



# Self-Reliance

*by Ralph Waldo Emerson*

1 "Ne te quaesiveris extra."

"Man is his own star; and the soul that can  
Render an honest and a perfect man,  
Commands all light, all influence, all fate;  
5 Nothing to him falls early or too late.  
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,  
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."

*Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's Honest Man's Fortune*

10 Cast the bantling on the rocks,  
Suckle him with the she-wolf's teat;  
Wintered with the hawk and fox,  
Power and speed be hands and feet.

## *Self-Reliance*

15 I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not  
conventional. The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it  
may. The sentiment they instil is of more value than any thought they may contain. 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. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense;  
20 for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost,—— and our first thought is rendered back  
to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the  
highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and  
traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. A man should learn to detect  
and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the  
lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought,  
because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come  
25

1 back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson  
for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored  
inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a  
stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the  
time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

5 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 to till.  
The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which  
10 he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one  
fact, makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is  
not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it  
might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that  
divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good  
issues, so it be faithfully imparted, but God will not have his work made manifest by  
15 cowards. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his  
best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance  
which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no  
invention, no hope.

20 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. 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 at 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,  
25 obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark.

What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text, in the face and behaviour of children, babes,  
and even brutes! That divided and rebel mind, that distrust of a sentiment because our  
arithmetic has computed the strength and means opposed to our purpose, these have not.  
Their mind being whole, their eye is as yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces, we  
30 are disconcerted. Infancy conforms to nobody: all conform to it, so that one babe commonly  
makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it. So God has armed youth and  
puberty and manhood no less with its own piquancy and charm, and made it enviable and  
gracious and its claims not to be put by, if it will stand by itself. Do not think the youth has  
no force, because he cannot speak to you and me. Hark! in the next room his voice is  
sufficiently clear and emphatic. It seems he knows how to speak to his contemporaries.  
35 Bashful or bold, then, he will know how to make us seniors very unnecessary.

1 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. A boy is in the  
parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his  
corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the  
5 swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He  
cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent,  
genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you. But the man is, as it were,  
clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with éclat, he  
is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds, whose affections  
must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into  
10 his neutrality! Who can thus avoid all pledges, and having observed, observe again from the  
same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence, must always be formidable.  
He would utter opinions on all passing affairs, which being seen to be not private, but  
necessary, would sink like darts into the ear of men, and put them in fear.

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter  
into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its  
15 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.

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms  
20 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. 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  
25 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." No law can be sacred to me but that of my  
nature. 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 to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead  
30 institutions. Every decent and well-spoken individual affects and sways me more than is  
right. I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways. If malice and  
vanity wear the coat of philanthropy, shall that pass? If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful  
cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say  
to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that  
35 grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for  
black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.' Rough and graceless would

1 be such greeting, but truth is handsomer than the affectation of love. Your goodness must  
have some edge to it, — else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the  
counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pules and whines. I shun father and mother  
and wife and brother, when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post,  
5 *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in  
explanation. Expect me not to show cause why I seek or why I exclude company. Then,  
again, do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in  
good situations. Are they *my* poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the  
dollar, the dime, the cent, I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not  
belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for  
10 them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education  
at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand;  
alms to sots; and the thousandfold Relief Societies; — though I confess with shame I  
sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the  
manhood to withhold.

15 Virtues are, in the popular estimate, rather the exception than the rule. There is the man *and*  
his virtues. Men do what is called a good action, as some piece of courage or charity, much as  
they would pay a fine in expiation of daily non-appearance on parade. Their works are done  
as an apology or extenuation of their living in the world, — as invalids and the insane pay a  
high board. Their virtues are penances. I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for  
itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be  
genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady. I wish it to be sound and  
20 sweet, and not to need diet and bleeding. I ask primary evidence that you are a man, and  
refuse this appeal from the man to his actions. I know that for myself it makes no difference  
whether I do or forbear those actions which are reckoned excellent. I cannot consent to pay  
for a privilege where I have intrinsic right. 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.

