ON THAT SHADED DAY:
RALPH WALDO EMERSON'S RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

MEADVILLE/LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 7, 1981

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

Liberal religion has often been described as an optimistic, life-affirming faith. In my experience, Unitarian Universalists in particular find many occasions to celebrate the warmth of love, the joy of friendship, and the beauty of the earth. Our optimism is, I believe, one of our greatest strengths and yet is also a terrible weakness. What answers does our liberal heritage have for us when tragedy strikes, when pain is a part of our lives or great loss overwhelms us? Too often an optimistic faith avoids these questions, and yet suffering is a real part of every full human life.

How can liberal religion answer the person who cries out, "Why me? Why must I suffer? What have I done to deserve this pain?" Such questions are vital, real, and demanding. The church and ministry which avoid such questions deny some basic needs of their parishioners. The church or ministry which address and incorporate such questions will, on the other hand, find a wealth of richness and meaning. We each live with pain and loss, and the response which we make to our own and others' sufferings both informs and arises from our deepest religious convictions. That response will likewise arise from, inform, and enrich our lives together as religious people.

In this dissertation, I will attempt to formulate one liberal religious response to suffering inspired by the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In this first chapter, the characteristics of the "liberal paradox" which has helped lead to our neglect of the problem, will be discussed. A definition of the problem of suffering will then be developed through a discussion of the three dimensions of suffering: physical, psychological and social. Finally, three phases of coping with suffering will be presented. This first chapter will therefore outline and develop the problem of suffering using terms by which Emerson's response to suffering will later be examined.

The second chapter will accomplish two tasks. First, one definition of the broad term "mysticism" will be offered and, then, Emerson's transcendentalism will be discussed as one variety of mystical thought. Emerson's mysticism, I will argue, is at the root of all of his thought. In this chapter the boundaries of mystical thought will be delineated and Emerson's place within these boundaries will be established, thereby demonstrating that Emerson's response to suffering, to be discussed in the later chapters, will necessarily be a mystical one.

In the third chapter, I will examine Emerson's life and writings for patterns of his response to suffering. The transcendentalist movement which Emerson helped to found and lead was extremely influential on Unitarian churches throughout America, but it has generally been regarded as quite optimistic and lacking any strong emphasis on suffering. However, Emerson himself suffered great loss; his first wife died while she was still quite

young and a few years later his beloved five-year-old son, Waldo, died suddenly. Perhaps in Emerson's writings during and following these events we can find clues that will aid in the formation of a mystical Unitarian Universalist response to suffering.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, I will undertake an examination of Emerson's response developed within the third chapter, in light of the categories established within the first and second chapters. I will then draw some conclusions about how this response might be theologically employed by religious liberals.

One of the short-comings of the Unitarian Universalist faith has been its failure to address this issue seriously. "Suffering is not a popular topic with Unitarian Universalists who traditionally tend to meet life with unfounded optimism," wrote Jeanellen Ryan in an essay in the U. U. A. pamphlet on suffering.[1] The Rev. Tom Owen-Towle agreed. We see suffering "more as a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be experienced," he wrote.[2] Has our rational, scientific world-view left us naked to the winds of loss and pain which will continue to sweep through our lives? And how can we, as Unitarian Universalists, but also, often, as educated members of the American middle-class, address the personal and universal sufferings of other people? The U.U.A. pamphlet on suffering asserts that we only focus on a situation of suffering when we are personally immersed in it and acutely exper-

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[1]"Unitarian Universalist Views of Suffering," (Boston, Mass.: Unitarian Universalist Association), p. 3.

[2]Ibid., p. 3.

iencing it.[1] Dorothee Soelle agreed that for most people apathy is a prevalent world-view toward the suffering of others.[2] Such apathy leads both to an inability to understand and to grow from one's own sufferings, and to a tolerance of exploitation, oppression and injustice.

To remain alive, to be responsive to the needs of our own church members and to the needs of the world community of which we are a part, requires that Unitarian Universalists develop a response to suffering which both nourishes us and calls us to act in the world. We must also look at this problem together and form a corporate response which arises from our shared religious faith. As we look within ourselves, to each other, and to the writings and scriptures of the world's great teachers and religions for inspiration, we must likewise search many places, both individually and corporately, for a response to suffering. A great variety of responses to the question of human suffering has been offered by various religious traditions. Our response as Unitarian Universalists must take into account who we are as a people, the history from which we have come, and our present religious belief systems.

In this dissertation, I will address the problem of suffering from a particular school of thought, that of mysticism. I wish to determine whether it is possible to be theologically liberal and

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[1] Ibid., p. 3.

[2] Dorothee Soelle, Suffering, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 36.

inclined to the mystical way, as I believe I and many other Unitarian Universalists are, and still find some meaning in the loss and pain, the suffering, that is a part of every human life. In order to explore what a theologically liberal, yet mystical, response might be to the problem of human suffering, I will try to ascertain what attitude or attitudes Ralph Waldo Emerson had toward this question. Emerson was an optimist, a poet, and liberal scholar whose thought has had a profound impact on Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist theology from his own time until the present. Emerson's thinking has greatly influenced my own; his optimism and enthusiasm for nature and for life and his conviction that each individual is equally intuitively able to know the Divine of which we are all a part, ring true for me. Much of what I have read of Emerson excites me and confirms that of which I am already convinced. However, while believing that all people are equally infused with a great, infinite spirituality, one must also consider how such spirituality includes and may even necessitate pain, loneliness and fear.

That we do suffer I will not question. Pain, suffering and death are a given part of our lives. "We need not ask why pain, suffering, and evil abide," wrote the Rev. Duke T. Gray. "We must begin by simply affirming that they do exist and always will because of the nature of human life."[1] This attitude is found in many of the major world religions. "To be born is to suffer,"

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[1]"Unitarian Universalist Views of Suffering," p. 8.

said Gautama, the Buddha.[1] Dorothee Soelle agreed, and continued: "The issue we face today, in my view, is not about the necessity and possibility of eliminating misery but about the persons through whom this process is carried out."[2] Soelle did not attempt to theorize whether or not suffering will ever end in the lives of human beings. She instead asserted that it is necessary and possible to work toward its lessening. The gradual reduction of suffering is a process of which we can each be a part, if we so choose. The important thing, Soelle claimed, is to decry apathy in the face of suffering and to ally ourselves with those who suffer. And this, for Soelle, is only the beginning.[3]

A recent conversation with a member of Chicago's First Unitarian Church helped to demonstrate for me both the need for a Unitarian Universalist response to suffering and the necessity for such a response if our churches are to survive. A long-time, active and dedicated member of First Church, Mary (not her actual name) has had a long series of medical problems and during the last year and a half has spent much of her time in and out of doctors' offices and hospitals. She is in severe pain much of the time. In one of her conversations with me, Mary asked, "Did something that I did earlier come back to punish me, now, as pain? . . . . What is it about my life? What is it that I am doing all wrong? Is it

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[1]In Buddhism, the Sanskrit word "Dukkha," sometimes translated "suffering" also carries the connotations of "impermanence" and "a false sense of the importance of self."

[2]Soelle, Suffering, p. 2.

[3]Ibid., pp. 2-3.

some kind of punishment?"[1] During a later conversation with her, at which time her pain was less, Mary spoke of the plans that she was making for the future and the hope that she had for reshaping and taking new charge of her life. Her questions of possible guilt and punishment did not come up again. However, she was greatly concerned about her future.

Her Unitarian church had been a place where Mary had felt very much at home. It was the center of her social and religious life. Yet Mary, who weekly worshipped in a place which spoke of ethical living inspired by an omnipresent, good god, questioned, during her pain, whether there might be a god which punishes evil-doers. Such a god would have been a very different one than the one preached about and embraced in her church. During our conversation, Mary seemed very aware of this paradox. She was searching desperately for an understanding of her suffering. Although her church meant a great deal to her, Mary went outside her church's liberal theology when looking for a response to her pain. For reasons which I do not know, the attitudes about suffering which she heard in her Unitarian church were not sufficient for her.

Mary needed more than her church was able to give her at that very difficult time of her life. She was not able to find the theological sustenence which she wanted. However, Mary did find another of her needs met; she found someone to talk to with whom she could share her needs and who lent an ear when she wanted

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[1]Personal conversation of October 15, 1980.

to try and work out her deep questions. Thus, her church had participated in making it possible for Mary to take an essential step: she was able to express her suffering, to name it.

Mary did have, and continues to have, several serious problems. Whether her church can help her still remains to be seen. In at least one dimension, I believe, it has already failed her. She does not seem to have gotten from her church a clear understanding of who she is and how she can confront her pain emotionally and spiritually. Mary's situation is not unique. I believe that many other Unitarian Universalist churches also tend to concentrate on the positive aspects of life, to the detriment of their members like Mary who are searching with difficulty for an understanding of their pain.

My interest in this subject has been amplified by personal experience. I was a very sickly child (with allergies, asthma and several bouts of pneumonia) and spent much of my early childhood in and out of hospitals and doctors' offices. I am not sure what influence these experiences had on me but it is possibly that my sensitivity to sick and ailing people may have been heightened by my "having been there." Also, when I was fifteen years old, my spiritual and theological rug was pulled out from underneath me: my beautiful, brilliant thirteen-year-old brother died very suddenly of a viral infection. Suffering because of the loss of a loved one became very real to me, then, and life and happiness were no longer things which I took for granted. I desperately wanted, at that time, to find an answer to the questions of why he had died, and of what meaning this event had for my life and in the greater

world. From that time on, I have denied the existence of the omnipotent, beneficent god in whom I had been led to believe by my Methodist and Presbyterian church school teachers. Such a god is absurd, I believe, in the face of my brother's death, and in the face of the suffering of innocent people throughout the world. And yet, I still believe there is a god, and there is a way to understand suffering without lapsing into absurdity. Several years later, my brother's death was followed by that of my father. Again I screamed at the universe, demanding meaning, and swearing that I would someday discover such meaning.

With these different historical views and personal experiences in mind, I return to the pivotal question of this dissertation: what can be the response of a Unitarian Universalist liberal theology to the question of human suffering? As previously stated, I am particularly interested in what might have been Emerson's attitude to the question. First, however, a description of the problem must be developed. This description and a following definition of the problem will then be used in later chapters to help determine whether or not Emerson's response to suffering is adequate for our lives, today.

Why have religious liberals often neglected the problem of human suffering? In Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches, Carl Wennerstrom noted that this neglect is a serious problem for our churches. Wennerstrom viewed religious liberalism "as a somewhat distorted, lopsided religion because it does not properly recog-

nize and help the forgotten man."[1] Wennerstrom felt that Unitarians spend much of their time naming problems and attempting to find solutions which can be implemented to resolve the problems. When such an action-oriented solution is not called for, when a person's problems call for a way of being instead of a method of doing, we are usually at a loss and actually avoid such needy persons rather than confront the ambiguities of their situations.[2] James Luther Adams wrote of Wennerstrom's opinion:

> Indeed, he was convinced the typical religious liberal is almost constitutionally insensitive in this respect. In his view, the religious liberal is willing to make dramatic sacrifices for the sake of freedom of conscience or for intellectual integrity or for the improvement of society, but he is not willing to give of himself by entering into affectional communion with the person in distress.[3]

Adams tended to concur with this view. He claimed that the religious liberal is driven toward success. The liberal has little patience with his or her own weaknesses or with the weaknesses of others. When such weaknesses are encountered, the religious liberal often tries to change the situation from a distance. He or she tends to look for clear answers and a dramatic resolution, and favors, especially, a philanthropic sort of im-

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[1]James Luther Adams, "Foreword," in James Luther Adams and Seward Hiltner, Eds., Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 10.

[2]Wennerstrom did the bulk of his research before the Unitarian Universalist merger and considered himself to be a Unitarian.

[3]Adams,"Foreword," in Adams and Hiltner, Eds., Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches, p. 10.

personalism as a way of affecting social change. He or she "dotes on being a trailblazer, but wants to maintain distance from the individual sufferer on whose behalf he or she enters the fray."[1]

Such an analysis of religious liberalism does not bode well for a useful response to suffering. There appears to be some sort of inherent weakness in our individual and corporate response to the needy person in our midst. John Hayward agreed. He wrote:

> . . .the liberal, being preoccupied with the active search for remedies, is at a loss in the face of irremediable tragedy. His or her whole inclination is to solve problems rather than bear them, to DO rather than BE. He or she is not spiritually disciplined to derive benefit, wisdom, even healing from situations in which there is precisely nothing to be done save to endure.[2]

If we can only DO, if we cannot BE with the person who suffers among us, our response to that suffering, despite our good intentions, will set up walls between ourselves and the suffering. Dorothee Soelle might have been describing the religious liberals that Hayward and Wennerstrom knew when she wrote: "Gratuitious solidarity with the afflicted changes nothing; precise knowledge that such suffering could be avoided becomes our defense against addressing it."[3] We must learn to accept and to honestly address the suffering in our own and other peoples' lives, and we must

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[1] Ibid., p. 10-11.

[2] John F. Hayward, "The Doctrine of Man in Liberal Theology," in Adams and Hiltner, Eds., Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches, p. 134.

[3] Soelle, Suffering, p. 15.

learn to do so without the committees and impersonal philanthropism that Adams sees rampant in our church. As Soelle wisely notes, "We can only help sufferers by stepping into their time-frame. Otherwise we would only offer condescending charity that reaches down from on high."[1] I believe that such condescending charity may leave us empty and desolate, as individuals, and be detrimental to us as a denomination. Therefore, I believe that a look at the possible causes for our present situation is in order.

Between 1956 and 1963, Carl Wennerstrom wrote the draft text of what still stands as the best description of the religious liberal's problem with human suffering. Wennerstrom addressed the question of how religious liberals should approach the problem of suffering from the viewpoint of pastoral care. It was his thesis that a curious paradox about pastoral care exists in Unitarian and other liberal churches. This paradox, to which our attitude toward human suffering is in large part due, is, in brief, the following: As the insights of Freud, and then many others from various fields of social sciences, began to shed light on the complex nature of human inner life and interactions, Unitarians and other liberals had, in principle, the least quarrel of any religious groups with the startling findings of these sciences. However, Unitarians did not pursue the implications of the new data to any measurable degree. To the contrary, Wennerstrom claimed, most liberal ministers, in particular, who became advocates of the modern mental health movement, neither rethought

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

their human philosophy on the basis of the data being used by the mental health field nor altered their methods of pastoral care with their people.[1] Therein lies Wennerstrom's paradox. We religious liberals, even the most optimistic and rationalistic among us, accepted the potentialities of evil demonstrated by modern social scientists. However, no noticeable rethinking of our generally optimistic, rationalistic doctrine of humanity has developed in response to these potentialities for evil. Instead, we continue to try to be "answer man" or woman to everything. Instead of directly accepting the suffering person where she or he is, and starting from there, as modern counseling and psychotherapy methods would teach us, we attempt to turn to rational explanations of the crisis, a theory of development or something else.[2]

It was Wennerstrom's argument that there is a chain of interrelated factors producing the liberal paradox about pastoral care. An understanding of these four factors may help to lead us to a self-understanding whereby we may overcome the "liberal paradox" and begin to be able to develop an appropriate and useful response to suffering. These four factors are interrelated and tend to reinforce one another.

The first factor is "rationalism." From the beginning of our movement, Unitarians have had a faith in God, but also a faith

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[1]Carl E. Wennerstrom, "Liberals and Pastoral Care," in Adams and Hiltner, Eds., Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches, pp. 19-20.

[2]Ibid., pp. 22-24.

in humankind. Mind, intellect, and the abilities to reason, plan, and inquire have been felt to be God's gifts through which God's truth can be discovered. Wennerstrom detected a great deal of nobility, truth and religious faith in this position. However, rationalism can also contribute to the undermining of our religious faith in the unknowable mysteries of life. An absolute acceptance of the ability of rationalism to answer all our questions may lead us to an unwillingness to consider new theories in theology and the behavioral sciences, new ways of thinking and acting. In our churches, we may be tempted toward a partial denial of and inattention to anything which can not be explained away by solely rational thought and social action.[1] Likewise, when a friend is suffering, we may have great difficulty simply being with that person.

"Reformism" is the second factor. Despite their small numbers, liberals have been prominent in the pioneering of social welfare efforts. Leaders such as Dorothea Dix, Henry Bellows, Florence Nightingale and Gridley Howe have been sensitive to slums, poverty, and prejudice and many other social ills. Currently our General Assemblies pass a number of resolutions every year condemning bigotry, classism and sexism. However, by unintentionally promising too much too soon, a few early reformers (Wennerstrom suggests that Dorothea Dix was one) invited disillusionment, and some of it actually came. Unwittingly, we, like our liberal forebears, may promise more than is actually possible. Thus, although

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[1] Ibid., pp. 20-27.

we may promise that the lessening of pain and suffering may be possible, great disappointment may sometimes instead occur.[1]

The third factor which helps to produce the liberal paradox about pastoral care and, correspondingly, suffering, is "dramatics." There is in the liberal movement, Wennerstrom wrote, a kind of cryptic, self-dramatic sense, which may be the liberal's way of trying to deal with the questions of power and self-identity. We tend to prefer the exciting, public, nonrepetitious method of approaching problems. We often want to blaze trails all of the time, instead of sometimes pausing to consider the implications and meanings of our discoveries. Thus, we oftentimes lose the ability to reflect honestly about our lives. Wennerstrom also noted that our love for dramatics may be in part an unwitting attempt to compensate for unacknowledged interior weakness. In the realm of pastoral care and the problem of suffering, we may therefore avoid an approach which does not appeal to our dramatic sense and may likewise ignore possible responses which do not move "onward and upward."[2] As Hayward wrote, our preoccupation with the active search for remedies may create in us an inability to face irremediable tragedy.[3]

Finally, the fourth factor is a characteristic which Adams, when editing Wennerstrom's incompleted work, termed "distance." This is the most important factor contributing to Wennerstrom's

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[1] _Ibid_., pp. 28-29.

