

## Ambulatory Luminaries

Did you ever notice that the numerous rooms off the Ambulatory of our church are named after (you might have guessed) various Unitarian or Universalist luminaries? This is the seventh of several articles that will attempt to shine a light on who these Ambulatory Luminaries were and why they merit the honor of being named to these locations.

### Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882 (Room 10)

by Toni Gold

**Ralph Waldo Emerson** was an American essayist, lecturer, philosopher, abolitionist, and poet who led the Transcendental Movement of the mid-19th century. He was a champion of individualism; his ideas were disseminated through dozens of published essays and more than 1,500 public lectures across the United States. Like his father, he was an ordained Unitarian minister.

Emerson's emphasis on a universal soul flowing through individual souls had wide-ranging implications for students and religious seekers. The basic Calvinist idea still lingering in 1836 New England — of humanity's helpless dependence on God's grace — was superseded by the Transcendentalist doctrine of the God within each individual. Over time, this belief prospered, and Unitarianism became an independent denomination.

In September of 1836 Emerson anonymously published his first essay, "Nature." At about the same time, he met with several like-minded intellectuals for the beginning of the Transcendental Club — the beginning of a movement. A year later, women began attending meetings of the Transcendental Club. The group began the publication of its flagship journal, *The Dial*. Emerson used the journal to promote talented young writers including William Ellery Channing and Henry David Thoreau.

On July 15, 1838, Emerson was invited to Harvard Divinity School to deliver the school's graduation address, afterwards known as the "Divinity School Address". In it, Emerson discounted biblical miracles and proclaimed that, while Jesus was a great man, he was not God: historical Christianity, he said, had turned Jesus into a "demigod, as the Orientals or the Greeks would describe Osiris or Apollo". His comments outraged the establishment and the general Protestant community. He was denounced as an atheist and a poisoner of young men's minds. He was not invited back to speak at Harvard for another thirty years. In May 2006, 168 years after Emerson delivered his "Divinity School Address", Harvard Divinity School announced the establishment of the Emerson Unitarian Universalist Association Professorship.

In 1841 Emerson published *Essays*, his second book, which included the famous essay "Self-Reliance". It gained favorable reviews in London and Paris; the book and its

popular reception, greater than any of Emerson's previous contributions, laid the groundwork for his international fame.

In 1851 Emerson denounced the Fugitive Slave Act. He wrote in his diary: "This filthy enactment was made in the nineteenth century by people who could read and write. I will not obey it." He believed in immediate emancipation of the slaves.

For Emerson, slavery was a moral issue, while equality of the races was a separate issue that he tried to analyze from a scientific perspective based on what he believed to be inherited traits. However, his ideas changed when he became more involved in the abolitionist movement. In much of his later work, Emerson seems to allow the notion that different European races will eventually mix in America. This hybridization process would produce a superior race that would lead to the superiority of the United States.

The major tenets of Transcendentalism have persisted and become fundamental to American thought. The most important of these is the affirmation of the right of individuals to follow truth as they see it, even when contrary to established laws or customs. This principle inspired not only the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement, but also the twentieth-century civil rights and conscientious objector movements.

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