

Self-Reliance

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is an American essayist, poet, lecturer and the leader of Transcendentalism. He exposed modern readers to Asian and Middle-Eastern writings and culture. Unfortunately, many of his sources were colonisers and he projected their negative perspectives on India, China and Egypt. He met William Wordsworth and Thomas Carlyle and published *Nature* (1836) his first book on nature philosophy. He formed the New England Transcendentalist group with Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson became a literary celebrity with the publication of *Essays* (1841) which has the most popular essay "Over-Soul". His *Representative Men* (1850) is a biography on Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon and Goethe. *May Day* (1867) is his collection of poems.

"Self-Reliance" was first published in his collection *Essays* (1841). It highlights the principles of individualism, responsibility and nonconformity. "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" is the major theme of the essay. Emerson begins his essay with a Latin epigraph that translates to "do not seek for things outside yourself." He praises Moses, Plato and Milton because they spoke what they thought. They did not pretend. Learning to understand one's intuition is the highest achievement of a man. Modern education has failed in many aspects. Educated people do not know how to express their thoughts and ideas. Emerson warns that "God will not have his work made manifest by cowards." Only those who are courageous enough to understand their intuition and come forward with their ideas will be rewarded. And even after the expression of these, only those who sincerely work hard with focus are truly happy. Quoting sages and kings of the past is of no use when a man cannot speak his mind. "If we live truly, we shall see truly," confirms Emerson.

Great men of the past have accepted their fate, their place and their duties. These people have advanced over chaos and darkness. Children accept their places and are innocent. They do not conform to anybody. Yet everyone conforms to them. Conformity traps a man into his consciousness. He may have many ideas in solitude but when he enters the world, all his great ideas vanish. He conforms to the society and loses his individualism. Self-reliance is the aversion of fixed rules. It creates rules and principles. The most sacred thing in the world is the integrity of one's mind. Emerson says a man can follow even the Devil if that is what his intuition says. Good and evil are mere names tagged on by dying societies and useless institutions. These institutions are often the shadows of one man. For example, the Reformation was actually the principles of Martin Luther. Milton called Scipio's reign as "the height of Rome" because he was unique.

Emerson respects love, especially that of domestic love. He does not admire the philanthropist who travels the world offering his charity when his family starves at home. "Thy love afar is spite at home." Charity must be true and from the heart. Holding large parties and Relief Societies for popularity are not real charity. Emerson also says that a man must accept solitude and turn from his family if that is what his position commands. This solitude must be spiritual and not physical. Even amidst a huge crowd, the man must maintain his solitude or his unique qualities. He must not give in to mob attitudes and forget his principles. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." The world is often cold towards a man of principles. And for this, the man must identify his true friends and stick to them. He may be misunderstood by many. But all great people are misunderstood. Even then, a man must be true to his principles. He must not change himself to please others.

Character is the next thing Emerson comments on. It must be natural. Virtues and vices are natural. They need not conform to religion or educational institutions." The best character does not deceive in the name of appearances. Honour is the best virtue. Modern people worship honour and learn it in books about the ancients. But true honour can easily be followed with the following principles: i) never pretend ii) never apologise unnecessarily iii) being true to the cause and to the self. Trusting the self to do a work is real magnetism. Modern society has made people weak. People are afraid of failure, death and the truth. Young people who fail for the first time lose their hearts and never try again. Emerson has specifically pointed out the following for developing one's self-reliance:

1. True prayers - begging God and bribing with offerings are not true prayers. Praying hard and not working towards the goal is mere laziness. Prayer as a means for a secret desire is equal to theft. Good prayer is often followed by hard work. Emerson supports his view by quoting Fletcher's *Bonduca*: "His hidden meaning lies in our endeavours." False prayers also lead to regrets. Feelings, just like prayers, must be true. Weeping for company is the meanest. Offering true sympathy even if it is a short one is real.
2. True culture - many people travel far and wide to admire the culture of other countries. They do this with hopes of relaxing their mind. They fail to realise that they carry their troubles with them.
3. True self - Just like travelling, people are fascinated with foreign things. They imitate the cultures of other countries. They place replicas of Greek statues and construct their homes in the Gothic style. Emerson's advice is "Insist on yourself: never imitate." Let homes be adorned with native crafts and the owner's art.
4. True spirit - modern people have lost their health because of technology. The coach has weakened the legs, the insurance offices have increased deaths and machinery has killed the vigour of man. Native Americans and tribes are very healthy

compared to “educated” people. People are maddened by height and bulk and have failed to recognise true health.

The conclusion warns men against Fortune. Some gamble with her, gain and then lose everything. There is nothing noble in being proud over an inheritance. A self-reliant person creates his own estate. Cause and Effect will soon catch up with unlawful winnings. Self-reliance brings peace. Emerson’s last line is “Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.”