



Written by William Ferraiolo

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn

William Ferraiolo's newest book, *Meditations on Self-Discipline and Failure: Stoic Exercises for Mental Fitness*, is written in the style of philosophical approach based on the Stoics. While the word 'stoic' means to endure pain and suffering without complaining or showing your feelings, a Stoic, with a capital S, dates back to 300 B.C. when someone named Zeno founded Stoicism, a systematic philosophy that taught people that they should be free from passion, unmoved by joy or grief, and that they should submit to unavoidable situations in life without complaint.

Ferraiolo's tone and posturing parallels the philosophies he prescribes to, completely. He confronts readers, challenges them to face reality, 'look it in the eye' as he uncovers common human feelings and situations that may lead to dysfunctional affective states such as depression, anxiety, guilt and so on.

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**He holds readers** to a higher sense of truth, has them look at their own self-defeating desires to control other people as well as hold onto delusions such as: politicians will tell the truth; people will not be biased, prejudiced, hateful, and so on.

**Along with the introduction**, there are 30 “books”, not chapters. There’s only 163 pages but this content, the way it is presented and the depth of reflection possible if one sits with the words and contemplates what they mean to the self, it might be a year before you are done.

**Reading the PDF version** that I received, I considered our current political climate, our current state of war and hate, of destruction of self and other. Ferraiolo’s direct approach spoke to me as a potential place for people to go who respond to and respect this type of challenge, perhaps responding to a more confrontational style. I can see therapists with clients who need a more down-to-basics citation, and Ferraiolo is qualified to do so, with wit and a sense of, I’m here too. The book is written in second person, so it addresses “you” the reader, the author is talking to you with no space for nonsense or self-aggrandizement.

**It’s hard for me to capture** the essence of the meditations—Ferraiolo writes things like: “You are slightly smarter than an ape or dolphin” (pg. 23) and “Complaining about an insect bit is an indication of an irrational petulance . . . When the inevitable occurs, only a foolish child whines about it” (pp. 70-71). There are statements that resonated with me . . . “practice gratitude” (pg. 24), “Your voices are your own”, “Do not blame nature, environment, or hereditary for your failures” (pg.25) and “Everything that can suffer, does suffer” (pg. 163).

**But to capture the quality of this book**, of Ferraiolo’s writing, you have to read his writing. I offer some of his work, with hopes that his publisher will not be too upset with the length of quotes I’m sharing. Believe me, it’s a drop in the bucket in terms of the entirety of his text. I hope these small snippets capture your interest as his writing did mine, and that you take time to read more.

### **From the Introduction**

*“You are reading these words because you seek counsel and you have not quite found what you are looking for anywhere else.*

*Had you found what you needed elsewhere, there would be no reason for you to continue searching, and no reason to look here, in particular. This seems a reasonable inference, does it not?*

*You do not want to be merely another whining, self-absorbed weakling who cannot handle daily life without running to Mommy, or some phony academic with a fancy degree or a television show— or call a psychic hotline! Life is hard. You get it. There is, however, something about your way of being in the world that is not quite comfortable.*

*Maybe your diet is out of whack. All that processed food, and microwaveable junk cannot be good for you, can it? Have you been watching too much television? Are you really getting the kind of restorative sleep that you need while tossing and turning on that mattress of yours? You know a lot of people who are taking antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications these days. There really is no shame in going to see a psychiatrist anymore, is there? Everybody seems to be doing it. Of course, not everybody seems to be getting much benefit out of it. The psychiatrists are doing pretty well for themselves, but their patients seem about as fouled up after “getting help” as they were before. Besides, how can you possibly know what kind of doctor or therapist you really need? Do you need to talk through your early childhood experience with some Freudian, or would you be better off with some hardcore cognitive-behavioral therapy, and bottle of Xanax to get you through those particularly rough patches at work, or on airplanes, or when your mother-in-law comes to visit?*