[2] _Ibid_., pp. 29-32.

[3] Hayward, "The Doctrine of Man. . .," in Adams and Hiltner, Eds., _Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches_, p. 134.

liberal paradox. As he developed this idea, Wennerstrom borrowed from the sociological idea of "social distance." According to this notion, both individuals and groups develop patterns of relationship involving optimal social distance and social intimacy. As a kind of subculture, Unitarianism in particular and the liberal churches in general, reveal quite particular assumptions about the optimal social distance. Wennerstrom observed that a liberal's preferred response to a person in need is to first gather the facts on the situation and then to join in community leadership to mobilize resources and programs. Such a response would make help definite, assured, and permanent within the limitations of the problem's severity. Such a response would also render unnecessary any intimate contact between the individual liberal and the individual person in need.[1]

In his discussion of "distance," Wennerstrom concluded that "for the liberal the development and evocation of appropriate social resources is a kind of Holy Grail."[2] He also believed that we are tempted to think our prophetic function renders unnecessary any genuine involvement with the present situation because we herald a new age and new potentialities. This often may lead to a lack of care for suffering persons:

> Rightly and ethically the liberal believes himself or herself to be impatient in the sense that he or she does not yield passively to any particular status quo that involves unfulfillment or suffering. . . .

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[1]Wennerstrom, "Liberals and Pastoral Care," in Adams and Hiltner, Eds., Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches, p. 33.

[2]*Ibid*., p. 33.

> For example, may he or she be impatient--even bored--with any specific person or instance of a problem or suffering because, seeing this instance always in the light of the more general problem, he or she wants to get on with solving this KIND of problem and not be deflected by this person's particular problem?[1]

Thus, as we concentrate our energies on trying to solve broad, general problems we lose our ability to deal with specific suffering persons. However, our concentration on the broad problems may be due in large part to our discomfort and unwillingness to deal with individual persons. Pushing one step beyond Wennerstrom, I believe the situation to be too often self-perpetuating. We must stop and focus on those needy individuals near us before we will be able to learn to care for them. Wennerstrom wrote: "Our standard liberal, I believe, feels most at home when there is a safe distance between him or her and the actual sufferings of particular people."[2] We do not want to get too close.

These four factors which contribute to the liberal paradox, rationalism, reformism, dramatics, and distance, may explain in part why we presently have vague and often unhelpful responses to those among us who, like Mary, cry out for meaning in the face of tragedy and pain. An understanding of these weaknesses may help us to develop a response which is not weak and which carries the power and the meaning which sincere questions about suffering deserve.

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[1] Ibid., p. 35.

[2] Ibid., p. 37.

Hayward, Adams and Wennerstrom all criticized the present liberal attitudes and responses to suffering and yet all three remained within the Unitarian Church, believing it to be the religious community within which their needs and beliefs could best be expressed. Each of them has contributed to a better understanding of the problem of suffering within our denomination. Each has spent much time in close contact with suffering people, ministering directly to them, despite Wennerstrom's generalization that "our unacknowledged anxiety too often keeps us away from the places where concrete suffering is being faced or endured or encountered."[1] Obviously there must be spiritual and theological resources which have inspired and led these men and others within our denomination despite the "liberal paradox." A development and reclamation of spiritual and theological resources which offer alternative methods of looking at the problem of suffering will help us to overcome the "liberal paradox." However, before those resources are discussed, a clear definition of suffering must be developed. In the next few pages, I will outline a biological and theological description of the term which may render a useful understanding of the problem of suffering.

A definition of suffering will be most useful, I believe, if it begins with the description of a real person's situation. There are several different dimensions to suffering, according to both Dorothee Soelle and Simone Weil, and, unhappily, some of us

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[1]Wennerstrom, "Liberals and Pastoral Care," in Adams and Hiltner, Eds., Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches, p. 35.

suffer more than do others. Mary's situation, for example, entails more than physical pain. She is also in the midst of great emotional upheaval as she is partially financially dependent upon her grown son, and does not want to be. She has, she says, no social life, as the pain is too great to bear going out, except very occasionally. She related that "all the strain and emotional feelings are going to make the pain worse, not better."[1] The suffering that she is going through approaches that which Simone Weil calls "affliction," distinguishing it from pain and from suffering.[2] Weil analyzed suffering in terms of its three essential dimensions: physical, psychological, and social. "Affliction" ("malheur") involves all three.[3]

Pain which occurs in only one of these dimensions is not only easier to overcome but also easier to forget, concurs Soelle. A tooth that is aching can be extracted. Or, the mind, when psychologically afflicted, usually has sufficient ways for escape. But in true suffering, all three dimensions are present.[4] For example, in Mary's situation, she is in substantial physical pain, she is experiencing emotional trauma, and she is suffering social-

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[1]Personal conversation of October 15, 1980.

[2]Simone Weil, Waiting for God, (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 117.

[3]No English words exactly convey the meaning of Weil's original "malheur." Our word "unhappiness" is a negative term and is far too weak. "Affliction" is the nearest equivalent but is not quite satisfactory. "Malheur" has in it a sense of inevitability and doom.

[4]Soelle, Suffering, pp. 13-14.

ly. "There is not really affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another," wrote Weil.[1] The degradation shows itself in the isolation that accompanies affliction. Mary's pain has necessarily isolated her from her friends and family. A gregarious woman when healthy, Mary appears shy, nervous and apologetic when experiencing pain.

Of these three kinds of suffering--physical, psychological and social--physical pain is, according to Weil, the most overwhelming and crippling. Affliction, she wrote, is inseparable from physical suffering and yet is quite distinct:

> With suffering, all that is not bound up with physical pain or something analogous is artificial, imaginary, and can be eliminated by a suitable adjustment of the mind. Even in the case of the absence or death of someone we love, the irreducible part of the sorrow is akin to physical pain. . . .[2]

Physical pain has the ability to capture us and bind us to an inescapable slavery, wherein we "lose half our souls."[3] If physical pain is transitory or momentary, it is, Weil wrote, a very unimportant matter and leaves no trace in the soul. If the physical suffering is very prolonged or frequent, however, it is an entirely different matter. In such a case it is something quite distinct from a brief attack of pain; it is often affliction.[4]

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[1]Weil, Waiting for God, p. 119.

[2]Ibid., p. 117.

[3]Ibid., p. 117.

[4]Ibid., p. 118.

According to Dr. Ronald Melzack, in his book, The Puzzle of Pain, the diversity of pain experiences explains why it has been impossible, so far, to achieve a satisfactory definition of pain.[1]

> the word 'pain' represents a category of experience signifying a multitude of different, unique events having different causes, and characterized by different qualities varying along a number of sensory and affective dimensions.[2]

The perception of pain is subjective, dependent upon many factors including the individual's culture, past experience and physiology. These factors render it very difficult for a final analysis to be made of what pain certainly is and is not. These factors also explain why physicians find pain extremely difficult to treat.[3]

Despite the difficulty of defining pain, no one, including Melzack denies that it is a crucial, debilitating problem in many peoples' lives. "Perhaps few persons who are not physicians can realize the influence which long-continued and unendurable pain may have upon both body and soul," Melzack wrote. Despite this conclusion, Unitarian Universalist ministers should have some understanding of the effects of long-term pain upon their parishoners, in order to help those parishoners cope with it.

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[1]Ronald Melzack, The Puzzle of Pain (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 45.

[2]Ibid., p. 46.

[3]Ibid., p. 22.

New research being done by Melzack and others may eventually lead to more effective pain management than is currently available to sufferers. However, pain is such a complex phenomenon and relief may be a long time coming, or may never be available. Until that time (if it occurs), pain remains as the central challenge to a possible response to suffering.

We are challenged by pain to discover meaning in the face of a destructive reality which sometimes has the power to destroy all meaning. Francois Legargneur, a Catholic priest, anthropologist and theologian, wrote: "Absolutely considered, sickness has a cause, an etiology, but has no meaning; its meaning comes to it from both a personal and a cosmic historical context."[1] How will the reality of physical pain be answered within our churches? What meaning does it have within a religiously liberal context?

Two other dimensions of suffering are present in affliction. Psychological suffering may take many forms. It may be present as fear or physical pain, as financial worries (as Mary has), as feelings of uprootedness or meaninglessness. Psychological suffering often increases physical pain or illness. Dr. David Bakan, a physician, wrote:

> There is accumulating evidence that the duration of illness among persons is associated with psychological indicants, that the more favorable the indicants with respect to the mental health of the

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[1]Michael J. Taylor, S.J., Ed., <u>The Mystery of Suffering and Death</u> (Staten Island, New York: Alba House, 1973), p. 79.

individual, the shorter the duration of the illness.[1]

This researcher found that those with "less favorable psychological indicants" remained ill longer. Thus, by this evidence, there is often a solid relationship between psychological suffering and physical suffering.

Dorothee Soelle believed that psychological suffering that was not related to physical pain or something analogous is "artificial," or "imaginary."[2] Weil agreed and described the suffering one feels at the loss of a loved one as "the almost biological disorder caused by the brutal liberation of some energy, hitherto directed by an attachment and now left without a guide."[3] Weil wrote that sorrow that is not centered around an irreducible core of such a nature is mere romanticism or literature. Neither Weil nor Soelle, however, described in depth or attempted to incorporate into their analyses the sufferings of persons with mental illness. Is the terror that some mentally ill people unfortunately experience truly physically based? Or is it a form of psychological suffering which points to a weakness in the thought of Soelle and Weil? I am not going to attempt to resolve this question but do want to recognize that some forms of psychological suffering may be more complex and disabling, by themselves, than Soelle and Weil realized.

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[1]David Bakan, Disease, Pain and Sacrifice (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 9.

[2]Soelle, Suffering, p. 14.

[3]Weil, Waiting for God, pp. 117-118.

Third, social suffering, that feeling of absolute loneliness resulting from social ostracism or degradation, either by itself or as a dimension of affliction has been recognized as devastatingly crippling by many authors.[1] Several characteristics of social suffering may show it to be the key factor through which we may begin to understand and respond to suffering. "There is not really affliction unless there is social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another."[2] When we are afflicted, we are alone, socially ostracized and degraded. Those who might try to care for us are unable to do so:

> . . .Those who have never had contact with affliction in its true sense can have no idea of what it is, even though they may have suffered a great deal. . . .And as for those who have themselves been mutilated by affliction, they are in no state to help anyone at all. . . . Thus, compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility.[3]

Compassion for suffering persons is an impossibility! Weil's conclusion is difficult to accept. Soelle agrees with Weil, however. We do not naturally want to help those who suffer, claims Soelle. To the contrary, we tend to want to attack with derision, or, at best, avoid those who are afflicted. We set up walls between ourselves and the suffering: "Gratuitious solidarity with the afflicted changes nothing; precise knowledge that such suffer-

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[1]These authors include Weil, Bakan, Melzack and Soelle.

[2]Weil, Waiting for God, p. 119.

[3]*Ibid*., p. 120.

ing could be avoided becomes our defense against addressing it."[1] Aside from a sentimental shudder, compassion is not natural or self-evident.

However, Soelle, unlike Weil, calls us to go beyond compassion. "There is no sorrow that is alien sorrow," she says. Wherever there is suffering, there is a concern of each of us. Those who suffer belong together, and we all suffer. There is no alien sorrow; we are all a part of it; we share in it. "Suffering tolerates no neutrality, no Pilate-standpoint."[2] Only by joining with one who is afflicted will that person's affliction have a hope of being eased. To understand ourselves, to understand and to help those who suffer even more than we do, we must suffer where they are. As Soelle wisely notes: "We can only help sufferers by stepping into their time-frame. Otherwise we would only offer condescending charity that reaches down from on high."[3]

This conclusion of Soelle's has mighty ramifications for the work of our ministry and churches. It is not enough simply to organize charity efforts or preach great sermons about the injustices in the world. We must join those who suffer, sharing their pain and not leaving them alone. We must "cross the tracks" in our various cities and towns and learn from those who are oppressed by our political and economic systems what it means to need social justice. We must join with those within our own

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[1]Soelle, Suffering, p. 15.

[2]Ibid., p. 172-173.

[3]Ibid., p. 15.

church communities who suffer, so that they do not suffer alone. Somehow we must learn how to overcome the rationalism, reformism, dramatics and distance that keep us active yet neutral, offering a form of help which is often only a form of "condescending charity." Finally, in our worship services, religious education classes, and pastoral care efforts, we must find ways of approaching the most difficult, painful topics imaginable, so that we may each develop resources on which we can rely in times of affliction. William G. Eliot, a nineteenth century Unitarian leader, believed this necessary and I concur with his words: "Religion must be familiar to our minds, the channel into which our thoughts naturally turn, or it will be an imperfect source of comfort to the stricken soul."[1] Weil went even further:

> in a time such as ours, where affliction is hanging over us all, help given to souls is effective only if it goes far enough really to prepare them for affliction. That is no small thing.[2]

We will therefore need to rediscover old resources and very possibly develop new resources which may help us in this preparation.

The discovery and development of these resources will partially come from the understanding that there are several different dimensions to suffering. Physical, psychological and social suffering place different demands upon us and may call for different responses. However, an acceptance of their similarities and

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[1]William G. Eliot, Discipline of Sorrow (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1855), p. 22.

[2]Weil, Waiting for God., p. 121.

their similar effects upon us will enable us to proceed to a discussion of the spiritual phases of suffering. These phases portray a change in attitude toward suffering which occurs when we learn to give voice to our pain. This attitudinal change may, in at least some instances, lead to a change in our actual suffering. These phases are the following:

First, some suffering reduces one to a silence in which discourse is no longer possible. Extreme affliction such as that which occurred in the Nazi concentration camps is an example of such suffering. When one is in such a condition, all feeling for others dies. Suffering isolates the person and he or she no longer cares about anyone but himself or herself. I remember such a feeling of desolation on the morning on which my brother died. I could not eat, think, or barely move. I had nothing to say to anyone and the well-meaning words offered by friends were profane platitudes to my ears. Soelle does not offer words at such a time. She believes that "respect for those who suffer _in extremis_ imposes silence."[1] Extreme pain destroys one's ability to communicate. There is really nothing one can say about this "night" of pain And yet, how long is pain unbearable? When disaster strikes, our first reaction is that it cannot be endured. As it continues, we are amazed at how much a person can stand.

There is suffering which no one can endure indefinitely. Of this suffering, Weil wrote:

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[1]Soelle, _Suffering_, p. 69.

> it deprives its victims of their personality and makes them into things. It is indifferent; and it is the coldness of this indifference--a metallic coldness--that freezes all those it touches right to the depths of their souls. They will never find warmth again. They will never believe any more that they are anyone.[1]

This initial phase of pain, Phase One, which we experience again and again, leaves us numb and mute. It has no way to express itself. Some people whom it touches "will never be warm again." The sufferer may repress the pain, become outwardly indifferent and remain mute, or he or she may begin to work on the suffering.[2] That work is the first step out of our silence and the key to the next phase.

Soelle claimed that a prerequisite for such work is the conviction that we live in a world that can be changed. If one lives in a culture with a static world view, in which suffering is believed to be a fate which can only be endured, one's attitude toward suffering cannot get beyond acceptance and resignation. "Only where change itself is comprehended as an essential human value and acknowledged by society, only there can the passive attitude toward suffering change."[3]

One can then begin to overcome suffering, Soelle wrote, when one wordlessly engages one's grief and then begins to give voice to one's pain, finding a language which leads out of the uncompre-

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[1]Weil, Waiting for God, p. 125.

[2]Soelle, Suffering, p. 70.

[3]Ibid., p. 70.

hended suffering, a language which at least describes the situation. This is Phase Two. The language must be that of the sufferer, alone. A scientific analysis of the situation may impart correct information but this act of reaching out from one's affliction requires more than rational cognition.

Granger Westberg's concise book, Good Grief has helped thousands of people to recognize these first two phases of intense suffering as they relate to the experience of loss of a loved one. Westberg described the first stage of grief as a state of shock, of "temporary anaesthesia," which in some way protects the new mourner from the debilitating pain of recognizing his or her loss.[1] This state of shock is similar, in its silence, to the initial phase of affliction earlier described. Likewise, one who is in this first stage of grief is truly unable to accept his or her suffering or to give voice to it.

Westberg's second stage of grief is that of "emotion." Again, there are some obvious parallels with Soelle's phases. Westberg wrote that eventually there wells up in us an uncontrollable urge to express our grief. If we do not pass through this stage, if we do not learn to express our grief, we will never grow out of it. The way to grow from grief, as the way to grow from affliction, begins with accepting and then giving voice to one's pain.[2] Westberg described several more continuing stages of

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[1]Granger E. Westberg, Good Grief (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 21-22.

