

Learning Self-Reliance with Ralph Waldo Emerson

Serah Welborn

Midwestern State University

Dr. Kirsten Lodge

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Becoming an atheist while living alone in a godly Texas village is an exercise in foolishness I do not well advise. Doing so as a college dropout with few work opportunities is even worse. Although a joke about cow-to-person ratios might emphasize the loneliness and frustration I experienced while in that setting, it was this space, combined with Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance," that allowed me to embrace uncertainty and return to school, this time to succeed as myself, not as the person I felt obligated to be.

Emerson's iron phrase, "Trust thyself," first found me while studying the American Romantic movement the fall of my junior year, at a time when I didn't trust myself very much at all. Instead, I made my momma happy by attending church and performing at student-led worship events every week. I was present, prayerful, and extremely judgmental; but beneath this feigned spiritual confidence was a rising self-awareness stirred by my review of Transcendentalism. Unlike the Beatnik sensualists that mixed physical ecstasy with nihilism in other discussion, Emerson showed a Christian respect for God as a wild, wholly omniscient force—an interpretation I loved for its freedom, somehow missing from my established avenues of faith.

In the West, the trajectory chosen at high school graduation is often based on an imagined self, especially that imagined by school, church, and family. I was taught by two of these that personal preference must bend to Biblical truths. Leaning on God also moved me to lean on academic infrastructure, my “chosen” adults, meaning that each proficiency and personality evaluation administered to me at school summed, through nebulous acronym, my character and ability. These second-hand measures of worth formed many aspects of my identity: When I performed well in the reading and English portions of the ACT exam, I assumed my spiritual calling would manifest through writing; When my Myers-Briggs tests read INFJ, I assumed consistent loyalty to my childhood values of faith and family would bring me happiness, just as I was taught by the Bible.

Sustaining this imagined self was fully possible, even profitable, within the religious communities of my university, and yet I experienced a severe, nameless resentment when alone, ignored whenever possible. Anxiety. A dream of cabin living in the rural Midwest suddenly seemed a more definitive goal than what my diminishing scholarship funds could buy me (which, at the time, was all the certainty of a Bachelor of Arts in English), and so I resolved to quit school, believing I needed to reset my priorities in a simpler setting. My mom felt the same way and invited me to live with her. I made it through the semester before breaking my lease and moving to Throckmorton, Texas, hoping to reaffirm my faith while studying forestry online.

I got part of what I wanted. Throckmorton is Transcendentalist perfection. Collarless dogs walk the streets, and some people have horses, even goats in their backyards. Unfortunately, like Emerson in Naples, I found no more peace in my new

surroundings than I had at school. Introductions to my neighbors included disclaimers, masks of a growing knowledge that anxious and fearful impulses had pushed me into joblessness, into caring for the family house instead of my studies. My apathy remained. Within the university and Throckmorton, both dreamy escapes from feelings yet unresolved, I had every symptom of discontent, described by Emerson as the “want of self-reliance.”

Being physically stuck in one location with few responsibilities gave me time to consider the substance of self. *Myself*, not the imagined one. Per Emerson, this substance is of Divine Innovation, a pure vein of genius which, if one never learns to stop exalting the word and works of others as mandated by convention, sours into wasted opportunity. Regret. In this, Emerson applies an interesting paradox: that originality means bold, uninfluenced thought, yet relies on its ability to voice “what [others] have felt all along.” To be inventive is not entirely a matter of saying something new and unique, but to do so as though one were in a *competition* where admonition is more important than the idea itself. The discoveries of others must always elicit remorse and jealousy from other people; shame, even, for not having been the first to say what everyone feels.

His words certainly shamed me. I was soon writing again—lots of poetry, some prose, all cognizant of Emerson’s command to “not seek for things outside [myself].” A narrow scope, perhaps, except that Emerson’s self, like God, includes all of nature and is capable of endless forms. Mine became the Devil’s advocate. I was suspicious of my emotions, seeing their role in the manipulation of my senses. No authorities previously accepted, including my own, were safe from scrutiny.

