

Meditations on Self-Discipline and Failure

Stoic Exercise for Mental Fitness

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BOOKS

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1

Do not invest time and emotional energy imagining calamities that might befall you or your family and friends. Be aware of the possibilities, prepare as best as you are able to avoid needless suffering, loss of life, financial disaster, and the like and, certainly, learn how to respond rationally and efficiently should the need arise. Do not, however, obsess in macabre fashion, or succumb to despair over troubles merely conceived, or disasters not yet incurred. It is unwise to fret about the mere *chance* that things may go awry. This chance is ubiquitous and pervasive. Just about anything *could* go wrong. It is unwise and wasteful to conflate the merely possible with the probable—or the inevitable. Your role as protector and defender of the family is, as yet, unchallenged. Luckily, there has been very little in the way of resentment about your exercise of the relevant duties. Do not perseverate on dark or morbid curiosities. Your protective function is more felicitously served with clear eyes, and an agile mind, unencumbered with ghoulish fancy.

2

Be grateful for your family, and for your opportunities to learn what it means to be a virtuous member of a thriving clan. In serving them admirably, you improve yourself more than you improve their circumstances. Being good to them is one of the best ways to become a better servant of the public good, as well as a better human being. Your kinfolk are not to be treated as mere equals-among-others. They are, for you, very specific others, and your obligations toward them supersede those in nearly any other arena. While it is true that everyone is somebody's child, it is also true that *not* everyone is *your* child, or spouse, or parent, or sibling. Do not be taken in by specious

arguments about equality or universality when it comes to unique duties based in biological, or otherwise intimate, associations. It is no vice to love “your own” in a manner that you do not offer to the rest of humanity. If you have the wherewithal to extend your affections further, without jeopardizing the family bonds, then there is no harm in doing so. Do not, however, divorce your thinking too far from the “tribe,” and all that is therein implied. The human race is *not*, in fact, “one community” in any viable sense. Those who argue the contrary are merely playing the role of the cosmopolitan—either that, or you are deeply confused about this issue.

3

Never underestimate the value of careful observation. You will learn more by watching, listening, and experiencing the outer and inner worlds with a clear mind than you will ever learn by talking, or by trying to demonstrate your intellectual prowess to others. Acquire understanding as best you can, and put it to use in the rectification of your character and behavior. Displaying your understanding to others is a secondary interest—and not an especially admirable concern at that. The proper purpose of observation and inference is not gaining accolades or winning trivia contests. The mind is not a showpiece. Do not be so foolish as to pose in the guise of a sage. You are nothing of the sort.

4

Choose your role models and exemplars carefully. Do not trust the common perception, or received wisdom, about “heroic” figures. Some are deserving of their status, and some are charlatans who deceived their contemporaries, as well as credulous students of history. Not every idol is worthy of your admiration, and none warrant idolatry. Socrates, Diogenes, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Buddha, and Jesus were all purveyors of values and virtues that have earned your respect

and admiration. The sages, themselves, were arguably flawed in a variety of ways, and you, of course, never met any of them. You only “know” what has been recorded of their exploits and their teaching. How much of the legend is accurate in each case? You cannot know. You *can*, however, put their *counsel* to the test, and directly experience the consequences both within your own mind, and between those who claim to be devotees. How do they conduct themselves in imitation of their (alleged) exemplars? Do they seem ennobled by this emulation? Does it seem sincere? More importantly, have *you* improved by dint of their teaching? To the extent that you have *not*, is the flaw within you, or is it a product of some defect in the worldview you seek to embody? This is one of the central difficulties for any genuine acolyte. Whence the imperfections?

5

Entertainment as escapism is, for you, a waste of time. From what, precisely, are you in such dire need of “escape” that you spend hours in flight from reality as it stands directly before you—and within you? Your life does not merit this level of aversion to the direct, clear-eyed experience of it. For some, escape is an understandable impulse. Consider the prisoner, the slave, the oppressed, the “unfortunates” of whatever stripe you might care to mention. There is no dearth of horrors to contemplate. This world has never lacked for miseries to observe and experience. Some are, indeed, beset with challenges that might very well prove too much for the likes of you. The “wretched of the earth” can be absolved of the “sin” of escapism. For *you*, however, it is cowardice. For you, the term “sin” might be aptly applied. To have been granted so much, and to have accomplished so little with your advantages, a case can be made that this is shameful. Luckily, time has not quite run out for you. It *will*, of course. What do you intend to make of yourself between now and then? More than good intentions are required now.

