

**“The Self as Person”**

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In his essay “The Secret of the Self,” Professor Wilfred McClay laments the rise of the “self” over the place of the person. As he observes “how poorly the word ‘self,’ even though it is one of the cardinal terms of our discourse, serves us as a marker for that thread of essential continuity in the individual life.” McClay uses the occasion of writing an obituary to elaborate on the difference between “self” and “person.” He notes that just writing about “self,” a persons hobbies, interests, status can not sum up the whole of that person found within relationships. He notes that it is in our relationships that our self is tested, transformed, truly perceived. As he explains “it is the person, not the self, whose nature is inextricably bound up in the web of obligations and duties that characterize our actual lives in history, in human society – child, parent, sibling, spouse, associate, friend, and citizen – the positions in which we find ourselves functioning both as agents and acted-upon.” McClay proclaims that we are not reducible to the “individual,” but always remain more fully, a person.

McClay’s essay is found in *The Best American Spiritual Writing 2006*, a collection of essays on religion, religious figures, spiritual and religious experiences. I strongly recommend it for summer reading. Essays cover a range of topics, a first person account of the spiritual life that develops after brain injury, an analysis of the Saddleback mega church in California, the author Kay Paterson’s testimony on why she wrote the Newberry Award winning *Bridge of Terabithia*, an amazing essay entitled Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought, and one on Afghanistan and the bombed Buddhas of Bamiyan, all collected from some of the most incisive American publications. Whether atheist or God-fearing theist there is something for you in here.

McClay’s essay caught my eye because “self” is a major theme and concern within Unitarian Universalism. The first source we draw from is the “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 that create and uphold life.” Leave it to the Unitarian Universalists to lengthen a simple concept. What good is one simple sentence when you can link three phrases? The perils of over-education.

In short, our first source is personal experience, your, my direct experience of mystery, thought, and wonder. This is a legacy from our Puritan forbearers who believed in the right of private conscience, that neither Pope, nor minister, nor parent can fully tell you what to believe, that your personal thoughts are your compass. The Puritans embraced this theology within community, and within an abiding commitment to long-term community. Puritans were not encouraged to develop their own ideas and wander away or to be lone rangers; they were to test their ideas together within a community of people. And yes, sometimes the community was oppressive. It was a difficult balance to

respect the person, test authority, and remain within community – one we are still trying to navigate today.

McClay turns to the writings of the great French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville who articulated America before we even knew ourselves. McClay reminds the reader that de Tocqueville noted that the historians of antiquity “taught how to command” while the historians of our time “teach only how to obey” so that “the author often appears great, but humanity is always diminutive.” According to McClay de Tocqueville hypothesized that this would lead to a sense of personal insecurity and irrelevance, and then a tendency to uplift the self in private fantasy and a submission to larger forces of power. This theory fascinates me.

McClay dismisses the self-reliance of Ralph Waldo Emerson as disconnected. Emerson, of course, is one of our “Unitarian” heroes, born into a Unitarian family, himself a Unitarian minister, a founder of the Transcendentalist religious and literary movement, a strong individualist determined to know and be true to himself. He was an astonishing writer and lecturer and as much as I have admired his intellectual rigor I have also debated his level of self-awareness and connection. And I felt grateful to McClay for finally naming something that has plagued me about Emerson and Emerson adulation every since Divinity School.

Emerson left us. I preached a sermon about this several years ago. First he left the ministry and then he left Unitarianism. Our hero left us. He didn’t like us anymore. Then again, his drive for individualism rendered him useless in any community that he didn’t control. In his private home and life Emerson had quite a bit of power as he grew older. He became a popular writer and lecturer. He had money, and his talent brought him interesting friends and recognition. The two significant things he could not control were the early death of his beloved first wife, Ellen, and later, of his adored first son, Waldo. These were crushing experiences for Emerson and his removal from Unitarianism, from the challenges of community living accelerated after these experiences.

So I have often wondered if his noteworthy individualism was a tough exterior for a more private, conflicted, sad, relational interior. Emerson’s entrance into Unitarian ministry was initiated by his dead father who was also a Unitarian minister. In his landmark Harvard Divinity School Address of 1838, Emerson lamented the lack of intellectual rigor and relevance in Unitarian preaching. What was most important was what he didn’t say in that address. He wasn’t sure he believed in communion so he wasn’t sure he could continue in the ministry which was his father’s legacy. He disliked the Unitarian minister in Concord, who gave mediocre sermons but really cared about his parishioners and was there when they really needed him. Notably, Emerson himself lacked pastoral skills. He did not have a good bedside manner, obviously though, he was an excellent preacher. So over time, rather than dealing with his relational dilemmas, Emerson rebelled and withdrew. Rebellion can be a way to avoid intimacy, relationship, the experience of being a person.

I wonder what would have happened if Emerson had remained in the ministry and continued the conversation about the need for rigorous preaching, the questionable place of miracles in theology, the relevance of communion (which, obviously, we no longer do). Emerson himself didn’t believe in the miracle of transubstantiation and communion

so he did not like to administer it. I am very sympathetic to his theological and professional dilemma. What if he had stayed in community to talk about it longer?

