

**An Original Relation**  
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**Reading** – from “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.

**Sermon**

As we heard in the reading, at the outset of Emerson’s revolutionary essay, “Nature,” he asked:

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?

Linguist and Christian missionary Dan Everett arrived at a similar Emersonian insight during his work in the Amazon, beginning about thirty years ago. He went to the Amazon to study the life and language of a small tribe, the Piraha. Perhaps some of you heard the story on NPR last weekend – and there is a long article in the current New Yorker magazine about Everett and the Piraha and the controversy among the linguists about the nature of their language and culture.

Well, the story of their language is fascinating – it is completely unique to this one tribe, apparently unrelated to any other language, and to our ears it sounds more like birdsong than spoken language. But what is of particular interest to me today is something else – reflected in their language, but at the same time more elemental.

The Piraha, Everett says, are “the ultimate empiricists.” In other words, what they know and believe has to be based on their *experience* – not on hearsay or speculation. Experience – what Emerson called original relation. So if you hadn’t seen something for yourself or if you didn’t know someone who had seen something, then it simply wasn’t worth talking about.

So what happened when Everett had learned enough of the Piraha language to prosletize his Christianity (which took many years by the way)?

Quite simple: the Piraha asked questions he just couldn’t answer. “A man came back from the dead? We’ve never heard of such a thing. What did he say to you?” When Everett replied that he hadn’t actually seen this man, they asked: “Well, do you

know anyone who *did* see him?” And when Everett had to reply that he didn’t... they lost interest!

The ultimate empiricists. They might as well be from Missouri as from the Amazon – since “Show me!” could be their motto too.

And so, in the end, the Piraha converted Everett rather than the other way around. Converted him from his Christianity to a purely scientific worldview – a worldview based on at one kind of original relation to the universe.

You know, it may well be that we are born empiricists, born into an original relation, and then learn to be otherwise. Think about it. As children, we human beings are constantly looking to see for ourselves, exploring everything from our own fingers and toes to the mud in the backyard, and experimenting all the time: What will happen if I tip this cup over? How high can I pile these blocks? And on it goes.

As we get older our curiosity simply takes more sophisticated forms.

When I was a boy, I had a telescope and spent hours scanning the night sky, seeing for myself the moons of Jupiter, the rings of Saturn. In the summer I snorkeled, seeing for myself up close what lay along the sandy bottom in the inlets near Jones Beach on Long Island. In biology class, what fun it was to earn extra credit by wading through swampy ponds looking for tiny hydra and planaria – seeing and finding for myself.

Meanwhile, in our Presbyterian Sunday school we learned the story of Jesus – taught to us as if it were as empirically verifiable as any scientific theory. But it never took deep root for me. I’m kind of with the Piraha on this one. How can we know? And though I realize that the story of Christ’s death and resurrection is infinitely meaningful to millions, it simply isn’t to me, not in any literal sense, rather in poetic and metaphorical ways only – which is, it must be said, true for many Christians as well (someone should tell Dan Everett).

In any case, when my family joined the Unitarian Universalist church I didn’t miss the Sunday school lessons about Jesus; instead I reveled in the freedom to come to my own conclusions about life – to have “an original relation to the universe” as Emerson put it – continuing at that time of my life to be far more intrigued by the latest discoveries in astronomy than by the ancient stories of Abraham and Moses and Jesus.

A little later on, though, I discovered that science was not the only route to “an original relation...”

Reading Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* as a high school senior – and then again as a college freshman in a philosophy seminar – opened my eyes to the mystical dimension of religion. And you know, Emerson was talking about this mystical dimension of religion at least as much as he was talking about the scientific enterprise when he spoke of “an original relation.” The point in either case is to see and experience for ourselves – whether a scientific truth or a spiritual truth.

And so... I eventually came to think of myself as what can be called a “mystical humanist” – one of a long line, even if not all by that name. Mystical humanism: one variation of empirical religion, seeing-is-believing religion, experiencing-is-believing religion, original relation religion.

At the risk of being overly inclusive and washing out real differences between one teacher or poet or religion and another, I think we could include to begin with Jesus in that line of mystical humanists, Jesus who invited us to *experience* what he called the “kingdom of heaven” spread before us but we do not see. Surely we could include the Buddha (the model for Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*), the Buddha who insisted that we “be

our own confidence,” that we follow only those teachings and precepts that we discover to be true for ourselves. His was, we are reminded again and again in Buddhism, a *way*, a *path*, not a set of predetermined doctrines.

Closer to our own time, of course our 19<sup>th</sup> century forebears including Emerson, as well as Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and many others, are in this line of what I’m calling mystical humanism – those who seek Emerson’s original relation, an empirical approach to life and religion.

In that same essay on “Nature” Emerson (who had an intense interest in the scientific discoveries of the age) catalogued in an orderly, almost scientific way the various uses – from directly practical to reverently inspirational – to which human beings can put nature as we learn nature’s ways; but he also reports his own mystical experience of wonder, particularly in this well known and at the time often parodied passage:

Standing on the bare ground, - my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.

