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Collected and Edited by John P. Kaminski: The Quotable Jefferson

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The Thoughts and Words of Thomas Jefferson

Advice



You will perceive by my preaching that I am growing old: it is the privilege of years, and I am sure you will pardon it from the purity of its motives.

To Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., Paris,
November 25, 1785

The greatest favor which can be done me is the communication of the opinions of judicious men, of men who do not suffer their judgments to be biased by either interest or passions.

To Chandler Price, Washington, February 28, 1807

Your situation, thrown at such a distance from us, & alone, cannot but give us all great anxieties for you. As much has been secured for you, by your particular position and the acquaintance to which you have been recommended, as could be done towards shielding you from the dangers which surround you. But thrown on a wide world, among entire strangers, without a friend or guardian to advise, so young too, & with so little experience of mankind, your dangers are great, & still your safety must rest on yourself. A determination never to do what is wrong, prudence and good humor, will go

far towards securing to you the estimation of the world.

To Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Washington,
November 24, 1808

How easily we prescribe for others a cure for their difficulties, while we cannot cure our own.

To John Adams, Monticello, January 22, 1821

Adore God. Reverence and cherish your parents. Love your neighbor as yourself, and your country more than yourself. Be just. Be true. Murmur not at the ways of Providence.

To Thomas Jefferson Smith, Monticello, February 21, 1825

Consultation

I have found in the course of our joint services that I think right when I think with you.

To John Adams, Paris, July 7, 1785

Setting an Example

View, in those whom you see, patients to be cured of what is amiss by your example, encourage in them that simplicity which should be the ornament of their country; in fine, follow the dispositions of your own native benevolence & sweetness of temper, and you will be happy & make them so.

To Madame de Bréhan, Paris, May 9, 1788

I have ever deemed it more honorable, & more profitable too, to set a good example than to follow a bad

one. The good opinion of mankind, like the lever of Archimedes, with the given fulcrum, moves the world.

To José Correa da Serra, Monticello, December 27, 1814

Suggestions

Suggestion and fact are different things.

To the Marquis de Lafayette, Monticello, August 4, 1781

As I know from experience that profitable suggestions sometimes come from lookers on, they may be usefully tolerated, provided they do not pretend to the right of an answer.

To Unknown, 1813

Ten Canons for Practical Life

Decalogue of Canons for Observation in Practical Life

1. Never put off till tomorrow what you can do to-day.
2. Never trouble another for what you can do yourself.
3. Never spend your money before you have it.
4. Never buy what you do not want, because it is cheap; it will be dear to you.
5. Pride costs us more than hunger, thirst and cold.
6. We never repent of having eaten too little.
7. Nothing is troublesome that we do willingly.
8. How much pain have cost us the evils which have never happened.

9. Take things always by their smooth handle.

10. When angry, count ten, before you speak; if very angry, an hundred.

To Thomas Jefferson Smith, Monticello,
February 21, 1825

Agriculture



I am never satiated with rambling through the fields and farms, examining the culture and cultivators, with a degree of curiosity which makes some to take me for a fool and others to be much wiser than I am.

To the Marquis de Lafayette, April 11, 1787

A steady application to agriculture with just trade enough to take off its superfluities is our wisest course.

To Wilson Miles Cary, Paris, August 12, 1787

The pursuits of Agriculture [are] the surest road to affluence and best preservative of morals.

To John Blair, Paris, August 13, 1787

Agriculture . . . is our wisest pursuit, because it will in the end contribute most to real wealth, good morals & happiness. . . . The moderate & sure income of husbandry begets permanent improvement,

quiet life, and orderly conduct both public and private. We have no occasion for more commerce than to take off our superfluous produce.

To George Washington, Paris, August 14, 1787

I return to farming with an ardor which I scarcely knew in my youth, and which has got the better entirely of my love of study. Instead of writing 10 or 12 letters a day, which I have been in the habit of doing as a thing of course, I put off answering my letters now, farmer-like, till a rainy day, & then find it sometimes postponed by other necessary occupations.

To John Adams, Monticello, April 25, 1794

This first & most precious of all the arts.

