Self-Fashioning in Society and Solitude

On crafting a liberal-arts education

by NANNERL O. KEOHANE

Editor's note: Each spring term since 2008, Hobbs professor of cognition and education Howard E. Gardner and Pforzheimer professor of teaching and learning Richard J. Light—in cooperation with the Freshman Dean's Office and a group of facilitators—have offered "Reflecting on Your Life." These voluntary discussions, made available to all first-year undergraduates, provide an opportunity to discuss ways to make life choices and to think about values. Last spring, Nannerl Keohane—a scholar of political theory, the past president of Wellesley College and of Duke University, and a member of the Harvard Corporation—met with a group of discussion leaders and students. She asked them to prepare for their conversation by reading "Self-Fashioning in Society and Solitude," remarks she had earlier shared with students at Stanford. This text, adapted from those remarks, bears generally on the aims of a liberal-arts education, at the outset of a new year for the entire University community, and particularly for entering members of the class of 2017.

SELF-FASHIONING is part of the age-old purpose of higher education, particularly in the liberal arts and sciences. The key point is to be aware, sometimes, that this is happening—to deliberately engage in *fashioning*—not just let events and experiences sweep you along without your conscious participation.

Richard Brodhead expressed this well in his speech to the entering class as dean of Yale College in 1995: "You've come to one of the great fresh starts in your life, one of the few chances your life will offer to step away from the person you've been taken for and decide anew what you would like to become." In this mood, students typically see college as a place where a new stage of life's journey begins. "Incipit Vita Nova" was one motto of my alma mater, Wellesley, and it surely seemed appropriate at the time.

You now have this incredible opportunity to shape who you are as a person, what you are like, and what you seek for the future. You have both the time and the materials to do this. You may think you've never been busier in your life, and that's probably true; but most of you have "time" in the sense of no other duties that require your attention and energy. Shaping your character is what you are *supposed* to do with your education; it's not competing with something else. You won't have many other periods in your life that will be this way until you retire when, if you are fortunate, you'll have another chance; but then you will be more set in your ways, and may find it harder to change.

You now also have the materials to shape your character and your purposes: the rich context, resources, incomparable opportunities that Harvard provides. And the combination of time and materials is truly an opportunity to treasure.

My purpose in this essay is to think with you about how you might use this time and these materials wisely, with full awareness that this experience will be unique for each of you, but also the conviction that since countless other men and women have set out on the same journey, they can offer some perspectives that will be helpful to you now.

Advice from past sojourners

I'LL BEGIN with one basic piece of advice about how you might approach this business of "self-fashioning." It's the very familiar maxim carved on the temple of Apollo at Delphi: "Know Thyself."

This may seem wholly paradoxical: I'm discussing your fluidity, your openness to new character and form, and I start by advising you to get to know yourself, what you already are like. But it's not so paradoxical if you think it through: among the materials you should use to form or shape or fashion yourself, the basic qualities and most durable features of your own personality surely have to be taken into account. Whatever you do here at Harvard, you will not be creating yourself from scratch.

For example, you already know whether you are quick to anger or even-tempered; you can learn to adjust this internal barometer to some extent, controlling your temper rather than exploding immediately. But you can't turn yourself into a slow, patient person if that's not what you are. If you have a tendency to procrastinate, there are ways to set real deadlines for yourself, but you won't ever be the kind of person who finishes a paper several days before it's due. If you are tone deaf, no matter how much you listen to concerts, you will not develop perfect pitch.

To understand better what you are working with when you shape your "self," I went to the unabridged dictionary. I was amazed to see that under the word "self" there are *three and one half pages*, closely printed, of variations on the word—from self-

