

Self-Reliance

by Ralph Waldo Emerson

edited and updated by Richard Brodie

Contents

Genius | Speak Your Own Mind | Originality
Trust Yourself | The Lessons of Children
The Power of Teenagers | The Jail of Consciousness
The Conspiracy of Society | Be a Nonconformist
The Devil's Child? | Good and Bad | Love and Hate
Whims | Philanthropy | Good Deeds
Duty | Dead Causes | Conformity
Phoniness | Disapproval | Contradiction
Inconsistency | Your Nature | Greatness
Nonconformity | Character | Know Your Value
Hypnotized by Kings | Intuition
Perceptions | Soul | Past-Worship | Timid Man
Charismatic Leaders | Living Truly
The Highest Truth | Living | Obedience to Nature
Self-Sufficiency | Going It Alone | Isolation
Declare War | Standards | Society
Failure | The Power of Self-Trust
Wishes and Prayers | Regrets | Help Yourself
Religious Doctrine | The Blinded Student
Traveling | Imitation | Insist on Yourself
The Spirit of Society | Modern Man
Great Men | Technology | The Wave of Society
Property | Numbers | Triumph

Preface

Ralph Waldo Emerson entered Harvard in 1817 at the age of 14, 160 years earlier and three years younger than I did. In 1841, he published his first volume of essays, including this one on Self-Reliance.

This essay deals with an essential paradox of life: that to live at peace in society we must in fact break with society. To be approved of, we must act without regard to others' approval. To win the support of others, we must act alone.

The power and inspiration present in Emerson's work are such that I wanted it to be available to the modern reader. Yet the flowery 19th-Century prose Emerson wrote backfires in modern times: the precision and connotation that many of his words carried in 1841 is today lost in obscurity.

Risking cries of "sacrilege," then, I have updated Emerson's great work with the sole aim of making his ideas accessible to a new generation of readers. As I worked on this project, I had firsthand experience with the danger Emerson warns us of: worrying about other people's reactions. Would they say I was colorizing *Citizen Kane*? Would this be like the "updated" bible in which the 23rd Psalm's "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" became "Even though it's really dark, I'm not scared"? Did I really want people to categorize me as one of those cultural terrorists?

No, I didn't, but my intuition kept telling me to go on with the project. Here, then, is my expression of my impression of Emerson. Read it, then throw it away, and go out and have a great life!

Richard Brodie
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Genius

The other day I read some unusual poems. The poet wasn't famous for his poetry; in fact, he is a well-known artist, a painter. But the verses were so original and unconventional that they struck me, as I'm struck by any art that refuses to conform to convention, regardless of the subject or medium. It feels like the ghost of an old schoolteacher shaking a disapproving finger at my soul, scolding me for not remembering a lesson I should have learned by now. The frame of mind this kind of art puts me into is worth more to me than its content or message.

*To believe your own thoughts—
to believe that what is true for you
in your private heart
is true for everyone—
that is genius.*

Say your secret belief out loud and it becomes the truth of the universe. In time, the innermost idea will expand to the outermost edge of the cosmos, and our first thought will be echoed back to us in the dying notes of the end of eternity.

Speak Your Own Mind

As brilliant as they were, the true contribution of Moses, Plato, Jesus, and the like is that they sidestepped history and tradition and spoke their own mind, not a rehash of what the experts agreed on.

*True brilliance is noticing the little gleam of light
that flashes through your own mind from within,
not the neon signs of experts and world leaders.*

But we give up on our own thoughts without a fight, simply because they are ours! In every work of genius, don't we recognize our own rejected thoughts? They return to us with a certain alienated majesty.

The most important lesson we can learn from great works of art is this: to stand behind our spontaneous impression with gentle firmness, even and especially when the fans are all cheering for the other side. And if we don't? Tomorrow some stranger will come along and say quite eloquently what we thought and felt all the time, and we'll have to shamefully take our own opinion from someone else.

Originality

At some point everyone realizes that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that like it or not, we are who we are; that despite the infinite abundance in the universe, nothing good can come to us except by working that little plot of land that we are given to farm.

*Each of us is a brand-new power in nature.
No one else knows what we can do.
We ourselves don't even know until we've tried.*

It's not for nothing that a face, a personality, a fact will strike a note with you but make no impression at all on me. Your mind is sculpted that way for a purpose. Your eye was placed in the path of a particular ray of light so that it could testify about that ray.

But what do we do? We don't halfway express ourselves before we become ashamed of that divine idea each of us represents. There's no reason to distrust that idea. It grew out of goodness and harmony, given to us in good faith. But God won't have his work done by cowards.

We turn out happy and refreshed when we put our heart into our work and do our best. Anything else gives us no peace; it's a shortcut that short-circuits. And when we try the shortcut we lose our inspiration, our muse, our creativity, our hope.

Trust Yourself

Trust yourself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the universe has found for you—your culture, your society, your circumstances.

*Great people have always done that.
Like children, they take for granted
the adventure of the world they were born into.*

They reveal their belief that what's completely trustworthy lives in their heart, works through their hands, and radiates through their entire being.

We're adults now, and must accept in our highest mind the same ultimate destiny. We're not children and cripples in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing from a revolution, but guides, liberators, and champions, loyal to the forces of Good and making advances on Chaos and the Dark.

The Lessons of Children

Here's a good lesson in self-trust: take a look at children, or babies, or even the few remaining uncivilized peoples of the world. Study their faces, their behavior. Their minds aren't divided and rebellious like ours! They don't automatically discard ideas like we do when our mental computer calculates too much opposition to it.

