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Reflections on "The American Scholar": Words of Inspiration for These Dark Times

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Abstract

The great American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of educators in 1837 is taken up and examined for its relevance for us today. Themes such as the book as teacher; teaching, learning, and leadership; spirituality and materiality; the duties of the scholar; the influences on the scholar; self-reliance; and freedom and democracy are introduced and developed in this paper. Others' insights into this exceptional oratory—and into that of Walt Whitman, Emerson's compatriot—are plumbed for their insights. One of the revelations to come from this process is words of wisdom and inspiration to guide us in these dark times for America and American education.

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"*The past is never dead. It's not even past*."—William Faulkner

Rereading Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The American Scholar"[i], an address given to the assembly of the Phi Beta Kappa Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts August 31, 1837, just shy of 200 years ago, one cannot help but see its relevance for scholars today—teachers, administrators, those who set educational policy, and public intellectuals of all sorts. As one would expect, those intervening years have wrought critical changes in education—and by this we mean principally public education; that is, schooling—and changes in the environments within which education is enmeshed—in the US and throughout the world.[ii] The continued relevance of Emerson's musings is due, no doubt, to some elemental core values imbuing how we think about public education in the US and elsewhere and also, I imagine, due to Emerson's genius.[iii] Also, if we're to be honest, the perceived relevance of Emerson's message today is to be found both in the delivery and in our reading—the delivery, because Emerson spoke in lofty terms, as befits a poet of his magnitude, speaking not of the minutia of schooling; and of our reading, because we are all apt to read with our own experiential lenses, schema, and understandings; we bring something of ourselves to the reading and take something subjective from it for ourselves and into our personal and professional lives. Even granting all this, there's still much to glean from this piece of exceptional American oratory; it can teach us, if we let it. Here we'll pay homage to the man and his words and make relevant his message to the scholars, the educators, of his day.[iv]

Books as Teachers

Often some of our greatest teachers are known to us only through the work they leave behind—words in time. Nietzsche (1874) had his Schopenhauer, a teacher he never met.[v] He described his

"delight and amazement when I found Schopenhauer" (p.13) as he "could guess that he was the very educator and philosopher for whom I had been searching" (p. 13). But, he wrote:

> *I only had his book, of course, and therein lay a great limitation. So I made a particular effort to see through the book and to imagine the man in flesh whose great testament I had before me, and who would only make heirs of those who wished and were able to be more than mere readers, namely his sons and pupils. (p. 14)*

Let us learn from books, especially those of geniuses and poets. The best communicate in an expressive language of images, feelings, and emotions, not through simple explication and pedantry. Their authors assume, in Rancière's (1991) phrase, an equality of intelligence—that readers can understand them at some level. The poet, the genius, the writer, attempts to transmit feelings, emotions, and thoughts using our common language[vi]: "the instantaneousness of these ideas and feelings that contradict each other and are infinitely nuanced—this must be transmitted, made to voyage in the wilds of words and sentences. And the way to do that hasn't been invented" (p. 68).

Rather, wrote Rancière (1991):

> *We are left with learning, with finding the tools of that expression in books. Not in grammarians' books: they know nothing of this voyage. Not in orators' books: these don't seek to be* ***figured out****; they want to be* ***listened to****. They don't want to say anything; they want to command—to join minds, submit wills, force action. One must learn near those who have worked in the gap between feeling and expression, between the silent*

> *language of emotion and the arbitrariness of the spoken tongue, near those who have tried to give voice to the silent dialogue the soul has with itself . . . .*
>
> *Let's learn, then, near those poets who have been adorned with the title genius. It is they who will betray to us the secret of that imposing word. The secret of genius is that of universal teaching: learning, repeating, imitating, translating, taking apart, putting back together again. (p. 68, emphasis in original)*

And for us at this moment, I suggest that Emerson is such a poet.

Emerson (1837) opined that:

> *the next great influence [after nature] into the spirit of the scholar, is, the mind of the Past… Books are the best type of influence of the past, and perhaps we shall get at the truth,—learn the amount of this influence conveniently,—by considering their value alone. (p. 5)*

"The theory of books is noble" (p. 5), Emerson said. He continued:

> *The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him, life; it went out from him, immortal thoughts. It came into him business; it went out from him, poetry. It was dead fact, now it is quick thought. It can stand, and it can go. It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires. Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issues, so high does it soar, so long does it sing. (p. 5)*

But, he wrote, this distillation, as he called it, is not perfect:

> *Or, I might say, it depends on how far the process had gone, of transmuting life into truth, in proportion to the completeness of the distillation, so will the purity and imperishableness of the product be. But none is quite perfect. As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought, that shall be as efficient, in all respects, to a remote posterity, as to contemporaries. . . . Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this. (Emerson, 1837, p. 5)*

Here Emerson (1837) perhaps anticipated this labor we now undertake. But the iconoclast in Emerson, the culture critic, called into question the notion of the perfect book of Truth, of received wisdom. Taking inspiration from his life and times, distilling them into immortal thought, distilling business into poetry and dead facts into quick thought, he commented:

> *Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation,—the act of thought,—is transferred to the record. The poet chanting, was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled, the book is perfect: as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly, the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant. The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry, if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted*

> *dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books. (pp. 5-6)*

Books should be inspirational, not dogmatic. And though in certain quarters it might be thought blaspheme, even The Book, and The Book or scripture of any religion, should be read for inspiration. This was Hazony's (2012) point: that Hebrew Scripture can be read as parable, metaphorically, as inspirational life lessons.

