

Ralph Waldo Emerson on Self-Reliance

Robert S. Griffin

www.robertsgriffin.com

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was an American essayist and lecturer who championed individualism and the value of subjective, inner truths—he referred to “the splendid labyrinth of one’s own perceptions”—in the face of society’s pressures on people to conform in both thought and deed. Emerson is a major figure in the history of American thought. His address to a Harvard audience in 1837, published with the title *The American Scholar*, has been called America’s “intellectual Declaration of Independence.”

One of Emerson’s major writings is the essay *Self-Reliance*, which he included in a book published in 1842. I had long known about *Self-Reliance*, but had I’d never read it. A couple of weeks ago, I decided *Self-Reliance* was something I wanted to check out. The essay’s topic had appeal for me because of its apparent relationship to a project central in my current efforts to strengthen myself personally. I’ve thought of what I’m trying to get done in this area as achieving greater self-sufficiency, but self-reliance sounded close enough what I’m about to warrant taking a look at what Emerson had to say on this topic. Beyond that specific interest, I was simply curious to read some Emerson. I knew something of Transcendentalism, an American form of philosophical idealism—Emerson was prominent in that movement—but I’d never read anything Emerson had written. So a couple of weeks ago I checked out a collection of Emerson’s writings that contained *Self-Reliance* from the library.

Reading through the essay, I resonated favorably with the basic thrust of the writing—taking stock of one’s inner reality and using it as a guide to living, breaking away from the herd, and charting one’s own path in life. However, my biggest response to the essay—and it’s what I’m writing about in this commentary—was surprise. *Self-Reliance* was famous at the time it was written, and it is still famous one hundred and seventy years after its publication, and it is taken very seriously by informed people, including scholars. Knowing all that, I expected to encounter something really fresh and profound in this writing, and that didn’t happen. I found *Self-Reliance* to be markedly less sophisticated, less nuanced, than I had expected it to be. It is simplistic, shallow, and, truth be told,

sophomoric. I came away from reading *Self-Reliance* with the sense that Emerson hadn't really pressed into this concern, that he had been satisfied with surface-level, and conceptually muddy, bromides. *Self-Reliance* is replete with easy dualisms--things are this-or-that, this-rather-than-that, this-is-better-than-that. That might be how reality looks if you don't rigorously scrutinize it. If you press hard into some matter, however, truth is often this *and* that; or this contingent on one set of affairs and that contingent on another state of affairs; or this and that in interactive and complementary relationship--that is to say, phenomena are in fact polarities, not dichotomous opposites. I was taken by the intellectual immaturity of what I encountered in *Self-Reliance*, and that left me trying to resolve the contradiction between what I was experiencing and what I take to be Emerson's enduring high reputation.

More, I picked up pretentiousness and self-satisfaction to the point of smugness in this writing. Emerson is one-up on the rest of us plebeians, that came across. I also got the message that if I bought him and what he was putting out, which included the price of admission to one of his lectures, I'd be up there up there with him at the top of the ladder. Well, I'd still be a rung below him, but I'd be looking down on the unwashed masses, that's the important thing.

How did/does Emerson get away with this act? I asked myself. A part of the answer to my question, I've decided, and perhaps the major part of it, is that Emerson was, and still is, telling people what they want to hear, and if you do that, people will never challenge your line of patter, and more, they put pictures of you on their walls. People aren't going to bring you up short because they like how they feel when they come into contact with you. Beneath the particulars of *Self-Reliance*--and nobody remembers particulars anyway--is a feel-good message: We (Emerson and, to just a bit lesser an extent, you) know what's up, while those other guys over there don't have a clue. We, which includes you, are fine just as we are. We don't have to expend much, if any, effort, take any big risks, or change what we do day to day, because being on the intellectual and moral high ground, as we are, is enough, talk is enough, being right is enough, being superior to *them* is enough.

Based on this essay at least, Emerson had a knack for making himself look superior, and for making his audience feel superior to

the point of sincere self-congratulation. The generalization I offer is that if you want to go over big—as a politician, teacher, show business personality, best-selling non-fiction writer, just about anything—this is a big part of your sell. My impression is that Emerson—who, after all, paid off his creditors with book royalties and the gate receipts from his lectures—had this part of the sell down pat.

With these remarks as a backdrop, I'll give over the remainder to this writing to my commentaries on excerpts of *Self-Reliance*. The excerpts are set in and in smaller type.

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius.

. . . A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light that flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of bards and sages.

