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A Homecoming

ON A CRISP OCTOBER DAY in 1834, Waldo Emerson and his mother boarded a stagecoach in Boston that would take them to Concord some seventeen miles to the north and west. During the four hours that the coach rattled and rocked its way along, there was lively talk among its passengers about the beauties of a countryside ablaze with fall colors and the sorry state of public affairs. It was not surprising that one of them, a resident of Concord, a place of natural features bearing Indian names such as the Muskettaquid River and still yielding arrowheads and other Indian artifacts from a precolonial settlement with every spring plowing, should harangue his captive audience about the cruel action by President Jackson—"King Andrew the First," he called him—in uprooting the Seminoles from their native Florida. Ordinarily, Emerson might have participated in the conversation, and he certainly would have been looking forward to the rest and recreation that visits to the family homestead had provided over the years. But not on this trip. He squeezed himself into a corner of the coach and kept glumly silent while contemplating the circumstances in which he found himself. It was not sentiment or pleasure that prompted this return to Concord. It was need. He could no longer afford to rent suitable quarters for himself and his mother in Boston and might never again be able to do so. Through tragedy

and an exercise of his own stubborn will, his once golden personal and professional lives had turned to dross.

Having heard, when they boarded, the names of the young man and the woman who looked to be his mother, the driver needed no prompting to pull his team to a halt before the stone gateposts of the property in Concord known to have housed Emersons for as long as anybody could remember, instead of carrying them on to his usual stopping place at a tavern in town. For Waldo this courtesy was a bright glimmer in a dark day. It made him realize that few of his new neighbors could know the details of what he had been through in the six years since he had last been in Concord, and he would be accorded respect, however undeserved. While the driver offloaded their luggage, the Emersons stood together between moss-furred posts that had not held a gate for years and stared down the long tree-lined pathway to the door they would soon enter. The momentary lift to Waldo's spirits subsided. Signs of neglect and decay were everywhere to be seen. Magnificent compared to surrounding dwellings when his grandfather built it as an appropriate manse for the First Parish Church, the weathered gray house and unkempt grounds now reflected the physical decline and dated theology of the grumpy old man who would be their host.

Perhaps fortunately, Waldo's mother did not share his gloom. "Oh, isn't it good to be home!" she said. The best Waldo could manage in response was, "Yes, I suppose it is." With no other evident choice, he would try to make the best of it. In the journal he had kept since college days, he would note the homecoming by writing a kind of prayer: "Hail to the quiet fields of my fathers! Not wholly unattended by supernatural friendship and favor, let me come hither. Bless my purposes as they are simple and virtuous."

Waldo's description of the Concord area as "the fields of my fathers" was no idle boast. The first white party to replace the Indians on the banks of the Musketaquid two years earlier had been led by one of his direct ancestors, the Reverend Peter Bulkeley. In 1775, standing in the study of the house he had recently built, Waldo's grandfather, William Emerson, had been witness to the

first battle of the Revolution; two slain British soldiers had been buried in unmarked graves on the grounds of the manse. Filled with patriotic fervor, thirty-three-year-old William Emerson had then signed on as chaplain to the American troops and had died of dysentery at the siege of Ticonderoga. He left a young widow, Phebe; a seven-year-old son, William; and a two-year-old daughter, Mary Moody. To make ends meet, Phebe took in boarders, one of whom was the Reverend Ezra Ripley, who replaced her husband in the pulpit, and within a year in her bed. Ezra Ripley buried Phebe in 1825 but, now eighty-three, still clung to the job and house he had inherited. His invitation for his stepdaughter-in-law, Ruth, and her son to share the house was not entirely a charitable gesture; confined to his bedroom by illness, he was as much in need of their help as they were of his space.

In building his manse, Grandfather Emerson had evidently intended to beget a large family as well as live up to his status in the community. Massachusetts had long been a theocracy in which the state supported the churches of an approved Protestant persuasion, and the clergy were thus accorded an unofficial influence and power in civic affairs. It had in fact only been in the last year that the state's constitution had been amended to establish a separation of church and state as the founders, led by Jefferson, had done in forming the federal government. Waldo had no doubt that Dr. Ripley would view this development with a dismay similar to that of Lyman Beecher down in Connecticut when that state disestablished his Congregational church back in 1818. Whatever his host might think of the demotion, Waldo welcomed it even though it might become a bone of contention between them unless he could avoid discussion of matters theological or political with the old man. He was hoping that the original creation of many rooms, however small, for children would allow for a comfortable privacy and for his younger brother, Charles, and his aunt Mary Moody, who had been born in the manse, to join them.