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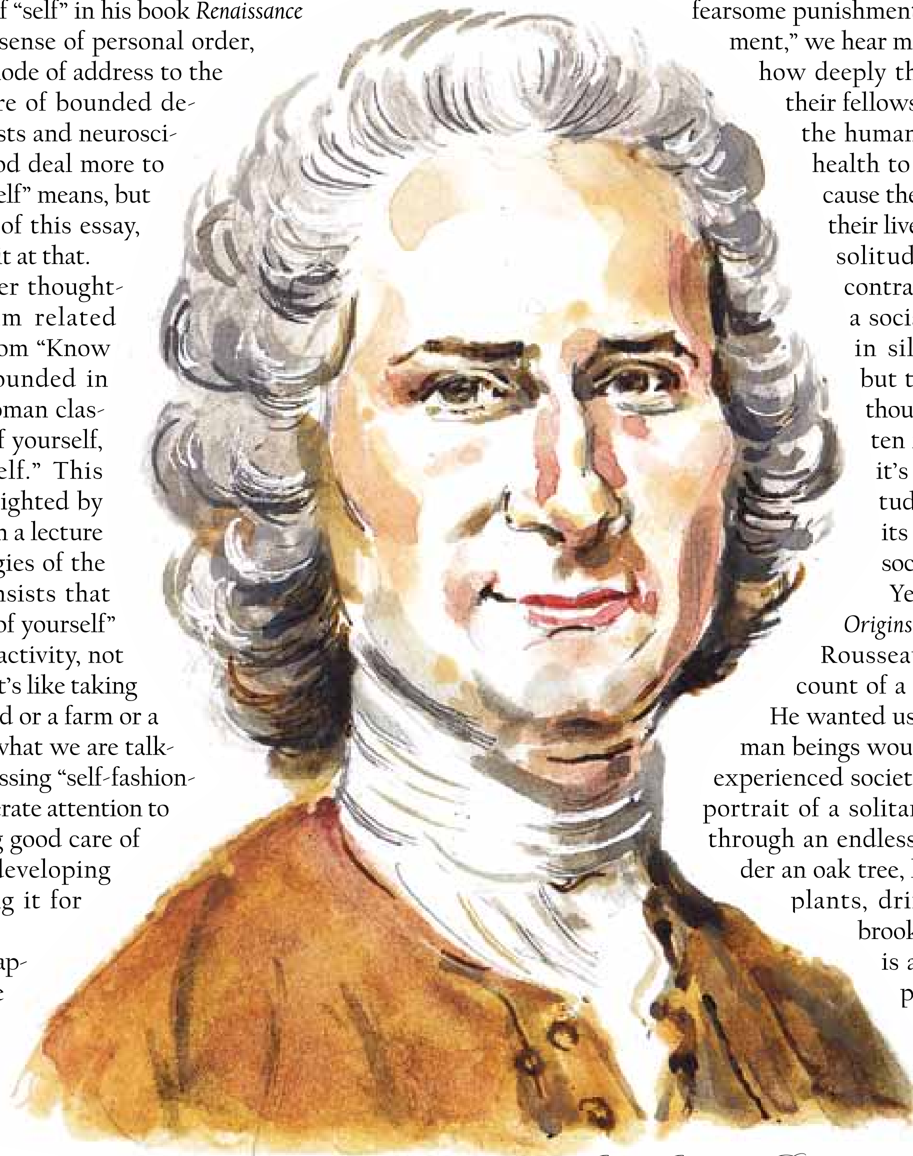
abandonment and self-abnegation to self-validation and self-will. Clearly the English language is as absorbed in "selfhood" as many individuals are!

"Self" means "the total, essential, or particular being" of a person, what distinguishes you as an individual from others, what sets you apart and makes you unique; it also means your *consciousness* of this separateness, this distinctiveness, this "you." Harvard professor Stephen Greenblatt offers a particularly eloquent definition of "self" in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*: "A sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires." Psychologists and neuroscientists have a good deal more to say about what "self" means, but for the purposes of this essay, I'm going to leave it at that.

There is another thought-provoking maxim related to but distinct from "Know thyself," also grounded in the Greek and Roman classics: "Take care of yourself, attend to yourself." This variant was highlighted by Michel Foucault in a lecture called "Technologies of the Self." Foucault insists that this "taking care of yourself" is "a real form of activity, not just an attitude." It's like taking care of a household or a farm or a kingdom. That's what we are talking about in discussing "self-fashioning": paying deliberate attention to your "self," taking good care of it, tending and developing it, not just taking it for granted.

This all sounds appealing, but like most young people, and most people across history, you are more likely to be self-absorbed than self-abandoning. What we may all need most is reflection on the importance of *community, of other selves*. I'm going to link the two in this essay because I believe firmly that we fashion our "selves" both in solitude and in society.