6

Do not insist upon greater reward than an endeavor can plausibly offer. Fulfillment and happiness cannot be the object of every pursuit. Do not anticipate heightened emotional, psychological, or spiritual experiences to ensue from trivial, quotidian tasks and chores. Take out the trash. Do not expect to attain enlightenment on the way back from the curbside. This does not suggest that enlightenment is unattainable, or even that it cannot be had by emptying a dustbin with proper care and attention. The counsel here pertains to expectation. Perhaps even more so, it pertains to the insistence that certain moments *must* be filled with magic or wonder. Sometimes, just breathing in and out is wonderful enough.

7

Keep your body reasonably clean and healthy, but do not obsess about such matters, and do not agonize over your physical appearance. The body is a tool kit. Keep the tools in working condition as best you can, but do not concern yourself with the indications of ordinary wear. A pristine tool has probably been put to insufficient use. Your scars, your greying hair, your broken bones, and all the areas in need of maintenance are just signs that you have lived viscerally as well as within the confines of reason. You have not shied altogether away from danger, but you are no hero either. The world is a rough and bumpy place, and no one gets out entirely unscathed. This is as it should be. A life entirely devoid of injury is a life half-lived at best. Imagine that you had never been punched in the face, tackled roughly to the ground, or subjected to the various lacerations attendant upon collision with immovable objects. What a shame that would have been. Pain is an efficient instructor.

8

Money has its legitimate uses. You should not deny this, nor

should you attempt to make a show of some imaginary disdain of the pecuniary. Money is, however, merely an instrumental good. Utility is the sole virtue of the stuff. In and of itself, money makes you no wiser, no more virtuous, and no more admirable, than does any other instrument. Do not envy those who possess more of it than you, and do not pity those with less. You can discern nothing about character, integrity, or self-respect in a ledger or bank account. On what account do you shun the homeless or the penniless? What did Diogenes possess? Where did Socrates hide his riches? Did the Buddha carry a golden alms bowl? Did Jesus offer the Sermon on the Mount from a palace? In their names, the world has been offered priceless benefits—but this has not been accomplished without a price. The virtuous *use* of money is the key. In the absence of judicious management, money may as well be used for a bonfire.

9

Find something before which you may sincerely humble yourself. This is not a difficult task. Both the material world and transcendent reality (if it *is* reality) offer grandeurs from which you may readily choose. Do not, however, *feign* humility or reverence merely because the masses or the mighty insist that you ought to do so. Disingenuous self-effacement is an insult to both the object of your phony reverence and, perhaps as importantly, to yourself. Indeed, if it is false, the modesty expressed becomes a kind of self-aggrandizement—a show to win the acceptance or approval of some audience. There is no need for playacting. There is no justification for taking up some fraudulent veneration or sham devotion. The world provides ample resources to engender genuine awe. The voices of majesties call out from every direction. You need not listen long to perceive one calling *your* name. Indeed, you have to stop up your ears to *avoid* hearing. Be still a moment and attend to the voices.

10

Who are you that anyone should heed *your* counsel? Indeed, you have not even earned the right to *keep* your own counsel. There are simply no alternatives available in some areas of endeavor. You have had to find your own way, and have failed to do so at least as often as not, because no one felt compelled to bother with you or your interests. Can you blame them? Were you anyone else, how much attention would you pay to some lost soul of *your* stripe? On what grounds would you spend the effort? What hope do you believe you engender in any who encounter you? If there is evidence that you are something more than an awkward, dysfunctional, talking ape, you must admit that this evidence is remarkably well concealed. Nothing about you appears special or worthy of particular notice. Therefore, do not flagellate, even in your own mind, those who ignore your advice or disdain your counsel. There is nothing inherently unreasonable in their indifference to your opinion. Respect, as you well know, must be earned.