Whether from weariness or unanticipated graciousness, Dr. Ripley greeted Waldo with a precious gift. A place for concentrated labor on writing sermons had been a professional necessity

for William Emerson, and he had kept that in mind while planning the manse. In a corner of the second floor, above and apart from the bustle of housekeeping and entertaining, he had outfitted a room as a study. Dr. Ripley had been told that Waldo had given up one of the most prestigious and financially rewarding pastorates in Boston because he would not participate in a Christian rite that even Unitarians performed. Utter foolishness in old Ezra's way of thinking, and he understood that Mary Moody and one of Waldo's smart younger brothers agreed with him. Apparently, Waldo was trying to earn something by giving lectures to people who would pay to hear him, filling pulpits wherever and whenever asked, and writing a book. None of these ventures sounded promising, but Ezra knew from long experience that they would require the facilities for thought. So almost as soon as he heard their voices when they entered the manse, he summoned them up to his bedside and told Waldo that he could have exclusive use of the study for as long as he needed it.

Much as he had wanted and hoped for such a gift, Waldo felt obliged to offer a feeble protest: "But you'll soon be getting back to the pulpit, and . . ."

"Don't give a thought to that, my boy. I don't need it. I've written thousands of sermons, most of them packed away up in the attic. I've been dusting them off and reusing them for years, as you will one day. Now I know you've got a lot to do to settle in."

The next morning after breakfast, Waldo mounted to the study and began moving to the attic more of the theological material dating back well beyond Ripley's tenure to make room for the books and papers that he had brought. It was honest and necessary labor, and he began feeling much better about his prospects. From time to time he would pause to look through the small cracked panes of the double window in the west wall. Much of the bare-limbed orchard between the willow shading the house and the river had been planted by Dr. Ripley since he and his mother and younger brothers, Edward and Charles, had spent most of 1827 and 1828 here. At the breakfast table that morning, Ruth

Emerson had clucked with delight over all the fresh fruit she had found in the larder. Out of the single window on the north side, Waldo could see that historic spot where the rebels and redcoats had first exchanged shots on the North Bridge. There would be anniversary ceremonies there in the next spring for which he had been asked to prepare suitable remarks before anyone knew that he might then be living in Concord. Perhaps this was another indication that his fall from grace was not known here.

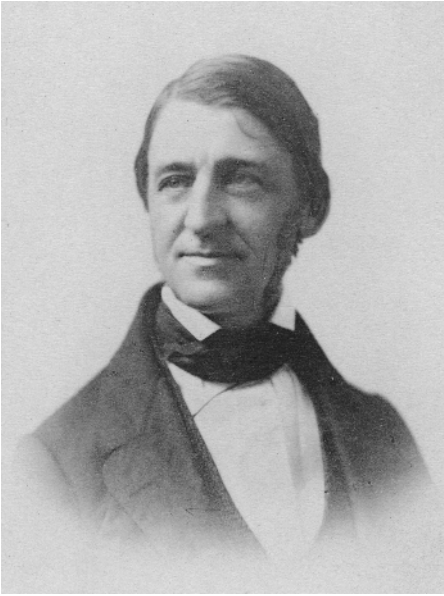
While moving things around, Waldo ran into some papers of his grandfather's, and hanging on the wall of a little hideaway apartment in the attic was a crude likeness by a country painter of a solemn, bewigged man just about his own age but looking a great deal older in his antique attire. These objects reminded him of the weight of tradition that he had carried on his shoulders throughout most of his years of awareness. Although only seven when his father, William, died of stomach cancer, Waldo was conscious of the honor conferred upon him and the whole family by his father's position as pastor of Boston's First Church. In addition, there were all those other ministers who were talked about within the family circle—seven generations of them, some said—and the christening of his brother Robert Bulkeley Emerson carried the line back to that famous founder of Concord. Honor was just about all that the second William Emerson left behind him except for the five of eight children—all sons—who had survived infancy. As had her mother-in-law before her, Ruth Emerson took in boarders. To help her run the establishment in Boston, she had put the boys to work so consistently that Waldo would always refer to his youth as “hard.” An even tougher taskmistress for the boys than Ruth was her sister-in-law, Mary Moody, who moved in with her to help out. A tart-tongued maiden lady of strict religious views, Mary Moody wanted to groom all of her five nephews for the ministry. It was the fate for which Emersons were destined. Waldo's one memorable respite from the rigorous Boston regime had come at age nine when he was sent to Concord for a lengthy stay with the Ripleys to escape the uncertainties of the war in 1812.



An artist's look at the town of Concord, Massachusetts, in the 1830s when Ralph Waldo Emerson returned to his ancestral home seeking solace after the death of his bride and a crisis in his once promising career as a Unitarian minister.

Referred to in disgust as “Mr. Madison’s War,” the conflict was causing little but misery in Boston, where it disrupted the commerce on which the port thrived. The fear in households like the Emersons’ was that there would be riots and pillaging. But for an imaginative boy like Waldo, the safety of Concord was no comfort; it was banishment from the excitement of running down to the waterfront with other boys to watch the warships under sail and dream of glory.

To make ministers of the brood under their care, Ruth and Mary Moody knew that it meant somehow getting them through college. In Boston that meant going to Harvard, an institution over in Cambridge that, according to a statement by its founders in 1636 and carved on its gates, was intended to “advance learning and perpetuate it to Posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the Dust.” The Emerson women could not know how much more than literacy was being taught in Harvard when, following in his brother William’s footsteps, Waldo enrolled in 1817. For more than half a century beginning in 1673, there had been ongoing



All who knew him were warmed by Emerson's gentle smile, which reflected the kindliness and optimism of his nature regardless of many personal trials and tribulations and a deepening dismay over the course of a dividing nation.



