

Modern English Version of Self-Reliance

From Emerson's Essays
By Ralph Waldo Emerson

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THE FOLLOWING IS Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, *Self-Reliance*, translated into modern English. I have been studying this essay for years. I consider it one of the most significant pieces of writing ever written. I once typed the whole essay word for word and printed it out on my computer as a booklet. I looked up all the words I didn't know, and made footnotes of definitions for each word on the page (and there were a lot of them). [Read that here](#). I put the essay on tape and listened to it over and over while driving. And I tried to apply it to my life.

Then, to understand it even more deeply, I went over it line by line, trying to write what Emerson was saying in my own words. That rewrite project is what follows. I do not feel I'm a better writer than Emerson. I love his writing. I think it's very powerful. Some of his sentences were so well-said, I included them in this translation just because I didn't want to leave them out. My motivation for translating it came from an entirely different source.

The idea was inspired by a *Cliff Notes*. I had always considered *Cliff Notes* as a kind of cheating. If you didn't want to read the real book, you could read a condensed version that tells you everything you need to know to pass a class. Then one day I saw the movie *Henry V*. I really liked it but I only understood about half of what was being said. They were speaking English, but three things were hindering my understanding:

1. English was spoken differently back then. They commonly used words we are now unfamiliar with.
2. Shakespeare was a poet, so he often inverts sentences and uses unusual phrases in order to make things sound poetic.
3. They were speaking with an English accent.

Emerson's essay is difficult for a modern American today for the first two reasons. Emerson used words that, although I can find them in a dictionary, I've never heard anyone say. And he was a poet, so some of his phrases were meant to be savored rather than read only for their direct meaning.

One day I came across a *Cliff Notes* on *Henry V* and I was curious what they had to say, so I read it and found it a revelation. They explained terms and phrases I didn't know. I remember, for example, the phrase, "throwing down a gage." The *Cliff Notes* explained this. It is an archaic term that means throwing gloves at the feet of someone, which back then meant you were challenging the person to a duel. I could have watched *Henry V* fifty times and not ever figured that out. But after I learned it, I understood better what was going on when I watched the movie again.

That's what I hope happens after you read my translation. I hope you go back and enjoy [Emerson's original and eloquent essay](#), and understand it better, and really appreciate his creative, powerful prose.

Here, then, is my translation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, *Self-Reliance*:

THE OTHER DAY, I read some original statements written by a famous painter. Whenever I read something truly original, I get a feeling. That feeling is far more valuable than the statements themselves. The feeling fills me with a recognition of a profound truth: That genius is simply to "believe your own thought." "To believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all [people]."

Speak what is true for you, and it will almost always resonate in others.

The voice in your own mind is so familiar to you that you give it no respect. Instead, you give too much weight to the thought of others — your neighbors, your teachers, or some great thinker from the past. But what makes great thinkers great is that they didn't disregard their own thought. They expressed what they truly thought; they listened to their own voice.

You must learn to detect the light that shines from within and pay it more respect than the blinding illumination of the great minds of all history. When you look at wonderful works of art, let it teach you this.

Let the flashes of genius that hit your mind urge you to stick with your own "spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility" — especially when everyone seems to think otherwise. Speak out what your own perception, your own impression tells you is true and speak with boldness and trust.

As Emerson wrote, "envy is ignorance; imitation is suicide." You have something unique, original, and great to express. Try to imitate someone else and you kill off that originality which is you. Envy is a lack of appreciation of your own special gifts.

Nobody knows what your special gifts are, and you won't know until you try to express them. Follow your own interest. It will lead you where you need to go.

You are an expression of this vast and wondrous universe. You are one of the things the universe is doing right now. This immense, mysterious existence is expressing itself everywhere at every moment. For the miracle to be expressed through you, it will take courage and a firm dedication to truth and honesty. The greatness of the universe cannot be expressed by cowards.

Be brave and true to yourself. Put your heart into your work. Do these things with sincerity and you come nearer to being what you truly are: A singular expression of all existence — a genius, a creator, a redeemer, a healer, a teacher, a force for good in the world.

Trust yourself — not your petty self, but that Self you touch in blissful solitude on quiet walks in the mountains, that Self you feel when you are at your highest best.