I have found that there a wisdom of my being, to call it that, I can tap by quieting down and connecting with my immediate sense of being alive—the thoughts, images, and kinesthetic sensations that comprise me at each moment as I experience myself. But it would certainly be too big a big stretch for me to assume that those inner truths—or arguable conclusions, anyway—about the world and my existence are true for all men, or anything remotely akin to genius.

I bring what I consider to be a healthy skepticism to the process of introspection. I realize that the predominance of my private heart, to use Emerson's term, is the residue of what others and I have put inside me, and, frankly, a lot of that is not worth much. It's data for me to work with and, often, valuable in that regard, but it is far from the gospel truth. From my earliest days, both directly and indirectly, I have been inundated with teachings and admonitions from my parents, churches (even though I've had nothing to do with organized religion directly, its messages have gotten through to me), schools, the media (movies and television shows, including the zillion ballgames I've watched), popular magazines, newspapers, politicians, peers, and love interests, all of them letting me know what is going on and what went on in the past, what is good and important, what everything means, who I am and where I fit in the scheme of things, and what I ought to be doing with my time, including how I'm supposed to relate to them. And

too, over the course of my life, I've done this, that, and the other thing in various contexts. What I've retained from all of that is the "gleam of light" that flashes across my mind when I check myself out. For me to believe for a second that that gleam (misnomer) has "the luster of bards and sages" would be the height of self-delusion; and, I must say, I have spent a lot of my life self-deluded to a pretty good height.

To the extent that I have come to any useful insights and defensible conclusions, created anything, or achieved anything that remotely approximates wisdom and genius, it has come out of rigorous and long-term—years, decades--study of the world and myself, not navel gazing. Emerson thinks something great—God, no less—is inside me, and that I can contact Him/Her/It, whatever it is, and use what comes out of that to guide my life, or at least feel good about myself. Until the last decade, when I finally woke up and went to work to do something about it, the vast majority of what's been inside me has been crap that I've had to expel as part of a process of self- and world-discovery and taking charge of my life.

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him. . . . A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said and done otherwise shall give him no peace.

The whole point of externally imposed education—education broadly defined, from schools, politicians, interest groups, and the media--is to fit men to their yoke, and to ensure that they never arrive at the conviction that envy is ignorance, imitation is suicide, and so on, and in the vast majority of cases it works.

Indeed, I am most relieved and gay when I put my heart into my work (*my* work, not somebody else's), and yes, that is a way to peace—but I came to that realization, and that experience, sadly late in life, and I think many if not most people ever get to this point.

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society

of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated in their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort and advancing on Chaos and the Dark.

A clergyman in his early years, Emerson had faith—or said he had faith, anyway—in divine providence and destiny and aligning one's life with that. Emerson professes that God is imminent, within us, rather than transcendent, outside us, or above us. Nothing I have ever thought, felt, or done has brought me to share his (seeming) assuredness that there is something divine in here, or out there, anywhere. As far as I can tell, what I see, touch, taste, smell, hear, and discern is it; or it's enough of it, anyway, for me to get on with my life in an honest, productive, and gratifying way. Notions of God, the Almighty, and the divine, I've concluded, are words, concepts, abstractions, hopes, wishes—that is their only reality. They are important in that regard, because these fictions serve the ends of some people—like getting people to defer to clergy and give them money (“God is big, and I'm connected to God, so treat me as if I'm big, and on your way out, drop some money in the collection plate”), or garner book royalties, lecture fees and invitations to the right social gatherings for someone like Emerson. But as far as my life goes, the best take on things for me, I've decided, is that I'm here now and not some place else at some other time, I'm mortal, it going to end for me, and nothing is going to follow the life I'm living now, and my existential challenge, to call it that, is to figure out what to do between now and my end. That's not going to get me any lecture gigs or party invitations, but that is just the way it is going to have to be, and I'm OK with that.

In the last decade I've become adult-like and I'm proud of that; I was childlike for too long. An invalid, me, has gotten out of his wheel chair. I am a man now. Accomplishing this has taken (as well as developed) character: courage yes, but also commitment,

dedication, determination, and persistence. Courage alone hasn't been enough.

I'm not so presumptuous as to see myself as anyone's guide, redeemer, or benefactor. I but seek to live truthfully, self-expressively, and honorably to the extent possible given my capabilities and circumstances in the time I have left on this earth. Finally, late in life, I am doing that, and it feels good.