The Old Manse in Concord, built just before the Revolutionary War by Emerson's grandfather, then pastor of the First Parish Church, was Emerson's first refuge in the town and would later become the honeymoon nest of Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne.

disagreements among the clergymen who made up the institution's Board of Overseers between those who clung to the Calvinist conservatism of the founders and those who were open to newer theological thinking. By the mid-eighteenth century, the conservatives were so outnumbered that they withdrew and went across the border into Connecticut to join Yale, "a school of the prophets." In 1792, the first layman took a seat on Harvard's Board of Overseers, and in 1805 a Unitarian was made a professor of theology. Wide-ranging reading and discussion or friendly argument over what they learned from it was the favorite recreation of the Emerson brothers, and they entered college eager to grasp any new knowledge or experience that would excite their minds.

College authorities recognized not only the financial need, but also the scholastic promise of the Emerson boys. Waldo was given the coveted position of a bed in the then president John T. Kirkland's house in return for his services as an orderly—a kind of all-around servant. When he moved to a dormitory in sophomore year, he went on waiting table and taking summer teaching jobs to cover expenses. By junior year, in a gesture indicative of how college was changing him, the young man dropped his given first name, Ralph, for the more unusual middle name he favored, and he would thereafter be Waldo to friends and family who did not insist on sticking to the formality of "Mr. Emerson." His curriculum was largely classical, and he became familiar with the histories and philosophies of Greece and Rome and, of course, mother England. He did not turn out to be a star student; he graduated thirtieth in a class of fifty-nine. But he did win prizes for essays on ethics and Socrates, and he enjoyed oratory enough to agree to deliver the class poem after half a dozen others turned the honor down. As a public speaker he had an asset for which he could claim no credit—a resonating baritone voice.

Degree in hand, Waldo had little choice as to what he should do. William had started a girls' school to help out with family finances, and he recruited Waldo for the enterprise. Money was needed for the care of brother Bulkeley, who had only a child's

mind, and for the education of Edward and Charles, both brilliant and Harvard-bound. It was the beginning of a depressing period in Waldo's life. He had no taste for teaching and a bad case of low self-esteem. He told his journal that "the dreams of my childhood are all fading away and giving place to some very sober and very disgusting views of a quiet mediocrity of talents and condition—nor does it appear to me that any application of which I am capable, any efforts, any sacrifices, could at this moment restore any reasonableness to the familiar expectations of my earlier youth." His harsh analysis of his own personality was that he suffered from "a sore uneasiness in the company of most men and women, a frigid fear of offending and jealousy of disrespect." Whatever Waldo thought of himself, it apparently did not show, since the girls in his care would recall him as a good and amiable teacher. Slight and straight, he just missed being strikingly handsome by reason of a long nose and long neck. His "fear of offending" caused him to adopt an attitude and expression best described by a kitchen maid who was asked when she emerged from one of his lectures, "Do you understand Mr. Emerson?" She laughed. "Not a word, but I like to see him stand up there and look as if he thought everyone was as good as he was."

Waldo's hope that teaching might be a brief interlude in getting started on a more appealing career soon went glimmering. Members of the Harvard faculty who had enjoyed time abroad came back with enthusiasm for the German writers and philosophers whose work was becoming the rage among intellectuals in Britain and on the Continent. Persuaded by them that study in Germany was essential to anyone wishing to become a minister, William left Waldo in charge of the school and, in effect, of earning the family bread while he took off for Europe. During his brother's absence, Waldo had a debate with himself, much of which he confided to his journal, as to his own future. That rather harsh view of his character caused him to rule out the law as a possible profession because it "demands a good deal of personal address, an impregnable confidence in one's own powers." Medicine, too,

was out of the question, because “it also makes large demands on the practitioner for a seducing mannerism.” With a kind of resignation, he settled on the ministry, noting that “in Divinity I hope to thrive. I inherit from my sire a formality of manner and speech, but I derive from him, or his patriotic parent, a passionate love for the strains of eloquence. What we ardently love we learn to imitate. My understanding venerates and my heart loves that cause which is dear to God and man—the laws of morals, the Revelations which sanction and the blood of martyrs and triumphant suffering of the Saints which seal them. In my better hours, I am the believer (if not the dupe) of brilliant promises, and can respect myself as the possessor of those powers which command the reason and passions of the multitude.”