Since their minds are whole, their eye hasn't yet been conquered, and when we look in their faces we are disconcerted.

*Infancy doesn't conform to anyone—
we all conform to it!
It only takes one baby
to turn all the adults in the room
into four- or five-year-olds.*

The baby's magical charisma could be available to all of us in youth, puberty, and even adulthood if we'd just let it shine through us, unadulterated.

The Power of Teenagers

Don't think teenagers have no power because they can't express themselves the way we might like. Listen! You can hear them expressing themselves loud and clear in the next room. They can speak perfectly well to their peer group. Through silence or shouting, they know how to make us adults very unnecessary.

The casual sense of entitlement kids have when they know where their next meal is coming from—their princely refusal to acknowledge that you might be doing them a favor by feeding them—is just healthy human nature.

A boy in the living room is like a heckler at a show.

Independent, irresponsible, a spectator of the people and events that pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, swiftly and unceremoniously: good, bad, interesting, silly, cool, trouble. He never worries about consequences, about special interests. He gives an independent, genuine verdict. You have to court him! He doesn't court you.

The Jail of Consciousness

We adults are thrown into jail by our consciousness. As soon as others applaud one thing we say or do, we're committed.

*From that moment on,
we're forced to factor the approval or hatred
of everyone we know into everything we do.
There is no unlearning this.*

If only we could go back to that naive way of being! Imagine if someone could put aside all his attachments, seeing life once more from that same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unafraid innocence. He'd be terrifying! He'd comment on whatever happened, giving opinions that wouldn't seem like mere points of view, but like the absolute truth. His words would stick like darts in people's ears and inject them with horror.

The Conspiracy of Society

Even if we're able to hear these voices of self-reliance when we're alone, they grow faint and inaudible as we go out into the world.

*Society everywhere is in a conspiracy
against the humanity of every one of its members.*

Society is a publicly held corporation. The stockholders agree, in order to maximize return on their investment, to sacrifice everyone's liberty and uniqueness. The most valued ethic is conformity. Self-reliance is its opposite. The Company Way is not truth and creativity, but labels and customs.

Be a Nonconformist

If you want to be a human being, be a nonconformist. To make a lasting contribution, don't let yourself be limited by what is *labeled* good, but instead explore for yourself if it *is* good.

*Nothing is truly sacred
but the integrity of your own mind.*

Declare yourself honorable to yourself and the world will rally behind you.

The Devil's Child?

I remember a conversation I had with my godfather as a boy. I asked him, "Why should I care about sacred traditions, if everything in my life comes from inside myself?"

He suggested, "Well, those impulses may come from Hell, not from Heaven!"

I replied, "They don't seem that way. But if I'm really the Devil's child—I suppose I'll live the way my father raises me."

*No law can be sacred to me
unless it's a law of my nature.*

Good and Bad

Good and bad are just names that can easily be transferred to one thing or another. The only right is what is aligned with my integrity; the only wrong is what is against it.

*Carry yourself against all opposition
as if everything but yourself
were temporary and in name only.*

I'm ashamed to think how easily we surrender to badges and titles, to large societies and dead institutions. Well-respected and well-spoken people sway me much more than they should. I ought to live unsuppressed, with my head held high, and always speak the rude truth.

Love and Hate

If a malicious, self-centered man pretends to be a great philanthropist, should he get away with it? If an angry bigot joins the altruistic Human Rights movement and comes to me with the latest news from Bosnia, why shouldn't I tell him:

"Go love your baby! Love your garbage collector! Be a good friend and neighbor. *That's* goodwill! Don't sugarcoat your hard, selfish ambition with this phony tenderness for Muslims halfway around the world. Your long-distance love affair is wrecking your home life."

A greeting like that would, of course, be rude and ungracious, but truth is handsomer than phony love.

*Your goodness has to have
a bit of an edge to it,
or it isn't real.*

The doctrine of hate has to be preached, as the antidote to the doctrine of love, when love starts to whimper and whine.

Whims

I shut out my father, mother, wife, and brother when inspiration calls me—I might just stick a sign saying "whim" on my door and lock myself in.

*Of course, I hope what I write
eventually turns out somewhat better than a whim,
but you can't spend all day explaining things.*

Don't expect me to justify why I want company or why I avoid it.

Philanthropy

And don't tell me, as a good man did today, that it's my obligation to find good jobs for the poor. Are they *my* poor? Listen, you silly do-gooder: I resent every dollar, every dime, every penny I give to people who don't belong to me and to whom I don't belong.

There is a group of people to whom I'm spiritually bought and paid for; for them I'll go to prison if I have to. But your random popular charities, sending fools to college, handouts to drunks, and the thousands of food banks and soup kitchens—

*though I confess with shame
I sometimes cave in and give the dollar,
it is a wicked dollar,
which some day I'll have the guts to withhold.*

Good Deeds

Good deeds, most people would say, are the exception rather than the rule. They are something a man *does*. People do something labeled virtuous, some act of courage or charity, like they would pay a traffic fine to excuse their speeding. They do good deeds as an apology or justification for the way they live in the world, like paying high fees to put their parents in a nursing home. Their good deeds are penance.

*I don't want to atone—
I want to live!*

My life is for itself, not for a show. I'd much rather have a life of a lower pedigree, as long as it's real and permanent, than have it be a glittering mirage. I want my life to be healthy and enjoyable, not to require diet and exercise.

Give me firsthand evidence that you are a man. I deny this appeal to your actions. I know that for myself it makes no difference whether or not I do things people call virtuous.

I can't agree to pay for a privilege that is my intrinsic right.

*As small or few as my talents might be,
I actually am,
and don't need any secondary testimony
to assure myself or anyone else of that fact.*

Duty

My duty is to do everything that concerns me, not what other people think.

This rule, just as difficult to follow in actual as in intellectual life, might be the only difference between great and small-minded people. The fact that you'll always find people who think they know what your duty is better than you do makes it even harder. It's easy to follow the world's opinion when you're in the world. It's easy to follow your own when you're alone.

*But a great human being is someone who,
in the middle of the crowd,
keeps the independence of solitude
with perfect grace.*

Dead Causes

The problem with conforming to causes that have become dead to you is that it scatters your energy. It uses up your time and blurs the mark you make on the world.

If you support a dead church, contribute to a dead environmental group, vote for or against the Democrats or Republicans, hold dinner parties like you owned a restaurant—I have no idea, through all these filters, who you are! And of course all that energy is diverted from your true purpose in life.

*But do your life's work, and I'll know you.
Do your life's work, and you'll strengthen yourself.*

Conformity

Let's take a look at what a farce this game of conformity is. In the first place, as soon as I know your party, I know your party line!

A preacher announces a sermon on the usefulness of one of the teachings of his church. Don't I know, before he opens his mouth, that he can't possibly say one new or spontaneous word? Don't I know that with all the pretense of examining the soundness of the teaching he will do no such thing? Don't I know that he is committed to look only at one side, the permitted side, not as a man but as a parish minister?

*He is the attorney for the defense.
This pretense of being an impartial judge
is the thinnest of facades.*

Phoniness

Well, most people have put on one blindfold or another and attached themselves to one or the other of these communities of opinion.

This conformity doesn't just make them phony in a few ways, authors of a few lies, but phony in every way. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four—every word they say frustrates us and we don't know where to begin to set them straight.

Meanwhile, nature wastes no time dressing us in the prison uniform of the party to which we attach ourselves.

*We start to walk alike, talk alike,
and gradually acquire
the same sweet asinine expression.*

Now *there's* a mortifying experience that has caused untold ripples in history: "the foolish face of praise"—the forced smile we put on whenever we're in uncomfortable company amid conversation that doesn't interest us. The muscles, not activated by spontaneity but by some overriding compulsion, tighten around the outline of the face, accompanied by a most unpleasant sensation.

Disapproval

For not conforming, the world whips you with disapproval. That's why you've got to know how to size up a sour face.

Suppose a bystander looks at you suspiciously on the street or in a friend's house. If this frown originated in contempt and resistance like your own, you might very well go home with a sad expression yourself.

*But the sour faces of the multitude,
like their sweet faces,
have no profound meaning:
they're put on and taken off
according to the way the wind blows
and today's headlines.*

The disapproval of the masses is worse than that of Congress or the university faculty. It's easy enough for a determined, worldly person to withstand the rage of elitists. Their rage is prim and proper, because they are timid, being very vulnerable themselves. But when you add the indignation of the people, when you arouse the ignorant and the poor, when you make the unthinking brute force that lies at the bottom of society start to growl and hiss, only the pretext of philanthropy and religion is all-powerful enough to treat it as a trifle of no concern.

Contradiction

The other terror that scares us from our self-trust is our consistency: a reverence for our past actions or words. Other people have no other data for computing our orbit than our past actions, and we hate to disappoint them.

But why look back over your shoulder? Why drag around this corpse of your memory, afraid to contradict something you once said in this or that public place?

Suppose you do contradict yourself—so what?

It seems to be common wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, even in acts of pure memory, but to replay the past for renewed judgment by the eyes of the present, always living in a new day.

Inconsistency

You say the kingdom of God is within you. Yet when the divinity of your soul tries to emerge, you strangle it rather than let it breathe shape and color so that you may clothe God. Leave your philosophy, as Joseph left his coat of many colors in the land of the harlot, and run away!

*Consistency for its own sake is stupidity—
a favorite idiocy of small-minded
politicians, philosophers, and preachers.*

A great soul simply has no attachment to consistency. You may as well worry about your shadow on the wall. Speak your mind now in no uncertain terms, and tomorrow speak tomorrow's thoughts just as forcefully, even if it contradicts everything you said today.

Ah, but won't you be sure to be misunderstood? Is it such a big deal to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood. So were Socrates, Jesus, Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and every authentic and wise spirit that ever took flesh.

To be great is to be misunderstood.

Your Nature

It's impossible to violate your nature. All the varied exploits of your will are rounded out by the law of your being as the irregularities of the Andes and the Himalayas are insignificant in the curvature of the earth.

*It doesn't matter
how you measure or judge someone.
A person's character
is like a magic square or a palindrome—
read it forward, backward, or across,
and it still spells the same thing.*

In my nice house in the woods, which God allows me, if keep a diary of my honest thoughts day by day, without thinking about the future or the past, I have no doubt it will turn out symmetrical even though I neither intend it nor notice it. My diary will smell of pines and hum with insects. The swallow over my windows will interweave the thread or straw he's carrying in his bill into my web too. We come across as what we are. Character teaches above our wills.

*People think they only show their virtue or vice
by overt actions.
They don't see that virtue or vice
emits a breath every moment.*

A pattern will emerge in whatever actions you take, as long as each is taken honestly and naturally in the moment. Born of one mind, the actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem. Their variety disappears at a little distance, at a little height of thought. One tendency unites them all.