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves no realities and creators, but names and customs.

If manhood (which of course includes womanhood) is living autonomously and honorably, the generalization holds that societies want a lot of worker bees deferring to a few queen bees, not men and women. Hierarchy and top-down control is the essence of society, and that means all of them—democracy is no different from any other in this regard. Deference to the group, dependence on the collective, not self-reliance (which I define as living your life not the one somebody tells you to live), is the order of the day everywhere, and it should be obvious I see that as highly problematic.

But it isn't enough to decry conformity as Emerson does and leave it at that. Conformity must be understood at a deep level, and then strategies and techniques have to be identified and implemented in order to get around it. That is to say, we need a technology of personal authenticity and efficacy. If we don't have that, we'll live with the sense that something is off, but we don't quite know what it is, and whatever it is, we will stay stuck in the rut we're in, or better, have been put in.

It is important to remember that there are good reasons why people, including me, conform. It gets us what we need (or think we need) and want: like jobs, social approval, safety, sex, love, friends. As they used to say when I was in the army, and with good reason, to get along, go along. It is ultimately more rewarding to break away from the crowd and go down one's own path in life, but in the short run it can lead to problems. The challenge is to hang in there

through the problems. (Which may or may not pass. What makes life different from a movie you see in a theater is that the ends of your and my “movies” haven’t been shot yet. Our movies might have sad endings no matter what we do. In fact, we’ll never even know the very end of our movies: the lights will just go out, forever, and we won’t even know when it happens. Plugging on and doing the best we can in the face of that reality is the measure of you and me.)

While this may sound contradictory, I have found breaking out of the cage of conformity both very difficult to do and remarkably easy.

Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

Integrity of mind is good, but it isn’t enough. I can have integrity of mind—that is to say, I don’t give it over to anyone--without *excellence* of mind: keen understandings and insights; creative and innovative perceptions; sophisticated assessments and evaluations; valid goals and strategies (they get you where you ought to be going). Integrity of mind alone can result in an aimless, unproductive, and unhappy rebel without a cause. A developed mind is requisite to personally gratifying and socially constructive non-conformity, and that is the only kind of non-conformity worth having.

Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if every thing were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. 135

It matters greatly whether something squares with my constitution, as Emerson puts it, but at the same time I am not the sole determinant of what is right or wrong. Morality isn’t merely a

matter of what I think it is. People who commit genocide feel morally justified in doing so, but that doesn't make it right.

Everything isn't "titular and ephemeral" but me—how self-centered, presumptuous, solipsistic, and dangerous to the world—for me to assume that. I don't want to easily capitulate, but the same time I want to hear, and honor, others' conceptions of reality.

I don't assume that large societies are always bad or wrong.

Life's connectedness and continuity, as well as basic human nature, keeps any institution, no matter how dormant, from ever being completely dead.

Few and mean as my gifts may be, I actually am, and do not need for my own assurance or the assurance of my fellows any secondary testimony. What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. . . . It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he would in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

I have worked to inform and strengthen myself to the point that can forego the assurance of others and secondary testimony.

It was easy for me to live with the world's opinion, but it has been very hard not to live that way—though to the extent I have managed to live in my own opinion, as it were, it has been very gratifying.

To live my life rather than the one set out for me to live, I've had strengthen myself physically, get philosophically clear, enhance my intellectual capability and insight, become more purposeful and willful, and become much efficacious than before. Knowing and wishing don't make it so; it takes hard, diligent work.

Indeed, part of becoming self-reliant, in my sense of that word, it to learn to value your own company.

Do your work, and you shall be reinforced.

It has been important for me to realize I'll also be reinforced if I do somebody else's work. That is how others have controlled me: they have paid me off when I did what they wanted me to do. The challenge for me has been to figure out how that arrangement

works, and then to get myself to the point that I stop chasing after others' rewards. I've needed to learn what my work is (not the work others have assigned me) and to reinforce myself when I engaged that work—self-acknowledgement, self-praise—because, very often, since I wasn't giving people what they wanted, self-reinforcement was the only reinforcement I was going to get.

If I know your sect I anticipate your argument. . . . most men have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief, and attached themselves to some one of these communities of opinion. . . . Their every truth is not quite true.

