

## ***RALPH WALDO EMERSON***

**Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*. Dover Thrift ed. New York: Dover Publications, 1993.**

“[T]he Bostonian minister, magazine editor, diarist, essayist, lecturer, poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) has had an enormous influence on writers and thinkers at home and abroad. Much of his finest thought is distilled in his *Essays* (1841) and *Essays: Second Series* (1844), largely based on earlier lectures and journal entries. ...Emerson’s optimism (based on an apparently boundless self-confidence) was highly encouraging to the young American psyche, and he was truly prophetic in his call for a genuinely national literature, while simultaneously urging American intellectuals to join the mainstream of world—especially European—culture. As an eternal questioner in religion, epistemology and other areas of thought he was definitely a precursor of our skeptical era.”<sup>1</sup>

“Ne te quæsiveris extra.”<sup>2</sup>

“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.”<sup>3</sup>

“A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages.”<sup>4</sup>

“Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.”<sup>5</sup>

“The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature.”<sup>6</sup>

“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 not realities and creators, but names and customs.”<sup>7</sup>

“Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.<sup>8</sup> Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. I remember an answer which when quite young I was prompted to make to a valued adviser, who was wont to importune me with the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested,—‘But these impulses may be from below, not from above.’ I replied, ‘They do not *seem* to me to be such; but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.’<sup>9</sup> No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.<sup>10</sup> Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this;<sup>11</sup> the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it.”<sup>12</sup>

“Your goodness must have some edge to it,—else it is none.”<sup>13</sup>

“I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me.”<sup>14</sup>

“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.<sup>15</sup> This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness.<sup>16</sup> 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 who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.<sup>17</sup> The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is, that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character.<sup>18</sup> If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-society, vote with a great party either for the government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers, —under all these screens I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are. And, of course, so much force is withdrawn from your proper life. But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself.”<sup>19</sup>

“The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them. . . . A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.<sup>20</sup> With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day. ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’ Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.”<sup>21</sup>

“[A] true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the center of things.<sup>22</sup> Where he is, there is nature. He measures you, and all men, and all events.”<sup>23</sup>

“Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his design;<sup>24</sup>—and posterity seem to follow his steps as a train of clients. A man Caesar is born, and for ages after we have a Roman Empire. Christ is born, and millions of minds so grow and cleave to his genius,<sup>25</sup> that he is confounded with virtue and the possible of man. An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man; as, Monasticism, of the Hermit Antony; the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox; Methodism, of Wesley; Abolition, of Clarkson. Scipio, Milton called ‘the height of Rome’; and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons.”<sup>26</sup>

“If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old moldered nation in another country,<sup>27</sup> in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fullness and completion? Is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence, then, this worship of the past? The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul.”<sup>28</sup>

“Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose. . . . But 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 too lives with nature in the present, above time.”<sup>29</sup>

“When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way;<sup>30</sup> you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other;<sup>31</sup> you shall not see the face of man;<sup>32</sup> you shall not hear any name;<sup>33</sup>—the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new.<sup>34</sup> It shall exclude example and experience. . . . In the hour of vision, there is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy. The soul raised over passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well.<sup>35</sup> . . . Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim.<sup>36</sup> This one fact the world hates, that the soul becomes; for that for ever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to a shame, confounds the saint with the rogue, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside.”<sup>37</sup>

\*“Let us stun and astonish the intruding rabble of men and books and institutions, by a simple declaration of the divine fact. Bid the invaders take the shoes from off their feet, for God is here within.”<sup>38</sup>

“But your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation. At times the whole world seems to be in conspiracy to importune you with emphatic trifles. Friend, client, child, sickness, fear, want, charity, all knock at once at thy 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 them by a weak curiosity. No man can come near me but through my act.”<sup>39</sup>

“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. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should. I will not hide my tastes or aversions. I will so trust that what is deep is holy that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me, and the heart appoints.”<sup>40</sup>

\*“As men’s prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect.”<sup>41</sup>

“Traveling is a fool’s paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. I seek the Vatican, and the palaces. I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go.”<sup>42</sup>

“What a contrast between the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil, and a bill of exchange in his pocket, and the naked New Zealander, whose property is

a club, a spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under! But compare the health of the two men, and you shall see that the white man has lost his aboriginal strength. If the traveler tell us truly, strike the savage with a broad ax, and in a day or two the flesh shall unite and heal as if you struck the blow into soft pitch, and the same blow shall send the white to his grave.”<sup>43</sup>

“Phocion, Socrates, Anaxagoras, Diogenes, are great men, but they leave no class. He who is really of their class will not be called by their name, but will be his own man and, in his turn, the founder of a sect.”<sup>44</sup>

“Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.”<sup>45</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*.
- <sup>2</sup> “Do not seek for things outside yourself.” Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 19.
- <sup>3</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 19.
- <sup>4</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 19.
- <sup>5</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 20. Sounds like Shakespeare’s “To thine own self be true” in *Hamlet*.
- <sup>6</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 21.
- <sup>7</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 21.
- <sup>8</sup> Then nothing is sacred, for my mind lacks integrity.
- <sup>9</sup> Emerson would rather be true and evil than false and good. That’s understandable in a way. But in God’s world, the good, the true, and the beautiful always go together. **Jn 8:44** 44 You [Jewish leaders] are of your father *the devil*, and your desire is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.
- <sup>10</sup> Emerson obviously doesn’t view his nature as fallen.
- <sup>11</sup> In other words, ethics is relative.
- <sup>12</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 21-22. This sounds like Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*. This true autonomianism, or self-law. Emerson is a law unto himself. **Is 5:20** 20 Woe to those who call evil (*רע*) *good* (*טוב*) and *good* evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!
- <sup>13</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 22. Modern man loves to be “edgy,” to push things to the edge, to live dangerously.
- <sup>14</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 22. Jesus said something very similar. **Mt 10:37-39** 37 He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy [to be a disciple] of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy [to be a disciple] of me. 38 And he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. 39 He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for my sake will find it. Emerson leaves his family for his own genius. The disciple leaves his own family for Jesus.
- <sup>15</sup> **2 Co 8:21** 21 ...For we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man.
- <sup>16</sup> For Emerson, the chief virtue is to be great and the worst vice is to be mean. Yet Jesus humbled himself and went to the cross. **He 12:2** 2 ...Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.
- <sup>17</sup> This is true, provided the man is meditating on God’s word. **Ps 1:1-2** 1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers. 2 But his delight is in the law of Yahweh, and on his law he meditates day and night.
- <sup>18</sup> Tradition can sometimes obstruct the good, as God defines good. **Mt 15:3** 3 [Jesus] answered them, And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?
- <sup>19</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 23. One’s “work” shows his authentic personhood. There is some truth to this, as God has made us his image-bearers with a capacity for creativity.
- <sup>20</sup> It’s a good thing Jesus and Paul were consistent. **Php 4:9** 9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

<sup>21</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 24-25. In a sense, Emerson is right. The world misunderstands the gospel and those who live by and preach it. **Ac 26:24-25** 24 And as [Paul] was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind. 25 But Paul said, I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words.

<sup>22</sup> Instead of mankind as a whole being the measure of all things, now a single “I” is the measure of all things.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> **Ps 144:3-4** 3 Yahweh, what is man that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him? 4 Man is like a breath. His days are like a passing shadow. See *Verses on Brevity of Life*.

<sup>25</sup> Jesus is genius, yes. But he is much more than a genius. He is not to be compared with the other men in Emerson’s list.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 26. This is Carlyle’s “great man” theory, stated only a few years before in 1840. There is some truth to the theory.

<sup>27</sup> Israel?

<sup>28</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 28. Emerson subscribes to the myth of progress.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 28-29. Emerson sounds almost Buddhist here.

<sup>30</sup> **Jn 14:6** 6 Jesus said to him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

<sup>31</sup> **1 Co 11:1** 1 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

<sup>32</sup> **2 Co 3:18** 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

<sup>33</sup> **Php 2:9-10** 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth....

<sup>34</sup> **Ec 1:9** 9 What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. **Jer 6:16** 16 Thus says Yahweh: Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk in it.

<sup>35</sup> Sounds like Buddhism or Taoism.

<sup>36</sup> Sounds like Nietzsche’s “overman.”

<sup>37</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 29. Sounds like Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*. It is indeed a bold move to place Jesus and Judas on the same plane.

<sup>38</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 30. **Ex 3:5** 5 Then he said, Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.

<sup>39</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 30-31. This is a recipe for isolation and loneliness. What about community as seen in the Trinity? I’m glad Jesus didn’t have this mindset.

<sup>40</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 31. This is classic expressive individualism.

<sup>41</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 33. Christianity is a disease? Nietzsche would agree.

<sup>42</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 34-35. This is quite a good quote, if the giant is sin.

<sup>43</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 36. This is classic Rousseauian noble savage language.

<sup>44</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 36. If we all took Emerson’s advice, there would be currently 8 million sects in the world.

<sup>45</sup> Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 38. **Col 3:15** 15 And let the peace of Messiah rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. **2 Th 3:16** 16 Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all.