Completely accept your current situation — the place and time you live in. Accept it and make something magnificent with it. There is no better time. There is nothing to wish for. Genius and wisdom arise when you see that the source of existence is in your heart and works through your hands.

You are not a victim of life. You have a destiny, a part to play in this awesome universal battle between good and evil.

Look at children. They trust their own impression. They haven't learned to calculate how many people oppose their purposes and so they don't alter their purposes accordingly. If they conceive a purpose, they start to accomplish it without any self-censoring calculations.

Infants do not conform. The adults conform to the infant. An infant is charming, attractive, interesting, and the adults gather around and try to please him or her. But listen: There is something just as charming, just as interesting, and just as pleasing about every stage of life, from childhood to old age. Infancy has no monopoly on charm.

Take exactly what you are and find the magnificence of it and express it. Do not weep for younger years or think things will be great only when you get older. Be exactly what you are right now and already your charm starts to manifest.

It is a healthy attitude to consider conciliatory behavior beneath you. In other words, don't try to gain goodwill by displaying pleasing behavior. Don't try to beg for peoples' approval. That is the attitude of someone who doesn't feel he has a right to be what he is, to feel the way he feels, to think what he thinks. But you DO have the right.

Be yourself.

Don't try to figure out what behavior or opinion will make you popular with others. It is disrespectful to the grandeur of who you really are. It is selling your soul for the low outcome of manipulating the superficial affections of others — as if you needed their approval. Be what you are. Be indifferent to the judgments of others, not with a thoughtless or angry defiance, but with the firm knowledge that you are a vital expression of something unspeakably intelligent and good.

Forget about what you have been before. Forget what you've said before. Be what you are now, even if it "isn't you" — that is, even if it seems to contradict what you or others have pigeonholed you to be. Be free. Be the creative force on the crest of the mighty wave of this very instant.

Be exactly what you are right now and what will happen? Your truth, your honesty, will scare some people, and they will actively try to make you stop being true to yourself.

The world is in a conspiracy to make you conform. Others will think they know what you should be and how you should act and what you should think. And they will apply pressure to you to make you conform to it. But if you conform, you lose your soul. You lose your originality. You lose your connection to the Mystery. You lose your creativity and your aliveness.

The people who know you will sometimes resist your creativity. They feel more comfortable with what is familiar.

If you want to be the full greatness you can be, you must give up the game and be your honest self. As Emerson put it, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." Rely on yourself and you become one of those who determine the future of the world.

Not you? Why not you? Many of the people who have changed the course of history also would not have believed that they could or would. But when you rely on yourself and be exactly what you are, a new force moves through you, and a new source of power.

Emerson said, "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." Take the stand that you are the one who knows, and all opposing people and opinions are only temporary fads and "authority" propped up by the mere agreement of mob mentality.

"Go upright and vital," urges Emerson, "and speak the rude truth in all ways." When you hear someone earnestly spouting the latest politically correct opinion, why not be direct and without apology say, "I don't want to hear a popular

opinion. What do you really think and why?" This response might be taken as somewhat rude, but honesty is far more beautiful than the pretense of acceptance, and it will do more good. Conditions do not improve when everyone goes along just to avoid seeming rude.

Emerson wrote, "For nonconformity, the world whips you with its displeasure...but the sour face of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause...but are put on and off as the wind blows and the newspaper directs." Have the fortitude to treat this displeasure "as a trifle of no concernment." The displeasure is really beneath your notice.

The reason conformity is so damaging is that it "scatters your force." It takes the pure, strong, true expression you are and blurs it into feebleness and mediocrity.

But go about your business with a deep honesty, and your power shines through, your genius arises, your true goodness has a chance to show itself, and your creativity is set on fire.

Do not join any crowd. Every club or group tries to make each member a "retained attorney," locked into one perspective, chained to a set of beliefs that blind you to the truth. You can no longer just see. You are driven to justify a certain point of view, to uphold a fixed perspective, cutting away your freedom and cutting you off from a free expression of the immense intelligence you really are.

As a painful example of the sensation of being locked away from your own soul, consider the feeling you get when talking to people you don't feel comfortable with, wearing a forced smile, a painful smile, while you converse on topics that don't interest you. It makes your face hurt. The discomfort of it is a clear signal. In your dishonesty you have stuffed a towel into the tube through which your life and creative force flow, leaving you without power or comfort or peace or happiness.