No sooner thought than done. While carrying on with the school, Waldo began ministerial studies. Edward was helping with the school on vacations from Harvard, where he was outperforming Waldo scholastically and developing the kind of personality that made his plans to study law after graduation quite realistic in his older brother’s view. But it was something of a shock when William returned from Germany also intending to study law. Instead of enriching the faith that William had planned to preach, his encounter with German thinking had shaken it. Nevertheless, he urged Waldo to go to Germany himself, or at least read up on it. Already four years out of college, Waldo was too impatient to get on with his chosen profession to waste time in Europe, and he enrolled in Harvard Divinity School instead. But he was interested in what William told him and intended to keep an open mind. Possibly to counter the feeling of following too meekly in the path of family tradition, he had written a youthful declaration of independence for himself: “Who is he that shall control me? Why may I not speak and write and think with entire freedom? What am I to the universe, or, the universe, what is it to me? Who hath forged the chains of wrong and right, of Opinion and Custom? And must I wear them? I say to the universe, Mighty One! thou art not my mother. Return to chaos if thou wilt. I shall still

exist. I live. If I owe my being, it is to a destiny greater than thine. Star by star, world by world, system by system shall be crushed,—but I shall live.”

There would be no escape from German influence in divinity school. One of Waldo’s best friends there was Frederic Henry Hedge, son of a professor, who had been to Germany before entering Harvard College. His experience there did not deflect him from the ministry as in William’s case, but it did alter his thinking as to how the faith should be presented, and he would share his views with an appreciative Waldo. One Germanic theme that the young Bostonians found very appealing was *Bildung*. First sounded by the great Goethe, it was translated as “self-culture” in America by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who would describe it in Harvard lectures as Goethe’s “great study from youth to age” that made him “like the athlete of ancient story, drawing all his strength from earth. His model was the perfect man, as man; living, moving, laboring upon earth in the sweat of his brow.” Longfellow added that through *Bildung* Goethe “beheld beauty in everything and God in everything. This was his religion.” William Ellery Channing, Boston’s most illustrious Unitarian minister and a mentor to young Emerson, suggested thinking of culture in this context as cultivating or tilling. “To cultivate anything, be it a plant, an animal, a mind, is to make it grow. Growth, expression, is the end,” he said. *Bildung* was a natural fit with Emerson’s personal declaration of independence.

Of more importance to Waldo’s development was what Hedge prevailed upon him to absorb from the works of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. The philosopher, who died a year after Emerson’s birth, left behind him a massive body of work that challenged conventional views on just about everything from the structure of the mind itself to the mind’s use in the realms of religion and politics. Kant called his conclusions about the working of the mind “transcendental philosophy” since they postulate an inherent element of the mind that transcends the experience of the senses. This was a seed that would take strenuous tillage by

Emerson and his like-minded friends before it would flower into an influential American school of philosophy. But, like *Bildung*, the seed of transcendentalism had landed in the fertile soil of an open mind.

There was a strain of physical weakness, threatening the lungs and nervous system, in all of the Emerson boys. Edward was hit first and hardest and had to give up his law studies temporarily in 1825 and sail for Europe in hope of recovering. With William in New York reading law in Wall Street, the trip was made possible by Waldo's own troubles: the reading connected with his theological studies overtaxed his eyes to the point where he gave up and opened a school in Cambridge to provide family income.

Within a year, however, Edward felt strong enough to come back and accept an invitation to learn his law in the offices of Senator Daniel Webster, and Waldo went back to an exhausting round of study with "mended" eyes and preaching in hope of a "call" to a paying position in some church. It was too much. Although he was "approbated to preach" by the Middlesex Association of Ministers in the fall of 1826, he considered a tightness in the chest as a warning that he too shared his brother's affliction. When a well-to-do uncle, Samuel Ripley, offered to finance a trip to Florida, he set sail for St. Augustine.

The time Waldo spent in the South did as much for his mind as his lungs. He found himself living in the same boardinghouse as Achille Murat, a nephew of Napoleon and former crown prince of Naples. Achille's father, married to Napoleon's youngest sister, Caroline, and crowned king of Naples by Napoleon, had been executed after Waterloo and the son had been exiled from Europe. It was no hardship for the young man, who had hated his uncle, and only three years into residence he had become such an enthusiast for American democracy that he was writing a book about it. The fellow boarders had youth—Waldo at twenty-four and Achille at twenty-six—in common and a lively interest in matters of the mind. Murat had purchased a plantation near Tallahassee and staffed it with slaves, with one of whom he had fathered a child.

In his book in progress, he argued that slavery was valuable economically to the whole nation and personally to the plantation owner, who was freed by slave labor to “cultivate his mind.” Murat was also an atheist. Yet Waldo found somewhat to his surprise that they could be friends, particularly after they spent days together in the cabin of a small sailing ship weathering a storm during its passage from St. Augustine to Charleston, South Carolina. They could discuss their differences without agreeing or losing respect for each other. On his trip homeward in early 1827, Waldo summarized for his journal how the southern experience had hardened his feelings against slavery and softened his feelings about people who did not share his faith.

St. Augustine, February 27: A fortnight since I attended a meeting of the Bible Society. The Treasurer of this institution is Marshal of the district, and by a somewhat unfortunate arrangement had appointed a special meeting of the Society, and a slave-auction, at the same time and place, one being in the Government house, and the other in the adjoining yard. One ear therefore heard the glad tidings of great joy, whilst the other was regaled with “Going, gentlemen, going!” And almost without changing our position we might aid in sending the Scriptures to Africa, or bid for “four children without a mother” who had been kidnapped therefrom.

Charleston, April 6: A new event is added to the quiet history of my life. I have connected myself in friendship to a man who with as ardent love of truth as that which animates me, with a mind surpassing mine in the variety of research, and sharpened and strengthened to an energy for action to which I have no pretension, by advantages of birth and practical connexion with mankind almost all men in the world,—is, yet, that which I had ever supposed only a creature of the imagination—a consistent Atheist—and a disbeliever in the existence and, of course, the

immortality of the soul. My faith in these points is strong and I trust, as I live, indestructible. Meantime I love and honour this intrepid doubter. His soul is noble, and his virtue, as the virtue of a Saducee must always be, is sublime.

In the summer of 1827, Ruth Emerson was living in the manse in Concord, where she could provide a place of rest and recreation for her busy and sometimes overstressed sons. On summer vacation from Harvard, Charles was with her most of the time, except for a speaking appearance at a college exhibition in July. Often complaining of not feeling well, Edward came down weekends to rest up from his work in Webster's Boston office and get into shape for accompanying the senator and his family to Washington in the fall. At Harvard commencement exercises in August, where he received an honorary master's degree, Edward gave an oration that Waldo criticized in a letter to William as falling rather flat. Suspecting that his disappointing delivery might have been caused by health problems, Waldo warned William in a postscript, "You will say to Edward if you say anything that you have heard from Waldo of his success for, I have heard today that 'it was the perfection of speaking' & he looks sad under the suspicion that it was not." As for Waldo himself, he was earning ten dollars on Sundays preaching in different churches and spending weekdays with Charles roaming the familiar fields around Concord. He found the combination of hot weather and walking a wonder-working tonic.

At the very end of that year, one of Waldo's preaching dates took him to Concord, New Hampshire. There on Christmas Day, he was entertained in the home of one of the town's most prominent citizens, Colonel William A. Kent, and introduced to his sixteen-year-old stepdaughter, Ellen Tucker. She was vivacious and pretty and possessed of a handsome legacy from her late father, Bezaleel Tucker, who had owned and operated a Boston rope factory. She was almost as interested in words as in animals, as witnessed by her giving the name Byron to her pet spaniel, one

member of her menagerie that included a lamb, a canary, and some white mice. The developing eloquence of the young visiting preacher impressed her. Not only was the voice golden, but there was a new shine to the words it carried. Although this Mr. Emerson started his sermon dully enough with a text from the Bible, he went on to illustrate his points with examples from nature that she loved and with quotations from other great thinkers going back to the Greeks. His message was that each of them sitting there in front of him had the need and capacity to think deeply about spiritual matters and his or her own path to becoming a better person.

Waldo was appreciative of the warm reception that he got at the Kent household—and particularly from this bright young girl who was obviously well read for her age and well versed, too, as he could tell from a bit of poetry that she shyly showed him. He hoped that the rest of the congregation shared her reaction. Even if a congregation called itself Unitarian, Waldo could never be sure that he would not shock his audience, many of whom still cherished the lingering rites and pieties of the Calvinism in their background. In the matter of denying the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—as worshiped in orthodox Christianity, he argued in a letter to a friend, “All I said was this—that a priori, we know no reason why God may not exist in a threefold unity; but that since the manner of such an existence is inconceivable to our minds, he would never have revealed to us such an existence which we can neither describe nor comprehend. Infinite wisdom established the foundations of knowledge in the human mind so that twice two could never make anything else than four. So soon as this can be otherwise, our faith is loosened and science abolished. Three may be one, and one three.” He had doubts about a great many other aspects of orthodoxy and openly wondered whether he would have been “approbated to preach” if the examiners could have looked into his mind. But he had no doubts at all about the moral truths to which Jesus of Nazareth witnessed in his life and with his death, and these he was preaching with conviction when Ellen Tucker first heard him.

Throughout the next year, Ellen and Waldo corresponded. He could not help but be moved and flattered by her openness. "I am entirely yours now and ever shall be," she wrote in one letter, and in another, "Dear Waldo I love you says Ellen T. I dream about you again night and day." Although it was distressing to Waldo, he found the sad fact that she suffered from tuberculosis, which had killed her brother, all too familiar; it was his own family's affliction. She treated it lightly, proposing that a "drop of blood vermeil" be made into the family crest. Her letters revealed a saving wit, as for instance, "I want to tell you that I love you very much and I would like to have you love me always if consistent with your future plans." Ellen was definitely in Waldo's future plans, and the thought of their being together helped to sustain him when Edward went through a fit of madness so severe that he had to be briefly institutionalized. Waldo attributed his brother's derangement to an overdose of energy. In typical self-deprecating fashion, he noted that he was saved from such a fate by a "mixture of silliness" in his makeup. By year's end, Waldo and Ellen became engaged, while Edward gave up his taxing apprenticeship to Senator Webster and set sail for Puerto Rico.