Original relation indeed!

And Henry David Thoreau. He after all considered his time at Walden pond to be an *experiment* in living; he said he wanted to *see for himself* whether life was mean or sublime; he wanted to *see for himself* whether one could live a life of simplicity in the midst of an outward civilization, as he put it. Thoreau, who spent entire mornings “rapt in a reverie” losing track of time as he sat on his little front porch utterly and wordlessly immersed in nature, a kind of mystical experience to be sure. Yet Thoreau was also one of the most careful and thorough naturalists of his era, spending many other hours walking the woods and carefully cataloguing the flora and fauna of Walden and surrounding territory. In other words, Thoreau was both mystic and scientist – with no contradiction.

And Whitman surely nurtured an original relation to *every* dimension of life. He was an attentive observer of *everything* – almost to a fault – as his catalogues of the life of the streets and cities and towns of our nation went on for pages and pages; yet he too also brought a sense of mystical wonder to his life and work:

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? .... I do not know what it is  
any more than he.

And:

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?  
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four,  
and each moment then...

Then we have Emily Dickinson, such a careful – one might say almost scientific – observer of the particulars of nature and also of her own inner life, who concluded her poem “I dwell in possibility” with these words, certainly the words of a mystical humanist, a mystically empirical poet in original relation with the universe:

For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

And now, these days we have, among others, Mary Oliver. Mary Oliver, like each one of these poets and prophets, teachers and philosophers, looks for herself and invites us to look for ourselves – to be in an original relation with the universe. In “The Summer Day,” a poem familiar to many of you, through *her* attentive observation she invites *us* to attentive observation, to an acute attention – not a generalized wonder, but noticing *this* grasshopper...

the one who has flung herself out of the grass...

She goes on to say – in a somewhat Whitmanesque turn...

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention...

...in other words to be in “original relation.”

Okay, then, philosophers, prophets, and poets. Yet on a kind of parallel track to these poets and writers, during that same 19<sup>th</sup> century of the Transcendentalists and with ever increasing speed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now into the 21<sup>st</sup> the scientific enterprise has accelerated apace, the natural curiosity of every child turned by some into the vocation of a lifetime. And so, modern geology, evolutionary biology, physics... all born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and still growing, still extending our knowledge, broadening and deepening the understanding we all have of this miraculous and mysterious world in which we live. (And however much we learn and know through our scientific “original relation,” this world is still miracle and mystery also.)

Original relation.

And all this leads me to the message I'd like to leave us with this morning. It is not only *good in itself* to be in “original relation with the universe,” to experience directly, as the sources of our Unitarian Universalist “Principles” put it, the “transcendent mystery and wonder” of life. And not only good in itself, as our sources also put it, to learn from the “results of science” and, as the “Principles” themselves put it, to engage in the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” All this *is* to be fully alive and awake; all this is good.

Yet we have also in our time – perhaps it is true at all times, but it somehow seems all the more urgent today – we have the need to link the empirically *scientific* with the empirically *mystical* in order to arrive at the empirically *moral* when it comes to life in this world.

That's a mouthful. I'll say it again, and note that for me this all flows from Emerson's assertion that we too can have an original relation with the universe. So, once again: We need – urgently - to link the empirically *scientific* with the empirically *mystical* in order to arrive at the empirically *moral* when it comes to life in this world.

And this is not as complicated as I may have just made it sound.

Really seeing and experiencing and as best we can understanding (for our empirical seeing and experiencing must be extended through our analysis and

understanding) our “place in the family of things” (to use Mary Oliver’s words from her poem “Wild Geese”) and really seeing and understanding for ourselves (as best we can) our human responsibility for such realities as poverty and violence and global warming, not to mention the more mundane and close at hand dimensions of our lives with one another – will lead us to the moral questions as to how we shall live in this world.

This explains to me what might seem like a leap in Mary Oliver’s poem “The Summer Day.” There is the poet, utterly, one might say both scientifically and mystically, attentive to the grasshopper – and suddenly in her concluding lines she is reminding us...

Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

Her final question is it seems to me a profoundly moral question. It’s as if *really* noticing, *really* seeing any one thing in this world will remind us of the essential questions *of* our lives and will wordlessly challenge us to answer, spiritually and morally, *with* our lives.

So, yes, with the Piraha, I am far more interested – scientifically and mystically – in *this* world and its wonders, the woods awakening in the spring for example, than I am in ancient reported miracles.

And morally I am far more interested in the health and well-being of *this* world and its wonders than I am in ancient supernatural miracles or miracles to come. More interested in the survival of the Amazon and the Piraha, and in the healing of the living systems on earth upon which we all depend than, for example, in the possible survival of the soul after death.

Yes, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” Now more than ever – we must. Now and always.

May we know that this is a *good* way to live; and that the goodness of this way of living can overflow and bless the world.

So may it be.