Follow your deep whim. Do what you truly want to do — not your superficial, thoughtless impulses, but when you are here, now, being as nakedly honest with yourself as you can, speak and act from that unmasked honesty and your perceptions will strike a chord in the hearts of others, for the center of their Self converges with the center of yours.

People do and say things much of the time in the spirit of someone trying to make amends or to atone for a sin. They take actions as if to justify or excuse themselves. Their whole demeanor reeks of apology.

But I need no excuse. I'm not here to please the world. I'm here to live. My life exists as an end in itself, without needing justification. My life is for itself and not for a show.

If my motivations are base, so be it. Better that they are base and honest than lofty and phony.

My life should be unique and original. It should not be like any other and no apology is needed for that. Act from the center and your life is a saving grace, a triumph, a work of art, a cavalry charging over the hill to win the day.

You have the right to be what you are. Never allow the well-meaning people to make you pay for that privilege. You are what you are and you need no stamp of approval or sponsor to grant you the authority to be so.

All that needs to concern you is your own task, not what people think about it or you. This is difficult and may be the only defining difference between those who are great and those who are mediocre.

When you are alone, you can be yourself. When among your fellows, you are bended by their desire for you to be this or that. The ultimate attainment is to keep that solitary independence when among others.

Trust yourself. Don't concern yourself with what you have said or done in the past. Others have seen it and expect you, even insist, that you act that way in the future.

Set yourself free. Learn and grow and extend your understanding. Create yourself newly, freshly, honestly every day.

When your soul is moved, yield to it, even if it contradicts what you knew or thought in the past.

Do not try to be consistent. Trying to be consistent blocks the new creation that is constantly attempting to flow out of you. "Speak what you think today in words as hard as cannonballs, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today." Yes, you will be misunderstood. All great souls have suffered this indignity. You'll be in excellent company. You will be a cause, a creator, an architect of a new world, as all great souls have been who had the guts to see the world with honest eyes.

Act and speak from that honest place and when you look closely at what you've done, it may seem you spout contradictory statements while you try to express the profound paradox the truth encompasses. The course of a missile looks like a zigzag up close because it is constantly correcting its flight path. But when you look at it from a distance it flies straight and true to its mark. In the very same way, you will find that your honest expression will have a deeper, more intelligent trajectory than you could have realized from so close a perspective.

Our puny conscious mind cannot see the big picture. Our feeble efforts of willpower are completely outmatched by the grandeur of the will of the universe, and to second-guess it or to think you can edit it in-flight is the arrogance of the ignorant. Give up your effort to censure yourself. Be an honest, open expression and you will be surprised at the height of your knowing in the long run.

Be great enough to be true now, with self-trust, with self-reliance, with a self-sufficiency, independent of your own pet theories or the scolding fingers of others. Trust yourself and shine from the center and your genius will justify you in the end.

HEROES

The force of your independent character is surrounded by, as it were, an escort of angels — surrounded by all the great souls of history who have defied the status quo and acted from the source.

We respect and admire the brave heroes of the past because they were true to themselves. And in the end we will respect and honor those who do it now. Honor is not superficial. It is eternal and that's what makes it great. It does not try to please or appease, it does not try to win our respect, and so ultimately wins it.

Cultivate a profound indifference to circumstances, opinions, and authority. Do this and future generations will bring your original work to its full fruition. The world will follow you.

The reading of history is the reading of the biographies of a few strong people who took resolute action, often against tremendous popular resistance — resistance to nonconformity, resistance to genuine, original thoughts and actions.

Know your worth and keep your feet on the ground. Do not sneak around, afraid, as if you had no right to be what you are. Know your true worth and allow the source to express itself.

You see great works — statues, buildings, machines, books, and you feel belittled by them, put in your place, puny, unworthy. But you're looking at it all wrong. Their greatness awaits *your* judgment. Emerson wrote, "The picture waits for my verdict; it is not to command me, but I am to settled its claims to praise."

The state of humankind is like a king who has forgotten his place and wanders the world like a beggar. Don't make that mistake! Wake up, be what you are, express your genius and your originality.

