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Personal Writings - 1899, February 7 - Emerson's Essays

Madge Webb Riley

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Compensation.

Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals. Superinduce magnetism at one end of a needle; the opposite magnetism takes place at the other end. If the south attracts, the north repels.

The entire system of things gets represented in every particle. The reaction, so grand in the elements is repeated within these small boundaries. For example, in the animal kingdom the physiologist has observed that ~~no~~ creatures are favorites, but a certain compensation balances every gift and every defect.

The theory of mechanic forces is another example. That we gain in power is lost in time.

The same doctrine underlies the nature and condition of man. Every excess causes a defect. For everything you have missed, you have gained something else; and for everything you gain, you lose something.

The farmer imagines power and place are fine things. But the President has paid dear for his White House. It has commonly cost him all his peace, and the best of his manly attributes. To preserve for a short time so conspicuous an appearance before the world, he is content to eat dust before the real masters who stand erect behind the throne.

Things refuse to be mismanaged long. If the government is cruel, the governor's life is not safe. If you tax too high, the revenue will yield nothing.

Every occupation, trade, art, transaction, is a compound of the world, and a correlative of every other. Each one is an entire emblem of human life; of its good and ill, its trials, its enemies, its course and its end. And each one must somehow accommodate the whole man, and receive all his destiny.

The world-globe itself is a drop of dew. So do we put our life into every act. The true doctrine of omnipresence is, that God reappears with all his parts in every mass and combination. The value of the universe contrives to throw itself into every point. If the good is there, so is the evil; if the affinity, so the repulsion; if the force, so the limitation.

Thus is the universe alive. All things are moral. That soul,

which within us is a sentiment outside of us is a law. We feel its inspiration; out there in history we can see its fatal strength.

The World looks like a multiplication table, or a mathematical equation, which, turn it how you will, balances itself. Take what figure you will, its exact value, nor more nor less, still returns to you. Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty.

Every act rewards itself, or, in other words, integrates itself, in a two fold manner; first, in the thing, or real nature; and secondly, in the circumstance, or in apparent nature. Crime and punishment grow out of one stem. Cause and effect, means and ends, seed and fruit, cannot be severed; for the effect already blooms in the cause, the end preexists in the means, the fruit in the seed.

Men seek to be great; they would have offices, wealth, power, and fame. They think that to be great is to possess one side of nature, — the sweet, without the other side, — the bitter.

This dividing and detaching is steadily counteracted. The parted water reunites behind our hand.

Life invests itself with inevitable conditions, which the unwise seek to dodge, which one and another brags that he does not know; — that they do not touch him; — but the brag is on his lips, — the conditions are in his soul. If he escapes them in one part, they attack him in another more vital part.

The human soul is true to these facts in the painting or fable, of history, of law, of proverbs, of conversation.

It finds a tongue in literature unavares. Euripides forgot to ask youth for her love, and though Pithonius is immortal, he is old.

All things are double, - one against another. Give for tal; an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth; blood for blood; measure for measure; love for love. - Give and it shall be given you.

A man cannot speak but he judges himself. With his will, or against his will, he draws his portrait to the eye of his companions by every word. Every opinion reacts on him who utters it.

You cannot do wrong without suffering wrong. Human labor, through all its forms, from the sharpening of a stake to the construction of a city or an epic, is one immense illustration of the perfect compensation of the universe.

Our strength grows out of our weakness. A great man is always

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willing to be little. Blame is safer
than praise.

Put God in your debt. Every
stroke shall be repaid.

There is a deeper fact in
the soul than compensation, - to wit,
its own nature. The soul is not a com-
pensation, but a life. The soul is.

In the na-
ture of the soul is the compensation
for the inequalities of condition.

The compensations
of calamity are made apparent to the un-
derstanding also, after long intervals of
time. A fever, a mutilation, a cruel dis-
appointment, a loss of wealth, a loss of
friends, seems at the moment unpaid loss,
and unpayable. But the sure years re-
veal the deep remedial force that under-
lies all facts.

The American Scholar.

Year by year we come up
hither to read one more chapter of his
biography. Let us inquire what new
lights, new events, and new days
have thrown on his character, his
duties, and his hopes.

Man is not a farmer, - or a
professor, - or an engineer, but he is all.
Man is priest, and scholar, and states-
man, and producer, and soldier.

Is not indeed every
man a student, and do not all things
exist for the student's behoof? And,
finally, is not the true scholar the
only master? But as the old oracle
said, "all things have two handles:
Beware of the wrong one." In life, too
often, the scholar errs with mankind
and forfeits his privilege.

Let us see him in his school, and consider him in reference to the main influence he receives.

The first in time and the first in importance of the influence upon the mind is nature.

