

# **Cultivate the ethic of the essential: extracts & commentaries**

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## Wisdom from John Steinbeck's journal of a novel

When John Steinbeck wrote his masterpiece *East of Eden* he kept a journal. Many of his entries are as applicable and interesting to ambitious scientists as they are to ambitious novelists.

There is a separate discussion surround a quote form his journal on the value of theories and speculations on p. 25, which I do not include here. But there are many other quotes in his journal that are good for a scientist, and well anybody, to read. Some of them I do not agree with 100%, but they are interesting ideas to think about, so that the reader can come to their own assessments.

Here are the quotes:

"... the two great foundations of art and science: curiosity and criticism."

"You can't train for something all your life and then have it fall short because you are hurrying to get it finished."

"I think I dislike amateurs in any field. They have the authority of ignorance and that is something you simply cannot combat."

"The human mind I believe is nothing but a muscle. Sometimes it has tone and sometimes not."

"There are no good collaborations and all this discussion amounts to collaboration."

"Money always removes the charge of craziness."

"Plans are real things and not experiences. A rich life is rich in plans. If they don't come off, they are still a little bit realized. If they do, they may be disappointing.... I believe too that if you can know a man's plans, you know more about him than you can in any other way. Plans are daydreaming and this is an absolute measure of a man."

"I think the human thrives best when he is a little worried and unhappy..."

"One thing I found out in the war is that I can do nearly anything if the pressure is great enough and nearly nothing without pressure. And could that be the reason why paternalisms fail? Because they remove the necessary pressures on men? I can complain like mad but I never have done good work when there was a perfect and uncomplicated ease."

"I wish I knew how people do good and long-sustained work and still keep all kinds of other lives going – social, economic, etc. I can't. I seem to have to waste time, so much dawdling to so much work."

“To be anything pure requires an arrogance he [Steinbeck’s father] did not have, and a selfishness he could not bring himself to assume.”

“If you are determined to finish even if you work at night, you usually find that you don’t have to work at night.”

“... I had never done anything without having a problem.”

“One is never drained by work but only by idleness. Lack of work is the most enervating thing in the world.”

“And I’m pretty sure if I knew no one in the world would ever read it, I would still do it. I wonder whether that last is true.”

“How the mind rebels against work, but once working, it rebels just as harshly against stopping.”

“Having gone through all this nonsense, what emerges may well be the palest of reflections. Oh! It’s a real horse’s ass business. The mountain labors and groans and strains and strains and the tiniest of rodents come out. And the greatest foolishness of all lies in the fact that to do it at all, the writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true. If he does not, the work is not even what it might otherwise have been.”

“But it does seem a desperately futile business and one which must be very humorous to watch. Intelligent people live their lives as nearly on a level as possible – try to be good, don’t worry if they aren’t, hold to such opinions as are comforting and reassuring and throw out those which are not. And in the fullness of their days they die with none of the tearing pain of failure because having tried nothing they have not failed. These people are much more intelligent than the fools who rip themselves to pieces on nonsense. And with that I will go to work.”

“I need so much time to waste also. Seems to require about 4 to 1 of waste over work.”

“It is too bad we have not more humor about this. After all it is only a book and no worlds are made or destroyed by it. But it becomes important out of all proportion to its importance. And I suppose that is essential. The dunghill beetle must be convinced of the essential quality in rolling his ball of dung, and a golfer will not be any good at it unless striking a little ball is the most important thing in the world. So I must be convinced that this book is a pretty rare event and I must have little humor about it. Can’t afford to have.”

Quotes from John Steinbeck. *Journal of a Novel*. New York: Viking Press, 1969.

## Athenodorus teaches Roman Emperor Claudius how to write well

Robert Graves channeling the 12-year-old future Roman emperor Claudius describing his lessons on writing and communicating effectively:

“Athenodorus told me [Claudius], the very first day of his tutorship, that he proposed to teach me not facts which I could pick up anywhere for myself, but the proper presentation of facts. And this he did. One day, for example, he asked me, kindly enough, why I was so excited; I seemed unable to concentrate on my task. I told him that I had just seen a huge draft of recruits parading on Mars Field under Augustus’s inspection before being sent off to Germany, where war had recently broken out again.

“‘Well,’ said Athenodorus, still in the same kindly voice, ‘since this is so much on your mind that you can’t appreciate the beauties of Hesiod, Hesiod can wait until tomorrow. After all, he’s waited seven hundred years or more, so he won’t grudge us another day. And meanwhile, suppose you were to sit down and take your tablets and write me a letter, a short account of all that you saw on Mars Field; as if I had been five years absent from Rome and you were sending me a letter across the sea, say to my home in Tarsus. That would keep your restless hands employed and be good practice too.’

“So I gladly scribbled away on the wax, and then we read the letter through for faults of spelling and composition. I was forced to admit that I had told both too little and too much, and had also put my facts in the wrong order. The passage describing the lamentations of the mothers and sweethearts of the young soldiers, and how the crowd rushed to the bridgehead for a final cheer of the departing column, should have come last, not first. And I need not have mentioned that the cavalry had horses; people took that for granted. And I had twice put in the incident of Augustus’s charger stumbling; once was enough if the horse only stumbled once. And what Postumus had told me, as we were going home, about the religious practices of the Jews, was interesting, but did not belong here because the recruits were Italians, not Jews. Besides at Tarsus he would probably have more opportunities of studying Jewish customs than Postumus had at Rome. On the other hand, I had not mentioned several things that he would have been interested to hear – how many recruits there were in the parade, how far advanced their military training was, to what garrison town they were being sent, whether they looked glad or sorry to go, what Augustus said to them in his speech.

