

78 QUOTATIONS



Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

(1809-1894)

Oliver Wendell Holmes descended from Anne Bradstreet and became a distinguished poet, novelist, physician, scientist, biographer, lecturer, critic, and wit in the Neoclassical tradition of Benjamin Franklin. As one of the Boston Brahmins with the poet Longfellow and the poet/critic James Russell Lowell, he criticized the Transcendentalists led by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller. He was an unusually versatile writer most famous for his poems “Old Ironsides,” “The Chambered Nautilus” and “The Deacon’s Masterpiece,” satirizing the collapse of Calvinism.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, truth, political correctness, freedom, iconoclasm, courage, Puritan heritage, pastoralism balancing puritanism, individuation, friendship, love, woman, common sense, wisdom, genius, language, verse, puns, inner music, fame, critics, old age, death:

YOUTH

Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing.

It’s faith in something and enthusiasm for something that makes life worth living.

I was always patient with those who thought well of me, and accepted all their tributes with something more than resignation.

EDUCATION

Every idea is an incitement.

A thought is often original, though you have uttered it a hundred times.

One’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.

Every library should try to be complete on something, if it were only the history of pinheads.

The world's great men have not commonly been great scholars, nor its great scholars great men.

The advice of the elders to young men is very apt to be as unreal as a list of the hundred best books.

Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than in the one where they sprung up.

The main part of intellectual education is not the acquisition of facts but learning how to make facts live.

PURSUIT OF TRUTH

Truth, when not sought after, rarely comes to light.

The great thing in the world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving.

People who honestly mean to be true really contradict themselves much more rarely than those who try to be "consistent."

Don't be "consistent," be true.

Truth is tough. It will not break, like a bubble, at a touch, nay, you may kick it about all day like a football, and it will be round and full at evening.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Why can't somebody give us a list of things that everybody thinks and nobody says, and another list of things that everybody says and nobody thinks.

FREEDOM

The very aim and end of our institutions is just this: that we may think what we like and say what we think.

To be civilized is to be potentially master of all possible ideas, and that means that one has got beyond being shocked, although one preserves one's own moral aesthetic preferences.

If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other it is the principle of free thought, not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate.

ICONOCLASM

Rough work, iconoclasm, but the only way to get at truth.

Apology is only egotism wrong side out.

COURAGE

When in doubt, do it.

Have the courage to act instead of react.

PURITAN HERITAGE

Every calling is great when greatly pursued.

It is very lonely sometimes, trying to play God.

Put not your trust in money, but put your money in trust.

The mode by which the inevitable comes to pass is effort.

This is a court of law, young man, not a court of justice.

Speak clearly, if you speak at all; carve every word before you let it fall.

Happiness consists in activity. It is a running stream, not a stagnant pool.

To reach a port we must sail, sometimes with the wind, and sometimes against it. But we must not drift or lie at anchor.

Most people are willing to take the Sermon on the Mount as a flag to sail under, but few will use it as a rudder by which to steer.

Between two groups of people who want to make inconsistent kinds of worlds, I see no remedy but force.

The man who is always worrying about whether or not his soul would be damned generally has a soul that isn't worth a damn.

PASTORALISM BALANCING PURITANISM

The Amen of nature is always a flower.

Life is painting a picture, not doing a sum.

I don't generally feel anything until noon, then it's time for my nap.

Where we love is home—home that our feet may leave, but not our hearts.

Pretty much all the honest truth-telling there is in the world is done by children.

The sound of a kiss is not so loud as that of a cannon, but its echo lasts a great deal longer.

Memories, imagination, old sentiments, and associations are more readily reached through the sense of smell than through any other channel.

INDIVIDUATION

Grow we must, if we outgrow all that loves us.

He has half the deed done who has made a beginning.

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length are free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!

FRIENDSHIP

Without wearing any mask we are conscious of, we have a special face for each friend.

Sweet is the scene where genial friendship plays the pleasing game of interchanging praise.

Don't flatter yourself that friendship authorizes you to say disagreeable things to your intimates. The nearer you come into relation with a person, the more necessary do tact and courtesy become.

LOVE

Love prefers twilight to daylight.

Love is the master key that opens the gates of happiness.

WOMAN

Man has his will, but woman has her way.

Easy-crying widows take new husbands soonest; there's nothing like wet weather for transplanting.

COMMON SENSE

Stupidity often saves a man from going mad.

Insanity is often the logic of an accurate mind overtaken.

Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.

Simple people...are very quick to see the live facts which are going on about them.

Do not be bullied out of your common sense by the specialist; two to one, he is a pedant.

Science is a first-rate piece of furniture for a man's upper chamber, if he has common sense on the ground floor.

WISDOM

Controversy equalizes fools and wise men—and the fools know it.

Wisdom is the abstract of the past, but beauty is the promise of the future.

It is the province of knowledge to speak, and it is the province of wisdom to listen.

A man may fulfill the object of his existence by asking a question he cannot answer, and attempting a task he cannot achieve.

GENIUS

The world is always ready to receive talent with open arms. Very often it does not know what to do with genius.

LANGUAGE

Eloquence may set fire to reason.

Language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow.

VERSE

Chicago sounds rough to the maker of verse. One comfort we have—Cincinnati sounds worse.

PUNS

A pun does not commonly justify a blow in return. But if a blow were given for such cause, and death ensued, the jury would be judges both of the facts and of the pun, and might, if the latter were of an aggravated character, return a verdict of justifiable homicide.

INNER MUSIC

A few can touch the magic string, and noisy fame is proud to win them: Alas for those that never sing, but die with all their music in them.

Many people die with their music still in them. Why is this so? Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live. Before they know it, time runs out.

FAME

Nothing is so common-place as to wish to be remarkable.

Fame usually comes to those who are thinking about something else.

CRITICS

Nature, when she invented, manufactured, and patented her authors, contrived to make critics out of the chips that were left.

OLD AGE

Old age is fifteen years older than I am.

The young man knows the rules, but the old man knows the exceptions.

To be seventy years young is sometimes far more cheerful and hopeful than to be forty years old.

Men do not quit playing because they grow old; they grow old because they quit playing.

DEATH

A great calamity is as old as the trilobites an hour after it has happened.

If I were dying my last words would be: Have faith and pursue the unknown end.

