

# Ralph Waldo Emerson on the Wall Which Separates Us from Hope

While a vast majority of Americans [believe in God](#) or a “universal spirit,” many feel they have trouble connecting to God. A Google search shows almost  $\frac{1}{2}$  billion results for phrases such as “I don’t feel close to God,” or “I can’t feel God’s presence.”

In her book [Coming to Life](#), Polly Berends observes, “If we are looking for something, clearly we don’t think we have it. So if we are looking for peace of mind, security, love, fulfillment, these must be qualities we think we lack.”

How do we try to fill that lack? Today, how many times have you reached for a “connection?” How many times have you checked Facebook or email? Notice that behind the compulsive checking is, as [Brant Hansen puts it](#), “a sense of hope.” But what are we hoping for? Are we hoping to fill a sense of lack?

A sense of lack generates anxious feelings. We may cope by excessive shopping, eating, or other compulsive behavior. We may seek ways to draw attention to ourselves. What if we are looking in the wrong direction as we seek a solution for the universal need to feel connected?

Minister, essayist, lecturer, and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson was among the most influential writers of the 19th Century.

Emerson would ask us to notice how much we rely on our calculating-self, the part of our thinking preoccupied with comparing, evaluating, wanting, and designing our next move. Today we call that calculating-self our ego—the insatiable, internal narrator exerting itself to direct our life.

Emerson has good news for us; there is a better way to walk in the world than listening to the voice of our ego. In his essay [The Over-Soul](#) Emerson tells us our calculating-self misrepresents who we truly are: “What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself.”

Emerson points us in another direction, to live as an expression of our soul eternally connected to the “fountain of action and of thought”:

“Him [the calculating-self] we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love.”

Of the wall of separation from God, Emerson writes, there is “no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins.” Yet, most of us experience a wall; that sense of separation from God. Our entire self-concept is based on a problematical stream of thinking that creates the experience of separation from God.

## The Wall We Build

There are many ways we erect a wall separating us from God. The sense of lack widens as we get lost in our thinking. *If only I had a shorter commute, a better manager, a partner who is more supportive, children who are more grateful*, the list goes on and on. Our suffering is self-inflicted.

Notice when you chew on [endless grievances](#) and judgments. So eager are we to chew on grievances that we seek out news of celebrities and politicians whose bad behavior we disdain.

Notice when your thinking drifts to the past or anticipates the future, taking you away from the present moment. [What if our experience of life depends](#) on the thoughts to which we pay

attention? In his essay [Self-Reliance](#), Emerson observed, “Man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future.”

Notice how often you grind away at solving problems. Rather than get caught up in mental churning, Emerson advises it is better to allow the infinite intelligence of God to inspire us:

“Here are the lungs of that inspiration which giveth man wisdom, and which cannot be denied without impiety and atheism. We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.”

When we find goodness in our lives, Emerson informs us, “we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beam.” Emerson’s ideas challenge us to examine our calculating-self, the personal power we believe is the source of our safety and goodness.

Our personal power is weak. Emerson advises us to “let the soul have its way through us.” For those who believe in running off their personal power, Emerson observes, “The weakness of the will begins when the individual would be something of himself.” Relying on personal power is like trying to run your vacuum cleaner when it is unplugged.

## Mental Silence Tears Down the Wall

Mahler’s Second Symphony is one of the grandest in the classical music canon. Recently my wife and I were fortunate to hear this spectacular and ethereal music.

As the final notes rang out, the audience rose to their feet with thunderous applause. The conductor acknowledged individual musicians in the orchestra.

As the piccolo player stood, from behind me, ringing out over the tumult, a man called out to his companion, “The best

piccolo I ever heard was at the end of the first movement of Shostakovich's Tenth."

Did his companion find him boorish or was she eager to be "educated?" Who knows? I received a lesson: The man caused me to pause to remember how often my calculating-self robs me of the moment. Tedious thoughts of comparison may arise, but we don't have to grab hold of them.

God's voice is quieter than the voice of our ego. Are you mentally busy all day long? If so, notice how your thinking keeps God away. Notice too, how reluctant you are to relinquish habitual thinking patterns. To rely on this stream of thinking, Emerson would caution, is to choose against God.

When we willingly admit just how much of our distress is coming from our thinking, we open up a quiet space in the present moment. Our minds begin to still. In that relative silence, Emerson instructs, you will hear the "right word": "There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word."

Emerson's path to God requires the addition of nothing. The wall of separation from God is nothing more than a manifestation of our mental churning. Subtract the mental churning and we open a space in which we breathe in the wisdom, virtue, and love flowing from our connection with God. God's grace, Emerson would say, is our birthright.

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