

Precepts or maxims are of great weight;
and a few useful ones at hand do more
toward a happy life than whole volumes
that we know not where to find.

—Seneca

PRECEPTS

My father's name was Thomas Browne. And his father's name was Thomas Browne. That's why my name is Thomas Browne. I didn't know until I was a college senior that there was a far more illustrious Thomas Browne, who had lived in England in the seventeenth century. Sir Thomas Browne was a gifted author, a student of the natural world, a scientist, a scholar, and an outspoken supporter of tolerance at a time when intolerance was the norm. In short, I couldn't have asked for a better namesake.

I started reading a lot of Sir Thomas Browne's works in college, including *Enquiries into Very many received Tenets, and commonly presumed Truths*, a book that set out to debunk the prevalent false beliefs of the day, and *Religio Medici*, a work that contained a number of religious inquiries that were considered highly unorthodox at the time. It was while reading the latter that I came across this wonderful line:

We carry within us the wonders we seek around us.

The beauty and power of that line stopped me cold, for some reason. Maybe it was exactly what I needed to hear at that particular moment in my life, a time when I was racked with indecision about whether the career I had chosen for myself—teaching—was full of enough “wonder” to keep me happy. I wrote the line down on a little slip of paper and taped it onto my wall, where it remained until I graduated. I took it with me to graduate school. I traveled with the Peace Corps and carried it in my wallet. My wife had it

laminated and framed for me when we got married, and it now hangs in the foyer of our apartment in the Bronx.

It was the first of many precepts in my life, which I began collecting in a scrapbook. Lines from books I've read. Fortune cookies. Hallmark card homilies. I even wrote down the Nike ad line "Just do it!" because I thought it was the perfect directive for me. You can draw inspiration from anywhere, after all.

I first introduced precepts to my students as a student teacher. I was having a hard time getting my kids interested in the essay-writing unit—I believe I had asked them to write one hundred words on something that meant a lot to them—so I brought in the laminated Thomas Browne quote to show them something that meant a lot to me. Well, it turned out they were much more interested in exploring the meaning of the quote itself than they were in its impact on me, so I asked them to write about that instead. I was amazed at the things they came up with!

Ever since then, I've used precepts in my classroom. According to *Merriam-Webster*, a precept is "a command or principle intended especially as a general rule of action." For my students, I've always defined it in simpler terms: precepts are "words to live by." Easy. At the beginning of every month, I write a new precept on the board, they copy it, and then we discuss it. At the end of the month, they write an essay about the precept. Then at the end of the year, I give out my home address and ask the kids to send me a postcard over the summer with a new precept of their own, which could be a quote from a famous

person or a precept they've made up. The first year I did this, I remember wondering if I'd get a single precept. I was floored when, by the end of summer, every single student in *each* of my classes had sent one in! You can imagine my further astonishment when, the following summer, the same thing happened again. Only this time, it wasn't only from my current class that I received postcards. I also got a handful from the previous year's class!

I've been teaching for ten years. As of this writing, I have about two thousand precepts. When Mr. Tushman, the middle-school director at Beecher Prep, heard this, he suggested that I collect them and turn them into a book that I could share with the world.

I was intrigued by the idea, for sure, but where to start? How to choose what precepts to include? I decided I would focus on themes with particular resonance for kids: kindness, strength of character, overcoming adversity, or simply doing good in the world. I like precepts that somehow elevate the soul. I chose one precept for every day of the year. My hope is that the reader of this book will begin every new day with one of these "words to live by."

I'm thrilled to be able to share my favorite precepts here. Many are ones I've collected myself over the years. Some were submitted by students. All mean a lot to me. As I hope they will to you.

—Mr. Browne

Teach him then the sayings of the past,
so that he may become a good example
for the children. . . . No one is born wise.

— *The Maxims of Ptahhotep*,
2200 BC



JANUARY

JANUARY 1

We carry
within us
the wonders
we seek
around us.

—Sir Thomas Browne

JANUARY 2

And above all, watch with
glittering eyes the whole
world around you because
the greatest secrets are
always hidden in the most
unlikely places. Those who
don't believe in magic
will never find it.

—Roald Dahl

JANUARY 3

Three things in human
life are important:
the first is to be kind;
the second is to be
kind; and the third
is to be kind.

—Henry James

JANUARY 4

No man
is an
island,
entire
of itself.

—John Donne