And for all his wonderful essays, I find Emerson most moving, most meaningful, most astonishing and relevant when he writes about his relationships. From his private Journal, January 30, 1842

The sun went up the morning sky with all his light, but the landscape was dishonored by this loss. For this boy, in whose remembrance I have both slept and awakened so oft, decorated for me the morning star, the evening cloud. A boy of early wisdom, of a grave and even majestic deportment, of a perfect gentleness. Every trampler that ever tramped is abroad, but the little feet are still. He gave up his little innocent breath like a bird. Sorrow makes us all children again, - destroys all differences of intellect. The wisest knows nothing.

I still can't read that without crying. I have read it dozens of time. Emerson found a way to articulate the human, personal experience of the death of a child. Few of us can manage that. And to me it says so much about Emerson, that he was a passionate, caring human being and an attentive and loving father. It's not that I want to pry into his private life. But McClay is right, just his writing, just his lectures are brilliant, clipped, and critical, but his full person develops in relationship and I don't think that Emerson can be known or understood without knowing how much he loved his first wife, Ellen, who died so young and then the death of his adored his first son, Waldo, from his second marriage. The fullness of his intellectual rigor and person is revealed when he writes about these things. And when I see them together with his better known lectures and quotes I have a deeper appreciation of his gifts and presence as a human being.

When is individualism a shield from pain, from institutional forces that feel overwhelming, even life and death? When does the individualist rebellion keep us from community development and transformation, from intimacy, authenticity and awareness?

We know ourselves in relationship and community, but relationship and community are no panacea. We all come from families. Do you know anyone with an easy family life (their parents, siblings, partners, and children)? I don't.

My full time vocation is here in a religious community and to quote Dickens "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." I love our ministry *and* ministry can wear a person to the core, not because of sermon deadlines or memorial services, but relationships with human beings. The most difficult part of my job is difficult people and unresolved conflict, and that is true of every person in community (be it at work, in a congregation, family, school, doing volunteer work, as a neighbor). I am convinced that the hardest thing we will ever do in this life (other than parenting which is its own community) is live in community.

So I also understand why Emerson ditched us. Ministry is hard, disappointing, and conflicted. Right and wrong were and are not always obvious. It's hard to be a leader within community, and I am sure he was not supported for having divergent thoughts (which is enough to make anyone retreat). It can be painful, or feel vulnerable to be known in community. But when we retreat we keep our communities insular and falsely homogenous. We also prevent the full development of ourselves. One of the greatest tests we face in this life is remaining in dialogue with community over a long

period of time. But it is not easy. Community of any kind, for good and bad, has rules, expectations, and values. To develop one-self in relation to these is a life-long journey.

This past year I was divorced. Divorce is one of those watershed moments where you find the hidden boundaries of community. Every person's divorce is different and mine defied most statistical and community expectations. By the time I entered the divorce process the easy part of my relationship was negotiating the dissolution with my former husband, Peter. The difficult part of my divorce was everyone else's response to it.

I had a family member who refused to speak to me because I was getting divorced. This person just recently decided to speak to me again. When that breakthrough occurred I asked myself whether to write this person off or enter into dialogue beginning with "It hurt when you refused to speak to me." In the name of community I entered dialogue.

Oddly, many of my friends began insisting that I immediately begin dating. Believing it was too early, I refused. Within Hinduism an unmarried woman is considered inauspicious, a deviance from the natural order. I've decided Americans believe the same thing, only they won't admit it. My new singleness has challenged my many married friends and family members and I have chosen to remain engaged with them as best I can while being true to myself and my needs. This is what McClay means when he refers to coming to a deeper understanding not through the self known as isolated opinion and experiences but as a person with thoughts, feelings, obligations, and relationships.

It is a grueling endeavor, to neither over nor under-react, to be authentic, to constructively communicate even when community groups don't understand or approve. The goal is to be oneself, and be oneself in relation with others.

It is somewhat torturous for our friends who feel the need to choose between us, but Peter and I still go to Adam's major events and parties together. We have come to the conclusion that the "choosing problem" is theirs and what we want is to be parents who are present for our son at major events, to be honest about friendships with one another and many people. Someday that might change, but for now this is who I authentically am, who we authentically are, and I can see that most of our friends are struggling to accept it. We are divorced. We are not dating one another. We are parents. We are friends. I give them credit for struggling, for remaining in community. No one said community was easy.

I have also realized that if I say nothing, if I stalk off in a huff, drop my friends, stop seeing Peter at Adam's events because it makes other people uncomfortable, let myself unwillingly be set up on a blind date to make someone else happy, then I am perpetuating an insular and falsely homogenous community. You know it's possible to get divorced and like your former spouse. It is possible to be single and not date until you are ready. It is possible to talk openly about divorce, so that people know there are many ways to go about it, to think about it, live with it, help one another with it, and make choices about it.

McClay explains

The self is made in relationship and culture, and the richest forms of individuality cannot be achieved without the sustained company of others. . . . [then there is]

Tocqueville's further insight that it is in the school of public life, and in the embrace and exercise of the title of "citizen," that the selves of men and women become most meaningfully equal, individuated, and free – not in those fleeting, and often illusory, moments when they escape the constraints of society, and retreat into a zone of privacy, subjectivity, and endlessly reconstructed narratives of the "self."

May you each find yourself in rich community with relationship and culture so that you may uncover the deep and evolving person and human being that lies within.