Do not envy or feel inferior when you read of a great soul. So they were great. So what? Did they use up greatness? No! Your own actions have as much potential to affect the future if you would be exactly what you are — fully and truly.

When you express your unique gifts, the honor will be transferred to you just as readily.

Great souls have existed at all times since the beginning. There are no fewer great souls now than ever have been. In fact, the number is probably greater if the percentage stayed the same. You will find a startling similarity between all self-reliant souls of history, no matter what time and place they lived. What they share is that the great souls leave behind no classification into which others may fit. Anyone who is truly in the same category will not seem similar, but will be wholly unique.

We should look at the reverence we give to presidents and statesmen and the supersuccessful and realize it is the level of respect we should give to each other. These great people were ordinary folks who decided to take matters into their own hands, to fulfill their destinies — sometimes at great personal cost. Any one of us has a latent greatness if we would only break free of conformity.

THE SOURCE

All original action has an undeniable magnetism. Why? Think about it: The source of those original actions is the center and source of all things. That center is what can be trusted. That center is the source of genius, of moral strength, of self-discipline, and the source of all life and all aliveness.

At the center of you is the center of all things. That source of being and wisdom is not separate from all other things but emanates and expresses itself alike in all things. Yet we walk this earth feeling like an unconnected, isolated, self-contained individual.

Here is the source of action and thought. Here is the source of the highest form of inspiration. Emerson wrote, "We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us organs of its activity and receivers of its truth."

When we recognize justice or truth or goodness, we are not creating it. We are not putting it there, but merely opening to a perception of something that already exists. We allow ourselves (or not) to receive the recognition. We do not make it so by our acknowledgment.

Decisions, opinions, conclusions — these are deliberate acts. But when you look at a flower, whether or not you perceive its color is not up to you. Perception is

not under your voluntary control. The deliberate acts of our minds can be disputed, but perception is final and undeniable.

If I perceive something and point it out to someone else, they will perceive it also. And even if I am the first human to ever notice it, I have opened the way for future generations to notice it forevermore.

Although perceptions can be shared, what is perceived is always new, always now. Relying on old philosophies or dogmas misses the fact that all of the universe is being created now, and you need rely on nobody else to tell you what is. You can receive your knowing directly.

When a person recognizes the truth of something, all former teachings crumble to dust and blow away. The source is eternally now, and dissolves all past and future in its ever-emanating center.

If a person claims to know of divine matters but uses ancient language from another country, do not believe it. Why worship the past? The truth is here, now, as fully and completely as it has ever been. You need no ancient description of the color of the sky; you only need to look up. You can describe it however you want to describe it. Memorizing former descriptions misses the point entirely.

Do not be hesitant. Do not cower in shame or fear. Don't quote some wise man of former ages. Say boldly what you perceive now.

Let us hope we do not always think so highly of ancient teachings and obsolete languages. We are like children who memorize rules and ideas, struggling to remember the exact words. Later, when they come to understand more about the world, they can throw away those words and perceive the truths for themselves, saying it just as well from their own present understanding, in their own words. Let us do the same.

"If we live truly," wrote Emerson, "we shall see truly." Live a deeply honest life, and you will perceive what is. Then what old wisdoms need to be remembered? When you live truly, your experience will be original and new. Your experience will be a continual surprise and delight.

A deeply honest person does not remind you of anyone else. A deeply honest person's experience will be utterly unique and singular. You will not be following any known path because you are *making* a path. You will have no fear. You will have no hope. "Fear and hope are alike beneath it." You will have a tranquillity and serenity as you gaze upon the immensity of universal causation. All time, all space, all distance, all things will be seen through as inconsequential. A rigorous, unrelenting, bold honesty is the path to that ultimate level of sight.

THE WORLD AS IT IS

To clearly see the need for this philosophy of self-reliance, all you need to do is look at our modern world. We are, by and large, timid and easily disheartened. The truth scares us. Death scares us. The future scares us. And we are afraid of each other.

What we want is for someone to rise up and make things right, but what we see is that most people are seriously lacking real personal power. They're passive. They lack real purpose. They whine. They feel entitled to much more than their contribution merits. They have no backbone, no guts, no character.