25 What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally  
arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between  
greatness and meanness. 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  
30 the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

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. 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  
35 difficulty to detect the precise man you are. And, of course, so much force is withdrawn from

1 your proper life. But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall  
reinforce yourself. A man must consider what a blindman's-buff is this game of conformity.  
If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument. I hear a preacher announce for his text and  
topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that  
not possibly can he say a new and spontaneous word? Do I not know that, with all this  
5 ostentation of examining the grounds of the institution, he will do no such thing? Do I not  
know that he is pledged to himself not to look but at one side, — the permitted side, not as a  
man, but as a parish minister? He is a retained attorney, and these airs of the bench are the  
emptiest affectation. Well, most men have bound their eyes with one or another  
handkerchief, and attached themselves to some one of these communities of opinion. This  
conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all  
10 particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not  
the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us, and we know not where to begin to set  
them right. Meantime nature is not slow to equip us in the prison-uniform of the party to  
which we adhere. We come to wear one cut of face and figure, and acquire by degrees the  
gentlest asinine expression. There is a mortifying experience in particular, which does not fail  
to wreak itself also in the general history; I mean "the foolish face of praise," the forced smile  
15 which we put on in company where we do not feel at ease in answer to conversation which  
does not interest us. The muscles, not spontaneously moved, but moved by a low usurping  
wilfulness, grow tight about the outline of the face with the most disagreeable sensation.

For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must  
know how to estimate a sour face. The by-standers look askance on him in the public street  
20 or in the friend's parlour. If this aversation had its origin in contempt and resistance like his  
own, he might well go home with a sad countenance; but 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 a  
newspaper directs. Yet is the discontent of the multitude more formidable than that of the  
senate and the college. It is easy enough for a firm man who knows the world to brook the  
rage of the cultivated classes. Their rage is decorous and prudent, for they are timid as being  
25 very vulnerable themselves. But when to their feminine rage the indignation of the people is  
added, when the ignorant and the poor are aroused, when the unintelligent brute force that  
lies at the bottom of society is made to growl and mow, it needs the habit of magnanimity  
and religion to treat it godlike as a trifle of no concernment.

The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act  
30 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.

But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your  
memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose  
you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on  
35 your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment

1 into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day. In your metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity: yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and color. Leave your theory, as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee.

5 A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. 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 10 Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.

I suppose no man can violate his nature. All the sallies of his will are rounded in by the law of his being, as the inequalities of Andes and Himmaleh are insignificant in the curve of the sphere. Nor does it matter how you gauge and try him. A character is like an acrostic or 15 Alexandrian stanza; — read it forward, backward, or across, it still spells the same thing. In this pleasing, contrite wood-life which God allows me, let me record day by day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect, and, I cannot doubt, it will be found symmetrical, though I mean it not, and see it not. My book should smell of pines and resound with the hum of insects. The swallow over my window should interweave that thread or straw he carries in his bill into my web also. We pass for what we are. Character teaches above our 20 wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment.

There will be an agreement in whatever variety of actions, so they be each honest and natural in their hour. For of one will, the actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem. These varieties are lost sight of at a little distance, at a little height of thought. One tendency 25 unites them all. The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency. 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 to-day to do right, and scorn eyes, I must have done so much right before as to defend me now. Be it how it will, do right now. 30 Always scorn appearances, and you always may. The force of character is cumulative. All the foregone days of virtue work their health into this. What makes the majesty of the heroes of the senate and the field, which so fills the imagination? The consciousness of a train of great days and victories behind. They shed an united light on the advancing actor. He is attended as by a visible escort of angels. That is it which throws thunder into Chatham's voice, and dignity into Washington's port, and America into Adams's eye. Honor is venerable to us 35 because it is no ephemeris. It is always ancient virtue. We worship it to-day because it is not

1 of to-day. We love it and pay it homage, because it is not a trap for our love and homage, but  
is self-dependent, self-derived, and therefore of an old immaculate pedigree, even if shown in  
a young person.