“Three days later Athenodorus made me write out a description of a brawl between a sailor and a clothes dealer which we had watched together that day as we were walking in the rag-market; and I did much better. He first applied this discipline to my writing, then to my declamations, and finally to my general conversation with him. He took endless pains with me, and gradually I grew less scatter-brained, for he never let any careless, irrelevant, or inexact phrase of mine pass without comment.”

Robert Graves. *I, Claudius*. Penguin Books: London, 1986.

Comment: These are very good lessons on writing scientific papers as well. Among the writing sins implied above, repetition and getting side-tracked off the main argument are perhaps scientists' biggest writing sins. However, repetition is often viewed as a good technique to emphasize the main points of the paper. Claudius, or rather Robert Graves, would disagree.

## Chris Rock on writing

*Chris Rock's paraphrase of advice Louis CK gave him on writing:*

"You gotta write this by yourself.... You gotta get in a room, and you have to feel hurt, you have to feel lonely, you have to feel the pain, the blood sweat and tears it takes to write by yourself, to be in a hole and stare at a piece of paper and have no one to help you get out of this thing but you. You always write with people and you end up with a watered down version of you. You have to write by yourself...."

*Chris Rock describes experience of writing alone:*

"When you write with other people you get a consensus.... When you are in that room by yourself, man, something emotional happens, something spiritual comes out of you, when you're in that room by yourself, you know, and you're living in your head, and your secret thoughts, and you're not trying to get approval from anybody when you're in there by yourself."

From Charlie Rose interview of Chris Rock, aired 12 December 2014 (PBS).

This interview was carried out during Rock's press tour of the film "Top Five".

<http://www.pbs.org/video/2365384481/>

Comment: These quotes are very relevant to science writing as well. The first quote – advice from Louis CK – is advice every physics professor tells physics students about homework. "You have to feel the pain, the blood sweat and tears it takes to write [problem solve] by yourself." Exactly!

And the second quote is equally applicable. A report with multiple authors can be better than a single author paper in some ways. For example, obvious things are not usually missed with many authors. However, richness, depth of clarity, courage, impact and beautiful style – that comes when an author writes alone.

## Cultivate the ethic of the essential

"Every novelist, starting with his own work, should eliminate whatever is secondary, lay out for himself and for everyone else the ethic of the essential!"

"The ethic of the essential has given way to the ethic of the archive. (The archive's ideal: the sweet equality that reigns in an enormous common grave.)"

From Milan Kundera, "What is a Novelist?", *New Yorker*, October 9, 2006.

All italics are Kundera's italics.

Comment: The ethic of the essential is also moving toward ethic of the archive in science. However, in literature the ethic of the archive does not make since. A novel is for art and entertainment — the ethic of the archive is just a pretention of the novelist that we should be so enamored with his/her world that all thoughts that come to the author must be expressed and read. It does not respect the reader. In science, we can have both ethics. The research paper is now generally a summary of results of what was done. It is hardly an archive of everything. Nevertheless, increasingly researchers are archiving their computer programs, their data, their calculations, and even background material that would be of use to the small group of researchers who read the published paper and want to know more. Thus, it is not ethic of the essential vs. ethic of the archive in science. Both can survive simultaneously rather comfortably.

## Foucault : j'aime bien le beau style

“Et vous me direz que j’emploie souvent un certain nombre de contorsions stylistiques qui semblent prouver que j’aime bien le beau style, eh bien je dirais : oui, il y a toujours une espèce de plaisir, un peu bassement érotique, peut-être, à trouver une jolie phrase quand on s’ennuie un matin à écrire des choses pas très drôles, on s’excite un peu, comme ça, en rêvassant, et puis, brusquement, on trouve la jolie phrase, ça fait plaisir, et on trouve du mouvement pour aller plus loin.”

Michel Foucault as quoted in “Foucault : « Mes livres sont des espèces de petits pétards...»”. Le Point, 3 décembre 2015, p. 78 (from original 1975 interview).

[http://www.lepoint.fr/culture/foucault-mes-livres-sont-des-especes-de-petits-petards-06-12-2015-1987559\\_3.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/culture/foucault-mes-livres-sont-des-especes-de-petits-petards-06-12-2015-1987559_3.php) (accessed December 18, 2015)

Comment: When you first try to express through speech or writing a thought that you thought was a majestic nugget of wisdom, more often than not it comes out as a banality. Yet, with work, further reflection, care, editing, and nurturing of your ideas, the core wisdom can come out. And if you are writing boring material that just has to be done, for work or whatever, and you stumble across a poetic and excellent way of expressing it, satisfaction derives from that too. As Foucault says, there is always a type of pleasure when one finds “la jolie phrase.” Michel Foucault, one of the most interesting and stylistic philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, surely felt that pleasure many times.



## Thomas More and Martin Luther's vituperativeness

“Scholastic debates, if sometimes arid, had commonly been sober and courteous. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, was always anxious to put the best possible interpretation on the theses of those he disagreed with. Erasmus shared something of Aquinas' eirenic spirit; but More and Luther attack each other with bitter vituperation made only the more vulgar by the elegant Latin in which it is phrased. The pugnacious conventions of humanist debate were a factor which led to the hardening of positions on either side of the Reformation divide.”

From A. Kenny. *A New History of Western Philosophy In Four Parts*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2012.

Comment: My early modern history friends tell me that Erasmus was the quintessential gentleman, mimicking the old courteous debate style of the scholastics. More and Luther, on the other hand, were vicious. This led to the hardening of positions. Not clear why the debates got so pugnacious, and do not want to judge, but those times were rough and tumble intellectually.