Why? Because they've been beaten down by the opinions of others. They've conformed. And in conforming, they've lost their connection to their own selves. We have all done it. We have tried to avoid the battlefield where truth fights it out with the dark forces. We fear failure and we fear doing something original. If a young person does well in high school and doesn't go on to a good college, we fear for her future. If a young businessman fails, we think he is ruined. This is ridiculous. I am ruined or not, beaten or not, depending on what I say to myself. If I boldly think strongly, I'll pick myself up and go on. With this attitude, I can try and fail at many things and come out all right. If I took the attitude of our society to heart, I would give up at the first sign of failure, climb into a bottle, and complain loudly for the rest of my life.

We are not victims, we are creators. Maybe some great teacher will come along who will reveal to us our own power. The teacher would tell us we must detach ourselves from our reliance on the values and opinions of our culture. We must become independent. We must become self-reliant. If we would trust ourselves, we would find our powers multiplied. We have come to put the world right, and should be embarrassed by the sympathy of others. The moment you take genuine self-sourced and original action, nobody will pity you. They will admire and emulate you, now and in generations to come.

REVOLUTION

We need a revolution — a self-reliance revolution — a new level of trust in the divinity within each of us. Here are some areas where the revolution can be started in your own life:

1. LIVE IN THE PRESENT

Time doesn't exist at the core of all things as it emanates this instant. It is perfect at every moment — just what it is, complete, whole, and right now.

But we habitually ignore the present. We regret the past or yearn for it; we strain our minds to perceive the future; we dismiss the wonder of what is here now. There is one elemental truth that you must understand now, and re-understand every day: You can't be happy or strong until you live in the present, beyond time.

The ever-present creation of all life is always dynamic, always new. This eternal lifesource, when it is flowing through you, will be shut down by retiring, by attainment, by ending the quest and deciding you now have The Answer. It is opened back up again by re-entering the ever-changing river of existence. As Emerson put it, the soul *becomes*.

When you are present and becoming, you are one with the river, and so your actions have power. But hold still, and your power vanishes.

Ride that ever-flowing emanation with your deep honesty, and you are more powerful than kings and countries. People will appear to bend to you, to follow you, but they are not following you — they become the same sun as you are and shine forth light with the same light. Honesty is reality. Honesty is the creator, the ruler. Things are as real as they are honest.

Every honest action reveals a quality, an excellence, and you can't help but respect and admire it.

From this point forward, let us restrain our impulse to wander, to imitate, to envy. Let's look right here and express what we feel needs to be expressed the way we feel it ought to be expressed. We will "stun and astonish" the less honest with our simple expression of truth. They don't need to look any further than you: The divine pulse is right here, shining out of you into their face and they will feel an incomprehensible shock of recognition.

Next to the richness you are floating in, everything else is shabby and petty. Dive into your ocean within to swim in your indescribable wealth rather than trying to beg a cup of water from someone else.

2. SOLITUDE: A KEY

The ocean within can only be reached through solitude. The pressures, the desires, the opinions, the complaints, of others — even though we love each other — only cloud and obscure your vision. Solitude allows the dust to settle and the air to clear. Then you can see truly. Then you can attain the independence and strength and clarity that you will require if you wish to retain your honesty

while among people. Otherwise, your human inclination is to acquire the notions and prejudices of your friends and family.

Solitude will free your mind and ears and soul from the constant, unimportant interruptions. Learn to distance yourself from too much entanglement in the problems or goals of others. Certainly shine light where it may help, but their goals and problems are theirs, and yours are yours, and keeping that distinction is the only way it can work.

Remember this: Getting caught in the web of others can only be done with your consent. You give your consent out of weakness.

But no more.

Your solitude and your deep honesty will strengthen you and guide your attention vitally and healthfully.

3. RIGHT SPEECH

Another key in the quest of deep honesty is to simply try to speak truly.

Up until now, you have sometimes expressed agreement where you really disagreed, you have gone along with what you knew was wrong, you have failed to correct mistaken assumptions, you have restrained your honesty to save others' feelings. You have shut yourself off from your own freedom and power in order to keep them safe from a painful truth, or merely to keep them liking you. You have taken the golden heart of the universe and traded it for a "benefit" which it is beneath you to desire.