[2]Ibid., pp. 26-28.

grief, but these initial two are especially pertinent here.

The work of the church can be useful at this second stage. Acknowledgement of a friend's grief may help lead to expression of that grief by the one who is in pain. Liturgy, if it is carefully designed, can serve to give voice to peoples' fears and pain, as well as their happiness. Skilled pastors can listen to the pain of those who suffer, encouraging expressing of grief and affliction. The resources of a dynamic church may be invaluable to a person at this phase of suffering.

Once a person begins to speak of his or her suffering, those words press beyond themselves toward change. The factors that make up the suffering can now be discussed, and liberation can be organized. This is Soelle's "Phase Three." The beginnings of this phase are difficult and painful. At first, "it intensifies suffering and strips away whatever camouflages it."[1] The suffering is examined carefully and new questions arise. Among them is the overarching, "How do I organize to conquer suffering?" People begin to believe that they may be able to change those structures which shape the situation which is causing, or helping to cause, their suffering. A person may begin to take an active interest in his or her medical situation and choose or change doctors or treatments. Another may begin to look at an oppressive or heretofore unmanageable home situation with an eye to possible alternative modes of relating to family members. This third phase of suffering turns people toward each other instead of in

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[1]Soelle, Suffering, p. 72.

upon themselves. Active behavior replaces the reactive behavior of the first and second phases. The conquest of powerlessness, in whatever ways are possible, leads to changing the structures and to knowledge that the suffering in our lives can be battled.

This third phase is possible for people in many varying situations of suffering, from those who are in great physical torment to those suffering on the workplace or in their marriages. However, many situations of affliction remain from which there is no escape and no possibility of relief. The resources available for persons trapped in such situation do not include the option of acting on the faith that they can influence their situations and possibly lessen their suffering. What other resources are available to them?

Several "mystical" writers have offered that we each have resources within ourselves which provide us help in the most difficult circumstances. Some authors suggest that suffering can be purifying, a positive experience which, when properly accepted, can be actually joyful and liberating. Others suggest that the experience of suffering, by turning us toward other people, should be recognized as a gift.[1]

These attitudes first strike me as profane. If suffering is truly painful and often destructive of the human body and spirit, as authors whom I have quoted throughout this chapter have testified, then it is something to be avoided, as we learn in in-

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[1]These different mystical responses will be discussed in greater depth in the second chapter.

fancy to avoid the fire that would burn us. The attitude that suffering is a gift suggests that it is something to be desired or sought.

However, there is more to this attitude of acceptance than is first apparent. It can grow only from the belief that we choose the meaning which we give to our days upon this earth. Those who venture that suffering can be a positive experience have chosen to recognize that even when we are thrown into the abyss of great affliction, growth is still possible. In the beginning, that growth may be but a spiritual acquiescence to the suffering, the first step out of Soelle's mute first phase of suffering. Later, some mystical writers (who will be discussed in the next chapter) suggest, we can learn to claim our suffering triumphantly, as an experience which beings us very close to the Divine.

Neither Soelle nor Weil advocated suffering as a good to be sought when it is not unavoidable. To the contrary, Soelle, in particular, condemned such an attitude as masochistic and extremely destructive. The claim that affliction comes from God's hand as an instrument of chastisement and/or instruction is a prescription of which Soelle heartily disapproved. She made a distinction between that suffering which we can and that which we cannot alleviate.[1] We are called to do everything humanly possible to end that suffering which we can end; we are called to stand with and listen to those whose pain we can do nothing about; we are called

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[1]Soelle, Suffering, p. 119.

to develop our own spiritual resources which will enable us to embrace and grow from our own unavoidable sufferings.

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that, as Carl Wennerstrom postulated, the main factor in the liberal paradox of suffering is that we maintain a distance from pain and loss. We religious liberals are afraid to get close to our own and others' sufferings. The attitude suggested by Soelle (in her discussion of the phases of suffering), and by several mystical writers (to be discussed in the next chapter) that by claiming our suffering and becoming close to it we can grow from it is very different from the liberal attitude that closeness to suffering is something to be avoided whenever possible. I believe that a rediscovery of a possible resource within our own heritage, that of a liberal mystical response to suffering best exemplified by Emerson, can help to bridge the chasm of 'distance' which has helped to perpetuate our avoidance and neglect of the problem of suffering.

CHAPTER TWO

MYSTICISM AND EMERSON

Emerson, the leading exponent of American transcendentalism, was a mystic: his response to suffering was therefore a mystical one. His particular response, to be explored in the third chapter, can only be understood when his mysticism is accepted and understood. In this chapter, I will offer one definition of the broad category, "mysticism," and will discuss how transcendentalism, as Emerson expressed it, was one variety of mystical thought. Mystical experience, many theologians have claimed, is the basis of the world's great religions; therefore the Unitarian Universalist response to suffering to be developed here will be based in Unitarian Universalist mystical experience. Louis Depré claimed that the mystical "permeates the entire religious experience; indeed, it is that experience itself in its purest form."[1] William James concurred. "I think," he testified, "that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness."[2] Therefore, if a Unitarian Universalist response to the devastating, difficult problem of suffering is to be developed, it is clear that that response should take into account the resources offered by our own mystical heritage, a heritage

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[1]Louis Dupré, The Other Dimension (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 357.

[2]William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 299.

most strongly represented in the writings of Emerson.

Mysticism is, first and most importantly, a series of experiences. Poetry, music, drugs, or other stimuli may trigger these experiences. Also, "certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods," wrote William James.[1] Emerson, for example, was stirred in that manner by nature as his poems "The Rhodora" and "Threnody" testify. These states are actually more common than generally believed, wrote James,[2] and Evelyn Underhill concurred.[3] The latter stated that every deeply religious person has a touch of mysticism. Conversely, no mystic can be other than religious, in the psychological if not in the theological sense of the word. Mysticism is, she wrote, "the active expression of a power latent in the whole race. . . the power of perceiving transcendent reality."[4] Few people pass through life without knowing what it is to be at least touched by this mystical feeling, she concluded.

Underhill argued that most people have the capability to have some brush with mystical experience during their lives. However, she also believed that the higher forms of mystical experience are beyond the capabilities of most people:

The true mystic is the person in whom such powers

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[1] *Ibid*., p. 310.

[2] *Ibid*., p. 299-310.

[3] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961), pp. 70-73.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 70-73.

> transcend the merely artistic and visionary stage, and are exalted to the point of genius: in whom the transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness, and who has definitely surrendered himself to the embrace of Reality.[1]

The true mystic, she wrote, is fired by a "spiritual spark" which "though the life of our life, remains below the threshold of ordinary men."[2] We may be capable of brief mystical insights, but not of becoming true mystics, of embarking on the mystical path, or attaining full mystical awareness.

Underhill may well be correct in her analysis. Whether our culture does not encourage mystical awareness or whether few individuals are capable of true mystical awareness, I am aware of no "true" mystics in my neighborhood. However, I know many people whom I believe have had mystical insights at moments throughout their lives. I, for one, am utterly convinced now, and have been for as long as I can remember, that there is a holiness, a divinity of which we are each a part. The only true proof of the existence of God to which I have ever been able to point is an intuitive yet absolute personal certainty. However, I witness examples of this existence in everything that I touch or see, particularly when I am outside. The shape of a tree limb or the structure of a snowflake may trigger in me a flash of peace, certainty and awe that relegates to complete unimportance any other thought that I may be having at the time. Such moments are brief but often quite

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

common. I rarely remember them individually but through such flashes of awareness I am constantly reminded of the power and the oneness which surrounds, penetrates and completes each person, each molecule and each atom.

Underhill's definition of mysticism as "the active expression of . . . the power of perceiving transcendent reality" is a definition which includes those experiences which occur in many of our lives. This definition, although broad, will serve as the foundation for the understanding of mysticism to be developed here. Underhill further developed this definition when she wrote:

> Mysticism, then, is not an opinion: it is not a philosophy. It has nothing in common with the pursuit of occult knowledge. On the one hand it is not merely the power of contemplating Eternity: on the other, it is not to be identified with any kind of religious queerness. It is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consummation of the Love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man. Or, if you like it better--for this means exactly the same thing--it is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute.[1]

Mysticism is, she wrote, a process, "a conscious relation with the Absolute." The mystic, she stated, is able to joyously apprehend the Absolute, God, and in later stages of mystical development, obtains a unique consciousness of union with the divine.[2] Such knowledge is, she wrote, attainable neither through sense impressions nor by any process of intellection but instead

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[1]*Ibid.*, p. 81.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 240.

is a sort of self-evident realization of the nature of reality.[1]

In his article, "More about the 'Fourth Mysticism,'" John Redwood Anderson described the mystical realization of the nature of reality as an awareness of unity within multiplicity:

> Therefore is the Divine Consciousness not that of a One over against the Many of the World, not that of any one of the Many, nor that of all the Many together, but of a One-Many. The idea of Identity in Difference and Difference in Identity is at the root of any understanding of the World, and, indeed, at the root of all mysticism.[2]

However, Anderson contended, along with Underhill, that such an understanding is not an intellectual proposition but a spiritual fact; it is pure element of awareness in, and the pure subjectivity of, all subjects alike.[3]

This basic symbol of mysticism, the absolute unity of all things, is continually mentioned in religious literature. "Mysticism is the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God; it is nothing, therefore, but the fundamental feeling of religion, the religious life at its very heart and centre," wrote Otto Pfleiderer.[4] Edward Caird agreed, "Mysticism . . . is that attitude of the mind in which all other relations are swallowed up in the relation of the soul of God."[5] Richard Nettleship advanced

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[1] Ibid., p. 23.

[2] John Redwood Anderson, "More about 'The Fourth Mysticism,'" Faith and Freedom, Volumes 11, 12, & 13 (Oct. 1957-June, 1960), p. 83.

[3] Ibid., p. 85.

[4] W. R. Inge, Mysticism in Religion (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 25.

[5] Ibid., p. 25.

a similar, although differing description of the mystical experience, "True mysticism is the consciousness that everything that we experience is an element and only an element in fact; i.e., that is being what it is, it is symbolic of something more."[1]

Although the central symbol of unity can be detected in each of these definitions, some differences are also obvious. Such definitions import a religious and philosophical interpretation to the phenomenon of mysticism that would not be shared by all contemplatives. For instance, the Buddhist mystic, not believing in a personal God, would reject the first two of these definitions and might well be skeptical about the third. The experience of nirvana is not often treated as symbolic of something else.[2]

Therefore, mystical experience is a major form of religious experience, but it is difficult to delineate by a simple definition for two main reasons. First, mystics often describe their experiences partly in terms of their own cultures' doctrines, which are presupposed to be true (e.g., the existence of "God"). Secondly, there is no one set of doctrines invariably, cross-culturally, associated with mysticism. However, similarities can be detected throughout the writings of many mystically-inclined writers. The similarities, argued Walter Stace, are much more important than

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[1]Ibid., p. 25.

[2]Paul Edwards, Ed., The Encyclopedia of Philosophy (New York: Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1967), Vol. V., pp. 419-420.

are the differences:

> . . .although mystical experiences may in certain respects have different characteristics in different parts of the world, in different ages, and in different cultures, there are nevertheless a number of fundamental common characteristics . . . the agreements are more basic and important, the differences more superficial and relatively less important.[1]

Stace claimed, as has been argued here, that the central characteristic of all fully developed mystical experiences is "an apprehension of an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses nor the reason can penetrate."[2] This apprehension, Stace argued, can be found in every variety of mystical experience, from the raptures of medieval mystics to the intuitions of American transcendentalists such as Emerson (whose doctrine of unity-within-multiplicity through the Over-Soul will be discussed later).

Therefore, although descriptions of mystical experience vary widely, the central characteristic can be found in literature of many eras and cultures. Mysticism is, as Underhill and other authors described it, a process of apprehending the Unity of all things, a process which occurs as one establishes a relation with the Absolute. However, a discussion of mysticism also requires a description of the distinguishing "marks" of an experience which may justify calling it mystical. A description of

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[1]Walter T. Stace, The Teaching of the Mystics (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), p. 14.

[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

these "marks" will modify and enhance Underhill's definition. For this discussion, I will turn to William James, whose description of the salient features of a mystical experience, a description extended, and in some ways improved later by other commentators (including Evelyn Underhill) still remains the outstanding description of the mystical experience. The four "marks" to be discussed here will later be used to help determine if Emerson's experiences and descriptions can be judged to be containing "mystical" qualities.

The first quality is that of "ineffability." The mystic, James pointed out, declares of the experience that "it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words." Its quality must be directly experienced. No sufficient description of its contents can be imparted or transferred to others. "This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else."[1]

Second, mystical experiences have a "noetic quality." In mystical states, one attains true knowledge: "They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain. . ."[2] Saint Teresa, who had many personal mystical experiences, was strongly imbued with the belief that her experiences were reve-

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[1]James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, pp. 299-330, 318.

[2]Ibid., p. 300.

lations of new depths of truth."

> If you, nevertheless, ask how it is possible that the soul can see and understand that she has been in God. . . I reply. . . that she sees it clearly . . . by a certitude which abides with her and which God alone can give her. . . I shall never believe that any soul who does not possess this certainty has ever been really united to God.[1]

A discussion of these two characteristics can be found many places, but William Johnston summed it up well:

> The Cartesian trend in Western thought has tended to assume that knowledge can be found only in clear and distinct ideas; but mystical knowledge, dark and obscure, has nothing to do with concepts. That is why it is ineffable; but it is true knowledge.[2]

James ended his discussion of the "marks" of mysticism with these two characteristics, but he added two other qualities usually found. The first is "transcience." Mystical states cannot be sustained for long, he claimed. However, although experiences of even the highest states of mystical experience are often described this way, the deep sense of the presence of "God" in some forms of Western religion, and the "samadhi" of Zen, for another example, ineffable and noetic although they may be, are not always transient but continue almost unbrokenly in the lives of some persons.

The other secondary quality is "passivity." "When the

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[1]Ibid., pp. 321-322.

[2]William Johnston, The Still Point: Reflection on Zen and Christian Mysticism (New York: Fordham University Press, 1970), p. 136.

characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power."[1] This is certainly true of many forms of mysticism, including many Christian forms. However, Underhill described mystical experience more actively. The experience is an achievement, a consummation, even an art, she wrote. Final mystical union with the One is arrived at after an arduous psychological and spiritual process, and, after having attained that union, mystics act because of it:

> Hence those who we are to accept as mystics must have received, and acted upon, intuitions of a Truth which is for them absolute. If we are to acknowledge that they "knew the doctrine" they must have "lived the life."[2]

These latter two secondary qualities of transcience and passivity are, James claimed, usually found in mystical experiences.[3] However, the latter is more often not a distinguishing mark, according to Evelyn Underhill, who described mysticism as a process and an achievement. The two primary qualities of mystical experiences, their indescribability and their ability to reach to new depths of truth, are the universal "marks" of mystical experiences. These ineffable and revelatory qualities render the experiences particularly difficult to describe.

Despite the differences in their discussions of the

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[1] James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 300.

[2] Underhill, Mysticism, pp. 82-83.

[3] James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 329.

qualities of mysticism, James agreed with Underhill that the central characteristic of mystical experiences is the feeling that one is apprehending Unity:

> This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition . . .[1]

Therefore, James concluded, in agreement with Underhill, that this central characteristic, modified by the qualities of ineffability, supreme importance, (and, often, we might add, transcience,) can be found in every mystical experience.

However, despite this central characteristic, mystical experiences are as broad and varied as are the religious traditions of which they are a part. In his The Varieties of Religious Experience, James described several different types of mystical experience. He attributed the human ability to have mystical experiences to the existence of different forms of consciousness:

> . . . our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.[2]

James argued that no account of the universe can be final which

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[1] Ibid., p. 329.

[2] Ibid., p. 305.

disregards these various forms of consciousness. Louis Dupré also seemed to suggest that mystical experiences take place in a realm of consciousness outside or beyond our rational consciousness: "In all forms of mysticism the self expands beyond its ordinary boundaries and is passively united with a reality which transcends its normal state."[1]

William James described several forms of mystical experience which, he argued, take place at different levels of consciousness. Briefly, James' simplest example of mystical experience is that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one. This sense of eternal, inner significance, not confined to rational propositions, can, when it suddenly comes over one, lend one's experience of words, poetry, music and literature a profound and lasting significance. "Dreamy states," another form of consciousness, are also an extremely frequent phenomenon. They include that sudden feeling of deja vu, of having 'been here before.' These states "bring a sense of mystery and of the metaphysical duality of things, and the feeling of an enlargement of perception which seems imminent but which never completes itself."[2]

A much more extreme state of mystical consciousness is that described by J. A. Symonds as a mood which sometimes overtook him irrestibly and totally, as a sort of trance:

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[1]Dupré, The Other Dimension, p. 361.

[2]James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, pp. 302-303.

> It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self. . . . In proportion as these conditions of ordinary consciousness were subtracted, the sense of an underlying or essential consciousness acquired intensity. At last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract Self.[1]

Symonds' experiences have some similarities with those mystical experiences already described which relate the perception of an Absolute Unity to be the central achievement of those experiences.