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The character of solitude

Solitude in literature almost always involves individuals who have spent their lives in society but are separated from it, either voluntarily or because they have been exiled, lost, or shipwrecked. On the positive side, think of Thoreau at Walden Pond, Buddhist and Cistercian monks, solitary backpackers spending weeks in the wilderness. These individuals have sought out solitude for its virtues in developing selfhood and for its restorative qualities. But precisely because they are already familiar with society, already shaped by it, we can't see these persons as totally isolated. They carry their social training, assumptions, equipment, and preferences around with them even in solitude.

In describing the most negative form of solitude, the fearsome punishment called "solitary confinement," we hear men and women talk about how deeply they miss the company of their fellows, how devastating it is to the human personality and mental health to be always alone. It's because these individuals have spent their lives in society that enforced solitude is so unbearable. The contrast between being part of a social group, and living only in silence with no company but the insects and your own thoughts, is what prisoners often find most devastating. So it's hard to think about solitude without being aware of its counterpart and context, society.

Yet in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau set out to give an account of a truly solitary individual. He wanted us to think about what human beings would be like if we had never experienced society at all. He paints a vivid portrait of a solitary individual wandering through an endless forest, finding food under an oak tree, living on acorns and wild plants, drinking from the nearest brook, sleeping wherever there is a comfortable place. This person rarely encounters other human beings and shows no curiosity when he does. He needs no instruments or machines; his own strength is fully sufficient for his purposes. In such a situation, says Rousseau, "one is always carrying oneself, so to speak, entirely with one."

Rousseau didn't claim that the life of the solitary savage would be especially happy; it would be quite boring, lacking intellectual stimulation and company. It seems brutish in the worst sense of the word—worse than the life of many social animals. The only thing that brings human beings together in this imaginary forest is sex, and when it's finished, both savage man and savage woman fade off into the forest, never thinking about the other individual and not even recognizing the person if they ever encounter each other again.

Portraits by Dan Williams

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It's the ultimate one-night stand.

But wait a moment, you may ask: what if savage woman gets pregnant? What happens to savage child? And here Rousseau is forced to confront an insight that rarely comes up in the classic works of political thought: our species comes in two sexes, and it cannot always be true that whatever goes for males also goes for females. An author may get away with always referring to "Man" on some topics if nobody calls him on it; but it won't work when you are writing about reproduction.

So Rousseau hypothesizes that his imaginary woman, being a healthy savage, has no problems with her pregnancy, bears her child in isolation and nurses him because both the child and she need this, and even comes to feel some kind of closeness to the child; but as soon as the child can feed himself, he too melts into the forest, and they never see one another again.

This hypothesis seems especially implausible, for many reasons, but it brings us back to Rousseau's purpose in doing this thought-experiment: he wants to figure out what's most basic about our species, about our "self." Unlike Hobbes, Rousseau didn't think we would naturally make war on each other; unlike Aristotle, he saw no reason that we would naturally seek out society. Instead, in his view there are only a few basic human traits, most of which we share with other animals: we have a natural interest in ourselves and our own preservation. And we also have a natural instinct of compassion or pity if we see another being in pain. But two other traits are distinctively human: we are unusually intelligent, and we have the capacity for self-improvement, adapting creatively to circumstances, not just following instinct.

Given these traits, the *Discourse* goes on to describe what happens as our population grows and the changing environment throws human beings together more regularly. Rousseau asserted that the happiest era for mankind was when individuals gathered into families and small villages. They could then enjoy human companionship, love, friendship, art, and music without all the disadvantages that come with more complex societies. Yet the story of what happens in society is not completely positive, by any means. Rousseau's main point is how society shapes and deforms us. We begin to compare ourselves with other individuals, we start to have an interest in appearing more handsome, stronger, smarter than we really are, and in this context, envy, greed and a proprietary sense of family and household crowd out the basic instincts of compassion and the simplicity of the savage life.

Michel de Montaigne

As Montaigne (whom Rousseau greatly admired) says in his essay "Of Vanity": "Whatever it is, whether art or nature, that imprints in us this disposition to live with reference to others, it does us much more harm than good. We defraud ourselves of our own advantages to make appearances conform with public opinion. We do not care so much what we are in ourselves and in reality as what we are in the public mind." Thus both Montaigne and Rousseau make us aware of the formidable power of society to shape us as individuals, leading us to behave in ways other people expect or want us to, rather than in the ways that might be true to our best selves. That's a temptation to which you should be especially alert when you are surrounded by so many intelligent, articulate, forceful fellow-students.

