

## The Aphorism

A couple of years ago I was given a book by James Geary entitled: The World in a Phrase with the subtitle: A Brief History of The Aphorism. Being a country boy from Alabama I had no idea what an aphorism was. The Miriam-Webster dictionary defines the aphorism as: "A concise statement of a principle or a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment", in other words, an adage. An online dictionary defined it as: "A terse saying embodying a general truth or astute observation", as: "**Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.**" attributed to Lord Acton. Frederick Nietzsche said of the aphorism: "**A good aphorism is too hard for the teeth of time and is not eaten up by all the centuries, even though it serves as food for every age: hence it is the greatest paradox in literature, the imperishable in the midst of change, the nourishment-like salt-is always prized but which never loses its savor as salt does.**"

According to Mr. Geary, these definitions are not complete. He says that an aphorism must obey five rules:

1. It must be brief. In a burning building you do not take time to explain how the fire started or who is responsible. To yell "FIRE!" or "HELP!" is all that is needed.
2. It must be definitive as the definition of a word must be. Word definitions and aphorisms assert rather than argue. Samuel Johnson's: "**Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.**" Would lose some of its punch if it contained all manner of qualifications. As it is, it does pack a punch and, I think, it is particularly appropriate for the political climate of our day. (I know that we are to refrain from discussing politics and that is as close as I plan to get to that topic.)
3. It must be personal. Holbrook Jackson, a literary critic and friend of G.K. Chesterton published a book of aphorism in 1911 and sent Chesterton an autographed copy. Jackson, an atheist philosopher, "had a disdain for convention and praise for man's impulsive, irrational nature". Chesterton, on the other hand was a rationalist and in his copy he wrote beside the words of Jackson his responses.

Jackson: **He who reasons is lost.**

Chesterton: **He who never reasons is not worth finding.**

Jackson: **Don't think – do.**

Chesterton: **Do think! Do!**

It is the personal quality that gives the aphorism the power to illicit reaction; therefore it must be attributed to someone. Many times who said it gives clues to the intent.

4. It must have a twist. A good example is one by Francois-Auguste Rene' de Chateaubriand:

**An original writer is not one who imitates nobody, but one whom nobody can imitate.**

5. It must be philosophical. "Friedrich von Schlegel jotted his musings in a notebook and printed them in Athenaum, the literary journal founded by <sup>him</sup> he and his brother August Wilhelm. Like Bacon, he believed this kind of fragmented philosophizing more accurately reflected the shifting, scattershot nature of thinking – and experience of life itself. Aphorisms, he said, **are the 'true form of the universal philosophy' and contain 'the greatest quantity of thought in the smallest space'**"

Geary tells a story about Nathaniel Hawthorne's wife in order to give, what for him, is a perfect example of the five laws of aphorism at work. Sophia Hawthorne would use her diamond to scratch thoughts on the window panes of their home, Old Manse, in Concord Massachusetts. Some still remain. One in the upstairs study states:

**Man's mistakes are God's purpose, 1843.**

It has been suggested that this was written in response to a miscarriage she had that year after falling on a patch of ice.

One of my grandfathers had a way with words and produced some memorable sayings that I still use on occasion. They may not qualify as aphorisms but they speak to me. He had a small neighborhood grocery store in which I worked during my teenage years. Many of his customers bought groceries on credit and when they didn't pay, I was given the job of going out into the neighborhood to try and collect. As I was leaving the store, he would often say: **"Turn your hat around so I think you're coming back"** as a way of telling me to hurry. Another of his sayings which had a double meaning was: **You are not worth much if you are not worth what you eat.** For those who failed to pay their bills, he was saying they were not worth very much. Other times he would forgive bills or just give food away to those who were unable to pay. For the needy he was saying you are at least worth what you eat.

At Huntingdon College, I painted with the Buildings and Grounds crew during the summers. I hated trimming windows and doorways. When I would complain an old painter, Mr. Calloway would say:

**Just paint it and get away from it.**

If you think about it that is an aphorism. Those things in life that are necessary but unpleasant do them without complaining and move on.

One from the book's author, which I like, is:

**There are certain mistakes that we enjoy so much we are always willing to repeat them.**

I have been there a few times but have learned to avoid most since the cost is usually greater than I want to pay.

