

Wisdom 140

Art & Craft of the Tweet

We live in a bumper sticker culture. Information overload is the norm, and if you want your ideas to pierce the fog of information they must be razor sharp, and sword-tip pointed.

We also live in a world of profound skepticism where ideas are mistrusted, and, ironically, critical thinking is discouraged. This leads some people to thoughtlessly cling to ideologies without reflection, or



to reject all thought as mere ideology. Propaganda passes for truth, and cleverness is mistaken for wisdom. Get used to it. This isn't going to change any time soon.

If you want to reach people with your ideas you must learn the art of the aphorism: the art of speaking plainly and powerfully in as few words as

possible. One of the most powerful vehicles for aphoristic writing is Twitter.

Created in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Twitter is a microblogging platform that enables you to build a large readership for small messages. While Twitter continues to ask the question, "What happening," you can use Twitter to share what you are thinking. Nobody really cares that you are eating pancakes at IHOP, but they might care to read your thoughts on eating in general: "Eating and scratching need only a beginning" (Romanian proverb).

It is too easy to dismiss Twitter as narcissistic silliness. Indeed, most of it is, and most of what's left is the blatant marketing of products and services (some of which, by the way, can be most helpful). But there are those who use Twitter for something more--to truly share their deepest truths. And, given that the art of the short form is becoming more and more popular, and Twitter is a great place to hone your craft, learning to write short may become a practical as well as an artistic skill you need to master.

This workshop has three goals: 1) encourage you to open and use a Twitter account; 2) learn the key elements of solid and engaging aphoristic writing; and 3) produce a few aphorisms to post on your Twitter page.

Write Sticky

Chip and Dan Heath in their bestselling book, *Made to Stick*, identify six principles of stickiness:

Simplicity: Think proverb, not sound bite; be brief, memorable, and profound.

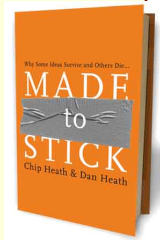
Unexpectedness: Think curiosity rather than surprise. Surprise fades, curiosity grows.

Concreteness: Use sensory imagery not abstractions.

Credibility: You have none. Your writing must be self-evident.

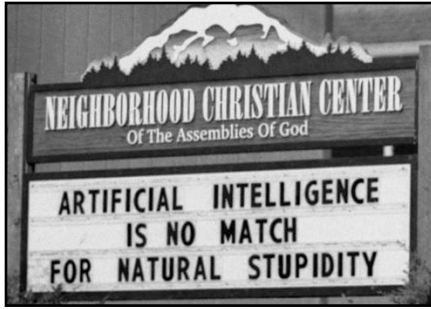
Emotions: Evoke and harness feelings.

Stories: Tell them. Friedrich Schleiermacher was a theologian. Jesus was a storyteller. Which one do you read?

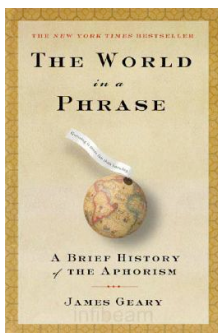


To some extent, depending on the kind of aphorism you are crafting, each of these is an essential part of writing powerful aphorisms. Use these principles to measure the quality of your writing.

WHY APHORISMS



“Why aphorisms? Because they’re just the right size to hold the swift insights and fresh observations that are the raw data of the wisdom of the ages. Aphorisms are literature’s hand luggage. Light and compact, they fit easily into the overhead compartment of your brain and contain everything you need to get through a rough day at the office or a dark night of the soul. They are, as the nineteenth-century author John Morley observed, “the guiding oracles which man has found out for himself in that great business of ours, of learning how to be, to do, to do without, and to depart.” (James Geary, *The Word in a Phrase*, p.9)



GEARY'S FIVE LAWS FOR WRITING APHORISMS

It must be brief.

Aphorisms must work quickly, because they are meant for times

of emergencies (James Geary, *The Word in a Phrase*, p.9). While not limited to a single sentence, an aphorism is not a speech.

It must be definitive.

Aphorisms assert a truth rather than argue a position. They do not bother to argue or persuade, but simply state the matter as you see it.

It must be personal.

Aphorisms are glimpses into the mind of the author. Write only what you believe to be true, not simply what you think is clever. Reveal yourself without defense. To offer an aphorism is to stand naked before a crowd. No hiding.

