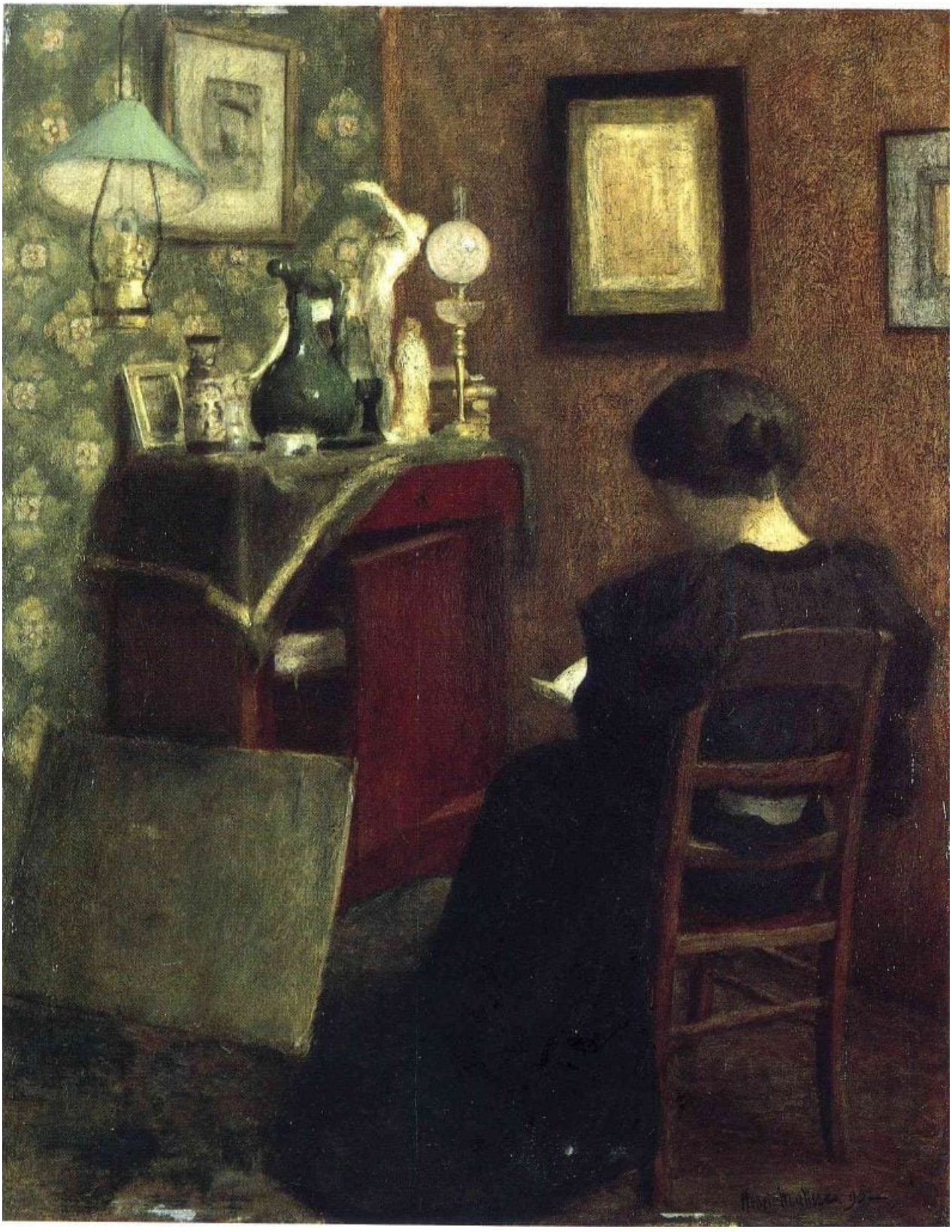
Do it Yourself with Ralph Waldo Emerson

Notes on Life Repair

by Cristina Nehring (July 2025)



The Reader (Henri Matisse, 1894)

Introduction

Ralph Waldo Emerson has fallen into disrepute. Once considered

“the best of the Americans”—the best of American thinkers, that is— by Friedrich Nietzsche, he is considered today the business of antiquarians. The books of the man who in the 19th century commanded standing audiences of thousands wherever he deigned to make a lecture stop in America or Europe, now gather heavy layers of dust on library shelves.

Why is this? To be sure, Emerson’s essays are dense and complex. And yet modern critics are always at pains to “complicate” them further. The complicators are a noble bunch who have written and edited good books over the last half century, starting with Joel Porte’s 1982 selection of Emerson’s journals comprised to overcome the “eviscerated, bowdlerized” 1926 edition by Bliss Perry. This is a venerable intention and Emerson would have saluted it. In a recent *New York Times* review the author of a new Emerson biography is complimented as “puncturing the image of Emerson as an icon—an “overly cheerful idealist” and “drag[ging] Emerson down from [his] pedestal to reveal the complex, doubt-ridden, shape-shifting flesh and blood man behind the effigy.”

So much the better—Emerson is anything but “overly cheerful.” His essays are often harrowing, often dark. Even in his more rousing texts, Emerson is uncompromising. In eulogies of friendship and love he declares that “We walk alone in the world … Like two globes we can touch only at a point.” In reviews of the contemporary church—of which he was once himself a minister—he notes that it is sick to death, that “it seems to totter to its fall, almost all life extinct … We shrink, as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift but smite and offend us.”

But in all this complexifying of an already complex figure we don’t want to lose what is most valuable about Emerson—his ability to speak to us about his issues—and our issues—in words arresting, inspiring and epigrammatic. In dismissing the “Sage of Concord” we don’t want to thrust away the arm that

this very human, very fallible man extends to us not only to guide us but, in truth, to steady his own gait. For in writing to us, Emerson writes always also to himself; he writes as he says “not only out of experience but out of aspiration and antagonism.” He writes, that is, to tell himself what he needs to hear as much as what we need to hear. A timid man in social settings, he talks to us, most famously perhaps, of self-reliance, of assertiveness. A frightened man, he brings us the consolation he needs himself.

We do not want to lose this consolation. We do not want to lose what made Emerson the foremost intellectual of his century, the first philosopher created by the United States, a man to whom the crowds flocked on two continents, the bearer of hard-earned truths and strong-tasting elixirs, the man who could help repair our lives and his own.

This text takes the core essays of Emerson’s career—the *First Series* (1841), the *Second Series* (1844), *The American Scholar* (1937) and *The Divinity School Address* (1838) —and identifies a number of life lessons in them that are relevant to our historical moment and which it subsequently attempts to flesh out with pertinent quotations from essays, journals and letters.. Written during Emerson’s most productive period when he was a young man in his mid-30s and early 40s, the *First* and *Second Series* contain all of the essays for which Emerson is famous with the notable exception of his early lectures, the *American Scholar* and the *Divinity School Address* which have been added to the mix considered.

As Emerson’s titles—*Experience, Spiritual Laws, History*—are at best indirectly related to the subjects he covers and at worst opaque—I have used, as an organizing principle for this piece titles for life lessons to be gleaned from his essays as a whole. It is my hope that these sections will illustrate just how much Emerson has to teach us in our contemporary age, how little he is dated, how vivid, electrifying and memorable are the words illustrating his points once they are gathered

together, and how winningly modest is that slender man behind those points.

I. Read Actively

For the author of many books, Emerson is surprisingly hard on books. Books are dangerous, Emerson often says; not because they can challenge our presumptions, as the received wisdom goes, but because they can actually lull us to sleep! “Books,” he states in *The American Scholar*, “are the best of things, well-used; abused among the worst.” In order to get the most out of reading we must not approach our books passively but with robust thoughts of our own, opinions of our own, lived experience of our own. “There is a right way of reading,” Emerson declares, “so it be sternly subordinated. Books are for a scholar’s idle times,” he claims:. “When he can read God directly the hour is too precious to be wasted among other men’s transcripts of their readings….Only when…the sun is hid…we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East where the dawn is.”