*The voyage of the best ship
is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks.*

See the line from far enough away 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

Greatness appeals to the future. If I can be brave enough today to do something right and ignore raised eyebrows, I must have done enough things right before to defend myself now. Always ignore appearances and you'll always be able to. Character is cumulative. All your past days of virtue have worked you into shape to handle this.

What makes our sports heroes and our great statesmen so majestic as to inspire our dreams and imagination? It's the awareness of a long trail of great days and victories behind them. They focus a light forward, illuminating their advance. A visible escort of angels accompanies them. That's what throws thunder into Martin Luther King's voice, dignity into Gandhi's fast, and America into the eyes of our founding fathers.

We respect honor because it isn't fleeting.

Honor is always ancient virtue. We worship it today because it didn't just happen today. We love and admire it because it's not designed to capture our love and admiration, but it's independent, self-generated, and therefore has an old immaculate pedigree, even in a youngster.

Nonconformity

I hope we've finally heard the last of conformity and consistency. Let's make fun of those words from now on. Instead of sitting in chairs around a meeting table, let's sprawl on cushions. Let's never make excuses and apologize any more. A great man is coming to eat at my house. I don't want to please him; I want him to want to please me.

*My stand for humanity is one of kindness,
but also of truth.*

Let's rip into the flat mediocrity and cheap contentment of the times. Let's confront all fashions, business, and authority with the ultimate lesson of history: that in everyone's work there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working. That real men and women don't belong to any other time or place; they're the center of everything. Where they are, nature is. They set the standard for you and every human being and every event.

Character

Ordinarily, everybody in society reminds us of something or someone else. Character—reality—reminds you of nothing else. It's a product of the whole creation.

*A man must be so big
as to make his circumstances irrelevant.*

Every human being is a cause, a country, and an era. It would take infinite space and support and time to fully accomplish his design, and posterity seems to follow in his footsteps like a parade 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 mold to his genius that he is mystified with virtue and the possibility of humanity.

An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man: the Reformation of Luther; Methodism of Wesley; Scipio, Milton called "the height of Rome." All history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few bold and true people.

Know Your Value

So know your value and keep things under your feet. Don't squeal, or steal, or skulk around like a welfare child, an illegal alien, or an unwelcome guest in this world that exists for you.

John Doe, unable to find any value in himself comparable to the force that built a skyscraper or recorded a hit CD, feels inferior when he sees these. To him a four-star hotel, a sculpture, or a hardcover book has an alien and forbidding aura, as if to say, "And you are—? And you're with—?"

*Yet all those works are his,
competitors for his attention,
suits for his mind,
pleading for it to come out and take possession.*

The painting is waiting for my verdict. It doesn't order me around; I'm here to pass judgment on its claims. There's the fable of the drunk who was picked up, passed out in the street. He was carried to the duke's house, washed and dressed, and laid in the duke's bed. On awakening, he was given the royal treatment like the duke and assured he had been insane. This fable perfectly

symbolizes the state of humanity.

*We're like drunks,
but once in a while we wake up,
use our brains,
and find out we're really princes.*

Hypnotized by Kings

Our school curriculum is hypocritical and sniveling. When we study history, we're coned by our imagination. Kings, generals, power, and wealth are a more impressive vocabulary than John and Mary Doe in a small house working in an office, but the stuff of life is the same to both; they're equally worthy.

Why all this deference to Washington and Lincoln and Alexander the Great? Even supposing they had some virtue, and it's worth studying, did they use up the last of it? There's as much at stake in your private act today as there was in their public and famous steps.

*When ordinary people act with original views,
the glamour will be transferred
from the actions of kings
to those of citizens.*

The world has been programmed by its kings, who have so hypnotized the eyes of nations. We've been taught by this colossal symbol the mutual admiration that people owe one another. With joyful loyalty, we've always allowed our leaders to walk among us exempt from our laws, to make their own living from us and our things while controlling ours, to pay for benefits not with money but with honor, and to represent the law in their own persons. This was the script by which we sublimated our awareness of our own right and magnificence, the right of every human being.

Intuition

The magnetism that all original actions exert is explained when we examine the meaning of self-trust. Who is the trustee? What is the original Self on which we might universally rely? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallax, without calculable elements, that shoots a ray of beauty into even trivial and selfish actions if the least bit of independence appears?

The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, that we call spontaneity or instinct. We call this primary wisdom *intuition*. All later teachings are *tutions*.

*From that profound force,
that pure quality that cannot be further analyzed,
comes the common origin of everything.*

The sense of aliveness that rises mysteriously in quiet times from the soul isn't something separate from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them. It clearly comes from the same source that gives life and being to all.

*First we share
the life-giving force that creates things,
then afterwards
we call a certain set of things "nature"
and forget that we came from the same place.*

That force is the fountain of our actions and thoughts. It is the lungs that inspire wisdom into us and which cannot be denied without irreverence and atheism. We lie in the lap of an immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.

When we recognize justice, when we recognize truth, we're not really doing anything; we're just allowing a passage to its beams. If we ask where this comes from, if we try to pry into the soul that causes, no philosophy can tell us. Its presence or absence is all we can affirm.

Perceptions

We can all tell the difference between the voluntary acts of our mind and our involuntary perceptions, and we know that we can have complete faith in the latter. We may err in our expressions of them, but we know that these things are so, like day and night, not to be disputed.

*My conscious actions are just meandering.
But my idlest daydream
and my faintest genuine emotion
command my curiosity and respect.*

Thoughtless people are just as willing to argue with a statement of perceptions as an opinion—actually, even more willing—because they don't distinguish between perception and conception. They imagine I choose to see one thing or another. But perception isn't whimsical; it's inevitable. If I see a quality, my children will see it after me, and eventually all humanity—although perhaps no one has seen it before me—because my perception of it is as much a fact as the sun.