A fourth form of mystical consciousness as described by James is the consciousness produced by intoxicants and anaesthetics, especially by alcohol. Although other commentators of the mystic experience have later disagreed with his analysis, James argued rather convincingly that "the sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature."[2] In his book The Doors of Perception, Aldous Huxley likewise argued that a principal appetite of the soul is the urge to transcend self-conscious selfhood, and that this urge has helped to lead to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Huxley, however, believed that his experiences upon ingesting mescaline were of a higher quality than are the ones possible with alcohol. Indeed, his description of his perception of three flowers while under the influence of mescaline echoes some similar themes:

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[1] Ibid., p. 303.

[2] Ibid., p. 304.

> [They were] all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged. . . [what they] so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were--a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence.[1]

Although Huxley and James believed that these drug-induced forms of consciousness are "doors" which lead to experiences of valid mystical consciousness, Louis Dupré considered them to be "lower" forms of consciousness than are those types of mysticism which have lasting positive effects upon a person's life. Dupré discounted many incidents of drug-induced mystical experience as "illusionary," and argued that:

> what requires no spiritual effort on the part of the mystic, and after prolonged use causes a serious unbalance in the personality structure, cannot be of the same caliber as the supreme achievements of spiritual giants resulting in outbursts of genuine creativity.[2]

However, Dupré acknowledged that drugs have both aided true mystics, at times, in their achievement of higher states of consciousness, and have been important in communal religious services in which hallucinogenic fruits are ingested.[3]

Therefore, there are at least four different types of con-

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[1] Aldous Huxley, The Doors of Perception, (New York: Harper & Brother, 1954), pp. 17-18.

[2] Dupré, The Other Dimension, p. 362.

[3] Ibid., p. 362.

sciousness which enable us to open ourselves to different "levels" of mystical experience. The four, which are a deepened sense of significance, dreamy states, timeless trances, and drug-induced moods, can be found to varying degrees in different eras and cultures. The degree to which these levels of consciousness are sought after and acknowledged within a culture contributes to the impact which mystical experiences have upon that culture. Drug-induced experiences within some varieties of American Indian religion, and carefully cultivated mystic trances within some forms of Hinduism, for example, are two types of mystical experiences which are condoned by and influential upon their respective cultures.

Such has generally not been the case within Protestantism, nor within Unitarian Universalism, one expression of Protestantism. There have always been mystics in Christian churches. However, mysticism has appeared more sporadically within Protestantism than it has within Catholicism. This is probably due to two emphases found in many Protestant churches. First, the type of experience that figured so centrally in early Protestantism and that has continued to be stressed in evangelical Christianity is a one-time occurrence which gives the individual certitude of salvation. Such a "conversion" experience differs from the imageless, timeless recurring experiences which are at the heart of mystical experience. Second, Protestantism has generally been organizationally unfavorable to the contemplative life, which has flourished principally in monasteries and provided a main rationale for their existence. Protestantism can be puritanical, but it

usually does not favor withdrawal from the world.[1]

These two emphases are certainly prevalent in the Unitarian Universalist denomination. Although the "conversion" experience is not stressed, the rational, "free and disciplined search for truth," (which, it is generally agreed, should not be contradictory of known scientific truths),[2] likewise differs from the altered states of consciousness of mysticism. Also, the congregational structure of Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships is not organizationally favorable toward the contemplative life. Therefore, examples of mystic thought are not highly prevalent within our denomination.

However, expressions of a mystical world view can be found in the literature of American transcendentalism, most of which was written by Unitarians, and especially in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. These writings, as will be demonstrated, are those of a mystic who intuitively experienced a relation with the Absolute and found that experience to be both revelatory and frustratingly impossible to fully describe. Emerson's mystical experiences appeared to occur within several of James' different "levels of consciousness" ranging from feeling moments of eternal significance to experiencing deep, trance-like revelations. These

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[1]Edwards, Ed., The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. V. p. 427.

[2]Unitarian Universalist Association,"Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Article II., Section C-2-2.: Principles," 1980 Directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1980), p. 259.

different levels of mystical experience all contributed to Emerson's mystical world view and to his mystical response to suffering. Emerson, therefore, as will be demonstrated, was a mystic, but belongs clearly to that category of mystical thinkers who are distinctively occidental, protestant and modern. Despite the unmystical prejudices of his heritage, Emerson had mystical experiences and sought to express them.[1]

As a school of thought developed by several liberal thinkers in nineteenth-century America, particularly a group of Unitarian ministers (and ex-ministers), transcendentalism stands to date as the outstanding and most influential form of mysticism within the Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist experience. Transcendentalism was "primarily a reassertion of the mystical basis of all religion," according to one author, and was therefore "primarily religious rather than philosophical."[2] It differed greatly from some forms of its antagonist, empiricism, which, as participants in that school of objective thought, claimed that knowledge comes through the physical senses, from experience. Transcendentalism supposed subjectivity to be the true way of gaining knowledge and, as Walter Leighton stated, was "the doctrine that man has a knowledge of philosophic principles by an immediate beholding without the process of reason or aid of experience."[3] Through

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[1]Frederic Ives Carpenter, Emerson Handbook (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., 1953), p. 115.

[2]Donald N. Koster, Transcendentalism in America (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 2.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 2.

the work of Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists, many Americans of the nineteenth century got their first taste of Oriental mysticism.[1] However, that mysticism had a definite American flavor.

Emerson, the outstanding spokesman of transcendentalism, publicly hesitated to define it. He once described it only as "idealism as it appears in 1842."[2] However, he often confided to his journals those ideas which would help shape and define transcendentalism to become what it would later be understood to be. "The evidence of things, not seen," Emerson wrote when only nineteen years old, "I presume of being made out as satisfactorily as anything subject to the eye of reason." Later he claimed that "empirical science is apt to cloud the sight and by the very knowledge of functions and processes to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole."[3] Only through intuitive wisdom, Emerson believed, are we able to recognize the unity that lies at the core of the universe. This basic symbol continually found within Emerson's thought, the absolute unity of all things, is, as has been discussed, the primary assertion of a mystical world view.

Emerson's belief in the Absolute Unity of all things thus coincides with the direct premise of mysticism presented by Under-

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[1]Hal Bridges, American Mysticism: from William James to Zen (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 73.

[2]Koster, Transcendentalism in America, p. 3.

[3]Ibid., pp. 31, 35.

hill. Although Emerson did not claim to have attained an absolute mystical experience, but rather described his aesthetic, natural experiences in mystical terms, his experiences were identical with those of all mysticism in this basic essential: they gave the conviction of "union with God." Emerson also agreed with Underhill that the mystical experience was dynamically a means, rather than passively an end. He believed that the goal of religion was insight into the active conduct of life and not withdrawal from that life.[1]

Emerson also agreed that this experience of the Unity of all things was both indescribable and revelatory of deep truth. First, he wrote that the experience could only be mediated by use of symbols, and he proposed a symbol system through which one can experience a unity with the divine. This symbol system was discussed in his book, Nature, and will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

Second, he agreed with James that these experiences have a "noetic" quality and are revelations of deep truth. When Emerson wrote that "the evidence of things not seen I presume of being made out as satisfactorily as anything subject to the eye of reason," he agreed with James who wrote that mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for non-mystics.[2] Such states are absolutely

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[1] Carpenter, Emerson Handbook, p. 115.

[2] James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 324.

authoritative for those who experience them, concurred James.

Thus, within the broad mystical tradition earlier defined by Underhill, Anderson and James, Emerson's beliefs are common and shared with people of many religious traditions. However, like many mystics before him, Emerson felt alienated from his particular tradition, which, he felt, was too rationalistic:

> The Transcendentalist or Realist is distinguished from the churchman herein, that he limits his affirmation to his simple perception, and never goes beyond the warrant of his experience (spiritual and sensuous) in his creed, whilst the churchman affirms many things as received on testimony as of equal value with the moral intuitions.[1]

Thus, Emerson wrote, trancendentalism included the tendency to respect one's own intuitions and to give them authority over experience. In his opinion, transcendentalism was not only a religious and philosophic attitude, but also an idealistic reaction against tradition and conventionality in all aspects of life.[2]

Having now placed Emerson and transcendentalism within a wider mystical tradition, his own particular transcendentalism will next be explored. For this discussion, there is no better place to start than with his own chosen starting point. Emerson stated that in all of his lectures, he taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man.[3] For Emerson, the single per-

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[1]Koster, Transcendentalism in America, p. unknown.

[2]Ibid., p. 31.

[3]F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), p. 6

son contains within himself or herself, through his or her intuition, the whole range of experience. In his essay, "Self-Reliance" he declared, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." His ideas concerning the relationship of humankind to God were central to his discussion of individuality. Emerson continually said "trust thyself," but the self referred to can be interpreted as the divine spirit of which we are each a part. Thus, by trusting ourselves, we are confiding ourselves to the all-embracing, benevolent universal being (or over-soul) that is the center and unifying agent of all things. By so trusting, we always do right.[1]

This relationship of the individual to God was also discussed in depth in his essay "The Over-Soul":

> That Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission. . . .We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.[2]

Thus, each person's particular being is contained in the Over-Soul and in it is made one with all others. "The soul of man is God; God is within man; we are each a form of God," Emerson wrote

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[1]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Essays: First and Second Series in Everyman's Library, Ed. by Ernest Rhys, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906), pp. 29-56.

[2]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Essays: First and Second Series in Everyman's Library, Ed. by Ernest Rhys. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906), p. 150.

in his journal. However, this soul of the whole is present not just in each individual and thing, but also among and between persons. In all conversation between people, a third party, a third nature is present; this is God, Emerson wrote. When, in human conversation, unity of thought occurs and all become wiser than they were, then, too, that common nature is God.[1]

Therefore, Emerson's self-proclaimed emphasis on extreme individualism must always be observed in light of his notion that we are each inherently divine through our oneness in Over-Soul, God, and are united by this divinity. According to F. O. Matthiessen, Emerson's stress on rugged individualism was tempered by the universality of his doctrine that all souls are equal. Each person's separateness from every other was not nearly as important to him as was the belief that the highest revelation is that God is in everyone.[2]

Along with his image or the individual, nature is the image which had the most meaning for Emerson. A union with God and a direct encounter with absolute truth was possible, he believed, through mystic experience but that experience could only be had through primary contact with nature. Nature was Emerson's primary symbol for the mediation of the sacred in existence. Thus, although a knowledge of Emerson's symbol of the individual is important when trying to comprehend his understanding of God, a

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[1]Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in Essays, p. 155.

[2]Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 8.

knowledge of Emerson's image of nature is also necessary when attempting to comprehend his theories of the relationships between people and God and between people and other people.

Emerson claimed that we will not find our salvation initially through the mediation of other people, but through achieving a sense of union with the universal being by means of establishing a primary contact with nature. Only after that contact is established will our human relationships become salvatory. Nature is "the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead the individual back to it."[1] Spirit is, for Emerson, the supreme being which creates and is present in nature. When humans degenerate, he wrote, they feel themselves strangers in nature and therefore alien to God. To know God, one must first feel at one with nature.[2] Emerson himself must have felt very close to nature at some times, because he related a description of a personal experience that he felt was an apprehension of God: "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."[3] Such an experience could have occurred for Emerson only in nature and no doubt helped lead to his use of nature as the primary mediating symbol between

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[1]Koster, <u>Transcendentalism in America</u>, p. 34.

[2]<u>Ibid</u>., pp. 34-36. This theory of Emerson's has some interesting connotations for cities and for church in cities.

[3]Emerson, quoted in Koster, <u>Transcendentalism in America</u>, p. 33.

people and God. By using this symbol of nature, Emerson exemplified the mystic, as described by Underhill, as one who is able to establish immediate communication between the spiritual person (entangled among material things) and the "only Reality, that immaterial and final Being, which some philosophers call the Absolute and most theologians call God."[1]

Within nature, Emerson found a particular set of symbols and images which expressed his transcendentalism. These are discussed in depth in his book, Nature, which has been said to include "nearly every important thing that he or any other American transcendentalist would ever say."[2] In that book, Emerson began by listing three basic propositions which can be interpreted as his symbolic representation of the world. They are: words are signs of natural facts; particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts; and nature is the symbol of spirit.[3] Words, natural facts, and nature are each therefore symbolic for Emerson of a deeper reality than they themselves appear to be. A discussion of these three propositions follows.

The statement that "words are signs of natural facts" can be interpreted to mean that language has an immediate dependence upon nature. In analyzing the origins of language, Emerson noted that every word, if traced to its root meaning, is found to have been borrowed from some description of a material actuality.

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[1]Underhill, Mysticism, p. 4.

[2]Koster, Transcendentalism in America, p. 35.

[3]Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 32.

Language always has been and continues to be, for Emerson, immediately dependent upon nature, upon physical, tangible realities.

Although not as apparently derivative from the theory of natural facts as is his discussion of language, Emerson's theory of the relationship of art to nature is relevant to this discussion. Art, he wrote, is, like language, a symbol of nature. Nature finds expression through person-created works of art which are minor images or symbols of natural facts. Such works are, Emerson wrote, abstracts or epitomes of the world. They are results or expressions of nature, in miniature.[1]

Emerson's second basic proposition in Nature, that is, "particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts," is also important for the development of his symbol system. Good writing and brilliant discourse are, he wrote, perpetual allegories. However, although material images supply the source of thoughts and language, the creation of such symbols in peoples' minds is the result of a pre-existing spiritual force:

> A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find that a material image more or less luminous arises in his mind, contemporaneous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought . . . . This imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made.[2]

Thus, by this argument, intuition, a direct working of Original

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[1] Ibid., pp. 32-44.

[2] Emerson, quoted in Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 41.

Cause, God, is primary in the creation of thought and language. It shapes, forms and interprets the impressions that material images cast upon the mind. The soul, Emerson wrote, makes its own world. Thus, spiritual facts (and mind, as one of those) come before natural facts.

A discussion of Emerson's definition of symbol is necessary for an interpretation of his third basic proposition in Nature, that "Nature is the symbol of spirit." For Emerson, a symbol represents a consciousness of the infinite within the moment of experience. He acknowledged that symbols have great power and stated simply that, "this power is in the image because this power is in Nature. It so affects because it so is."[1] However, words, which are things, are insufficient to symbolize the reality that lies beyond them. Only nature is adequate as a symbolization of spirit. Nevertheless, mind, as a spiritual fact, is primary. The "unfolding" of nature always takes place in the mind. Or, as Emerson paraphrased it, "Nature always the effect, mind the flowing cause." He called nature the "metaphor of the divine mind."[2]

Therefore, Nature, as the symbol for spirit, is the ultimate religious symbol. Because the sacred exists in everything (as well as beyond, and not-in everything), no symbol of any particular object can, for Emerson, mediate the sacred in existence. One

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[1]Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 42.

[2]Ibid., p. 54.

can find the sacred in every moment and in every object. For example, in the poem "The Rhodora," Emerson mentioned Beauty, but such Beauty, as found in natural objects, is not ultimate. It is, instead, the reminder of--but does not mediate for us--the sacred in existence.[1]

Emerson's description of the sacredness of everything has strong implications for the attitudes that persons should have toward all other persons. The divine spirit is a part of each of us; all people are equally sacred according to Emerson. Thus, although he is fiercely individualistic, his theology is fiercely democratic. A world community, toward which he believed we are growing, will be a community of all persons. Such a community finally will occur when we each achieve, as he believes we someday will, our full human potential, which is godlike. Education is the means by which this state will be brought about because through education and only through education will each person learn to respect each other person.[2]

Thus, through his discussions on the Over-Soul, the individual, symbols, and community, Emerson presented a mystical worldview which undergirds all of his work. Observed one at a time,

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[1]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Rhodora," in Poems, Vol. IX of The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904), pp. 37-38.

[2]Koster, Transcendentalism in America, pp. 44-45. Emerson wrote during a period of great faith in democracy and was strongly idealistic about the potential of the new American nation. We who are living today under the shadow of huge nuclear weapon arsenals might not share his optimism in the future of humanity.

Emerson's ideas, as previously discussed, can be seen as a coherent whole. First, that Unity to which he also gave the names Over-Soul, Spirit, and God, is everywhere and contains all existence. Individuals must be understood in relationship to this Spirit. Emerson also presented a set of symbols: nature is the primary symbol of spirit; language and art are symbols of nature. Although nothing, Emerson claimed, is actually able to mediate the presence of the sacred, symbols are able to announce the preexisting presence of the sacred, Spirit, in everything and every non-thing. By so doing, symbols (especially nature) are able to represent existence in the world, so that persons are able to recognize themselves and their true divine natures. This realization must occur first, Emerson wrote, within the individual, for each person must recognize the divine within himself or herself alone, unaided. However, once such an awareness does occur within a group of individuals, it will necessarily affect, change and transform that community into a more god-like (i.e., democratic) one. Emerson's transcendentalism, which at first glance appears to apply largely to the individual, has revolutionary implications for society as a whole.

Emerson's system of mystical ideas, which are complex and sometimes contradictory, has been misunderstood by several of his interpreters. This misunderstanding has arisen in two areas. First, Emerson, although a mystic himself, strongly criticized "mysticism" as he understood it and, second, Emerson's extrovertive, active mysticism has been criticized by those who believe

his mysticism to be totally introspective and passive. A discussion of these two criticisms follows.

