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Excerpts from address by  
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EMERSON, THE FOLK PHILOSOPHER

How can Emerson be associated with folk arts? The explanation is simple. He was a folk philosopher, as contrasted with the professional philosophers. In fact he had little use for professional philosophers. Neither have I, although I am one myself. They seem to spend most of their time writing unintelligible footnotes to each other instead of helping people solve their problems.

All folk art comes from the people and must return to the people. His deepest thought came from the people and he always wanted to return it to the people. He gave much time talking to small groups of people. One time he went all the way to Kalamazoo, Michigan, and drove 37 miles in a sled in winter over a corduroy road to talk to seven farmers who were interested in philosophy. He stayed there three days chatting and visiting with them. The average lecturer today would not talk to an audience of less than three to five hundred people. This is a good indication of why we can call him a folk philosopher.

Professional philosophy always gets itself channeled through an institution. Emerson cannot be identified with any institution at all, except the old Concord Lyceum where he and Thoreau often lectured. I lecture there myself once in a while. Also a small community group.

There were other reasons why Emerson never got attached to an institution. He started out young as a preacher but did not last long as a preacher. When he broke with his church it happened to coincide with the death of his first wife. I often think there was a connection between the two, his personal loss and the fact that his congregation did not agree with him about a minor theological point. He felt he could not administer the ritual of the Lord's Supper. It hurt him every time he did it and he finally decided it was not right for him to go on administering this ritual which he considered pagan, so he wrote out a beautiful, logical interpretation of why he did not want to do it any more. They held a meeting and he lost his job, and thereafter never attached himself to any institution.

His relation to his own college was similar. He was a graduate of Harvard and he went back to give a speech which enraged the Harvard theological personnel. It was the first time he was ever openly hissed by an audience. The second time he was hissed it was when he spoke against slavery, and the third time was when he spoke in favor of women's suffrage. From then on he rarely took the risk of appearing before large audiences in relation with controversial questions. Harvard honored him when an old man and took him back.

Another reason why I classify Emerson as a folk, not professional philosopher, is he never attempted to work out a system. Emerson considered it something of a pretense, as shown in his famous sentence "Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." A person who insists upon complete consistency is a small-minded person.

My own reason is, good philosophy is folk philosophy, as good art is folk art. I don't mean to establish a sharp separation between the two. The space between a folk art and conventional professional art is one of continuity. There is some relation between what happens in professional art and what happens when the urge to express something does not as a consequence run the tests of professionalism.

This afternoon I will talk about Emerson's secular, rather than his religious philosophy. His secular philosophy is better known. Also because in religion he was in his time the great radical. He fought many battles for free religion, but they are mostly no longer battles. His secular philosophy is just as germane as when he wrote it a century ago.

There are two general approaches to the question of truth. (Often spoken of as the eternal verities.) Those who believe truth is emergent and that absolutism is a form of betrayal. This struggle is one which I don't expect ever to be completely resolved. Most German thinkers couch everything they have to say in absolute terms. Their concept of state and right is always absolute. In which of these two schools does Emerson belong? Did he believe there are truths, either revealed or intuitive, to which sensitive people, once discovered, remain forever true - or did he believe truth is forever relevant? I believe he belonged to the latter school. "Truth; he has it who can use it." Practical concept. It isn't something, once discovered is clung to, but something you live by. If you use it you evaluate it in terms of its consequences. This is the only way you can tell whether it is truth or not, by experiment. "The one condition coupled with the gift of truth is its use." Not its beliefs, but its use. This led him to become a kind of positivist.

Emerson once believed that the main source of truth for our time was science. He made a statement to this effect which was one of the strongest - "I await the insight which our advancing knowledge of material laws will furnish." He placed his faith upon the kind of truth which would be revealed by the scientific method. He believed this was the kind of truth religion would have to use eventually. He believed a religion which did not encourage and make use of science not only would dishonor God but in the end be a dying religion. We are all believers in natural religion. We all agree that the health and integrity of man lies in self-respect.

