

Senator Robert Morgan
Scotland Neck High School
Commencement
Scotland Neck, North Carolina
June 8, 1980

SELF-RELIANCE

As you prepare to receive recognition for completing your studies, you are poised at a momentous juncture in your lives. From this point on you will more and more be on your own--you will be confronting new challenges. Don't ever think that this country has run out of challenges.

There is always the temptation to wish that you had lived at a different historical time--during the Revolution, the Civil War, or even during the Great Depression. Books, photographs, and television romanticize the past out of all proportion. This is not to say that you should not be aware of the past--you should--but you should study history, not myth. I have some photographs taken during the Depression. My title for them is, "The Depression Years: Do you really want to return to the good old days?"

Studying the past is essential, for if we fail to understand the past we cannot understand the present nor are we able to dream of the future. But since we are here, born

into these times, I think that we must build on the lessons of the past.

In that sense, I want to discuss one man's search for self discovery, for self-reliance. The man, of course, is Ralph Waldo Emerson, a great American literary figure of the 19th century who found in himself, in his community, in his state, and in his nation all the ingredients for a wholesome life.

Most of you are familiar with the basic facts of Emerson's life. He was born in Massachusetts, descended from Puritans, and part of the Transcendentalist Movement. He entered Harvard University at age 14, young even for that day. Yet, he was not an excellent student. After graduating he taught school to keep the family financially solvent.

I will not go into detail about Emerson's marriage, his struggle to reconcile his religious beliefs, or other aspects of his career. Rather, I want to spotlight one turning point of his life. After his first wife died and after his break with the church, Emerson was distraught. He was searching for meaning in life, and as an intellectual of his day, he realized that Europe was the origin of his culture.

He was in awe of European civilization and decided that he should make a pilgrimage there in search of culture and meaning.

His mission failed; he was not intimidated by European culture. What he did find in Europe was self-reliance. He also realized that while American culture was different from European culture, as an American he did not need to bow before the cultural gods of Europe. He met many of the leading European intellectuals, and he managed to talk with them as equals.

I think that Emerson's pilgrimage to Europe was a Damascus experience. Like Saul's experience on his way to Damascus, Emerson had been blinded by the grandeur and reputation of Europe. Only by confronting that culture directly would the scales or blinders fall from his eyes. Much of what he had admired from afar was, after all, veneer, facade. Behind the wealth and splendor, the beauty and the grandeur, were the realities. The manners and the style of the few--the royalty -- often hid the poverty of the many. Perceiving this, he was never so proud of being an American as when visiting Europe. When he wrote his essay "Self-Reliance," he noted that it was insecure "superstition" that sent Americans off to Europe to bow before that culture.

Once Emerson discovered that much of what he had thought about Europe was inflated and that American culture was in itself mature and innovative, he then turned inward personally. He found self-reliance. In the end it all came down to a very simple formula:

"Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."

I would suggest to you who are now launching your lives on your own that you should look inward for strength. Your teachers have given you the foundation upon upon which to build successful lives. It is up to you to construct a life that will be pleasing--not just to you but to the community and the larger world in which you live.

Emerson, when he returned from Europe, compared his life to an unfinished puzzle. Until he achieved self-reliance, all the pieces were jumbled. After realizing his own inner strength, he put together the center pieces of the puzzle. He had the rest of his life to sort out the other pieces of the puzzle. He believed that no one ever put the entire puzzle of life together. There was always some new challenge to put in place.

As with any class, there are diverse interests among you. Some of you have intellectual interests, others prefer practical matters, and still others have varied interests. Emerson had a very perceptive thing to say about different gifts. He did not believe that people differed very much. "Each is incomparably superior to his companion in some faculty," he wrote. A person's want of skill in one direction caused him to become more proficient or qualified in another.

In our society, the problem is that there is so much pressure for everyone to turn out alike. Emerson recognized this in his day and warned against "this game of conformity." In all too many people, he said, their ideas came down to this: "If I know your sect I anticipate your argument." There must be room for different opinions and there must be room for different interests. If everyone wanted to be doctors and lawyers and teachers, who would build the houses or plow the fields? Don't be forced into a life that satisfies others but denies yourself. Again, look inside for self-reliance.

