

13 Sublime Quotes from Emerson on Self-Reliance

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is considered the founding father of the American Transcendental movement.

The Harvard-educated scholar, godfather to William James and mentor to H.D. Thoreau, was both brilliant and controversial. His “Divinity School Address” in 1838, in which he discounted Biblical miracles and the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, precipitated outrage and an exile from Harvard that lasted several decades.

A few years later he published his famous essay “[Self-Reliance](#).” Though the work was praised in Europe, Emerson’s aunt called the work a “strange medley of atheism and false independence.”

The essay *is* odd. A paean to humanism and non-conformity, it hums with so much (faux?) optimism that it rings hollow. But context helps explain Emerson’s unusual hyper-enthusiasm of the self.

Both “Self-Reliance” and the “Divinity School Address” were written not long after the death of Emerson’s wife, Ellen, who left this world at the tender age of 20. The death had a profound impact on the young Emerson. He quit the ministry. He traveled the world but found little comfort in beauty of the Mediterranean or the treasures of antiquity (see quote #4). Neither the scriptures nor the works of Plato seemed to provide the answers he sought.

So instead he turned inward. The self, Emerson came to believe, was the source of truth and creativity. Knowledge could be gleaned by the great thinkers of the past, but the fountain of genius sprang from within. Here’s a snippet of his philosophy in 13 quotes:

1. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day.

2. Discontent is the want of self-reliance: it is infirmity of will.

3. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.

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

5. Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

6. For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure.

7. Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.

8. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

9. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, – that is

genius.

10. I do not wish to expiate, but to live.

11. What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in action and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness.

12. Our reading is mendicant and sycophantic. In history our imagination plays us false.

13. Let us affront and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times and hurl in the face of custom and trade and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history, that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor working where a man works; that a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the center of things.

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