To Robert R. Livingston, Philadelphia, April 30, 1800

The class principally defective is that of agriculture. It is the first in utility & ought to be the 1st in respect. The same artificial means which have been used to produce a competition in learning may be equally successful in restoring agriculture to its primary dignity in the eyes of men. It is a science of the very first order. It counts among its handmaids the most respectable sciences, such as chemistry, natural philosophy, mechanics, mathematics generally, natural history, botany. In every college & university, a professorship of Agriculture, & the class of its students, might be honored as the first.

To David Williams, Washington, November 14, 1803

Attached to agriculture by inclination as well as by a conviction that it is the most useful of the occupations of man, my course of life has not permitted me to add to its theories the lessons of practice.

To M. Silvestre, secretary of the Agricultural Society of Paris, Washington, May 29, 1807

About to be relieved from this *corvée** by age and the fulfillment of the *quadragena stipendia*,** what remains to me of physical activity will chiefly be employed in the amusements of agriculture. Having little practical skill, I count more on the pleasures than the profits of that occupation.

*servitude; forced labor

**forty years' service

To Charles Philbert Lasteryrie-du Saillant, Washington, July 15, 1808

No sentiment is more acknowledged in the family of Agriculturalists than that the few who can afford it should incur the risk & expense of all new improvements, & give the benefit freely to the many of more restricted circumstances.

To President James Madison, Monticello, May 13, 1810

The spontaneous energies of the earth are a gift of nature, but they require the labor of man to direct their operation. And the question is so to husband his labor as to turn the greatest quantity of the earth to his benefit. Ploughing deep, your recipe for killing weeds is also the recipe for almost every good thing in farming.

The plow is to the farmer what the wand is to the sorcerer. Its effect is really like sorcery. In the country wherein I live, we have discovered a new use for it, equal in value to its services before known. Our country is hilly and we have been in the habit of ploughing in strait rows whether up or down hill, in oblique lines, or however they lead, and our soil was all rapidly running into the rivers. We now plough horizontally following the curvatures of the hills and hollows on the dead level, however crooked the lines may be. Every furrow thus acts as a reservoir to receive and retain the waters, all of which go to the benefit of the growing plant instead of running off into streams.

To Charles Willson Peale, March 17, 1813

Farmers

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of god, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.

Notes on the State of Virginia, 1782

Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to its liberty & interests by the most lasting bands.

To John Jay, Paris, August 23, 1785

The cultivators of the earth are the most virtuous citizens and possess most of the amor patriae.*

Merchants are the least virtuous, and possess the least of the amor patriae.

*love of one's country; patriotism

To Jean Nicolas D emeunier, January 24, 1786

Ours are the only farmers who can read Homer.

To St. John de Cr evocoeur, Paris, January 15, 1787

Have you become a farmer? Is it not pleasanter than to be shut up within 4 walls and delving eternally with the pen? I am become the most ardent farmer in the state. I live on my horse from morning to night almost.

To Henry Knox, Monticello, June 1, 1795

I am entirely a farmer, soul and body, never scarcely admitting a sentiment on any other subject.

To Thomas Pinckney, Monticello, September 8, 1795

If a debt is once contracted by a farmer, it is never paid but by a sale.

To Mary Jefferson Eppes, Philadelphia, January 7, 1798

The truth is that farmers, as we all are, have no command of money. Our necessities are all supplied either from our farms, or a neighboring store. Our produce, at the end of the year, is delivered to the merchant & thus the business of the year is done by barter, without the intervention of scarcely a dollar: and thus also we live with a plenty of every thing except money.

To William Duane, Monticello, March 28, 1811

So that in the lotteries of human life you see that even farming is but gambling.

To Unknown, no date [1813?]

Gardening

I have often thought that if heaven had given me choice of my position & calling, it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered, and near a good market for the productions of the garden. No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, & no culture comparable to that of the garden. Such a variety of subjects, some one always coming to perfection, the failure of one thing repaired by the success of another, & instead of one harvest, a continued one thro' the year. Under a total want of demand except for our family table. I am still devoted to the garden. But tho' an old man, I am but a young gardener.

To Charles Willson Peale, Poplar Forest, August 20, 1811

Introducing New Crops

One service of this kind rendered to a nation is worth more to them than all the victories of the most splendid pages of their history, and becomes a source of exalted pleasure to those who have been instrumental to it.

To Alexandre Giroud, Philadelphia, May 22, 1797

Natural Fertilizing

The atmosphere is certainly the great workshop of nature for elaborating the fertilizing principles, & insinuating them into the soil.

