moses raised his club, the water parted and it rolled to the other side, safe and sound.

Next, Jesus strolled up to the tee and hit a nice long one directly toward the same water trap. It landed directly in the center of the pond and kind of hovered over the water. Jesus casually walked out on the pond and chipped it up onto the green.

The third guy got up and sort of randomly whacked the ball. It headed out over the fence and into on-coming traffic on a nearby street. It bounced off a truck and hit a nearby tree. From there it bounced onto the roof of a nearby shack and rolled down into the gutter, down the downspout, out onto the fairway and right toward the aforementioned pond. On the way to the pond, it hit a little stone and bounced out over

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1903), Vol. I, p. 3.

the water and onto a lily pad where it rested quietly. Suddenly, a very large bullfrog jumped up on the lily pad and snatched the ball into his mouth. Just then, an eagle swooped down and grabbed the frog and flew away. As they passed over the green, the frog squealed with fright and dropped the ball, which bounced right into the cup for a beautiful hole in one.

Moses then turned to Jesus and said, "I hate playing with your Dad."<sup>2</sup>

The images of Moses parting the water, Jesus walking on water, and even playing golf with God speak of experience, however grand and inconceivable they might be. I rather suspect that our churches would be fuller if more people had such experiences. Or maybe our golf courses would be fuller on Sunday morning. I am certain that those of our membership who are playing golf at this very hour are quite sure that theirs is a religious experience.

It reminds me of the Catholic priest who woke up to a beautiful Sunday morning. He was an avid golfer and he could not resist the temptation. He called in the assistant priest and said, "I want you to cover the Sunday mass schedule for me. I am being called to a higher destiny."

After the assistant left, the priest slipped into his purple paisley Bermuda shorts, his pink polo shirt, and his white golf shoes. He snuck his golf clubs into the truck of his car and sped off to a distant golf course where his parishioners would not like see him.

One of God's assistant angels witnessed this event and rushed to the Almighty's throne. "God," said the angel, "are you watching this? A priest is

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<sup>2</sup> [http://digitaldreamdoor.nutsie.com/pages/quotes/God\\_jokes.html](http://digitaldreamdoor.nutsie.com/pages/quotes/God_jokes.html), downloaded 6/22/10.

sneaking around on Sunday morning, shirking his vocation, and lying to one of the brothers. You must stop him.”

“It’s OK,” said God. “I’ll keep my eye on him. Don’t worry about it.”

The priest arrived at the golf course and rented a cart. He drove up to the first tee and hopped out of the cart with his favorite driver. He placed the ball on the tee, wound up and sent the ball soaring down the 375-yard fairway that dog legged sharply to the right. The ball soared over the pond and three sand traps and landed in the hole.

The priest was ecstatic. “A hole in one! Hallelujah!”

With an admonishing tone the angel said to God, “You call that keeping your eye on him. He just got a hole in one.”

God smiled and said, “Yeah, but who’s he going to tell?”

How do we tell about ecstatic experience? How do we risk sharing a religious experience or a spiritual wonder? If you are a Congregationalist you generally do not. Congregationalism has a long history of suspicion when it comes to religious experience in all of its varieties. Indeed, one of the most powerful preachers of the Great Awakening in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was our own Jonathan Edwards. He offered vivid and terrifying images of sinful women and men suffering the torments of hell. Other preachers, like the Anglican George Whitfield, spoke with passion, gesticulated with great flare, shared such emotions as anger, and even wept in the pulpit. Whitfield drew such large crowds that he often had to move out of doors to accommodate them. The movement spread from New England through the south.

But the Great Awakenings of both the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were not universally embraced. Within the Congregational and Presbyterian churches division

occurred. Old Light and New Light Calvinists reflected respectively their moderate and evangelical positions. The concern of Old Light Calvinists was the excess of emotion that threatened to diminish the importance of doctrine, tradition, reason, and education. The New Light Calvinists asserted that the church had become cold and stale, giving little place in the human heart for the love of God. There have been other “awakenings” in American history, including the rise of fundamentalism in the 1920’s and the charismatic movement of the 1970’s. What we are seeing nationally is a growing disaffection with religious institutions while most Americans consider themselves “spiritual” and even claim to believe in God or some higher power.

I think that much has been lost in the establishment of religious camps not only within denominations but also within congregations. I think about my friend Ralph Waldo Emerson who had a classic American education. By classic I mean that he was schooled in the ancients – languages such as Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; philosophy and theology; math and science. Like many of the geniuses of his day, including Henry Thoreau, Herman Melville, Margaret Fuller, William Ellery Channing, and Dorothea Dix, and Maria Lydia Child, he was well versed in the mythology and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Emerson would never abandon this intellectual foundation. He would utilize all of its tools throughout his life. But he claimed that his religious home, Unitarianism, had become a “cold cup of tea” and was “corpse cold.” It had lost its vitality. He complained about the minister of First Parish, Concord, the Rev. Barzillai Frost.

“I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say I would go to church no more. Men go, thought I, where they are wont to go, else

had no soul entered the temple in the afternoon. A snowstorm was falling around us. The snowstorm was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned...Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, - life passed through the fire of thought.”<sup>3</sup>

As we read from his introduction to “Nature,” Emerson is urging a vibrant bond of heart and mind. He does not want to live in the world of stuffy doctrine nor in the ether of fickle emotion. Emerson argues for the experience of life passed through the fire of thought. He wants the best of religious experience, even ecstasy, tested on the anvil of the mind. For that to happen the church has to be the place that embraces the experience of life even as it tests it with the disciplines of intelligence. The authentic church inspires the soul and engages the mind at the same time. This is the challenge that is laid at **our** feet every Sunday morning.