5 I hope in these days we have heard the last of conformity and consistency. Let the words be  
gazetted and ridiculous henceforward. Instead of the gong for dinner, let us hear a whistle  
from the Spartan fife. Let us never bow and apologize more. A great man is coming to eat at  
my house. I do not wish to please him; I wish that he should wish to please me. I will stand  
here for humanity, and though I would make it kind, I would make it true. Let us affront  
and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times, and hurl in the  
10 face of custom, and trade, and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a  
great responsible Thinker and Actor working wherever a man works; that a true man belongs  
to no other time or place, but is the centre of things. Where he is, there is nature. He  
measures you, and all men, and all events. Ordinarily, every body in society reminds us of  
somewhat else, or of some other person. Character, reality, reminds you of nothing else; it  
takes place of the whole creation. The man must be so much, that he must make all  
15 circumstances indifferent. Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite  
spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his design; — 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, that he is  
confounded with virtue and the possible of man. An institution is the lengthened shadow of  
one man; as, Monachism, of the Hermit Antony; the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of  
20 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.

Let a man then know his worth, and keep things under his feet. Let him not peep or steal, or  
skulk up and down with the air of a charity-boy, a bastard, or an interloper, in the world  
25 which exists for him. But the man in the street, finding no worth in himself which  
corresponds to the force which built a tower or sculptured a marble god, feels poor when he  
looks on these. To him a palace, a statue, or a costly book have an alien and forbidding air,  
much like a gay equipage, and seem to say like that, 'Who are you, Sir?' Yet they all are his,  
suits for his notice, petitioners to his faculties that they will come out and take possession.  
The picture waits for my verdict: it is not to command me, but I am to settle its claims to  
30 praise. That popular fable of the sot who was picked up dead drunk in the street, carried to  
the duke's house, washed and dressed and laid in the duke's bed, and, on his waking, treated  
with all obsequious ceremony like the duke, and assured that he had been insane, owes its  
popularity to the fact, that it symbolizes so well the state of man, who is in the world a sort  
of sot, but now and then wakes up, exercises his reason, and finds himself a true prince.

35 Our reading is mendicant and sycophantic. In history, our imagination plays us false.  
Kingdom and lordship, power and estate, are a gaudier vocabulary than private John and

1 Edward in a small house and common day's work; but the things of life are the same to both;  
the sum total of both is the same. Why all this deference to Alfred, and Scanderbeg, and  
Gustavus? Suppose they were virtuous; did they wear out virtue? As great a stake depends on  
your private act to-day, as followed their public and renowned steps. When private men shall  
5 act with original views, the lustre will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of  
gentlemen.

The world has been instructed by its kings, who have so magnetized the eyes of nations. It  
has been taught by this colossal symbol the mutual reverence that is due from man to man.  
The joyful loyalty with which men have everywhere suffered the king, the noble, or the great  
10 proprietor to walk among them by a law of his own, make his own scale of men and things,  
and reverse theirs, pay for benefits not with money but with honor, and represent the law in  
his person, was the hieroglyphic by which they obscurely signified their consciousness of  
their own right and comeliness, the right of every man.

The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of  
15 self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may  
be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallax,  
without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure  
actions, if the least mark of independence appear? The inquiry leads us to that source, at  
once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We  
denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep  
20 force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For,  
the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse  
from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds  
obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. We first share the  
life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that  
we have shared their cause. Here is the fountain of action and of thought. Here are the lungs  
25 of that inspiration which giveth man wisdom, and which cannot be denied without impiety  
and atheism. We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth  
and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of  
ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry  
into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can  
affirm. Every man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary  
30 perceptions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due. He may err  
in the expression of them, but he knows that these things are so, like day and night, not to be  
disputed. My wilful actions and acquisitions are but roving; — the idlest reverie, the faintest  
native emotion, command my curiosity and respect. Thoughtless people contradict as readily  
the statement of perceptions as of opinions, or rather much more readily; for, they do not  
distinguish between perception and notion. They fancy that I choose to see this or that  
35 thing. But perception is not whimsical, but fatal. If I see a trait, my children will see it after



1 me, and in course of time, all mankind, — although it may chance that no one has seen it before me. For my perception of it is as much a fact as the sun.

5 The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure, that it is profane to seek to interpose helps. It must be that when God speaketh he should communicate, not one thing, but all things; should fill the world with his voice; should scatter forth light, nature, time, souls, from the centre of the present thought; and new date and new create the whole. Whenever a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom, old things pass away, — means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour. All things are made sacred by relation to it, — one as much as another. All things are dissolved to their centre by their cause, and, in the universal miracle, petty and particular miracles disappear. 10 If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fulness 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. Time and space are but physiological colors which the eye makes, but the soul is light; where it is, is day; where it was, is night; and history is an impertinence and an injury, if it be any thing more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming. 15

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. These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less. Its nature is satisfied, and it satisfies nature, in all moments alike. 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 25 until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.