To William Strickland, Philadelphia, March 23, 1798

America



I sincerely wish you may find it convenient to come here. The pleasure of the trip will be less than you expect but the utility greater. It will make you adore your own country, its soil, its climate, its equality, liberty, laws, people and manners. My god! How little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy. I confess I had no idea of it myself.

To James Monroe, Paris, June 17, 1785

You have properly observed that we can no longer be called Anglo-Americans. That appellation now describes only the inhabitants of Nova Scotia, Canada, &c. I had applied that of Federo-Americans to our citizens, as it would not be so decent for us to assume to ourselves the flattering appellation of Free-Americans.

To Brissot de Warville, Paris, August 16, 1786

Head. When you reflect that all Europe is made to believe we are a lawless banditti, in a state of absolute anarchy, cutting one another's throats, & plundering without distinction, how can you expect that any reasonable creature would venture among us?

Heart. But you & I know that all this is false: that there is not a country on earth where there is greater tranquility, where the laws are milder, or

better obeyed: where every one is more attentive to his own business, or meddles less with that of others: where strangers are better received, more hospitably treated, & with a more sacred respect.

To Maria Cosway, Paris, October 12, 1786

Nothing in Europe can counterbalance the freedom, the simplicity, the friendship & the domestic felicity we enjoy in America.

To Johann Ludwig de Unger, Paris, February 16, 1788

[America] is made on an improved plan. Europe is a first idea, a crude production, before the maker knew his trade, or had made up his mind as to what he wanted.

To Angelica Schuyler Church, Paris, February 17, 1788

I know no country where . . . public esteem is so attached to worth, regardless of wealth.

To Angelica Schuyler Church, Germantown, Pa.,
November 27, 1793

Our geographical distance is insensible still to foreigners.

To John Adams, Monticello, May 27, 1796

American Character

It is a part of the American character to consider nothing as desperate; to surmount every difficulty by resolution and contrivance. In Europe there are

shops for every want. Its inhabitants therefore have no idea that their wants can be furnished otherwise. Remote from all other aid, we are obliged to invent and to execute; to find means within ourselves, and not to lean on others.

To Martha Jefferson, Aix en Provence, March 28, 1787

There is a modesty often which does itself injury. Our countrymen possess this. They do not know their own superiority.

To John Rutledge, Jr., Paris, February 2, 1788

The steady character of our countrymen is a rock to which we may safely moor.

To Elbridge Gerry, Washington, March 29, 1801

In our cities he will find distant imitations of the cities of Europe. But if he wishes to know the nation, its occupations, manners, & principles, they reside not in the cities; he must travel through the country, accept the hospitalities of the country gentlemen, and visit with them the school of the people.

To Madame de Stael de Holstein, Washington,
July 16, 1807

America's Future

Our confederacy must be viewed as the nest from which all America, North & South is to be peopled.

To Archibald Stuart, Paris, January 25, 1786

I carry with me the consolation of a firm persuasion that heaven has in store for our beloved country, long ages to come of prosperity and happiness.

Eighth (and final) Annual Message to Congress,
November 8, 1808

As the Hope of the World

Happy for us that abuses have not yet become patrimonies, and that every description of interest is in favor of rational & moderate government. That we are yet able to send our wise & good men together to talk over our form of government, discuss its weaknesses, and establish its remedies with the same sang-froid,* as they would a subject of agriculture. The example we have given to the world is single, that of changing the form of government under the authority of reason only, without bloodshed.

*composure; determination

To Ralph Izard, Paris, July 17, 1788

We can surely boast of having set the world a beautiful example of a government reformed by reason alone without bloodshed.

To Edward Rutledge, Paris, July 18, 1788

Never was a finer canvas presented to work on than our countrymen. All of them engaged in agriculture or the pursuits of honest industry, independent in their circumstances, enlightened as to their rights, and firm in their habits of order & obedience to the laws. This I hope will be the age of experiments in

government, and that their basis will be founded in principles of honesty, not of mere force. We have seen no instance of this since the days of the Roman republic, nor do we read of any before that.

To John Adams, Monticello, February 28, 1796

A just & solid republican government maintained here, will be a standing monument & example for the aim & imitation of the people of other countries; and I join with you in the hope and belief that they will see from our example that a free government is of all others the most energetic; that the inquiry which has been excited among the mass of mankind by our revolution & its consequences will ameliorate the condition of man over a great portion of the globe.