*Luckily, you are reading just the right book. There is no complex theory presented here for you to absorb, ponder, and then try to apply to your own life in some step-by-step fashion. You will find no twelve-step program explained in these pages, and you will not be encouraged to join any organization, or club, or religious cult, or any other outfit that charges dues and issues newsletters. You will find no case studies here. You will not be instructed to confess to anything, issue apologies to anyone, or attend any seminar. You will find one thing in this book. You will read meditations. This is not meditating in the style of Eastern wisdom traditions like*

*Buddhism or Hinduism (although there is nothing wrong with those practices). These are meditations as we find them in a lot of Western philosophy and religion. You will not, however, need to know much about those academic areas (although there is nothing wrong with learning some of that stuff). No, you just read along and, maybe every once in a while, stop to consider whether what you are reading applies to your life and your struggles. You will find that a lot of it does. As you may have noticed by now, this book is written in the second person—which just means that the word “you” designates the meditator.*

*Think for yourself. The words you read may prompt you to reconsider some things, or to consider some other things for the first time, and you may have a very different experience than another reader of the same text— but that really is part of the point. Each reader adds a different set of experiences to the writing.*

*Just read and let yourself think about what “you” seem to be dealing with. The deepest struggles that we all face, the difficulties that keep us up at night, and the concerns that cause us to wonder if we are living the lives that we ought to be living cannot always be addressed in language suited to a seventh-grade reading level. The words get a little “fancy” now and again. This is not for show. The deepest recesses of your mind, where the greatest discomfort arises and festers, is just not the kind of subject area that can be explained to the average twelve-year-old. Are you an average twelve-year-old? If so, you may want to leave this book on the shelf for a few more years. If not, then you may want to read on. It is not an easy read, but nothing worthwhile is ever all that easy. It is also not a particularly pleasant read. The word “Failure” appears in the title, after all. Also, “Self-Discipline” is generally kind of difficult to master. Ask a Marine or a Navy Seal. That is another running theme you may notice. You, however, and your thoughts, and your character, and your behavior, are your business. Ultimately, they are the only things that are really up to you. That is what these meditations are all about. What do you, and you alone, control? What kind of person do you want to be? Get started becoming what you want to be. You never*

*know how much time is left. Turn your attention inside.*

**See what I mean?** It’s intriguing. Ferraiolo has a distinct voice, his approach doesn’t leave room for self-pity, blame. There’s no way you can simply put your head in the ground (can’t play ostrich and pretend you don’t see). You must simply read these words and absorb what resonates, sit with what triggers you, explore the bodily sensations that arise when the mind perceives a potential assault and realizes that there is nothing here to defend, nothing to fight against, it’s all just here, presented for you to consider. Amazing actually.

**I appreciated his candor,** when he writes, *“You will find a lot of self-criticism here, and a lot of discussion of unpleasant experiences. Do not be frightened by the unpleasantness and try not to take the criticism personally. Remember, you did not write this stuff. The author did that, and the author’s mental life is, frankly, not yours— and you need not trouble yourself about the contents of someone else’s mind”*

#### **And then**

*“That is what these meditations are all about. What do you, and you alone, control? What kind of person do you want to be? Get started becoming what you want to be. You never know how much time is left. Turn your attention inside.”*

**I find his words coming back,** different passages, different moments in time. I can’t help but pause and consider my situation, look at what I’m expecting, wanting, at what I’m frustrated with because it’s not happening. And then laughing and letting go.

**I believe a powerful book resonates** well beyond the act of reading, when the author’s words become part of my own internalized mental chatter, when concepts spontaneously arise matching a situation I’m experiencing. It’s not a conscious attempt to remember what so and so wrote but it is just simply there. Ferraiolo’s style has a way of resonating with themes in my life, in the lives of those around me. And while he doesn’t offer steps or tools or exercises to “fix” anything, his “meditations” do offer a path for self-reflection, awareness, and if one wants, change.