

Creating Yourself: Reflections on Emerson

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One hundred and sixty-eight years ago, on August 31, 1827, Ralph Waldo Emerson opened a new academic year by addressing the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, MA. His topic that day was "The American Scholar," and his words remain alive and resonant for all of us gathered here this morning and especially for all of you who are preparing to begin your college experience at Stonehill College.

I'm sure that most of you have heard the name Ralph Waldo Emerson, and many of you are no doubt familiar with his life and work and his leadership of the first important American "school" of arts and letters, American Transcendentalism, which was centered close by here in Concord and Lexington. Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller and others contributed a distinctive American voice to the tradition of literature and philosophy. Studying Emerson and Thoreau, in particular, will teach you much about being human, but will also give you an extraordinary insight into our American character and experience. Of course, you may find that you do not agree with all that you find in their work, as I do not agree with all that I find there, but you will understand much better who you are because all Americans — every one of us gathered here today — are children of Emerson, Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists.

But I'd like Emerson to speak for himself this morning. I'd like to read just a few passages from his long oration, "The American Scholar" and reflect on their meaning for you and for all of us as we go about preparing to begin another academic year in September.

Emerson begins by rousing us to consider aright what we are called to be as "scholars" at the college and in our society and world more generally:

The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about in so many walking monsters — a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.

Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing; into many things. ...The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship.

In this distribution of functions the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is Man Thinking. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking.

In this view of him, as Man Thinking, the theory of his office is contained. Him Nature solicits with all her placid, all her monitory pictures; him the past instructs; him the future invites. Is not indeed every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student's behoof?

Of course, speaking in 1837, Emerson was unaware of the issue of gender-neutral language, so he is given to use the male pronoun exclusively. Even so, when he speaks about Man Thinking, he is speaking about human beings, about men and women. What's really important here is that he emphasizes the gerund thinking. As "scholars" at Stonehill, we are called to be men and women thinking, questioning, examining, reflecting. Our minds should be active and restless and wrestling with the many puzzles of our existence. Demand of your professors that they be more than mere conveyors of information and demand of yourselves that you be more than passive receivers of information. To paraphrase Emerson, do not become "ridden by the routine" of student-craft; always keep in mind the nobility, dignity, and "ideal worth" of your activities as young scholars at Stonehill.

Emerson then turns to the issue of the purpose of books and of education in general:

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? 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. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed and as yet unborn. The soul active...creates.... In its essence it is progressive. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they, — let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward.

Of course there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office, —to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame.

These are powerful words to consider as you begin your college education. For Emerson, genuine education should liberate our individuality, not smother it; it should make us bold to imagine change and progress for ourselves and for others; it should lead us beyond competence to creativity; and it should touch us and stir us in some profound way. Education should inspire, he says, and this is an important reminder for all of us. As professors, we must dig down deeply into ourselves and share with you everything that we have to offer; we must be prepared to inspire.

But you...you must be prepared to be inspired. You need to open yourselves to the possibility that a book or a lecture or a course or an encounter with a professor will make a decisive difference in your lives, will move you, touch you, stir you, change you. Indeed, real education requires that we both — students and professors — take the chance, the risk, of being changed, of changing.

Let us also not forget, Emerson continues, that Man Thinking is also man acting:

Without [action] [the scholar] is not yet man. Without it thought can never ripen into truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty, we cannot even see its beauty.

Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind... Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not.

Cowardly thinking is born of cowardly living. We should not use academic life or college life as a way to retreat from or avoid the difficulty, complexity, and sheer abundance of life, but rather as a way to connect with it, embrace it, and articulate it. That's the "heroic mind" that Emerson says the true scholar possesses.

Of course, he who has put forth his total strength in fit actions has the richest return of wisdom. I will not shut myself out of this globe of action, and transplant an oak into a flower-pot,....

I love the image of that last line. Our love of the world should make us very impatient with narrow and crabbed thinking and exceedingly wary of the simple and simple-minded solutions to the essential riddle of our existence. Don't betray the world in thought; resist with all your might the temptations to "transplant an oak into a flower-pot."

The mind now thinks, now acts, and each fit reproduces the other. When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended and books are a weariness, — he has always the resource to live... Let the grandeur of justice shine in his affairs. Let the beauty of affection cheer his lowly roof.

Emerson's right. There will come times when the academic work will weary you and you will need to be refreshed. But consider his advice: renew yourselves by living more intensely. Intensify your passion for justice and friendship, he prescribes; this will cure your weariness, your stress, your boredom. And he brings his point home with a typical flourish: "A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think."

Emerson concludes his address by exhorting each man and woman to step out of the customary and the conventional, to overthrow the authority of the past, and to insist on one's own desire, one's own work, one's own vision. I will conclude, too, with these words, and with the hope that Emerson's words will inspire each of you to take hold fully of your education at Stonehill and take up the task of creating yourself. Says Emerson:

Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit, — not to be reckoned one character; — not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong; and our opinion predicted geographically, as the north, or the south? Not so, ...ours shall not be so. We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds.