

## **“Let’s Dream Together”**

“Hitch your wagon to a star” was the advice of the illustrious Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his great essay “Self-Reliance,” the sage of Concord encouraged generations of Americans to defy convention, to chart their own destiny, to resist the good models and put more faith in their own inspiration more than in the creeds or catechisms of ancient authorities. “Trust yourself! Every heart vibrates to that iron string.” Yet even Mister Emerson had limits, and while he may have counseled to “hitch your wagon to a star” even he might have balked at tethering a lawn chair to a helium-filled weather balloon.

That feat awaited the advent of another visionary known as “Lawn Chair Larry.” According to the Darwin Awards, an honorary society which exists to commemorate those brave and half-witted individuals who improve the gene pool by removing themselves from it, Larry Walter’s boyhood dream was to conquer gravity.

*“But fates conspired to keep him from his dream. He joined the Air Force, but his poor eyesight disqualified him from the job of pilot. After he was discharged from the military, he sat in his backyard watching jets fly overhead.*

*“He hatched his weather balloon scheme while sitting outside in his “extremely comfortable” Sears lawn chair. He purchased 45 weather balloons from an Army-Navy surplus store, tied them to his tethered lawn chair (dubbed the Inspiration I) and filled the four-foot diameter balloons with helium. Then, armed with some sandwiches, Miller Lite, and a pellet gun, he strapped himself into his lawn chair. He figured he would shoot to pop a few of the many balloons when it was time to descend.*

*“Larry planned to sever the anchor and lazily float to a height of about 30 feet above the backyard, where he would enjoy a few hours of flight before coming back down. But things didn’t work out quite as Larry planned.*

*When his friends cut the cord anchoring the lawn chair to his Jeep, he did not float lazily up to 30 feet. Instead he streaked into the LA sky as if shot from a cannon, pulled by the lift of 45 helium balloons, holding 33 cubic feet of helium each.*

*He didn’t level off at 100 feet, nor did he level off at 1000 feet. After climbing and climbing, he leveled off at 16,000 feet.*

*At that height he felt he couldn’t risk shooting any of the balloons, lest he unbalance the load and really find himself in trouble. So he stayed there, drifting cold and frightened with his beer and sandwiches, for more than 14 hours. He crossed the primary approach corridor of LAX, where startled Trans World Airlines and Delta Airlines pilots radioed in reports of the strange sight.*

*Eventually he gathered the nerve to shoot a few balloons, and slowly descended. The hanging tethers tangled and caught in a power line, blacking out a Long Beach neighborhood for 20 minutes. Larry climbed to safety, where he was arrested by waiting members of the LAPD. As he was led away in handcuffs, a reporter dispatched to cover the daring rescue asked him why he had done it. Larry replied nonchalantly, “A man*

can't just sit around." [Reference: <http://www.darwinawards.com/stupid/stupid1998-11.html>}]

True enough. You can't just sit around. As Emerson put it, "Without ambition one starts nothing. Without work one finishes nothing. The prize will not be sent to you. You have to earn it." Aspiration plus perspiration equals progress. Success comes to those who dare. I don't think Ralph Waldo would have minded the apparent eccentricity of sending patio furniture three miles into the air. After all, "Imitation is suicide!" he declared. "To be a man is to be a non-conformist." He became famous for tweaking the noses of taste-makers and fashion mavens by surrounding himself with characters that others regarded as cranks and oddballs: hermits like Henry Thoreau, marching to his different drummer, dreamy vegetarians like Bronson Alcott, with his ill-fated but aptly named utopia called Fruitlands, radical feminists like Margaret Fuller, who ended her life fleeing from the Pope after trying to establish an abortive Roman Republic in Italy—the kind of woman who proved that nice girls don't change the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a magnet for people like these—the misfits, the zanies, the especially gifted and divinely driven, because he was one of them himself.

In 1832, just two years after an aeronaut named Charles Durant became the first American to risk an ascent in a hand stitched balloon, floating gracefully from Castle Garden in New York to Perth Amboy, New Jersey, Emerson drifted off in his direction, leaving behind the safe, well-worn and respected path of ministry that his father and grandfather, both Unitarian clergyman, had laid down for him, propelling and supporting himself on little more than his own hot air, wafting on currents that some felt were nothing but empty wind but that he himself felt sure were the promptings of the spirit.

He was not alone. Everyone in those days had some plan for revolutionizing the world, and he described the motley attendees of a Convention for Universal Reform held in Boston, filled with "Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day-Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists ... and Philosophers." He could make fun of this human zoo because he was one of the most exotic animals in the menagerie. He had his own wild schemes for revamping society. But he was also skeptical of fads and gadgets and politics, claims that a new diet or improved appliance or regime change at city hall would usher in the millennium. "We anticipate a new era from the invention of a locomotive, or a balloon," he cautioned in his essay *Nature*. "They say that by electro-magnetism, your salad shall be grown from the seed, whilst your fowl is roasting for dinner." That would have been organic electro-magnetic lettuce, with a locally grown game hen, no doubt. But to all who advocated changing the world through whole grains or better broadband access or other externals, Emerson admonished that real change had to begin at home, in the core of one's convictions and in the strength of one's own character.

He was suspicious of true believers, ideologues who thought they had the answers. He wanted to formulate his own answers, and the only soul he was interested in saving was his own. He scorned missionaries and do-gooders. "I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your

miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies; though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold." Emerson was not the kind of personality you wanted to head your church's annual fund raising drive. Yet he opened his wallet freely and donated liberally to causes he believed in, becoming one of the primary contributors to the so-called secret six, for example, who plotted with John Brown to foment an armed rebellion against slavery in the south.

Ralph Waldo actually came to Burlington, back in December of 1858, just a few months before the attempted uprising at Harper's Ferry. Our congregational historian Elz Curtiss, who unearthed this little known fact, wasn't able to ferret out all the motives for his visit. But it may have been to give moral support to Joshua Young, the minister here whose firebrand sermons had gotten him into hot water with the congregation, and perhaps also to visit the Adirondacks across the lake, where Boston abolitionist Gerritt Smith had donated a large track of land as a refuge for runaway slaves and where Emerson and his transcendental friends had established a small camp, not far from John Brown's home in North Elba, New York. While he was here in the north country, Emerson spoke in Burlington, doubtless with a room full of Unitarians in attendance. And if he were to re-visit our Society and could speak with us today, I can only imagine what he might say.

But I think he would say, don't bother with this church unless it helps you fly, unless it lifts you above the quotidian and mundane and affords you at least occasional glimpses of how life might be lived on a higher plane. Don't contribute or support this place because it's good for the community, or politically correct, or because it's helping people with AIDS or working for affordable health care or giving dignity to lesbians and gays, or because the building is such a beautiful and historic icon, although all of those things may be true. Rather, be generous because it's good for you, because it affirms your values and resonates with your own higher good. Do it because your natural inclination—like a blade of grass, or a warm breeze, or the sun on a dawning day-- is upward. Don't pledge to this congregation if it drags you down, because the preacher makes you feel guilty or wicked or inadequate. But give because this is one place a minister can speak honestly and enunciate opinions that might cost any other pastor his job, and because this is a place that empowers you to think and speak with similar boldness and integrity. Give out of your own abundance, Emerson might say, out of an expanded sense of personal power and possibility, because you realize that the most important things in life aren't things at all, but intangibles like friendship and sympathy and a sense of belonging and participating in a larger purpose that can't be possessed or experienced in solitude but that only exist and grow in relationship with others.

Principle, I think Emerson might say, is the only sure investment. Admittedly, we all have dreams that never get off the ground. Our best intentions sometimes flop. We

can all commiserate with Lawn Chair Larry, and with poor Hans Ludwig Babblinger, who chose the wrong place to levitate. Mistakes happen. Disappointment is the norm; frustrations are to be expected in any great undertaking. But low aim, not shooting for the heights, is what constitutes the real failure. Staying grounded is sound for the body, but the mind was meant to soar. For every step in the rise of civilization had its origin in the gleam of imagination, from abolition to suffrage to marriage equality. And when we dream together, our shared aspirations become the updraft of history that lifts us toward our goals, that makes our prayers go airborne, giving flight to our common hopes.

Tolerance and reason; freedom and fair play; the sanctity of conscience, the dignity of every person, a world where resources are stewarded and shared. These principles form the constellation of our faith. In a world where issues are complex, where quick solutions have a way of becoming tomorrow's problems, where human variety means we'll never be able to all agree on a single path, these are our UPS, our Unitarian-Positioning-System, our spiritual navigational beacons. If you can find better or brighter stars, steer by them. For myself, I'm hitching a wagon here.

Reverend Gary Kowalski is the author of ***Earth Day: An Alphabet Book*** (Skinner House, 2009) and ***Revolutionary Spirits: The Enlightened Faith of America's Founding Fathers***, published by BlueBridge in 2008. Other books include ***The Souls of Animals*** (New World Library, 2007), ***Goodbye Friend: Healing Wisdom For Anyone Who Has Ever Lost A Pet*** (New World Library 2007), ***Science and the Search for God*** (Lantern Books, 2003) and ***The Bible According To Noah: Theology As If Animals Mattered*** (Lantern Books, 2001). All are available on Amazon.com or from your local bookstore.