Otherwise, Emerson (1837) believed, books do damage:

> *Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end, which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. (p. 6)*

It is as Rancière (1991) wrote in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*—that each should have and seek their own orbit around the truth. "Each of us describes our parabola around the truth. No two orbits are alike" (p. 59), wrote Rancière, and "no one has a relationship to the truth if he is not on his own orbit" (p. 59).

Everyone creates. This is something with which Rancière (1991) might agree, as he wrote, "'Me too, I'm a painter'" (p. 67). "'Me too, I'm a painter' means: me too, I have a soul, I have feelings to communicate" (p. 67). This, for Emerson (1837) is genius, the active soul:

> *This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him . . . The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. In its essence, it is progressive. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they,—let us hold by this. They pin me down. They look backward and not forward. But genius looks forward: the eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hind head: man hopes: genius creates. (p. 6)*

The soul active—or *vita activa* in Arendt's (1958) typology of work, labor, and action— acts, and in that action creates, and that creation goes out into the world. Action's effects for Arendt are unpredictable and ripe with possibilities. Action, not work or labor, alone enjoins humankind's plurality, making it political.

Teaching, learning and today's teacher-scholar

Usually, the image the word *teaching* calls to mind is that of a teacher and their class in a schoolroom. In our mind's eye we usually see a primary-grade teacher, young and full of energy, speaking to the assembled children. Teaching, in this common image, is discursive, holding forth, relaying a message, explicating. But learning, as Biesta (2014) takes pains to point out, is more than being taught, it can be a *learning from*: "*to learn from someone is a radically different experience from the experience of being taught by someone*" (p. 53, emphasis in original). When students allow themselves to learn from someone, "they bring their teachers and what their teachers do or say within their own circle of understanding [i.e., within their own orbit], within their own construction. This means that they are basically in control of what they

learn from their teachers" (p. 53). There is no radical intervention from the outside.

It is in this way that I believe Nietzsche (1874) learned from Schopenhauer, and how I suggest that we learn from Emerson and his "The American Scholar". Nietzsche acknowledged his realization, "near the end of his productive life" (Pelligrin, 2018, p. xiv) that his essay, his "untimely meditation", *Schopenhauer as Educator* "'at bottom . . . speak[s] only of me. . . In 'Schopenhauer as Educator,' it is my innermost history, my own *becoming* that is inscribed" (Nietzsche as cited in Pelligrin, p. xiv, emphasis in original). Nietzsche realized that "not even the greatest educator could relieve one of the burden of *self-education*" (p. xiv, emphasis in original): "'No one can build that bridge for you'" (Nietzsche as cited in Pelligrin, p. xiv).[vii]

A love of learning and of free and open debate (i.e., free speech) were the Phi Beta Kappa society's founding tenets (www.pbk.org/History), so it is especially fitting that we take up and discuss, learn from and with, perhaps one of the most original and iconoclastic keynote addresses ever given to this body. Today in the United States, education, and with it learning, is under assault as never before and in need of champions. Conservative forces throughout the states are targeting teachers' speech and, hence, their instruction. Some states are offering bounties to those who inform on teachers who talk openly of race or gender. The situation is not dissimilar from that in Russia, where, according to *The Washington Post* (Whalen, April 10, 2022), students are secretly recording teachers, who are being fired and charged with a crime against the state for traitorous speech in speaking openly about the war in Ukraine. One such teacher, Irina Gen, was recorded surreptitiously and reported to authorities by students. *The Washington Post* obtained a copy of the recording. In it Gen was heard

responding to a student's question about why Russia was barred from participating in international sporting events. She replied that "'So long as Russia doesn't behave itself in a civilized way, this will go on forever'" (para. 2) and added that Russia "'wanted to get to Kyiv, to overthrow Zelensky and the government. This is a sovereign state'... 'There's a sovereign government there'" (para. 2) and that "'We have a totalitarian regime. Any dissent is considered a crime of thought'" (para. 18). A crime of thought!

In some states in the United States, students feel they must hide their gender identity for fear they and their parents will be persecuted or prosecuted. Members of the public, whether they have children in schools or not, are attacking and threatening school board members and their families over mask mandates, issues of gender, school and classroom libraries, and open discussions of race and racism. Local school board elections, previously a venue for civic-minded citizens wishing to serve the children in their communities, are being contested by reactionary and ideologically conservative single-issue candidates seeking to further restrict teachers' academic freedom, to severely limit and narrow the school curriculum and the school knowledge children have access to. These vitriolic politics, the Covid pandemic, and the Great Resignation are causing teachers and administrators to leave the profession *en masse* or consider doing so.[viii]

We, as teachers and leaders, must recognize and counter this "right way of reading" (Emerson, 1837, p. 7), the officially sanctioned speech, for ours and our students' intellectual fealty and political/ideological freedom. This "right way of reading" is there "so it be sternly subordinated" (p. 7). But "Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times" (p. 7) because when "he can read God [i.e., nature] directly, the hour is too

precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings" (p. 7). There are times, though, "intervals of darkness" (p. 7), "when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining" when we "repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is. We hear, that we may speak" (p. 7). Here Emerson cites "The Arabian proverb"— "'A fig tree, looking on a fig tree, becometh fruitful'" (p. 7). In this dark hour for public education, we would welcome a polestar, a shining light to guide us. Emerson the poet could be that light.