For most of us—certainly those of us on a university campus—solitude is a relatively rare experience. If we are to fashion ourselves, we will be doing so in the presence of other people, most of the time. We develop as selves through our interactions with other human beings—through relationships, beginning with the family and then the school and the neighborhood, through art, music, language, culture, ideas. Our selves are never, and cannot be, purely isolated beings: we are the products of our experience and our environment, and we need to understand the self in and through society, not as a stand-alone cardboard cutout.

The warnings of Montaigne and Rousseau about how this experience can deform us, pull us away from our true selves, misshape our selfhood, should be in our minds. But we should also recognize that most of what is best about us comes from our interactions with other individuals.

The path of education

How then can we fashion ourselves in society? And what does your education have to do with this?

In his novel *Emile*, Rousseau described in great detail the formation of a human being able to live comfortably with himself and also as a productive member of society. Education was the key, and the carefully designed format of Emile's educa-

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tion has been a spur and stimulus to thinking about education ever since. Emile had a tutor who managed every detail of his life from pre-school to young adulthood, ensuring that he learned just the right things at the right time and was not exposed to corrupting influences. Emile turned out perfectly, as a model husband, father and citizen. And Sophie, the young girl who is educated specifically to be his wife and helpmate, to regard Emile as her god and take her instructions and happiness from him, is presented in the novel as the perfect wife and mother.

But not surprisingly, in an unpublished sequel to *Emile*, Rousseau shows how the young man goes off the tracks because he can't function well without the familiar guidance of his tutor. And Sophie demonstrates that she has a mind of her own; she resents being placed in total submission to her husband/master, longs for a wider scope in her life, and goes off with another man.

So the formation of selfhood that depends on having someone else shape you like a work of art falls short of forming a successful human being. And it's not surprising that theories of education since the eighteenth century rely much more on individual choices and taking a significant responsibility for your own intellectual development.

In college, you have an exceptional amount of freedom to choose from the bewildering variety of great courses listed in the catalog, and the amazing proliferation of extracurricular activities, including both those that are already established and those that you might help organize, as so many Harvard students do. If you sometimes think, as you make these choices, about what kind of self this seminar (or this sport, or this club, or this office) will help you to become, you may find guidance here. Does this activity promise to make you a deeper, fuller, more interesting person? Does it expand your life in new ways, or build on what you have done before in ways that make you stronger? Does it challenge you to develop new mental or emotional muscles, so to speak?

Taking too many familiar or "safe" courses, embarking on yet one more extracurricular activity without any particular passion for it, won't allow you to answer these questions with a convincing "yes." You have time here at Harvard to fashion yourself, but not enough time to dribble it away or remain locked in your old comfort zone. You should stretch yourself, take some risks.

As Montaigne says about travel: "The mind is continually exercised in observing new and unknown things; and I know no better school…for forming one's life than to set before it constantly the diversity of so many other lives, ideas, customs, and to make it taste such a perpetual variety of the forms of our nature." You can do this through actual travel, time spent studying or working abroad, as many of you will during your Harvard years; but you can also do it through virtual travel—courses in history, literature, art, anthropology and other disciplines that expose you to "the diversity of so many other lives."

Society and self-fashioning

According to these pieces of advice, you should think about society not as a kind of zoo or curiosity shop where you can pick up a persona that suits you, but as the source of inspirational exemplars, diverse possible ways of shaping yourself, fascinating models. This means reading biographies and history, novels and essays, and paying attention to how people you admire handle challenges as they come along.

Yet society is not only a source of inspiring examples: it is even more often, as Rousseau said so well, a source of profound pressures to behave in certain ways. Society will surely shape you, the opinions and preferences and activities of your family, your friends, your classmates and professional colleagues, everyone with whom you spend any considerable amount of time. But too often the pressures are negative and will not help you in your self-fashioning, as all of us know when we reflect on peer culture, websites, TV shows, and movies. For worthwhile self-fashioning, you need a surrounding society that speaks to what is most importantly human, and brings you together with others in rewarding collective activities.

