

FOUNDING THE WILLIAM JAMES SOCIETY



Randall H. Albright
rhalbright423@gmail.com



It is great to be with you today. Twenty-five years ago, I suggested the creation of a William James Society in what was then called the James Family Listserv. To see how that suggestion initially worked and then was significantly strengthened, particularly by members of the philosophical educational community, is heartening. To paraphrase James, truth happens to an idea through the hard work of people who care about his life and legacy.

My own journey with James started in the mid-1990s when a friend of mine suggested that since I liked Ralph Waldo Emerson, I might be interested in how William James carried on his tradition of a kind of “can-do” public philosopher into the later 19th and early 20th century. I was not immediately convinced by *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which seemed such an advocate for the sick soul. “[T]here is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand”¹ as James suggested in the conclusion.

However, when I then looked through a copy of *Psychology: The Briefer Course*, I found his wit in titling a subsection of the “Perception” chapter on “Genius and Old Fogysm” to be helpful in understanding the importance of habit as well the ability to try new things every once in awhile—novelty, a term he often used, particularly in *Some Problems of Philosophy*—to break out of the merely rote and routine. I enjoyed it very much and could see some Emersonian-like can-do philosophy at work there. Reading further, I was particularly impressed with the “Stream of Consciousness” idea about the importance of transitions as well as places and found much else in the book to be an enjoyable read.

As I learned about his biography, I saw how James could not be the same kind of “can do” person that Emerson was on account of James’s own life and struggles, both with himself and his quite demanding father. I appreciated his sense of “evil” both around and inside of him.² His struggle with free will against determinism was not just theoretical. There was a very real threat of suicide when he was young, and pulling himself through that very rough time seemed to me heroic.

I started collecting books by James. It turned out that there was a revival of interest in him at the time. I bought Dover and University of Nebraska reprints of the original Longmans

publications. He could turn things upside down, like in what became known as the James-Lange theory of emotion, in ways that made me think. His anti-imperialism fleshed out a man who was not just interested in the academic side of his life. I appreciated the hedging in his pioneering use of the word “pragmatism” by saying that it was merely a new name for some old ways of thinking, and by invoking the spirit of John Stuart Mill, with whom I had some passing acquaintance and who James’s father met through an introductory letter from Emerson in England.³ The tender minded and tough minded seemed a rough equivalent to Emerson’s idealist and materialist categorizations in “The Transcendentalist” essay. Pluralism, open-endedness, tolerance for difference of opinion—all seemed and continue to seem to me to be noble goals.

Having a website that included a page for James was an interesting pastime. While not presenting myself as an academic, I did work on being knowledgeable about people like Emerson and James and became friendly with my often very intelligent visitors. I also became friendly with Frank Pajares, who taught in the education division of Emory University and ran the largest site on James at the time. I met Phil Oliver over the Internet during this time. I enjoyed reading about James’s style of writing in a book by Frederick Ruf called *The Creation of Chaos*, comparing *The Principles of Psychology* to a great American novel like *Moby Dick*, and talking about the *Principles* as a triumph of healthy mindedness while the *Varieties* was an advocate for the sick soul, which I had felt myself years before. Richard Poirier drew a genealogy of writing that traced from Emerson through James in *The Renewal of Literature*. The quantum physics-like ambiguity and importance of point of view portrayed by Michael Frayn in his 1998 *Copenhagen* play seemed to resonate with James’s ideas. While many of William’s thoughts seemed at the time to me to bring him into my own contemporary world, I also was fascinated by his biography and historical context as told by Ralph Barton Perry, R.W.B. Lewis, Alfred Habegger, and particularly Linda Simon.

This brings me back to my idea to form a society for William James, which came in 1999 to a reaction to some posts back and forth between Eugene Taylor and myself in the James Family Listserv. Eugene had a way of presenting himself as the last word

on William James, and indeed he had published a book in 1996, *William James on Consciousness Beyond the Margin*, with good recognition of Emerson's influence on James. Eugene also had a long list of blind peer reviewed works which he would often cite in his posts on the listserv. I had signed in and out of the listserv for a few years, disappointed to see that the only James who seemed worthy of discussion was William's brother, Henry. Eugene, however, often would comment on my posts. The turning point came when Eugene announced that William James's house on Irving Street in Cambridge was being sold to become condominiums. Around that time, I had made a query to Harvard about the William James lectures being held in alternate years between Emerson and William James Halls, to which I got a confused response from both the philosophy and psychology departments over the phone. Eugene said in the listserv that he did not think the people in Emerson Hall (home to philosophy) knew where William James Hall (home to psychology and sociology) was. I was also annoyed to see that the title for these "William James" lectures never had anything to do with William James. I then suggested forming a William James Society, which amazingly to me during that time of revival of pragmatism did not already exist.