A side quest for modern readers of “Self-Reliance” is the nature of truth: Is it an unmined gemstone waiting behind the thick of the external self, or is it liquid, malleable according to circumstance? Moral ambiguity lurks in either choice. The Bible took this choice away from me in the past, but, because of Emerson, I allowed myself to hear my doubts. Could that sacred text be no more legitimate than if I were to write, “I am God,” on a restaurant napkin? Hadn’t I already dismissed the gods of other cultures using the same argument? While sacrilegious questions such as these scared me, I knew that this was the root of my inward upheaval, so terrifying that I had shut myself in my mother’s house, away from all progress.

A mind, once alive with doubt, is incapable of reversal. Emerson was now a torn-up paperback on my bedside table, murmuring constant warnings: “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.”

The term *crisis* is not arbitrarily paired with *identity*. When one dares to ask, “What is it all for?” she also asks, “What is there to lose?” Self-discovery, then, is a grueling process by which, in observation of the skydiver and firefighter, the individual can experience real danger. Emerson correctly indicates that this route, more than any other, bears the potential for social ostracization (“O father, O mother, O wife, O brother, O friend, I have lived with you after appearances hitherto...”), and as my independent identity became stronger, more secular, I feared what those closest to me would do. My absences from church and renewed efforts to get an apartment were not ignored. My stepfather spent long moments at my doorway, sad-eyed and silent; my mom asked to pray with me. I signed a lease to a government-owned apartment at the first opportunity, my job across the street in a Baptist daycare.

It was here that my definition of self-reliance began to diverge from Emerson's. For example, to accept one's mistakes requires humility, the acceptance of all outcomes despite negative consequence, a vulnerability akin to strength—all outside the masculine stereotype Emerson uses to personify Independence. Furthermore, Emerson speaks discouragingly of nostalgia, describing it as a rotting corpse the compliant carry with them. I disagreed with this comparison because, at least in the metaphor of medicine, the "corpse of memory" is useful to the present self. It is the tantalizing rhetoric of cults that tells people their pasts have no value, that they can somehow radically and entirely change habit in one hour, provided they accept so-and-so's teaching of what is good. I had seen this at home and in many religious settings first-hand, and was wary thereof.

Admitting my atheism to my family caused a series of rejections. My mom blamed my education and accused me of moral corruption. Texts poured in from my younger brother, telling me that I belonged to Satan. To cope, I decided to switch my online degree plan from forestry to, once again, English.

This irony looked me straight in the eye every time I passed a mirror. Had I not left this same degree, not to mention scholarships and strong academic relationships, at Midwestern State University? I cringed as I remembered the goodbye notes I wrote to my professors, each alive with unrealistic statements without clause for failure. Alongside society, Emerson names pragmatic consistency as a rival to self-reliance, and now my progress was halted because of my fear of appearing wishy-washy. I deliberated for another three months as alternative methods of study closed to me, until

even my job was threatened by downsizing, before I decided to act against my pride. I had, after all, nothing more to lose.

As a secular woman and “bold sensualist,” I’m not sure Emerson would very much like me. I’m not sure it would matter. My new perspective sees that those outside the Christian tradition are excluded from Emerson’s arguments, and for good reason—he models Jesus’ charismatic leadership as the ideal, saying that “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius...” but, in the present world, this definition is more similar to that of ignorance. *Genius* often belongs to confidence, to the love for one’s ideas despite criticisms from the crowd, but not to bigheaded assumption. Nested in these problems is Emerson’s assumption of Universal Truth, a natural order capable of disruption, which well contextualizes the man-versus-the-world argument in his discussion of creativity. Still, what makes the liberal arts compelling as a method of study is its holistic approach to history. “Self-Reliance” is therefore an excellent example of revolutionary thought in the mid-1800s, and, since traditionalism will ever be slow to disappear, Emerson’s idealistic, fundamentalist arguments may yet serve as a starting point for self-discovery for others as it was for me.

Works Cited

Emerson, Ralph W. "Self-Reliance." *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed.

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