First, as has been previously discussed, Emerson's use of symbols was important in his mystical world view; however, when, in his essay "The Mystic," Emerson spoke of the ways in which a "mystic" uses language, he was dissatisfied with the result. His dissatisfaction arose not only from what he saw as the difficulty or impossibility of the traditional mystic's attempt to communicate an experience beyond expression but also from his perception that whenever the mystic does try to communicate through literature, he or she is likely to end by establishing a rigid formula of symbols to guide human experience. Such was the case with Swedenborg, whom Emerson selected as his representative "mystic" but significantly rejected as one without a genuinely creative, imaginative mind. Emerson remained discontented with the tendency of a "mystic" to harness and shackle language to a spiritual formulism.[1]

Despite this criticism, Emerson himself thought in terms of a broad imagery that resulted in giving sweep and expanse to his poetry and prose, and at the same time made it possible to condense his ideas into the set of concrete images previously discussed. However, there was a great difference between Swedenborg's symbols and Emerson's images. J. Russell Reaver viewed the former as confining and the latter as liberating. He wrote

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[1]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Swedenborg; or, the Mystic," in Representative Men, Vol. IV of The Complete Works, pp. 91-147.

that the free flowing of imaginative spirit through all forms of life represents the basic difference between Emerson's concept of truly imaginative productivity and the formulistic patterns of some other mystics' messages.[1] Emerson's symbols, Reaver believed, outline a process, and do not limit or confine creative thinking:

> Emerson's "transcendentalism" illustrates a belief in the intuitively mental and spiritually powerful potentialities of man who transcends his ordinary human experience by transforming it through imagination. . . . The body of Emerson's poetry is a metaphor of the essential possibilities for virtue and beauty in the mind and spirit of man as Emerson saw him.[2]

Therefore, although Emerson criticized mysticism as limiting and confining, he himself was a mystic whose symbols created possibilities and opened new avenues for imagination.

Emerson has been criticized, also, for propounding a mysticism which looks inward and denies the harsh realities of the real world. Stephen E. Whicher wrote:

> The only coin in which we can discharge our debt to suffering is attention to it, but Emerson seems to evade this obligation. Yet this chilling idealism is not simple insensitivity. Emerson is teaching his tested secret of insulation from calamity: Live in the Soul.[3]

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[1]J. Russell Reaver, Emerson as Mythmaker (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1954), p. 78.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 84.

[3]Stephen E. Whicher, "Emerson's Tragic Sense," in Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays, Ed. by Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 40.

This and similar criticisms have arisen, I believe, from a misunderstanding of Emerson's mysticism. Whicher considered Emerson's thought to be dangerously inward-looking and overly insulated. However, Emerson's mysticism was not as Whicher interpreted it. There are many different varieties of mystical experience and Emerson's was an occidental, unifying vision that should be distinguished from the silent way of introspection more often found in other varieties, such as some forms of Eastern mysticism.

Walter Stace and Rudolf Otto both made a distinction between these two forms of mysticism. A discussion of this distinction will both clear up the misunderstanding surrounding Emerson's mysticism (as voiced by Whicher) and will suggest possibilities for acceptance of mystical awareness in our modern lives.

First, Walter Stace made a distinction between two types of mystical experience, and named these two types of mystical experience introvertive mystical experience and extrovertive mystical experience:

> The extrovertive way looks outward and through the physical senses into the external world and finds the One there. The introvertive way turns inward, introspectively, and finds the One at the bottom of the self, and the bottom of the human personality.[1]

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[1]Stace, The Teachings of the Mystics, p. 15.

Stace described the extrovertive mystic as one who continues to perceive chairs and trees and houses as the rest of us do. However, for the extrovertive mystic, these objects are seen transfigured in such manner that the Unity shines through them. Stace cited Meister Eckhart as such a mystic. Eckhart wrote, "here [in this experience] all blades of grass, wood, and stone, all things are One."[1] The extrovertive consciousness perceives the world as transfigured and unified in one ultimate being; in some cultures (including ours) the one being is identified as God. Emerson's "Over-Soul" to which every part and particle is equally related was such a God, and Emerson's mystical consciousness was, by Stace's definition, extrovertive. Stace argued that this form of mysticism is a minor strand of mysticism and is less important because it is sensory-intellectual insofar as it still perceives physical objects and sees them to be distinct and separate from each other, although they are infused with the same One.[2]

Stace continued that introvertive mysticism, in which the ordinary sensory-intellectual consciousness disappears and is replaced by an entirely new kind of mystical consciousness, is a more fully developed form of mystical experience. This experience is generally achievable only after long periods of spiritual discipline and meditation during which the person seeks to rid himself or herself of emotions, desires and volitions. The paradoxi-

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[1] _Ibid_., p. 16.

[2] _Ibid_., pp. 15-17.

cal "light in the darkness" which the mystic may achieve after a time is pure consciousness, the consciousness which has no objects, the Emptiness called at times the Void, God, Nirvana, Nothingness. The achievement of this state is, Stace claimed, the great mystic achievement.[1]

This state may be the great mystic achievement, but it is unobtainable for the great majority of people upon this earth. For most of us, the contemplative, introvertive life is not an option; we must continue to live our lives among people and trees and stones. Are we then denied the possibility of glimpses of higher mystic truth?

Rudolf Otto described the development of mysticism in two directions similar to the two directions described by Stace. In Mysticism East and West, Otto described one as the mysticism of introspection and the other as the mysticism of unifying vision. Although clearly distinct, they must not be separated too strictly, he wrote, for the method of introspection leads to a unifying world view, while the unifying vision requires an attitude of recollection. "Perhaps only in their combination do they represent the ideal of mystical experience," he wrote.[2]

Although his categories are similar to Stace's, Otto made some very different conclusions about the importance and possible consequences of these two mystical directions. These different

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[1] Ibid., pp. 17-23.

[2] Rudolf Otto, Mysticism East and West (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1960), p. 59.

conclusions lead to a very different understanding of Emerson's mysticism and of the possibilities for mystical experiences in our modern lives. Of the mysticism of introspection, the first and, he termed, less important type of intuition, Otto wrote:

> Withdrawal from all outward things, retreat into the ground of one's own soul, knowledge of a secret depth and of the possibility of turning in upon one's self, is peculiar to the first type--mysticism as introspection. This means sinking down into the self in order to reach intuition, and here in the inmost depth of the self to find the Infinite, or God.[1]

This intuition, Otto argued, leads to self-knowledge, but can gradually be reduced to a system of ideas, always centered on a doctrine of the soul.

However, the second mystical direction, the way of unity, offers much more, Otto claimed. This direction knows nothing of "inwardness," and has no doctrine leading it into the region of the mystical. Instead,

> it looks upon the world of things in its multiplicity, and in contrast to [the inward way] leaps to an "intuition" or a "knowledge" of its own most peculiar kind, which we, according to our scale of values, may consider either a strange fantasy or a glimpse into the eternal relationships of things.[2]

This intuitive vision, Otto wrote, if it is followed, will lead us to several stages of awareness of the One. It originates with an awareness of things and events being seen as no longer separate

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

and divided, but instead are seen as part of an organic whole. In Emerson's writings, this awareness led to his belief in the unity of all parts and also led to a belief in the inherent relatedness of all parts, a relatedness described by his theory of compensation.[1]

Otto's "way of unity" shares with Stace's description of introvertive mysticism a description of a new form of consciousness, but it still, in the earlier stages, maintains that things are perceived as things, although transfigured, luminous, and visionary. Eventually, in Otto's third stage of the "way of unity," "the relationship of original immanence--the immanence of the unity in and of things and the immanence of things in the One--passes, and is transformed into complete transcendence."[2]

Although the "way of introspection" and the "way of unifying vision" can result in two distinct types of mysticism which may even be thought of as mutually exclusive and antagonistic, they can also blend and vitally interpenetrate each other. Thus, there are options for the would-be follower of the mystical path who, in the twentieth century finds herself or himself beseiged by work and family duties and finds little time for Stace's introvertive mystical discipline. By choosing Otto's description of the "way of unity" as a description of the possibilities for mystical awareness in our lives, we may reach a new understanding of

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[1]This theory of compensation will be discussed at length in chapter three.

[2]Otto, Mysticism East and West, p. 71.

the mystical insights that many of us have. Emerson's mystical intuitions also had the characteristics of "unifying vision," as has been discussed, and we might well recognize with Eckhart, as we, too, look at the world of things in its multiplicity, that "In the eternal goodness of the divine nature (as in a miraculous mirror) the essence of all creatures is seen as one."[1]

Emerson's expression of mysticism therefore falls into Stace's "extrovertive" category, but, as a participant in Otto's "way of unity," begins with intuitive vision and leads to awareness of the One. Underhill's fundamental characteristic of mystical experience, that it is a process of apprehending Unity, again appears. Emerson's mystical experience is visionary and therefore is not fully describable; such an experience is "knowledge," Otto wrote and carries new depths of truth.

Thus, Emerson's writings are those of a man writing from the viewpoint of one whose thought was grounded in mystical experience, as that experience has been defined by Underhill and James. Misunderstandings have arisen from Emerson's own criticisms of other mystics and from a misinterpretation of Emerson's mystical thought as passive and overly inward-looking. However, these misunderstandings can be alleviated by a recognition of the interrelatedness of Emerson's intuitive vision and his outward-looking descriptions of the structures of reality. A mystic, Underhill stated, is called to both spiritual and practical activity;

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[1] Ibid., p. 63.

the two are interrelated and equally necessary. Emerson would agree. He claimed that we are only intuitively able to apprehend the Absolute Unity of all things. However, his discussions of individuality, the Over-Soul, symbols, and community reveal him to be a mystic who also reached outward into his tangible world and tried to describe its relationship with the Absolute. That relationship was vital, complex and always in the process of becoming.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MYSTICAL RESPONSE TO SUFFERING IN EMERSON'S LIFE AND WORKS

Although Emerson criticized mysticism as he found it advocated by Swedenborg, he was a mystic himself, and his response to suffering can only be understood by taking his mysticism into account. Emerson suffered a series of illnesses and tragedies during his early adulthood and a survey of his writings of this era reveals a philosophical response to these tragedies which will assist in the development of a modern Unitarian Universalist response to suffering. Although Emerson is often accused of neglecting the tragic in human life, a careful reading of his journals, essays, poems and letters show that this man deeply felt and strongly expressed a rational yet sincere, response to the loss and pain that were a large part of his life.

This discussion of Emerson's response to suffering will be undertaken in three parts. First, an overview of the several personal tragedies of his life will be presented along with mention of how these events initially affected him emotionally and philosophically. This overview will bring to light the two recurring, interrelated themes of compensation and love. Second, the importance and implications of these two themes for Emerson's response to suffering will be discussed in depth. These two themes are found throughout Emerson's works and are the key to an understand-

ing of his response to suffering. Two other themes, those of personal immortality and "the child" as a model of human wholeness will also be mentioned. These were two symbols which, although at one time important to him, Emerson discarded as inadequate when challenged by the power of human suffering. The themes of compensation and love, however, met the challenge and through them Emerson's mystical response to the tragedies of his own life and human suffering throughout the ages can be found.

The strength of mind and serenity of soul which Emerson eventually obtained in his struggle with the meaning of human suffering have suggested to several of his biographers the myth of an indifference toward suffering which the facts utterly refute. G. E. Woodberry exclaimed: "There was. . . no storm and stress; he was born free from all that . . . . His youthful journals show . . . no friction, no disturbance, no unrest."[1] Newton Arvin wondered "how it is humanly possible for a man to have so weak a memory of his own sorrows or so little compassion for those of other men."[2] The result of Emerson's optimism, of his belief that people are somehow shielded from final and irremediable evil was, Stephen Whicher claimed, "to deny his philosophy the tragic sense of life, to its consequent impoverishment, as well as to betray him into saying some foolish or shallow things."[3]

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[1]George E. Woodberry, Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1907), pp. 25, 31.

[2]Newton Arvin, "The House of Pain," in Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher, Eds., Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 49.

[3]Stephen E. Whicher, Freedom and Fate (Philadelphia: University of Penn. Press, 1953), p. 46.

Emerson himself would probably not deny saying, at times, some foolish or shallow things. He was at times a contradictory, inconsistent writer who was more interested in harmonic literary forms than in the development of a methodical system of thought. However, the facts of his life and a study of his writings disprove the myth of his shallowness and lack of compassion.

Emerson spent over ten years of his early adulthood living in what Van Wyck Brooks described as "the House of Pain." These were "years of illness, frustration, false beginnings, of calamity and confusion."[1] Emerson was raised in poverty, was constantly threatened with tuberculosis and suffered sporadic eye failure and rheumatic pains. From 1825 to 1835 he was frequently in ill health and often, after efforts of preaching, suffered intense pains in the chest. After one preaching engagement he wrote his aunt that he was "still saddled with the villian stricture & perhaps he will ride me to death."[2] Although Emerson's ailments gradually cleared up as he grew into mature adulthood, during his earlier adult years, as he developed many of the ideas which would later be criticized as not compassionate, he was in much pain.

Second, Emerson suffered a series of personal tragedies during these years and during the several years following. In

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[1]Van Wyck Brooks, The Life of Emerson, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1932), p. 40.

[2]Ralph L. Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 123.

1828, his brother Edward, a brilliant young law student, suddenly became quite mentally ill. "There he lay, Edward, the admired, learned, eloquent, striving boy, a maniac," wrote R. W. Emerson to his brother, William. "We are born to trouble," he wrote and described "the state of feeling produced by watching him being utterly wretched."[1] After six more years of intermittent mental illness and tuberculosis, Edward finally died.

Next, in 1829, Emerson married Ellen Louisa Tucker, but in 1831, a year and a half later, she, too died of tuberculosis. All of his letters and journal entries of this time and all of the observations of his family and friends bear witness to the depth of his love for her. Emerson's relationship with Ellen was the one against which he would measure all others in his life and find them lacking. The intensity of their love fixed in Emerson's mind both an ideal of companionship and an ideal of womanhood that Ellen fulfilled. When, after seven and a half years of his second marriage to Lydia Jackson, Emerson expressed gratitude for "the bright revelations" of woman's "best nature" that had been made to him, it was not Lydia whom he cited as his teacher but "the angel who walked with me in younger days."[2] The actual love between Emerson and Ellen made every subsequent relationship of his fall short not just of an extrapolated ideal, but

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[1]Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ed. by Ralph L. Rusk (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), Vol. I. p. 236.

[2]Henry F. Pommer, Emerson's First Marriage (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. 94.

also of an ideal once realized. All of the evidence supports the opinion of Ralph L. Rusk, author of the authoritative life of Emerson, that Ellen stirred Emerson "more than anybody else ever had done or could do."[1]

Ellen's death therefore was devastating for Emerson and strongly influenced his thinking on many subjects. During 1829 and 1830, everything in nature had reminded him of his love for Ellen. He had written:

> When the redbird spread his sable wing,
> And showed his side of flame;
> When the rosebud ripened to the rose,
> In both I read thy name.[2]

Now, however, he read "his loss in every utensil in his house, in every garment, in the face of every friend."[3] All of his resources as a writer expressed his grief: journal entries, poems, sermons, and letters. He recorded her death in his journal:

> Shall I ever again be able to connect the face of outward nature, the mists of the morn, the star of eve, the flowers, & all poetry, with the heart & life of an enchanting friend? No. There is one birth & one baptism & one first love and the affections cannot keep their youth any more than men.[4]

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[1]Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 149.

[2]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thine Eyes Still Shined," in The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. IX: Poems (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1904), p. 99.

[3]Pommer, Emerson's First Marriage, p. 51.

[4]Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ed. by A. W. Plumstead and Harrison Hayford (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1969), Vol. III, p.227.

Emerson felt his grief so intensely that death seemed attractive: Five days after Ellen's death he wrote in his journal:

> God be merciful to me a sinner & repair this miserable debility in which her death has left my soul. Two nights since, I have again heard her breathing, seen her dying. O willingly, my wife, I would lie down in your tomb.[1]

And a few days later he mourned:

> O pleasant pleasant in my eye
> The grave is become
> And with all this green majesty
> 'Twill be a sweeter home. . . .
>
> Why should I live
> The future will repeat, the past
> Yet cannot give
> Again the Vision beautiful too beautiful to last[2]

In such verses and phrases found in his journals, Emerson said that if he lost faith in Ellen's remembering herself and him he would bury his ambition. He regretted that she had not visited him in dreams but implied that her love embraced him in other ways; he hoped that he would live well enough to join her in heaven.[3] None of these fragments was ever prepared by Emerson for publication; they remained private laments.

If Emerson intellectualized his love for Ellen, as has been charged and as is no doubt partly true,[4] the warmth and di-

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[1]*Ibid.*, p. 226.

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 230.

[3]*Ibid.*, pp. 228-229; 285-286; 289-290.

[4]Pommer, *Emerson's First Marriage*, p. 32.

rectness of his love while Ellen lived are clear from his poems, journals, and correspondence of that time. Likewise, the record seems clear that "with Ellen's death in 1831, Emerson did feel 'sharp peaks and edges' of grief, and did not 'fall soft on a thought' until about three years later," when he made the statement that he had never keenly suffered.[1] "I am born tranquil," he wrote, "never a keen sufferer. I will not affect to suffer."[2] However, the testimonies of his earlier days of grief stand in marked contrast to these later disavowals of deep emotion. Ellen's life and death greatly affected both his philosophy and his emotional life from 1828 onward. It is quite possible that, as Henry F. Pommer proposed, Ellen's death "fastened a touch of aloofness" on Emerson, as a protection against further deep pain.[3]

Despite the terrible loss which he felt at his wife's death, Emerson also felt great peace at that time. While Ellen was lying ill, Emerson's brother Charles wrote to their Aunt Mary that "Waldo is bowed down under the affliction. Yet he says tis like seeing an angel go to heaven."[4] Within a few hours of her death, Emerson himself wrote to Aunt Mary that

> My angel is gone to heaven this morning & I am

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[1]*Ibid.*, p. 73. ("The only thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface. . . .")

