

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

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 , then 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 Mizner, "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.