Soul

The relationship of the human soul to the divine spirit is so pure that it's profane to try to interpose guidance. It must be that when God speaks, he communicates not one thing but everything; he fills the world with his voice; he scatters around light, nature, time, and souls from the center of the present design, updating and recreating the whole.

*Whenever a mind is simple
and receives divine wisdom,
old things pass away—
strategies, teachers, temples fall;
the simple mind lives now,
and absorbs the past and future
into the present moment.*

All things are made sacred by their relation to the simple mind, one as much as another. All things are dissolved to their center by their source. In the universal miracle, petty and particular miracles disappear.

Past-Worship

So if someone claims to know God and carries you backward to the phraseology of some moldy old nation in another continent, in another world, don't believe him.

Is an acorn better than an oak, which is its fullness and completion? Is a parent better than the child into whom he has poured the benefit of all his experience? Where did this past-worship come from, anyway?

*The centuries are conspirators
against the sanity and authority of the soul.*

Time and space are just physiological colors that the eye makes, but the soul is light: where it is, it's day; where it was, it's night. History is irrelevant if it's anything more than a cheerful account or parable of my being and becoming.

Timid Man

Man is timid and apologetic. He doesn't walk upright any more. He doesn't dare say "I think" or "I am," but instead quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed to be compared to a blade of grass or a blowing rose.

*The roses under my window make no reference
to former roses or to better ones;
they are for what they are;
they exist with God today.*

There is no time to them. There is simply the rose, perfect in every moment of its existence. In the unburst bud it has a full life. In the bloomed flower it has no more; in the leafless root it has no less. Its nature is satisfied, and it satisfies nature, exactly the same in every moment.

But man postpones or remembers. He doesn't live in the present; he looks back and regrets the past or, blind to the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He can't be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, beyond time.

Charismatic Leaders

This should all be pretty clear, right? But how many sharp minds dare not hear God himself unless he's speaking the language of some David, or Jeremiah, or Paul?

We won't always put such a high price on a few books or a few lives.

*We're like children who repeat by rote
the sentences of grandmothers and tutors
and, as they grow older,
of whatever charismatic leaders
they happen to meet—
painfully recollecting the exact words they spoke.*

Afterwards, when the grown children mold their opinions to match those who uttered the sayings, they understand them and are willing to let the words go—they can now come up with words just as good whenever there's an appropriate occasion.

Living Truly

If we live truly, we'll see truly.

It's as easy for the strong man to be strong as it is for the weak man to be weak. When we perceive something fresh, we'll gladly dump the memory of those hoarded treasures as old rubbish. When a man lives with God, his voice will be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn.

The Highest Truth

After all this, the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid. It probably can't really be said, because everything we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition. My best approximation of that thought, though, is this.

*When something good is near—
when you have life in yourself—
it's not by any familiar or known way.
You won't notice anyone else's footprints.
You won't see anyone's face.
You won't hear any name.*

The way, the thought, the good will be totally new and strange. It won't follow any example or experience. The way leads away from you, not toward someone else. Everyone who ever lived is its forgotten minister. Both fear and hope are beneath it. Even hope is somewhat below it. In your hour of vision, there's nothing you could call either gratitude or joy. The soul elevated beyond passion sees identity and ultimate cause, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself by knowing that everything's going well. Vast spaces of nature—the Atlantic Ocean, the South Seas—long intervals of time—years, centuries—mean nothing. This thought, this feeling, underlay every past moment of life and circumstances. It underlies my present, and what we call life, and what we call death.

Living

Only living matters, not having lived. Power dies the instant you stop and rest; it lives in the moment of transition from the past to a new state, in leaping across a gulf, in pursuing a purpose.

This is one fact the world hates: that the soul *becomes*. That fact permanently devalues the past. It turns all wealth to poverty, all reputation to shame. It confuses the saint with the crook and shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside.

Obedience to Nature

Why then do I ramble on about self-reliance? To the degree there's a soul present, power isn't something to trust, it's something that's there working. To talk of reliance is a poor external way of speaking.

Let's talk instead about that which is already inside us, relying, working, and being. Anyone who has more obedience to it than I do masters me without lifting a finger. I revolve around him by the law of gravity applied to our spirits. We imagine it's a figure of speech when we talk about the height of virtue. We don't yet see that virtue really is Height.

*A man or group of people
who are molded and permeated by principles
must, by the laws of nature,
overpower and override
all cities, nations, kings, rich men, and poets
who are not.*

Self-Sufficiency

Now we come to the ultimate point, as we so quickly do on any topic: boiling everything down to the original Source of everything.

The quality of self-sufficiency comes from that Source and you can measure goodness by the degree to which all lower life forms are self-sufficient. Things are as real as the amount of goodness they contain. Commerce, farming, hunting, whaling, war, eloquence, personal weight—they're all partly real, and are interesting examples of both Creation's presence and its impure action.

I see the same law working in nature for conservation and growth. Power, in nature, is the essential measure of right.

*Nature has no mercy
for members of her kingdoms
that can't help themselves.*

The genesis and maturing of a planet, its rotation and orbit, the bent tree recovering from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable—they're all demonstrations of the self-sufficient and therefore self-reliant soul.