This should be plain enough. Yet see what strong intellects dare not yet hear God himself, unless he speak the phraseology of I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul. We shall not always set so great a price on a few texts, on a few lives. We are like children who repeat 30 by rote the sentences of grandames and tutors, and, as they grow older, of the men of talents and character they chance to see, — painfully recollecting the exact words they spoke; afterwards, when they come into the point of view which those had who uttered these sayings, they understand them, and are willing to let the words go; for, at any time, they can use words as good when occasion comes. 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. When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish. When a man 35

1 lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the  
corn.

5 And now at last the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for  
all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition. That thought, by what I can now  
nearest approach to say it, is this. When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is  
not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other; you  
shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name;— the way, the thought, the  
good, shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience. You take the  
way from man, not to man. All persons that ever existed are its forgotten ministers. Fear and  
hope are alike beneath it. There is somewhat low even in hope. In the hour of vision, there is  
10 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. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the  
South Sea, — long intervals of time, years, centuries, — are of no account. This which I  
think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my  
15 present, and what is called life, and what is called death.

Life only avails, not the having lived. 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. 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. Why, then, do we prate of self-reliance?  
20 Inasmuch as the soul is present, there will be power not confident but agent. To talk of  
reliance is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies, because it works  
and is. Who has more obedience than I masters me, though he should not raise his finger.  
Round him I must revolve by the gravitation of spirits. We fancy it rhetoric, when we speak  
of eminent virtue. We do not yet see that virtue is Height, and that a man or a company of  
men, plastic and permeable to principles, by the law of nature must overpower and ride all  
25 cities, nations, kings, rich men, poets, who are not.

This is the ultimate fact which we so quickly reach on this, as on every topic, the resolution  
of all into the ever-blessed ONE. Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it  
constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms. All  
30 things real are so by so much virtue as they contain. Commerce, husbandry, hunting,  
whaling, war, eloquence, personal weight, are somewhat, and engage my respect as examples  
of its presence and impure action. I see the same law working in nature for conservation and  
growth. Power is in nature the essential measure of right. Nature suffers nothing to remain in  
her kingdoms which cannot help itself. The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and  
orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every  
35 animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul.

1 Thus all concentrates: let us not rove; let us sit at home with the cause. 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. Let  
our simplicity judge them, and our docility to our own law demonstrate the poverty of  
5 nature and fortune beside our native riches.

But now we are a mob. Man does not stand in awe of man, nor is his genius admonished to  
stay at home, to put itself in communication with the internal ocean, but it goes abroad to  
beg a cup of water of the urns of other men. We must go alone. I like the silent church  
before the service begins, better than any preaching. How far off, how cool, how chaste the  
10 persons look, begirt each one with a precinct or sanctuary! So let us always sit. Why should  
we assume the faults of our friend, or wife, or father, or child, because they sit around our  
hearth, or are said to have the same blood? All men have my blood, and I have all men's. Not  
for that will I adopt their petulance or folly, even to the extent of being ashamed of it. But  
your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation. At times the  
15 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. "What we love that we have, but by desire we bereave ourselves of the love."

If we cannot at once rise to the sanctities of obedience and faith, let us at least resist our  
20 temptations; let us enter into the state of war, and wake Thor and Woden, courage and  
constancy, in our Saxon breasts. This is to be done in our smooth times by speaking the  
truth. Check this lying hospitality and lying affection. Live no longer to the expectation of  
these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse. Say to them, O father, O  
mother, O wife, O brother, O friend, I have lived with you after appearances hitherto.  
Henceforward I am the truth's. Be it known unto you that henceforward I obey no law less  
25 than the eternal law. I will have no covenants but proximities. I shall endeavour to nourish  
my parents, to support my family, to be the chaste husband of one wife, — but these  
relations I must fill after a new and unprecedented way. I appeal from your customs. I must  
be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or 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  
30 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. If you are noble,  
I will love you; if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions. 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 to-day?  
You will soon love what is dictated by your nature as well as mine, and, if we follow the  
35 truth, it will bring us out safe at last. — But so you may give these friends pain. Yes, but I  
cannot sell my liberty and my power, to save their sensibility. Besides, all persons have their

1 moments of reason, when they look out into the region of absolute truth; then will they justify me, and do the same thing.

