

## The Sage of Concord: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Integrity

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can you maintain your integrity by making good choices?
- **Virtue:** Integrity
- **Definition –** Integrity is personal consistency in moral goodness.
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about the integrity of Ralph Waldo Emerson and how they can use integrity in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze Ralph Waldo Emerson's decision to leave the ministry in order to maintain his integrity.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of integrity to their own lives.
- **Background**
  - Transcendentalism dominated early nineteenth century thinking of the American Renaissance. One of the main leaders of the movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson, possessed a deeply held assertion that spirituality is connected to one's conscience. His writing focused on internal transformations and individual equality. Through his work, Emerson guided small groups of writers through logic and empirical study in a backlash to European Enlightenment thinking about how nature worked.

Emerson believed that the “essence of self-reliance is the resistance to conformity.” Emerson stated that the ability to have any belief that was not forced onto you is an authentic belief and idea. This message epitomized integrity in action for Emerson. Moreover, faithfully following one’s conscience was the essential part of Emerson’s definition of integrity. He wanted people to believe in themselves and not conform to the norms of a society that is not serving the larger good. He was a role model for his generation and beyond when he stated “What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison to what lies inside of you.” Emerson’s message was for each individual to recognize their own inner truth (self-reliance) and to act on it with strength and confidence to find their wholeness (integrity).
- **Vocabulary**
  - Transcendentalism
  - Renaissance
  - Literary
  - Backlash
  - Enlightenment
  - Rational
  - Intuitive
  - Manifested
  - Epitomized
  - Conscience
  - Obediently
  - Resign
  - Internal
  - Theological
  - Rigid
  - Communion
  - Profoundly
  - Delineating
  - Inextricably
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**

- As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
  - What challenges are you facing?
  - What fears or concerns might you have?
  - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**

- Who was Ralph Waldo Emerson? Why was he significant?
- What was Ralph Waldo's purpose in leaving the ministry?
- What actions did Ralph Waldo Emerson take to promote self-reliance and integrity?
- How did Ralph Waldo Emerson's integrity help to advance freedom?

- **Discussion Questions**

- Discuss the following questions with your students.
  - What is the historical context of the narrative?
  - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
  - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
  - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
  - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
  - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
  - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
  - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**

- Emerson, Ralph W. *Address and Divinity College*. N.p., 1938.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "An Oration, Delivered Before Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, August 31, 1837."
- Porte, Joel, and Saundra Morris. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Cambridge England New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- "Ralph Waldo Emerson." *Bio*. A&E Television Networks, 2015. Web. 25 June 2015. <http://www.biography.com/people/ralph-waldo-emerson-9287153#later-work-and-life>
- Ralph Waldo Emerson Texts. Web. 25 June 2015. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/index.htm>
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- Richardson, Robert D. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire: A Biography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

## **Handout A: The Sage of Concord: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Integrity**

### **Background**

Transcendentalism dominated early nineteenth century thinking of the American Renaissance. One of the main leaders of the movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson, possessed a deeply held assertion that spirituality is connected to one's conscience. His writing focused on internal transformations and individual equality. Through his work, Emerson guided small groups of writers through logic and empirical study in a backlash to European Enlightenment thinking about how nature worked.

Emerson believed that the "essence of self-reliance is the resistance to conformity." Emerson stated that the ability to have any belief that was not forced onto you is an authentic belief and idea. This message epitomized integrity in action for Emerson. Moreover, faithfully following one's conscience was the essential part of Emerson's definition of integrity. He wanted people to believe in themselves and not conform to the norms of a society that is not serving the larger good. He was a role model for his generation and beyond when he stated "What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison to what lies inside of you." Emerson's message was for each individual to recognize their own inner truth (self-reliance) and to act on it with strength and confidence to find their wholeness (integrity).

### **Narrative**

"A little integrity is better than any career." – Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Behavior," *The Conduct of Life*.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts on May 25, 1803 into a strict Unitarian family, Ralph Waldo Emerson was destined to follow obediently in his father's footsteps and become a minister. Sadly, Emerson suffered the death of his father when he was only eight years old. This heartbreak was the beginning of a long line of premature deaths of those Emerson loved that would shape his later life. As a boy, Emerson attended the Boston Latin School, and then proceeded to attend Harvard University finally followed by the Harvard School of Divinity. He was ordained a minister of the Second Church in Boston in 1829 fulfilling his family's calling.

Emerson resigned from the ministry after the death of his first wife, Ellen Tucker, whom he wed in 1829. Emerson's strong personal sense of integrity instigated deep introspective consideration of the conflicts between his beliefs and theological doctrines. This quest caused him to question experiences like the "Lord's Supper" and spurred him to travel extensively in Europe. During his travels he met literary figures Thomas Carlyle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth who influenced Emerson's philosophy profoundly. It was during these travels that Emerson began delineating his philosophies on nature and self-reliance.

Upon his return to America, Emerson settled down in Concord, Massachusetts, where he began a career as a writer and lecturer. He married his second wife, Lydia Jackson in 1835 and they had four children together. Emerson emerged as a principal Transcendentalist in the American literary landscape and helped define the early nineteenth century American Renaissance. Emerson became a celebrity in his own time and profoundly inspired many contemporaries, including Henry Thoreau and Walt Whitman. When many transcendentalists were beginning to espouse a socialist worldview, Emerson continually promoted the idea that individual reform was more valuable to the well-being of society than organized reform movements.<sup>1</sup>

Emerson provoked the ire of many following his "Address at Divinity College" in July 1838, where he returned to his alma mater scoffed at the traditional norm of formal religion, instead promoting self-reliance and the internal spiritual relationships held by individuals. Despite knowing he would cause controversy, Emerson felt compelled to maintain allegiance to his strong personal beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

Emerson, the "Sage of Concord," was known among fellow New England Transcendentalists for his ideas about a "rebirth of an intellectual and artistic life that was inextricably bound up with the life of the spirit." At

the time of his speech Emerson had begun to widen his circle of influence to a greater body of people. During his lifetime he came to be the father of the ideals which governed the true spirit of Transcendentalism.

Just a few years later, at a time when society was deeply divided over issues such as slavery and basic human rights, Emerson again stood steadfast in his belief that all individuals are equals in spirituality. Despite earlier struggles, as he grew in his transcendentalist beliefs, he became an active opponent of slavery, welcoming abolitionist leaders and even expressing disappointment that President Abraham Lincoln didn't immediately put an end to slavery.<sup>3</sup>

Emerson dedicated his later years to encouraging many followers to be servants to the greater good in society and not to fall victim to their own self-interest while seeking to improve themselves as individuals. To Emerson the most important thing a person could do was act with integrity. His belief in living life with integrity and self-reliance could be seen in his professional activities, from his decision to depart from the ministry and enter into secular scholarship to his outspoken opposition of the annexation of Texas on the grounds that he knew it would lead to a war he felt was unjust and would the expansion of slavery. Trusting the soundness of his own judgment, he embarked on a career as an independent author and lecturer, achieving great success as an existentialist intellectual. In time, he delivered more than 1,500 lectures around the United States, and his writing enjoyed widespread popularity.