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 58

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 96.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 48-49.

> alone in the world & strangely happy. Her lungs shall no more be torn. . . it is true that I have never known a person in the world in whose separate existence as a soul I could so readily & fully believe & she is present with me now.[1]

Even as he mourned her death, in his journals, he also prayed that she and he would someday be reunited in heaven. His comfort was, in large part, in the belief that she was happy and well.

Journal entries made during the time of Ellen's grave illness describe times of prayer which the couple often shared. Ellen frequently led their prayers, and encouraged her husband to keep his faith in the personal God in whom they believed.[2] Soon after her death, Emerson addressed her in his journal: "Pray for me Ellen," he wrote, "& raise the friend you so truly loved, to be what you thought him."[3]

As these phrases show, the chief source of Emerson's courage immediately before and after Ellen's death was the faith the two of them had in personal immortality. Twelve days after Ellen's death, Emerson preached a sermon entitled "Consolation for the Mourner" from his Second Unitarian Church pulpit in Boston. Emerson began that sermon by affirming that the "main fact" of the truth of God is the immortality of the human soul.[4] He

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[1]Emerson, The Letters ..., Vol. I., p. 318.

[2]Pommer, Emerson's First Marriage, pp. 48-49.

[3]Emerson, The Journals ..., Vol. III., p. 226.

[4]Ralph Waldo Emerson, Young Emerson Speaks, Ed. by Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1938), p. 138. (Sermon, "Consolation for the Mourner").

continued that:

> The Christian faith teaches us that the soul does not die but is separated from the body and enters into a nearer relation to the Father of Spirits. The Christian faith teaches this, and the Christian soul, as it departs out of life, affirms it cheerfully to those who weep.[1]

Similar assurance of the fact of survival (though not the precise form of that survival) is expressed in poems and letters of that year.[2] However, in his journals during the last part of 1831, a weakening of his confidence in immortality is suggested:

> I would not ask any other consolation than to be assured by one sign that the heart never plays false to itself when in its scope it requires by a necessity the permanence of the soul.[3]

Although publicly Emerson continued to state his assurance in the immortality of the soul, privately doubts were expressed. A few months later he confided to his journal:

> Don't tell me to get ready to die. I know not what shall be. The only preparation I can make is by fulfilling my present duties. This is the everlasting life.[4]

No consistent, constant pattern of belief on this question emerged during the years immediately following Ellen's death.

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[1] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

[2] Emerson, *The Journals ...*, Vol. III., pp. 240, 289-290; *The Letters ...*, Vol. I., pp. 331-333.

[3] Emerson, *The Journals ...*, Vol. III., p. 209.

[4] Emerson, *The Journals ...*, Vol. IV., p. 41.

However, as Emerson suffered other personal tragedies, as other close family members died, the end of his belief in personal immortality can be observed. In his essay "The Over-Soul," published in 1841, five years after his brother Charles' death, Emerson denied the survival of personal identity and asserted that Jesus never "uttered a syllable concerning the duration of the soul."[1] Finally, when his young son died in 1842, Emerson expressed neither expectation nor hope of seeing him again:

> I comprehend nothing of this fact but its bitterness. Explanation I have none, consolation none that rises out of the fact itself; only diversion.[2]

Although the belief in personal immortality had greatly consoled Emerson at the time of Ellen's death, it did not withstand the challenge of his later thinking. Emerson's philosophy was changing, and gradually he abandoned one faith which he and Ellen had shared.

Although his belief in personal immortality did not survive the challenge presented it by Ellen's death, Emerson's belief in Compensation as a universal truth survived, adapted, and grew stronger during that period of crisis. Emerson believed that there is a just balance in everything and in all parts of the universe, that nothing can be given or taken away in this world. As

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[1]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul" in The Complete Works ..., Vol. I: Essays, First Series, pp. 283-284.

[2]Emerson, The Journals ..., Vol. VI., p. 166.

early as 1820, he had described:

> that eternal analogy which subsists between the eternal changes of nature & scenes of good & ill that chequer human life. Joy cometh but is speedily supplanted by grief. . .[1]

Emerson's belief in Compensation continued to sustain him during Ellen's illness and after her death. One of his immediate reactions to Ellen's death was of compensating sorrow and joy, loss and gain:

> The past days the most eventful of my life are all a dim confusion & now the pall is drawn over them, yet do they shine brilliantly in my spiritual world. Say, dear Aunt (Mary), if I am not rich in her memory?[2]

Emerson was to frequently experience and describe this pattern of a loss in the world of matter and affections being compensated for in the world of spirit. He wrote, later that same year:

> Is not the law of compensation perfect? It holds as far as we can see. Different gifts to different individuals but with a mortgage of responsibility on every one. . . I have nothing charactered in my brain that outlives this word Compensation.[3]

> Compensations is one of the watchwords of my spiritual world -- & time & chance & sorrow & hope do not by their revelations abate my curiosity.[4]

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[1]Emerson, The Journals..., Vol.I., p. 19.

[2]Emerson, The Letters ..., Vol. I., p. 318.

[3]Emerson, The Journals ..., Vol. III., pp. 249-250; 265-266.

[4]Emerson, The Letters ..., Vol. I., p. 330.

Of the two ideas that most consoled Emerson at the time of Ellen's death, only Compensation stood the challenge of his later thinking and it survived only in a form modified by the collapse of his faith in immortality. Compensation was transformed from a Christian into a Transcendental concept. Soon after Ellen's death, Emerson had preached that: "The pure and the wise who leave this world receive the natural reward of goodness and wisdom, in the removal of all doubt as to the course and the end of their secret journey."[1] However, within a year after Ellen's death, Emerson began to refer to compensation as something which occurs in this life. The earlier theory came under attack. It is, he preached in 1832:

> grossly defective to urge people to a good life because their future well-being depends upon it. That is not the right reason.[2]

Emerson's thoughts on the meaning of Ellen's life and death had not led him to believe that there were no compensations in an after-life, but instead to conclude that even the greatest losses experienced here are also compensated here. Life on earth, he believed, is spiritual, regardless of whether a later one also exists, and in this present life both spiritual and material compensations create a perfect harmony.[3]

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[1]Emerson, Young Emerson Speaks, p. 140.

[2]Ibid., p. 245. (This was the next to the last sermon at Second Unitarian Church).

[3]Pommer, Emerson's First Marriage, pp. 74-75.

Both before and after Ellen's death, Emerson strongly believed in compensation as a fundamental truth. However, his love for Ellen strengthened his belief, and his reaction to her death directly affected it. He wrote to her: "We cannot let our angels go. We do not see that they only go out that archangels may come in."[1]

A similar thought was expressed in his poem, "Give all to Love," when he wrote, "When half-gods go; The gods arrive."[2] However, the gods now came and went for him in this world and no longer intervened for him as immortal souls. Pain and suffering, loss and grief, could now be understood by him to be events which must receive their explanation in this life and he no longer advocated awaiting compensation for such sufferings in a happy afterlife. As loved ones die, he believed, our grief can be assuaged by the gradual effect which those deaths will have upon our way of living and thinking in this world. Emerson's most powerful statement to this effect lies within the last paragraph of his essay "Compensation," published ten years after Ellen's death and yet obviously influenced by her:

> The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide or genius; for it commonly operates revolutions in our way of life, terminates an epoch of infancy or of youth which was waiting to be closed, breaks up a wonted occupation, or a household, or style of living, and

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[1]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation," in Everyman's Library: Essays, First and Second Series, Ed. by Ernest Rhys (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906-08), p. 75.

[2]Emerson, "Give All to Love," in The Complete Works..., Vol. IX: Poems, pp. 90-96.

> allows the formation of new ones more friendly to the growth of character.[1]

Emerson's strong faith in the "deep remedial force that underlies all facts," gave him peace, serenity, and the will to continue despite his pain and questions.

Emerson suffered greatly through the months of Ellen's illness and for months and years following her death. It was a time for him of grappling with the basic tenets of his religious faith. His faith in personal immortality was tested; it survived only the period of his greatest need. His faith in compensation was modified but eventually strengthened. The emotional and intellectual bases of his optimism emerged stronger than ever and sustained him for the rest of his life. However, further challenges to his faith soon appeared. His brother Edward, who had been ill for several years, died in Puerto Rico in 1834. Then, suddenly, his brother Charles died in 1836, also of tuberculosis. Because of his great love and admiration for Charles, this loss struck Emerson very deeply.

Compared with the more obvious ways in which Ellen's death and the later death of his son, Waldo, would affect Emerson; the death of Charles seemed to be a shock which had no answer and from which little observed philosophical growth occurred. Perhaps Charles' death was one loss too many at a time in his life when Emerson was suffering much unhappiness. He recorded his

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[1]Emerson, "Compensation," in The Complete Works ..., Vol. I: Essays, First Series, p. 76.

feelings in his journal one week after Charles died:

> Beautiful without any parallel, in my experience of young men, was his life, happiest his death. Miserable is my own prospect from whom my friend is taken. . . . Now commences a new & gloomy epoch of my life.[1]

The strain of this loss, after so many losses, was heavy for Emerson. Ralph Rusk, one biographer of Emerson, noted an incident which occurred at Charles' funeral: "With his nerves tense to the breaking point as he stood at his brother's grave, he let 'compressed nature,' according to one observer, break through his restraint 'in a laugh -- and an ejaculation "dear boy."'"[2] So severe was the loss that Emerson found the whole structure of his own philosophy momentarily shaken. Trying to understand his loss, he could "gather no hint from this terrible experience," and only groped "in greater darkness."[3] No certain clues can be found concerning the effect which Charles' death had on Emerson's broad, developing response to suffering. Emerson mourned deeply for several months until an event occurred which diverted him from meditating on death to celebrate life, instead: his first child, Waldo, was born.

Emerson was, by all accounts, completely devoted to his son. "I feel," Lydia told her sister, "as if a volume might be filled before one could duly set forth all that this child is to him,

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[1]Emerson, The Journals..., Vol. V., p. 151.

[2]Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 230.

[3]Ibid., p. 231.

both as possession and hope . . . ."[1] Emerson himself entered into his journal: "Ah! my darling boy, so lately received out of heaven leave me not now! Please God, this sweet symbol of love & wisdom may be spared to rejoice, teach & accompany me."[2] Waldo restored the foundations of optimism in Emerson's heart. The father, Ralph Rusk wrote, "fell an easy convert to the cult of childhood after a mere pretense of keeping a philosophical aloofnees."[3] The child, Waldo, was greatly beloved by his father but also reinforced and strengthened Emerson's admiration for "the child" as a symbol of the possibilities for human wholeness and greatness.

This symbol was part of the stress which Emerson put on human potential in his early work which, in the late 1830's and early 1840's, had a radically individualistic strain. Stephen Whicher wrote that, especially in the essay on "Self-Reliance," the reader is encouraged to cut loose from dependence on any foreign force and live wholly from within. This requires strenuous and radical self-renewal. "'Be yourself,'" Whicher wrote, "meant to Emerson 'Be your potential self.'"[4] This emphasis on being one's 'potential self' led to a frequent connection of the self-reliant and nature-mastering self with the figure of the child. The child enjoys an "original relation to the universe,"

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[1] Ibid., p. 251.

[2] Emerson, The Journals..., Vol. V., p. 293.

[3] Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 232.

[4] Whicher, Freedom and Fate, pp. 58-59.

Emerson claimed in Nature and later he connected the child with the self who is fully self-integrated. "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood."[1]

The spirit of childhood was for Emerson both the spirit of potential self-integration and a vague memory of the once-divine condition, a state which adults have lost and the child still seems to occupy. "Infancy is the perpetual Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen men and pleads with them to return to paradise," he wrote.[2] Before 1842, Emerson would not have accepted a philosophy which would have placed importance on memory or on the inevitability of growing up. For Emerson, at that time, the adult world of experience, involving history, community, and relationships, would have unacceptably compromised the life of self-absorbed creativity and oneness with the divine, a life symbolized by "the child." Emerson called for adults to become more childlike, in order to rediscover their original creativity and oneness with the divine.[3]

Real children, especially his own son, became constant reminders, for Emerson, of the possibility of a return to a con-

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[1]Emerson, "Nature," in The Complete Works..., Vol. I: Essays, First Series, pp. 3, 8-9.

[2]Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in The Complete Works ..., Vol. I: Essays, First Series, p. 71.

[3]Bruce Ronda, "Literary Grieving and the Death of Waldo," in The Centennial Review, Vol. XXIII No. I, Winter 1978, pp. 94-97.

dition of spontaneity, openness, and wonder. Emerson's use of the child as metaphor was due in part to his ability to capture the antics and language of real children. Emerson could move easily from the actual, observable child to the child as typical of saved humanity, as seen in "Self-Reliance":

> What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behaviour of children, babes and even brutes! That divided rebel mind, that distrust of a sentiment because our arithmetic has computed the strength and means opposed to our purpose, these have not. Their mind being whole, their eye is as yet unconquered . . . .[1]

As this passage reveals, Emerson could see children both as real persons and as symbolic of a higher reality. His symbol of child was, therefore, crucially linked with the life of that child whom he loved above all others, his son.

Therefore, when Waldo died very suddenly on January 27, 1842, at the age of five of scarlet fever, the personal shock to Emerson was enormous, a shock that can be observed in the changes which his symbol of "child" soon underwent. First, however, Emerson the man and the father deeply grieved. The overwhelming anguish can be read in a few lines he wrote to a friend:

> My little boy died last night, my little wonderful boy. You too have seen him & loved him. But you can never know how much daily & nightly blessedness was lodged in the child. I saw him always & felt him everywhere. On Sunday I carried him to see the new

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[1]Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Everyman's Library; Essays, First and Second Series, p. 31.

> church & organ. & on Sunday we shall lay his sweet body in the ground. You will also grieve for him.[1]

Emerson never forgot this son whose death climaxed his series of personal tragedies and, once again, put a great strain on his faith. Six weeks after Waldo's death, Emerson remained stunned and desolate. His Journals chronicled his despair once more:

> The chrysalis which he brought in with care & tenderness & gave to his Mother to keep is still alive and he most beautiful of the children of men is not here.[2]

His son was gone; among the last words Emerson uttered, at the very end of his own long life, was the exclamation: "Oh, that beautiful boy!"[3]

Emerson's despair lingered for awhile. Eventually, in mid-June, the ministrations of a friend helped him to turn toward a mood of acceptance and understanding of the event. Charles Newcomb lent Emerson a manuscript and Emerson wrote:

> Let it be his praise that when I carried his MS story to the woods, & read it in the armchair of the upturned root of a pinetree I felt for the first time since Waldo's death some efficient faith again in the repairs of the Universe, some independency of natural relations whilst spiritual affinities can be so perfect & compensating.[4]

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[1]Emerson, The Letters ..., Vol. III, p. 9.

[2]Emerson, The Journals ..., Vol. VIII, p. 205.

[3]Rusk, The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 508.

[4]Emerson, The Journals ..., Vol. VIII, p. 179.

Emerson's rediscovered "efficient faith" can be found reworked in his poem "Threnody," in which he sought to harmonize the painful event of his son's death with the universe which he believed to be ultimately good and beneficient. This poem contains the major elements of Emerson's response to human suffering during this era of his life. There are, however, as will be seen, some great differences in how this poem has been interpreted by several different critics. These differences follow from differences in interpretation of Emerson's mystical view of the world. A discussion of "Threnody," therefore, will not only show how Emerson responded to his son's death, but will also lead to a better understanding of how this response is intimately linked to his mystical world view.

This poem is so important in the development of Emerson's response to loss that several excerpts from the first and second parts of the poem will be included here. The poem begins:

> The South wind brings
> Life, sunshine and desire,
>
> . . . .
>
> But over the dead he has not power,
> The lost, the lost, he cannot restore;
>
> . . . .
>
> On that shaded day,
> Dark with more clouds than tempests are,
> When thou didst yield thy innocent breath
> In birdlike heavings unto death,
> Night came, and Nature had not thee;
> I said, "We are mates in misery.

Emerson continued his lament throughout the first part of the poem:

No watcher in the firmament,
No angel from the countless host
That loiters round the crystal coast,
Could stoop to heal that only child,
Nature's sweet marvel undefiled,
And keep the blossom of the earth
which all her harvests were not worth?

Not mine--I never called thee mine,
But Nature's heir--if I repine,
And seeing rashly torn and moved
Not what I made, but what I loved,
Grow early old with grief that thou
Must to the wastes of Nature go . . . .

In the second part of the poem, Emerson intuited an answer to grief:

The deep Heart answered, "Weepest thou?

. . . .

Taught he not thee--the man of eld,
Whose eyes within his eyes beheld
Heaven's numerous hierarchy span
The mystic gulf from God to man?

