

Useful Sayings Assembly

This morning I would like to talk about useful sayings. I think it was probably the Romans who originated the idea of gathering together well expressed truths. They accumulated a vast collection of short sayings, which allowed them to be guided by the wit and wisdom of others in most situations. There is a word for these sayings: they are called aphorisms. An aphorism is a short and pithy statement of something held to be generally true. It is even better there is a little humour mixed in with the wisdom. Perhaps the greatest master of the aphorism was a Frenchman, writing in the 17th century. He was called François de la Rochefoucauld. His short book called *Maxims* is quite brilliant and did a lot to shape the intellectual character of France. I cannot do it justice here and will quote only two maxims to whet your appetite - I hope you seek the book out for yourself. La Rochefoucauld was not quite a cynic, but you get a flavour of his thinking from these two thoughts: "True love is like ghosts, which everybody talks about and few have seen." Or try this: "We all have strength enough to bear the misfortunes of others." Both aphorisms are delicate reminders that humans are rarely guided by unselfishness and openhearted kindness to others.

La Rochefoucauld was trying to elegantly express his perception of humanity and society. Other aphorisms are less philosophical in nature and have a more practical purpose. These aphorisms are intended to guide us in our thinking and our decision-making. It is upon these that I intend to focus this morning. I find it useful to have a stock of carefully chosen aphorisms in the back of my mind. They are there to serve as touchstones when a decision has to be made, or when a dilemma presents itself. The beauty of our well expressed aphorism is that its elegance of phrasing makes it instantly memorable. For example, imagine someone wishes to talk to you about some crackpot idea. Perhaps they wish to convince you of the truth of astrology, homoeopathy, the existence of ghosts, the effectiveness of trickle-down economics or any other such hokum. They will often conclude triumphantly that the case against has not been proven, and that we should keep an open mind. At this point, I recall a wise aphorism from Richard Dawkins: "By all means let us be open-minded, but not so open-minded that our brains drop out."

Aphorisms can also serve to provide us with definitions of difficult concepts. "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die." Here, Mel Brooks takes two key literary concepts and reminds us of the impact of our own self-love on our perception of the world.

You might be familiar with the aphorism, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail". Very useful, but other aphorisms go further. 'Planning is an unnatural process; it is much more fun to do something. And the nicest thing about not planning is that failure comes as a complete surprise rather than being preceded by a period of worry and depression.'" John Harvey Jones was a businessman; his aphorism is longer, more humorous and fearfully appropriate to the Leavers' approach to Brexit. Mike Tyson, the boxer, offers a different take on the idea: "Everyone has a plan, until they get punched in the face." Here, Tyson reminds us that having a plan is not sufficient. When your plan comes into contact with the problems of the world, you need the character to see it through.

And the world can be a difficult place. In the mid 19th century, Frenchman called Nicolas Chamfort said: "We should swallow a toad every morning, in order to fortify ourselves against the disgust of the rest of the day, when we have to spend it in society." A few years later

Mark Twain added, “If you have to swallow a frog, don't stare at it too long.” Both take the rather unpleasant concept of eating a frog, but use the idea in different ways. Of course, neither is actually advising you to eat an amphibian. For Chamfort, the metaphor describes a kind of desensitisation process. If you can stand *this*, then *that* will seem easy. Mark Twain is a practical American. His message is that if you have to do something unpleasant, don't spend too long thinking about it.

I could spend the rest of today, sharing aphorisms that have either moved me or made me think. I hope I have whetted your appetite to seek out some aphorisms of your own. I would like to conclude with four final examples, each of which offers that unique combination of wisdom, brevity and wit that defines the essence of a good aphorism.

Here is one of my favourite poets, Walt Whitman, providing an elegant and rueful reflection upon his own character, “I no doubt deserved my enemies, but I don't believe I deserved my friends.” Whitman's combination of mournfulness and gratitude is captured in a perfectly balanced phrase.

I also strongly recommend this thought, offered by Wilson Mitzner, “Don't talk about yourself; everyone will do that when you leave.” This combines the important thought that we shouldn't go on about ourselves in conversation, with the more difficult truth that others enjoy gossiping about you. But one shouldn't be too surprised; after all, unless you have great powers of self-control you certainly gossip about others. As a general rule of thumb, whatever someone is prepared to say about others to you, they are also prepared to say to others about you.

A final two aphorisms, both offering advice on behaviour. The first is from the great writer George Bernard Shaw. He could be talking about politics; he could be referring to any dispute with someone less classy than yourself. His words are ones to live by: “Never mud-wrestle a pig. You both get dirty and the pig likes it.”

The last two aphorisms are from a man who deserves a statue for his contribution to the aphorism. Winston Churchill produced hundreds of one liners, and has been credited with many more. Here he advises us that the outcome of our efforts depends less upon talent or wisdom, but more upon a relentless determination. The first is: “Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.”

The second, which I commend to you all - it is a certainty that it will be important at some point in the life of everyone in the room – is this: “If you are going through Hell, keep going.”

All of these aphorisms are words of wisdom, and I commend them to you all. Do go in search of your own favourites, and be guided by them.