

Self-Reliance in School

I hope Emerson isn't looking. I mean, at public schools in the U.S. today (or my essay, for that matter). If he could see what our hard working teachers have to go through in order to supposedly make our country more self-reliant, I think he'd be upset. I mean, isn't Emerson's essay, "Self-Reliance" just about the most famous and probably most quoted essay in our country? Even so, I've only recently stopped to think about what he meant. I don't think Emerson's self-reliance is the same as what we Americans sometimes call *rugged individualism*. In the name of being an individual, we are brought up in school to get skills in order to get a job, then compete with other countrymen and other countries to make more and more money. Isn't the self in that kind of self-reliance – selfish? It's against the others. What are we telling our children: that Emerson meant you should graduate with a hard-nosed approach to conquering things? What have we done to the ABCs since Emerson's time? Ok kids: A. you should conquer the competition, then B. move on to conquer nature, then maybe someday, C. we'll conquer outer space. Where is collaboration or sustainability? I guess they're luxuries for the student who is taught to look out for one's self. If you ask me, I think Emerson meant something else. And I think teachers are one group who are currently re-thinking self-reliance.

The teachers have a real part in the future of our country. But even they must be taught as they become teachers to become truly self-reliant. Didn't Emerson mean to rely on one's higher self - to check in with your beliefs fairly often - to see if you like who you are becoming. I think this means asking something like, "Am I really doing what I love for its own, intrinsic sake?" Didn't Emerson tell us to be with the crowd, but not follow it?

Following your own higher self does not simply mean being different, if you consider the self a higher part of you that knows when you are moving toward a higher goal or a lower one. Following your higher self, then, means doing what is right, as you discern it and freely choose it. And relying on it means letting your conscience be the main voice you live by. So why are state and federal mandates forcing teachers to simply pass on so much information and skills by demanding high stakes tests? What happened to letting the teachers form character by helping a child to 'know thyself'. When a student is captivated by a story or a science demonstration – for its own sake, not in order to do well on some test – doesn't that have the effect of deepening that student's connection to the world and therefore to his or her own self? In other words, shouldn't we move from simply informing ourselves to *transforming* ourselves?

So, basically what I'm saying is, "Don't ask me to be the one showing Emerson around our schools." You do it. You'd have to show him more cheating on tests than he ever saw in his day. You would probably have to explain that the tests have such high stakes that they tempt the kids to be competitive considerably beyond a healthy extent. Whether you showed him or not, he would see that both teachers and students are under a lot of stress because they have much less time to get their work done. He might ask why. Go ahead, you tell him. I'd be embarrassed to admit that some teachers have lost much of their class time teaching to the test. And why, he'd ask? Because our educational system is erroneously telling us that we are increasing testing to make our youth more "self-reliant".

Natalie, Maya, Riley, and Emmy had plenty of time. And they were quite self-reliant. They were my next-door neighbors. They and I made a great match. They were homeschooled by their mother, and I was a teacher in between jobs. When I offered to help, their mom said the subjects with which she could use the most help were math and science. Bingo. Those were my

favorites. I've taught science, technology, engineering, and math for over forty years. So they came over to my house about three days a week after lunch, and we did stuff until dinner. It started out just math and science, but then we mixed in a little cooking, reading/writing, music, Spanish, computer, and carpentry. We had to. You see all four girls still loved to learn. They each had a drive to find things out and an internally driven sense of completion. To be sure, they each had favorite and not-so-favorite area of expertise. Like most children, Natalie, Maya, Riley, and Emmy would rather get up from a seat and run and play and build things and cook. Of course it's not always as much fun to study subject matter that requires practice. It is often hard to sit down and repeatedly go over things like number facts or grammar. But unlike most children, they could sit longer, study harder, and own the desire to finish a job all the way to cleaning it up.

For example, we were describing how to add, then multiply. This lead to a discussion of how the computer works. This lead to how there are many connections in the brain and in the computer. This lead to a unit on electricity. So we built a primitive model of Turing's computer (one of the first computers) that used a machine to multiply computations to break codes during the second world war. This lead to the history of the struggle between England and Germany and how Alan Turing and the intelligence community at Bletchley Park in England broke Germany's Enigma Machine's code. While the children learned to solder wires, and lay out an electrical circuit, they also learned how the English intelligence community had the responsibility of saving lives by forewarning English cities that were to be bombed. Our little homeschool outpost learned some carpentry in order to make a wooden box for our computer, while we discussed how English intelligence couldn't let Germany know that they had cracked the Enigma machine code, thereby saving some of the cities. Discussions of human rights and collaboration were integrated with concepts on electricity and the

anatomy of the brain, which were integrated with skills of carpentry and electrical engineering. But it all worked together more naturally than trying to break these subjects apart. And the same held true for the integration of the levels at which we conversed and worked. I believe that this integrated approach had everything to do with building a foundation for self-reliance. It seemed that engaging the whole child in the experience of knowledge related to a deepening of both the creative/intuitive, as well as the intellectual/analytical sides of the brain. And isn't a child who can use the complete package of human powers definitely building a better foundation for relying on one's self?