When you think of University Congregational Church, what do you think of? Some will say the “wedding church.” Others might say we are an “iconic” church, referencing our distinctive and beautiful New England style building. I have heard people in the community refer to the wealth and intelligence represented by our membership. I even heard someone call us “The Church of St. Lexus.” That’s OK. The history and importance of intellectually stimulating sermons and excellence in music are part of our identity. We have a growing Christian Education program and we are known for the place of theater in our ministry.

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<sup>3</sup> Emerson, “The Harvard Divinity School Address,” op. cit., pp. 137-138.

For me the question is to what end does our stately building, wealth, education, preaching, Christian Education, and music serve? By all means, I laud and celebrate these qualities of our church. Wow! What a treasure trove of gifts we have! And I am compelled everyday to ask where our *tour de force* is leading us. How are these blessings used for the glory of God? Are we building the Kingdom of God with the abundance of our gifts, skills, talents, and wealth?

I believe that ours is a spiritual journey of progressive Christian thinkers. We build the Kingdom of God when we use our resources to blaze the spiritual path with thoughtful Christian values. This presumes that we take the journey of the spirit with our minds on fire. We engage the power of life and pound out its meaning on the anvil of thought. We risk inspiration, wonder, awe, and celebration. We tread the valleys of fear and trembling, doubt and decay, and the changing impermanence of life. Authentic Christianity enters the sepulchers of disease and death, the hospice rooms and funeral parlors, unafraid to experience our mortality and dare to promise that God's love is greater still. Authentic Christianity raises a toast at the wedding, blesses the child who asks "why" without ceasing, and never ceases to wonder at beauty.

God forbid that someone enter this sanctuary and not know that we have first hand experience in the joy of a marriage and the sorrow of divorce, the celebration of a child's birth and the devastation of a child's death, the victory of career and the defeat of cancer, the certainty of faith in the midst of doubt. When the church cannot tell the human story from the pinnacle of its steeple to the bowels of the grave it has

no usefulness. If the gospel does not speak to the human condition it does not speak at all.

I once was on an airplane flying to Denver. I was wearing a clerical collar. Seated next to me was an African American woman in her mid-twenties. She asked me several questions about my faith and religious tradition. Daphne said that she used to be a Christian but no longer wanted anything to do with the church. I asked her why. She told me that she had a little girl. After the baby was born she went to her Methodist minister to have the baby baptized. Understand that she was an active member of his congregation. The minister told Daphne that he would not baptize the baby because it was an illegitimate child. He said, and I quote, “We do not baptize bastards in this church.” I will never forget that conversation as long as I live.

There is no human being or family situation or experience that is immune from God’s grace and the church’s care. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The church is the Christ of the present.” I dare say, present to everyone and every place where women, men, and children tread.

With each step of the way we ask the meaning of our experience. What wisdom do we gain on such a journey? What new conclusions can we draw about human destiny and purpose? As Emerson said, there is new wool and flax to be gathered. Let them be carded, spun, and woven into new poems, new laws, and new worship. This is the work of the mind. Consider this relationship between experience and mind.

Three young men were once given three kernels of corn apiece by a wise old sage, who admonished them to go out into the world, and use the corn to bring

themselves good fortune. The first young man put his three kernels of corn into a bowl of hot broth and ate them.

The second thought, “I can do better than that,” and he planted his three kernels of corn. Within a few months he had three stalks of corn. He took the ears of corn from the stalks, boiled them, and had enough corn for three meals.

The third man said to himself, “I can do better than that!” He also planted his three kernels of corn, but when his three stalks of corn produced, he stripped one of the stalks and replanted all of the seeds in it, gave the second stalk of corn to a sweet maiden, and ate the third.

His one full stalk’s worth of replanted corn kernels gave him 200 stalks of corn! And the kernels of these he continued to replant, setting aside only a bare minimum to eat. He eventually planted a hundred acres of corn. With his fortune, he not only won the hand of the sweet maiden but also purchased the land owned by the sweet maiden’s father. He never hungered again.<sup>4</sup>

Each of the three men had the same experience. Each used his mind differently. Which do you think the wiser?

I believe that the spiritual journey of progressive Christians is an invitation to think about what our experience teaches us about who we are as human beings, the responsibilities that we have for one another, and how we care for the earth. How do Christian principles engage the challenges that we must meet in a materialistic and technological world? What are the limits of Christian ethics and what other resources must we engage?

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.storiesofwisdom.com/hundred-fold-blessings>, downloaded 6/25/10.



My purpose in life is not to defend some ancient creed or rummage through the attic closet of Christian doctrine and shine it up for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Where scripture and theology are no longer adequate let us move on. Let us put our minds to the tasks and challenges of an ever-changing world.

This past week I had an extensive written interview with a theology student who has been reading the philosopher Rene Gerard. The student asked me to consider Girard's idea of mimetic desire and contrast it with Buddhist thought and the problem of violence in society. His last question was, "Do you have a sense of how (Thich Nhat) Hanh would respond to sacrificial atonement theory?" I replied, "I think he would find it absurd and totally without moral veracity. Thay (teacher) would certainly understand that compassion and peacemaking come with sacrifices, even ultimate ones. I also think he would question the value of theories of atonement. The real question that people want an answer to is, 'How do we find our way out of suffering?'"

There is real suffering in the world. It is felt by members of this congregation and floods out to all of the world. The sacrificial atonement theory brings little satisfaction to that suffering. Let us bring our minds to the task at hand and address the experiences of life. Dare I suggest that there are more thoughtful ways to bring the life and teachings of Jesus to bear on a wounded world?

At University Congregational Church we are on a spiritual journey of progressive Christian thinkers. Walk with us, won't you?

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