

Quotations Can Guide Us

We all have a shared humanity, which means that although each of us is unique, we also have a great deal in common. That means that the thoughts and experiences of others can be a valuable guide to our own lives. Sometimes the thoughts of others can be a consolation, sometimes an inspiration. Sometimes a good quotation provides a jolt of recognition – a moment of shared experience that links you with another person, perhaps long dead. I thought I would share some quotations this morning and I have chosen them in the hope that most of them will be previously unknown to you. I wonder if they will strike a chord with you.

Our lives are busy and challenging. It can be all too easy to lose perspective. We are heading into the unknown, the dark of our various possible futures. As the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard said, ‘Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.’

The actor Tom Hiddleston advised, ‘You keep putting one foot in front of the other, and then one day you look back and you’ve climbed a mountain.’ There’s a lot to be said for dogged determination. And a degree of stoicism. Taking a metaphor from snow clearance, the novelist Greg Kincaid has a character say, ‘No matter how much falls on us, we keep ploughing ahead. That’s the only way to keep the roads clear.’ But it won’t always go your way. ‘You just have to accept that some days you are the pigeon and some days you are the statue’ (David Brent, *The Office*). It helps if what you do for a living, or your family situation grounds you in the things that matter. I heartily recommend that you take a job that gives you life satisfaction, rather than be motivated by a search for wealth. As a teacher, I know what gives my life meaning. It is summed up by Neil Postman, who said, ‘Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.’

At times we all face a situation or problem that makes us ask a fundamental question of ourselves. What should I do? The writer and Christian thinker C S Lewis has some of the wisest words I know to guide you: ‘You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.’ The American tennis player Arthur Ashe develops this idea further: ‘Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.’ By taking it back to basics, we are reminded of a deep truth. The only resources we have are found where we are, with what we have and what is possible. Sometimes we ask too much of ourselves by overreaching these boundaries. And let’s not try to do it all at once. Sometimes it takes time to see results. ‘There is only one way to eat an elephant: a bite at a time’ (Desmond Tutu). Two women offer further tough-minded advice on how to move forward. The first female member of the US Supreme Court was Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Her stern words were to tell us to set aside negative emotion as unnecessary and unhelpful: ‘Waste no time on anger, regret, or resentment, just get the job done.’ The famous scientist, Marie Curie, has an even tougher message: ‘Have no fear of perfection; you’ll never reach it.’ At first, it sounds rather bleak but for those who are chained to the feeling that only perfection will do, it is actually hugely liberating. The final thought to tell us what we can do and how we can forge a path ahead, undermines the idea that paths themselves exist. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado gives us a challenge: ‘Traveller, there is no path. The path is made by walking.’

In addition to dealing with uncertainty regarding actions, we also have to find a way in a constantly changing world. This can be unsettling. Fear not – there are plenty of quotations to support you in that time of worry. Maya Angelou wrote, ‘We delight in the beauty of the

butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.’ For her, change is a positive. Others think that whilst some change is desirable, not everything *can* be changed. Denis Waitley is an American motivational speaker – his strategy is to, ‘Change the changeable, accept the unchangeable, and remove yourself from the unacceptable.’ Fear of change can lead us to be attracted to what we expect to see or what find usual – many prefer things to be normal. Charles Addams, the cartoonist who invented the darkly brilliant Addams Family has a different take on the idea of normal. He says, ‘Normal is an illusion. What is normal for the spider is chaos for the fly.’

Three qualities will steer you through the management of how to act and what to do in a changing world. The first is how hopeful you are, the second is your capacity to be at peace with yourself. The third quality emerges from these two – it is leadership. Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond and the writer of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* has advice on hope: ‘Hope makes a good breakfast. Eat plenty of it.’ I think he means that it is good to start with high hopes. That sets the right tone for what will follow. It is not so good to *end* with hope, as it means that however positive your attitude was, you were not successful in your efforts.

Anne Lamott is an American non-fiction writer. She has a tough-minded approach to hope. For her, it is not a shiny, joyful emotion. Hope is not easy and does not come easily. ‘Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don’t give up.’ Martin Luther King, who needs no introduction, also pairs hope with hard times, but emphasises the greatness of hope: ‘We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.’ The final thought I offer on hope points to what can grow from it – leadership. ‘The pessimist complains about the wind. The optimist expects it to change. The leader adjusts the sails.’

Alongside and as important as the ability to sustain hope is the capacity to be at peace. ‘As important as it is to have a plan for doing work, it is perhaps more important to have a plan for rest, relaxation, self-care, and sleep’ (Akiroq Brost). Similarly, this thought: ‘Unplugging for a while fixes computers and humans.’ All too often we feel we have to perform for others, that unless we are at the top of our game, others will not appreciate or like us. The wonderful writer, Virginia Woolf, has a thought to act as an antidote to that urge. It is so true, and I heartily recommend it to you: ‘No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but yourself.’ We’ll finish this section with another quotation from Anne Lamott:

‘Don’t wish me happiness
I don’t expect to be happy all the time.
It’s gotten beyond that somehow.
Wish me courage and strength and a sense of humour.
I will need them all.’

Buoyed up by hope and inner peace, you now have the capacity to offer something to others. That something might be leadership. Many people are put-off by the word leadership – they might see it as self-aggrandising, boastful, egotistical. Nothing could be further from the truth. The baseball player, Joe DiMaggio puts it well ‘A person always doing his or her best becomes a natural leader, just by example.’ You must be authentic in your service to others and hold tight to your own ideas and values: ‘Don’t compromise yourself. You are all you’ve got’ (Janis Joplin). Further, all good leaders serve others. Leaders know that their leadership is not about them, it’s about serving the team. The contrast between the inadequacy of solo

efforts and excellence of team delivery is well put by H E Luccock 'No one can whistle a symphony. It takes a whole orchestra to play it.'

Whatever you decide to do, however you manage the changes around you, whether you can go forward in hope and peace, remember these two final thoughts. The first is a reassurance. No matter how bad it looks right now, we all of us soon forget the things we worried about in the past. Dale Carnegie puts this thought succinctly: 'Remember, today is the tomorrow you worried about yesterday.' Whatever troubles you now will pass tomorrow, and if not tomorrow, soon. The secret is to keep going forward. And to be in the present... this moment... now. Worries are usually located in the past or the future. Everything wonderful is in the here and now. I have a secret for you - you already have what you need.

A last thought from Mary Wollstonecraft, the writer, philosopher, and women's rights campaigner: 'The beginning is always today.'