Tell me someone's philosophy, worldview, and I'll predict his take on reality. For example, tell me someone's politics and I'll tell you what they are dead sure happened in the 2000 presidential election between Bush and Gore. I work in a university among people who ascribe to the presumptions of modern feminism, the diversity movement, and neo-Marxism. In every instance I can think of, and with all sincerity, they fit reality to those presumptions. I also have to remember that I am not immune to doing the same kind of thing, and that I am going to have to work hard in order to make sure I perceive reality accurately and not just see what my outlook tells me will be there.

For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. . . . the sour faces of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause, but are put on and off as the wind blows and the newspaper directs.

If I am going to be self-reliant, I am going to have to get self-important enough (I matter, what I do matters), clear enough, directed enough, and tough and resilient enough to face the whips of the world.

Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today.

The challenge is to avoid becoming dogmatic. Emerson is right: consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds. I need to know when it is time to change my outlook and direction. What I say and do,

including in this thought, reflects who I am and what I consider to be true at this point in time, and only that. Tomorrow I may be different, and what I think may be different, and if that is the case, I want to reflect that reality in the way I live, including in my expressions in this site and elsewhere.

To be great is to be misunderstood.

I'd like to think I can be both great and understood. (Truth be told, I don't think the word great is ever going to apply to me. I believe I have a shot at being forthright, decent, and persistent, though, and if I get anywhere near that I'll be happy.) Most people who are considered great are not misunderstood, at least their surface message isn't (knowingly or unknowingly, they may be up to something other than what they are getting across to their audience). The great tend to stay within the frames of reference of the people they play their lives to: that is a big reason they are thought of as great in the first place; people project their own self-admiration, or basic assumptions and values and aspirations, onto them. But too, greatness at times is not acknowledged in one's lifetime, or ever. If I am to be great (or better, worthy of a human being) on my terms, and that is what I'm shooting for, I'm going to have to become my own discerning and critical audience. I'm going to have to get to the place where I decide for myself what greatness (broadly defined in my case) is, and to what extent I am moving in its direction and fast enough.

I suppose no man can violate his nature. All the sallies of his will are rounded in the law of his being . . .

Human beings are malleable creatures, and they are prone to do just about anything that looks to them as the way to get their basic needs met (sustenance, safety, social approval and inclusion, sex). Deep down, selling out doesn't feel right, and we try to make that feeling and its associated thoughts go away with alcohol, food, a shiny new car, and/or a young mistress, but nevertheless even the most successful men, or at least nominally successful, violate their better natures all the time.

Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing. Act singly, and what you have already done singly will justify you now. Greatness appeals to the future. If I can be firm enough today to do right and scorn eyes, I must have done so much right before as to defend me now. Be how it will, do right now.

I don't count on anyone other than me knowing what the actions of mine I consider genuine are about.

My conformity explains a lot of things—that I am on the right side, no threat to anyone in power, and deserve a job and a lunch invitation.

Doing one honorable thing makes it easier to do another honorable thing. That is not to say, however, that doing the honorable thing is easy. Usually it isn't, because doing the honorable thing rubs up against what the world wants you to do, and the world does its best for making you pay for that digression.

Greatness appeals to the future . . . sometimes. Sometimes it appeals to the present, and sometimes it puts the past in perspective. Greatness takes many forms.

If I do something right today, that doesn't mean I did something right before today.

And yes: whether what you did yesterday was right or wrong, do the right thing now.

Honor is venerable to us because it is no ephemera. It is always ancient virtue.

To me, honor means doing whatever will make me proud of myself next week and next year and on my death bed.

Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say "I think," "I am," but quotes some saint or sage.

Some men are timid, and some men are forthright. Some men duck and slide, and some men say "I think" and "I am" and quote saints and sages in order to inspire and guide themselves as they act upon the world in the best ways they can imagine.

Man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he lives with nature in the present, above time.

I seek to live *in* time, not *above* time. I seek to live with a sense of continuity with the present, past, and future. The present makes sense largely because it is connected to what was and what will be.

We are like children who repeat by rote the sentences of granddames and tutors, and, as they grow older, of men of talents and character they chance to see—painfully recollecting the exact words they spoke. . . . If we live truly, we shall see truly. It is as easy for the strong man to be strong, as it is for the weak to be weak.

But why do we repeat by rote? We do it for a reason, such as a better grade or a good recommendation letter. If we are going to live truly, Emerson's word, we are going to have to understand the very good reasons why we don't live truly.

It is much easier to be weak than strong; that is one of the reasons there is so much more weakness than strength in the world. While strength builds on strength, never count on it being easy to be strong. Weakness is, relatively, a picnic: just put the right bumper sticker on your car.