Natalie was 15, Maya was 13, Riley was 12, and Emmy was 10. You can imagine how these various discussions had to be simultaneously held at different levels. And so with the physical tasks of building the computer. If you were in my living room, where we built the computer, you would hear very different questions and comments. But if you think this inhibited the efficiency of learning, because unlike our public schools, these children weren't grouped by age and learning level, think again. The diversity in subject matter and levels of learning caused a higher level of collaboration, because they helped each other more. And, at the same time, it caused us all to hear questions that ranged from primitive to sophisticated. Riley would ask a question about soldering that Natalie could show her. But Riley would turn around and show Emmy and the others how to program our computer by wiring the switches. And this collaboration didn't just facilitate learning several ways, it prompted a self-reliance and independence. Seeing her older sisters working, Emmy grabbed the soldering iron saying, "I get it, Mr. Bickart, I'll decorate the computer box myself by woodburning designs into it." While Maya tested the switches, we cut into an old modem, then re-purposed some Christmas tree lights to signal when our circuit was completed.

Our computer didn't break the Enigma code, but it could light up and buzz if you answered five matching quiz questions in a row by manually hooking wires with alligator clips. The girls learned to build the circuits, and to also program the correct code for each next quiz. We then used our quiz computer to memorize famous scientist facts, then some Spanish vocabulary. Was all this confusing because it mixed topics? Was it debilitating because older kids had to hear simpler questions of the younger? Did it cause a loss of initiative, because we constantly had to help each other to complete a part of the circuitry? No. Trust me. This school had no competitive social setting where learning is a "horse race" with winners and losers. What prevailed was a love of the subject for its own sake.

I'm glad Emerson isn't here. I'll bet he'd go nuts to see great teachers having to cut out lots of great activities. Emerson, teachers, and students alike say that they would want to have more real life projects like helping community businesses and families in trouble. They want to do live science experiments and demonstrations and less naming of the parts of science. They want to do more art and music. They want skills and information to be integrated with hands on activities. But we have given up pieces of time from all of these great activities in order to constantly measure how well the kids are doing. And how do we measure progress? With those high stakes tests. But it gets worse. If Emerson were looking, he would have to see that the self-reliance and American initiative that made our country so great getting squashed by the very attempts to get it back. I think that when I stop integrated learning because I have to drill factoids that are on a test, my students learn a little less. And when I have to separate kids from helping each other in order to evaluate what each can do individually, I sometimes squash a little bit of their self-reliance. We think we are doing the opposite. But, really ... are we? My point is not that homeschools are better than public schools. I'm just one teacher who wants something new. Don't you agree that you could do so much more with the wonderful

ideas you personally bring to your profession? Don't teachers get into teaching because they want kids to grow? Don't they have favorite subjects they would like to share? I do. I wish I could let one project inspire what my students and I did next, instead of having a rigid curriculum dictate my teaching to the next high stakes test.

Ok. Wait a minute. Let me play devil's advocate to my own rant. I know, I know, none of us can ever be completely free. We can't just follow our noses from one enjoyable topic to the next. There is a small core of basic skills and information and concepts that are common to every culture. And hey, you can't love every topic yourself, as a teacher. And every kid won't love every part either. But ... and this is a big BUT ... don't you think that we have to move in a new direction? Shouldn't we switch some directions 180 degrees? I wish we could turn our heads and hearts and look with new eyes. And I have some questions. Does self-reliance come from separating students to evaluate them - or does it come from a healthy balance between separation and collaboration? Doesn't self-reliance arise from the human spirit where there is a balance between competition and mutual help? And what about the balance between knowing others and knowing yourself? In fact, doesn't living from one's higher self cause you to be tuned to the higher self of others? As Emerson said, "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" (1894/1996).

The number of homeschoolers seems to be growing. They used to leave public education primarily for religious reasons, but now it seems that most just don't like the American public school. According to a recent study by the National Center for Education Statistics, "In the 2011–12 school year, 91 percent of homeschooled students had parents who said that a concern about the environment of other schools was an important reason for

homeschooling their child, which was a higher percentage than other reasons listed”. Many just don’t like all of the testing. The funny thing is that some homeschool websites report that homeschoolers seem to be doing better on standardized tests than public school averages. Some say that this homeschooling has moved from being considered as an alternative form of education to one of the mainstream options. Homeschoolers constitute over 3% of the children or about 1 ¾ million kids. That’s 18% more than the number of homeschoolers in 2007, or double the number of them from 1999. America is saying something. But what?

I don’t mean to advocate for homeschooling. I just wonder if we need educational reform that can borrow some of the lessons of enlightened schooling, whether it is done at home, in private schools, or in public schools. What are those lessons? Here are some "ingredients" of educating for self-reliance:

- love of, and respect for, the teacher
- enthusiasm for the subject and for teaching
- experiential, multi-subject, project-based learning
- love of the subject for its intrinsic nature, versus extrinsic excitements or rewards, including the competitive drive
- respect for the whole person - focus on engaging creativity and intuition, as well as intellectual and analytical thinking (which makes the above possible)
- mutual help among students and encouraged openness to multiple perspectives.

References

Emerson, R. W. (1894/1996). *Essays & poems*. New York:
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