

Gifts of the Stoics by Dennis Perkins – 9/28/25

Sometimes when you least expect it, when you're thinking hard about one thing (in this case, my thinking about Stoicism), a memory will come out of nowhere. And sometimes if you're lucky that memory may lead to a story. And sometimes that story may lead to a point—which just happens to be the point you were looking for all along.

Travel back with me for a moment about 60 years ago to a small fishing village on the northern shore of Casco Bay--West Point, Maine. West Point consisted of a few dozen small houses owned by fishing families, a couple of dealer docks where the fisherman could sell their catch and buy bait and fuel, a small church, and the social hub of the entire community, the West Point General Store, which sold not only the basic staples for groceries but fishing gear essentials and also served as the post office for the village. Just outside of the main door to the store sat a long bench which looked, appropriately enough, like a church pew. And on that pew in every season but winter sat three very old men--retired fishermen. Between them they had almost two centuries of commercial fishing experience: seining, tuna fishing, gill netting butterfish, shark fishing when there was a market for them, and lobstering, always lobstering--that was the bread and butter of West Point fishing families. That's my memory from sixty years ago. Three old lobstermen, long since lost in the mists of time, sitting on a bench, swapping memories, nodding to friends as they came and went through the door to the store. And now the story—not as true as the memory, but more important.

One day a young 20-year-old woman from the village, Roberta, dressed in oilskins from the morning's lobstering, stopped and spoke to the three old men. "Sorry to bother you", she said. "but you three knew my father from the time he was born and you probably saw me going out lobstering with him from the time I was old enough to bait traps. Well, you may know that he just died unexpectedly, leaving me the boat to continue to pull traps and support my mother. There's just the two of us now, Mom and me. So I've got all kinds of questions and I thought I'd ask for your advice since you have more experience than anyone in the village, about fishing for lobster. Best places, best kinds of bait, best number of traps for someone fishing single, best times to move traps out to deeper water for the winter and back in towards shore in the summer. Will you help me?"

Amos, the oldest of the three, looked up at the young woman and sideways at his bench companions, then he quietly asked her a simple question, "If we share what we've learned, what will you do with our experience? Will you think it over? Maybe talk it over with the

other lobstermen in the harbor to see what they think? Give yourself a season to continue fishing the way you're fishing now and plan to try some of our suggestions maybe next season?"

The young woman thought for a second and then said, "You three have fished for more years than I can imagine and I only had a chance to fish with my father for five years. If you're willing to share your experience, then I'll start following your advice today. If it means moving my traps around or changing my bait, then I'll start this afternoon. What do I have to lose?"

Amos smiled and then invited the young woman to join them on the bench. For the next hour the old men talked and the woman listened. People going into the store that morning remarked that they had never seen the old men talk that much in their whole lives.

Those old lobsterman in West Point were the purveyors of sound advice based upon their lived experience. They had been sitting quietly in front of the store for who knows how long, waiting for someone to come along who a) needed their advice, b) wanted their advice, c) was willing to take the time and have the humility to ask for their advice, and d) was willing to immediately try and put that advice into action.

This morning we'll have the chance to listen to some of the best advice for living life to the fullest ever given by one human being to another. These old men lived in Rome in the beginning of the first century AD. They followed and developed a philosophy begun by the man on the cover of your Order of Service, Zeno of Citium, a Cypriot, three centuries earlier. His philosophy was based on two profound pillars. First, that the entire universe is God and that a virtuous life is one lived in harmony with the Universe and that brings happiness. The other pillar is that the virtuous life is earned by practicing reason over emotion. That philosophy of living came to be known as Stoicism and its three most famous authors, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius will share their advice with us as members of our congregation read from their works. Before each reading I'll provide a brief biography of each Stoic. The words of these old men will comprise the first three - quarters of this morning's message. In the final part I will share how the wisdom found its way into my own life—unbeknownst to me.

Introduction to Seneca

Born into a family of wealth and political influence in 4 BC, Seneca the Younger, named after his father, received an excellent private education centered on literature, grammar, logic, and rhetoric. His instructor was a member of the Stoic school.

As a Roman senator Seneca became renowned for his oratory as well as for an extremely even-tempered and rational demeanor. Because of this he was selected to become tutor and later, imperial advisor to Nero, whom he tried to educate in the disciplines of Stoic thought. Despite some early success directing the emotional young emperor toward rational public policy, with Nero's growing mental instability and conspiratorial suspicions, nurtured by his mother Agrippa, Seneca fell out of favor and was eventually removed from the Senate and finally forced to choose suicide over exile.