A learned person, according to Emerson, is an active person; a person who goes, like Emerson’s friend Henry David Thoreau, to live in a cabin in the woods to see if he can survive in nature. The learned person is someone who goes, like Emerson’s friend Margaret Fuller, to report on revolutions in other countries; the learned person is the one who, like Emerson himself, circumnavigates the globe giving lectures, meeting fellow-thinkers and raising children; who does not relegate life to reading but reading to life. Reading, as Emerson says, is what you do after (or in the middle of) a full day of living.

It is never the primary occupation of a scholar; it is always the secondary occupation. Unless you bring a mindful of impressions and ideas to your books, they are likely to leave

you as emptyhanded as if you had never read them in the first place. “He who would bring out the wealth of the Indies must carry in the wealth of the Indies,” Emerson writes.

You have to bring into your library what you would like to take out of it. If you bring nothing in, the best statements, the best insights are likely to leave you cold. If you are reading correctly, reading is a matter of recognition, not discovery. You recognize, in a text, your own “rejected thoughts,” —or your own half-formed thoughts, or indeed your own fully fledged thoughts, memorably articulated. If you go in as a blank slate you will leave as a blank slate. Thus the importance of doing things, not just reading things. Whether it be a sport or a piece of social work, it is “pearls and rubies to your discourse,” Emerson asserts, and thus to your reading. As a result, “I do not see how any man can afford for the sake of his nerves or his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake … The true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by as a loss of power. The scholar loses no hour which the man lives.”

In the absence of an active life, “meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, with Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote their books…” We must trust our own life impressions or else—God forgive us— “instead of Man Thinking we have the bookworm.”

Thought requires two parts running, one part sitting still. And even when we come to sit still with a hardback in hand, we must wrestle with it, compare and contrast it with our own life, argue with it. Is this our own impression, we must ask of ourselves; does this square with our own thoughts? Only then, only if it does, can we quote it, assimilate it, accept it. If our impression is the reverse, our books must be the incentive to articulate our dissent. This is, indeed, one of the principal services that books render us: to prompt us to

formulate our own disagreement. “We write from aspiration and from antagonism as much as from experience,” says Emerson. Reader and writer are not spectator and actor but one wrestler and another wrestler. To read you must be willing to write. To witness you must be willing to testify.

Failing that willingness, we make “preposterous use of books,” according to Emerson. We can say of ourselves: “He knew not what to do and so *he read*” —a sad and a sorry state of affairs. “My time,” we should say to ourselves instead, “should be as good as [the authors’s] time, my fact, my net of relation as good as theirs.”

Unless we cherish our extra-lexical activities we are not good enough to argue or to champion the stuff of our readings. We must be human beings before we are bookworms. Indeed, instead of being bookworms, we must be book-athletes; we must be willing to grapple our authors’ statements to the ground or to raise them overhead to the sun of our own knowledge.

This is the meaning of what Emerson calls “creative reading” —for which one must be just as inventive, he says. as for “creative writing.” The alternative? That we be, as Emerson says, simply too courteous, “too civil with books.” Take it from a lifetime reader like him—and a lifetime writer: Books are worth more than our politeness; they are worth our rough strife; they are worth our combativeness and our recognition, our war and our (hard-earned) peace.

II. Trust Your Own Intuition; Don’t Quote Me!

—Or don’t quote me exclusively! Emerson reminds us again and again. You have everything you need in your private toolkit to formulate your own theses. If a quotation of mine can help you out, so much the better, but if it is an impediment to your thought—or simply alien—let it slide off your bedside table. Instead, believe in yourself; “as [Sir Philip] Sidney says,

‘Look into your heart and write.’” Sidney was a famous Renaissance love poet and essayist who made introspection his selling point. Write *of* yourself, he intones, with Emerson, and, at the same time, write *to* yourself. “He that writes to himself, writes,” after all, according to Emerson, “to an eternal public.”

This, arguably, is what Emerson does throughout his essays. This is why, as is frequently noted by critics, he does not always preach what he has modeled perfectly in his own life, but *au contraire*, what he needs, him*self*, to *learn*. When he urges us to be self-reliant in social situations, he is urging himself to be self-reliant. He is not saying that he *is* always self-reliant; quite the reverse.

In fact, Emerson is almost always awkward in company: He complains to his journal, that he is “’always on stilts.’ … Most of the persons I see in my own house, /I see across a gulf. I cannot go to them or they come to me. Nothing can exceed the frigidity and the labor with such.” (Sometimes, in an effort to be self-reliant, he put people off by seeming simply and strangely “serene” in the face of contradiction and disagreement. On other—more numerous—occasions he simply appeared clumsy. Even his famous lectures (on which his essays are based) were not so much delivered confidently and passionately as delivered stoically. “Like a perpendicular coffin,” was one person’s description of Emerson as he lectured.

Why would we listen to the words of this “perpendicular coffin?” Because he directs us back to ourselves. He does not claim to give advice; he claims to send us back to where we came from: “If,” he says, “we would know what the great God speaketh, we must go into our closet and shut the door.” If Emerson seems to contradict himself—having previously said that we should court action and movement—well, he contradicts himself. “A foolish consistency,” he says elsewhere, “is the hobgoblin of little minds.”

Both of Emerson's statements manage to be true: first, that we should court action; second, that to really think or write about what we've learned from our active lives, we should court isolation. We should not inquire after what other people have said—be they sages of yore or not-yet-born prophets—we should write what we ourselves think. "Dante's praise," he intones, "is that he dared to write his own autobiography in colossal cipher…" Back in the 14th century, the author of *The Divine Comedy*—detailing in the first person his descent into hell, purgatory, and heaven, is but a rewriting of his own life and it is for that—not for his exoticism—that he commands the attentions of readers whose own life he recounts simply by relating his own.

"By going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secret of all minds," says Emerson. The deeper we go into our own souls the more we go into the souls of our sisters and brothers. For beyond our superficial differences, Emerson holds, we are all the same. There is a universal mind, an "oversoul" in which we all have a part. Our access may be different but our destination is the same. Thus the more deeply we trust ourselves, the more accurately we capture the spirits of our brethren. All we need do is persist in our excavation of ourselves: "Doubt not, Emerson warns, "O poet, but persist. Say it is in me but will out. Stand thee, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted—stand and strive until at last that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own emerges."

Don't attend to people poking fun at you; trust that the farther you proceed, you poet (and every woman and man, to Emerson, is a potential poet) the less your neighbors will sneer; the more they will realize that you are onto something. We must only get beyond the superficial currents; we must only dive below the roaring surf to find the same, calm deep-sea treasures as our fellow swimmers.