The engagement virtually forced Waldo early in 1829 to settle down and take one of the permanent jobs with salary attached that he was being offered. He chose to sign on as assistant pastor at the historic Second Church, the religious home of the famous Increase and Cotton Mather. Apparently as wealthy as it was famous, the church paid Waldo twelve hundred dollars a year, an impressively large sum. When Waldo was only a few months into the job, the senior minister, Henry Ware, convinced that the congregation liked his junior, resigned to take a teaching position at Harvard. Waldo's compensation was raised to an amazing eighteen hundred dollars in July, and by September he felt wealthy enough to marry Ellen and bring her to Boston. It was the beginning of a romantic idyll for Waldo. The love that they shared for each other was oddly strengthened by her occasional sick spells when she coughed up blood. Waldo enthusiastically cooperated in any treat-

ment the doctors suggested, such as taking her on a two-hundred-mile bumpy buggy ride to shake the sickness out of her system, and buying dumbbells to join her in home exercises. The consciousness of what her illness might lead to caused them to communicate their feelings constantly in notes and poetry if not in person. In the midst of reading or writing at home, Waldo was sometimes heard to look up and call out, "O Ellen, I do dearly love you." But in a sermon on death just months after their marriage, he told the congregation that "our own pleasant dwelling has been the house of pain. The lamp of our life is burning already in the socket."

Low as it might have been, the flame was bright. With the money that Ellen brought with her and with Waldo's salary, they were able to live well—each of them to have a buggy, for instance, and Ellen to have her mother and sisters with her. Waldo had enough money left over to keep his mother and brothers in comfort, too. Ellen soon discovered that she had married a personage rather than a parson. Like his father before him, Waldo was named chaplain to the Massachusetts legislature and elected to the Boston School Committee. Although he enjoyed crafting sermons, Waldo was less enthralled with other aspects of his job. He was soon in conflict with his congregation over administering the sacraments, and he literally dreaded making pastoral calls. In that process, he was known to mix up addresses and visit perfect—and astonished—strangers who had no connection to his church. When he did get to the right person, he could be nearly tongue-tied by shyness. One story widely circulated about him had to do with his effort to ease the passing of a dying veteran of the Revolutionary War. Waldo could think of nothing hopeful to say until his eyes lighted on the sick man's medicine bottles and he began discussing glassmaking. "Young man, if you don't know your business, you had better go home," the old soldier grumbled.

While he had Ellen to go home to, Waldo could put up with anything in order to keep her happy and comfortable. But in early 1831 there came a time when it was obvious that he could no

longer help her. It was an event that he had anticipated. At the height of their happiness he had written to his aunt Mary, "You know—none can know better—on what straightened lines we have all walked to manhood. In poverty and many troubles the seeds of our prosperity were sown. Now all these troubles appeared a fair counterbalance to the flatteries of fortune." After pointing out how well his brothers were doing at the time, he went on:

Waldo is comparatively well and comparatively successful,—far more so than his friends, out of his family, anticipated. Now I add to all this felicity a particular felicity which makes my own glass very much larger and fuller, and I straight away say, Can this hold? Will God make me a brilliant exception to the common order of his dealings, which equalizes destinies? There's an apprehension of reverse always arising from success. But is it my fault that I am happy, and cannot I trust the Goodness that has uplifted to uphold me? I cannot find in the world without or within, any antidote, any bulwark against this fear, like this: the frank acknowledgment of unbounded dependence. Let into the heart that is filled with prosperity the idea of God, and it smooths the giddy precipices of human pride to a substantial level; it harmonizes the condition of the individual with the economy of the universe.

The fear proved valid when Waldo was compelled to make this terse entry in his journal: "Boston, February 8, 1831—Ellen Tucker Emerson died, 8th February, Tuesday morning, 9 o'clock."

Waldo was devastated. That "bulwark against this fear" was not there. For a year he walked every morning to her father's vault in Roxbury where Ellen lay to deliver thoughts he had of her, poems he wrote to her. When not thinking of Ellen, he was dwelling on an increasing conviction that the conventional ministry was not for him. It involved mouthing words and conducting rituals unchanged for more than a thousand years that, in his view, distorted and obscured what should be a living faith. He could no

longer honestly administer the sacrament of communion, or the Lord's supper, in which the wine is held to be the blood, and the bread the flesh, of Jesus. If, as claimed, its purpose was "in remembrance" of Jesus, Waldo agreed with his Quaker friends that the physical acts of drinking and eating profaned what should be a spiritual experience. He was at a loss as to how to handle his feelings in this matter until a fateful day in early 1832. On his regular daily visit to the cemetery, he performed an act that he recorded in his journal without elaboration: "I visited Ellen's tomb and opened the coffin."

However grisly the act might appear to others, it was life-changing for Ralph Waldo Emerson. He had a new birth of freedom. Ellen was truly gone beyond recall, and he no longer had to cling to a job that he would have needed to support her and any family that they might have had. In fact, he had been made aware that her considerable legacy would come to him when the estate was finally settled, and become the source of a livable income. No eccentric act he now performed could bring shame upon his love, and he was emboldened to take up the communion issue with leaders of his congregation. After many meetings in which there was no agreement, Waldo retreated to the mountains to meditate. He came back with a sermon on the subject that would cause his resignation.