5 The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes. But the law of consciousness abides. There are two confessionals, in one or the other of which we must be shriven. You may fulfil your round of duties by clearing yourself in the *direct*, or in the *reflex* way. Consider whether you have satisfied your relations to father, mother, cousin, neighbour, town, cat, and dog; whether any of these can upbraid you. But I may also neglect this reflex standard, and absolve me to myself. I have my own stern claims and perfect circle. It denies the name of duty to many offices that are called duties. But if I can discharge its debts, it enables me to dispense with the popular code. If any one imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandment one day.

15 And truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster. High be his heart, faithful his will, clear his sight, that he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law, to himself, that a simple purpose may be to him as strong as iron necessity is to others!

20 If any man consider the present aspects of what is called by distinction *society*, he will see the need of these ethics. The sinew and heart of man seem to be drawn out, and we are become timorous, desponding whimperers. We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other. Our age yields no great and perfect persons. 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 out of all 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 parlour soldiers. We shun the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born.

25 If our young men miscarry in their first enterprises, they lose all heart. If the young merchant fails, men say he is *ruined*. If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges, and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, it seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened, and in complaining the rest of his life. A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who *teams it, farms it, peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. He walks abreast with his days, and feels no shame in not 'studying a profession,' for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a hundred chances. Let a Stoic open the resources of man, and tell men they are not leaning willows, but can and must detach themselves; that

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1 born to shed healing to the nations, that he should be ashamed of our compassion, and that  
the moment he acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idolatries, and customs out of  
the window, we pity him no more, but thank and revere him, — and that teacher shall  
restore the life of man to splendor, and make his name dear to all history.

5 It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and  
relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living;  
their association; in their property; in their speculative views.

1. In what prayers do men allow themselves! That which they call a holy office is not so  
much as brave and manly. Prayer looks abroad and asks for some foreign addition to come  
10 through some foreign virtue, and loses itself in endless mazes of natural and supernatural,  
and mediatorial and miraculous. Prayer that craves a particular commodity, — any thing less  
than all good, — is vicious. Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest  
point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God  
pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and  
theft. It supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness. As soon as the man is  
15 at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action. The prayer of the  
farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his  
oar, are true prayers heard throughout nature, though for cheap ends. Caratach, in Fletcher's  
Bonduca, when admonished to inquire the mind of the god Audate, replies, —

20 "His hidden meaning lies in our endeavours;  
Our valors are our best gods."

Another sort of false prayers are our regrets. Discontent is the want of self-reliance: it is  
infirmity of will. Regret calamities, if you can thereby help the sufferer; if not, attend your  
own work, and already the evil begins to be repaired. Our sympathy is just as base. We come  
25 to them who weep foolishly, and sit down and cry for company, instead of imparting to  
them truth and health in rough electric shocks, putting them once more in communication  
with their own reason. The secret of fortune is joy in our hands. Welcome evermore to gods  
and men is the self-helping man. For him all doors are flung wide: him all tongues greet, all  
honors crown, all eyes follow with desire. Our love goes out to him and embraces him,  
because he did not need it. We solicitously and apologetically caress and celebrate him,  
30 because he held on his way and scorned our disapprobation. The gods love him because men  
hated him. "To the persevering mortal," said Zoroaster, "the blessed Immortals are swift."