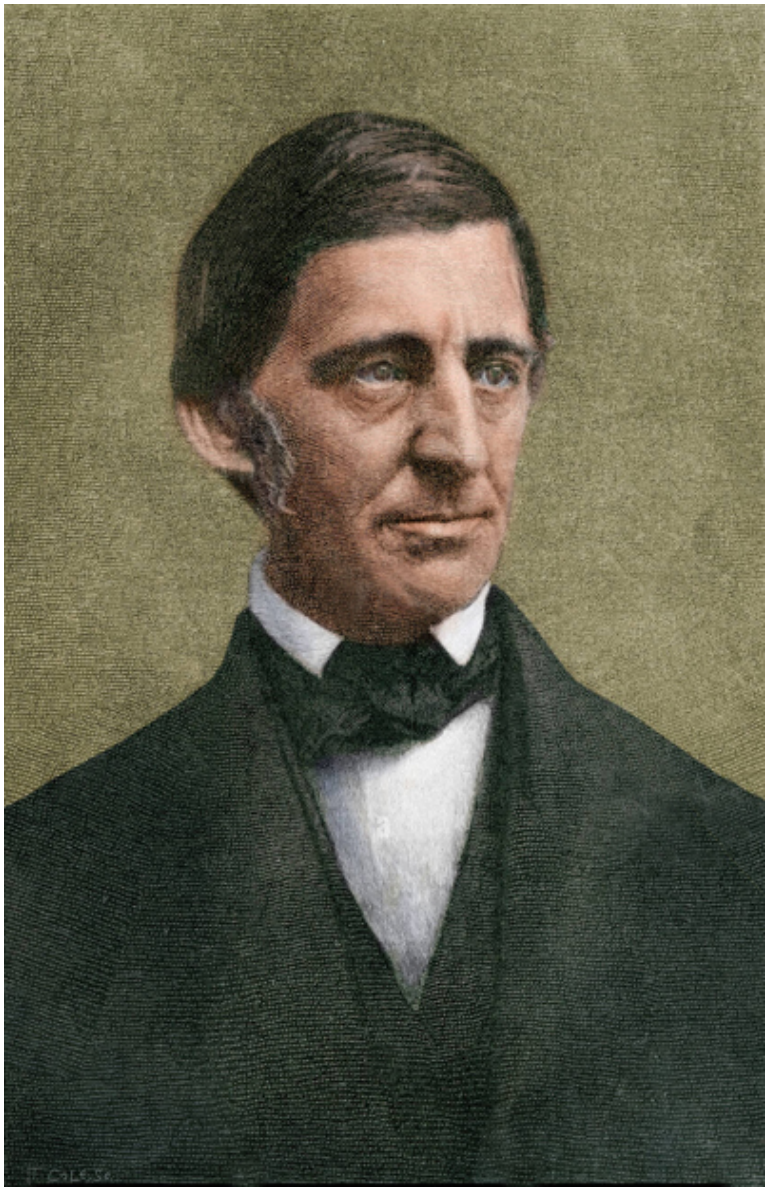
We don’t always know where we are going but we must persevere: Oftentimes indeed, “we do not know today whether we are busy or idle… Our life looks trivial and we shun to read it” –but we must read it. It is not because it is only ours that we must disdain it but the reverse; the truth most peculiarly *ours* shall be the *universal* truth, if Emerson has any say in the matter. So, “Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to the iron string”: trust your intuition, trust your tale; trust your faith and you shall tell the world what it thinks itself in its private chambers. By following your own instinct, you discover the instinct of mankind– “for the inmost, in time, becomes the outmost and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpet of the Last Judgment.” Conclusion? “To believe your own thought; to believe that what is true for you in your own private heart, is true for all men, that is genius… Speak your latent conviction and it will be the universal sense.” The problem is that most women and men dismiss their thought too readily because it is theirs; that’s why “in every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works have no more affecting lesson than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility, then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought all the time and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinions from another.”

With “shame”? Weren’t we supposed to recognize our opinions in the work of another with delight? Isn’t that a key joy of active reading? Well, the hobgoblin is still here, the hobgoblin of consistency; he is always there in Emerson lamenting that every two of his maxims do not necessarily, on the surface, go together. And yet, after an initial start, we realize that these two maxims do go together: We are at once gratified to distinguish our thought in the work of another and we are simultaneously somewhat shamed. Why hadn’t *we* had

the sagacity to set this truth down heretofore? The tickle of pleasure and the bite of shame coexist and make the reading process an ever bittersweet occupation, never a bland one, never a merely saccharine one.

Into ourselves with hope and trust therefore we go, then most when the majority outside our closet door is heckling. By steady attention to what goes on within us, within the action-filled life that is our own, we find the “universal sense.” We must not fear, but only stride forward in good cheer, glad that we have the musical score of our lives within us to grant us access to the harmony of the spheres.

III. Work Hard in Your Own Place



Ralph Waldo Emerson

When in doubt, work. Nothing else grants a woman or man such peace of mind, according to Emerson. Even if you do not know what you are working *on*—or what place your oeuvre really has in the world—continue to work. “A man is happy and relieved when he has put his heart into his work,” Emerson admonishes us. Nothing—not love, not passion, not sympathy, not fame—can keep people’s temper as even as continued work at whatever is in their path, whatever presents itself as their vocation in the moment, be it high or low, whether they are sure of it or not, whether they perform it in good or in failing health.

Whatever the circumstance, whatever the public or private debate of the day ,we must “heed our private dream,” our

private calling: “Thou shalt,” says Emerson, “not be missed in the scorning and skepticism” outside your door. “Stay there in thy closet and toil… Thy sickness, they say, and thy puny habit require that you do this or avoid that, but know that your life is a flitting state, a tent for the night, and do thou, sick or well, continue that stint.” Regardless of your health or inspiration, toil on in the solitude you need to accomplish your ends. Don’t worry about what people outdoors clamor or what your health, supposedly, needs; pick up your pen or your spool, your lumber or your laptop, and work. Only then can you be happy, only then can you be even-tempered and equal to everything else in your life.

What if you don’t know whether you have anything to offer, what if you are nervous at not having enough to display; what if you are afraid of your neighbor having more than you do? Never mind, then: “I cannot choose but rely on my poverty more than on your wealth,” confesses Emerson. Do not waste your time in jealousies; do not compare and contrast, just put your nose to that grindstone and produce.

The gods do not give every person the same calling: But “do thou what is assigned thee,” says Emerson, “and you cannot hope too much or dare too much.” If the gods do not give every person the same calling, neither are they endlessly patient with the calling they have allotted: “So much of our time is preparation, so much is routine, and so much retrospect, that the pith of each man’s genius contracts itself into a very few hours.”

We have not time to waste; we must get to our job, we must seize our stylus or our “ and begin as soon as now. Between what we regard as preparation and what the gods consider only retrospect, we have very little real time to use. If we do not consider this duty closely—this duty and this happiness—then we risk ending up like so many of our sisters and brothers, who promise much but produce little: “We see young men who owe us a new world, so readily and lavishly do they promise, but

they never acquit the debt; they die young and dodge the account; or if they live they lose themselves in the crowd." Rather than lose ourselves in the crowd, we do well to trust in our higher beings and to stride ahead, never mind the road we take. "A man," after all, "never rises so high" in his work "as when he does not know where he is going."

Moreover, whatever direction we take in our vocational lives, "everything good is on the highway." While we imagine that we have to stick to the margins, to take byroads and secret channels to arrive at life's well-hidden treasure, this is manifestly untrue. The best things are available not to the happy few but to the searching many. If you are a writer you can spend a fortune for a signature of Shakespeare's but you can read Shakespeare's collected works without a cent. "Here at the fair a man has spent 180 guineas for an autograph of Shakespeare's, but there in the corner yonder slip of a boy can read Hamlet for nothing." The world has looked out for its children; it has placed what is essential, what is important, what is vital "on the highway" and tucked away for the eye of specialists only what is specialized, what is secondary, what is expendable. We can thus go confidently forward with the information and the means that we have at our disposal, knowing that they are enough to reach great conclusions and to accomplish great ends.

All we need do is get busy and refrain from being distracted by contemporary debates: "Expediency of literature [itself may be] questioned, much is to say on both sides and while the fight wages hot, thou, my dearest scholar, stick to thy foolish task, add a line every hour and between whiles, add a line." We need do nothing more complicated than add a sentence to our oeuvre, our novel, our treatise, if we are writers; to add a stick of firewood if we are lumberjacks; to add a stitch if we are seamstresses. To ignore the din around us is already a noble end. It is an end which repays those who observe it; it is an end that allows us to concentrate and to accomplish

our designated task. Whether we go about that task in a closet or in a cubicle, in a forest or in an outhouse, in a study or in a stream, is up to us.