While Seneca's wisdom was clearly wasted on Emperor Nero, he found an eager student in a younger man named Lucilius to whom he wrote more than 120 letters of moral instruction on the Stoic values of self-examination and realizing the importance of time as the source of greatest wealth to a person.

Barbara Covey will read one of these letters this morning. Imagine that Seneca is writing not to Lucilius, but to you.

Seneca's Letter to Lucilius^[1]

"Greetings from Seneca to his friend Lucilius.

Continue to act thus, my dear Lucilius—set yourself free for your own sake; gather and save your time, which until lately has been forced from you, or filched away, or has merely slipped from your hands. Make yourself believe the truth of my words—that certain moments are torn from us, that some are gently removed, and that others glide beyond our reach. The most disgraceful kind of loss, however, is that due to carelessness.

Furthermore, if you pay close heed to the problem, you will find that the largest portion of our life passes while we are doing ill, a goodly share while we are doing nothing, and the whole while we are doing that which is not to the purpose. What man can you show me who places any value on his time, who reckons the worth of each day, who understands that he is dying daily? For we are mistaken when we look forward to death; the major portion of death has already passed. Whatever years lie behind us are in death's hands.

Therefore, Lucilius, do as you write me that you are doing: hold every hour in your grasp. Lay hold of today's task, and you will not need to depend so much upon tomorrow's. While we are postponing, life speeds by. Nothing, Lucilius, is ours, except time. We were entrusted by nature with the ownership of this single thing, so fleeting and slippery that anyone can oust us from possession. What fools these mortals be! They allow the cheapest and most useless things, which can easily be replaced, to be charged in the reckoning, after they have acquired them; but they never regard themselves as in debt when they have

received some of that precious commodity—time! And yet time is the one loan which even a grateful recipient cannot repay.

You may desire to know how I, who preach to you so freely, am practicing. I confess frankly: my expense account balances, as you would expect from one who is free-handed but careful. I cannot boast that I waste nothing, but I can at least tell you what I am wasting, and the cause and manner of the loss; I can give you the reasons why I am a poor man. My situation, however, is the same as that of many who are reduced to slender means through no fault of their own: everyone forgives them, but no one comes to their rescue.

What is the state of things, then? It is this: I do not regard a man as poor, if the little which remains is enough for him. I advise you, however, to keep what is really yours; and you cannot begin too early. For, as our ancestors believed, it is too late to spare when you reach the dregs of the cask. Of that which remains at the bottom, the amount is slight, and the quality is vile. Farewell.”

Introduction to Epictetus

Unlike the other two members of the triumvirate of Roman Stoics, Epictetus was not born rich or politically powerful or noble. In fact he wasn't even a free man. Born to poor parents in a Greek province he was sold as a slave to Emperor Nero's secretary. Because he was connected to Nero's staff, Epictetus received what was rare for a Roman slave—an education. He studied under a teacher of the Stoic school. He flourished as a student and quickly gained enough of a reputation to become a teacher himself. His renown as a great speaker grew and he was granted his freedom at age 40 just after Nero's death. However, like Seneca with Nero, Epictetus learned that outshining an emperor's brilliance can quickly drop one from favor and so he was banished to Greece by Emperor Domitian along with all of the other philosophers in the capitol. (Even two thousand years ago certain leaders became infuriated with and attacked the great centers of learning.)

Epictetus continued to teach into old age and many of his insights were written down by some of his students and compiled into the sayings of the master, much as Plato had done with Socrates. Epictetus may have been the originator of the thought behind the now famous Serenity Prayer: “Grant me the serenity to accept those things I cannot change, the courage to change those things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Beth Schiller will now share some more of the wisdom of Epictetus. Let each thought sink in as if your mind were partaking of a healthy nourishment.

Wisdom of Epictetus

“The essence of philosophy is that a person should so live that their happiness shall depend as little as possible on external things.”

“Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants.”

“People are not disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them.”

“There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power of our will.”

“First learn the meaning of what you say, and then speak.”

“If you desire to be good, begin by believing that you are wicked.”

“It is the nature of the wise to resist pleasures, but the foolish to be a slave to them.”

“A wise person does not grieve for the things they have not, but rejoices in those they have.”

“Be careful to leave your children well instructed rather than rich, for the hopes of the instructed are better than the wealth of the ignorant.”

“No great thing is created suddenly.”

“All philosophy lies in two words, sustain and abstain.”

“When you are offended at any person’s fault, turn to yourself and study your own failings. Then you will forget your anger.”