Emerson (1837) began his address by alluding to a fable, "out of an unknown antiquity" (p. 2), wherein "the gods, in the beginning, divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself, just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end" (p. 2). "But unfortunately, this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered" (p. 2). The divisions have alienated each from the whole and their place in relation to the whole that is Man (and Woman). "Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things" (p. 3). "In this distribution of functions, the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state, he is, Man Thinking. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking" (p. 3). The public political discourse concerning education is full of slogans and banal clichés—the parroting of others' 'thinking'. Repetition of dicta and dogma by, especially, Christian nationalists (Brown, 2019, 2021) and white supremacists is far removed from thinking. The volume and vitriol with which these fundamentalist slogans and diatribes are delivered substitute for reason and empathy. Countering these dark forces calls

for more than, something other than, debate and political rhetoric. Rancière's (1991) insight is apropos here: "Reasonable man knows, therefore, that there is no political science, no politics of truth. Truth settles no conflict in the public place" (p. 90).

What may at first seem a paean to America and American exceptionalism is anything but. Emerson is eminently egalitarian. In both "The American Scholar" (Emerson, 1837) and "The Poet" (Emerson, 1844), Emerson extolls the common and the lowly: "I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day and you may have the antique and future worlds" (Emerson, 1971, as cited in Rancière, 2019, p. 56). With Walt Whitman, Emerson lauds the plebian, the worker, the farmer:

> *I hear therefore with joy whatever is beginning to be said of the dignity and necessity of labor to every citizen. There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade, for learned as well as for unlearned hands. And labor everywhere is welcome; always are we invited to work; only be this limitation observed, that a man shall not for the sake of wider activity sacrifice any opinion to the popular judgments and modes of action. (Emerson, 1837, p. 12)*

In "The Poet", Emerson called for a new poetics, one reflective of the promise of a nascent America. In it,

> *the poetry of the present time breaks with a certain idea of time, one regulated by great events and rhythms inherited from the past. It finds its material no longer in historical succession, but in geographical simultaneity, in the multiplicity of activities distributed in the diverse spaces of a territory. It finds its form no longer in regular meter inherited from tradition, but in the common pulse that links these activities. (Rancière, 2019, p. 57)*

Rancière points out that the "common pulse that the new poet must make sensible in the material activities of the new world is itself entirely spiritual" (p. 57).

Emerson, the Transcendentalist (Rancière, 2019[ix]), was interested in the life of the spirit and in reintegrating it with the corporeal or material, from which it was sundered by philosophers of the Enlightenment and of modernity (Quijano, 2007). Reading Emerson, Rancière made this comment upon his project:

> *Materialism is the dualism that separates the material from the spiritual by separating particular things from the life of the whole. The task of the American poet [i.e., Emerson] is to restore the vulgar materialities of the world of work and everyday life to the life of the mind and the whole. (p. 57)*

For Emerson (1837), and following him, Whitman (1855), spirit emanated from The One, God, but not entirely and not always; for Emerson (1837) speaks of the spirit and the soul that animate Man and the scholar. Nature is the first and greatest influence upon the scholar: "the first in time and the first in importance of the influence upon the mind" (p. 3). And when the scholar reflects upon nature and sees that each particular stems from one root— "And what that Root? Is not that the soul of his soul?" (p. 4). He observed:

> *this spiritual light shall have revealed the law of more earthly natures,—when he has learned to worship the soul, and to see that the natural philosophy that now is, is only the first groupings of its gigantic hand, he shall look forward to an ever expanding knowledge as to becoming a creator. He shall see, that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part.*

> *One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. (p. 4)*

In his essay "Democracy", D. H. Lawrence (1950; see also Williams, 1958) wrestled with the way Whitman, and by extension Emerson, conceived of spirit. Lawrence argued that:

> *You can have life two ways. Either everything is created from the mind, downwards; or else everything proceeds from the creative quick, outwards into exfoliation and blossom. Either a great Mind floats in space: God, the Anima Mundi, the Oversoul, drawing with a pair of compasses and making everything to scale, even emotions and self-conscious effusions; or else creation proceeds from the forever inscrutable quicks of living beings, men, women, animals, plants. The actual living quick alone is the creative reality. Once you abstract from this, once you generalize and postulate Universals, you have departed from the creative reality, and entered the realm of static fixity, mechanism, materialism. (p. 88)*

He found that:

> *you can't make an **idea** of the living self: hence it can never become an ideal… There it is, an inscrutable, unfindable, vivid quick, giving us off as a life-issue. It is not **spirit**. Spirit is merely our mental consciousness, a finished essence extracted from our life-being… The living self is not spirit. You cannot postulate it. How can you postulate that which is there?...*
>
> *The quick of self is there. (p. 89, emphasis in original)*

Williams (1958) believed that "Lawrence wrote nothing more important than this" (p. 208)— "an emphasis . . . on the preservation

of the 'spontaneous life-activity' against those rigidities of category and abstraction, of which the industrial system was so powerful a particular embodiment" (p. 208).