I was encouraged to follow through with the idea of a Society by two people in the listserv who did occasionally talk about William with me: Jonathan Levin, who had recently published a book called *The Poetics of Transition* with significant coverage of James, and Jason Gary Horn, who had a recent book on James and Mark Twain, called *Crafting a Free Self*. Frank Pajares offered to join an advisory board, and it was with these three people that I published a few newsletters, which I called *Streams of William James*, and recruited scholars on James like Paul Croce, George Cotkin, and Richard Rorty. John Shook had done his doctorate with Peter Hare at the University of Buffalo in the philosophy department some years before. I met both John and Peter at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division conference that December of 1999, and each was encouraging. Through John I met Micah Hester and also briefly met John McDermott, who asked that all citations use the Harvard editions of James's work, a request which Peter later that same day said I could safely disregard. John McDermott was a real character. There were also people here in metropolitan Boston

who helped me. Roberta Sheehan, who was active in the Henry James Society, was friendly not only with John McDermott but Bay James, William's great granddaughter and literary executor, and Michael ("Micky") James, William's grandson, who lived in the Back Bay of Boston.

I expanded the Advisory Board to include John Shook and Micah to encourage its professionalization. Micah in particular was great at putting together a constitution and reaching further out to people while I worked with John to improve *Streams* with an editorial board and blind peer review for submissions. By 2000 John was at Oklahoma State University, which funded the printing and mailing of *Streams* for the rest of its life through 2004. I was thrilled that Micah got John McDermott and Linda Simon to serve as the first president and vice president of the Society. Meanwhile, I got John Snarey in the psychology department at Emory and Paul Croce in American Studies at Stetson to do guest editorships for *Streams* to celebrate the centenary of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 2002. James Medd, who joined the James Family Listserv in 1998, was one of our first members. He developed the first independent website for the Society. James Pawelski, whose early professional career included a stint at Albright College before moving onto UPenn, also served as guest editor in 2004.

Putting together and keeping *Streams* going in those early days was very enjoyable. An early contributor was the poet Mark Scott, who studied at Rutgers the same time Jonathan Levin was there. When I look back in the archives, I smile, having met people through the Internet from faraway places like Ramon del Castillo in Madrid and Renato Kinouchi in Brazil. We had a student essay contest, and one of the winners in 2001 is our recent secretary, Tadd Ruetenik.

There are some aspects of James that I think of almost daily. He had a preference for small things instead of large, which seems increasingly hard to deal with in this age of Amazon and mega-merged corporations.⁴ He fought for underdogs. What seems to me his preference for almost a kind of fragmentation and piecemeal experience that one sews together in potentially this way, potentially that way, still rings true. The difference between a *perception* and a *conception*—what the French would call *savoir* compared to *connaître*—is essential to remember. The map is not the territory.

James's place in contemporary colleges and universities is predominantly in philosophy and religion departments these days. There is a bit of psychology, at least as a footnote, and English and history departments sometimes give him a bit of time. However, for me I would also put James in an art department, not only because of his time studying with John LaFarge under William Morris Hunt, but because that is what I classify myself and often see him as: an artist. I am not the only one to see him that way.⁵ Among the beautiful tributes to him in Linda Simon's *William James Remembered* collection is Théodore Flournoy's "Artistic Temperament."⁶ "Artist" is also the term that James used with a capital "A" to describe Emerson in his centenary address.⁷ Interestingly, the James heirs that I knew were either artists or had a very artistic side to the way they presented themselves.

With professionalization of the Society came my own time to exit. I loved William James, but I am merely an artist with a BA in Semiotics from Brown in 1978. I owe a lot to people who truly made the hypothesis of an idea for a William James Society a live option, as we see it flourishing today. Eugene Taylor, Frank Pajares, Peter Hare, John McDermott, Richard Gale, Micky James, Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam, Richard Rorty, William Gavin, Robert Richardson, and others are no longer with us, but there is now a place for the spirit of William James to live. And, again in that spirit, I want to leave you with some funny words from the William James correspondence that have stuck with me through the years. As you may know, William had a complicated relationship with his father, who once wrote a book called *The Secret of Swedenborg*, which William Dean Howells noted, "and he kept it a secret." In another context, William had this to say about another Swedenborgian.

After dinner enter one of the Tafel translator & editor of Swedenborg, with the first volume and an immense encyclopedic work on the brain, based on a manuscript of Swedenborg's just out,—the most infernal Swedenburgling, Swedenburffling, Swedenbungling bore I ever met in my life, bringing the animal strength of the elephant, the insensibility of the rhinoceros, the learning of the German, & the intelligence of the jackass to converge upon the sole end of boring you. —

from a letter to his wife, December 19, 1882.⁸

Thank you once again for having me.

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NOTES

¹ James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 508.

² A letter to Shadworth Hollway Hodson from December 30, 1885, shows James's passionate belief that "life is evil." See *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 6, 99.

³ Young, Frederic Harold, *The Philosophy of Henry James, Sr.*, 5.

⁴ See his letter to Sarah Wyman Whitman in *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 8, 546, for an example of James talking about this.

⁵ Henry James talked of the importance of William's time with Hunt and LaFarge in *Notes of a Son and Brother*. Howard M. Feinstein's *Becoming William James* also has good information on James's relationship with Hunt and Lafarge.

⁶ Flourney, Théodore. "Artistic Temperament," in *William James Remembered*, 84-88.

⁷ See "Address at the Emerson Centenary," *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, 1120.

⁸ *The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 5, 338.