

Self & Society

"A thought would destroy most persons whom we know. Bring a thought into a chamber full of company, it would extinguish most of them."
Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

By Carlton Cornett

Poet, essayist, orator, social activist, and stubborn individualist, Ralph Waldo Emerson is cherished by many as the quintessential American. His writings were part Romanticism and part transcendentalism (for those who make a stark differentiation of the two) and they were generally provocative. Emerson is often presented as the "patriotic" poet who wrote "Hymn: Sung at the Completion of the Concord Monument, April 19, 1836," containing the famous lines

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world.

However, he was much more than this. At age 26 he left the ministry after telling his congregation that he no longer believed in communion and would not offer it as a ritual in his church ("... this mode of commemorating Christ is not suitable to me"). He was a man who challenged institutions to change and people to think about and take responsibility for their lives. Emerson's name is often used now to represent a sort of shallow patriotism and even shallower sense of individuality - the sort that seems to say "Be an individual, but don't rock the boat!" Emerson was forever capsizing hypocrisy and superficiality. In the quote above, from a lecture he delivered on "Powers of Mind" toward the end of the 1850's, he challenges us to seriously consider the idea that we are a society of conformists; that we would be destroyed by an original thought that might cause the established order any distress. We follow, whether it makes sense to follow or not. In his concern about our unwillingness to look critically at what others consider "the truth," or "commonsense," we abrogate our most fundamental freedom (i.e. to be an individual guided by an internal moral compass) and most basic responsibility.

Emerson's fears about conformity presaged the rise of Hitler by about a century. Looking critically at what conditions fostered the rise of Hitler, psychoanalytic



social theorist Erich Fromm (1900-1980) found a couple of important elements. He presented these in his 1941 book, *Escape from Freedom*. Most importantly, he found that people, when frightened, readily give up the freedom (and responsibility) to consider problems and solutions for themselves. Instead, they seek a person or group who confidently propose simple solutions to the problems facing them. In Germany in the 1930s, the fear was of chaos in the streets created by warring political factions and impending economic catastrophe. Hitler touted the message that nationalism, rearmament, and eradication of the Jews would solve Germany's problems.

After September 11, 2001, America became frightened. Suddenly, George W. Bush had answers. What the United States needed was nationalism, conservative values, and eradication of terrorists. Hitler perfected what has been called "The Big Lie." George Bush has offered a series of smaller lies: Iraq harbored terrorists that took part in the 9/11 attack; well, Iraq may not harbor terrorists, but they have weapons of mass destruction that endanger us; well, they may not have harbored terrorists or have weapons of mass destruction, but Saddam Hussein is not a very nice man. Most recently, he has asserted that the situation in Iraq has stabilized, even as the casualties on all sides mount. Am I suggesting that George Bush's lies are on the same order as those of Adolf Hitler - certainly not. Am I suggesting that the same fundamental psychological process is at work in our society as that which created Nazism - absolutely.

Emerson followed the phrase above in his "Powers of Mind" lecture by stating "They are exposed as counterfeits and charlatans, as rats and mice, they who strutted, a moment ago, as the princes of this world." He truly understood the power of one mind, when it thinks critically and responds with courage.

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