

# Around Town

## Slogan's run

**James Geary** loves aphorisms – those pithy little sayings that capture universal truths in a nutshell – so dearly, in fact, that he's organised a symposium devoted to them

Not long ago, I was walking along Essex Road in Islington when I spotted a billboard with a big picture of Thierry Henry on it. I don't remember now what Henry was hawking; what I do remember are the words emblazoned next to his face: 'I hate to lose, but I'm not afraid to fail.'

As an advertisement, I suppose that billboard was a failure because I haven't the faintest idea what Henry was selling. But as an aphorism – a short, smart, witty, philosophical saying – it was a huge success. That phrase has stuck in my mind ever since, an edgier version of the more old-fashioned maxim, 'It's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game.'

You don't hear the word 'aphorism' much these days but, as the Henry billboard shows, they are all around us. The aphorism is the oldest written art form on the planet. The Egyptians and the Chinese were at it more than 5,000 years ago; the ancient Greek philosophers and Old Testament authors were also early practitioners. Buddha ('We are what we think'), Jesus

grandmother always used in times of stress: 'Keep your mind and your bowels open and you'll be all right.'

On a train headed out of London, I saw a teenager swaying down the aisle towards me. He had shoulder-length hair, his face riveted by lines of studs and piercings. On his T-shirt was this proud declaration: 'A weekend wasted is not a wasted weekend.'

Aphorisms are pithy, simple sentences that deliver the short

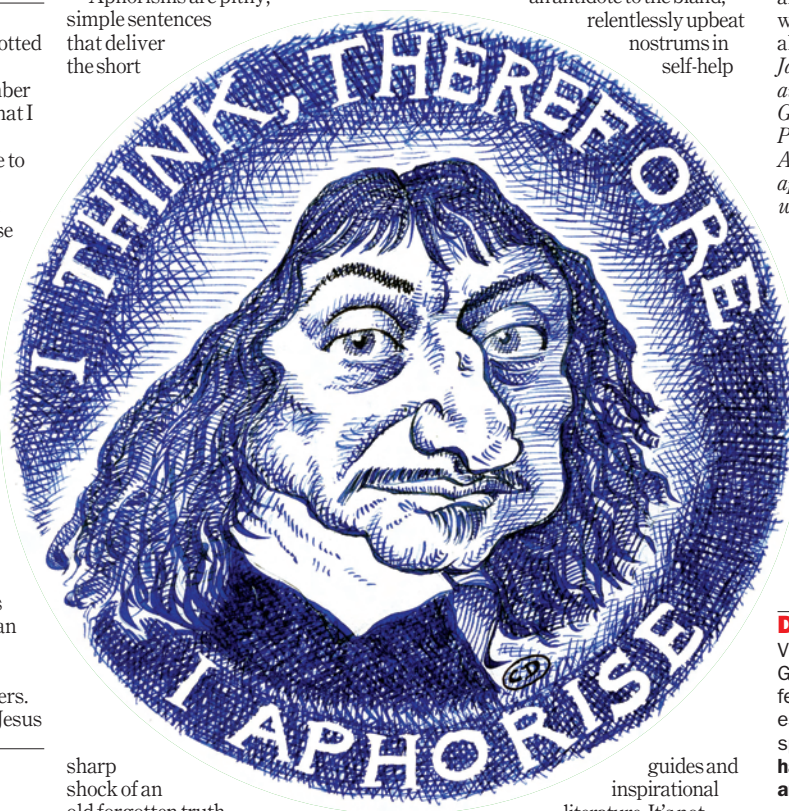
philosophers, psychologists and comedians (all of them aphorists) from Europe and the US will gather to discuss the aphorism as a bright, incisive way of grappling with the big questions of life – and to celebrate the form as just the thing if you hate ideologies but love ideas.

Why aphorisms? Because they cut the crap. They are cynical and acerbic, an antidote to the bland, relentlessly upbeat nostrums in self-help

aphorisms,' he says, 'key equations (e=mc<sup>2</sup>, for example – are super-pared down but immensely complex. They are the shortest possible expressions of interesting ideas.'

Lloyd also sees parallels between aphorisms and jokes, and will give a talk on that topic at the symposium. 'If you're miserable, the best thing to do is to have a laugh,' he says. 'There is always something positive about the wisdom in aphorisms; jokes are not always that optimistic.'

James Geary ([jamesgeary.com](http://jamesgeary.com)) is the author of 'Geary's Guide to the World's Great Aphorists' and 'The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of the Aphorism'. He performs his 'juggling aphorisms' show – real live juggling, with words and balls – on Mar 13 at 6.30pm at Waterstones on Gower Street. 'The World in a Phrase: Philosophy and the Aphorism' takes place on Mar 14 in the Great Hall of London House at Goodenough College, Mecklenburgh Square. For information and tickets, go to the Institute of Philosophy website at [philosophy.sas.ac.uk](http://philosophy.sas.ac.uk)



**Aphorisms cut the crap. They are an antidote to bland nostrums in self-help guides**

('If a blind person leads a blind person both of them will fall into a ditch'), and Muhammad ('Trust in Allah, but tether your camel first') all did it – and we still do it, too.

Everyone has a favourite aphorism, whether it's a refrain from a pop song, a passage from a novel, or something a friend or relative used to say. An elderly gentleman came up to me at a literary festival, jabbed his forefinger into my chest, and recited a line his

sharp shock of an old forgotten truth.

We all need words of wisdom to live by, little sacred scriptures we carry around inside our heads. And it is this aphoristic instinct that motivates us to carve inscriptions onto monuments and tombstones, scrawl graffiti on the sides of buildings, and plaster bumper stickers on the tailgates of our cars. It's the reason I've been obsessed by aphorisms since I was eight years old, and why I've organised a symposium on the subject under the auspices of the Institute of Philosophy at the University of London.

The symposium – 'The World in a Phrase: Philosophy and the Aphorism' – will explore why, despite their antiquity, aphorisms remain the thinking and writing style best suited to our times. Poets, professors,

guides and inspirational literature. It's not enough to just read one and murmur sagely to yourself, 'How true, how true.' Aphorisms make you want to do something. In our age of drive-thru culture, soporific soundbites and manufactured sentiment, they retain the power to instigate and inspire, enlighten and enrage, entertain and edify.

Aphorisms are literature's hand luggage. 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.

For John Lloyd, producer of television comedies such as 'Not the Nine O'clock News', 'Spitting Image', 'Blackadder' and 'QI', aphorisms are as valid and as useful statements about existence as mathematics or physics. 'Like

## London's aphorists

### Dr Johnson

Visit Samuel Johnson's house on Gough Square near Fleet Street for the feel of the cafes and drinking establishments where the good doctor spouted lines such as: '**The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.**'

### William Blake

A stroll through Soho will take you past some of the rooms where William Blake held seances, during which he executed quick sketches of the historical personages who came to visit (King Herod, Michelangelo, Socrates) and where he penned aphoristic verse including: '**If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.**'

### Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Make the pilgrimage to St Michael's Church in Highgate, where Samuel Taylor Coleridge is buried, across the road from the house on The Grove where he made the following aphoristic quip: '**Painting is the intermediate somewhat between a thought and a thing.**'

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