That answer includes an affirmation in a balancing power, a form of compensation, within which all things are included and endlessly participate:

My servant Death, with solving rite,
Pours finite into infinite.
Wilt thou freeze love's tidal flow,
Whose streams through nature circling go?
Nail the wild star to its track
On the half-climbed zodiac?
Light is light which radiates,
Blood is blood which circulates,
Life is life which generates,
And many-seeming life is one,
Wilt thou transfix and make it none?

The poem concludes with a final solemn acceptance of his grief

and an affirmation that that grief will somehow be compensated within God:

> Silent rushes the swift Lord
>
> . . . .
>
> Waters with tears of ancient sorrow
> Apples of Eden ripe tomorrow.
> House and tenant go to ground,
> Lost in God, in Godhead found."[1]

Many of the lines and phrases of "Threnody" can be found in Emerson's letters and journal entries written in the weeks and months following Waldo's death. The first and second parts of the poem, as the reader will notice, are markedly different in content and tone. The first part is an outburst of rage and frustration at nature for having stolen a promising, beautiful child. This part of the poem is informed by the belief that people and nature exist in a sort of correspondence and that people, in some sense, give nature part of its meaning. Emerson's outrage and amazement are a reaction to a nature which appears indifferent to the boy's death, and are a questioning of the harmony between nature and humanity which he had come to expect. The real and ideal boy are suddenly torn apart: the flesh-and blood son who symbolized for his father the divinely empowered, reborn self, is dead:

> O child of paradise,

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[1]Emerson, "Threnody," in The Complete Works ..., Vol. IX: Poems, pp. 148-158.

> Boy who made dear his father's home,
> In whose deep eyes
> Men read the welfare of the times to come,
> I am too much bereft.

When the real was so unexpectedly taken away, the ideal also was gone. The dead boy combined innocence and wisdom, for Emerson, in such a way as to model for humanity a new way of life, but when that boy died, so, too, did the symbol; the first part of the poem ends:

> O trusted broken prophecy!
> O richest fortune sourly crossed!
> Born for the future, to the future lost!

Thus, the symbol of "the child" as a symbol for wholeness and untarnished divinity, did not withstand the challenge presented to it by the reality of Emerson's own suffering. As his child died, so did his symbol. "Threnody" marks a turn in Emerson's thought, away from the assertion of the power of the creative, godlike self, toward an acceptance of the self's limitations in a world it has not made. "Threnody" is one of the crucial turning points in this shift because it is both a personal and a literary event. It focuses simultaneously on the death of Waldo Emerson and on the death of the child as a figure of the redeemed self. This symbol, earlier an important one in Emerson's works such as his essay on "Self-Reliance," no longer is relevant.

The second part of the poem is written with a very different content and tone and delivers a very different message. The argument of this part of the poem is a challenge to the claim of

human mastery over nature which Emerson had developed up to 1842. It proposes another relation between human and non-human, a relation which further broadens the depth and power of Emerson's philosophy of compensation.

The voice of the second part, the deep Heart, asserts that human events must be seen in a cosmic setting. In contrast to the outlook in Nature and "Self-Reliance" where non-human events and powers are felt to be mastered by, or at least seen in the context of, the self, here the cosmic voice argues that "each private sign" must be seen in the context of "the supersolar blaze." Although in language the second part of the poem is far more general and constrained, and in argument perhaps less convincing, this second part represents a return from the inconsolable stance of a grief-stricken parent to a fuller acceptance of the doctrines of compensation and Unity within multiplicity.

Therefore, "Threnody," as the resolution of Emerson's private struggle to find meaning in his son's death, is a victorious statement for the healing, positive power of the Whole. From this time on, in Emerson's thought, the symbol of the child may still remind the reader of the integrated and uncluttered life, but it still lives prior to experience. Adult encounters with loss, grief, limitation and failure are inevitable and any adequate system of thought and expression must make room for them. "Threnody" is the painful account of that process of making room in Emerson's personal and public life. The resolution offered by the poem is not of a reality devoid of tragedy or one where tragedy is unim-

portant but, instead, is of a reality which accepts tragedy, pain and suffering as inevitable parts of a full human existence.

Emerson, as has been demonstrated, lived through and experienced much pain and suffering of his own. In his attempt to find meaning in these events he tried and then discarded at least two philosophies which he found wanting: the immortality of the soul and the idea of a totally self-reliant human being, as symbolized by the child.

However, throughout his life Emerson found the idea of Compensation to be a theme which, as it changed and evolved, continued to challenge him and undergird his mystical response to suffering. In his essay "Compensation," published in 1892, Emerson described the basic idea which took poetic form in "Threnody;" this idea is compensation, a wholeness which answers our cries for meaning with the assurance that the world is One and the world is Good. However, when Emerson wrote that the universe is moral and exists for good, he was not asserting that it is soft or weak. To the contrary, it exists because it is power, and even the good it promotes is power. Nothing can exist or can be done without power. On the whole, he claimed, putting together is good because it is formation, construction, and harmony: parting asunder is bad because it is separation and disharmony.[1] However, the two forces are both part of the Whole and are compensations and balances, one for the other.

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[1] Emerson, "Compensation," in The Complete Works ..., Vol. I: Essays, First Series, pp. 58-61.

Emerson's mystical idea of Unity which combines and includes all compensations and balances was the fulcrum of his response to suffering, and yet it is this idea which is so often misunderstood. Stephen Whicher wrote that:

> In some of his poems, particularly, . . . (one) . . . may see him swept into entranced submission to "the over-god" by the compulsion of his personal problems. . . . So the teasing evanescence of his moments of insight into reality is submerged in "The World-Soul." He bows to the same power for a bleak consolation in his "Threnody" for his son.[1]

Such criticisms do not take into account the fact that Emerson, as a follower of mystic tradition, tried to describe the indescribable and continually found language to be lacking. Emerson had a vision of the Whole, a vision which he claimed could only be intuited and not known through rational discourse but he continued to try to describe it. These two mystical themes, of Wholeness and of the intuitively available but indescribable knowledge of that Wholeness, can help to explain the faults and idiosyncracies for which Emerson's response to suffering has usually been criticized. One author who agreed is Frederic Ives Carpenter who wrote:

> Because Emerson viewed things mystically from the point of view of "the god," rather than tragically from the point of view of suffering humanity, he has been accused of insensitivity to human feeling, and especially to human pain and evil. But this is the very nature of mysticism. And because Emerson judged man by the standard of a god-like ideal of perfection, measuring both man's potentiality and man's failure by this absolute standard, he has been accused both of blind optimism and of heartless

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[1]Whicher, Freedom and Fate, p. 84

> perfectionism. But this also is the nature of mysticism.[1]

Emerson's philosophy, Carpenter claimed, becomes simple and logical with a recognition and acceptance of his mysticism. Thus, if his idea of Unity within multiplicity, and the intuitively-available knowledge of that Unity are accepted as starting points, his response to suffering can be seen in a clearer light.

His essay "Compensation," when regarded with an eye to his mystical starting points, reveals the ideas which will lead us to an understanding of Emerson's response to suffering. Throughout the painful times in his life, Emerson kept returning to the theme of compensation as his bedrock of faith. In "Compensation," Emerson described the basic ideas underlying his philosophy of evil and, consequently, human suffering. A discussion of these basic ideas follows:

As gravity in the physical universe holds things together, Emerson believed, so does truth sustain the moral realm. For Emerson, the supreme truth about the system of things is that it is moral and goes according to plan or law. Evidence of this was (as has been described earlier in Chapter Two) in the number of analogies demonstrating that physical laws were counterparts of moral laws and can be translated into them. Emerson believed that nature, if viewed in the perspective of centuries or millenia, shows growth upward, not unbroken or continuous, but continual in

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[1]Frederic Ives Carpenter, <u>Emerson Handbook</u> (New York: Hendricks House, 1953), pp. 122-123.

a loose spiral sense. Likewise, he believed that human moral life is correspondingly becoming greater, progressing upward: he pointed to instances of social reform as illustrations. [1]

All of us are part of this movement, he wrote, yet humans have always been dedicated to the problem of how to detach the sensual sweet, strong and bright from the moral sweet, deep, and fair. We seek to divide and detach, to halve things and get the sensual good alone by itself, without the moral good. This, for Emerson, is evil. Inasmuch as people destroy and sow dissension, they work against the principles of the universe. However, the mighty principle of compensation in the universe insures that everything thought or done brings its own requital. Doers of evil do not continue in life unscathed by their deeds. Just as nothing in the world of affairs is ever bought for nothing, so in the moral world no act of mind or body is done without effect. Every departure from truth, every transgression of affection leaves its mark on the soul of the transgressor, who is perpetually separating from a Nature whose motion is always toward integrity and unity. Ultimately, in the eternal account, the only good or harm that befalls us, Emerson wrote, we do ourselves.[2]

Although he believed in retribution as a form of compensation, that those who did evil would find the results of their actions returning to them in some way, Emerson did not accept the

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[1]Emerson, "Compensation," in The Complete Works ..., Vol. I: Essays, First Series, pp. 56-77.

[2]Ibid., pp. 63-69.

notion that persons presently alive and suffering from handicaps of whatever kind were being punished for sins they had individually committed in previous incarnations. They were instead the victims of the collective operation of cause and effect in nature:

> The violations of the laws of nature by our predecessors and our contemporaries are punished in us also. The disease and deformity around us certify the infraction of natural, intellectual and moral laws . . . . plague, cholera, famine, indicate a certain ferocity in nature, which, as it had its inlet by human crime, must have its outlet by human suffering. Unhappily no man exists who has not in his own person become to some amount a stockholder in the sin, and so made himself liable to a share in the expiation.[1]

Emerson called himself an optimist, and his name has come to be synonymous with optimism, yet it is plain that in connection with him the term has to be carefully qualified. The system of things in the universe was for the best, he claimed, but at no time historically were conditions on earth the best.[2]

Evil, in Emerson's world of wholeness, was not absolute or a thing in itself but was privative, the absence of good, as cold is the absence of heat and darkness the absence of light. However, evil was not only the absence of good; it was the means of good, and could be turned into good. Physical suffering, by heightening mental activity, often led sufferers to important discoveries about themselves, he believed. Bereavement was just as often a

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[1]Emerson, "The Over-Soul," in The Complete Works ..., Vol. I: Essays, First Series, p. 249.

[2]Warren Staebler, Ralph Waldo Emerson (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1973), p. 127.

carrier of benefit to the bereaved.[1]

Emerson maintained that eventually, in all circumstances, good will come out of evil. In his poem, "Uriel," he used a bit of mythology of his own making to illustrate this belief. This poem tells of the fall of the archangel Uriel from his high state due to his bold philosophy of the good. The meaning of the fable is best understood when viewed in its relation to Emerson's Platonism. Emerson wrote:

> Thus a sublime confidence is fed at the bottom of the heart that, in spite of appearances, in spite of malignity and blind self-interest living for the moment, an eternal, beneficent necessity is always bringing things right; and though we should fold our arms -- which we cannot do, for our duty requires us to be the very hands of this guiding sentiment, and work in the present moment -- the evils we suffer will at least end themselves through the incessant opposition of Nature to everything hurtful.[2]

This is a doctrine which Emerson found in Platonism. "Evil according to old philosophers," he wrote, "is good in the making."[3] This is the doctrine that the archangel Uriel referred to when he expressed the sentiment that caused his downfall:

> Line in nature is not found;
> Unit and universe are round;
> In vain produced, all rays return;
> . . . .

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[1]Emerson, "Spiritual Laws," in Everyman's Library: Essays, First Series, p. 126.

[2]Emerson, "The Sovereignty of Ethics," in The Complete Works..., Vol. X, pp. 188-189.

[3]Emerson,"Swedenborg; or the Mystic," in The Complete Works..., Vol. IV: Representative Men, p. 38.

Evil will bless, and ice will burn.[1]

And though his voice was obscured in his fall, Uriel could still be heard near the end of the poem to say: "Out of the good of evil born," an expression that made the old gods shake with fear.

Thus, Emerson believed, although the universe is whole and good, we humans continue to push toward separation and division. And although we strive to be apart and separate, causing ourselves and others unavoidable compensatory pain, the universe still finally strives for and will achieve good. We seem to be caught up in a paradoxical world, and yet, from the mystical point of view, there is a way out. There is yet meaning to be found in our sufferings, Emerson wrote. The meaning is to be found in love.

Emerson's final response to suffering, love, arises from his idea of compensation, and is extremely similar to a traditionally mystical one offered by Aldous Huxley in his book _The Perennial Philosophy_. Suffering often results, Huxley wrote, in agreement with Emerson, from the drive of one human being to be separate from another, to be separate from the divine. Huxley further developed this theme. Every incident of suffering is both entirely private and extremely contagious, he wrote. No one of us is able to experience the suffering of another, and yet the craving for separateness which eventually leads to some unshareable suffering for the craver, also results, sooner or later,

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[1]Emerson, "Uriel," in _The Complete Works ..._, Vol. IX: _Poems_, pp. 13-14.

directly or indirectly, in equally private and unshareable suffering for others. Similarities with Emerson continue: "Suffering and moral evil have the same source--a craving for the intensification of the separateness which is the primary datum of all creatureliness."[1] If each of us were in a proper relationship with our divine, natural and social environments, there would only be as much suffering as Creation makes inevitable, concluded Huxley.[2]

Throughout his life, Emerson advocated a similar response. We are, he wrote, both called by God to love other people and find God in our love for other people. Through that love, we can begin to break the bonds that separate us and reverse our drive toward ever-increasing separateness. One month before Ellen's death, Emerson wondered in his journal:

> Is not the true principle of Charity the love of God? I am not to help my neighbor because he is importunate, nor because he wants; but because he is God's creature as I am, & I have received all, & only hold all I have as occasion of exercising affections.[3]

Even in these earlier years, before many of the important tragic events occurred in his life, Emerson recognized the relationship between love of God and love of other people. His reason for being, even at this time, was to "exercise affections."

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[1]Aldous Huxley, The Perennial Philosophy (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1945), p. 228.

[2]Ibid., p. 230.

[3]Emerson, Journals ..., Vol. III, pp. 222-223.

Soon after Ellen died, he reaffirmed his belief in love. In his sermon "Consolation for the Mourner," he preached: "the only true and enduring bond that can unite souls is the love of the same excellence, the love of truth and goodness--the love of God who is their source."[1] These thoughts gave him comfort at the death of his wife, and his ideas on love continued to develop.

These statements on love arise from Emerson's basic idea that there is a Unity which combines and includes all compensations. As his belief in immortality dissapated, and his belief in God as Unity, as Over-Soul, became more emphasized, Emerson's view of love also took on new dimensions. When we love, he later wrote, barriers and divisions between individuals break down and the lover and the loved move toward becoming part of the Whole, the divine. Emerson's most powerful statement of this philosophy is contained in his essay on "Compensation":

> In the nature of the soul is the compensation for the inequalities of condition. The radical tragedy of nature seems to be the distinction of More and Less. How can Less not feel the pain; how not feel indignation or malevolence toward More? . . . It seems a great injustice. But face the facts, and see them nearly, and these mountainous inequalities vanish. Love reduces them all, as the sun melts the iceberg in the sea. The heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of His and Mine ceases. His is mine. I am my brother, and my brother is me.[2]

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[1]Emerson, Young Emerson Speaks, pp. 143-144.

[2]Emerson, "Compensation," in The Complete Works ..., Vol. I: Essays, First Series, pp. 74-75.

From his personal pains and losses, Emerson had learned what it felt like to truly suffer. As he read, pondered, and experienced, his responses to suffering changed. His beliefs in the personal immortality of the soul and in the potential for human wholeness outside of and beyond nature (as symbolized by "the child") did not withstand the test of personal experience.

However, Emerson's faith in the unity of the universe, with compensation as a regulatory theme continued to be reinforced by events in his life. Emerson believed in the goodness of life, in the goodness of the Universe and in the power of love to break down barriers and alleviate suffering. Always a mystic, but a mystic with his heart turned to those around him, he announced: "Belief and love, -- a believing love will relieve us of a vast load of care. O my brothers, God exists."[1]

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[1]Emerson, "Spiritual Laws," in Everyman's Library: Essays, First and Second Series, p. 81.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUFFERING, MYSTICISM, AND EMERSON'S RESPONSE: A CONCLUSION

Throughout his life, Emerson suffered much pain and loss. He underwent long periods of ill health and mourned the deaths of several members of his family. From a discussion of his journal entries, essays, poems and letters written during and after these events, we have seen that this man strongly expressed a thoughtful, heartfelt response to the loss and pain that were a large part of his life. This response has, in summary, two dimensions which are deeply interwoven. First, he asserted that we are each part of a Unity, a Spirit, an Over-Soul which is ultimately good and whose existence we can intuitively know. This "deep remedial force that underlies all facts," will compensate us for our sufferings by opening possibilities for healing and growth.

Second, he argued that although the universe is whole and good, we humans continue to push toward separation and division. This drive for separation causes ourselves and others compensatory pain, as we forget our common participation in divinity and become unable to share with others. There is, however, a way out of this paradoxical chain of events, Emerson wrote. That way is love.

Emerson's final response to suffering, the response of love, arises from his transcendental idea of compensation and has strong similarities to responses offered by other mystics. As Emerson described it, love can contribute to an understanding of

the meaning that suffering may have in our modern lives. In this chapter, I will undertake an examination of Emerson's response in light of categories established within the first and second chapters and will then draw some conclusions about how this response might be employed by religious liberals.

