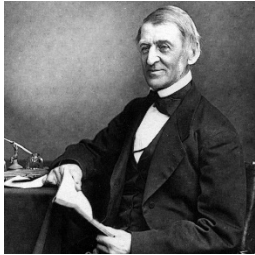


# What Emerson Can Teach Us About Resilience

The great writer coped with pain and loss by getting back to work, not by withdrawing into 'self-care.'



Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1860.

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*By Mark Edmundson*

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Since the 19th century, Americans have looked to Ralph Waldo Emerson for wisdom on many subjects, from education to religion to politics. Today, surrounded by political storms and the sorrow and wreckage of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Emerson we need most is the prophet of resilience. Emerson's ideas about resilience stand in potent contrast to our current cultural consensus on how to deal with suffering and loss. Instead of "self-care" and "healing," he offers an aggressive affirmation of the will and of work.

Life compelled Emerson to become something of an expert on resilience. As a young man he lost the love of his life, his wife Ellen, to tuberculosis when she was just 19. His oldest son, Waldo—a joyful child who seemed to concentrate in himself what was most uninhibitedly life-loving in his father—died of scarlet fever when he was 5 years old.

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Emerson's remedy for sorrow, grief and depression was not to stay still. Don't hold on to your pain and wait for it to work itself through—instead, get up and do something. Write your speech, compose your music, start your business or expand it; go at it, whatever it might be. In his essay "Self-Reliance," he puts it this way: "Life only avails not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose, it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of the gulf, in the darting to an aim."

In the essay "Power," Emerson writes that we carefully watch children to see if they possess "the recuperative force." Those who instinctively retire to their rooms in sorrow when they're slighted, miss the prize or lose the game will be at a serious disadvantage in adult life. "But," Emerson continues, "if they have the buoyancy and resistance that preoccupies them with new interest in the new moment,—the wounds cicatrize, and the fiber is the tougher for the hurt."

When Waldo died, Emerson needed that kind of buoyancy and resistance to overcome the greatest sadness of his life. Writing in his journal two days after his son's death, he seems overwhelmed by grief: "The morning of Friday I awoke at 3 o'clock, & every cock in every barnyard was shrilling with the most unnecessary noise. The sun went up the morning sky with all his light, but the landscape was dishonored by this loss. For this boy in whose remembrance I have slept & awaked so oft, decorated for me the morning star, & the evening cloud."

Yet Emerson was soon up and moving again, tending to work and family—his two surviving children and his second wife, Lidian. He went back at life with all the brio he could muster. Two years after Waldo's death, Emerson writes wonderingly about how he responded to his son's passing. "In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me. If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps for many years, but it would leave me as it found me—neither better nor worse. So it is with this calamity: it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which

could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar.”

The passage can freeze the blood on first reading—it seems so distanced, so detached from the tragedy. But it also attests to his ability to keep living and moving forward. Emerson’s resilience was shaped by his conviction that we are mortal and there is no other life than this. Nothing can redeem the time when you did not plunge forward and do what you had to do. The moral quality Emerson commends above all others isn’t love, faith or patriotism but a commitment to work. “But do your work and I shall know you,” he writes in “Self-Reliance.”

Emerson’s commitment to rapid recovery from loss isn’t gentle or humanitarian. But it is classically American in its insistence on affirming the future over the past. For all our faults, Americans are still people who look ahead, scope the territory, move forward. When we fail at something, we give it one more go and maybe get it half right.

This is very different from the psychoanalytic approach, which values resilience less than patience, self-understanding and gentleness. In his surpassingly humane essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud describes how the healthy ego engages in the slow, steady “work of mourning.” This involves bringing up every significant image and hope that connects the mourner to the departed one, infusing it with emotional energy, and then letting it pass. The work is finite, and in time the life of the psyche is resolved and turns back to normal.

This approach to dealing with loss, sorrow and disappointment has become standard in our culture. We speak commonly of “healing”: Communities must heal, individuals need to withdraw from life and heal themselves. As practitioners of “self-care” we treat ourselves gently, acting as our own attending physicians.

Emerson wouldn’t necessarily disparage this approach; he understood that we all must seek what is best for ourselves in our own way. But at a moment when loss, deprivation and suffering are fresh in our hearts and minds, he steps forward with a

different mode of response. Don't make yourself a patient, don't plump the mattress or pickle yourself in Cabernet. Instead, make life more demanding than it has been. Be tougher on yourself; fill your mind with your tasks and go after them, hard. When we're down, we need to get up and fight as best we can—not tomorrow, but now. Remember, "power ceases in the instant of repose."

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