A few others that spoke to me:

**Mirrors would do well to reflect a little more before sending back images. – Jean Cocteau**

Too often in arguments we respond out of anger and once it is out we can't take it back. We all know it is hard to put toothpaste back in the tube. Another:

**I have often been forced to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that there is no place else to go.**  
– Abraham Lincoln

**I never let school interfere with my education – Mark Twain**

**The effect of studying masterpieces is to make me admire and do otherwise. – Gerard Manley Hopkins**

And of this group my favorite:

**The difference between a rut and a grave is depth – Gerald Burrill, former Episcopal Bishop of Chicago**

I don't know about you, but for me, it is easy to fall into the same old routine. Habits are hard to break. How often do we take a different route when going to frequent destinations or eat at a new restaurant? Trying something different is the spice of life.

Looking at the history, one of the earliest Aphorist was Lao-tzu who lived in the sixth century BC. "He was a historian of the Chou dynasty who was so fed up with the way the local aristocracy was running things that he decided to leave home and job to live alone in the mountains." There, he was asked to write down his teachings and he adopted the aphoristic style for his Tao-te Ching, a treatise about statesmanship, philosophy, and personal virtue. His advice to those who wish to go into politics was that:

**Ruling a large kingdom is like cooking a small fish; the less handled the better.**

If handled too much, a small fish will flake and fall apart. It is better to turn it only once or twice in the cooking process. Lao advice to rulers was to manage the process but not get too involved in the details. Another saying for cooks as well as kings:

**The greatest carver does the least cutting.**

"This aphorism contains a great pun in Chinese since "chih", the word that means 'to carve' also means 'to rule.'"

Confucius was asked by one of his followers for a word that could be used to guide a person's life. He replied:

**Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.**

This turns the golden rule of Jesus' teaching around and emphasizes our conduct.

A couple more of Confucius' sayings:

**When a country is well governed, poverty and a mean condition are things to be ashamed of. When a country is ill governed, riches and honors are things to be ashamed of.**

And then this:

**The commander of the forces of a large state may be carried off, but the will of even a common man cannot be taken from him.**

Confucius went on to developed rules for how he felt a kingdom should be governed and spent the last ten years of his life searching, without success, for a ruler who would follow those rules.

I would now like to jump ahead in the history of the aphorisms to an early American aphorist, Benjamin Franklin. The almanac was the social media of his day and was a major source of a printer's income. Ben and his partner had a major argument in 1732. The partner left taking their almanac with him and set up a rival shop. The loss was a major blow to Franklin's income so he produced a competing almanac using the pseudonym Richard Saunders, an impoverished, absent minded astrologer who took up writing in order to make ends meet. In addition to the regular fair offered in almanacs, "Poor Richard" offered advice about earning a living and leading a virtuous life. We will get to that later, but first an interest anecdote about Franklin's sense of humor.

The almanac business was very competitive and in an early addition of "Poor Richard" Franklin, as a joke, printed that a rival almanac writer, Titan Leeds, would die on October 17, 1733 at 3:29 pm, the instance of conjunction of Mercury with the sun. Leeds did not see the humor and ridiculed Franklin publicly, but Ben kept up the gag. He wrote that indeed Leeds had died, as predicted, and pretenders were now writing his almanac. When Leeds finally died five years later Franklin wrote thanking the imposters for ending their ruse.

Now to a few of his musing which many of you probably know.

**He that lieth down with dogs shall rise up with fleas.**

**It is hard for an empty sack to stand upright.**

**Little strokes fell great oaks.**

**Take counsel in wine, but resolve afterwards in water.**

**Different sects like different clocks may all be near the matter, tho' they don't quite agree.**

Good advice and words to ponder.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the country's most famous man of letters in the mid 1800s. He was much involved in the trends and issues of his day: opposition to slavery, civil rights for African Americans and the first back-to-nature movement, but never joined any organized group. He was a lone rebel.

**It is easy in the world to live 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.**

Emerson became a minister after finding that independence of mind was not always so sweet. He became well known for his eloquent sermons, but he began to question organized religion and the death of his first <sup>wife</sup> prompted his break with traditional Christianity. Yet his ministry continued. He stopped writing sermons and began writing essays and speaking to large audiences around the country. "His message was as simple as it was subversive:"

**God builds his temple in the heart on the ruins of Churches and religions.**

Emerson dreamed of building a cabin on land he owned near Walden Pond. A friend David Henry Thoreau actually did it. Emerson was the conforming nonconformist living a traditional life while Thoreau, less original in his thinking, led a very unconventional life. In 1845 he wrote: "I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in my youth, for timber. It is difficult to build without borrowing." In fact he borrowed the axe, the woods and the pond from Emerson.

Thoreau wrote:

**If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.**

That is, dream big dreams then work to make them come true. Thoreau's only rule was to be true to self.

**If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.**

And finally one from Dr. Phil:

**If you marry for money, you will earn every penny.**

Thank you, and stay out of the ruts.