It must have a twist.

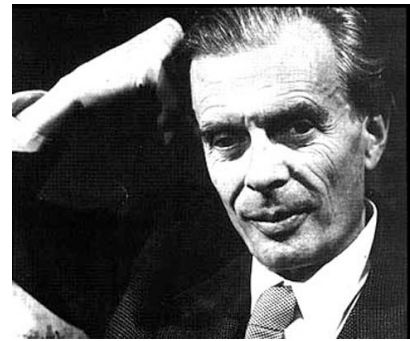
“Like a good joke, a good aphorism has a punch line, a quick verbal or psychological flip, a sudden sting in the tail that gives you a jolt. Both jokes and aphorisms lift you into a wonderful weightless state—that giddy point just after the joke is finished and just before you get it—then abruptly drop you back down to earth in some completely unexpected place.” (James Geary, *The Word in a Phrase*, p.17)

It must be philosophical.

Your aphorisms should be about life: what it is, how to live it, and how to leave it. Aphorisms respond to the big questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Why? Aphorisms address the big issues: justice, truth, compassion, love, loss, etc. Twitter may be filled with the trite and trivial, but your aphorismic tweets must not.

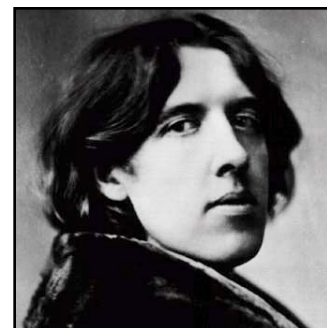
SEVERAL EXCUSES ARE ALWAYS LESS CONVINCING THAN ONE.

Aldous Huxley (1894-1963)



WE ARE ALL IN THE GUTTER, BUT SOME OF US ARE LOOKING AT THE STARS.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)



Aphorisms of My Own

It may be difficult to create an aphorism out of thin air, and many of the great aphorisms arose as personal responses to prior aphorisms. What follows are aphorismic prompts, sayings that may spark your own imagination. Feel free to use these as you will, or to invent aphorisms of your own. The rule, of course, is to keep the entire aphorism to no more than 140 characters (letters, grammatical signs, and spaces), and ideally to no more than 120. This lesser number allows people who read your work on Twitter to retweet it to their friends and hence increase your audience.

You can fail without being a failure.

You learn more from failure than success.

Give your best.

Give real service, not lip service.

The greatest gift you can give someone else is your own happiness.

Two things are bad for your heart: running up stairs and running down people.

It is easy to shoot a bird; it is hard to sing a song.

You cannot build your mansion in heaven with mud you throw at others.

A critic is a legless man who teaches running.



JADED WISDOM SAMPLE APHORISMS BY RABBI RAMI, [HTTP://TWITTER.COM/RABBIRAMI](http://twitter.com/rabbirami)

- There is no right way to do anything. There is only the way other people think is right.
- Success is about making a difference. So is failure. Everything makes a difference, so what's the difference?
- Doing less often means doing more, but only if you don't know what doing less means.
- If you are going to make a difference in the world, make it now, then you can loaf until you die.
- The best is yet to come.
Of course that is what you said yesterday as well.
- Expecting success only makes failure all the more painful. Expect reality instead.
- Pessimists ask why. Optimists ask why not. Then they start shooting one another.
- Nothing will change until you do.
So, chances are, nothing will really change.
- When it comes to a new idea, sell yourself first.
Buy others with the proceeds.

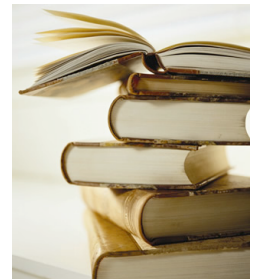


Rabbi Rami is an award winning author and educator. He direct's Wisdom House, a center for interfaith study, contemplation, and dialogue, in Nashville, and co-directs The Writer's Loft at MTSU. His latest book is *Recovery, the sacred art*. (Skylight Publishing).

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TWITTER AND BEYOND: SERVICES TO EXTEND YOUR REACH

Twitter.grader.com measures the reach of your twitter profile;
Tweetdeck.com allows to organize your social media on one screen
TweetBookz.com lets you publish collections of your aphorisms.
Twitpic.com allows you to add photos to your posts.
Search.twitter.com allows you to search for tweets on specific topics

OTHERS:

