Pearls of Wisdom

A collection of sayings on history, liberty, truth, and character

History and Civilization

"The study of history is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions, which seem to us novel and plausible, have been tested before, not once but many times and in innumerable guises; and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false."

— Paul Johnson
The Recovery of Freedom (1980)

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"Civilization is not inherited; it has to be learned and earned by each generation anew; if the transmission should be interrupted for one century, civilization would die, and we should be savages again."

— Will and Ariel Durant
The Lessons of History (1968), ch. 13

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"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

— George Santayana
The Life of Reason, vol. 1, Reason in Common Sense (1905)

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"We shall not grow wiser before we learn that much that we have done was very foolish."

— F. A. Hayek
The Road to Serfdom (1944), Conclusion

Liberty, Government, and Economics

"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it on to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free."

— Ronald Reagan
Address to the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, March 30, 1961

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“Once you admit that the individual is merely a means to serve the ends of the higher entity called society or the nation, most of those features of totalitarian regimes which horrify us follow of necessity.”

— F. A. Hayek
The Road to Serfdom (1944), ch. 10, “Why the Worst Get on Top”

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“Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron’s cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.”

— C. S. Lewis
“The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment” (1949), in God in the Dock

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“Nobody spends somebody else’s money as carefully as he spends his own. Nobody uses somebody else’s resources as carefully as he uses his own. So if you want efficiency and effectiveness, if you want knowledge to be properly utilized, you have to do it through the means of private property.”

— Milton Friedman
Interview for Commanding Heights (PBS, c. 2000)

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“But the chief penalty is to be governed by someone worse if a man will not himself hold office and rule.”

— Plato
Republic I, 347c (trans. Paul Shorey). The source of the popular paraphrase about being ruled by fools.

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“What matters to bureaucrats is not whether what they are doing makes sense but whether it fits the routine. It is both bothersome and dangerous to go beyond the routine because that means taking personal responsibility for the consequences. One of the main hallmarks of bureaucrats is avoidance of personal responsibility.

The one thing that all bureaucrats have in common is the notion that the bureaucracy is never wrong. If anything has gone wrong, it had to be someone else’s fault, preferably the fault of whoever complains about the bureaucracy. Any evidence that would prove them wrong is likely to be kept under wraps.”

— Attributed to Thomas Sowell
Original column not located

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“The task of weaning various people and groups from the national nipple will not be easy. The sound of whines, bawls, screams and invective will fill the air as the agony of withdrawal pangs finds voice.”

— Attributed to Linda Bowles
Syndicated columnist; original column not located

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“For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law.”

— Attributed to Óscar R. Benavides, President of Peru
Traditional attribution (“A mis amigos, todo; a mis enemigos, la ley”), also credited to others

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“You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.”

— Traditionally attributed to Abraham Lincoln
No contemporary record; first credited to him in 1885

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“Vox populi, vox Dei. (The voice of the people is the voice of God.)”

— Latin proverb
Alcuin warned Charlemagne against it in 798: “the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness.”

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“God made man, Sam Colt made them equal, John Browning keeps them free.”

— American saying
Expanded from the 19th-century “God created men; Colonel Colt made them equal”

Truth and Knowledge

“Believe those who seek the truth; doubt those who find it.”

— André Gide
Ainsi soit-il, ou Les jeux sont faits (1952): “Croyez ceux qui cherchent la vérité, doutez de ceux qui la trouvent.”

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“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence.”

— Albert Einstein
Quoted by William Miller, LIFE, May 2, 1955

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“It takes considerable knowledge just to realize the extent of your own ignorance.”

— Attributed to Thomas Sowell
Original column not located

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“It’s amazing how much panic one honest man can spread among a multitude of hypocrites.”

— Attributed to Thomas Sowell
Original column not located

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“The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it.”

— Selwyn Duke
Often misattributed to George Orwell

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“Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

— Popularized by Carl Sagan
The Dragons of Eden (1977); first stated by Rev. William Wright (1887)

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“There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.”