IV. Believe that You Gain Something for Whatever You Lose

…or whatever you lack. It goes both ways, says Emerson: For whatever you gain you also lose something. But the more important lesson to retrieve here is the first. Our "compensation," as Emerson calls it, does not come, as so many think, after our death on the hands of a vengeful god; it comes during our life on earth. Emerson dismisses the custom of relegating compensation until after our demise; indeed, he mockingly summarizes his opponents' view: "We are to have *such* a good time [in heaven] as the sinners have now [on earth] … You sin now; we shall sin by and by; we would sin now; not being successful, we expect our revenge to-morrow."

This simplistic view of the world is wholly erroneous: Our compensation for good and bad actions, for good or bad traits of character, for losses or for gains, comes in this life, not in the next one. In this life, not in the next, is "every secret told, every crime punished, every wrong redressed…"

Compensation is the law of the living universe. We cannot have a good without a bad, a bad without a good: "The compensations of calamity are made apparent to the understanding … a fever, a mutilation, a cruel disappointment, a loss of wealth, a loss of friends, seems at the moment to be unpaid loss, and unpayable. But…the death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover which seemed but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of the guide or genius; for it commonly operates revolutions in our way of life, terminates an epoch of infancy or of youth which is waiting to be closed up, breaks up a wonted occupation, or a household, or style of living, and allows the formation of new ones more friendly to the growth

of character.”

The setbacks in our lives are very often breakthroughs. What seems like a pure loss can turn out to be a real gain. Far from merely depriving us, it sets us, now or later, on a path to improvement. We must not lament the tragedies we experience, but consider them disguised favours, tentative steps up the ladder of being.

What is true of new losses is true, also, of longstanding deficiencies: Has a person a “defect of temper that unfits him for society?” Emerson asks. “Thereby is he driven to entertain himself alone and acquire habits of self-help, and, thus like the wounded oyster, he mends his shell with a pearl.” This image is particularly resonant with Emerson, who, as a person of native timidity, of unschooled social graces—of what he called “arctic habits” —has gained, in return, the habit of writing alone and writing grandly. Emerson was a mediocre university student at Harvard and an exceptionally mediocre person socially, as many of his acquaintances and friends were quick to confirm, but his flaws in the social department led him to a habit of ingenious solitary writing. Had Emerson been gregarious in society, it is unlikely that he would have resorted to writing “in his closet” to an audience of millions and billions. In contrast, for people who are vivacious and winning in person it is altogether possible that—like Emerson’s friend, Margaret Fuller, a “fisher of men” in society—their writing is not up to the level of their conversation. Rare is it for a person to be equally strong at both; the gods distribute their talents judicially—a spike here, a nadir there. They observe the law of compensation, says Emerson—not merely in the afterlife but, most importantly, in the present life of women and of men.

Thus we must never mourn for a loss or a lack; we must know that it only exists to furnish us with a gain or a gift: Our reflex is that “we cannot part with our friends; we cannot let our angels go. [But] we do not see that they go only that

archangels may come in.” When we pay with angels, we acquire arch-angels. When we lose our peace, we procure invitations to change for the better. Consequently, “a great man is always willing to be little. Whilst he sit on the cushion of advantages, he goes to sleep.” We must trade our rest for our restoration. Every step down is a step up. Nature does not allow a loss to remain a loss; it reimburses us forever with a gain, and the reverse. Therefore, we must neither rest on our laurels nor toss, hopeless, in our private hells. In both cases we must look forward to the timely compensation of the gods. An unearned good entails a payment; an unearned injury brings a good.

We are never alone with our comedies any more than we are with our tragedies; we are always awaiting the tilting of the scales by the judicious deity. We must not stay sad when our lot is dark; we must know that for every shadow in our life we can await a sun; for every tear we can expect a turn in our fortunes—a smile and a laugh, an uptick and an opportunity.

V. Give Your Friends a “Religious Treatment”

_Before Emerson moves to “friendship” in his essays, he deals, for some pages, with romantic love. He notes its supreme importance in every human biography: “What,” he asks rhetorically, “do we wish to know of any worthy person” —be it an artist, an actor or a philosopher— “so much as how he sped in the history of this sentiment? What books in the circulating libraries circulate?” Books, of course, about love.

Having established the supreme importance of romantic love, Emerson proceeds to caricature and to distort it. In the whole of Emerson’s writing there is no other such hokey and disingenuous description as his rendition, here, of two romantic lovers-to-be: “Who can avert his eyes from the

engaging, half artful, half artless ways of school-girls who go into the country shops to buy a skein of milk …and talk half an hour with the broad-faced, good-natured shop-boy … Plainly do they establish between them and the good boy the most agreeable, confiding relations …about Edgar and Jonas and Almira, and who was invited to the party, and who danced at the dancing school, and when the singing school would begin, and other nothings of which the parties cooed. By and by that boy wants a wife and very truly and heartily will he know where to find a sincere and a sweet mate…" We can almost see the rainbow stickers and the emoji in the margin of this passage. We can almost see Emerson looking down his nose at his pair of invented lovers. Has Emerson ever even met a "broad-faced, good-natured shopboy" or an "artless" girl who "coos" a lively interest in "when the singing school would begin" —much less fancied one? Never is Emerson so little Emerson as in this paragraph of "Edgar and Jonas and Almira."

None of Emerson's love relationships started in anything resembling this way. His first wife, Ellen Tucker—the only person with whom he was unambiguously in love—started over a conversation about a lecture he had just given (not over a "skein of milk") and ended, one-and-a-half years into marriage, with the beautiful 19-year-old dying of tuberculosis. Emerson dug up her grave and opened the coffin a year afterward—a fact he records without comment in his journal in the fashion he reports nearly all the most important events in his life.

The second marriage he undertakes, as he specifies to his siblings, with greatly transformed sentiments: "I am engaged," he writes "to Miss Lydia Jackson of Plymouth. I announce this fact in a very different feeling from that which I entered my first connexion. This is a very sober joy." If his marriage to Ellen was a marriage of passion, this marriage is a marriage, very visibly, of duty and responsibility. Though he also met Lydia—or Lydion as he called her forever afterward—at a

lecture of his own, she clearly did not engage his thoughts or emotions in half the way Ellen did. He married her out of a desire for a wife, not out of a desire for her. This marriage was to last, however, for his remaining life; when Emerson died at 81, his also 81-year-old wife proceeded to outlive him by another ten years.

When Emerson penned his words of the “artless” girl and the “broadfaced” boy he clearly did not “look into his heart and write,” as Sir Philip Sidney would have urged him. He was not able to write much of Ellen and did not want to write of Lydion. The pinnacles of his major extramarital passions—with fellow intellectuals, Margaret Fuller, Caroline Sturgis and Anna Barker—were still ahead of him. With all three of these sparkling women he would maintain chaste, ambiguous and often predominantly epistolary liasions. Victorian that he was, he would undoubtedly have categorized them to himself or to them as friends rather than as romantic interests.

For all these reasons, we turn to Emerson’s essay on friendship rather than to his essay on love to discover his deepest emotions toward his fellow humans. In “Love” Emerson is inexperienced and fake; in “Friendship he is experienced and ingenuous.

Emerson’s notion of friendship, unsurprisingly, is no simple, chummy exchange. It is, as he says, “the meeting of two large, formidable natures” —not the mellow to-and-fro of two easy-going buddies. They are relationships of high conversation and debate, not familiar back-slaps. They are relations of which he memorably writes that they “demand a religious treatment.”

“Let [your friend] be to thee forever a sort of beautiful enemy,” Emerson asserts, “untameable, devoutly revered, and not a trivial constituency to be soon outgrown and cast aside.” Your friend is to you a divine interlocutor, an enemy as much as an ally; a beast as much as a god; an examiner as much as a consoler.

