from ***Self-Reliance***An essayby Ralph Waldo Emerson

**1** There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed[[1]](#footnote-1) on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what he can do, nor does he know until he has tried…

**2** Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion[[2]](#footnote-2). It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

**3** Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind…

**4** A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin[[3]](#footnote-3) of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. “Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood?”--is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood…

**5** The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has got a fine Geneva watch, but he has lost his skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so, being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice[[4]](#footnote-4) he does not observe; the equinox[[5]](#footnote-5) he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His notebooks impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber[[6]](#footnote-6); whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, by a Christianity entrenched in establishments and forms some vigor of wild virtue. For every Stoic[[7]](#footnote-7) was Stoic; but in Christendom[[8]](#footnote-8), where is the Christian?

1. **bestowed** (v): presented as a gift or an honor [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. **aversion** (n): strong feeling of dislike [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. **hobgoblin** (n): something causing superstitious fear [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. **solstice** (n): when the sun reaches its highest or lowest point in the sky at noon, marked by the longest and shortest days [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. **equinox** (n): the time or date (twice each year) at which the sun crosses the celestial equator, when day and night are of equal length [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. **encumber** (v): to impede or hinder [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. **Stoic** (noun): a member of the ancient school of Stoicism, a philosophy founded by Zeno, who taught that people should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and submit without complaint to unavoidable necessity [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. **Christendom** (n): the worldwide body or society of Christians [↑](#footnote-ref-8)