So everything eventually comes back to this point. Let's not wander, then. Let's stay home with the source. Let's shock the intruding rabble of men, books, and institutions by a simple declaration of the divine fact. Tell the invaders to remove their shoes before entering; this is God's house. Let our simplicity judge them and our obedience to our own law show how poor nature and fate are next to our native riches.

Going It Alone

We're a mob these days. We don't stand in awe of great men, nor do we discipline ourselves to look inward for our inspiration, to commune with the internal ocean. Instead, our inspiration goes out to borrow a cup of water from someone else's well. We must go it alone.

I like the silent church before the service begins better than any preaching. How distant, how calm, how pure the others look, each in their own private world or sanctuary. If we could only sit like that all the time—

*Why should we take on the faults
of our friend or wife or father or child
just because they sit on our sofa
or supposedly have the same blood?*

All men have my blood and I have all of theirs. That doesn't mean I'll adopt their irritability or stupidity, even to the extent of being ashamed of it.

Isolation

But your isolation must not be mechanical—it must be spiritual, must be elevation. Sometimes the whole world seems to be in a conspiracy to enroll you in some urgent trivia. Friend, client, child, sickness, fear, want, and charity all knock at once on your closet door and say, "Come with us!" But keep your balance; don't enter into their confusion. The power people have to annoy me I give them through mild curiosity. No one can come near me without me causing it.

What we love, we have; what we desire, we lose.

Declare War

If it's too hard to become completely obedient and faithful all at once, we can at least resist our temptations. Let's declare war and arm ourselves with courage and commitment.

We can do this when things are going well by telling the truth. Quit pretending to be hospitable and affectionate.

*Stop living up to the expectations
of the deceived and deceiving people
we interact with.*

Tell them, "Hey, Dad? Mom? Wife? Friend? Until now, I haven't been straight with you. From now on, I'm going to be truthful. I'm letting you know that from now on, my highest law is the eternal law. I won't have contracts, just relationships. I'll try to nurture my parents, support my family, be faithful to my wife—but I'm going to fulfill these relationships in a new and unprecedented way. I'm breaking from your customs. I have to be myself. I can't break myself any longer, even for you.

*"If you can love me for what I am,
we'll be happier.
If you can't, I'll still try to deserve your love.*

"I won't hide my tastes or aversions. I'll trust so much that what is deep is holy that I'll boldly do in front of the sun and the moon whatever gives me inner joy and appeals to my heart. If you are noble, I will love you; if you aren't, I won't hurt you and myself with hypocritical attentions. If you're honest, but your truth isn't the same as mine, stick with your companions; I'll look for my own.

"I'm not doing this to be selfish, but to be humble and true. It's in your interest as well as mine, and everyone's, however long we've been living a lie, to live the truth. Does this sound harsh right now? You'll soon love what your nature dictates as well as mine, and if we follow the truth we'll come out safely in the end."

But saying that may cause these friends pain! Yes, but I can't sell out my liberty and power to spare their feelings. Besides, everyone has moments of reason, when they clearly see the absolute truth; then they'll justify me and do the same thing.

Standards

People think that if you reject popular standards you've rejected all standards—that you don't believe your behavior is subject to any concept of good or evil. A presumptuous parasite will invoke the name of philosophy to sugarcoat his crimes.

But consciousness, and conscience, are what it's all about. There are two ways to clear your conscience, and you must choose one of them. You can fulfill your duties by clearing yourself in the eyes of others, or in your own.

On the one hand, you may consider whether you've satisfied your responsibilities to father, mother, cousin, neighbor, community, cat and dog—whether any of these has a reason to criticize you.

*But you can also ignore this external standard
and absolve yourself to yourself.*

I have my own strict requirements and distinct boundaries. It doesn't agree with what most would say are my duties and obligations, but if I can live up to its standards it enables me to dispense with society's code.

If you think this law is too lax, try keeping it some time. It really demands something godlike in someone who has sworn off the usual motives of humanity and has dared to trust himself as a ruler. You need a high heart, faithful will, and clear sight in order to be your own doctrine, society, and law, so that a simple purpose can be as strong to you as steel physically is to others.

Society

If you think about the current state of what we call *society*, you'll see the need for these ethics. The human race's heart and muscles seem to be tiring. We've become timid, depressed whimperers.

*We are afraid of truth,
afraid of fate,
afraid of death,
and afraid of each other.*

These times don't produce any great and perfect people. We want men and women who will renew life and society, but we see that most people can't make ends meet, can't satisfy their own desires, have an ambition all out of proportion to their practical capability, and spend all day and night leaning and begging. Our housekeeping is poor, our arts, our occupations, our marriages, our religion we haven't chosen, but society has chosen for us. We shun the rugged battle of fate, where strength is born.

Failure

If our young men fail in their first business they lose all heart. If a young merchant fails, people say he is *ruined*. If the greatest genius studies at one of our colleges and isn't installed into an office within one year afterwards in Cambridge or Palo Alto, it seems to his friends and to himself that he's justified in being disheartened and complaining the rest of his life.

A sturdy lad from Vermont or Idaho—who in turn tries all the professions, who flips burgers, drives a truck, sells encyclopedias, runs a day-care, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys real estate, and so on, in successive years, and always lands on his feet like a cat—is worth a hundred of these city dolls. He walks in step with his age and feels no shame in not "studying a profession," because he's not postponing his life, he's living it now. He's got not one chance, but a hundred chances.

The Power of Self-Trust

Get a guru in here to tell people this: That they're not leaning willow trees, but can and must detach themselves. That with a little self-trust, new powers will appear. That a human being is the word of God made into flesh, born to heal

nations, and that the moment he acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idols and customs out the window, we stop pitying him and start to thank and admire him. That teacher will restore the life of man to splendor and go down in history.