“A new person is to be a great event and hinders me from sleep,” declares Emerson of a candidate for friendship. Far from reclining into a cozy connection with his friends, Emerson rises into a demanding reparté. Always on the look-out for robust conversation, Emerson carries his secret ideas around in his chest until the moment he identifies the right person with whom to share them: Forever, as he says, he “carries the keys of my castle in my hand, ready to throw them at the feet of my lord whenever and in what disguise soever he shall appear.”

Whether his “lord” appears as journalist, Margaret Fuller, or as British essayist, Thomas Carlyle, or as twenty-year-old poet, Caroline Sturgis, Emerson is ready to lay down all his wares before them. True friendship is that; the mutual laying down of arms, the mutual sharing of pointed possessions, the mutual enclosing of the other’s poisons.

“I do not wish to treat these friendships daintily but with roughest courage,” Emerson intones: “When they are real they are the solidest thing we know.” Friendship is a daring proposition for Emerson; he gives all and he takes all. Ultimately it is “an absolute running of two souls into one,” an uncompromising union: “Like the immortality of the soul, [it] is too good to be believed.”

Too good, indeed. Among other things, it awakens all the friend’s latent capacities: “Our intellectual and active powers increase with our affection,” Emerson insists: “The scholar sits down to write and all his years of meditation do not furnish him with one good thought or one happy expression; but it is necessary to write a letter to a friend, —and forthwith troops of gentle thoughts invest themselves on every hand with chosen words.”

To write a letter to a friend is far easier than to write a treatise to amorphous posterity. A friend illuminates our discourse like so many fairy lights. It is for that reason

that Emerson requests, time and again, to get a letter back that he has written to Margaret Fuller; he has managed to express his thought in it much better than in a lecture or in an essay he may have attempted at the same time. Friendship opens mouths, it opens pens, it opens eloquence. The best the scholar can do is to write to her or his friend. The next best is to *read* her or his friend. “Our own thought sounds new and larger from his mouth.” In the dialogue of friends both parties are enlarged; both parties are canonized.

And if there is inequality in these relations? Even then, Emerson concludes, it’s all for the best: “It seemed to me lately,” he writes, “more possible to carry a friendship greatly, on one side, without due correspondence on the other. Why should I cumber myself with regrets that the receiver is not capacious? It never troubles the sun that some of his rays fall wide and vain into ungrateful space, and only a small part on the reflecting planet. Let your greatness educate the crude and cold companion. If he is unequal, he will presently pass away; but thou art enlarged by thy own shining.”

To love your friend is always divine, even if it is unreciprocated. It’s the fault of your companions if they do not reflect back at you your own strongest rays. If you send those rays off regardless you are that much more luminous than if you had never done so. You are the sun; your friends are the rogue planets. Your rays serve to irradiate yourself.

Emerson had a number of unequal relationships, notably with Margaret Fuller, who loved him more than he did her, and with Anna Barker who he loved more than she did him. He cannot fail to have had these relations in mind when he writes the foregoing words. He is nothing inferior to Anna Barker in spite of the fact that she accepted a marriage proposal from his rival in the midst of their intimate exchanges; Margaret Fuller is nothing inferior to Emerson despite the fact that he is often at pains to explain to her why he cannot love her. (“You would have me love you,” he writes to her in a not-so

imaginary conversation in his journal: “What shall I love? Your body? The supposition disgusts you. What you have thought or said? Well, whilst you were thinking & saying them, but not now. I see no possibility of loving anything else but what now is, & is becoming; your courage, your enterprise, your budding affection, your opening thought, your prayer, I can love—but what else?”

For all the inequalities of these relations, they are nonetheless holy to Emerson. And the person who gives more than the other, far from being shunted into shameful darkness “is enlarged by [her or his] own shining.”

Emerson’s conception of friendship is nothing if not magnanimous. It is royal. It is bent upon maximizing the quality of conversation which to Emerson, was the highest good—higher, as we shall see in the next section, than caresses, kisses, or back-slaps.

VI. Do Not Cling

Emerson, as we have seen, has a worshipful, well-nigh religious concept of friendship. For him a loving friendship between strong personalities is close to the highest good on this round earth. And yet he is adamant about the fact that even the deepest relationship can be destroyed by one or the other party’s starting to *cling.*

In any relationship, Emerson argues, the *distance* between two “lovers,” must be as strong as the *union* between them: “There must be very two before there can be very one.” They must be two great, independent spirits, “mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep identity, which, beneath these disparities, unites them.”

If we start out attached as barnacles, we will never go far: Instead, “let us sit apart, like gods talking from peak to

peak, around Olympus. I like that each chair should be a throne and hold a king … Let us not be too much acquainted." We must guard our dignity—we must protect our intrinsic human royalty—even in the tightest of relationships. Even in the tightest of relationships, we should not assume too much proximity lest we cheapen this proximity.

Emerson's horror of clinging relationships may seem excessive—and it is! —yet it provides a needful counterweight to the cartoonish state of affairs we inhabit today.

Conversation is always Emerson's principal point, so stooping and clinging is not on the order of the day. Far from feigning agreement on various issues, we must push forward with disagreement; we must thrust ahead with distinctive points of view: "I hate, where I looked for a manly furtherance, or at least a manly resistance, to find a mush of concession." says Emerson. "Better be a nettle in the side of your friend than his echo." To be an upright contrarian, an upright inquisitor, is far more magnetic, in the long run, than to be a limp parrot of phrases. We seek to stimulate our friends, not to mime them.

To be sure, Emerson is advocating here a debate model of friendship; he is not advocating a touchy-feely model. True intimacy, according to Emerson, does not rest on constant bodily proximity: "Are you," he challenges us, "the friend of your friend's buttons or of his thought? To a great heart he will still be a stranger in a thousand particulars, that he may come near in the holiest ground."

We must not be greedy with exterior circumstances of our friend; we must not hope to be an index of her or his personal details: "Why insist on rash personal relations with your friend?" Emerson demands of us. "Why go to his house, or know his mother and brother and sisters? Why be visited by him at your own? Are these things material to our covenant? Leave this touching and clawing." Small-talking with your friend's

“mother and brother and sisters” does not intensify your spiritual union. “Neighborly convenience” is not the essence of friendship. Candid and self-revealing conversation is the most we can get from those who are closest to us—and this kind of conversation does not hinge on a “skein of milk.” It does not hinge on our borrowing a missing ingredient for our cake, or a chair for our salon; it does not hinge on chit-chatting with our friend’s relatives. These things, while nice, are not “essential to our covenant.” We can get them from “cheaper companions.” We should not confuse a helpful neighbor with a sacred friend.

So ethereal can friendship be in Emerson’s view that it can even be—perhaps ideally *is*—a chiefly epistolary relationship: “To my friend,” he says, “I write a letter and from him I receive a letter. That seems to you little. It suffices me.”

The exchange between souls that for Emerson constitutes the core of all human interaction takes place sometimes, maybe best of all, in exchanges of letters. Emerson’s life was rich and velvet in letters. His emotional correspondence with Margaret Fuller or Thomas Carlyle comprise several separately published volumes.

Emerson adored friendship, but never quite so much as solitude. “I do then with my friends as I do with my books,” he declares. “I would have them where I can find them, but I seldom use them.” After all, “almost all people descend to meet,” confesses the constitutionally timid Emerson. “All association must be a compromise, and, what is worst, the very flower … of each of the beautiful natures disappears as they approach each other. What a perpetual disappointment is actual society, even of the virtuous and the gifted … Our faculties do not play us true and both parties are relieved by solitude.”

