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Self-Reliance in Millennials

As far as varying periods of American intellect, the decades of the 1820s and 1830s brought a new movement of individualism and perception of greatness known as transcendentalism. This school of thought was led by a group of intellectuals called the Transcendental Club, including Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Henry David Thoreau, W. E. Channing, among others, and was led by Ralph Waldo Emerson. These writers were creating their works in a time heavily steeped in American idealism, with the fight for gender equality gaining fervor and women authors' popularity on the rise. Additionally, with the global emphasis of scientific advancements, transcendentalists reacted against scientific rationalism by focusing their attentions on the belief that intuition ruled a human's psyche and that, instead of religion, one should trust in the self ("Ralph..."). This held true with the ideals of Romantic authors in Great Britain and Germany who had great influence on Emerson, most prominently Thomas Carlyle and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, but his works show evidence of Hinduism, Kantianism, and Neoplatonism as well (Goodman).

Emerson and his compatriots were highly influential in their own day, but more than that, they sent ripples through the thinking of later generations, particularly the millennials of the twenty-first century (also known as Generation Y or echo boomers). Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" resonates today with behavior young adults between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five display, even though many of this group have never read the work. Beyond the mere comparisons seen between Emerson's ideology and millennials, though, a real danger presents

itself in the acceptance of universal truth which comes out of both the transcendental era and the similar generations that follow.¹

“Self Reliance” is formulated around the idea of *genius* (Emerson 269). Emerson postulates that one is considered genius if his motto of life, per se, is adopted by others to create success for themselves; he states, “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” (Emerson 269). He is not arguing for mass conformity or forced, herd-like compliance; such a design would counteract the idea of genius. One must set himself apart in his ambition and eminence to be considered worthy of claiming his own truth as being useful to other men. Beyond this, Emerson asserts that it is man's *duty* to strive for confidence in one's individual life formula, but such potential is often made difficult or impossible by lack of trying, otherwise he (and the rest of the world) will never know his true greatness (Emerson 270).

This greatness, due to its contrasting nature, is likely to be misunderstood (Emerson 274). The peaks of the tallest, most majestic mountains reach the furthest distance from the surface of the earth; likewise the minds of the most intelligent and creative people, if they were visible, would reach past the heads of others. The most important mark of genius, according to Emerson, is one's character and the honest decisions one makes (Emerson 274). Because a genius's abilities are past the capacity of the average rabble, those below may not be able to comprehend the decisions and actions of those that are great, but staying true to one's self in each moment is more important than having the approval of the surrounding crowd. The nature of genius, and what Emerson defines as manliness, requires that one “must be a nonconformist...Nothing is at last

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I am not arguing that Emerson's transcendentalist ideas are the *cause* for millennial's attitude or shortcomings; I am simply drawing conclusions from history as to how certain ideological beliefs may affect the broader mentality of Generation Y's culture as a whole. I will be specifically formulating my argument around the facet of transcendentalism that addresses universal truth.

sacred but the integrity of [his] mind” (Emerson 271). This definition of manhood rings true with the current coming-of-age generation and the dire need of its individuals to stand out in unique, exciting, self-made ways.

Young adults, especially during their college years and into the more established period of their late-twenties, face the healthy, natural task of making decisions for themselves, gaining more independence, and establishing their own place in society (whether it be the field of study they choose or the career they wish to pursue). Heading into this important stage of life, though, millennials have a unique mindset in regards to the individual's duties and rights. As many young adults with baby-boomer parents can attest to, millennials “have always been treated as special and important” (Howe, Strauss). The idea of participation trophies has spread to all areas of life so that competition becomes irrelevant and all people have the same sense of accomplishment. However, Ross Douthat, writer for *The New York Times*, argues that “individualism, not left-wing politics” creates the felt necessity for equality. Douthat continues that this “explains both the personal optimism and the social mistrust, the passion about causes like gay marriage and the declining interest in collective-action crusades like environmentalism, even the fact that religious affiliation has declined but personal belief is still widespread.” While Emerson calls for charity to be displayed out of genuine, private concern for specific people or groups (Emerson 272), millennials similarly denounce the need for “doing good” for the sake of recognition or moral fervor, but will engage wholeheartedly in causes that are *personal* to the them.

