

“Self-Reliance’ Revisited”
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Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church
Harvard, Massachusetts
January 4, 2009

Sometimes – rather often, actually – writing a sermon is a good deal like tracking a wild animal through the woods. One starts with a loose idea – sort of like a footprint in the sand – and one may think one knows where one will end up and what one will find. But then the tracks disappear for a short time, and the trail, once recovered, takes an unsuspected turn. And one finds oneself traveling through unfamiliar terrain only to end up somewhere somewhat – if not entirely – unexpected.

The last couple of weeks were a little bit like that for me. I started with this idea that I would be preaching today on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous essay, “Self-Reliance,” saying precisely what, I was not sure. But the journey was at times a bewildering one. This is how it happened...

Right around the time I was deciding on a sermon title, most of you were living through the aftermath of an ice storm here in Central Massachusetts. Some of you were hunkered down in your houses without electricity, heating with wood, making coffee on the gas grill, playing scrabble by candlelight. Others of you had headed out of town to stay with friends or family or in hotels. Still others had taken refuge in the community’s emergency shelter and were eating well from Chef Paul’s kitchen.

I mentioned to two or three of you that week that I was a tad bit jealous of the adventure you were having out here. The idea of self-reliance appeals to me. You were gracious enough not to roll your eyes at me too visibly. And to a person, you told me that it was kind of fun only for the first day or two. Then you were done with it. You missed hot showers. And you missed being connected to the power grid and to one another. And I get that. The idea of community appeals to me, too.

So, that’s where I started, thinking that I would talk with you today about Emerson’s essay on “Self-Reliance” *and* on the value of community. And I will do that, I promise. But in order to get there, I need to tell you about the trail I had to follow on my way to that place.

You see, at more or less the same time as the ice storm and my decision to preach on “Self-Reliance,” I was also engaged in an ongoing conversation with a young man I know from my life outside of Harvard. And this conversation took me into a world that was in many ways entirely new to me. I was reading and watching a lot of stuff that he’d recommended to me and that I probably never would have read or watched otherwise.

This was the world of Alex Jones. Are any of you familiar with Alex Jones? He is a 34-year old “paleoconservative” radio talk show host and documentary filmmaker who has a large following of young people – mostly men, I would guess – in their twenties. “Paleoconservative” is a sort of tongue-in-cheek self-descriptive term, which refers to someone who is an anti-communist, anti-

authoritarian, anti-federalist member of the right wing. In other words, a conservative who follows closely a tradition much older than that of a neoconservative. Many people would simply refer to Jones as a conspiracy theorist.

To give you an idea of what he believes...He was a defender of the Branch Davidians in Waco. He believes 9/11 was a part of a CIA plot. He believes that there is a secret powerful group of the elite who are planning a New World Order. He believes that the Federal Emergency Management Agency is building what are, in effect, domestic concentration camps, and that the Federal Government has plans to use the military to round us up as part of their plan to take over the world. He points to evidence in the news reports in the mainstream media to back up his interpretation of world events, and he speaks with a great sense of authority.

I have to say, Alex Jones freaks me out a little. What he says unsettles me. What his readers and listeners and admirers say in their comments to one another and in their own YouTube videos unsettles me even more.

There's some truth – a kernel or so of truth – at the root of much of what they say they believe. The government isn't always fully transparent, for example, and the economy is in a sorry state. What unsettles me, though – having explored this world for a good couple of weeks now – is how afraid they seem to feel, how untrusting they are...

And what unsettles me further is that their solutions to the problems they see seem to me to be so...well...ultra-self-reliant. Stockpile enough food to last you for a couple of years. Hide it in caches scattered about away from major population centers, but where you can reach it easily without a car, if need be...within a couple day's walk. Learn survivalist skills. Get a gun. Learn how to shoot it. Be prepared to use it to protect your food caches. It's so...every man for himself. That's how it feels to me, anyway

And of course, don't you know, some of them quote Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson wrote his essay on "Self-Reliance" in 1841, and it has influenced our culture greatly. Some of the roots of our own American brand of "rugged individualism" can be traced to the writings of Emerson and the other Transcendentalists. Many of us are familiar with some of the quotations taken from this particular essay, even if we don't always remember their source. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,"¹ for instance. He also wrote...

"Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members."²

"Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater."³

¹ Ibid., 269.

² Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Self-Reliance," in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (edited by William H. Gilman), Signet Classic, New York, 1965, 265.

³ Ibid, 265.

“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.”⁴

“...Do not tell me...of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong.”⁵

“What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think.”⁶

“To be great is to be misunderstood.”⁷

Taken out of context, there is a lot in Emerson that is easily misunderstood...a good deal that a modern day survivalist might find appealing.

Of course, I remember reading once that Emerson actually stopped using the term “self-reliance” after his essay was published in 1841 because it was too often confused with “self-sufficiency.”⁸ That wasn’t what he was writing about. Emerson was no more “self-sufficient” than...well, than Thoreau. Emerson relied on a whole network of women, as it were, including his wife and an inheritance from an aunt that enabled him to afford the time to write and lecture as he did. And Thoreau left his little cabin at Walden Pond every week to walk home to Concord so that his mother could wash his laundry.

Emerson’s essay is really more about thinking independently and creatively than about living independently. Fundamentally, what Emerson wrote was this: Trust yourself! Think for yourself! Don’t imitate others. Don’t hold another’s opinion as your own. And that includes Alex Jones, he might likely add.

As Robert Richardson, author of *Emerson, The Mind on Fire*, has said, in contrast to the then predominant message of Calvinism – that humans were utterly depraved – “Emerson is saying, No, our minds are a match for things. We have within us the resources we need to understand the world.”⁹

In one of my favorite passages, Emerson makes reference to a popular fable of the time...