“To accuse *others* for one’s own misfortunes is a sign of want of education. To accuse *oneself* shows that one’s education has begun. To accuse *neither oneself nor others* shows that one’s education is complete.”

“It is impossible for a person to learn what they think they already know.”

“We are not privy to the stories behind people’s actions, so we should be patient with others and suspend judgement of them, recognizing the limits of our understanding.”

“Don’t just say you have read books. Show that through them you have learned to think better, to be a more discriminating and reflective person. Books are the training weights of the mind. They are very helpful, but it would be a bad mistake to suppose that one has made progress simply by having internalized their contents.”

“Freedom is the only worthy goal in life. It is won by disregarding things that lie beyond our control. Stop aspiring to be anyone other than your own best self: for that does fall within your control.”

Introduction to Marcus Aurelius

Born in 121 AD, Marcus Aurelius was early identified as having the qualities of leadership necessary for a head of the empire and so was adopted into the family of Emperor Hadrian and moved into life at the palace. He received an elite education in rhetoric and oratory, logic, and Greek and Roman literature, but he was, ironically and by his very nature, drawn to the contemplative life. Marcus’s favorite and most influential teacher had studied under Seneca and the Stoic philosophy held great appeal for him. Before becoming emperor and during his reign, he kept a diary of reflections upon the human condition. Although probably never intended for publication, following his death in 180AD these diaries were made public under the title *The Meditations* and have been read by generations of famous writers as well as millions of ordinary citizens around the world seeking simple directions toward the good life. Imagine having a leader drawn to daily self-examination toward the sole purpose of trying a better life.

This morning Sarah Seder will read some of the profound thoughts of this naturally humble political giant. Let’s listen and enjoy.

From Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*

Embrace the present moment:

“Give yourself a gift: the present moment.”

“Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what’s left and live it properly.”

On the importance of character and virtue:

“The elements move upward, downward, in all directions. The motion of virtue is different—deeper. It moves at a steady pace on a road hard to discern, and always forward.”

“The life of a good person looks like this: someone content with what nature assigns him, and satisfied with being just and kind himself.”

“The only thing that isn’t worthless: to live this life out truthfully and rightly. And be patient with those who don’t.”

“At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: I have to go to work—as a human being. What do I have to complain of, if I’m going to do what I was born for—the things I was brought into the world to do?”

Have compassion for others:

“When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They are like this because they can’t tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own—not of the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine.”

“We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural.”

“What does not benefit the hive is no benefit to the bee.”

On the UU 7th Principle—being part of the web of all existence. (Nearly 2000 years before its appearance):

“And in the case of superior things like stars, we discover a kind of unity in separation. The higher we rise on the scale of being, the easier it is to discern a connection even among things separated by vast distances”.

Does the light of the lamp shine without losing its splendor until it is extinguished; and shall the truth which is in thee and justice and temperance be extinguished before thy death?

On learning to place reason above emotion:

“How much more grievous are the consequences of anger than the causes of it.”

“Concentrate every minute on doing what’s in front of you with precise and genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly, with justice. And on freeing yourself from all other distractions. Yes, you can — if you do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life, and stop being aimless, stop letting your emotions override what your mind tells you, stop being hypocritical, self-centered, irritable.”

“The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.”

The wise individual accepts their pain, endures it, but does not add to it.

“The mind freed from passions is an impenetrable fortress—a person has no more secure place of refuge for all time.”

“It isn’t virtuous to be enraged. Rather, gentleness and civility are more human, and therefore preferable. The nearer an individual comes to a calm mind, the closer that person is to strength.”

“Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present.”

Does what's happened keep you from acting with justice, generosity, self-control, sanity, prudence, honesty, humility, straightforwardness, and all other qualities that allow a person's nature to fulfill itself? So remember this principle when something threatens to cause you pain: the thing itself was no misfortune at all; to endure it and prevail is great good fortune.

“Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.”

Finally, three brief reflections that can change the course of a life:

“Begin – to begin is half the work, let half still remain; again begin this, and thou wilt have finished.”

“The universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.”

“It never ceases to amaze me: we all love ourselves more than other people, but care more about their opinions of us than our own.”

Gifts the Stoics Gave Me – Dennis Perkins

178,000. And this quote that we just heard from Marcus Aurelius: “The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.”

I hadn’t really heard or thought about the Stoics until just a few years ago, so it was remarkable to me to see how much Stoic thought had been a part of my life for nearly four decades. Let me explain.

