

Voices chapter 1

Emily doesn't know why, but she feels both highly expectant and curiously calm. She is about to meet one of the most important pastoral figures of the time. It is March of 1855, and she and her sister Vinnie are on the journey home to Amherst, Massachusetts from Washington, DC—where they have observed Father sitting in Congress. They plan to stop for a short visit in Philadelphia, where Emily's childhood friend, Eliza Coleman, has lived for several years. Often in her letters Eliza has mentioned the esteemed Charles Wadsworth.

He is an older man, married and much revered; the Colemans are his friends and parishioners. His reputation and his church have been steadily growing. The Sunday after the sisters arrive, Eliza brings them with her to hear him preach.

The Arch Street Presbyterian Church is a large brick structure much in the same style as Boston's Faneuil Hall—a building that Emily has seen on her two trips to Boston. It is nicely proportioned and has the added beauty of marble steps and a tall stone bell tower. The meeting hall inside the church holds several hundred people, and today they pack the pews—built of chestnut fitted with newly finished red velvet seat covers. The Colemans' is near the front of the church and to the left.

A door to the side of the pulpit is thrown open and a man strides into the room.

He is moderately tall and powerfully built, and beneath his robes his bearing is erect as a soldier's. Except on top, where he is balding, his hair is long, thick, and brown. His face carries an expression that Emily has never seen before—a dignity, a seriousness, almost a grimness, and yet an underlying humor that somehow marks him as a man of great intelligence. To this day the most majestic man Emily has ever seen is her father, Edward, but Charles Wadsworth is more weighty somehow, more a man to be reckoned with. He gives the impression of having seen most of what there is to see of the world, of having understood it in its essentials, and of knowing what to value and what to dismiss.

His voice is powerful and low-pitched, yet distinct and, at the same time, smooth and lovely. "Today's sermon is on self-knowledge," he says, "something with which we all can use some assistance."

Wadsworth opens with a quote from Corinthians. "Know ye not your own selves."

"This question," he begins, standing very straight and tall and looking entirely at ease, "is exceedingly impressive as addressed to the Corinthians. They prided themselves in the Greek philosophy, and the very wisest of the precepts of that philosophy was—'Know thyself.'"

"We do not know our own selves! A marvelous assertion, yet a true one. Physically, intellectually, morally, spiritually, most of men are to themselves profound strangers.

"Every man has his special intellectual gift, which often he does not discover till too late to develop and employ to profit."

Emily sits raptly, listening to his elegant discussion of the ways that men fool themselves. "Strange to say, few men understand rightly their own hypocrisies and disguises . . . The proud man looks after his covetousness—and the envious man looks after his dishonesty—and the

impure man looks after his insincerity—each carefully perceiving, perhaps honestly confessing, some evil thing about him, which yet is not the elementary evil of his character. And thus reading himself wrongly, he manages himself also wrongly. He is busy cutting down thistles, and brambles, and thorns, while the oaks and cedars of iniquity shoot deep their strong roots, and spread wide their mighty branches.”

As Emily sits in the far-off setting of Arch Street Church in Philadelphia, she understands something about the people of Amherst that has eluded her until now. Even basically good and decent people deceive themselves. They practice a kind of dishonesty of omission. It’s what her friend Susan Gilbert sometimes does—willfully refusing to see the consequences of her actions—the way she draws people in, then shuts them out with the steel door of her disdain. Here in this church, Emily is being told something that she always knew, but wasn’t aware that she knew.

She knows she must talk with this man.