As men's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect. They  
say with those foolish Israelites, 'Let not God speak to us, lest we die. Speak thou, speak any  
man with us, and we will obey.' Everywhere I am hindered of meeting God in my brother,  
35 because he has shut his own temple doors, and recites fables merely of his brother's, or his  
brother's brother's God. Every new mind is a new classification. If it prove a mind of

1 uncommon activity and power, a Locke, a Lavoisier, a Hutton, a Bentham, a Fourier, it  
imposes its classification on other men, and lo! a new system. In proportion to the depth of  
the thought, and so to the number of the objects it touches and brings within reach of the  
pupil, is his complacency. But chiefly is this apparent in creeds and churches, which are also  
5 classifications of some powerful mind acting on the elemental thought of duty, and man's  
relation to the Highest. Such is Calvinism, Quakerism, Swedenborgism. The pupil takes the  
same delight in subordinating every thing to the new terminology, as a girl who has just  
learned botany in seeing a new earth and new seasons thereby. It will happen for a time, that  
the pupil will find his intellectual power has grown by the study of his master's mind. But in  
all unbalanced minds, the classification is idolized, passes for the end, and not for a speedily  
10 exhaustible means, so that the walls of the system blend to their eye in the remote horizon  
with the walls of the universe; the luminaries of heaven seem to them hung on the arch their  
master built. They cannot imagine how you aliens have any right to see, — how you can see;  
'It must be somehow that you stole the light from us.' They do not yet perceive, that light,  
unsystematic, indomitable, will break into any cabin, even into theirs. Let them chirp awhile  
and call it their own. If they are honest and do well, presently their neat new pinfold will be  
15 too strait and low, will crack, will lean, will rot and vanish, and the immortal light, all young  
and joyful, million-orbed, million-colored, will beam over the universe as on the first  
morning.

2. It is for want of self-culture that the superstition of Travelling, whose idols are Italy,  
England, Egypt, retains its fascination for all educated Americans. They who made England,  
Italy, or Greece venerable in the imagination did so by sticking fast where they were, like an  
20 axis of the earth. In many hours, we feel that duty is our place. The soul is no traveller; the  
wise man stays at home, and when his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from  
his house, or into foreign lands, he is at home still, and shall make men sensible by the  
expression of his countenance, that he goes the missionary of wisdom and virtue, and visits  
cities and men like a sovereign, and not like an interloper or a valet.

25 I have no churlish objection to the circumnavigation of the globe, for the purposes of art, of  
study, and benevolence, so that the man is first domesticated, or does not go abroad with the  
hope of finding somewhat greater than he knows. He who travels to be amused, or to get  
somewhat which he does not carry, travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth  
among old things. In Thebes, in Palmyra, his will and mind have become old and  
30 dilapidated as they. He carries ruins to ruins.

Travelling 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  
35 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.

1 3. But the rage of travelling is a symptom of a deeper unsoundness affecting the whole  
intellectual action. The intellect is vagabond, and our system of education fosters restlessness.  
Our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home. We imitate; and what is  
imitation but the travelling of the mind? Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves  
5 are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow  
the Past and the Distant. The soul created the arts wherever they have flourished. It was in  
his own mind that the artist sought his model. It was an application of his own thought to  
the thing to be done and the conditions to be observed. And why need we copy the Doric or  
the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought, and quaint expression are as  
near to us as to any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise  
10 thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of  
the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these  
will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.

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  
15 only an extemporaneous, half possession. That which each can do best, none but his Maker  
can teach him. No man yet knows what it is, nor can, till that person has exhibited it. Where  
is the master who could have taught Shakspeare? Where is the master who could have  
instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton? Every great man is a unique. The  
Scipionism of Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow. Shakspeare will never be  
made by the study of Shakspeare. Do that which is assigned you, and you cannot hope too  
20 much or dare too much. There is at this moment for you an utterance brave and grand as  
that of the colossal chisel of Phidias, or trowel of the Egyptians, or the pen of Moses, or  
Dante, but different from all these. Not possibly will the soul all rich, all eloquent, with  
thousand-cloven tongue, deign to repeat itself; but if you can hear what these patriarchs say,  
surely you can reply to them in the same pitch of voice; for the ear and the tongue are two  
organs of one nature. Abide in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and  
25 thou shalt reproduce the Foreworld again.

4. As our Religion, our Education, our Art look abroad, so does our spirit of society. All men  
plume themselves on the improvement of society, and no man improves.

Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. It undergoes  
30 continual changes; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is christianized, it is rich, it is scientific;  
but this change is not amelioration. For every thing that is given, something is taken. Society  
acquires new arts, and loses old instincts. 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  
35 that the white man has lost his aboriginal strength. If the traveller tell us truly, strike the

1 savage with a broad axe, 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.

