

## Thinking with Proverbial Aunt Maude

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Aunt Maude was a lovely lady. She was kind, caring, and always had a supply of mint humbugs near at hand, to which I was very partial.

Among her many endearing qualities was the fact that she was also very amusing, though not necessarily intending to be so. Or so I thought.

Conversations with Aunt Maude were always delightful. The times I found myself chuckling most was when she would come out with one of her proverbs. Now you have to realise that Aunt Maude's countryside proverbs were not of the normal kind. Hers were unique—and as a way of commenting on life, often quite bizarre. Either they made no obvious sense, or they were blatant truisms that were so obvious that you spent ages wondering if you had missed some hidden meaning. Or maybe they were both superficial and profound? Or neither?

For example, in discussing the some situation, Aunt Maude solemnly declared, "Every sparrow has a nest."

Quite true, I thought. But how that meshed with our conversation I had no idea. I just nodded, and then spent the rest of the day puzzling. It was indeed true, but just as true as a comment that the sky is blue or that water is wet. Hardly a deep and insightful perspective summarised in a pithy proverb.

*Or was it?* Maybe the sparrows were the problems, and the nest the solutions? Like the (recognized) proverb that troubles always come home to roost? Or were we the birds and the nest those around us? Or what? I was driven to try and make sense of these sayings.

Like "walking on the floor is better than on the ceiling." Manifestly true. But so what? And who would even want to try?

Or "every tree has its branches." There's no arguing with the clear and definite truth of the statement. Yet why say something like that...

### **Baffling**

Some, as I say, were more on the very odd side of baffling—even quite bizarre:

"A fish in a field eats no grass." "A cloud has no need of its brother." "The darkest toad is found at night."

You try and tell me what they mean!

"Misty mornings, happy yawnings." "Apples know not that they are not pears." "Chestnuts and hazels do not siblings make." "Foxes and rabbits share good habits."

On and on they rolled like a flood—puzzling, perplexing, but always seeming so nonsensical. All proclaimed in deliberate tones of declarative wisdom.

I asked the family. They just smiled politely, as if unwilling to discuss whether they understood Aunt Maude or not. Clearly Aunt's logic processes were very different to the rest of us.

Determined to think them through, I engaged my brain and tried to discover some (any!) kind of meaning in these curious utterances. I recall pondering deeply one of her particular favourites:

"Rain falls on every roof."

Yes, the fact was undeniably correct, confirmed by regular verification, especially with English weather. So what did it mean?

Was it an aphorism declaring the universality of the human experience? A philosophical reflection on mankind's generic susceptibility to tragedy and ill? A deep proverb illustrating that none of us are exempt from situations of adversity, in the same way that none escape the impact of the elements?

Or did she mean that when it rains, every roof gets wet? Well, of course it does. Everyone knows that. A total truism that borders on the absurd, because it is completely and absolutely obvious. Like: every lawn has grass, every tree has leaves, every flower has petals.

**And so?**

Once I even asked. "And so?" Aunt Maude just nodded, and repeated the words, as if they meant a great deal to her, full of some meaning I just could not discern.

I struggled, trying to make sense of it all, wondering which of us was the one "seeing they see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand." Like people who believe differently, whose thoughts do not parallel our own. Those who do not really understand—was that me? Was I professing to be wise, but becoming a fool?

I challenged her: "I think you just say these things to tease us, to try and make us think, even though you know there's nothing really there."

"That's as maybe," was all she said. But she smiled an elusive smile, which I think meant something. But I was not altogether sure...

For then I thought about the things we also say, some that are quite without sense too.

Like:

*"It's always in the last place you look."* Of course it is, because once you've found it, then you stop looking. So anything you're looking for is always in the last place you look.

*"We'll be there in no time."* No. That means immediately, instantaneously. You never arrive like that. I know. As a child, that kind of answer invariably upset me. There is no such thing as arriving in no time. It always takes time, and usually far longer than you expect.

“*Wouldn’t you like to know?*” Why do people say that when you ask a question? Of course you’d like to know—isn’t that why you’re asking the question in the first place?

But at least Aunt Maude made me think. Though it was often frustrating and unsatisfying—not coming to a definite conclusion most of the time, I came to realize that thought was important.

That we need to look around us, to observe, to try to understand. That thinking is truly what separates us from the rest of life on this planet—that we have a wonderful gift in our brains.