To talk of self-reliance is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies because it works and is.

Because something is and works doesn't in itself argue for it. I can think of a lot of things that are that shouldn't be, and that work but achieve bad ends. The ideal of self-reliance provides a standard for assessing what is, as well as what it means for something to work.

Let us stun and astonish the intruding rubble of men and books and institutions by the simple declaration of the divine fact. Bid the invaders take the shoes from off their feet, for God is here within. Let our simplicity judge them, and our docility to our own law demonstrate the poverty of nature and fortune beside our native riches.

I am not looking to stun and astonish anybody, but rather to express my truth and live my life with dignity, integrity, and honor.

I have never been able to distinguish a divine fact from just a fact.

I pick up arrogance, pretention, in the idea that there are “invaders” that are lesser beings than I because God in me and not in them. And what is this “the poverty of nature and fortune beside our native riches”? Aren't we the cat's meow.

My focus is on living a life reflective of the complexity (not the simplicity) of things, and to do it with assertion (not docility).

All men have my blood and I all men's. Not for that will I adopt their petulance or folly, even to the extent of being ashamed of it. . . . all knock at once as they closet door and say—“Come out unto us.” But keep thy state; come not into their confusion. The power men possess to annoy me I give to them by weak curiosity. No man can come near me but through my act.

I do and don't have all men's blood. I am a separate being as well as connected to other men: those alive now and those in the past, and those yet to be born.

The power others have over me comes from more than my “weak curiosity.” It comes from that fact that, among other things, others can get me fired, and reject and shun me.

People can come near me without my acting. My challenge is to keep them from affecting me even as they get close.

Live no longer to the expectation of these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse. Say to them . . . I have lived with you after appearances hitherto. Henceforward I am the truth's. . . . I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you. If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. I will not hide my tastes or aversions. . . . If you are noble I will love you; if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical intensions. If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. I do this not selfishly but humbly and truly. It is alike your interest, and mine, and all men's, however long we have dwelt in lies, to live in truth. Does this sound harsh today? You will soon love what is

dictated by your nature as well as mine, and if we follow the truth it will bring us out safe at last.

The challenge for me has been to get myself to the point where I can live in accordance with this sentiment.

We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants, have an ambition all out of proportion to their practical force and do lean and beg day and night continually. Our housekeeping is mendicant, our arts, our occupations, our marriages, our religion we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us. We are parlor soldiers. We shun the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born.

My read of history leads me to conclude that it is always the case that only a few people rise above the herd and engage the “rugged battle of fate.” The issue for each of us is whether we are going to be among these exceptions.

We come to them that weep foolishly and sit down and cry for company, instead of imparting to them truth and health in electric shocks, putting them once more in communication with their own reason.

Don't commiserate with people: speak your truth (which may well be different from the truth—you could be wrong); be a living example of trying to live and die honestly and beautifully; and encourage people to get on their own cases and transform themselves into the best possible versions of the people they truly are. And through all that, recognize that what may be answer for one person may not be the answer for another, and that others may properly be going in different directions than the ones you are taking.

Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation, but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession. That which one can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. . . . Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare?

Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton? Every great man is unique.

Don't imitate for the sake of imitating, but do imitate the best.

Because every man is unique it doesn't follow that they don't need teachers. Shakespeare, Franklin, Washington, Bacon, and Newton needed teachers, and had teachers. You and I can profit from good teaching.

Society never advances. It recedes on one side as it gains on the other. . . . No greater men are now than ever were. . . . Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water in which it is composed does not.

Societies can and do recede—for example, the Roman Empire, and, I sadly hold, American society in our time.

That which a man is, does always by necessity acquire; and what a man acquires is living property, which does not wait upon the beck of rulers, or mobs, or revolutions, or fire, or storm, or bankruptcies, but perpetually renews itself wherever the man breathes. . . . It is only as man puts off all foreign support and stands alone that I see him to be strong and to prevail. . . . Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.

I've prepared myself to stand alone if I have to, but at the same time I greatly value the support of others. Invariably I have found that I haven't as alone as I at times thought I was, that if I looked around and sought them out and made myself available to them, supporters were out there.

Nothing can bring you peace but yourself? Nothing can bring you peace except the triumph of principles? Let's not take things to far. What about sunsets? What about great literature? What about your five-year-old daughter jumping into your arms and giving you a hug at the airport when you return from a business trip?

Source: Brooks Atkinson, editor, *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library) pp. 132-153.