5 The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on  
crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of  
the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so being sure  
of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky.  
The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright  
calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His note-books impair his memory; his  
libraries overload his wit; the insurance-office increases the number of accidents; and it may  
10 be a question whether machinery does not encumber; whether we have not lost by  
refinement some energy, by a Christianity entrenched in establishments and forms, some  
vigor of wild virtue. For every Stoic was a Stoic; but in Christendom where is the Christian?

15 There is no more deviation in the moral standard than in the standard of height or bulk. No  
greater men are now than ever were. A singular equality may be observed between the great  
men of the first and of the last ages; nor can all the science, art, religion, and philosophy of  
the nineteenth century avail to educate greater men than Plutarch's heroes, three or four and  
twenty centuries ago. Not in time is the race progressive. 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. The  
arts and inventions of each period are only its costume, and do not invigorate men. The  
20 harm of the improved machinery may compensate its good. Hudson and Behring  
accomplished so much in their fishing-boats, as to astonish Parry and Franklin, whose  
equipment exhausted the resources of science and art. Galileo, with an opera-glass,  
discovered a more splendid series of celestial phenomena than any one since. Columbus  
found the New World in an undecked boat. It is curious to see the periodical disuse and  
perishing of means and machinery, which were introduced with loud laudation a few years or  
centuries before. The great genius returns to essential man. We reckoned the improvements  
25 of the art of war among the triumphs of science, and yet Napoleon conquered Europe by the  
bivouac, which consisted of falling back on naked valor, and disencumbering it of all aids.  
The Emperor held it impossible to make a perfect army, says Las Casas, "without abolishing  
our arms, magazines, commissaries, and carriages, until, in imitation of the Roman custom,  
the soldier should receive his supply of corn, grind it in his hand-mill, and bake his bread  
30 himself."

Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed does not.  
The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal.  
The persons who make up a nation to-day, next year die, and their experience with them.

35 And so the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is  
the want of self-reliance. Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long, that



1 they have come to esteem the religious, learned, and civil institutions as guards of property,  
and they deprecate assaults on these, because they feel them to be assaults on property. They  
measure their esteem of each other by what each has, and not by what each is. But a  
cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property, out of new respect for his nature.  
5 Especially he hates what he has, if he see that it is accidental, — came to him by inheritance,  
or gift, or crime; then he feels that it is not having; it does not belong to him, has no root in  
him, and merely lies there, because no revolution or no robber takes it away. But that which  
a man is does always by necessity acquire, and what the man acquires is living property,  
which does not wait the beck of rulers, or mobs, or revolutions, or fire, or storm, or  
bankruptcies, but perpetually renews itself wherever the man breathes. "Thy lot or portion of  
10 life," said the Caliph Ali, "is seeking after thee; therefore be at rest from seeking after it." Our  
dependence on these foreign goods leads us to our slavish respect for numbers. The political  
parties meet in numerous conventions; the greater the concourse, and with each new uproar  
of announcement, The delegation from Essex! The Democrats from New Hampshire! The  
Whigs of Maine! the young patriot feels himself stronger than before by a new thousand of  
eyes and arms. In like manner the reformers summon conventions, and vote and resolve in  
15 multitude. Not so, O friends! will the God deign to enter and inhabit you, but by a method  
precisely the reverse. It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I  
see him to be strong and to prevail. He is weaker by every recruit to his banner. Is not a man  
better than a town? Ask nothing of men, and in the endless mutation, thou only firm  
column must presently appear the upholder of all that surrounds thee. He who knows that  
power is inborn, that he is weak because he has looked for good out of him and elsewhere,  
20 and so perceiving, throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly rights himself,  
stands in the erect position, commands his limbs, works miracles; just as a man who stands  
on his feet is stronger than a man who stands on his head.

So use all that is called Fortune. Most men gamble with her, and gain all, and lose all, as her  
wheel rolls. But do thou leave as unlawful these winnings, and deal with Cause and Effect,  
25 the chancellors of God. In the Will work and acquire, and thou hast chained the wheel of  
Chance, and shalt sit hereafter out of fear from her rotations. A political victory, a rise of  
rents, the recovery of your sick, or the return of your absent friend, or some other favorable  
event, raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it.  
Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of  
principles.

end