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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 *quadragesima 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 Dêmeunier, January 24, 1786

Ours are the only farmers who can read Homer.

To St. John de Crèvecoeur, 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

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