

Aphorisms

by Lionel E. Deimel



A recent [NPR story](#) focused on a new book about aphorisms, *The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of the Aphorism*, by *Time* editor James Geary. Perhaps because I appreciate elegance of expression, I was charmed by Geary's examples of his favorite aphorisms, even if I remained unconvinced that his "laws" about the construction of aphorisms would allow me reliably to distinguish an aphorism from, say, an epigram. Certainly, the former is a brief, elegant expression of some truth or opinion that, as Geary suggests, must be philosophical and challenging. Geary says that an aphorism must also be personal, which I assume is to distinguish it from the conventional wisdom of a proverb. He failed to persuade me, however, that Dorothy Parker's "Men seldom make passes/At girls who wear glasses" is aphoristic, rather than epigrammatic. (Besides, can a poem be an epigram? Geary was silent on the matter, but he appears to think so.)

The interview soon had me composing aphorisms in my head. After all, how difficult could such composition be? Aphorisms are a bit like haiku, requiring some real work, but not a sustained effort. In fact, I devised about half a dozen aphorisms (candidate aphorisms, anyway) while showering, shaving, and dressing after listening to the *Morning Edition* interview. I have continued to refine and add to the original list, though my productivity has diminished considerably. This is harder than it looks!

I offer my *oeuvre* in this genre below. The list seems to reflect my work and interests. Many instances touch on matters of quality and design. Others are the outgrowth of my experience as a writer or as a church activist.

The general meaning of most of these aphorisms should be clear, though some are challenging. I would be hard-pressed to explicate a couple of them.

Anyway, see what you make of my collection. These aphorisms are presented in no particular order, but, as I have added to the compilation, I have generally placed newer sayings at the end.

	Do not celebrate excellence in the service of evil.	
	A promise not to change is a promise not to grow.	

	Only the lead locomotive pulls the whole train.	
	Tomato slices fit best on hamburger buns.	
	The road to hell is paved with defective concrete.	
	The chain-maker does not need to send to know which link failed.	
	Growing apart is better than not growing at all.	
	The law prevails not because so many people support it, but because so few oppose it.	
	Half the world could be improved by aspiring to mediocrity.	
	A bad product is not enhanced by having been produced by a good process.	
	Only time can make a writer his own editor.	



You cannot smell the roses while talking on your cell phone.



Elections are won or lost by the people who choose not to vote.



No analogy involving Hitler or the Nazi Party, however apt, is likely to advance one's cause.



The newspaper story on the event you know about is never as accurate as the story on the event you don't.



Faith is the enemy of inquiry.



We learn to walk before learning to run, but we don't learn to balance on a bicycle before learning to ride.



There is no eternal expression of an eternal truth.



Trust in God, but keep your day job.



Questions are good; answers are dangerous.

	<p>If God had wanted to give us clear instructions for living, he wouldn't have given us the Bible.</p>	
	<p>If you were God, you would be home by now.</p>	
	<p>The fastest way to gain the cooperation of your colleagues is to do all the work yourself.</p>	
	<p>Beware of trying to do good things with bad people.</p>	
	<p>Do not encourage masochists to apply the Golden Rule.</p>	
	<p>Negotiating with crazy people leads to crazy agreements.</p>	
	<p>The tolerant cannot afford to tolerate the intolerant.</p>	



In the absence of actual history, people just make stuff up.

Will is not a substitute for time.



A rising tide drowns all swimmers.

The time to learn how to use a tool is before you need it.