Lawrence (1950) argued against the making of ideals: "You can't make an *idea* of the living self: hence it can never become an ideal" (p. 89). Spirit is mental consciousness, "a finished essence extracted from our life-being" (p. 89).

Having done with ideals, Lawrence (1950) stated what for us is his most important and relevant thesis, and his most important contribution to our thinking about means of human associative living—that it ought to ensure the nurturance of the free, spontaneous self. Lawrence pointed to how:

> *Whitman's Democracy is not merely a political system, or a system of government—or even a social system. It is an attempt to conceive a new way of life, to establish new values. It is a struggle to liberate human beings from the fixed, arbitrary control of ideals into free spontaneity.*
>
> *No, the ideal of Oneness, the unification of all mankind into the homogeneous whole, is done away with. The great* ***desire*** *is that each single individual shall be incommutably himself, spontaneous and single, that he shall not in any way be reduced to a term, a unit of any Whole. (p. 90, emphasis in original)*

Emerson (1837), too, feared the massification of people, a process already occurring in Europe. He lamented how:

> *But I have already shown the ground of my hope, in adverting to the doctrine that man is one. I believe man has been wronged; he has wronged himself. He has almost lost the light, that can lead*

> *him back to his prerogatives. Men are become of no account. Men in history, men in the world of to-day are bugs, are spawn, and are called "the mass" and "the herd". (p. 15)*

Rather than as in the original state of the One Man, wherein "Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all" (p. 2), the distribution of functions "has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered" (p. 2). "Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things" (p. 3), so that, for instance, "the tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars" (p. 3). Banal materialism and finance (i.e., capitalism) caused people to seek money and power:

> *Men such as they are, very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money—the "spoils," so called, "of office." And why not? for they aspire to the highest, and this, in their sleep-walking, they dream is highest. Wake them, and they shall quit the false good, and leap to the true, and leave governments to clerks and desks. (p. 16)*

Emerson felt that:

> *public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. . . . The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the decorous and the complaisant. Young men of the fairest promise . . . are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust. (p. 20)*[x]

Emerson saw the promise of a new land, new worlds for a new people. For Emerson and Whitman both, realizing this promise meant breaking with the past. As Rancière (2019) interpreted it, these poets of the new world were interpellated by its vastness and its egalitarian potential. They sensed a "geographical simultaneity, in the multiplicity of activities distributed in the diverse spaces of a territory" (p. 57). This was a unifying spirit and a different conception of time—"a common pulse" linking all activities. Action was essential for Emerson—the instantiation of the spiritual, consciousness, in the material, symbiotically. The individual was recognized and respected, not as we have come to conceive of the individual today in a libertarian sense, but as unique and creative in such a way that the individual wasn't erased in the massification of 'society' occasioned by the capitalist industrialization emerging in Europe. As Lawrence (1950) put it: "the unification into the homogeneous whole, is done away with" (p. 90). The person, the individual "shall be incommutably himself, spontaneous and single, that he shall not in any way be reduced to a term, a unit of any Whole" (p. 90).

This end is not assured. Indeed, the tyrannical forces of capitalism and production constantly work against its realization. "This coming into full, spontaneous being is the most difficult thing of all" (Lawrence, 1950, p. 91). "Man's nature is balanced between spontaneous creativity and mechanical-material activity. Spontaneous being is subject to no law. But mechanical-material existence is subject to all the laws of the mechanical-physical world" (p. 91). Lawrence calls on education, and by inference, educators, to guard against what he termed "the fall into mechanical automatism" (p. 91):

> *The only thing man has to trust to in coming to himself is his desire and impulse. But both desire and impulse tend to fall into*

> *mechanical automatism: to fall from spontaneous reality into dead or material reality. All our education should be guarding against this fall. (p. 91)*

Lawrence saw the dangers:

> *The fall is possible in a twofold manner. Desires tend to automatize into functional appetites, and impulses tend to automatize into fixed aspirations or ideals. These are the two great temptations of man. Falling into the first temptation, the whole human will pivots on some function, some material activity, which then works the whole being: like an idée fixe in the mental consciousness. This automatized, dominant appetite we call a lust: a lust for power, a lust for consuming, a lust for self-abnegation and merging. The second great temptation is the inclination to set up some fixed centre in the mind, and make the whole soul turn upon this centre. This we call idealism. Instead of the will fixing upon some sensational activity, it fixes upon some aspirational activity, and pivots this activity upon an idea of an ideal. The whole soul streams in the energy of aspiration and turns automatically, like a machine, upon the ideal. (p. 91)*

Again, education must be our safeguard:

> *These are the two great temptations of the fall of man, the fall from spontaneous, single, pure being, into what we call materialism or automatism or mechanism of the self. All* ***education must tend against this fall; and all our efforts in all our life must be to preserve the soul free and spontaneous****. (p. 91, emphasis added)*

Democracy, at its best, ensures (or ought to ensure) persons' coming into their spontaneous, creative self. Lawrence was adamant about this:

> *So, we know the first great purpose of Democracy: that each man shall be spontaneously himself—each man himself, each woman herself, without any question of equality or inequality entering in at all; and that no man shall try to determine the being of any other man, or of any other woman. (p. 93)*[xi]

The primary danger to democracy—and to other systems as well: "socialism, conservatism, bolshevism, liberalism, republicanism, communism: all alike. The one principle that governs all *isms* is the same: the principle of the idealized unit, the possessor of property" (p. 94, emphasis in original). Lawrence is unwavering on this point: "sometime, somewhere, man will wake up and realize that property is only there to be used, not to be possessed. He will realize that possession is a kind of illness of the spirit, and a hopeless burden upon the spontaneous self" (p. 94). He concluded:

> *if we are to keep our backs unbroken, we must deposit all property on the ground, and learn to walk without it. We must stand aside. And when many men stand aside, they stand in a new world; a new world of man has come to pass. This is Democracy: the new order. (p. 95)*

Materialism has become our kind's obsession and yoke. We (and by this, I mean mainly the 'elite' and powerful) get caught up in building ever larger cities and with ever taller skyscrapers, amassing fortunes, and subverting schools—whose task ought rightly to be the florescence of learning, the realization of a person's own nature (Rancière, 2019, p. 56) or "fullness of being" (Lawrence, 1950)—into

mere job-training institutions to fill their factories with "decorous and complaisant" workers. Materiality, with its acquisitiveness, has alienated the life of the spirit and of the mind from that of "Man Thinking" (Emerson, 1837, p. 3). The Scholar, along with the multitude, has been mired in materiality and its production—in today's scholar's case this becomes the production of 'achievement' on high-stakes tests, in what Biesta (2019) termed the "global education measurement industry" (p. 658).[xii] Tests drive curriculum, and the acquisition of ever higher test scores, like the Sirens' song, so seduces education and educationists that thinking and learning are forsaken, abandoned to chase the chimera that is 'achievement'. Spirit and mind atrophy through neglect.

There are alternative paths people—students, teachers, administrators, and others—can take. Some alternatives are gaining traction of late. Liang and Klein (2022a, 2022b) draw our attention to a purpose orientation or mindset as an alternative to either a performance- or a passion-oriented one. According to these authors, both a performance and a passion mindset are inner-directed, egocentric, and emanate out of fear and insecurity. A purpose orientation is more other-directed, connecting the person with the world.

In the distribution of functions from the Old Fable, which Emerson (1837) invokes in his discussion of Man, "the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state, he is, Man Thinking. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or, still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking" (p. 3). "Delegated intellect" implies both authority and consensus. Today, each of these components is suspect. Since the subjective turn (or what some have referred to as the linguistic or postmodern turn), authority

everywhere stands on shaky ground. It is seldom, if ever, granted as a given due to station. A rudimentary hermeneutical analysis may concede that, if ever the teacher's authority was secure, as it likely was in Emerson's time, it is so no longer, except perhaps in certain locales and social systems. And consensus or unanimity, again in postmodernity, is not to be had.

Emerson (1837) enumerated what he saw as the duties of the Man Thinking—represented by the scholar and teacher. Chief among these duties is self-reliance. Poverty and solitude result; spurning "the fashions, the education, the religion of society, he takes the cross of making his own" (pp. 12-13) "in the way of the self-relying and self-directed; and the state of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society" (p. 13). Emerson asked: "for all this loss and scorn, what offset?" (p. 13). The scholar is one "who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts" (p. 13). "He is the world's eye. He is the world's heart" (p. 13); though the scholar "defer[s] never to the popular cry" (p. 13).

Strength and courage are needed, and resilience: "Free should the scholar be,—free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom. . . . Brave, for fear is a thing, which a scholar by his very function puts behind him" (Emerson, 1837, p. 14).

> *It is a shame to him if his tranquility, amid dangerous times, arise from the presumption, that … his is a protected class; or if he seeks a temporary peace by the diversion of his thoughts from politics or vexed questions, hiding his head like an ostrich in the flowering bushes, peeping into microscopes, and turning rhymes, as a boy whistles to keep his courage up. So is the danger a danger still; so is the fear worse… let him turn and face it… The world*

> *is his, who can see through its pretension. What deafness, what stone-blind custom, what overgrown error you behold, is there only by sufferance, —by your sufferance. See it to be a lie, and you have already dealt it its mortal blow. (p. 14)*

The scholar engages with politics and "vexed questions," for the scholar is in and of the world.