To John Dickinson, Washington, March 6, 1801

It is impossible not to be sensible that we are acting for all mankind: that circumstances denied to others, but indulged to us, have imposed on us the duty of proving what is the degree of freedom and self-government in which a society may venture to leave its individual members.

To Joseph Priestley, Washington, June 19, 1802

The station which we occupy among the nations of the earth is honorable, but awful. Trusted with the destinies of this solitary republic of the world, the only monument of human rights, & the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom & self-government from hence it is to be lighted up in other regions of

the earth, if other regions of the earth shall ever become susceptible of its benign influence. All mankind ought then, with us, to rejoice in its prosperous, & sympathize in its adverse fortunes, as involving every thing dear to man.

To the citizens of Washington, March 4, 1809

The last hope of human liberty in this world rests on us.

To William Duane, Monticello, March 28, 1811

The eyes of the virtuous, all over the earth, are turned with anxiety on us, as the only depositories of the sacred fire of liberty, and that our falling into anarchy would decide forever the destinies of mankind, and seal the political heresy that man is incapable of self-government.

To John Hollins, Monticello, May 5, 1811

I hope & firmly believe that the whole world will, sooner or later, feel benefit from the issue of our assertion of the rights of man.

To Benjamin Galloway, Monticello, February 2, 1812

We are destined to be a barrier against the returns of ignorance and barbarism.

To John Adams, Monticello, August 1, 1816

I will not believe our labors are lost. I shall not die without a hope that light and liberty are on steady advance. . . . And even should the cloud of barbarism

and despotism again obscure the science and liberties of Europe, this country remains to preserve and restore light and liberty to them. In short, the flames kindled on the 4th of July 1776 have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism. On the contrary they will consume those engines, and all who work them.

To John Adams, Monticello, September 12, 1821

The American Revolution



The Declaration of Independence

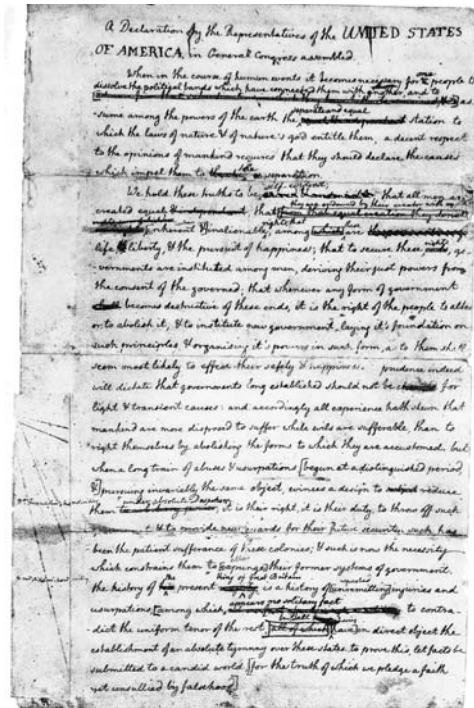
I turned to neither book nor pamphlet while writing it. I did not consider it as any part of my charge to invent new ideas altogether, & to offer no sentiment which had ever been expressed before.

To James Madison, Monticello, August 30, 1823

The Declaration [was] the genuine effusion of the soul of our country at that time.

To James Madison, Monticello, September 16, 1825

May it be to the world what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the Signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which Monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume



Jefferson's draft of the first page of the Declaration of Independence. (Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.)

the blessings & security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of

science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born, with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of god. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.

To Roger C. Weightman, Monticello, June 24, 1826

Purpose

The approbation of my ancient friends is, above all things, the most grateful to my heart. They know for what objects we relinquished the delights of domestic society, tranquility & science, & committed ourselves to the ocean of revolution, to wear out the only life god has given us here in scenes the benefits of which will accrue only to those who follow us. Surely we had in view to obtain the theory & practice of good government; and how any, who seemed so ardent in this pursuit, could as shamelessly have apostatized, and supposed we meant only to put our government into other hands, but not other forms, is indeed wonderful. The lesson we have had will probably be useful to the people at large, by showing to them how capable they are of being made the instruments of their own bondage.

To John Dickinson, Washington, December 19, 1801