In the fifth chapter of her powerful work of political philosophy, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt discusses the connections between individuals and political communities. She notes that each human being is "distinguished from any other who is, was, and ever will be"—which is a vivid way of thinking about selfhood. Yet precisely because each of us is a distinct individual, we need speech and action to communicate; I cannot just sense instinctively what somewhat else is thinking. In speaking and acting, we "disclose ourselves" and thus expose ourselves to possible misunderstanding or exploitation by others, but also to the rich possibilities of communication.

You should think about society not as a kind of zoo or curiosity shop where you can pick up a persona that suits you.

Speech and action, in Arendt's sense, cannot exist in isolation; they are meaningful only within human relationships. By the same token, "human nature"—as distinct from our more animal qualities—depends precisely on our capacity for speech and action: it is in fact through speech and action that each of us constitutes *our self.* This is Arendt's distinctive contribution to our discussion of self-fashioning: *the self is created not by each of us as individuals in isolation, but through the activities we share with other human beings—language, creativity, striving, politics.* If your goal is to fashion a worthwhile self, you should be mindful of your surroundings and choose companions and activities that will give you opportunities to develop your language, creativity, striving, and politics in more depth.

Self-fashioning and citizenship

This awareness of the importance of our relationships with others in fashioning the self also highlights our responsibilities to those outside ourselves, and the ways in which your education should prepare you to discharge these duties effectively. We have particular responsibilities as citizens of democracies that impose on us more weighty duties (and provide much richer opportunities) than those available to subjects of an autocrat. And one of the main aspects of self-fashioning that should concern you is preparing yourself seriously for good citizenship. Only in that way can you be one of those individuals who actively works to build a better community—political, social, economic—rather than one who just accepts what's on of-

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fer, accommodates to second or fifth best, lives with corruption, inertia, degradation of public life and public services, and mostly retreats into private life.

The urge to retreat into private life—the gated community, the corporate jet, the hired car, the private school—as the public world around us decays is one of the most powerful temptations you will face. You will of course enjoy some of these private benefits if you are sufficiently privileged by wealth and good luck. *But if you are to have a whole, integrated, complete self, you must resist becoming totally immersed in private spheres.* You must see it as part of your self-interest *and* your moral duty to play your part in society, to give something of yourself away to others who are in need, *to help sustain the common structures that make up our public life.* If you fail to do this, you will become a shrunken and diminished self. Recognition of this fact is what Alexis de Tocqueville called "self-interest rightly understood," or "enlightened self-interest": not pure egoism or selfishness, but caring for yourself in the context of acknowledging your responsibilities to others, which brings with it significant moral commitments and deep rewards.

At a time when democracy is passionately sought by people in countries around the world, and countries that have long enjoyed democracy are struggling to sustain it against multiple pressures, education for citizenship is one of the most powerful arguments for a liberal-arts education. Our democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves, assess arguments made by people who have a stake in a particular outcome, attend to nuances in difficult policy situations, and respect the interests and the dignity of others who are not like them. We need citizens who can empathize with others and take responsibility for working with other citizens to help fix things, not just throw up their hands and gripe about what's wrong. And that is surely connected with self-fashioning.

Hannah Arendt

Solitude, society, and the sexes

Now that we have established our rich and unbreakable connections to society, noted our obligations to be fully participating members of the public sphere, and discussed the ways in which our relationships with other selves powerfully shape our own individuality, we can appreciate more fully why occasional solitude is also important, and how solitude and society can work together to fashion our full selves.

I note once again that our species comes in two basic variants, male and female. Both are fully human individuals. But the experiences of members of the two sexes in all known societies are demonstrably different in some important ways, from infancy to old age. Some of this is culture, some of it is biology. That is why you can't just take for granted that anything that goes for men goes for women, too. But ignoring this fact, or assuming that a woman is just a deficient version of a man, is one of the most fundamental errors of many past thinkers.

This point is made with particular eloquence in Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, which was originally a lecture to undergraduates at Cambridge University in 1928. Woolf's major point in this essay is that across history, men have been far more likely than women to enjoy certain advantages—control of wealth, higher education, opportunities for travel. These advantages have given men a much better preparation for professional life, for writing books, for political life, for adventuring into society, for self-fashioning in whatever they may choose to do.

These resources have also given men more scope for solitude. Men can shut themselves up in their workshops or their libraries and ignore the needs of children or the kitchen. Just having "a room of one's own," where you can retreat to think and write and work or simply be your solitary self, is a privilege that relatively few women in history have enjoyed—only the comparatively wealthy ones, who may sometimes have more solitude than they would want because they are denied outlets into the world open to their brothers, husbands, and fathers.

So whether they have too little solitude or too much, women have often had a different experience of solitude and society from men. Men can leave the house and go off on a journey in many societies where women can never travel alone. Women in most cultures have had much less opportunity than men to explore the world, follow their adventurous inclinations. And they have been less likely to have a place or time where they can enjoy solitude. It's worth keeping this in mind when you read authors who write about self-fashioning. You can sometimes stop and ask: Would this advice have worked for a woman in the society this author is describing? Or are these *(please turn to page 75)*

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generalizations accurate only for the men? What, after all, were the women doing in this society?

Virginia Woolf asks us to imagine that Shakespeare had a sister called Judith, as talented as he. And Woolf asks: what would have happened to Judith? Despite being "as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world" as Will, she was not sent to school, had no chance of reading Horace or Virgil, was scolded when she picked up her brother's books on the sly. She was betrothed by her father at an early age to someone she hardly knew, beaten when she protested, and even though she loved her family, she ran away to London. But men laughed in her face. As a woman she could not get training or act any part in a play. Someone took pity on her and they became lovers. But she became pregnant and in despair, Woolf says, "she killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some crossroads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle."

You students today, male and female, are in the exceptionally fortunate position of being able to take all the eloquent advice you have heard, all the inspiring and thought-provoking books you have read, and act on what you have learned. In the past, only a few exceptionally privileged or exceptionally motivated men were able to follow their adventurous natures and travel widely around the world. Only they could have found the time and space to meditate about solitude or enjoy its fruits. The major exception to this generalization has always been members of religious orders, male and female, who could choose to retreat from society. But today, for each of you, these wonderful aspects of the human experience are open before you.

Solitude in society

Against that background, I'll offer a few more nuggets of advice to help you think about self-fashioning in society and solitude.

Many active men (and a few women) throughout history have specifically sought places where they could occasionally retreat to enjoy the felicities of solitude even as they also enjoyed the advantages of society and traveling. Montaigne, for example, lived a very active life, with family, friends, political positions, much travel; but he was exceptionally well aware of the importance of occasional solitude. His favorite place for writing and reflection was the tower library on his estate in southwestern France, to which he climbed by a series of narrow staircases reaching to the very top of his domain, with a view of the vineyards and grain fields, a ceiling carved with some of his favorite quotations, and lines of books and manuscripts around the shelves. If you visit his estate, you can still see that library and understand what his life was like.

Virginia Woolf

Inspired by that beloved space, in his eloquent essay "Of solitude" Montaigne used the arresting image of "a back shop all our own, entirely free." He thought of his own mind as a kind of tower library to which he could retreat even when he was far from home; it was stocked with quotations from wise people and experimental thoughts and jokes and anecdotes, where he could keep company with himself. He suggested that we all have such back shops in our minds, and I would add that the most valuable and attractive people we know are those who have rich and fascinating intellectual furniture in those spaces rather than a void between their ears. And this is surely one of the most important purposes of a liberal education: it is an extraordinarily fine way to furnish the "back shop" of your mind. As a result, you will be a much better conversationalist, so that others will seek out your company rather than regarding you as a simpleton or a bore. And you will also be better prepared to relish solitude, whether you choose it or it is imposed on you.

Let me close with a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on "Self-Reliance": "It is easy to live in the world after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who *in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.*"

This is the image I want to leave you with: developing the ability to maintain "with perfect sweetness" the independence of solitude—the integrity and wholeness of the self—in the midst of the crowd. Your education should give you the capacity to shape and sustain your selfhood. It should both furnish richly the back shop of your mind, and prepare you to be a productive member of whatever society you live in. And at best, it should also give you the ability to retreat into yourself even in the midst of a busy life when you need to get your bearings, refresh your spirit, reaffirm your integrity, and confirm what is most important to your *self.*

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