

Twelve Sayings

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I have spent a good deal of time with the classical Chinese and other texts, the wisdom (it has been thought) of the sages. I suppose it is fair enough to ask, if I have made any wise sayings of my own?

There are leaders, and there are followers. There are also spectators, the type to which I belong. The family is hiking, say, out in Virginia Kendall Park, looking at the scenery. And there is me, looking through the viewfinder of my Brownie Reflex camera, waiting for a picture to happen, and ready to snap it if it should. Here are twelve sayings by, or about, such a bystander.

1. My **first word** was so little memorable that it was *not* remembered, and did not pass into family lore.

2. Third grade. The teacher sought to correct the usage of the pupils, which did not match the Latin-based grammatical ideas of the teacher. The focus was the sentence "It is I." The teacher was wrong. Had I been able to quote the counter-example "**c'est moi**," or the children's song that Mozart set to music,

Moi, je dis que les bonbons
Valent mieux que la raison

I could have refuted her. But I didn't know enough French, and that was that.

3. Sixth grade. I won the town spelling bee. Next came the six-county finals. The winner would go on to Washington, and fame. It came down to six of us. One was a redheaded guy named Harrison, the crowd's favorite. He misspelled a word. Or so ruled the moderator, following *Wester's Unabridged*. But there was a stir in the audience. Both my parents were there, armed with the copy of *Webster's Collegiate* which Mom and I had worked through, word by word, the year before. It was later in date than the *Unabridged*, and it recognized Harrison's spelling. Pop rose from the audience, and pointed out the injustice. The moderator stood his ground. So did Pop. So did the audience, which was firmly on Pop's side. The moderator and his seconds went into conference. Finally they accepted Harrison's spelling. The crowd applauded wildly.

Pop was arguing against me. The word I later missed was "**hemstitching**," and had Harrison not remained, I would never have gotten that word to spell. I was never prouder of Pop than on that evening.

4. High school, Hudson; our pebbled driveway. I was heading downtown, looking at the pebbles, and suddenly the word "**concept**" popped into my head. You don't understand a fact until you see it in context with other facts, and the concept, one layer back from the facts, is the framework of that understanding. It was a revelation. There being no one to mention it to, I continued downtown.

5. Graduate School, Seattle. One student was a guy named Bob Paterson. He was loud. He was also gay. He expressed that publicly by pretending to be steamily attracted to the girl students. A few of us, including Laurel Lamb, were chatting. Paterson gave Laurel his standard treatment. "Lambie-Pie," he cooed. I looked him in the eye. "**Patty-Cake**," I said. And that was the end of that.

6. Seattle is rainy, and one day I came to class with my books under my shirt, to keep them dry. The teacher took one look at me, and remarked, *Tā shū bǐ rǎn hái bǎobèi*, “**He takes better care of his books than of himself.**” Without knowing it, I had evoked a classical Chinese image of the poor student.

7. One Chinese novel, *Jīn-píng Méi*, has erotic scenes so explicit that the only translation then available rendered them in Latin. The Seattle library had a copy of the Chinese original, and with illustrations, yet. But the Librarian kept it in a drawer of her desk, and who would dare ask to see it? A Dutch scholar, in a book on art, had translated the Latin parts into English. The Library did not have that book, but Berkeley did, and I got a look at it. I mentioned those translations to fellow student Charles Peterson. He denied that it was possible. I said, “**Charlie, I’ve seen the book. Have you?**” It ended the conversation.

8. Back at high school, as a sort of Visiting Scholar, I encountered the art teacher, Bill Moos, just going out the door. Not breaking his stride, he smiled: “Tell me sometime all about China.” I said, “**It changes.**” Moos stopped dead. I had just destroyed his idea of the Unchanging East.

9. Later, at dinner with Moos and others, I remarked, about the difference between painting and photography, “**In photography, you have to see faster.**” It blew him away.

10. There was a Japanese court music group, taught by Bob Garfias. We played on instruments he had brought back from Japan. I played the little drum called kakko – the lead instrument, the one the Emperor of China used to play. Three of Bob’s own teachers, the Imperial Court Musicians, were visiting from Tōkyo, and attended one of our sessions. Bob was concerned to show his group, and of course himself, in the best light. It seemed to me that he was overdoing it. With the visitors watching, he gave us some command. Bowing low over my instrument, I answered, “**Kashikomarimashita.**” This is the stock phrase with which the comic servant in a Japanese kyōgen (the comic interlude in a Nō performance), answers orders. The court musicians simply cracked up.

11. I was in Kyōto, trying to learn what I could, and coaching seven returned Fulbright fellows who wanted to keep up their English. In Japan, there is no more sensitive subject than the eta, the untouchables. They are not of different race, but their ancestors had occupations considered unclean in Buddhism: butchers, but also flower sellers (to cut a flower is to end its life). Of my seven, one was a Kyōto native; he knew where the eta districts were. One evening, he told the others. They were puzzled: the pattern made no sense. I pointed out that the eta districts were **just outside the gates of the old city**; as near as they could dwell and still get to the markets inside, come daytime. The seven stared at me. I knew their city better than they did.

12. As a junior professor at Harvard, I was on a committee that interviewed new grad students, and discussed their study plans. Between interviews, one Japanese professor asked another why he had switched from lit to history. He answered, “You can’t hot-air lit.” I was astonished. The obvious response was, “**What else can you do with it?**” But I did not ask that question.

Sometimes our best sayings are those we leave unsaid. No?