Walzer (2004), Mencken (1926/2009), Nietzsche (1873/2014) and others have spoken of courage. Walzer wrote of the moral virtues exhibited by the social critic, strikingly similar to Emerson's:

> *The first of these, and the most obvious, is courage… a political virtue, above all, the ability to sustain a commitment in dark times, to "hang in there"… Sometimes what … [is] require[d] is actual physical courage, to persist in the face of threats, imprisonment, and violence… More important… is the moral courage necessary to continue a critique of tyranny or oppression when one's fellow citizens are silent or complicit, and what is even harder, to confront and condemn their complicity. (p. xiv)*

Mencken (1926/2009), in *Notes on Democracy*, wrote:

> *genuine liberty demands… courage. The man [or woman] who loves it must be willing to fight for it; blood, said Jefferson, is its natural manure. More, he [or she] must be able to* ***endure*** *it—an even more arduous business. Liberty means self-reliance, it means resolution, it means enterprise, it means the capacity for doing without. The free man [or woman] is one who has won a small and precarious territory from the great mob… and is prepared and ready to defend it… All around him [or her] are enemies, and where he [or she] stands there is no friend… [They]*

> *must face the responsibilities… and the dreadful loneliness. (pp. 53-54, emphasis in original)*

Emerson also spoke of self-reliance. Courage and freedom are intertwined, inseparable. In these dark times, in the midst of a culture war which shows signs of morphing into a civil war (Marche, 2022), that courage is all the more dear, as the situation is all the more fraught and dangerous. Many have left the teaching profession and more are considering leaving rather than continue to endure the political barbs, threats, and dangers; rather than struggle to make a decent living in a perennially underpaid profession under draconian, authoritarian regimes of oversight and accountability with diminished professional autonomy. Is it courage they lack? Resilience? Or are there other root causes? We—educational leaders, professional communities, and publics—ought to recognize, applaud, and support those who stay, who weather the hardships and dangers to do the good work of teaching and raise up the upcoming generations of youth so that they, too, may realize their freedom and emancipation (Waite, 2022), their fullness of being.

In Higher Education

In tertiary, 'higher' education, the scholar, no matter their political leanings, is part of a corporation (Burke, 2000), a university or college, which is itself entangled in local, national, global ideological, economic, and political systems and so is complicit in them. This is no different from "the man (or woman) on the street": each of us is enmeshed so and contributes to those systems of which we are a part. Even the most progressive and revolutionary scholar is part of larger, principally capitalist systems. Capitalism, as ideology and as practice, at its best can be a progressive force (Schumpeter, 1942), at its worst, exploitative—of the worker, the scholar, the resource(s), and even of

the 'client', in this case, students. At its best, capitalism can be a progressive force; such as when democratic capitalism—allowing that this is not an oxymoron—replaces authoritarianism, even authoritarian capitalism. The trick is to not allow oneself to be exploited unfairly and to do more good than harm, on balance. This is the social justice calculus. Those who want to use the university, school, or college for good must analyze the situations, systems, and processes, looking for points of inflection (Hall, 2019) where they can do the political work for progressive change.

For its part, the university, as with any capitalist concern, has a complicated relationship with its faculty. On the one hand, the university would like the scholars it employs to be productive and compliant ("decorous and complaisant"), adding to its prestige, status, and rankings (Stack, 2021) and causing it no problems. But productivity, especially in knowledge fields, comes from innovation and creativity, often disruptive forces. Enzensberger (1982) portrays it as a contradiction:

> *In order to obtain consent, you have to grant a choice, no matter how marginal and deceptive; in order to harness the faculties of the human mind, you have to develop them, no matter how narrowly and deformed. It may be a measure of the overwhelming power of the mind industry that none of us can escape its influence. (p. 12)*

As with action of any kind, which is always unpredictable (Arendt, 1958), the "mind industry, however closely supervised in its individual operations, is never completely controllable as a whole" (Enzensberger, 1982, p. 12). As to the intellectuals, "the producers" (p. 12):

> *We find the dilemma aggravated and intensified. In terms of power, of course, there can be no question as to who runs the business. Certainly it is not the intellectuals who control the industrial establishment, but the establishment that controls them. There is precious little chance for the people who are productive to take over their means of production: this is just what the present structure is designed to prevent. (p. 12)*

Enzensberger continues: "However, … the relationship is not without a certain ambiguity, since there is no way of running the mind industry without enlisting the services of at least a minority…who can create something" (p. 12). There is a

> *dependence on … [those] capable of innovation, in other words, potential troublemakers… Consequently, intellectuals are, from the point of view of any power structure bent on its own perpetuation, a security risk. It takes consummate skill to "handle" them and to neutralize their subversive influence. All sorts of techniques, from the crudest to the most sophisticated, have been developed to this end: physical threat, blacklisting, moral and economic pressure on the one hand, overexposure, cooptation into star cult or power elite on the other, are the extremes of a whole gamut of manipulation. (p. 13)*

As Enzensberger explained, the mind-making industry,

> *is an industry that has to rely, as its primary source, on the very minorities with whose elimination it is entrusted: those whose aim it is to invent and produce* ***alternatives****… On the level of production, even more than on the level of consumption, it has to deal with partners who are potential enemies. (p. 13, emphasis in original)*

