

**Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Self-Reliance*. In *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. Edited by Joel Porte. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983, pages 257-282.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), with his essays, lectures, and poems, led the American Transcendentalist movement. Emerson's core themes were the individual, freedom, god, and nature. Emerson studied at Harvard Divinity School, worked as a pastor, but left as his opinions made the work intolerable. Emerson's young wife died of tuberculosis, which sorely grieved him. Emerson knew John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and Brigham Young. He was close friend and mentor to Henry David Thoreau. Emerson remarried, and received an inheritance (after a lawsuit with the estate) from the death of his first spouse. Emerson's Divinity School Address, in which he denied Jesus' divinity, won him widespread scorn and allegations of atheism. Emerson, in the same month his namesake son died of scarlet fever, became godfather to William James. Emerson became a reluctant abolitionist, but grew more assertive after hostilities of the Civil War erupted. When his house burned, friends' contributions rebuilt it. As his mind failed, Emerson withdrew from public lectures. He died of pneumonia. Emerson's thought influenced William James and Nietzsche and remains influential.

#### SELF-RELIANCE

Genius consists in believing your thoughts pertain to all men. So, speak. Genius resides in every man, but is often suppressed. Resist conformity. Laugh at yourself, but resist critics. We are stuck with ourselves; we neither are, nor can become, another. Conformity kills the soul. Create your best effort; that brings relief. Divinity made you and put you where you are for its own purpose. Children know this. They have not yet calculated the momentum of those different from themselves, how inexorable might opposing forces prove. Be childlike in your irascibility. Speak from your heart.

*CONFORMITY.* Society seeks to strangle every member with a noose of conformity. True men do not conform. What is sacred in the world is one's own view of matters. Right and wrong pertain only to one's own essence. Grief lies in surrender to institutions and trembling before paltry authorities. Every day, speak truth bluntly. No one is good unless his words draw some blood. Do not explain yourself; be yourself. Befriend your friends, not humanity. Forget sinning. Live as seems best to you. Others often think they know what is optimal. Live among others as though you were utterly alone. Join nothing. Do your work and by it be known. Conformers blind themselves, tell of themselves half-truths, and sport silly grins. Some will scowl at you for your insolence. Their breezy opinions seep from sermons and newspapers. Ignore them.

*CONSISTENCY.* Cease to castigate yourself for inconsistency. Past acts create expectations, which change disappoints. Do not fret over holding a steady line. Memory is a corpse. Do not drag it around, rather bury it. Speak today. Today has never before occurred. Small minds preserve consistency. Great souls care nothing for consistency. Reconcile yourself to this harsh fact: If you express yourself, many will misunderstand, and some will hate, you. Let your character breathe and live. Sailors tack their zig-zags to make progress against headwinds. Seize the future. Character cumulates from each day's integrity. Truth matters most. Confront. Rebuke, Hate mediocrity. Disrupt contented people. Make plain to all that wherever a true man works, all history is judged by him. Institutions long reverberate to the gong of their founder. All of history is stories of a few self-possessed people. Do what seems best to you. You may be also historic.

*THE ONE.* A human self, when grand, leans upon the divine Self. Divine Intuition created all. Every person luxuriates in the warm exhalations of vast Intelligence. It works through and in us. We serve as its conduits. Some disparage a true man's thoughts as mere perception. One's thoughts are real as rocks. All mankind will bruise itself upon such stones. No intermediaries stand between a man and god. Reject the old traditions. The old stifles the soul. To live in the present is to be joyous and potent. One who lives well knows well. When one sees god, his soul exceeds passions and knows all goes well in life and death. Souls become; they are never static. Life crowds out the past, and elbows former speakers (Jesus and Judas alike) out of

one's path. The One exists absolutely; we gain existence by conducting its virtue to the world. Such is real power. Let all men sense the divine in our presence.

*PERSONAL CHANGE.* Leave the mob. Go alone. Solitude is spiritual, not circumstantial. Stay focused; avoid confusions and trivialities. We permit others to distract us. Stop. Deviate as your soul dictates. Abandon whoever cannot permit you to be you. That will be best for all. The world brims with simpering whiners. It produces few great souls. So, reject laws and books and pedantic customs. Exercise your powers in splendor. History will grudgingly applaud.

*SOCIAL CHANGE.* Self-reliance transforms society. 1. In religion, self-reliant prayer abandons its wheedling. Farmers pray by weeding, the boatsman by rowing. Flee regrets and sympathy; these express dependency. Spit out creeds; these impair one's mind. Creeds are dead caricatures of great minds. Small minds thoughtlessly chew creeds as cows work cud. 2. Travel tempts fools. Most go because others have gone. The wise stay home; when they must go, they take their wisdom with them. Wherever one goes, his best self goes along. 3. Education and art are misdirected. They teach wandering and imitation. Look around. Learn what works here and now. Skip Egypt and Paris and Rome. Insist on your preferences. God made you for reasons; find those. There is only one you. Be a great self. 4. Society languishes, every advance marked by an equivalent retreat. Society changes, but fails to improve. Savages possess powers that pauper civilized men. Culture moves on; its particles, who are ourselves, stay in place and die. Property deludes us. When we become our best selves, we grow ashamed of our property. From property, we learn numbers, which leads us to democratic foolishness. Chance affects no true man. He disavows good fortune and bad. One finds peace in oneself. One triumphs when his principles rule him.