“A mind is a terrible thing to waste” would have been the right proverb at this point, of course. But knowing Aunt Maude, an understandable proverb would go against the grain. “Eyes blinking, better start thinking,” was her analysis—and immediately my mind was rushing down all kinds of avenues and blind alleys, trying to come up with the connection.

“Looks like your train of thought finally left the station,” she observed dryly, looking at me with a curious expression. “Make sure it doesn’t get derailed, or that you don’t get caught on the tracks. Trains of thought can be quite dangerous, you know. Especially oncoming ones if you’re standing on the tracks.” Again that knowing smile.

“So what do you want to know?” she asked, directly.

I stopped. A straight question. I paused. This was not usual at all. She looked at me expectantly.

### **Why are we here?**

I don’t know what I was thinking. A moment of truth, maybe. So I blurted out, “Tell me, what is it all about? This life—meaning and purpose? Why are we here?” Something like that—I don’t remember exactly. I just wanted to *know*.

“You’re asking about God,” she replied.

“I suppose I am,” I agreed. I waited. Maybe she was going to give me some sermon, I thought. Some heavy explanation, a theological exposition, whatever. But nothing came.

Then she turned to me and explained in a calm, measured voice: “What God most wants is thought.”

And she sat back in her chair, as if all had been said.

That was it. End of conversation. I have reflected often on her idea, then and since. Maybe Aunt Maude *did* know what she was talking about, I finally decided. She was hardly King Solomon, but ...

But her analysis surely is true. Without thought, what is there? And in terms of meaning and purpose, the essence of humanity is the thinking process. Otherwise there is nothing but thoughtlessness and nothingness.

Now, I'm not saying that her proverbial comments necessarily were deep and meaningful. Surely not. But as a thought-provoker, she was unique. She possessed an unparalleled ability to get you thinking, even if it was to decide that the proverbial assertion made no sense at all!

Even if the early worm catches the bird, or if every silver lining has a cloud, or if it's every man for himself but no man is an island, at least you have to think about it. An engagement of the mind, which is surely better than falling into blank-staring-dumbness in front of the mind-numbing TV screen or video game or whatever.

Of course, ultimately thoughts need to turn into conviction, belief, action—and our relationship to God cannot simply be a pleasant intellectual exercise without any kind of result in our lives. There has to be some kind of result to thinking.

Yet thinking inevitably produces some kind of result. You make decisions, you make choices. In terms of God, you make choices for or against him, and that reflects in the way you live and in the way you treat others. So Aunt Maude's conclusion that what God most wants is thought does have merit. For as you consider God and his ways, make decisions about truth and right, then you are making choices that change you—hopefully improving the kind of person you decide to be, with God's help.

That's why God appeals for everyone to reason together with him (see Isaiah 1:18). He wants your thoughts, your thoughts directed towards him. What God *doesn't* want is meaningless, thoughtless religion that has no reason (see Isaiah 1:11-16). For in that situation there is no receptiveness to God as he really is, no true relationship as friend—only the requirements of imposed commands based on unthinking obedience.

See how Jesus spoke, wanting people to think and to understand:

“Listen and understand... Do you still not understand? Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?” Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand... he explained everything... “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this... he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself... do you not understand these things?... know and understand...” Matthew 15:10; Matthew 16:8; Mark 4:13; Mark 4:33, 34; Mark 7:14; Luke 24:27; John 3:10; John 10:38 NIV.

So think now! Consider God and meaning and purpose, your place in the universe. Don't go through life without reflection, without thinking of what it means. Ask the question *why?* frequently! For we have God's greatest gift—the ability to think, and to act on our thoughts. We owe it to ourselves not to waste this wonderful capacity to think and reason and understand. The alternative is mindless, meaningless, pointless existence.

For to quote Aunt Maude again, “Once it's gone, it's gone.” Especially time, opportunity, and the ability to think and to act and to believe. Life itself is gone very quickly. That piece of proverbial wisdom *did* work for me. The only time we have is now, and the choices of today will echo throughout eternity.

Think, not just for now, but for *eternity!* An eternity with God. That's what he offers. Like they say, *Makes you think!*

“So what about time and eternity and the future?” I asked Aunt Maude in an unguarded moment.

“Oh that,” she said with a grin. “We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it.”

Huh?...

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