Those who protest or transgress, who strive to do good work and who seek to remove or distance themselves from the mind industry, or subvert it, do so at a cost. They are not "organization men" (Whyte, 1956/2002) and likely don't fit in. They may easily become isolated, even despondent or depressed, subject to the loneliness both Emerson and Mencken commented upon. As the society in which they live and work changes, so too does the organization, the college or school. With it, roles or role expectations change (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). Where at one time they were merely and purely scholars, expectations are now that they will be disciplinarians, surveil children for violent ideation, produce 'achievement', and safeguard their charges from violence. Academics, scholars, are encouraged to be 'entrepreneurs'. But those who:

> *detest, or profess to detest, the very machinery of the industry and would like to withdraw into some abode of refinement. Of course, no such refuge really exists…*
> *To opt out of the mind industry, to refuse any dealings with it, may well turn out to be a reactionary course. There is no hermitage left for those whose job is to speak out and to seek innovation.* (Enzensberger, 1982, p. 14)

The scholar, the intellectual, says Enzensberger[xiii]:

> *whether he knows it or not, whether he likes it or not, he has become the accomplice of a huge industrial complex that depends for its survival on him, as he depends on it for his own. He must try, at any cost, to use it for his own purposes, which are incompatible with the purposes of the mind machine. What it upholds he must subvert… there is more at stake than his own future. (p. 14)*

Production and reproduction of the status quo subjugates teachers and their students. This, despite the fact that the scholar may see themselves as progressive, liberal. The status quo, the hegemonic, is produced and reproduced through "the industrialization of the mind" and "the mind industry" (Enzensberger, 1982). In the university classroom, the unreflective scholar plays their part in the production of what Rancière (1991) calls a "society pedagocized" (p. 130). In the conduct of their research, they can all too easily support the status hierarchies (Stack, 2021) and the "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 1991, 2010) which assign everyone a place and keep everyone in their place.

To this point, Emerson (1837) noted that action—work and labor—are the wellspring of the scholars', of everyone's thought and intellect: "I hear therefore with joy whatever is beginning to be said of the dignity and necessity of labor to every citizen" (p. 12). "There is virtue in the hoe and the spade, for the learned as well as for unlearned hands" (p. 12). He cautions, however, "that a man shall not for the sake of wider activity sacrifice any opinion to the popular judgments and models of action" (p. 12).

The duties of the scholar, said Emerson (1837), entail "self-trust" (p. 12). The scholar:

> *must relinquish display and immediate fame… he must accept,—how often! poverty and solitude. For the ease and pleasure of treading the old road, accepting the fashions, the education, the religion of society, he takes the cross of making his own, and, of course, the self-accusation, the faint heart, the frequent uncertainty and loss of time, which are the nettles and tangling vines in the way of the self-relying and self-directed; and the state*

> *of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society. (pp. 12-13)*

Echoes of Nietzsche abound, though Emerson predated him:

> *In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be—free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, "without any hinderance that does not arise out of his own constitution." Brave, for fear is a thing, which a scholar by his very function puts behind him. Fear always springs from ignorance. (Emerson, 1837, p. 14)*

Though fear springs from ignorance, it has other causes and catalysts as well. Knowledge, too, can evoke fear. Which is why those who comprise what Rancière (1991, 2010, 2014) calls "the police order" attempt to limit and curtail the knowledge taught and learned in schools—knowledge of racism, classism, sexism, gender discrimination, and other injustices— which is dangerous knowledge for the police order. Which is why those of the police order strive to control the scholar, the student, and the wider public. Bravery (Menchen, 1926; Walzer, 2002), independence of mind—Walzer's "a good eye", compassion, and agency are all part of the armory the scholar needs in the fight for knowledge and freedom (Waite, 2022).

Emerson (1837), observant of the changes wrought by industrialization and capitalism at the time when sociology was birthed to chronicle and analyze the trends[xiv], lamented that too many young men and women chased money and, in the process, surrendered their hearts and souls. Scholars, too, fell under the sway of capitalism's harpy song. Emerson commented:

> *The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. Public and private avarice make the air we*

> *breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of the country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself. There is no work for any but the decorous and complaisant. Young men of the fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God, find the earth below not in unison with these, –but are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust, –some of them suicides. (p. 20)*

"What is the remedy?" he asked:

> *They did not yet see, and thousands of young men as hopeful now crowding to the barriers for the career, do not yet see, that, if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him. Patience, –patience; –with the shades of all the good and great for company; and for solace, the perspective of your own infinite life; and for work, the study and the communication of principles, the making of those instincts prevalent, the conversion of the world. (p. 20)*

To cheer the young scholar, to support them in their journey, he concluded:

> *We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of joy around all. (p. 20)*

Final Reflections

We cannot be intimidated. We must continue to speak out, truth to power. We do so in our classrooms and beyond—in our staff rooms with colleagues, and in the public square, in blogs, on Twitter and Facebook. We will weather the trolls and the droll; realizing that raising their ire is a sign that we are doing good work. Return again and again to the scholars who inspire you. Make of them your teachers, friends, and compatriots. Find and support like-minded scholars, both 'learned' and 'unlearned'. Feed your soul, and others', that you may inspire coming generations. Be steadfast and self-reliant and walk your own true path, unbent and unbowed.