If Emerson’s stance toward human interaction seems to us extreme, it’s because it is. But a dash of his suspicion of

clinginess is medicinal for our Hallmark age. To cling is to put your relationship in danger. The core of life, we are well-served to remember, lies not in the ability to compile a catalogue of all our friend's physical tics or of all the members of her or his family; it lies not in pushing our friends forever into greater confessions of devotion, but in open, cant-free exchange—an exchange in which we tell the deepest truth about ourselves and in which we are not afraid to dissent from our other. A regal exchange, in other words.

VII: Welcome Change

Everybody is in favor of progress; everybody is apparently for change and development, except those who are not. The cheerleaders of change in fact are often the enemies of change. Emerson identifies them in his two most famous speeches, the "American Scholar" and the "Divinity School Address." In the first, he calls for a new kind of poet, an American one: "We have listened," he proclaims, "too long to the courtly muses of Europe." It is time we make a tradition for ourselves; it is time we create a poet and a poetry for our own historical moment. Looking around, he sees none. But not long after he preached this quasi-sermon, he received a book of poems out of the blue from Walt Whitman, who had become a passionate Emersonian, who heeded his idol's call for a new verse and sent him "Leaves of Grass." "I greet you," wrote Emerson, "at the start of a great career." If Emerson paved the way for the sensuous, anarchic, larger-than-life Whitman he paved the way too, for the ethereal, intimate miniaturist, Emily Dickinson. Neither of them could or would have attained a following without Emerson's call for a new poetry.

In the second speech, the "Harvard Divinity School Address," Emerson pleads again for the leaving behind of existing forms—specifically those of the aging, formalistic church:

“Oh, my friends,” he pleads, “there are resources in us on which we have not yet drawn.” It is time we make a break with the church rites of old and that we draw on these resources: “The stationariness of religion, the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the bible is closed” all partake of “the falsehood of our theology.” “It is the office of a true teacher to show us what God is, not was, what he speaketh, not what he spake.” We must turn the dial forward; we must not preach as though God were past but as though he were present. We should not be celebrating a historical figure but a living man in our midst.

These discourses made Emerson forever unwelcome at Harvard, unwelcome in circles of church-abiding Americans. Earlier in his career he had already given up his ministerial robes because he was unable to mouth the priestly platitudes required of him.

But Emerson’s embrace of change—not mock-change—tears through all of his work, all of his essays. He is the man of today, the man who sweeps out of his front porch the idolatry of yesterday: “We are the idolaters of the old,” he intones; “the voice of the Almighty saith ‘Upward and Onward’ forevermore. We cannot sit among the ruins.”

To retain the old church forms, to retain the old poetic forms is to shiver shirtless in a refugee camp or to smolder in the embers of civilization.

For according to Emerson, we have trouble to “believe there is any force in today to rival and recreate that beautiful yesterday. We linger in the ruins of the old tent where once we had bread and shelter and organs, nor believe that the spirit can find, cover, and move us again.”

For Emerson to use the same trope twice—the trope of the “ruins” —he must be making a key point. He does *not* want us to linger among the remains of extant poetry, of extant religion,

of extant life. He wants us to fling away our fears, and advance—even when, or especially when—we know not where we are going: “As the traveler who has lost his way throws his reigns on his horse’s neck and trusts to the instinct of the animal to find his road, so must we do with the divine animal who carries us through this world.”

“Faith in the future! Onward, old soul! Then most when you don’t know your path.” This is Emerson’s message to us: Be not afraid of change. Welcome it with open arms for it brings you new delights, new beliefs, new inspiration. Know that “every end is a beginning” and “fear not the next generalization.” The next generalization? By this Emerson means the next insight. Wait actively for the new generalization therefore—the new faith, the new literature. Trust in your intuition as the rider does the instinct of his horse when he is far from home. Man, too, has intuitions. May we only listen for them, release our choke-hold on the beautiful yesterday and forge still more glorious tomorrows based on our insights of today.

“Every action,” after all, “admits to being outdone.” Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning,” and every beginning is a sacred and necessary change.

VIII. Don’t Idealize Travel

Emerson’s relationship to travel is contradictory. On the one hand, his attack on travel is among the positions for which he is best known. On the other hand, he traveled almost daily to lecture in one place or another—New England or New York, England and California—he also repeatedly undertook multi-month-long trips to Europe.. If we have as many letters as we do from Emerson to his wife and friends, it is because he was

so often afoot; he was so often *en voyage*. To be fair to Emerson one should begin with his apologia. Buried, as it is in "Self-Reliance," Emerson declares that "I have no churlish objection to the circumnavigation of the globe for the purposes of art, of study, and benevolence, so that the man is first domesticated…."

By "domesticated" Emerson means not to expect anything more surprising from travel than one might have experienced from staying at home. It also means not to expect a different and superior self in a foreign clime. The proper self is the self that recognizes her or his life story in the life stories—and sculptures, and paintings—of foreign peoples but does not expect any miraculous switch—from shy scribbler to social butterfly. Whatever Emerson may do, wherever he may go, "my giant goes with me." His inhibitions accompany him into whatever country he enters, into whatever landscape he ventures. His fear of man goes with him wherever he travels; his arctic habits do not leave his side, no matter whether he finds himself in Florence, in Paris, before the pyramids of Egypt or back home in his native Concord.

Travel for the sake of one's job and education is acceptable to Emerson. It is first and foremost travel with the goal of "amusement" that Emerson seems to revile. "Travelling is a fool's paradise," he intones. "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." Emerson's old "giant" attends him always.

No matter the sites, no matter the change of temperature, the old self attaches to the tourist as a monkey attaches to its owner's neck and travels with her or him. What we glean from

works of art is only what we already knew, and what we seek to escape is securely fastened to us as with glue. The hope of recognizing great new things and the hope of switching out one's personality are both disappointed.

Emerson implies that it is part of his nascent America's inferiority complex that America sought all its diamonds and pearls of wisdom in old Europe. Everything you have to know is here!

He is forever exclaiming to his countrypeople: Stop! Look! The message of Michaelangelo, the ambivalence of the Mona Lisa are right here in Concord or wherever it is that you live. They are in our books, in our friends, in our museums and in our souls. Naples and Rome only afford us an additional view to what we have seen already. The teaching of the sages "I find [as] true in Concord, [as in] in Cornwall or Bretagne."

Was Emerson always consistent? Certainly not. He enthusiastically lauded his young friend, Henry David Thoreau's moving into a cabin in the wilds of Emerson's own property on Walden Pond. One could say that this was a kind of travel, and yet Emerson approved it. Was it because Thoreau's embrace of nature's simplicity as opposed to the multiplicities of international travel was more to his liking? After all, Thoreau in some sense did what Emerson is always calling for: he went "into his closet and shut the door." And even when he went out, he went out only to discover "edible roots" and "boardnails" (or so he claimed) which constituted his diet. Thoreau's outward-turning to Walden was actually an inward-turning; it was a way he could prove to himself and the world that, in Emerson's words, "the soul is no traveler and the wise man stays at home." At home he stayed, for nearly two years and kept a journal. The journal is now known in the literary world as *Walden*.

There are many loopholes to Emerson's distaste for travel. What is clear, however, is that Emerson wants us to understand

that where we are is where we ought to be. We must not crave to be somewhere else. All the insights to be had are here, where we are: Jealousy behooves us nothing: “Though the wide universe be full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to [us] but through his toil bestowed on that ground that is given him to till.”

We must “accept the place that divine providence has found for [us].” We must till the ground we have been given to till. Can we take a vacation? Surely—as long as we do not imagine that we go to a superior place than that where we stand; as long as we do not imagine that we will be someone else when we change the place we put our feet.

It is the escapist form of travel—the form that makes us imagine that where we are is not good enough and that for enlightenment or pleasure we must be somewhere else—against which Emerson sets his face: “He who travels to be amused, or to get somewhat which he does not carry, travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth among old things…He carries ruins to ruins.”