You have read a great deal of Emerson, probably more of his mysticism rather than science. He was a two-sided man and the two strands of his character never did get together resolved. He was both a mystic and a pragmatist. The two phases seemed to go in rhythms. I don't know how to explain these things. All the Emerson family had a streak of genius. Perhaps it was his intuitive genius which caused him to see what was truth. You will never find a complete resolution of these two strands, mysticism and pragmatism. Sometimes when lecturing about this new volume of essays, I'm talking about the lack of consistency in the Emerson philosophy. There on the romantic and mystical side find Emerson a great source of comfort. Those also on the other side find him as I do. That is why I brought out this new volume of essays recently which were not well known. I only included two of the old favorites and inserted writers least quoted and less well known among American readers.

This idea of science led him to the idea of life as an experiment. We can't believe every kind of knowledge has to come to us through our own experience. That is more radical than I would go. His old friend Bronson Alcott --- it was the center of his whole pedagogical philosophy. His general theme was, life is an experiment. All life is an experiment. Whatever he began, starting a new school or new cooperative of some kind, began "life is an experiment." Some of this doctrine Emerson learned from Alcott. To a group of young people graduating from a small college he said, "Be an opener of doors for such as come after thee." Do not try to make the universe into a blind alley. Be an experimenter.

This stream of thought runs through American philosophy pretty consistently. The late Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in one of his letters to his friend in England wrote, "Emerson, the one bright shining star who continued to shine as brightly in old age as in his youth." Holmes knew Emerson personally; spent many afternoons talking to him. Holmes was once chided about his attitude toward the Constitution. He said "All life is an experiment; the Constitution is an experiment." That attitude, that even fundamental documents like the Constitution are an experiment should not be regarded as absolute. I believe that very strongly. I am troubled most about young people who fall victim to the Communist philosophy because once a Communist they must become absolutist. It is a fixed doctrine and you have to accept it. I have seen young students fall victim to this form of absolutism and have watched their careers afterward. They cease to become functional and go on until they spend their lives in nothing but propaganda in attempting to convert others to what they believe to be absolute truth.

The problem of faith is one which interests me greatly these days. Emerson had a great deal to say about it, outside of religion. It was a shock to me to hear about how after his second visit to England when he met Thomas Carlyle and heard his great men of history theory. He told his discussion group what he had learned from Carlyle and asked them if they would like to continue to study leadership. After some discussion they defined leadership as a form of energy. Whatever else it is, it is a form of energy. Some people have it and some don't. What is its source? They found themselves going around in circles and after two or three meetings there was no advance. They could not define its source. Emerson said, this is silly. We don't know enough to talk about this problem. Let's stop discussion and do some studying. Emerson thought he found the clue. His study was an analysis of the biographies of great men, to see if he could find some common elements in all great men, Napoleon, Swedenborg, etc. to test out the theory. He called the group back and said he had made a great discovery. They waited anxiously. He said I have discovered the basic common element in all leadership is faith. All the people I studied believed something fervently. That is where they got their energy - it came from their faith and belief.

Emerson discovered something even more startling. It is so overwhelming when I think about it it makes me shudder. It doesn't make any difference what you believe, even if it is a complete falsehood - you will get strength for leadership if you believe it strongly enough. That was shocking in the early 19th century, that you could have false leaders who could mislead people. Like Hitler with his queer belief about race. That is how he got his energy. He was in earnest. It was his belief or faith in what was actually wrong and could be disproved by science that gave him absolute dominance over seventy or eighty million people and almost the entire world. We only escaped by a narrow margin. Emerson had a great deal to say about this, the most important being that faith that stands on authority is not faith. He begins with a distinction between pseudo faith and genuine faith. Pseudo faith is that which stands on authority. True faith is that which you discover yourself. All great ages have been ages of faith.

Mr. Lindeman read from an address delivered almost 100 years ago in Boston during a disastrous period in our history. The credit of the country was imperilled. We had had two depressions. There was a great deal of pessimism. Emerson was asked to give a lecture before the Mechanics Institute in Boston "On Our Times". One of the early paragraphs of this lecture reads as follows: (think of the mood of our present time) ----

"Our torment is unbelief (not disbelief) which I take it means the uncertainty as to what we ought to do and the distrust of the value of what we do. A great perplexity hangs like a cloud on the blue of all cultivated persons, a certain of the best spirits which distinguishes our period. It is not that men do not wish to act. They pine to be employed, but they are paralyzed by the uncertainty as to what they ought to do."