Or, put another way, we might heed Whitman's (1855) advice from his preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

> *This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body. (para. 2)*

Or, said in more modern parlance, spoken to more contemporary contexts and threats, are the words of Sarah Kendzior (2020) to the effect that:

> *But I need you to fight too, in the way that matters most, which is inside. Authoritarianism is not merely a matter of state control, it is something that eats away at who you are. It makes you afraid, and fear can make you cruel. It compels you to conform and to comply and accept things that you would never accept, to do things you never thought you would do.*
>
> *You do it because everyone else is doing it, because the institutions you trust are doing it and telling you to do it, because you are afraid of what will happen if you do not do it, and because the voice in your head crying out that something is wrong grows fainter and fainter until it dies.*
>
> *That voice is your conscience, your morals, your individuality. No one can take that from you unless you let them. . .*
>
> *There are many groups organizing for both resistance and subsistence, but we are heading into dark times, and you need to be your own light. Do not accept brutality and cruelty as normal even if it is sanctioned. Protect the vulnerable and encourage the afraid. If you are brave, stand up for others. If you cannot be brave—and it is often hard to be brave—be kind. (pp. 13-14)*

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[i]http://digitalemerson.wsulibs.wsu.edu/exhibits/show/text/the-american-scholar

[ii] To put it in a bit more context, keep in mind that Emerson gave this lecture barely 60 years after the American Revolution and about 30 years shy of the American Civil War.

[iii] The relevance of Emerson's essay may be owing to the phenomenon, as some like to say, that if you were able to transport someone from the past to the United States of today, the only thing they would recognize is the schools.

[iv] Clearly, mine is not the only possible interpretation and I would encourage the reader-scholar to read this extraordinary piece for themselves. Also, there are oral readings available on the internet and other commentaries.

Emerson was writing in 1837, when the convention was to use the masculine form. Rather than alter the flow of his oratory or presume a more enlightened sensibility with the insertion of either sic or an awkward construction such as he/she/they, I will leave his language, especially his pronouns, as they were in the original and simply ask the reader to read and interpret his words with their preferred pronoun in mind.

[v] Interestingly, Emerson's address predated Nietzsche's musings on Schopenhauer by about forty years, causing one to wonder whether the latter was familiar with the former's work and how it might have influenced him. It's likely. It's also worth commenting that Emerson was drawing attention to the dawning of the American century and its emerging and distinctive intellectual tenor as distinct from the Old

World ideas and intellectual history; he jibes "the English dramatic poets," for instance, who "have Shakspearized now for two hundred years" (p. 7).

[vi] The translator's task and the issues with which they wrestle, though worthy of note, are not the focus of the present paper.

[vii] It seems as though Nietzsche changed his orientation to Schopenhauer from being taught by him to learning from him—a less radical intervention from the outside; or, perhaps he realized later in life that his original estimation of their relationship—having been taught by Schopenhauer—had been more of a learning from.

[viii] A recent poll of Texas teachers found that two-thirds, 66%, are considering leaving the profession, citing pay, the stresses from working through the Covid pandemic, and the contentious, dangerous, political climate (The Dallas Observer, February 23, 2022).

[ix] Emerson was a former Unitarian pastor. Rancière (2019) noted his contribution, along with his friend, disciple, and compatriot Walt Whitman, another of America's great poets, to a new poetics. (Rancière titled his chapter on Emerson "The Poet of the New World".) This new poetics both Emerson and Whitman practiced has many facets—it is idealist, "for it strives to define the spiritual potential hidden in the diversity of things and material activities" (p. 64); it is materialist, "for it does not concede any world of its own to spirituality—it recognizes it only as the link that unites sensible forms and activities; it is symbolist, "for in the table of sensible things, it only shows a copy of the text written in 'the alphabet of the stars'" (Mallarmé, 2007, as cited in Rancière, pp. 64-65); it is also unanimist, expressing the unity of all things: "something is poetic only if it is attached to the totality that it expresses" (p. 65). "Unanimist poetics . . . entrusts the multiplicity of

words and assembled forms alone with the potential to represent its own infinity" (p. 65). "Symbolist poetics", Rancière asserts "is an egalitarian poetics: it gives everything and every material relation the power to symbolize what the poetic tradition limited to a few privileged relations" (p. 65).

[x] Emerson saw the same trend, the same temptation we see today, whereby potential young scholars and other youth embarking on or exploring careers are seduced and co-opted by materialism, finances, and lucre.

[xi] That there is a movement in the US today, primarily driven by men, the American patriarchy, and bolstered by reactionary fundamentalist 'Christian' ideologies, to subjugate women's bodies through anti-freedom of choice legislation shows just how far we have strayed from this democratic principle and how patriarchy, along with racism, remain little changed from Emerson's time—another similarity between then and now.

[xii] Those who manufacture and sell the tests also, like snake oil salesmen, sell the remedies for the 'problems' their tests unearth. We forget that the 'problems' (and solutions) are manufactured and socially constructed.

[xiii] Try as I might, I saw no way of making the pronouns in this passage gender neutral without doing violence to the language and flow. I appreciate the reader's understanding.

[xiv] Williams (1976) thoroughly chronicles the evolution of the word society and sociology.