So good-bye old Cornwall, good-bye old Bretagne, good-bye old London. New York or Davenport, Los Angeles or Kalamazoo—are every bit your equal.

All of our insights can be had where we are; all our pleasures can be torn thence. The idolatry of geography is a sickness from which we must recover or waste our lives in eternal commutes and futile fantasies. We must embrace the small plot we have been given to work.

IX: Don’t Be a Parrot

Imitation, as Emerson variously says, is anathema. We can use books, we can quote friends but we must never—never—simply imitate them. We must always dig deep within ourselves for our

wisdoms, and never simply mime others, whether they be famous philosophers, college English teachers or best friends. “Insist on yourself, never imitate,” Emerson urges us. “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 are experts only of our own thought, not of the thought of others. If our thought does not partake of our biography, it is nothing. It is like the words of a bad minister, as Emerson undiplomatically says in his Harvard divinity address. In the words of this bad minister “was there not a surmise, a hint…that he had ever lived at all. Not a line drawn from real history… It could not be told from his sermon whether he had a father or a child; whether he was a free-holder or a pauper; whether he was a citizen or a countryman; or any other fact of his biography.” In the face of a discourse so remote, “it seemed strange,” Emerson says facetiously, “that the people should come to church [at all.] It seemed as if their houses were very unentertaining, that they should prefer this thoughtless clamor.”

Thoughtless clamor is all to which we can aspire when we mime other people and don’t hearken closely to our own convictions. To be sure, we can quote a thought, but it must be a thought that reflects our own thinking and not our own thinking that reflects the thought: “Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation Wesleys and Oberlins, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for these good men, but say [to them], ‘I also am a man.’ Imitation cannot go beyond its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it, because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator, something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty to come short of another’s man’s.”

In imitating another, we can only obtain so much clarity and eloquence. The person we imitate may have much clarity and

eloquence. But in the imitator all things are restricted. He cannot fall too low but neither can he rise too high. He is doomed to a middle ground; he is doomed to mediocrity.

To be “the parrot of other men” is, according to Emerson, a “degenerate” state. We who fall into it, do not listen ardently enough to our own souls or to our environment. “Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists.” Too feeble fall the impressions of nature to make us articulate human beings. It is when we don’t pay enough care to our own sensations that we fail as speakers, as witnesses—and that we bend to the temptation to imitate what we have heard as opposed to formulating what we feel ourselves.

What is true in private life is true, too, in literary history. When Emerson addressed the Phi Beta Kappa society on the American scholar at Cambridge in 1837, he did not see an original American poetic talent. All art seemed to him mimetic: it imitated the models of old Europe rather than forging new, properly American poetic voices, new properly American poetic styles. Emerson attempted to announce the end of this long tradition of mimicry: “Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close,” he said to the assembled scholars. “The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests.” The American public was, thought Emerson, demanding something new, demanding something other than the withered remains of European invention, the slavish aping of European art. When the larger than life Walt Whitman sent Emerson his euphoric manuscript, *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson hailed him as the new voice for which he had been looking. After Whitman came the utterly opposite, original, miniaturist Emily Dickinson and Emerson’s wishful announcement of the end of the mimicry of European convention seemed—at least in poetry—to have been justified.

X. Don’t Fear Truths

“Fear not the new generalization,” says Emerson in “Circles”—by which he means fear not the next truth that presents itself to your mind. A generalization, for Emerson, is the widening of a private insight, the expansion of a secret observation. Generalizations, per se, are not fashionable in intellectual circles today; the cult of diversity makes them suspect. But for Emerson and for many writers before and after him, generalizations were the essences of truth. So when Emerson tells us not to fear the new generalization he is telling us not to fear the next grand thought that raps on our door; he is telling us not to fear to think, not to fear to conclude, not to fear to wager.

And he says this with justice, because no matter our provenance, we are most often afraid of our own thoughts. Emerson knows this better than anyone. “In every work of genius,” he says, “we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.” When we read philosophers—like Emerson himself—we recognize our own repressed or discarded thoughts in their prose. They come back to us with a certain detached and superior “majesty:” “Great works have no more affecting lesson than this,” Emerson pursues. “They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored flexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else tomorrow a stranger shall say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.”

We must trust and formulate our own confidential thoughts rather than wait for another to formulate them for and before us. Because “to believe your own thought; to believe that what is true for us in our own private heart is true for all men, that is genius.” It is when we delve most deeply into our personal psyches that we produce the most publicly palatable truths. “Speak your latent conviction and it will become the

universal sense for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the last judgment." The most individual insight is the most universal insight, the most meticulously observed private detail becomes the most resoundingly promulgated public truth."

If we need not fear that our professions be too personal, neither should we fear that they be too contradictory. All great truths are paradoxes, after all, and we might as well concern ourselves with "our shadow on the wall" as with the precepts we have previously articulated and that we might conceivably incline to contradict. Consistency is the "hobgoblin" of the small- minded, Emerson pronounces: "With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do … Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today." Don't pull your punches out of fear of inconsistency. "Ah," says Emerson, "so you shall be sure to be misunderstood. Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates and Jesus and Luther and Copernicus and Galileo and Newton and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."

On this radical and profound epithet Emerson rests his case. But he has said other things elsewhere; he has made other pronouncements about consistency and about the privacy of public truths:

On consistency: "The terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act and word because the eyes of others have no other date for computing or orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them. But why," Emerson demands, "shall you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this cape of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat you have stated in this or that public space? Suppose you should contradict yourself, what then? It

seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone…but to bring the past to judgment, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past to judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day. 'Leave your theory as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot and flee.'"

The Joseph in question is hardly the husband of Mary but the favored son of Genesis 39 who is sold into servitude in response to the hatred and envy of his siblings. He is brought to Egypt to be employed by Potiphar, one of the Pharaoh's officials, in whose household he gains the attention of Potiphar's wife. After multiple attempts on her part to seduce him, she snatches after his coat as Joseph flees. This is the way we are intended to abandon our theory—as Joseph abandons his coat in the hand of Potiphar's wife.

For what it is worth, Joseph is accused by the disappointed wife of rape, and thrown into prison, but, as everywhere, Joseph builds himself up once again, becoming the star of the prisoners by interpreting their dreams. Ultimately he is given the opportunity to interpret the dreams of the Pharaoh himself and is put in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

Despite the price we, like Joseph, will thrive again. We must not be afraid of any new truth that comes to us, though it may require that we abandon all our previous sayings. Only in this way can we become and remain creative thinkers.

The alternative is to become the slave of a sect, even if it be a sect of our own making. "If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument," says Emerson. Gone is the unpredictability and the imagination of our thought process. To be great is to be willing to contradict not only the arguments of others but our own. To be great is to be always open to the next observation, the next truth that presses itself upon us. If we are misunderstood, so be it; the most superior of thinkers have been misunderstood. It is far better

to be misunderstood than to stagnate. Our loyalty must not be to our reputation but to our ever-evolving truths.

XI. Live in the Present

Human beings, says Emerson, have a penchant for living in the past or in the future, but not in the present. We idolize previous geniuses or we look to the future to provide us with new technologies, new opportunities, new solutions—as opposed to seizing the present by the scruff of the neck, drawing it to our hearts and wresting from it what we may.

"Since our office is with moments, let us husband them," he declares. "Five minutes of today are worth five minutes in the next millenium. Let us be poised and wise and our own today."

The future has no more advantages on us than does the past and yet we venerate past geniuses as we look forward to future geniuses, neglecting only our present, the present in which we live. "Every ship is a romantic object except that we sail in," Emerson points out.