At a September service, Waldo told his people that he did not believe from his understanding of the Bible that Jesus meant his last supper with his disciples to be perpetual and that the effect of doing so was "to clothe Jesus with an authority which he never claimed." He went on to say that

the importance ascribed to this particular ordinance is not consistent with the spirit of Christianity. The general object and effect of this ordinance is unexceptionable. It has been, and is, I doubt not the occasion of indefinite good; but an importance is given by Christians to it which never can belong in any form. My friends, the apostle well assures us that "the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but

righteousness and peace and joy, in the Holy Ghost.” I am not so foolish as to declaim against forms. Forms are as essential as bodies; but to exalt particular forms, to adhere to one form a moment after it is out-grown is unreasonable, and it is alien to the spirit of Christ. If I understand the distinction of Christianity, the reason why it is to be preferred over all other systems and is divine is this, that it is a moral system; that it presents men with truths which are their own justification; that if miracles may be said to have been its evidence to the first Christians, they are not its evidence to us, but the doctrines themselves; that every practice is Christian that praises itself; and every practice unchristian which condemns itself. I am not engaged to Christianity by decent forms, or saving ordinances; it is not usage, if not what I do not understand, that binds me to it—let these be the sandy foundations of falsehoods. What I revere and obey in it is its reality, its boundless charity, its deep interior life, the rest it gives to my mind, the echo it returns to my thoughts, the perfect accord it makes with my reason through all its representations of God and His Providence; and the persuasion and courage that come out thence to lead me upward and onward. Freedom is the essence of this faith. It has for its object simply to make men good and wise. Its institutions, then, should be as flexible as the wants of men. That form out of which the life and suitableness have departed, should be as worthless in its eyes as the dead leaves that are falling around us.

Although some younger hearers thought that their minister made sense, the general reaction was expressed by a lady who cornered him after the service and said, “You have taken my Lord away and I know not where you have laid him.” His stand did not go down too well even in his own family. His usually adoring brother Charles expressed concern that he had gone too far in

“the expression of individual opinion.” Aunt Mary Moody felt that he was repudiating the work and reputation of his father and all that she had hoped for him even though he said, “I have sometimes thought that to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry.” Fellow ministers thought that he had gone “Quakerish,” and there were even rumors that he had gone mad. Oddly enough, his strongest supporter was a fire-breathing Methodist minister, Father Edward Taylor, who had been aided by Waldo in founding a Seamen’s Mission. When fellow Methodists complained of the association and insisted that Waldo “must go to hell,” Taylor thundered, “It does look so, but I am sure of one thing: if Emerson goes to hell, he will change the climate there, and emigration will set that way.”

Instead, Waldo went to Europe. The strain that the Emersons had been under since Ellen’s death played havoc with their weak constitutions. Charles developed alarming symptoms of tuberculosis and departed for Puerto Rico to be with Edward. Before leaving, he informed Aunt Mary Moody that he had never seen Waldo so “disheartened.” In addition to general malaise, Waldo was dealing with persistent diarrhea. He did not know what to do about it until he heard of a ship sailing for southern Europe on Christmas Day, and he found himself almost unwittingly aboard when it cleared Boston harbor. The voyage restored his health, and he enjoyed seeing places he knew only by reading, such as Rome, Paris, and London. He overcame his shyness enough to call on his favorite authors—Coleridge and Wordsworth in England and Carlyle in Scotland. He had been fascinated by Thomas Carlyle’s essays on the new thinking coming out of Germany, but he hadn’t been prepared for the effect of meeting him. Although very different personalities, their mutual attraction was such that Waldo offered to get the Scotsman’s book published in America and noted in his journal, “Carlyle is so amiable that I love him.”

Sailing homeward, Waldo had a great deal of time for thinking about what he would do and where he would do it. The loss of a pulpit had been his own choice, and he was determined to

justify it by carrying on his ministry in any available way. To do so, he felt obliged to come up with a response to that woman in his lost congregation who wanted to know where he had laid her Lord. He used the idle time aboard ship to frame an answer that might satisfy her and all like-minded souls:

Before I parted from you I anxiously desired an opportunity of speaking to you upon the subject of that change which seems to be taking place under our eyes in the opinions of men on religious questions; of that teaching which all men are waiting for; of that Teacher who has been predicted, and hath not yet come. Who is that Teacher? Let Jesus answer. Even the Spirit of truth. He would say that there is constant effort of the Divine Providence for the instruction of man. Time, the great teacher, is always uttering his lessons; every day is exposing some of the falsehoods that have deceived us; every day the Almighty Father accumulates knowledge in the mind of the race, from endless sources. The Teacher is one, but he speaks by a thousand lips. To drop all personification, the progress of society, the simple occurrences of every day, are always instructing men, undeceiving them; and every event, big with what crimes and misfortunes soever, carries with it this beneficial effect. So with the highest truth, the relations, namely, of man to God, and the character of God. The perspective of time, as it sets everything in the right view, does the same by Christianity. We learn to look at it now as a part of the history of the world; to see how it rests on the broad basis of man's moral nature, but is not itself that basis. I cannot but think that Jesus Christ will be better loved by not being adored. He has had an unnatural, an artificial place for ages in human opinions, a place too high for love. There is a recoil of affections from all authority and force. In the barbarous state of society it was thought to add to the dignity of Christ to make him King, to make him God.

