

**Musings on the *Universality of Man's Spiritual Striving*  
Exerpts from *Self-Reliance* by Ralph Waldo Emerson**



*“Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Our exploration this past year of the “universality of man’s spiritual striving and its rich variety of expression in the religions, philosophies and literatures (Aim # 3) reveals a great diversity of thought, but a common focus on the capacity of human beings to seek the truth and value the good. From the ancient teachings of the Indian text, the Katha Upanishad, to the theoretical postulates of the Higgs field in contemporary physics and observations of neuroplasticity in brain studies, the human ability to expand knowledge and creatively describe invisible layers of reality became evident. A long lineage of teachers, Plato, Apollonius of Tyana, Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll, Emerson, Thoreau, Gandhi, and Ramana Maharishi, offered guidance. Impressionist painters and traditional icons of religious art, East and West revealed insights into the search for spiritual experience. The co-existence of classical and Sufi values in Islam were explored as well as the tension between faith and reason in the founding vision of America. Our journey took us to the mountains of Bhutan, to the ancient Indonesian kingdom of Cirebon with a long tradition of music and to the beautiful habitat of wolves and other living things in Yellowstone Park. Everywhere was evidence of translating what the creative imagination discovered through its striving into a rich expression of what is universally valuable and into an affirmation of ethical responsibility. The vast potential of the human mind to meaningfully take such a journey is explained by the great visionary of 19th century America, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay “Self-Reliance”. The following passages both express and explain how a human life can be an enriching journey supported by boundless realms of Nature with multiple pathways to truth rather than a deadening wait in a station of social conformity. – *Editor*

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## Self-Reliance

"Ne te quaesiveris extra."

"Man is his own star; and the soul that can  
Render an honest and a perfect man,  
Commands all light, all influence, all fate;  
Nothing to him falls early or too late.  
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,  
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."

*Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's Honest Man's Fortune*

I hope in these days we have heard the last of conformity and consistency. Let the words be gazetted and ridiculous hence-forward. Instead of the gong for dinner, let us hear a whistle from the Spartan fife. Let us never bow and apologize more. A great man is coming to eat at my house. I do not wish to please him; I wish that he should wish to please me. I will stand here for humanity, and though I would make it kind, I would make it true. 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 wherever a man works; that a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the centre of things. Where he is, there is nature. He measures you, and all men, and all events. Ordinarily, every body in society reminds us of somewhat else, or of some other person. Character, reality, reminds you of nothing else; it takes place of the whole creation. The man must be so much, that he must make all circumstances in-different. Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his design; — and posterity seem to follow his steps as a train of clients.

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The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self, on which a universal reliance may be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of in-dependence appear? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For, the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source whence their life and being also proceed. We first share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause. Here is the fountain of action and of thought. 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

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immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm.

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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. That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. No man yet knows what it is, nor can, till that person has exhibited it. Where is the master who could have taught Shakspeare? Where is the master who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton? Every great man is a unique. The Scipionism of Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow. Shakspeare will never be made by the study of Shakspeare. Do that which is assigned you, and you cannot hope too much or dare too much. There is at this moment for you an utterance brave and grand as that of the colossal chisel of Phidias, or trowel of the Egyptians, or the pen of Moses, or Dante, but different from all these. Not possibly will the soul all rich, all eloquent, with thousand-cloven tongue, deign to repeat itself; but if you can hear what these patriarchs say, surely you can reply to them in the same pitch of voice; for the ear and the tongue are two organs of one nature. Abide in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and thou shalt reproduce the Foreworld again.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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