“That popular fable of the sot who was picked up dead drunk in the street, carried to the duke’s house, washed and dressed and laid in the duke’s bed, and, on his waking, treated with all obsequious ceremony like the duke, and assured that he had been insane, owes its popularity to the fact, that it symbolizes so well the state of man, who is in the world a sort of sot, but now and then wakes up, exercises his reason and finds himself a true prince.”¹⁰

⁴ Ibid., 265.

⁵ Ibid., 266.

⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁷ Ibid., 269.

⁸ Higgins, Richard, in “Emerson’s Mirror,” *UU World*, March/April, 2003.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Emerson, (ed. Gilman), p. 271

And in another, he asks,

“Why all this deference to [great men in history]? Suppose they were virtuous; did they wear out virtue? As great a stake depends on your private act today, as followed their public and renowned steps.”¹¹

Believe in yourself! What you think, what you do, matters! That was his underlying message. And a very optimistic message it was!

According to Suzanne Meyer, “We have misinterpreted Emerson’s self-reliance to mean the self is autonomous, that individual will should come ahead of anything else...But being a free individual is only the first step and not the end point. To be self-actualized, as Emerson saw it, was ultimately a communal vision.” As she says, we haven’t always gone that next step with him.¹²

Which leads me to the next step on my sermon-writing journey, and this is another place where the trail takes an odd turn...

I recently came across two articles written within the last two months about self-reliance and the Mormons. Did any of you by chance see either of these? The first was published in early November, and was titled, “Mormon canneries preserve the spirit of self-reliance.” It was a story about a dozen or so Mormons who were gathered at a cannery in Washington State, preparing jars of salsa.

I had never heard of this before, but the Church of Latter-Day saints has a system of canneries – in fact, an entire food system of farms and dairies and canneries and distribution centers – through which Mormons prepare food to store in case of personal emergencies. Volunteers gather together, and for the cost of the food and the jars, they can pack canned goods and take them home for their family’s consumption.

Sometimes it’s salsa, sometimes corn, or peaches, or packages of wheat. You name it. And what isn’t taken home by the volunteers is stored in and distributed from a regional system of warehouses. If someone is in need of assistance – Mormon or not – he can take the food as from a food pantry, although he would be expected to volunteer his time in exchange for the food. Millions of cans are also distributed during times of natural disaster to people in need around the world.

These canneries - and farms and orchards and cattle ranches and warehouses - are part of a larger church welfare system that also includes thrift stores and employment and job training offices. The system was first developed during the Great Depression to help see church members through that economic downturn, and it has allowed the Mormons – as a community – to become largely self-reliant rather than rely on the Federal Government for help in times of need.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Higgins

The second article that I came across was published just last week, on the day after Christmas. It was titled, “Mormons well-served by self-reliance in hard times.” This article talks more about the food storehouses, but also about the doctrine of “self-reliance and selflessness” that is preached by church leaders.

Mormons, I learned, are also encouraged to become self-reliant as individuals and families. Women and men are encouraged to prepare themselves to enter the job market, by getting as much education as possible, and acquiring the necessary skills to support their families. Even if a woman chooses to stay home with her young children, she should be ready to enter the job market if need be – in case her partner loses a job or becomes incapacitated. She should be self-reliant in terms of employment rather than relying on her husband to take care of the family.

Mormons are also encouraged to live frugally and set aside a few months’ worth of living expenses as emergency savings. They are encouraged to set aside enough food to meet the basic needs of every member of the family for one year. They are encouraged to maintain good physical, spiritual, and emotional health so that they will be prepared in case of a personal emergency, like a job loss, or in case of a natural disaster. Both families and churches are encouraged to be prepared to take care of their own in case of emergencies of any kind. And not just their own. Mormons are also taught to share what they have with anyone – member or non-member – who is in need.

Now I don’t usually look to the Church of Latter Day Saints as a model, but I found these articles inspiring. They weren’t at all alarmist. Sure, Mormons do want to be ready for the Second Coming, but there is very little talk about that. Instead, they are very pragmatically preparing themselves for times such as these...for economic downturns, for stints of unemployment, for those times when a family member becomes ill and the financial burdens on the family become more pressing. They are taught to prepare themselves to help themselves. And they are taught to prepare themselves so that they can help others. We really could learn a lot from them in this respect.

And in marked contrast to the reading I’d been doing earlier about the modern day survivalist movement, there is not an overwhelming sense of fear or mistrust, but instead a sense of great and calm confidence. There is not a sense of isolation – of every man for himself – but instead, a spirit of community that binds people together in acts of love and care.

One writer referred to the Mormon example as one of “self-reliant community” or “interdependent self-reliance.” And I like that balance. When I started my journey, I didn’t expect to end up here, in the Church of Latter-Day Saints. But this was my quarry, this was what I was looking for as I begin a month of reflecting on community - this balance between the virtues and values of community and self-reliance.

And this is along the lines of what Suzanne Meyers suggested the next step would be for us, if we were to keep walking with Emerson. Again, as she said, “...Being a free individual is only the first step and not the end point. To be self-actualized, as Emerson saw it, was ultimately a communal vision.”

And that's really the vision of any church, isn't it? Here we are, gathered together, having agreed essentially to three things: to grow as individuals, to care for one another, and to serve the larger world. As I see it, that's precisely what our Mission and Covenant Statement boils down to: To grow as individuals. To care for one another. To serve the larger world.

Emerson's "Self-Reliance" is where we begin. But it is only the first step on our journey. And the journey is one we must make together.

Amen. And Blessed Be.