That number 178,000 is the number of alcohol-related deaths in the United States each year. Deaths from accident, from organ failure, and from suicide. Nearly 40 years ago I came very close to becoming one of those 178,000. Addiction to alcohol almost caused me to take my own life. That moment of total despair in 1985 led immediately to another moment—a moment of clarity: I couldn't beat alcoholism on my own. I could no longer do it alone. I reached out and in a couple of days found myself involved in a 12-step program for alcohol addicts. What had been the greatest obstacle in the lives of me and my family—alcoholism—led me totally unexpectedly to what would become the source not only of physical sobriety but of spiritual instruction in my life. I began living the words of Marcus Aurelius: “What stands in the way becomes the way”—without having any idea who he was.

12 step programs are often mistaken for religious programs. They are not. They emphasize the presence of a higher power, but not in the sense of a particular religious deity. Instead, 12 step programs have increasingly grown to understand God not as a being but as a way, much like the Chinese concept of the *Tao* or like the Stoic concept expressed for example by Marcus Aurelius as

“All things are in the care of the Universe, and everything happens for the good of the whole.” — Marcus Aurelius

For Stoics, the divine is not separate from the world.

Instead, the universe itself is a living organism infused with the logos, which dictates the natural laws and cycles of existence.

Increasingly, modern spiritual expression uses the word “Universe” in place of the word “God”. Very Stoic.

At the center of 12 step programs is the continual work of honest self-appraisal (steps 4-8). Difficult at first but easier and more rewarding with repetition. Again: the hidden instruction of Stoicism.

Epictetus on the importance of self-appraisal: “When you are offended at any person's fault, turn to yourself and study your own failings. Then you will forget your anger.”

The final 3 steps of 12-step programs discuss the need for continual practice and re-education: again in the words of Epictetus which we've already heard this morning, “All philosophy lies in two words, sustain and abstain.”

Abstain from addiction to both substances and behaviors, behaviors both physical and emotional (anger, self-righteousness, self-pity, intellectual false pride, egoism) that distort perceptions and produce mistaken assumptions about reality. Learn to get better and better at recognizing these mental and physical behaviors and then practice abstention. Simultaneously, develop behavior that leads to emotional balance and clarity of understanding. Work diligently to sustain these. In short, stop repeating your failures and start repeating your successes.

Toward what end? Why bother with this work of the Stoics or of 12 step programs at all?

Let me explain again with two things that Marcus Aurelius wrote to himself. Although he had an empire to administer and we each have only the tiny government of our own lives, the meaning and purpose of both are the same regardless of size:

First, "Never forget that the universe is a single living organism possessed of one substance and one soul, holding all things suspended in a single consciousness and creating all things with a single purpose that they might work together spinning and weaving and knotting whatever comes to pass."

And second, "Live a good life. If there are gods and they are just, then they will not care how devout you have been, but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by. If there are gods, but unjust, then you should not want to worship them. If there are no gods, then you will be gone, but will have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones."

Finally, why have 12-step programs of all kinds been so relatively successful not only at overcoming substance and behavioral addictions, but more importantly, learning--teaching human beings to live peaceful and useful lives? I believe the reason was intuitively clear to the Stoics, as it was to the Buddha, to Jesus, to spiritual people of all times and all places. Ultimately what drives addictions is loneliness, separateness, and separation. What releases a man or woman from those same things is the need for unity, the need to move from being "apart from" to "a part of" everything. When in a 12-step meeting a banker listens to the man beside him who is a beggar, and when each sees the other as a brother, not an inferior or a superior, then the logos of the universe is operating and as Zeno and Marcus Aurelius and the other Stoics said "the universe is God and everything in it is connected by love." What possible obstructions could addictions or any other plots of isolation have against that unity?

Closing Words

The Stoics set the task for humanity to become more peaceful and therefore useful. Usefulness was, in a nutshell, living life to good purpose no matter what the prevailing conditions. Good purpose was characterized by how we treat the people and the world around us. Can we practice the virtues so beautifully described by poet William Blake in the lyrics of the hymn we have just sung: “For Mercy has a human heart, and Pity a human face; and Love, the human form divine, and Peace, the human dress.”

Blake wrote those words in the 16th century. Our three Stoics wrote their wisdom in the first and second centuries AD. And 500 years before the Stoics, Lao-Tzu captured the simple truth that would become the heart of Stoicism:

If there is to be peace in the world,
there must be peace in the nations.
If there is to be peace in the nations,
there must be peace in the cities.
If there is to be peace in the cities,
there must be peace between neighbors.
If there is to be peace between neighbors,
there must be peace in the home.
If there is to be peace in the home,
there must be peace in the heart.”

— Lao-tzu

May we each do our part to make it so.