

Pithy Prose: The Wit & Wisdom of Friedrich Nietzsche

by Philip Yaffe

Part 6 of an occasional series

I am a collector of quotations. I have been ever since I learned how to write, I mean professionally, not in primary school.

I am particularly fond of what I like to call "pithy prose". These short quotations can cover an unlimited variety of subjects: love, religion, politics, human nature, etc. What unites them is their ability to say more in one or two sentences than could be expressed in a thousand-word treatise. It's like being able to pour a liter of liquid into a half-liter bottle.

They are superb examples of Mark Twain's famous dictum, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug."

In principle, all writers and public speakers are capable of producing pithy prose, but clearly some are better at it than others.

Any collection of pithy prose must necessarily be biased in terms of what it includes and excludes. I make no apologies for my selections, only for the hundreds of other meritorious quotations I had to leave out.

No one will agree with all these quotations; this was not their intention. You may even find some of them repugnant or outrageous. This was their intention.

We seldom learn anything of value from what we already agree with. Only those ideas that grate on our nerves can open our minds. As with oysters, irritation can produce pearls. So if anything you are about to read annoys or shocks you, try to think clearly and dispassionately about what it is saying. You will either be confirmed in your current belief or shaken into re-examining it.

Either way, you win!

This article is part of an occasional series. In each article, I will be offering more amusing, educating, and exasperating quotations to your judgment. But just to be certain that we agree on what we are talking about, here it is in a nutshell.

Pithy Prose: A quotation where at first you may not be quite certain what it means. But when you become certain, you become equally certain that it couldn't have been said better any other way. In short, big ideas in small packages.

If you have a better definition of pithy prose, please contact me. I would love to hear it.

Who Is Friedrich Nietzsche?

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900) was a German philosopher who challenged the foundations of Christianity and traditional morality. Central to his

philosophy is questioning all ideas and dogmas that are not "life-affirming", however much they may be part of the social fabric. His writings are believed to have strongly influenced Adolph Hitler.

1. A casual stroll through the lunatic asylum shows that faith does not prove anything.
2. Admiration for a quality or an art can be so strong that it deters us from striving to possess it.
3. All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.
4. Anyone who has declared someone else to be an idiot or a bad apple is annoyed when it turns out in the end that he isn't.
5. At times one remains faithful to a cause only because its opponents do not cease to be insipid.
6. Convictions are more dangerous foes of truth than lies.
7. Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones, but by contrary extreme positions.
8. Fanatics are picturesque; mankind would rather see gestures than listen to reasons.
9. Fear is the mother of morality.
10. He that humbleth himself wishes to be exalted.
11. In every real man a child is hidden that wants to play.
12. In individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations and epochs, it is the rule.
12. It is impossible to suffer without making someone pay for it; every complaint already contains revenge.
13. It is not when truth is dirty, but when it is shallow, that the lover of knowledge is reluctant to step into its waters.
14. Let us beware of saying that death is the opposite of life. The living being is only a species of the dead, and a very rare species.
15. Love is blind; friendship closes its eyes.
16. Many a man fails as an original thinker simply because his memory is too good.

17. Many are stubborn in pursuit of the path they have chosen, few in pursuit of the goal.
18. Morality is the herd-instinct in the individual.
19. Mystical explanations are thought to be deep; the truth is that they are not even shallow.
20. No one lies so boldly as the man who is indignant.
21. Nothing has been purchased more dearly than the little bit of reason and sense of freedom which now constitutes our pride.
22. On the mountains of truth you can never climb in vain: either you will reach a point higher up today, or you will be training your powers so that you will be able to climb higher tomorrow.
23. Once spirit was God, then it became man, and now it is even becoming mob.
24. One has to pay dearly for immortality; one has to die several times while one is still alive.
25. One often contradicts an opinion when what is uncongenial is really the tone in which it was conveyed.
26. Rejoicing in our joy, not suffering over our suffering, makes someone a friend.
29. Some are made modest by great praise, others insolent.
30. Success has always been a great liar.
31. Talking much about oneself can also be a means to conceal oneself.
32. That which does not kill us makes us stronger.
33. The "kingdom of Heaven" is a condition of the heart - not something that comes "upon the earth" or "after death."
34. The best author will be the one who is ashamed to become a writer.
35. The best weapon against an enemy is another enemy.

36. The demand to be loved is the greatest of all arrogant presumptions.
37. The doer alone learneth.
38. The essence of all beautiful art, all great art, is gratitude.
39. The future influences the present just as much as the past.
40. The man of knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies but also to hate his friends.
41. The most common lie is that which one lies to himself; lying to others is relatively an exception.
42. The surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct him to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently.
43. There is in general good reason to suppose that in several respects the gods could all benefit from instruction by us human beings. We humans are - more humane.
44. There is not enough love and goodness in the world to permit giving any of it away to imaginary beings.
45. This is the hardest of all: to close the open hand out of love, and keep modest as a giver.
46. Those who cannot understand how to put their thoughts on ice should not enter into the heat of debate.
47. To forget one's purpose is the commonest form of stupidity.
48. We do not hate as long as we still attach a lesser value, but only when we attach an equal or a greater value.
49. We hear only those questions for which we are in a position to find answers.
50. We love life, not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving.
51. Whatever is done for love always occurs beyond good and evil.
52. When a hundred men stand together, each of them loses his mind and gets another one.

53. Without music, life would be a mistake.

54. Words are but symbols for the relations of things to one another and to us; nowhere do they touch upon absolute truth.

55. You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it does not exist.

Previously in this Series

Part 1: Pithy Prose: The Wit & Wisdom of Mark Twain

Part 2: Pithy Prose: The Wit & Wisdom of Oscar Wilde

Part 3: Pithy Prose: The Wit & Wisdom of People Named "W"

Part 4: Pithy Prose: The Wit & Wisdom of Anatole France

Part 5: Pithy Prose: The Wit & Wisdom of Ambrose Bierce

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