Greater self-reliance will cause a revolution in every part of human life: in our jobs and relationships; in our religion, education, goals, and lifestyles; in our businesses, possessions, and visions of the future.

Wishes and Prayers

First, greater self-reliance will alter the types of things we wish and pray for. Right now, what we like to call "good causes" are really more like impressive or macho.

Praying is looking far away and asking for some external gift to appear through some external force. Prayers get lost in endless physical and metaphysical mazes of interventions and miracles.

*Any prayer that craves a particular thing,
anything less than all good,
is vicious.*

Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It's the soliloquy of a gazing and joyous soul. It's the spirit of God pronouncing his works good.

But prayer used to reach a private goal is cheap and thieving. It assumes divisiveness, not unity, in nature and consciousness.

When a man is at one with God, he won't beg. He'll see prayer in every action. The farmer kneeling in the field to weed it, 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 asked what the god Audate might have in mind, replies:

His hidden meaning lies in our endeavors;
Our valors are our best gods.

Regrets

Another kind of false prayers are our regrets. Discontent is the absence of self-reliance: it's a disease of the will.

*Regret people's hardship
if it will help the sufferer;
if not, mind your own business
and the hurt immediately begins to heal.*

Sympathy is just as silly. We go to people who weep foolishly and sit down and cry for company instead of giving them truth and health in rough electric shocks, knocking some sense back into their heads.

Help Yourself

The secret of success is to take advantage of your own abilities. If you help yourself, you'll always be welcome to gods and men. For you, all doors are wide open; all mouths greet you; all awards are given to you; all eyes follow you with desire.

*We love and embrace the self-reliant man
because he doesn't need it.*

We eagerly and apologetically hug and congratulate him because he stayed on track and ignored our disapproval. The gods love him because people hated him. "To the persevering mortal," spoke Zoroaster, "the blessed Immortals are swift."

Religious Doctrine

As prayers are a disease of the will, religious doctrines are a disease of the intellect. They say, as those foolish Israelites did centuries ago, "Don't let God speak to us, or we'll die! Tell us what to do—you, anybody, and we will obey."

*I can never meet God in my brother,
because he's shut his own temple doors
and recites fables of his brother's—
or his brother's brother's—
God.*

Every new mind is a new way of classifying the universe. If it turns out to be a mind of unusual activity and power—a Freud, a Jung, a John Locke, a William James, a Charles Darwin—it imposes its classification on other men and—presto!—a new system. The deeper the thought, the more of life's chaos it explains to the pupil, the greater the complacency.

This is most apparent in churches and support groups, which are also classifications of some powerful mind acting on the simple thought of man's duty and relationship to the Highest. Such is Christian Fundamentalism, Scientology, Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Blinded Student

The student of a doctrine takes the same delight in subordinating everything to the new terminology as a girl who has just learned botany does in suddenly seeing a new earth and new seasons.

For a time, 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 itself off as the end
and not for a quickly exhausted means.*

The limits of the system blend to their eye in the remote horizon with the limits of the universe; the luminaries of heaven seem to them hung on the arch their master built.

They can't 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 don't 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, soon their neat new box will be too small and confining, will crack, will bulge, 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.

Traveling

Second, it's because of a lack of self-culture that the superstition of traveling, whose idols are Italy, England, Egypt, retains its fascination for all educated

Americans.

*The people who made England, Italy, or Greece
such great places
did it by staying firmly planted where they were,
like an axis of the earth.*

When we're being men, we feel a call to duty. The soul is no traveler; the wise man stays at home. When his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from his house, or into foreign lands, he's still at home, and lets people know by the expression on his face that he goes as the missionary of wisdom and virtue, visiting cities and people like a sovereign, not like an intruder or a valet.

I have no cranky objection to world travel for the purposes of art, of study, and goodwill, as long as the individual is first domesticated, or doesn't go abroad with the hope of finding something greater than what he knows. He who travels to be amused, or to get something he doesn't have within, travels away from himself, and gets old among old things while he's still young. In Thebes, in Palmyra, his will and mind have become as old and run-down as they have. He carries ruins to ruins.

Traveling is a fool's paradise.

Our first journeys show us how little difference places make. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty and lose my sadness. I pack my bags, hug my friends, get on the plane, and wake up in Naples, and there next to me is the cruel fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. I look for the Vatican and the palaces. I pretend to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go.

Imitation

Third, the fad of traveling is a symptom of a deeper problem affecting the whole intellectual process.

*The intellect is homeless,
and our system of education
encourages restlessness.*

Our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home. We imitate, and what is imitation but the traveling of the mind?

Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our thoughts lean and favor the Past and 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.

Why do we need to follow the Doric or the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought and quaint expression are as near to us as any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise 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 fit together, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied as well.

Insist on Yourself

Insist on yourself; never imitate. You can give your own gift any time with the accumulated power of a whole life's work. But if you copy someone else, you'll never have more than temporary half-ownership.

*That which each can do best,
none but his Maker can teach him.*

No one knows what it is, nor can they, till that person has expressed it. Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare? Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Lincoln, or Kennedy?

Every great man is unique. The Kafkaesqueness of Kafka is precisely that part he couldn't borrow. Another Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare. Do what's assigned to you, and you can't hope too much or dare too much. Right now there is something for you to say as huge as the chisel of Michelangelo, or the trowel of the Egyptians, or the pen of Moses or Dante, but different from all of them.

A rich, eloquent soul with a thousand-branched tongue will never repeat itself. But if you can hear what these masters say, you can surely reply to them in the same tone of voice, because the ear and the tongue are two parts of the same whole. Live in the simple and noble regions of your life, obey your heart, and you'll recreate the Wonders of the Ages.

The Spirit of Society

Fourth, as our religion, education, and art look abroad, so does the spirit of our society. Everyone prides himself on the improvement of our society, and no one improves.

*Society never advances.
It recedes on one side
as fast as it gains on the other.*

It undergoes continual changes; it's barbarous, it's civilized, it's Christianized, it's rich, it's scientific; but this change isn't *better*. For everything given, something is taken. Society acquires new arts and loses old instincts.

Modern Man

What a contrast between the well-dressed, reading, writing, thinking American, with a pager, a cellular phone, and a credit card in his pocket, and the naked aborigine, 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'll see the civilized man has lost his aboriginal strength. If the reports are true, you could strike the savage with an ax and in a couple of days the flesh will heal as if you had struck the blow into soft tar. The same blow will send the American to his grave.

*The civilized man has built cars,
but has lost the use of his feet.*

He is supported on crutches, but has lost the corresponding support of muscle. He has a nice digital watch, but he doesn't know how to tell time by the sun. He has a precise road atlas and, being so sure of the information when he wants it, doesn't know a star in the sky.

He doesn't observe the solstice; the equinox he knows as little, and the whole calendar is without a dial in his mind. His notebooks impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance company increases the number of accidents. Could it be that computers limit us? Have we lost by our refinement some energy? By a moral state, entrenched in establishments and forms, the vigor of wild virtue? In old times, every Stoic was a Stoic, but in Multiculturalism where is the Multiculturalist?

Great Men

The standard of morality is just as fixed as the standard of height or volume. Men are no greater now than they ever were. There's no difference between the great men of the first and of the last ages.

*All the science, art, religion, and philosophy
of the 20th Century
can't produce greater men
than Plutarch's heroes,
24 or 25 centuries ago.*

The race does not progress with time. Socrates and Diogenes were great men, but they didn't leave copies of themselves behind. Someone of their greatness will not be named after them, but will be his own man, and in his turn the founder of a sect.

Technology

The arts and technology of each era are only window dressing and do not give people life. The harm of improved technology may balance out its good.

Hudson and Bering accomplished so much in their fishing boats as to astonish Parry and Armstrong, whose equipment exhausted the resources of science and art. Galileo, with an old opera glass, discovered a more amazing series of celestial phenomena than anyone since. Columbus found the New World in an undecked boat.

*It's curious to see the regular rusting and junking
of technology that was introduced with loud fanfare
a few years or centuries before.*

Great genius comes from the simple man. Although we've made incredible scientific advances enabling us to build advanced weapons systems, the North Vietnamese beat us with guerrilla warfare—falling back on naked bravery free of all aids. Napoleon thought 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 himself."

The Wave of Society

Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water it's made of does not. The same molecule does not rise from the trough to the peak. Its unity is only perceived.

*The people who make up a nation today
die next year,
and their experience dies with them.*

Property

Relying on the notion that you own property—relying on the notion of a government that protects your property—means abandoning self-reliance.

Most people have looked outside of themselves and at *things* for so long that their lives become dedicated to the religious, cultural and civil institutions that guard their property. People who attack these institutions are dismissed, ridiculed, because what sane man would attack the idea of property? Their level of respect for one another reflects what each one has, and not what each one is.

*But an enlightened man
becomes ashamed of his property
out of a new respect for his nature.*

He especially hates what he has if he got it by accident—by inheritance, or gift, or crime. Then it's not really *having*. It doesn't belong to him because it has no root in him. It just sits there because no revolution or robber has taken it away.

But what a man *is*, is truly his. It's living property, not subject to the control of rulers, mobs, revolutions, fire, storm, or bankruptcy, but continually renewing itself every time he breathes. "Thy lot or portion in life," said the Caliph Ali, "is seeking after thee; therefore be at rest from seeking after it."

Numbers

Depending on external things leads us to worship numbers. Political parties meet in huge conventions. With each larger gathering and each announcement louder than the next—The delegation from Seattle! The Democrats from New Hampshire! The Republicans of Texas!—the young activist feels himself stronger

than before by a thousand new eyes and arms.

In the same way, religious movements call conventions and take votes of the masses. Come on, folks! That's not the way to make God enter you and inhabit you—just the reverse.

*It is only when a man frees himself
from all foreign support
and stands alone
that he will be strong and prevail.*

You get weaker every time you recruit someone to join your side. Isn't a man better than a town? Don't ask anything of anyone and by natural selection your lone sturdy pillar will soon show itself to support everything around you. As soon as you see that your power is innate—that your only weakness has been looking for good outside yourself—and throw yourself unhesitatingly into your thought, you instantly regain your balance. You stand up straight, have control of your arms and legs, and work miracles, just as a man who stands on his feet is stronger than a man who stands on his head.

Triumph

So don't rely on "luck." Most people gamble, win everything, and lose everything as the wheel of fortune spins. But let me tell you: drop those winnings like stolen cash, and deal instead with Cause and Effect, the emissaries of God.

*Be true to your Purpose
in what you do and what you acquire,
and you've chained the wheel of Chance,
and will sit from now on
without fear of its turning.*

A political victory, a tax cut, recovering from an illness, a friend returns home. That or some other event raises your spirits, and you think happy days are here again.

Don't believe it.

Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.

Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.

More work by Richard Brodie can be found at

www.memecentral.com