Throw away your pretense and enter reality. Say to the people you know: "I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you." No longer hide your likes and dislikes. Trust that "what is deep is holy." Do and say what truly and deeply delights you. Do and say what makes you feel serene and content at the core of your being. As Emerson put it, "I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inly rejoices me and the heart appoints." Not what superficially titillates, but that which resonates with bliss at the deepest and highest within you.

Emerson suggests you say to your friends and family, "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."

This new way of being, this discipline to speak the truth, will sometimes seem excessively harsh. But if you follow the path of honesty, you will ultimately enter

the flow of the river — you will ultimately live in reality instead of the tangle of lying, misleading, and pretending that passes for reality.

Yes, your honesty will cause pain. But will you sell your freedom and power to save someone from an unpleasant feeling? Especially when the feeling is an appropriate response to reality?

In time, if the person will consent to look, they will perceive the truth too, and thus may begin a life of honesty.

To others it may seem as though you have rejected all rules simply because you do not conform to the rules of your culture. But the discipline of honesty has its own strict code and profound principles, and if anyone thinks this is an easy path, let him try to keep the regimen for one day, and he will be set straight. Emerson wrote, "Truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity and has ventured to trust himself for a task-master. 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."

4. PRAYERS

When you pray for anything but the good of all, you are out of touch. Praying for some special favor is a demonstration of the lack of self-trust. That kind of prayer arises out of a lack of knowledge about the unity of all things. Prayer, if engaged in at all, should be a "contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view." It is the monologue of a grateful soul. It is the universe acknowledging itself.

When you live as an open expression of the mystery and grandeur of the universe, you will not beg for private favors in your prayers. You will see all action as prayer. Do not miss this point. Deep honesty will reveal the true way to pray: Take action.

Another form of misguided prayer is regretting the past. If there is some action you can take that will help the situation, then take it. Regret comes from a lack of self-discipline.

And sympathy falls into the same category. We sit down and pat the hands of those who bring trouble on themselves instead of speaking the truth boldly "in rough electric shocks" that might jar them out of their fog and self-created illusions and put them in touch with their own powerful soul.

The secret of success is simply this: Take pleasure in self-derived work. "Welcome evermore to gods and men is the self-helping man." People love and admire him because he does not need their love and admiration. We celebrate his triumphs because he persevered when everyone was against him.

Not only are our prayers an expression of a "disease of the will" but those principles we live by are an expression of an equally pathetic "disease of the intellect." For the most part, when I speak to someone, I am alone because I am not likely to be speaking to a deeply honest person. I'm not likely to meet the universe expressing itself through him. No. He will be following some creed or other, not of his own creation. He will be relying on the external rules created by others rather than trusting himself. He will recite "truths" he has borrowed from others. But each soul is an entirely new classification. Not a new member of an already-existing class. A new class. Each person is original — or at least *should* be! But people are, for the most part, followers. They do not create or initiate genuine actions, but copy and follow.

When an un-self-reliant person finds some new philosophy, she will think it is the end-all, be-all, the all-encompassing truth. It is natural to feel an enthusiasm for new ideas, new systems — at least for awhile because you can feel the new philosophy has expanded your understanding and the reach of your mind. A self-reliant soul, however, will outgrow the system and go beyond it. The weak mind will stop seeking and consider the new philosophy the only truth and will refuse to understand how anyone else could see the light without the particular teachings of this one master. But the light will shine on any open mind. It makes no narrow discriminations. It only requires honesty to open the door, and it will happily beam bright and warm into the humblest shack.

If our follower would become honest and self-reliant, the master's philosophy would crack at the edges and fall away, allowing the light to shine directly on this newly-honest soul.

5. TRAVELING

Another area to start this revolution of self-reliance is in the habit of traveling. It is ironic that we will travel thousands of miles to see great architecture rather than staying home and building our own great works — something the architects of these great foreign buildings obviously did.

Of course there is a place for travel, but not as a way of finding anything. You take *yourself* with you wherever you go, and if you are not at ease in your own home, you will not be at ease anywhere else. If you hope to find something greater than your own surroundings when you go traveling, you will be sadly disappointed. Greatness is everywhere, even where you are, if you would open your eyes and look. As Emerson wrote, "Traveling is a fool's paradise." You may travel to get away from yourself, but no matter how far you go, when you wake up in this new place and look in the mirror, there you are. You can't escape yourself.