I feel that is a very good description of what has happened to the cultivated people of our time...the growing disbelief in the U.N. throughout America. Nobody thinks it is going to succeed any more. They have already made up their minds it is a failure. The general tenor of American thought is that all UN actions are failing. If we don't believe in peace; have some kind of basic faith that our world can be operated without killing, then it seems to me all the lesser beliefs will fade away and there won't be much else to believe in. Emerson's faith was always affirmative, he was always advising people not to spend time on negatives. We must embrace the affirmative, hug it, hold to it. We must not worry about things from a negative point of view but always faith you can act upon. This aspect is very pertinent to our time.

...I found debates going on among sophisticated audiences about Western versus Eastern democracy. They were discussing whether the Russian idea or the American idea of democracy was proper. They rarely called it "Russian", usually "Eastern." Finally I asked for a definition of Eastern democracy. The only definition I got was to a Russian anything is democratic if it is in the interests of all the people. Anything done for all the people is, per se, democracy. As soon as I got the definition it seemed to me this debate was nonsense. How can anyone brought up in the western period of democracy assume what is good for the people is democratic regardless of what is done, or does it mean ...

The wisest thing he ever said -- "Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, these cannot be severed." The end pre-exists in the means. That is truthful in science and in experience. You become what you do. You don't become what you wish. Anybody who assumes that good ends can be achieved through the use of undesirable means has already departed from the democratic theory, it seems to me. Here again we have a generation in America coming on who are not well grounded in this means--end doctrine and are being easily misled into the assumption that somehow or other if your end is all right it doesn't make any difference how you strive to achieve it. But Emerson is right about this. You won't get the end you think you are going to get if you don't use means that are appropriate to it -- you will get something entirely different. The end pre-exists in the means. I hope some of you will continue to mull about it and see whether or not you can't come to some agreement. I would say this is the thing most Americans have to learn over again. No scientist would contradict this principle. No good ~~scientist~~ ~~psychologist~~ ~~would~~, either. Every good psychologist will tell you you become what you do.

Just a word about democracy. Emerson himself was called a radical democrat. Many people have worried about that phrase. The context makes it clear. He was not interested in the machinery of democracy but was only concerned with its deeper fundamental values. He was not interested in partisan politics. He did not trouble to vote, saying the democrats had the best candidates and republicans had the best principles and it was difficult to choose between the better man and the better idea.

I believe democracy is a radical idea. It rests upon the radical assumption of human relationships. In that sense I call myself a democrat. One of the basic principles of democracy is incorporated in the philosophical mood of the U. S. Through diversity towards unity is also one with which Emerson had a great deal to do. This is a story which will amuse you. Emerson was asked by a young teacher just beginning his career to visit his class. "After you have watched me teach, I want to get some criticisms from you." Emerson did as he was asked. He was always good natured. When the young teacher asked him to criticize the class, "How did it go?" Emerson said, "It was all wrong." "Surely I couldn't have done everything wrong." "So far as I am concerned, it was all wrong. As far as I could see, all during the lesson all you have been trying to do was make all of these pupils into little 'yous' and one of you is enough." Then there is the story about the farmers in Martha's Vineyard who asked visiting professors to come out and pray for the farm. When they arrived and looked over the place they said "This farm doesn't need prayer, it needs fertilizer."

Democracy rests upon diversity, not upon uniformity. Trying to make people into your own image is violating the democratic principle. The first principle of folk art is diversity, not copying from a blue print. The essential of the democratic way of life is diversity. Most of us believe in diversity in federal government and in religion. We are a strong nation because we have such a variety of people here but they have dropped accepting the theory of economic philosophy. In economics they call it totalitarianism. In a democracy nothing is all-or-none. The law of democracy is the law of partial functioning of ideals, not the all-or-none principle. This is a sample of Emerson's philosophy.

In closing let me give a quotation from Emerson which has pertinency to our problems, "Sovereignty of ethics." Young perplexed people with their confusions, not able to find any clear pathway for the way decisions they have to make; when they ask for guidance, I start by asking them, "Have you found the moral element in your problem?" If you can find the moral equation, your other confusions will disappear. My strong adherence to the sovereignty of ethics I owe largely to Ralph Waldo Emerson.