But will it not come to be thought the chief value of his teaching that it was a brave stand made for man's spiritual nature, against the sensualism, the forms, and the crimes of the age? The value of his particular lessons is something less to us than it was to his contemporaries, because, like every wise and efficient man, he spoke to his times, in all their singular peculiarities. He speaks as he thinks, but he is thinking for them. And it is the great mark of the extraordinary force of his mind that, notwithstanding this occasional character, his sayings have a fullness of meaning, a fitness to human nature, and an universality of application which has commended them to the whole world. Christianity is the most emphatic affirmation of spiritual nature. But it is not the only nor the last affirmation. There shall be a thousand more. Very inconsistent would it be with a soul so possessed with the love of the real and unseen as Christ's to set bounds to that illimitable ocean. He never said, "All truth have I revealed." He plainly affirms the direct contrary: "I will send you another Teacher, another Comforter, even the Spirit of truth; he will guide you into all truth." His word is a mustard seed; it is a little leaven; but, with a prophet's eye, he sees it quicken the minds of good men, and run, like something endued with life, from soul to soul, from land to land—searching, agitating, educating society; touching with sympathy all heroic minds, and preparing hearts to conceive and tongues to utter yet more lofty and significant revelations. "Greater things than these shall he do." We see with our eyes the verification of his promise. In the place of unsupported virtues of solitary individuals that sparkle in the darkness of antiquity, of the little, stingy, rapacious intercourse of those days, the nations of the globe are brought together by pacific and equitable commerce; liberal, humane, Christian associations are correcting the manners and relieving the sufferings of vast masses of men:

are they not all the fruit of the life and teachings of the lowly Nazarene?

There is a revolution of religious opinion taking effect around us, as it seems to me the greatest of all revolutions which have ever occurred; that, namely, which has separated the individual from the whole world, and made him demand a faith satisfactory to his own proper nature, whose full extent he now for the first time contemplates. A little while ago men were supposed to be saved or lost as one race. Adam was the federal head, and his sin a federal sin, which cut off the hopes of his posterity. The atoning blood of Christ again was sacrifice for all, by which the divine vengeance was averted from you and me. But now man begins to hear a voice that fills the heavens and earth, saying that God is within him; that there is the celestial host. I find this amazing revelation of my immediate relation to God a solution to all the doubts that oppressed me. I recognize the distinction of the outer and inner self; the double consciousness that, within this erring, passionate, mortal self, sits a supreme, calm, immortal mind, whose powers I do not know, but it is stronger than I; it is wiser than I; it never approved me in any wrong; I seek counsel of it in my doubts; I repair to it in my dangers; I pray to it in my undertakings. It seems to me the face which the Creator uncovers to his child. It is the perception of this depth in human nature, this infinitude belonging to every man that has been born, which has given a new value to the habits of reflection and solitude. In this doctrine, as deeply felt by him, is the key by which the words that fell from Christ upon the character of God can alone be well and truly explained. "The Father is in me; I am in the Father, yet the Father is greater than I."

As he sat in the quiet of his study in the Concord manse reading over his journal, Waldo was aware that it would take him

many years and require many forms of expression to spread this message that, in another entry at sea, he had condensed into a sentence: "The highest revelation is that God is in every man." He would need allies in the process, one of whom would certainly be brother Edward, whose only quarrel with the new thinking was a too frequent use of the word *reason* instead of the word *soul*. On his first walk to the post office, Waldo found a letter from Puerto Rico. Since Charles had long ago returned home, more to court a Concord girl than to try to practice law, in Waldo's estimation, the letter should be from Edward. But Waldo did not recognize the handwriting on the envelope. Fearful of what that could mean, he tore it open right there in the post office and read the worst possible news. A friend was informing the Emerson family that twenty-nine-year-old Edward had died almost on the day that they had moved to Concord. That night Waldo told his journal that "I see I am bereaved of part of myself."

For Waldo, Edward's death was the last sad straw on the load of calamity befalling him since Ellen had left him. He could have given in to despair, but doing so would have meant denying his belief that the Comforter was within him. What he did do was to plunge into work. He was in the act of putting together his thoughts on nature to make a book. Done rightly, it would be a fitting memorial to Ellen, who had so loved nature. What Ellen saw in nature, and what he saw better through her eyes, was uplifting beauty. As he thought about that, he wrote, "Beauty in its largest and profoundest sense is one expression for the universe; God in the all-fair. Truth and goodness and beauty are but different faces of the same All." He began feeling better with every scratch of the pen. Coming to Concord, where beauty could be seen from every window, gave promise of a move in the right direction instead of a retreat from defeat.