6. IMITATION

The sixth area ripe for a self-reliant revolution is the disease of imitation, which is a kind of traveling of the intellect. We admire styles and ideas that seem foreign, from another country or another time. But in each place and time, great works were created then and there. The model was in the mind of the artist and not anywhere or anywhen else.

Remember this: Beauty and magnificence are as near to you as to anyone, and if you would decorate your house and your mind with what fits your own disposition, your own tastes, your own place and time, you will find it extraordinary and wonderful, fitting and satisfying.

"Insist on yourself," wrote Emerson, "never imitate." You can express your own talents every moment, and those talents have been accumulating power and refinement your entire life. But when you try to imitate or adopt the talents of another, you have only a superficial "half-possession."

Whatever you can do best, nobody can teach you but your own deep source and your own work and practice. Where was the genius who could have taught Shakespeare? Who could have taught Thoreau or Einstein or Edison? Every great soul is unique and original. What makes Thoreau great is that very part he could not borrow from anyone else. A new Thoreau could never be made by the study of Thoreau.

Do the task that calls to you and you cannot be too optimistic about the outcome. There is, right in this moment, a great work inside you — a work as awe-inspiring as the Great Pyramid, the 5th symphony, or the Theory of Relativity, but different from them all. The source of the universe is capable of infinite expression, and if it has the use of a new mouthpiece (from your newly-acquired deep honesty), it will not repeat itself. Why would it? If you had an infinite number of different things to say, why would you ever repeat yourself? Any true expression through you will be wholly new and original.

And if you think you are not that great, that you aren't capable of originality or greatness, think about this: If you have the power to understand what another great soul has expressed — if you understand those great words, if you grasp the beauty of a painting, if you recognize the genius of a piece of music — surely you also have the power to answer in the same tone of voice as an equal. If you are up to the level of understanding, you are on an equal plane, and can reply in kind. You may not know how to paint or write music, but you have a genius of expression with which you can reply. You and I have greatness inside us waiting to get out. Open the gate with deep honesty.

7. WHAT REALLY IMPROVES

The self-reliance revolution needs to revamp our ideas about improvement. You cannot improve "society." It changes, but the change is not improvement — for

everything that becomes better, something becomes worse. We get new forms of entertainment and they waste hours of our time, distancing us from our loved ones, making us feel isolated and alone in a world full of people. We get electricity and the lightbulb, and it throws our carefully-evolved biological system, attuned for eons to the earth's cycles of light and dark, out of balance. We get new modes of transportation and lose some health from our drop in exercise. We get labor-saving devices and then both parents have to work to pay for them all.

HOW TO BE HAPPY

Circumstances are insignificant and relatively inconsequential. We look to things, to property, to external situations to make us happy, to make us good, to make us feel satisfied or redeemed. These things cannot be gotten from circumstances or ownership of anything.

We have a tendency to make the mistake of measuring each other by what we *have* rather than by what we have *become*. But property is superficial. When you act from your center, you will probably acquire property, but it doesn't matter because the important gain is not material goods but a stronger character. You have become a more excellent channel for the universal will.

Another form of external property is our thirst for the agreement of others. We want large groups of people to believe as we do, and we feel stronger every time a new convert joins our group, whatever our group may be: vegetarian, democrat, positive thinker, whatever. But the nature of wisdom and power works in exactly the opposite way. You gain access to the universal expression only by letting go of the opinions, customs, rules, and systems of others and stand alone, original, self-reliant, self-trusting, self-sourced.

If you would release your fearful clinging to the wisdom of others and throw yourself on your own wits, you would instantly right yourself like a ship heeled over and suddenly becoming upright again. Your balance returns. Your power surges back up. Your weakness was caused by your lack of confidence in your own wisdom.

Don't rely on luck, either. Trust in the law of cause and effect. Do your work. Speak the truth. Live your life with deep honesty, and you have made luck irrelevant. The causes will produce their effects, luck or no luck.

And if some lucky good fortune comes your way — you win the lottery, your annoying neighbor moves away, the value of your stock suddenly rises — you may be tempted to think luck is on your side. Don't believe it. External circumstances have no lasting value. Deep honesty and only your deep honesty can bring you true satisfaction and contentment.