We incline to idolize the great figures who came—or were invented—before us. Respect is proper and good but needs to be held within bounds.

We are made of the same stuff as Shakespeare or Hamlet so it is for us to debate them, to align with them and to agree or disagree with them: "Men say [of historical figures] where did he get this? And think there was something divine in his life. But no, they had myriads of facts just as good [as we have] would they only get a lamp to ransack their attics withal."

We must see ourselves as colleagues of the great figures of histories, not as its minions. To see ourselves as minions serves neither them nor us. "In the sculptures of the Greeks and the masonry of the Romans…the highest charm is the

universal language they speak.” says Emerson.

What is greatest of our past heroes is that they spoke a language which we can still understand today—and the greatest insult we can pay to them is to act as though we did not understand this language; to act as though we were global dyslexics. To the contrary, we need to formulate our own speech in such a fashion that it will be recognized not only today but tomorrow.

“The experience of a new age requires a new confession and the world seems always to be looking for its own poet.” So we must step up to the plate and be a poet of our age rather than exalting the achievements of yore or the clairvoyance of the future.

For to gape at the future is to neglect the present: While we look forwards, “life wastes as we are preparing to live.” Life is lost as we are waiting for the future to provide our bliss. This moment, Emerson wants us to know, is as good as any other moment; it is inferior neither to future revelations not to past loyalties: The present is the only time we can control—and it is as worthy as the future or the past. When we were born “we woke and found ourselves on a stair; there [were] stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there [were] stairs above us, many a one, which [went] upwards and out of sight.”

Our only duty is to attend the stair we are on. Adulation of the past or deference to the future is useless. We must speak today what today thinks though it contradict everything we said yesterday, and deny everything we might say tomorrow.

“Nature, as we knew her, is no saint … She comes eating and drinking and sinning … We must set up the strong present tense against all the rumors or wrath, past or to come.” All our business has to do with is the present, not with previous or prospective times.

“Life is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep. Grant it,” Emerson urges, “and as much more as they will, —but thou, god’s darling! Heed thy private dream; thou wilt not be missed in the scorning and the skepticism; there are enough of them; stay there in thy closet and toil until the rest are agreed what to do about it. Thy sickness or thy puny habit require that you do this… or leave that but know that they life is a flitting tent for a night, and do thou sick or well, finish that stint. Thou art sick, but shalt not be worse, and the universe, which holds thee dear, shall be the better.”

Dispense with excuses, Emerson says, for why this is not the right moment in history for you to intervene: perhaps you are sick, perhaps you lack time, perhaps your habits don’t make it convenient, perhaps you are intimidated by the past or waiting for the future. Sit down nevertheless and write. Be the poet of your generation. Be the truth-teller of your moment.

The present is the only home you have, so husband it; take care of it, soar with it. Do not believe that there ever was or shall be any moment better. Grab the minutes that are available to you and forge with them what you can. Remember always that your idols were only ever people like you: They did not ask for your approval; they turned the pages of their library books as you do, aching to set down a part of the truth of their time. “

Intellectual life is a huge democracy; no age is better than any other age, but only one age—your own—is available to you to do with as you will, to address in whatever way you can. So grab the day, mold it to your wisdom, and let it fly again. You will be the happier for having done so and your age will revere you. Perhaps subsequent ages will revere you. You never know until you set aside your patient waiting for the perfect moment and try. Set “puny habits” aside; set sickness aside, set excessive admiration of the past or future aside and *create*. Only thus will you honor your own age and speak to the

ages of others.

XII. Look for God Inward, not Outward

“On Sundays,” Emerson proclaims in his address to the future ministers of Harvard’s divinity school, “it seems wicked to go to church.” Why? Because so many sermons are uninspired; so many preachers put their congregations to sleep. “It seemed as if the houses [of the churchgoers] must be very unentertaining, that they should prefer this thoughtless clamor” in the pews to the activity in their own homes. Most preachers, says Emerson, are bad preachers; they seem to check their real-life experience and personalities at the door. “The true preacher, the good one, so rare in American church life, “can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life—life passed through the fire of thought. But of the bad preacher it could not be told from his sermon, what age of the world he fell in, whether he was a father or a child, whether he was a citizen or a countryman; or any other fact of his biography. It seems a shame that the people should come to church “to hear such an impersonal and unenlightening discourse. They would do better to stay home”, and mull about religious matters themselves. And indeed that is what they would do were they not such creatures of habit: “Men go [to church] … because they are wont to go, else had no soul entered the temple in the afternoon.” Life lies outside the church and inside the mind of the parishioner but not in the sermon of a preacher of whom “if he had ever lived or acted we were none the wiser for it.”

It is no wonder the graduates of the divinity school were less than thrilled by Emerson’s sermon and he was never again invited to return. For Emerson organized religion was a waste; it was for that reason, among others, that he himself resigned from the ministry in 1832 having been ordained for less than three years.

Emerson did not, however, exclude the notion of a good preacher or even a “bad” preacher. There can, he says be bad speakers with good listeners who fasten upon the nuggets of wisdom that might be tucked away in the speech of even a bad teacher. The most important thing for preacher or parishioner is to listen to their heart, to listen to their own lives, their own insights. As he says in “Self Reliance,” to “believe that what is true for you in your own private life is true of all men. The most intense personal truth is the most publicly important. Alas, preachers of Emerson’s day skirted the personal, and spoke in such general terms that nobody could identify with their words: “Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist…we shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us. We are fain to wrap our cloaks about us and secure, as best we can, a solitude that hears not. I once heard a preacher who surely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more.”

Men and women do much better to study the bible on their own as opposed to attending vacuous sermons. The individual, as always for Emerson, is the king. Able to hear, able to feel, able to generalize. If the church could be populated by these sorts of persons, it would be worth attending. But as it stands, it is not—and a person does better to meditate and love God on her or his own than to listen to most preachers.

The individual as always, wins out. We must study our individual insights—and trust them—not cloy to the words of a tired minister following antiquated forms. For in Emerson’s age “the priest’s sabbath has lost the splendor of nature; it is unlovely, we are glad when it is done. We can make and we do make, even sitting in our pews, a far better, holier, sweeter for ourselves.”

It is hard to imagine the extent to which Emerson’s words insulted his audience. But they should have been unsurprised; they were listening to a man who had resigned from the ministry and who, ever and always, elevated the individual in

comparison to any person bearing an office. To send his hearers back to their bibles and to discourage them church was to be expected of Emerson. He minced no words in this contention; he pulled no punches: “Would [the preacher] ask contributions for the missions, foreign or domestic? Instantly his face is suffused with shame, to propose to his parish, that they should send money a hundred or a thousand miles, to furnish such poor fare as they have at home and would do well to go the hundred or the thousand miles to escape.” The offerings of the church were worth going a hundred miles to escape—not spending a hundred dollars to replicate elsewhere.

Were there exceptions? To be sure, said Emerson, but “the exceptions are not so much to be found in a few eminent preachers, as in the better hours, the truer inspirations of all, —nay in the sincere moment of every man.” “Man Thinking” is always Emerson’s ideal; a woman or man contemplating the sunrise is always the solution to the problem. It is not a bureaucrat or a bureaucracy. The individual thinking is the solution. The individual thinking and unafraid to generalize from his or her thought; the individual who “believes his own thought and believes that what is true for him in his own private heart is true for all men, that is genius.” That, to Emerson, is also religion. Jesus was a man like other men; and we are human beings as other human beings and to understand our deities the best we can do is to contemplate them as human beings from our human station before the sun. Only in that way will we be able to grasp true religion. The church—failing in certain exceptional circumstances—is a dead end street. Man Thinking is a highway to heaven.

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Cristina Nehring‘s most recent book is *The Child Who Never Spoke: 23 1/2 Lessons in Fragility*. She is also the author

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