

## Writing an Essay on Wisdom

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

I supposed looking up Confucius would be the place to start when planning an essay on the topic of wisdom. It was he who said, "By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."

But that seemed highfalutin' for a kid who came up from the gritty parochial school yards of Laramie, Wyoming, so instead I scaled a proverbial mountain where, rather than a guru sitting cross-legged in a cave, I came across a collection of quotes erupting from an entirely different font of wisdom, childhood itself.

I read the words of a kid named Patrick, cautioning us, "Never trust a dog to watch your food." It was wisdom likely gathered in a hard scrabble, dog-eat-hotdog childhood.

Another kid left two bits of advice for coping with parents. "When your dad is mad and asks you, 'Do I look stupid?' don't answer him," and, "Never tell your mom her diet's not working."

There were some other gems in the treasure trove, including: "Never allow your three-year-old brother in the same room as your school assignment," "Never hold a dust buster and a cat at the same time," "You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk," "If you want a kitten, start out by asking for a horse," "Never try to baptize a cat," and, "Stay away from prunes."

Discouraged with climbing mountains looking for insight, I wandered into my local library and re-acquainted myself with the wisdom of Sam Clemens in the persona of Mark Twain, who instructed me, as a would be essayist and journalist, to "Get your facts first, and then you can distort them as much as you please."

Twain gave us another good proverb that "Life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen," and that "A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way." Obviously old Clemens had a life lesson like that of the little girl who tried to baptize a feline.

You have probably heard of Will Rogers, who preceded ours by a generation or two. He advised us, "There are three kinds of men. The one that learns by reading. The few who learn by observation. The rest of them have to pee on the electric fence for themselves."

I can't say this research has made me any wiser, and I am still shy of the chops necessary to write credibly about wisdom. I'll have to resort to lyrics that some philosopher added to Sousa's Stars and Stripes Forever. They express how we should treat each other and live within the ecology of our world. "Be kind to your web-footed friends, for a duck may be somebody's mother." Now you may think that this is the end. Well, it is.