

## Advice from Baltasar Gracia'n and Frances Perkins

Christopher Breiseth and Charles Hoffacker

During the last decade of her life (1955-1965), Frances Perkins served as a visiting professor at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations in Ithaca, New York. She happily accepted the invitation of the students at Cornell's Telluride House to live among them. Perkins made it a habit to give each graduating senior at Telluride House a copy of *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* by Baltasar Gracia'n, a seventeenth century manual for promising young people that remains in print today.

Baltasar Gracia'n y Morales (1601-1658) was a Spanish Jesuit priest, prose writer, and philosopher. He dedicated himself to teaching in Jesuit schools, achieved fame as a preacher, and wrote several books, including a novel entitled *El Criticon* that became famous across Europe. Although his repeated disobedience brought him into disfavor with his religious superiors, the village in Aragon where he was born, Belmonte de Calatayud, eventually changed its name to Belmonte de Gracian in his honor.

Gratian was the most representative writer of the Spanish Baroque literary style known as conceptism, characterized by the concentration of a maximum of significance in a minimum of form. Known in Spanish as *agudeza* (wit), this approach reaches its apex in the three hundred numbered maxims of his *Art of Worldly Wisdom*, the title of which translates literally as *Manual Oracle and Art of Discretion*.

*The Art of Worldly Wisdom* was praised by celebrated intellectuals including Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and André Gide. It is alleged to have been read by the young Winston Churchill on the ship taking him to the Boer War.

At least seven English translations have appeared over the course of three centuries. Translations have also been made into Chinese, Finnish, French, Japanese, Portuguese, and other languages. A new rendering into English by Christopher Maurer became a national bestseller in the U.S. in 1992 and sold nearly 200,000 copies. This small book was titled *The Art of Worldly Wisdom: A Pocket Oracle*.

Frances Perkins owned a 1930 copy of the English translation by Martin Fischer. Now the property of her grandson Tomlin Perkins Coggeshall, her copy features lines in pencil marking fourteen sections. Presumably Frances Perkins made these markings to indicate sections of special interest to her. These passages appear below.

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*As a Cornell student, Christopher Breiseth became acquainted with Frances Perkins during their residency at Telluride House. Charles Hoffacker is a priest of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington. Both Breiseth and Hoffacker serve on the Frances Perkins Center Board of Directors.*

11.

Live with those from whom you can learn; let friendly intercourse be a school for knowledge, and social contact, a school for culture; to make

teachers of your friends is to join the need of learning to the joy of converse. Happiness among the understanding is mutual, rewarded for what they say by the approval they receive; and for what they hear, by what they learn; it is personal interest usually that draws men together but here it is glorified. A man of understanding seeks out the houses of those true noblemen which are more the stages of a heroic than the palaces of vanity. There exist men in this world, known to the discerning, who in their bearing are veritable exemplars of every greatness and whose train, even, constitutes a courtly academy of art and learning.

20.

A man of your century. Great men are part of their times. Not all were born into a period worthy of them, and many so born failed to benefit by it: some merited a better century, for all that is good does not always triumph: fashions have their periods and even the greatest virtues, their styles: but the philosopher has one advantage: he is ageless: and should this not prove his century, many to follow, will.

21.

The art of being lucky. There are rules to luck, for to the wise, not all is accident: try, therefore, to help luck along. Some are satisfied to stand politely before the portals of Fortuna and to await her bidding; better those who push forward, and who employ their enterprise, who on the wings of their worth and valor seek to embrace luck and effectively gain her favor. And yet, properly reasoned, there is no other way to her but virtue and attentiveness: for none has more good luck, or more bad luck, than he has wisdom, or unwisdom.

26.

Discover each man's thumbscrew. It is the way to move his will, more skill than force being required to know how to get at the heart of anyone: there is no will without its leanings, which differ as desires differ. All men are idolaters, some of honor, others of greed, and the most of pleasure: the trick lies in knowing these idols that are so powerful, thus knowing the impulse that moves every man: it is like having the key to another man's will, with which to get at the spring within, by no means always his best, but more frequently his worst, for there are more unholy men in this world than holy: divine the ruling passion of a man, excite him with a word, and then attack him through his pet weakness, that invariably checkmates his free will.

31.

Know the lucky, in order to hold to them, and the unlucky, in order to flee from them. Hard luck is mostly the punishment of foolishness, and no disease is so catching for the mourners: never open the door to a small misfortune, for many more always creep in behind it, and greater ones under its protection. The great trick in cards lies in knowing what to discard: and the deuce of a suit that is trump, is more valuable than the ace of a suit that was. When in doubt, there is safety in sticking with the intelligent and the prudent, for, sooner or later, they catch up with luck.

32.

Be gracious: for those who govern it is the grand manner through which to please: it is the halo of the mighty by which they gain the good will of the populace. This is the single advantage of power, that it enables the

holder to do more good: those are friends who make friends. There are those, on the other hand, who can never be gracious, not so much because of peevishness, as of meanness, the very opposite in everything of the divine virtue.

50.

Do nothing to make you lose respect for yourself, or to cheapen yourself in your own eyes: let your integrity be the standard of rectitude, and let your own dictates be stricter than the precepts of any law. Forego the unseemly, more because of this fear of yourself, than for fear of the sternness of outer authority: learn this fear of yourself; and there will then be no need for that imaginary monitor of Seneca.

51. A man of discernment. The most of life is that; it calls for good taste, and the best of judgment, for neither learning nor mind is enough. There is nothing perfect where there is no choice: two qualities are required: the power to choose, and the power to choose the better. And yet in these, many of fertile mind, and subtile, of sharp understanding, of learning and experience, always fail: forever consorting with the worse, as though determined to go wrong, wherefore this comes to be one of the greatest gifts from on high.