Twenty-somethings through *every* era have demanded to make these “big life choices” on their own, as a claim to one's own capabilities, but there is a broader division happening between millennials and nearly every community they could be associated with—social norms, previously accepted laws and restrictions, religion, country. They fight against the idea of society choosing for them, which is deplorable to Emerson as well (Emerson 281). He even claims that one's

“sect,” as he calls it, discounts one as an individual because of what he has ascribed himself to as part of certain company (Emerson 273). In other words, he puts stock in stereotypes, but poses that one should avoid them if at all possible.

A popular video thread produced by BuzzFeed is a perfect example of millennials attempting to remove these stereotypes by sharing their individual abilities, preferences, and attributes. These include “I’m Christian, But I’m Not...,” “I’m Bisexual, But I’m Not...,” “I’m Fat, But I’m Not...,” “I’m Asian, But I’m Not...,” among others. The people in the videos are a diverse group, made up of only millennials, describing in short phrases how they are more than the stereotypes laid upon them. By removing themselves from the distinction that put them in the video in the first place, though, they are attempting to declare that they are just like everyone else. Their claims, such as “I’m bisexual, and I’m an athlete” or “I’m fat, and I love to laugh” (BFMP “I’m Bisexual...,” BMFP “I’m Fat...”) do remove them from potential stereotypes—although I do not see how anyone would assume overweight people would not enjoy a universal reaction to happiness—but does not make them any more of an individual. I believe Emerson would argue for the fact that the young adults in these videos are not finding true individuality, but are instead trying to be as well-included and accepted as possible by a broader society. Moreover, the argument produced by these videos is heavily one-sided. The creators chose people that may classify themselves under the broader category of “Muslim” or “Transgender,” but they only include those who will further bring themselves and others to *common* ground, even if they do not properly represent the true values of the sect as a whole. As a specific example, although Christian doctrine demands an unadulterated belief in a single God and a single path to heaven, one participant in the video “I’m Christian, But I’m Not...” states, “Everybody is in a different part of life, on their own path to wherever they’re trying to go.” He is entirely contradicting the values of the religion he is claiming to ascribe to in order to seem

tolerant.

As mentioned previously, those born between 1980 and 2000 are not the first to rally for a more tolerant, catch-all idealism. The most relatable era in my opinion was the Beat Generation of the 1950s and 60s, which “embraced originality and individuality in the way people thought and acted, throwing out the old rules of literature, music, sex, and religion” (“What Was...”). This description could apply to many periods, but many strong connections remain between Generation X and the hippies that spurred off of writers such as Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac in the 50s, and circulated around a pop culture of the 60s—The Beatles, sexuality, drugs, and civil rights movements. Influences in modern culture, from clothing style to racial equality to the legalization of weed, point back to this earlier generation.² Emerson recognizes this tendency for culture to repeat itself in “Self-Reliance.” He states that “Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed, does not” (Emerson 285). Overall, the characteristics of this second transcendentalist-like movement hail back to Emerson's own personal beliefs, including a rebellion against the prescribed American way of life, concern for social advocacy, and even a renewed interest in Eastern mysticism and Buddhism (Huddleston).

The question arises, then, why the similarities between hippies and hipsters is important, beyond the realm of mere irony. Looking through the examples of the past, deductions can be made about the future state of the millennial generation. For the transcendentalists, their heavy focus on the individual “presaged, ironically, the death knell of the higher principle of universal brotherhood for which transcendentalism, more than any other American philosophy, might have provided the foundation” (Gura). A community called Brook Farm was founded by Emerson's

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Another helpful and entertaining source about this topic is the blog post by Lauren Martin entitled “Could It Be? Millennials Are The New Generation Of Hippies, But With Better Weed.”

cousin, George Ripley, in the mid-1800s, but Emerson denied invitations to join the secluded society himself, “explaining that he still had far to travel on his own personal, spiritual journey before he could get so directly involved with other the reformation of others’ lives” (Gura).

Contemporary critics postulated their anxieties of what such individualistic ends could mean for a society, and, ultimately, the different emphases on utopian socialism of the Brook Farmers and the seclusionists like Thoreau created a recognizable split within the community of dear friends that made up the Transcendental Club (Gura). The “free love” culture of the 1960s left a percentage of American adults ravaged by addiction, disease, and anti-patriotism (“Flower Power”). As Generation Y begins to pass into adulthood showing similarities to the preceding examples, one could assume comparable negative effects to arise.

Adverse connotations already accompany the term “millennial,” including entitlement, unrecognized racism, and an unhealthy dependence on technology ruining young adults' oral skills and their ability to socialize in-person. This particular generalization rings true in “Self-Reliance,” though Emerson is not referencing cell phones or the internet, of course. He declares that society, though it may invent greater technology, will never advance due to society's misuse of said developments (Emerson 284). As Emerson describes “the civilized man [having] built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet” (284), so have the majority of millennials lost a great deal of self-sufficiency as inventions are turning into crutches and incapacitating young people.

These inabilities create an important distinction between individualism and self-reliance. Transcendentalists viewed them as mutually inclusive, but today the end result of individualism is more a sense of uniqueness and being able to stand out, instead of producing adept thinkers with original ideas. Notwithstanding, millennials have accomplished worthwhile achievements in areas such as eco-sensitive efforts, children's education programs, and making their voices heard on a governmental level (*Millennial Achievements...*). Not only this, but this group of people is

also known as being “friendly, open-minded, intelligent, responsible, socially minded and informed” (AMP Agency). However, sheer positivism combined with the accompanying entitled attitude will only lessen the possibilities for individuals with the potential for genius. Jean Twenge, author and psychology professor at San Diego State University, is quoted in an NPR article as saying, "We have this kind of empty individualism where we have the self-focus but not the engagement that we really need for an individualistic democracy" (Raphelson).

Millennials have created an idealism that may allow for wider acceptance of those with different views but have adopted the lacking idea of what “Self-Reliance” explains as truth.

In his essay, Emerson posits the theory of relative truth—that what some consider right and valuable may differ from person to person. Having pulled from various religions himself, his life philosophy would have to allow for such a broader view. He sets up a valid point in saying, “I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you. If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should. I must be myself. I will not hide my tastes or aversions” (280). The contrast I see between these statements and the mentality of many echo boomers is that, although he will not change his own views, he will not write off the other individual due to personal bias. America has become so entirely polarized that when one group holds a certain perspective, those that disagree with the group's standing as a whole automatically write off the possibility that that single perspective could hold worth. Such rash opposition forces fragmentation and a shallow kind of individualism, backed only by personal preference, strictly because no one can agree. We see this in the existence of a multitude of denominations and the plethora of spliced and revised religious beliefs. For truth to hold any weight, for it to live up to its definition, it cannot be subjective. Truth cannot ascribe itself to the whims of people, but instead, the opposite must occur; because a belief is considered true, whether it is that the sky is blue or that the universe is billions of years old or that there is

life after death, people must ascribe to *it*.

Religions, organizations, establishments, and the like work as a communal setting for a reason. They provide an environment to either foster, protect, teach, learn, defend, or postulate an idea to a wider group, and those that agree with that group can join it; however, this by nature must exclude other groups and ideas as being incorrect, or rather, not *true*. Furthermore, new ideas come out of communication with others; no one is purely original in himself, but is made up of his ancestors, influences of education, the culture around him, the friends he meets, the climate he lives in, the inherent nature within him, and so on. Emerson's idea that "if you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own" (280) has become what millennials (unknowingly) cling to in order to make everyone *comfortable*, but has caused the loss of the more-important concept of strength in a truth for what it offers to a human life, instead of developing a system of ethics that may or may not apply to anyone but the creator. Because of the example of the transcendentalists, millennials would be wise to consider the risks of a seemingly progressive and even *good* thing. Elizabeth Peabody, the woman who established the first kindergarten in the United States and Emerson's tutee in Greek, commented that "Emerson's stress on self-reliance and individual fulfillment might...lead to what she termed 'ego-theism,' his setting up himself, or comparably inspired individuals, as somehow gods themselves" (Gura). She goes on to explain that this melancholy pseudo-divinity was selfish, unfulfilling, and led to no one's betterment (Gura). Likewise, if transcendentalist individualism persists, young adults of the twenty-first century will fall into a similar form of moral deterioration and be left with nothing but a haphazard idealism on which to cling; a more others-focused balance must be found and built up in modern American society.

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