— Popularized by Mark Twain
Twain (1907) credited Benjamin Disraeli, but the true origin is anonymous

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“Biology reduces to Chemistry, Chemistry to Physics, Physics to Mathematics, Mathematics to Philosophy, Philosophy to Theology.”

— Anonymous

Character and Virtue

“Half the harm that is done in this world is due to people who want to feel important. They don’t mean to do harm—but the harm does not interest them. Or they do not see it, or they justify it because they are absorbed in the endless struggle to think well of themselves.”

— T. S. Eliot
The Cocktail Party (1949), spoken by Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly

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“It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.”

— Attributed to Augustine of Hippo
Augustinian in thought (cf. City of God XIV.13); exact wording not found in his works

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“I wish that I may never think the smiles of the great and powerful a sufficient inducement to turn aside from the straight path of honesty and the convictions of my own mind.”

— Attributed to David Ricardo

Traditionally cited from his correspondence

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“Those who are kind to the cruel will end up being cruel to the kind.”

— Rabbinic saying
After Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:16, on King Saul’s mercy toward Agag (1 Samuel 15)

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“Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan “Press On” has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.”

— Attributed to Calvin Coolidge
Credited to him by 1929; developed from Rev. Theodore T. Munger, On the Threshold (1881)

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“Great minds discuss ideas. Average minds discuss events. Small minds discuss people.”

— Anonymous
Earliest form credited to Henry Thomas Buckle (1901); often misattributed to Eleanor Roosevelt

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“Wise men speak because they have something to say; fools because they have to say something.”

— Anonymous
Often misattributed to Plato

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“Weak people revenge. Strong people forgive. Intelligent people ignore.”

— Anonymous
Often misattributed to Albert Einstein

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“I never saw a wild thing sorry for itself. A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough without ever having felt sorry for itself.”

— D. H. Lawrence
“Self-Pity,” Pansies (1929)

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“One of the best lessons you can learn in life is to master how to remain calm.”

— Attributed to Bruce Lee
Not found in his published writings

Life, Age, and Humor

“The old believe everything; the middle-aged suspect everything; the young know everything.”

— Oscar Wilde
“Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” (1894)

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“Our lives are defined by opportunities, even the ones we miss.”

— Eric Roth
Screenplay, The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (2008)

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“Some folks are wise, and some are otherwise.”

— Tobias Smollett
The Adventures of Roderick Random (1748), ch. 6

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“Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

— Tom Sims
Newspaper column (1925); often misattributed to Will Rogers

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“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There’s no point in being a damn fool about it.”

— Anonymous
Often attributed to W. C. Fields, but first linked to him after his death

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“We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.”

— Anonymous
After G. Stanley Hall, Adolescence (1904); often misattributed to G. B. Shaw

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“Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.”

— Anonymous
Earliest record 1968; often misattributed to Mark Twain

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“Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I’m not sure about the former.”

— Attributed to Albert Einstein
Reported secondhand by Frederick Perls; unverified

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“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

— Attributed to Albert Einstein
Unverified; listed as “probably not by Einstein” in Calaprice, The Ultimate Quotable Einstein

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“Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.”

— Anonymous
Earliest record 1986; often misattributed to Albert Einstein

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“Ya take all o’ yer wouldas, yer couldas and yer shouldas in one hand, and a quarter in the other, and you can maybe buy a donut.”

— Tony Baretta (Robert Blake)
Baretta, television series (1975–78)

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“Surgeons know nothing and do everything; internists know a lot and do little; pathologists know everything—just too late.”

— Anonymous medical saying

A Note on Sources

Attributions were checked against primary texts (Hayek’s The Road to Serfdom, Smollett’s Roderick Random, Plato’s Republic, Santayana’s The Life of Reason) and against the documented quotation research of Garson O’Toole at Quote Investigator. Readers with an original source for any quotation listed as “attributed to” are welcome to share it.