And don't be afraid to use your talents. Without testing yourself, you will never know the limits of your talent.

Emerson realized that his world was changing and becoming more complex. Craftsmen were disappearing before the factory system. People were becoming more interested in commercial success than in personal satisfaction of the spirit. Puritanism was giving way.

Your world is even more complex as computers and machines do much of the work. Faced with increasingly routine jobs, it is more important than ever to find self-reliance. Never let the clock dictate your life.

At this point I want to suggest some positive things that self-reliance can bring to your lives. Even though there are prophets of gloom, and even though we are now in a recession, I want to assure you that I have confidence that our country will endure, that it will survive the present crisis and emerge greater than ever. Americans respond to challenge, to crisis, and I have every confidence that we can stand any test, indeed, that we will steel ourselves in crisis and strengthen our moral fiber by adversity.

This is not the first crisis that I and your parents have witnessed. I saw the country emerge from the Depression in the 1930s and under Franklin D. Roosevelt overcome hunger and low prices, implement innovative policies that aided

farmers, workers, and those who were dispossessed by economic forces. I watched the country enter war, and was myself drawn into that war from college and made friends from all over the country. It gave me a sense of pride and nationalism to travel and witness the spirit that young men and women shared during that emergency. I again witnessed this fighting spirit in the Korean War.

Nor should you think that this land lacks opportunity for all, no matter what your background. Several years ago I went to England to arrange for shipping the Magna Carta to the United States for exhibition. An English member of Parliament asked me where I was from, what my background was. I told him that I grew up on a farm in North Carolina, that I came from a rural family of hard working people, that I worked my way through college, that even as I was finishing my law degree that I went into politics, that I served in the North Carolina Senate and later was Attorney General before becoming a United States Senator. He observed that such a thing could never have happened in England. The class lines are still too rigid in England to allow such mobility. So, as Americans you have a greater chance to develop your potential, your self-reliance. Only your talent is the determination of your station in life.

There is a great deal to be proud of as Americans. People from all over the world look to us for our accomplishments.

For example, we feed much of the world with our productive agriculture. Today our farmers are able to grow three or four times more on an acre of land than in 1930, and machinery has rescued workers from backbreaking labor that characterized earlier days.

We have the most sophisticated technology in the world. Most of you accept the fact that you can make a telephone call across the country, but when I grew up my family did not have a telephone.

Today's communications are like magic. A child of my generation read about such things in science fiction books. We read the outrageous idea that a space ship might one day allow a person to go to the moon, that there might be communications systems that could use satellites in space to transmit messages, and that space ships might approach distant planets and send back images to the earth. To your generation, these these things are daily events.

We are still reaping the benefits of the space race, from NASA. These inventions vary from tiny computers to solar panels for energy. As every astronaut has acknowledged, he was part of a team, a band of scientists, test pilots, astronomers, plant workers, and recovery teams that made it possible for three men to leave the cape and go into space. The men who participated in these missions still have the American frontier spirit.

So your generation will have to continue this great tradition. The new challenges will probably not be as glamorous as going to the moon, but with teamwork and daring and self-reliance we can regenerate the American spirit.

Thus, I want to leave you with a challenge. Our forebears conquered a continent, they erected a government, they fought battles and invented ways of making life easier. Your generation will be asked to carry on with less resources the traditions that have led to greatness. This will perhaps be the central challenge for the remainder of the century.

In conclusion I want to read to you a quotation from one of our state's most famous authors, Thomas Wolfe. I think that he captures this sense of the mission of our country.

"I think the true discovery of America is before us. I think the true fulfillment of our spirit, of our people, of our mighty and immortal land, is yet to come. I think the true discovery of our own democracy is still before us. And I think that all these things are certain as the morning, as inevitable as noon. I think I speak for most men living when I say that our America is Here, is Now, and beckons on before us, and that this glorious assurance is not only our living hope, but our dream is to be accomplished."