

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

# SAYINGS and their EDUCATIONAL USE

**Why not make more use of sayings and quotations in the classroom and around the school? During the 1997 RE Festival, many schools witnessed a real growth of such sayings - religious and non-religious - around their schools including such gathering places as assembly and dining halls. What a creative way to encourage reflection.**

## Introduction

In pre-literate societies – societies that knew no written language – things could not be ‘looked up’ in any written form. What needed remembering from one generation to the next had to be memorised. At its largest, this might have been a law code or a saga; at its shortest, it might have been a proverb or a pithy saying.

The advent of literacy did not dispense with the need to remember certain word groups, however. Still, today, our language is peppered with sequences of words and more formal statements like proverbs. Indeed, many people have made a practice of collecting or copying down statements, sayings and observations that have an appeal for them. When this was a more common practice than it is now, such collections were often gathered in what people referred to as ‘commonplace books’. Others, in a less systematic way, might keep ‘cuttings’ in a wallet, a diary, or in an old note-book. The famous French essayist, Montaigne (1533-1592), wrote sayings on pieces of paper which he then displayed all over his study. Still today, public or private office space is a rich field for finding statements (and cartoons) that people have pinned up because they find them meaningful.



# CELEBRATING RE

## Proverbs, sayings and quotations

Why should people want to make a note of, or collect, sayings at all? Isn't it because such sayings provide an interesting or evocative perspective on life and the world, whether they be philosophical, humorous or just plain quirky?

In the case of proverbs, which abound in all societies and cultures, the saying takes the form of a little nugget of wisdom that has been distilled from the life experience of generations and gradually ground down so that it is expressed in an economical and effective way. Take, for instance, the following familiar English proverbs:

- \* ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth’;
- \* ‘Many hands make light work’;
- \* ‘People in glass houses should not throw stones’;
- \* ‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder’; and
- \* ‘Red sky at night, shepherd’s delight: red sky in the morning, shepherd’s warning.’

As a matter of interest, the academic study of proverbs is called ‘paremiology’ and, amongst other things that paremiologists have pointed out, is that proverbs can be contradictory (see the first two examples above) and that they can be grouped (see the fifth example above, a typical ‘weather proverb’).

But ‘proverbs’ are only one form of familiar saying. There are ‘anecdotes’, small stories based on experience, often with a humorous edge; ‘epigrams’, small sayings of wisdom or wit; ‘adages’, general sayings; and ‘aphorisms’, crafted,



witty statements which have clustered around characters such as Confucius, Martin Luther, Oscar Wilde, Winston Churchill and Mae West.

And then, of course, there are quotations that mean something to the listener or reader for reasons that only they can surmise. Take three from my own commonplace collection:

- \* 'Strive for simplicity but learn to mistrust it' (Alfred North Whitehead; heard in a radio broadcast);
- \* 'Happiness is not given to us, nor is misery imposed. At every moment we are at a crossroads and must choose the direction to take' (from Matthieu Ricard's book *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*); and
- \* 'Take time to enjoy the little things because, one day, you might realise that they were the big things' (jotted down during a talk by Miles Hilton-Barber).

In fact, the more you look, the more sayings and statements you see: on cars ('My karma ran over my dogma'), in cafes ('If you like home cooking, go home!'), on tee-shirts ('Time wounds all heels'), and on office notice-boards ('You don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps'). And now, of course, there is the Internet which has a growing number of quotation websites, some general, some dedicated to particular people. 'The sky is the limit' it seems.



## Religions and sayings

If proverbs, sayings and quotations often capture shards of wisdom or practical advice about how to live life, it is not surprising that religious traditions abound in them.

Within the Christian tradition, for instance, the observations and insights of Jesus have been perpetuated in literary and everyday language, such as:

- \* 'It is more blessed to give than to receive';

- \* 'Sufficient unto the day are the evils thereof'; and
- \* 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven'.

Within the Muslim traditions, *hadiths* – reports of what the Prophet Muhammad said or did - have had a profound effect on the shape of the Muslim way of life and have been quoted by Muslims down the ages. Take, for example, three sayings related to knowledge and learning:

- \* 'Seek knowledge as far as China';
- \* 'Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave'; and
- \* 'An hour of learning is worth more than a year of prayer'.

Jews, of course, have always exhibited a great love for the written and spoken word. Though *Yiddish*, the language of Eastern European Jewry, is spoken by less and less people now, Yiddish proverbs and sayings can still be seen to abound in wit and wisdom. For example:

- \* 'Laughter is heard farther than weeping';
- \* 'You must go out into the world to know how lovely your home is'; and
- \* 'The door to evil-doing is wide, but the return gate is narrow'.



## Wise sayings, schools and religious education

Sayings, in the form of a 'saying of the week', can often be found displayed in and around schools. Take for example the secondary school that uses sayings of the week to contribute to its collective worship programme and thus to encourage people's curiosity and spiritual development. Each week, a saying is displayed on special notice boards around the school and also in each classroom. In order to encourage reflection, the sayings chosen are usually challenging and sometimes provocative:

- \* 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways: the point is to change it' (Karl Marx).

