

Emerson speaks

Few people have so profoundly influenced the whole of American life and literature as Ralph Waldo Emerson—essayist, poet, philosopher, and man of God—the “Seer of Concord.”

Born in 1803, Emerson came of a long line of sturdy pioneers and strong Puritan clergymen. His father died young, leaving five small sons, whom the mother, despite poverty, was determined to educate. Ralph Waldo Emerson attended Harvard College, but self-directed reading rather than a college curriculum formed and fed his intellectual life. After college he taught a few years, then entered Harvard Divinity School. In 1829 he became assistant pastor of the Second Church of Boston; but after three years he resigned his pulpit because he could not administer the sacraments.

The turning point of his life came on his European journey in 1833 when he met Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle, and began to read Goethe and the German idealists. In 1836 he published the essay on *Nature* and the following year delivered the address, *The American Scholar*, considered an intellectual Declaration of Independence. His first series of essays appeared in 1841. From then on he settled into a well-ordered life of writing, lecturing and traveling; his circle of readers widened and his influence grew. During the 1850's and 60's he was intensely aware of the events transpiring around him and he was especially concerned with the slavery issue. By 1870 his work was almost done and he knew it was time “to trim his sails to the storm of time.” He lived until 1882.

The philosophy which permeated all of Emerson's poems and essays is timeless; he speaks to us today:—

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Dorothy Lloyd Gilbert and Leonard S. Kenworthy

ON MAN AND HIS SOUL . . .

"We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meanwhile within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One."

"The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth."

"The soul gives itself, alone, original and pure, to the Lonely, Original and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads and speaks through it."

"There is a serene providence which rules the fate of nations, which makes little account of time, little of one generation or race, makes no account of disasters, conquers alike by what is called victory, thrusts aside enemy and obstructions, crushes everything immoral as inhuman, and obtains the ultimate triumph of the best race by the sacrifice of everything that resists the moral laws of the world."

"Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition; and a religion by revelation to us and not the history of theirs?"

"It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake. The true Christianity—a faith like Christ's in the infinitude of man—is lost."

"Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and theft."

ON MAN AND MAN . . .

"A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of Nature."

"Our chief want in life is somebody who shall make us do what we can."

"The ornament of a house is the friends who frequent it."

"I must feel pride in my friend's accomplishments as if they were mine, and a property in his virtues."

"Our friendships hurry to short and poor conclusions because we have made them a texture of wine and dreams, instead of the tough fibre of the human heart."

"I wish that friendship should have feet, as well as eyes and eloquence. It must plant itself on the ground before it vaults over the moon."

"Friendship requires that rare mean betwixt likeness and unlikeness that piques with the presence of power and of consent in the other party."

"Respect so far the holy laws of this fellowship as not to prejudice its perfect flower by your impatience for its opening."

"The essence of friendship is entireness, a total magnanimity and trust."

"The only reward of virtue is virtue; the only way to have a friend is to be one."

"A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. I am arrived at last in the presence of a man so real and equal, that I may drop even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought, which men never put off, and may deal with him with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another."

ON MAN AND HIMSELF . . .

"There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better or for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till."

"Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous half possession."

"We pass for what we are. Character teaches above our wills."

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

"Nature arms each man with some faculty which enables him to do easily some feat impossible to any other, and thus makes him necessary to society."

"Discontent is the want of self-reliance; it is the infirmity of will."

"Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string."

"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."

"Let a man then know his worth and keep things under his feet."

"We see the foaming brook with compunction; if our own life flowed with the right energy, we should shame the brook."

ON MAN AND HIS EDUCATION . . .

"The main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of a man."

"Every moment instructs, and every object; for wisdom is infused into every form."

"The scholar is that man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future. He must be an university of knowledges."

"The scholar loses no hour which the man lives."

"The man may teach by doing, and not otherwise. If he can communicate himself he can teach, but not by words. He teaches who gives, and he learns who receives. There is no teaching until the pupil is brought into the same state or principle in which you are; a transfusion takes place; he is you and you are he; then is teaching, and by no unfriendly chance or bad company can he ever quite lose the benefit."

"Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? . . . They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul."

"But they (colleges) can only serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from afar every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of youth on flame."

"Be the opener of doors to those who come after you."

ON MAN AND NATURE . . .

"He (man) can not be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time."

"Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us."

"Nature is loved by what is best in us."

"The inhabitants of cities suppose that the country landscape is pleasant only half the year. I please myself with the graces of the winter scenery, and believe that we are as much touched by it as by the genial influences of summer. To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour, a picture which was never seen before and which shall never be seen again."

"Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will."

"But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars."

"Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man; only let his thoughts be of equal greatness."

"We can never see Christianity from the catechism—from the pastures, from a boat in the pond, from amidst the songs of wood birds we possibly may."

"At night I went out into the dark and saw a glimmering star and heard a frog, and Nature seemed to say, Well, do not these suffice? Here is a new scene, a new experience. Ponder it, Emerson, and not like the foolish world hanker after thunders and multitudes and vast landscapes, the sea or Niagara."

"The near explains the far. The drop is a small ocean. A man is related to all nature. This perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries."

EMERSON, THE POET, SPEAKS . . .

"Go where he will, the wise man is at home.
His hearth the earth—his hall, the azure
dome;
Where his clear spirit leads him, there's his
road
By God's own light illumined and fore-
showed."

* * *

"As the bird trims her to the gale,
I trim myself to the storm of time,
I man the rudder, reef the sail,
Obey the voice at eve, obeyed at prime:

* * *

'Lowly faithful, banish fear,
Right onward drive unharmed;
The port, well worth the cruise, is near,
And every wave is charmed'."

* * *

"Nor knowest thou what argument
Thy life to thy neighbor's creed has lent.
All are needed by each one;
Nothing is fair or good alone."

* * *

"Then I said, 'I covet truth;
Beauty is unripe childhood's cheat;
I leave it behind with the games of youth:—
As I spoke, beneath my feet
The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,
Running over the club-moss burrs;
I inhaled the violet's breath;
Around me stood the oaks and firs;
Pine-cones and acorns lay on the ground;
Over me soared the eternal sky,
Full of light and of Deity;
Again I saw, again I heard,
The rolling river, the morning bird;—
Beauty through my senses stole;
I yielded myself to the perfect whole."

ON TRUE LIVING . . .

"To finish the moment, to find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom."

"Do not be timid and squeamish about your actions. All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better. What if they are a little coarse and you may get your coat soiled or torn? What if you do fail, and get fairly rolled in the dirt once or twice? Up again you shall never be so afraid of a tumble."

"We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life."

"What you are speaks so loud that I can not hear what you say."

"We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken."

"Life only avails, not the having lived."

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