First, Emerson's own experiences with the "phases of suffering," will be described, along with how those experiences led to the response found in his life and work. Emerson's response to suffering arose, as has been shown, from his own life experiences, from the pain and loss which he personally experienced. When he encountered that pain and loss, it will be argued, he passed through the three phases of suffering described by Dorothee Soelle. His response to suffering was an expression of his growth through these phases.

Next, Emerson's response will be examined to see how it answers the four terms of the liberal paradox of pastoral care. A Unitarian Universalist response to suffering has been inherently weak, Carl Wennerstrom claimed, because of the liberal paradox. This paradox presents a challenge to Emerson's response to suffering which will be reviewed to see how it meets this challenge.

Finally, from the discussion of Emerson and the liberal paradox will emerge the basic qualities of Emerson's response, its mystical yet Unitarian dimensions. Other mystical responses to suffering will be briefly analyzed in the final section of this chapter in order to clarify Emerson's response. The unique qualities of Emerson's thought, which may render it especially useful

for our lives, will thereby be indicated.

Dorothee Soelle described three "phases of suffering" which, she claimed, a sufferer must pass through in order to finally accept and begin to grow from his or her sufferings. After the deaths of both his wife and his son, Emerson can be observed to have passed through these phases. In both cases, he first spent some time feeling distraught and desolate, and then he began to speak and write of his experience. Finally, when he started to reach out, believing himself again able to take meaningful action in his world, observable significant changes occurred in his attitudes about God and about human relationships. These changes contributed to his response to suffering.

For example, when his wife, Ellen, died, Emerson was shocked and deeply saddened. He was in Soelle's first phase of suffering, which leaves one feeling numb and desolate. Emerson felt his grief so intensely that he wrote that he would like to also die.[1] However, in his sermons and letters, Emerson began to slowly speak about his grief. He thereby passed into Soelle's second phase of suffering in which one gives voice to one's grief, as he began to reach out to those around him (including his brother, Charles, and his aunt, Mary) who cared about him and supported him. Eventually, Emerson grew toward stage three of suffering: he began to make some decisive changes in his life. Within two years of Ellen's death, he left the ministry, travelled abroad, and began the formu-

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[1]His personal religious faith in the immortality of the soul gave him some consolation but that faith slowly changed.

lation of his most important ideas, including that of "compensation."

Emerson's passage after his wife's death through Soelle's three phases of suffering has some strong parallels with the traditional mystic journey from darkness to light. Traditionally, "the mystic way" leads away from the routine life of the senses by means of an "awakening" (or realization of personal inadequacy), through a "dark night of the soul" (or period of "purgation"), to a moment of mystical experience (or "illumination"), with its resultant conviction of "union with God," or "knowledge of ultimate reality." Although Emerson did not suffer an absolutely "dark night of the soul," after Ellen's death he did pass through a protracted period of personal suffering, combined with mental struggle and self-communion, reaching its "crisis" in 1832, when he retired to the White Mountains and decided to resign his ministry.[1] This period of "purgation" was followed by flashes of mystical insight, which he reported in his essays and his journals. He then used these insights as the foundation of his book, Nature, and of all his later thought.[2]

Emerson's passage through Soelle's phases of suffering was in some ways aided by his mystical insights and also led to the further development of those insights. As Emerson gave voice to

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[1]Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks, Ed. by William H. Gilman and J. E. Parsons, Vol. II (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), pp. 491-503. (This entry was recorded under the title of "Crisis," by Emerson.)

[2]Frederic Ives Carpenter, Emerson Handbook (New York: Hendricks House, Inc., p. 1953), p. 117.

his grief, his expression was that of one who found the meaning of his suffering within mystical experience, as his essay on "Compensation" testifies. And as he began to focus his thoughts on the question which has been phrased by Soelle, "How do I organize to conquer suffering?" he found his answer, human love, grounded in his mystical intuition of the divine.

Emerson underwent another "dark night of the soul," leading to eventual expression and growth, after the death of his son. As has been noted, Emerson sank into depression and despair after Waldo's death (Soelle's Phase One), but soon found himself able to express his grief in letters to family and friends (Phase Two). Emerson eventually found consolation and meaning for his suffering in his affirmation of the goodness of the Whole of the universe.[1] The powerlessness of his grief was in part assuaged by his choosing to affirm the ultimate good and beneficence of the universe, as he wrote in "Threnody" (Phase Three). Although with Waldo died Emerson's belief in the totally self-reliant human being (as represented by the symbol of "the child"), his eventual expression of Waldo's death made a new place for loss, grief and suffering within his thought. Again, as he earlier had in "Compensation," Emerson confirmed that the world is beneficent, but his passage through Phase Three of suffering was accompanied by a strong acceptance of our human limitations. Again, Emerson's intuitions of the divine led him to human relationships: within a few months

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[1]Emerson, <u>The Journals ...</u>, Vol. VIII, p. 179.

of Waldo's death he undertook the editorship of the Dial and thereby became the hub of a community of transcendentalist writers. Also, at the same time, he spent much time, energy and money supporting and encouraging his friend, Bronson Alcott and Alcott's farm community, Fruitlands. As seen by these interpersonal relationships, Emerson's response to his own grief included reaching out to others. "Love," again, was part of his response to his own grief.

Therefore, after both the death of his son and the death of his wife, Emerson moved through the three stages of grief presented by Soelle. In each case, Emerson looked inward for the intuitive meaning of his sufferings, but in each case found that that meaning once grounded in an intuition of the divine, could then be discovered in interpersonal relationships. It included an attitude toward other people and a way of acting toward them.

In each case, Emerson was able to engage and grow from his grief because he accepted it and gave voice to it. He did not avoid or sublimate his grief but instead, as had been earlier described, thought and wrote much about it. Therefore, in some respects, Emerson did not express the "liberal paradox." The religious liberal, Carl Wennerstrom believed, when encountering his or her own weaknesses or the weaknesses of others, often tries to change the situation from a distance. He or she tends to look for clear answers and a dramatic resolution, and favors, especially, a philanthropic sort of impersonalism as a way of effecting social

change.[1] Emerson did not, as far as I can ascertain, fall into any of these traps. A discussion of Emerson and the four factors of the liberal paradox makes this clear.

"Rationalism," the first of the factors of the liberal paradox, is an attitude toward suffering of which Emerson has sometimes been accused. Rationalism has been defined as the belief that mind, intellect, and the abilities to reason, plan, and inquire are felt to be God's gifts through which God's truth can be discovered. Rationalism to an extreme, however, tempts us toward a partial denial of and inattention to anything that cannot be explained away by solely rational thought and social action; we become so committed to DOING that we have trouble BEING. Emerson's earlier optimism and his faith in the power of creative individuals (especially as seen in his essay "Self Reliance"), may have contributed to the generally optimistic, rationalistic Unitarian view of humanity which has contributed to the "rationalism" of the modern liberal paradox. However, Emerson's faith in the individual's ability to mystically intuit truth was another dimension of his view of humanity which has been underemphasized by those who see only the "rational" aspects of his thought. Emerson's mysticism counterbalances, in a sense "compensates," his stress on rational thought. His mystical symbols create new possibilities for ways of being and open new avenues for imagination when dealing with questions of meaning and suffering.

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[1] James Luther Adams and Seward Hiltner, Eds., <u>Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches</u> (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), pp. 10-11.

Second, Emerson was a leading reformer of his day and "reformism," the second factor of the liberal paradox, is a quality of which one might assume that he would be accused. Emerson saw reform as one expression of his deep faith in the divinity of all persons; he believed in the goodness of life, in the goodness of the Universe and in the power of love to break down barriers and alleviate suffering. However, although he viewed social reform as one expression of this uniting love and was a leading reformer of his day, Emerson had no illusions about social change, and thus did not expect too much, too soon, from the social reform in which he was involved. Emerson did not fall into the trap of "reformism" because he believed that humans crave separateness as well as unity; we tend to do evil as well as good. As we reach out to others, we will begin to lessen the chasm that separates us, but that chasm for now is, he wrote, the natural compensation for our and others' violations of the laws of nature.

The third factor which helps to produce the liberal paradox of pastoral care and suffering is "dramatics." Wennerstrom wrote that we religious liberals tend to prefer the exciting, public, nonrepetitious method of approaching problems instead of pausing to consider the implications and meanings of our discoveries. Emerson was, at times, a dramatic person and spent much of his life on the lecture circuit. He was a public person, but also often reflected in his journals about the meaning of his life. His deep mystical belief in the Over-Soul, Spirit, and the possibilities for human unity with that Absolute gave his thought an

inward, reflective dimension. Emerson publicly preached about mourning two weeks after Ellen's death, but he also spent much time privately working out the meaning that his loss had for him. Emerson's response to grief, that we are compensated for our suffering by the love which we share with other people, is not a dramatic response, but instead calls for serious interpersonal commitment.

Finally, "distance" is that factor of the liberal paradox which Adams, when editing Wennerstrom, felt was most important. This factor appears, in other language, in Emerson's discussion of suffering where he, too, considers it to be both part of the cause of suffering and a hindrance to our eventual liberation from it. Wennerstrom believed that religious liberals prefer a safe distance between themselves and the actual sufferings of other people. That distance permits only a limited response, he wrote, and may lead to a lack of care for suffering persons and an actual perpetuation of their suffering.[1] Emerson would have agreed. In our striving to be apart and separate, he wrote, we cause ourselves and others suffering and pain. Emerson believed that love will break down injustice, inequality and other barriers between people. Therefore, by reaching out to others, we are compensated for the calamities which befall us, and discover new paths of growth which otherwise would not have been open to us. By transcending the "distance" between ourselves and other people, Emerson believed, we find meaning and compensation for our sufferings and also help alleviate the conditions which would allow new

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[1] Ibid., pp. 33-35.

sufferings to occur.[1]

Emerson therefore accepted the fourth factor of the liberal paradox as a reality and proposed an attitude of love which he believed would overcome the destruction which it wreaks. His vision of love was grounded as was all of his thought, in his mystical intuition of the Absolute; he shared with many other mystics, as will be demonstrated, the belief that a knowledge of the Absolute will lead to love.

Love, Underhill wrote, is the business and method of mysticism. Love is the active expression of the mystics' will, desire and natural tendency for the Absolute. "Love is a total dedication of the will; the deep-seated desire and tendency toward its Source."[2] However, that Love is not escapist. The mystic is not called by that Love to turn his or her back on the world and retreat into a private ecstasy of bliss. To do so, St. John of the Cross declared, is "spiritual gluttony," an act to be severely condemned.[3] Instead, any mystics, including Emerson, have often emphasized that mystical union with God brings with it an intense and burning love of God which will overflow into the world in the form of love for other people, in the form of deeds

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[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation," in Essays: First and Second Series in Everyman's Library, Ed. by Ernest Rhys, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1906)., pp. 74-76.

[2] Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961), p. 86.

[3] Walter T. Stace, The Teaching of the Mystics (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), p. 26.

of charity, mercy, and self-sacrifice.

William Stace agreed with Emerson on this. He wrote:

> In the mystical consciousness all distinctions disappear and therefore the distinction between "I" and "you" and "he" and "she". This is the mystical and metaphysical basis of love, namely the realization that my brother and I are one, and that therefore his sufferings are my sufferings and his happiness is my happiness. This reveals itself dimly in the psychological phenomena of sympathy and more positively in actual love.[1]

Therefore, Stace concurred, mystical experience leads not only to spiritual insight and knowledge, but also points the way outward, toward other people's sufferings. William James noted that this mystical love, once directed outward, can be a powerful phenomenon within a society. He wrote:

> The human charity which we find in all saints and the great excess of it which we find in some saints, (is) a genuinely creative social force. . . .[2]

Therefore, Emerson's response to suffering, a love for other people grounded in a mystical apprehension of the divine, is a response shared by several other mystics, including Stace, James, and St. John of the Cross. Emerson was participating in this tradition when he asked: "Is not the true principle of Charity the love of God?"

Emerson's "love of God," his vision of the Absolute, dif-

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[1] Ibid., p. 27

[2] William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 283.

fered, however, from that of some other mystics, including Stace, who believed that the deepest revelation of mystic truth is "introvertive" and can only be achieved by ridding oneself of consciousness of sensory things. Instead, Emerson's "extrovertive" vision of unity of all things occurred when he looked outward, into nature, within which he saw the Absolute. Nature was the only symbol which Emerson believed capable of mediating the presence of the sacred. By recognizing the sacred as announced to us by the symbol of Nature, we recognize our own and other peoples' divine natures, Emerson wrote. Thus, the intensely personal mystical experience which occurred for Emerson within nature led him to other people. Like that of other mystics, Emerson's conclusion was that love is the active expression of mystical experience but unlike many other mystics, Emerson's mystical experience which gave issuance to that expression was grounded in a perception which occurred within nature.

Emerson's response to suffering has several implications for a modern Unitarian Universalist response to suffering. First, Emerson's attitude was that of acceptance. He believed suffering to be an experience which can guide and teach, and therefore can be a positive experience. This attitude of acceptance is precarious, and yet it is always the first step out of the loneliness and misery of our suffering. "The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide or genius," he wrote, concluding that suffering in some ways is good, because it opens up new op-

portunities for growth.[1]

This mystical attitude of acceptance involves great dangers. "I say that next to God there is no nobler thing than suffering . . . . (and) God is always with a man in suffering," sermonized Eckhart.[2] This passion for suffering as a way of attaining union with God (Eckhart) or as a way of making new self discoveries (Emerson) can come very close to extreme and pathological masochism. However, Dorothee Soelle asserted, such masochism "has expressed itself more in ascetic than in mystical directions. The mystics' question remains how people can come to accept grief as joy."[3]

Second, and relatedly, Emerson believed that suffering, which occurs because of a lack of "good," also produces an opportunity to create "good." We can make important discoveries about ourselves and can reach out toward other people through a transcendence of our sufferings. The drive to convert suffering into positive values is also found in Christian mysticism, wrote Dupré, who noted that a purification through suffering often requires not the active love which is directed into the world as charity and mercy, but passivity, an acceptance and opening oneself up to the will of God, even if that will includes terrible pain. St. John of the Cross was one mystic who proscribed this

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[1]Emerson, "Compensation," in Essays: First & Second Series in Everyman's Library, p. 76.

[2]Dorothee Soelle, Suffering (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 96-97.

[3]Ibid., p. 95.

attitude toward suffering, although he described this passive purgation as "bitter and terrible to sense." St. John went farther than recommending simply accepting the pain which comes our way, however. He advocated, instead, that one "strive always to prefer, not that which is easiest, but that which is most difficult. . . .Not that which gives most pleasure, but rather that which gives least. . .," that the soul may, by imitating the hardships of Christ, become more Christlike.[1] This attitude begins to come close to the masochism against which Soelle warned.

Where, then, are the boundaries? What is the difference between, on the one hand, accepting one's sufferings and growing closer to God and other people through them and, on the other hand, actively seeking pain as a way of seeking growth? Underhill wrote that:

> the mystics have a profound conviction that Creation, Becoming, Transcendence, is a painful process at the best . . . . That law of the inner life, which sounds so fantastic and yet is so bitterly true -- 'No progress without pain' -- asserts itself.[2]

I believe that a response to pain which remains true to the Unitarian Universalist principles of "affirming, defending, and promoting the supreme worth and dignity of every human personality,"[3]

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[1]Louis Dupré, The Other Dimension (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 403.

[2]Underhill, Mysticism, p. 222.

[3]Unitarian Universalist Association, "Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Article II, Section C-2-2: Principles," 1980 Directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association (Boston: U. U. A., 1980), p. 259.

must be one which suggests how the human personality can maintain worth and dignity in the face of great suffering and yet does not advocate the promotion of suffering for any person. We cannot and must not suggest that the conscious creation of pain may be for our good. Such a suggestion creates victims and victimizers, not human community, not equality and not love.

Therefore, we do need to make a distinction, I believe, between the pain which we can and cannot end. Soelle makes such a distinction and warns that "there is no justification for letting innocent people endure . . . avoidable suffering."[1] Emerson's mystical perception of God will lead us, instead, to reach out to those in pain, and will encourage us to learn and change from our own sufferings. Soelle's description of the "mystic sufferer" fits Emerson very well:

> It is not the stoic hero who with folded arms makes himself small, waits and keeps his distance in a state of indestructibility; it is not he who shows the possibility for humanizing suffering. Rather it is the mystic sufferer who opens his hands for everything coming his way. He has given up faith in and hope for a God who reaches into the world from outside, but not hope for changing suffering and learning from suffering.[2]

There is much that can be learned from Emerson about suffering. In many situations of pain, our attitude is everything. When we claim our suffering and begin to speak of it, the very

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[1]Soelle, Suffering, p. 19.

[2]Ibid., p. 145.

language that we use is symbolic of nature which is, in turn, symbolic of that healing wholeness which supports and includes us all. When we begin to speak out and to act on our sufferings, reaching out in mystical faith for healing wholeness, we will certainly, quite surely, be led back to those whose lives and hearing will give our sufferings meaning. For, Emerson wrote: "Love is our highest word, and the synonym of God."[1]

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[1]Emerson, "Love," in _Essays: First and Second Series_ in _Everyman's Library_, p. 98.

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