They might, on the other hand, be much simpler and seemingly less sophisticated:

- \* 'The only hard thing in this school is the furniture'; and
- \* 'Success comes in cans, not in cannots'.

This style can, of course, also be translated into the classroom as with the teacher in a special school who had a prominent 'Wall of Wisdom' in her classroom, the idea being that when children made interesting or insightful statements, they could be quickly displayed: sayings such as:

- \* 'You can't judge books by their covers; you can't judge people by their colour'.

Another teacher had his own 'saying of the week' displayed in the classroom. When a new saying went up – chosen by the teacher but increasingly brought in by the pupils too - the 'old' saying was pinned on the classroom ceiling. By the end of the year ...

Another school had a whole-school 'wall of wonder' in the foyer just outside the school hall. As each term went on, the board filled with a variety of statements, some by the pupils themselves. some by staff and other gleaned from other sources; sayings such as:

- \* 'Be patient. In time, even an egg will walk'.

And then what of the use of sayings and so on as a focal point of specific pieces of work? This might

work in two ways. Imagine, for example, some work on the Sikh tradition with its egalitarian teachings. In small groups (for 'many heads are better than one') children are asked to put into their own words what Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism was getting at when he stated:



- \* 'From women, man is born. From her, kings are born'.

On the other hand, noting that Guru Nanak taught that it was wrong to treat women as second-class people, the task could be to create a short, pithy statement that Guru Nanak might have used in his teaching.

And what about gathering collections of sayings to illustrate particular issues or the viewpoint of particular traditions? Such sayings could be displayed, sorted, paired, ranked, and much more besides.

The number and type of sayings, proverbs and quotations in human culture have been boundless. So too, perhaps, should their use be in education. For, after all:

- \* 'An idea launched like a javelin in proverbial form strikes with sharper point on the hearer's mind and leaves implanted barbs for meditation' (Erasmus, 1466-1536).



# APPENDIX of SAYINGS

**'Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakens.'**

*Carl Jung (1875-1961)*

**'One of the most beautiful gifts that humans have brought to the earth is music. In great music the ancient longing of the earth finds a voice.'**

*John O'Donohue (1956-2008)*

**'All the efforts of the human mind cannot exhaust the essence of a single fly.'**

*Thomas Aquinas (c1225-1274)*

**'Well begun is half done.'**

*Traditional proverb*

**'Optimists believe we live in the best of worlds and pessimists fear this is true.'**

*Anon*

**'Even the smallest person can change the course of the future.'**

*Galadriel to Frodo Baggins in the film 'The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring'*

**'Take time to enjoy the little things because, one day, you might realise that they were the big things.'**

*Miles Hilton-Barber*

**'The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance.'**

*Alan Watts (1915-1973)*

**'Character is what you do when no one's looking.'**

*Anon*

**'Discovery consists in seeing what everybody else has seen and thinking what nobody else has thought.'**

*Albert Szent-Györgi (1907-1972), Hungarian scientist & discoverer of vitamin C*



# CELEBRATING RE

**'Schools are not about enabling children to have a living but about children being able to have a life.'**

*Eliot Eisner, US educationist*

**'An hour of learning is worth more than a year of prayer.'**

*Muslim saying*

**'Religion is not the same as the spiritual but it marks the battleground where the fiercest conflicts have taken place.'**

*Jack Priestley*

**'Religion is poetry plus, not science minus.'**

*Anon*

**'While faith may no longer be society's glue, it may yet be a sacred marinade in many communities.'**

*Alan Billings, 2009*

**'No fist is big enough to hide the sky.'**

*African proverb*

**'Give to the world the best you have and the best will come back to you.'**

*Shaker saying*

**'Be patient: in time, even an egg will walk.'**

*Anon*

**'Man thinks and God laughs.'**

*Yiddish sa*



**'God could not be everywhere and therefore he made mothers.'**

*Jewish proverb*

**'God sleeps in the rock, dreams in the plant, stirs in the animal, and awakens in mankind.'**

*Sufi teaching*

**'I expect to pass through life but once. If, therefore, there be any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, for I shall not pass this way again.'**

*William Penn (1644-1718)*

**'The human spirit is more powerful than any drug and that is what needs to be nourished – with work, play, friendship, family. These are things that matter. This is what we've forgotten – the simplest things.'**

*Dr Sayers (Robin Williams) at the end of the film 'Awakenings'*

**'The only things we really have are those we give up. The things we keep possess us.'**

*Thomas Merton (1915-1968)*

**'Man can live three weeks without food, three weeks without water. But he can't live three minutes without hope.'**

*Rabbi Hugo Gryn (1930-1996)*

**'Life is a train. Get on board.'**

*Sign on a doctor's desk*

**'Life is half spent before we know what it is.'**

*English saying recorded in 1651*

**'A person is a person through other people.'**

*African saying*



**'We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.'**

*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955)*

**'Laughter is the shortest distance between two people.'**

*Victor Borge (1909-2000)*

**'The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shore-line of wonder.'**

*Anon*

**'Live your life as if you are ready to say goodbye to it at any moment, as if the time left for you were some pleasant surprise.'**

*Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE)*

**'Life is rather like a tin of sardines – we're all of us looking for the key.'**

*Alan Bennett, English playwright*

**'Most people love humanity. It is the person next door they can't stand.'**

*Anon*

**'I try to take just one day at a time ... but, lately, several days have attacked me at once!'**

*Notice in headteacher's office*

**'Prayer is not an idle amusement. Properly understood and applied it is the most potent instrument of action.'**

*Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)*

**'Be humble for you are made of earth. Be noble for you are made of stars.'**

*Serbian proverb*

**'We didn't inherit the land from our fathers. We are borrowing it from our children.'**

*Amish saying*

**'You cannot discover new oceans unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.'**

*Anon*

**'The one who knows, does not say. The one who says, does not know.'**

*Zen Buddhist saying*

**'A day is long, but a lifetime is short.'**

*Russian proverb*

**'Life is like a swimming pool; all the noise is at the shallow end.'**

*Anon*

**'The 'perfect' person does not exist; making mistakes is permissible; I can learn from them as others can.'**

*One of a school's 'Golden Rules for Staff'*

**'If I don't go to sleep, will the morning ever come?'**

*Young child*

**'When a great moment knocks on the door of your life, it is often no louder than the beating of your heart, and it is very easy to miss it.'**

*Boris Pasternak (1890—1981), Russian poet & novelist*

**'Declare peace every day.'**

*Words on a Quaker poster*

**'Knowledge consists of knowing that a tomato is a fruit, and wisdom consists of not putting it in a fruit salad.'**

*Miles Kington (1941-2008), British journalist*

**'Words are only for what can be said; Silence has a better vocabulary.'**

*From the poem 'Against Speech' by U A Fanthorpe, English teacher & poet (1929-2009)*

**'The unexamined life is not worth living.'**

*Socrates (469-399 BCE)*

**'Just as your hand, held before the eye, can hide the tallest mountain, so this small earthly life keeps us from seeing the vast radiance that fills the core of the universe.'**

*Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810)*

**'Do not speak unless you can improve on the silence.'**

*Monastery rule*

**'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'**

*Jesus of Nazareth*

**'Never measure the height of a mountain until you have reached the top. Then you will see how low it was.'**

*Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961), 2<sup>nd</sup> UN Secretary-General*

**'Where is the life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?'**

*T S Eliot (1888-1965)*

**'Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.'**

*Anon*

**'How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?'**

*'Satchel' Paige, US baseball player (c1906-1982)*

**'Architecture, of all the arts, is the one which acts the most slowly, but the most surely, on the soul.'**

*Ernest Dimnet (1866-1954)*

**'Good fortune closes the eyes, misfortune opens them.'**

*Slovakian proverb*

**'A smooth sea never made a skilful mariner.'**

*English proverb*

**'The only hard thing in this classroom is the furniture.'**

*Notice seen displayed in a school classroom'*

**'Your worst enemy is your best teacher.'**

*The Buddha*

**'Beauty will fade, but not goodness.'**

*Philippine proverb*

**'Your parents have to tell you off because they don't want you to grow up like them.'**

*Ten year-old boy*

**'What was hard to bear is sweet to remember.'**

*Portuguese proverb*



**'I don't like to waste a day, to waste any time at all. You have to keep learning about the world.'**

*Michael Palin, English comedian & traveller*

**'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.'**

*Julian of Norwich (1342 –c1416)*

**'A thousand friends is too few. One enemy is too many.'**

*Anon*

**'I'm an atheist ... thank God.'**

*Dave Allen (1936-2005), Irish comedian*

**'Grief and joy are a revolving wheel.'**

*Indian (Tamil) proverb*

**'The heart has its reasons, which reason knows nothing of.'**

*Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)*

**'East or west, home is best.'**

*Dutch proverb*

**'He that loseth wealth, loseth much; he that loseth friends, loseth more; but he who loseth his spirit, loseth all.'**

*Spanish proverb*

**'I wonder when the trees discovered they could help us.'**

*Eight year-old*

**'Much wants more.'**

*Proverb*

**'Life can only be understood backwards; it has to be lived forwards.'**

*Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)*

**'God created man because He loves stories.'**

*Old saying*

**'Cherish the past, adorn the present, construct for the future.'**

*Motto of Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, Welsh architect (1883-1978)*

**'Community begins in mystery and ends in administration. Leaders move away from people and into paper.'**

*Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche organisation*

**'Life is fragile. Handle with prayer.'**

*Notice seen outside a church building*

**'We read to know that we're not alone.'**

*Anon*

**'All books are bigger on the inside than the outside.'**

*Anon*

**'Almost anything is easier to get into than out of.'**

*Allen's Law*

**'I never realised it before, but a school teacher is a very delicate instrument.'**

*Charlie Brown cartoon*

**'If we saw our lives as a series of experiments, we would become less discouraged by our inevitable failures.'**

*Theodore Zeldin*

**'Highest is truth. Higher still is truthful living.'**

*Text from Guru Granth Sahib, Sikh Scriptures*

**'Fine words butter no parsnips.'**

*English proverb*

**'A closed mouth gathers no foot.'**

*Car bumper sticker*