Nature becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And in give the ancient precept, "Know thyself," and the modern precept, "Study Nature," become at last one maxim.

The next great influence into the spirit of the scholar is the mind of the Past. Books are the best type of the influence of the past, and perhaps ^{we} shall get at the truth, - learn the amount of this influence more conveniently, - by considering their value alone.

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.

Undoubtedly there is a right way of reading, so it be sternly subordinated. Man's thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for scholars idle times. When he can read God directly, the book is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings. But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must, - when the soul seeth not, when the sun is hid and the stars withdrawn - then shining, - we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, - to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is.

() We all know that as the human body can be nourished

on any food, so the human mind can be fed by any knowledge. And great and heroic men have existed who had almost no other information than by the printed page. One must be an inventor to read well. There is then creative reading as well as creative writing.

There goes in the world a notion that the scholar should be a recluse, a person of a weak, sickly constitution, - as unfit for any hard work or public labor as a pen knife for an axe. The so called "practical men" sneer at speculative men, as if, because they speculate or see, they could do nothing.

It is the raw material out of which the intellect molds her splendid products. A strange process too, this by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin. The manufacture goes forward at all hours. The value of action, like

- that of books, and better than books,
is - that it is a resource.

The mind now thinks,
now acts, and each fit reproduces
the other. When the artist has ex-
hausted 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. Character is higher
than intellect.

The duties of a scholar are
such as become Man Thinking. They
may all be comprised in self-trust.
The office of the scholar is to cheer,
to raise, and to guide men by show-
ing them facts amidst appearances.

There being his functions, it
becomes him to feel all confidence
in himself, and to defer never to the

popular cry. Success treads on every right step. For the instinct is sure that prompts him to tell his brother what he thinks. He then learns that in going down into secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds.

In self trust all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be, - free and brave.

He it seems, are critical. We are embarrassed with second thoughts. We cannot enjoy anything for hawking to know where of the pleasure exists.

One of the signs of the coming day is the fact that the same movement which effected the elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state assumed in literature a very marked and as benign an aspect. Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low, the

common, has exploded and
poetized.

Embrace the common, I ex-
plore and sit at the feet of the
familiar, the low. Give me insight
into today and you may have the
antiquity and future worlds. This
same idea has inspired ^{the genius of} Burns, Gold-
smith, Cooper and in a newer
time, of Goethe, Wordsworth and Car-
lyle. Man is surprised to find
that things near are not less beautiful
and wondrous than things remote.
The near explains the far.

Another sign of our times,
also marked by an analogous
political movement, is the new im-
portance given to the single person.
Everything that tends to insulate
the individual - to surround him

with barriers of natural respect,
 so that each man shall feel the
 world is his, and man shall
 with man as a sovereign state with
 a sovereign state—tends to true
 union, as well as greatness.

The mill walk on our
 feet; we will work with our hands;
 we will speak our own minds.
 A nation of men will for the first
 time exist, because each believes
 himself inspired by the Divine Soul
 which also inspires all men.

Self Reliance.

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. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost.

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the tuster of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain estranged majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to

a bid by our spontaneous impression with good humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, Tomorrow a stranger will 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.

None but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best.

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connections of events.

The indifference of boys who are sure of a dinner and would

disdain as much as a lord to do or say ought to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He condems himself never about consequences, about interests; he gives an independent, genuine verdict. But the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness.

Every decent and well spoken individual affects and sways me more than is right. I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways. What I must do is all that concerns me, not

what the people think. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

A terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency; a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have ^{thus} data for reckoning our orbit than our past acts, and we are loth to disappoint them. Suppose you should contradict yourself what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand eyed present, and live over in a new day. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-

tomorrow speak what tomorrow-think he
in hard words - again, though it con-
tradict everything you said today.

To be great is to be misunderstood.

No man can violate
his nature. Nor does it matter how you
estimate and try him. A character
is like an acrostic - or alexandrian
stanza; - read it forward, backward,
or across, it still spells the same thing.

Act singly, and what you
have already done singly will justify
you now. When private men shall act
with original views, the luster will be
transferred from the actions of kings
to those of gentlemen.


It is easy to see that
a greater self reliance must work a
revolution in all the offices and relations
of men; in their religion; in their

education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views.

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 half possession. That which each can do best, none but his ~~Maker~~ Maker can teach him. No man yet knows what it is, nor can, till that person has exhibited it. So that which is assigned you, and you can not hope too much or dare too much. Abide in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and thou shalt reproduce the Love world - again.

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





Emerson's Essays.
Compensation.
The American Scholar.
Self Reliance.
February 7th 1899.
Mudge L. Webb.