The Promethean Library



A Year with the Stoics

Fifty-Two Weekly Readings from Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Seneca

Epictetus · Marcus Aurelius · Seneca

One reading a week, with a reflection, a practice and a question

Readers · No. 1

A Year with the Stoics



A Weekly Reader

A Year with the Stoics

Fifty-Two Weekly Readings from Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Seneca

Readings in the public domain translations of George Long and Aubrey Stewart

With weekly reflections, practices and questions, notes and glossary



The Promethean Library · Readers · No. 1
Transatlantic Press

A Year with the Stoics
Fifty-Two Weekly Readings from Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and Seneca

The Promethean Library · Readers · No. 1
Published by Transatlantic Press
Series editor: Martin Robert Genter Jr.
First digital edition, November 2026

The readings. The readings are reproduced word for word from public domain translations. Each translator, edition and date is listed under Sources of the Texts, with what this edition leaves out.

How this edition was made. The introduction, headnotes, questions, reflections, practices, notes, glossary, chronology and reading list were drafted with the help of artificial intelligence and checked by hand against the readings and against published sources. Every quotation in them matches the readings printed in this book word for word, and every fact was checked against a published source before it was printed. The publisher keeps a record of the source checked for each fact. No quotation, fact or story was invented. The readings themselves are copied unchanged from the translations named under Sources of the Texts.

Typeset in EB Garamond and Cinzel. Trim size 5.5 × 8.5 inches.

We must make the best use that we can of the things which are in our power, and use the rest according to their nature.

Epictetus, Discourses I.1, translated by George Long

Contents

Before You Begin 9

Introduction 10

A Note on the Texts 16

First Quarter · Weeks 1 to 13: What Is in Our Power 18

- Week 1: The Gift of the Will 19
- Week 2: The Inner Retreat 21
- Week 3: Out of Reach 23
- Week 4: What Is Mine 25
- Week 5: Rising to the Work 27
- Week 6: Happiness and Virtue 29
- Week 7: Prepared All One's Life 31
- Week 8: Wherever I Am Cast 33
- Week 9: The Rough Young Man 35
- Week 10: Knowing Our Strength 37
- Week 11: Material for Virtue 39
- Week 12: No More Delay 41
- Week 13: The Wise Man Is Real 43

Second Quarter · Weeks 14 to 26: The Passions and Our Judgments 45

- Week 14: Apply the Rule 46
- Week 15: The First Movement 48
- Week 16: Stripping Things Bare 50
- Week 17: Habit Feeds Habit 52
- Week 18: The Greatest Remedy 54
- Week 19: How the Soul Harms Itself 56
- Week 20: How Will It Turn Out? 58
- Week 21: The Evening Review 60

Week 22: What We Forget 62
Week 23: The True Athlete 64
Week 24: If Nothing Hinders 66
Week 25: The Dye of Thought 68
Week 26: Not Seeing Everything 70

Third Quarter · Weeks 27 to 39: Duty and Other People 72

Week 27: The Busybody and the Ungrateful 73
Week 28: What Our Names Promise 75
Week 29: What a Benefit Is 77
Week 30: The Vine and Its Grapes 79
Week 31: Why Be Angry with Medea? 81
Week 32: Giving Promptly 83
Week 33: A Portrait of Antoninus 85
Week 34: The Rod of Hermes 87
Week 35: Two Commonwealths 89
Week 36: If Anyone Despises Me 91
Week 37: Where the I and the Mine Are Placed 93
Week 38: The Free Part of a Slave 95
Week 39: The Severed Hand 97

Fourth Quarter · Weeks 40 to 52: Death, Time and the Whole 99

Week 40: Life Is Long Enough 100
Week 41: Three Thousand Years 102
Week 42: Against the Fear of Death 104
Week 43: Seize the Day 106
Week 44: The Ripe Olive 108
Week 45: The Measure of Grief 110
Week 46: A Point in Time 112
Week 47: When Friends Part 114
Week 48: The Willing Follower 116
Week 49: If There Are Gods 118
Week 50: No Time to Waste on Anger 120

Week 51: A Small Part of the Whole 122
Week 52: One Light, One Soul 124

Notes on the Texts 126

Glossary 131

Chronology 134

Further Reading 136

Sources of the Texts 137

Edition Notes 138

Before You Begin

This book offers a year of short readings from three Stoic philosophers of the Roman world: Epictetus, a former slave who taught in Greece; Seneca, a statesman and writer at the court of Nero; and Marcus Aurelius, an emperor who kept a private notebook. There is one reading for each week, fifty-two in all, each between about 150 and 450 words long. You need no background in philosophy or in the ancient world.

Every week has four parts. First comes the reading itself, in an English translation made in the nineteenth century. Then a short Reflection explains what the passage says and where it comes from. A Practice suggests one small thing to try during the week, and a Question gives you something to think over, write about or talk through with others. Most readers will need about fifteen minutes for the week's pages, and a few minutes on later days for the practice.

The year is divided into four quarters of thirteen weeks, each with its own theme, described at the end of the Introduction. You can begin in any week of the calendar. You can read straight through, or turn to the quarter that meets your present need.

The numbers in the margin of each reading, such as 4.2, mark the reading and its paragraph or line. The Notes on the Texts at the back use these numbers to explain names and puzzling phrases. After the notes come a Glossary of Stoic terms, a Chronology, suggestions for Further Reading, and a list of the editions from which the texts were taken.

Introduction

Three Voices

The three writers in this book lived across nearly two centuries of Roman history. Seneca was born around 4 BC and died in AD 65. Epictetus was born not long before Seneca's death and taught well into the second century. Marcus Aurelius, born in AD 121, died as emperor in 180. They wrote in different languages and in different forms. Seneca wrote polished Latin essays addressed to friends and relatives. Epictetus wrote nothing himself; his lectures were taken down in Greek by a student. Marcus wrote notes to himself, also in Greek, and probably never meant them for publication.

Their stations in life could hardly have been further apart. One was born a slave. One advised an emperor. One ruled the empire. Yet they shared a philosophy, and they used it for the same purpose: to live well in a world they could not control. That shared purpose is why they have been read together for so long, and why they still speak to readers who have never opened a book of ancient philosophy.

None of the three was a professional scholar writing for other scholars. Each was trying to persuade someone, a student, a friend or himself, to change how he lived. Their writing is practical, often blunt and sometimes funny. It is also of its time. You will meet assumptions about slavery, women and foreign peoples that few readers now share, and the Reflections point these out where they appear. The useful thing is to notice them and to read on for what still holds.

What the Stoics Taught

Stoicism began in Athens around 300 BC, when Zeno of Citium started teaching in the Stoa Poikile, a painted colonnade in the city's marketplace. The school took its name from that porch. Zeno had studied with Crates the Cynic. After Zeno the school was led by Cleanthes and then by Chrysippus, its most influential thinker, who wrote over 150 works. None of these early books survives complete.

The Stoics divided philosophy into three parts: logic, physics and ethics. Physics, for them, meant the study of the whole of nature, including the divine. They pictured the universe as a single order, shaped and guided by reason, which they called logos and also God, and whose care for the world they called Providence. Everything happens according to this reason, in a long chain of causes. Human beings share in reason more fully than any other creature on earth. That shared reason makes all people kin, citizens of one great city.

In ethics, the Stoics made a startling claim: virtue is the only true good, and vice the only true evil. Health, wealth, reputation, pleasure, even life itself, are what they called indifferents. That does not mean they do not matter at all. Health is naturally preferred to sickness, and it is normally right to choose it. But such things do not make a person good or bad, and so they cannot make a life truly happy or truly miserable. What does that is the way we use them. The Stoics called such things the material for virtue, a phrase Marcus uses in Week 11.

The Stoics also had a distinctive account of the emotions. Strong passions such as fear, grief, craving and excessive delight are not storms that simply happen to us. Each one rests on a judgment, usually a mistaken one: that something outside us is a great good or a great evil. Change the judgment and the passion changes too. The Stoics did allow for sudden involuntary jolts, the flinch and the start, which come before we give any assent. What matters is whether we then agree with them.

The goal was to live in agreement with nature, which means with reason, both our own and the universe's. The person who did this perfectly

was the sage or wise man. The Stoics admitted that such a person was extremely rare; not even the leaders of the school claimed to be one. The rest of us are on the road, making progress. In the Roman period, the period of all three writers in this book, Stoic teachers put special weight on this practical side: on exercises, habits and daily reminders that help a person make progress.

Epictetus

Epictetus was born around AD 50, or at least sometime in the 50s, at Hierapolis in Phrygia, and he was born a slave. In Rome he belonged to Epaphroditus, a wealthy freedman who served as secretary to the emperor Nero. He studied with the Stoic teacher Musonius Rufus, and at some point he was freed. He was lame. Ancient sources disagree about why: one says a master broke his leg, another that he was lame from childhood.

When the emperor Domitian banished philosophers from Italy, in 89 by one dating or around 93 by another, Epictetus moved to Nicopolis in Epirus and opened a school. He taught there until his death around 135. One of those students, Arrian, who studied with him around 108, wrote down his lectures. Arrian's record, the Discourses, originally filled eight books or more, of which four survive. Arrian also made a short summary of the main teachings, the Enchiridion, or Handbook.

The Discourses are not polished essays. They read like what they are, a teacher talking to his students: questioning, teasing, scolding, telling stories. Epictetus returns again and again to one distinction, between what is in our power and what is not. In our power are our own judgments, desires and choices, which he gathers under a word his translator renders as the will. Everything else, our bodies, property, reputation and the actions of others, lies outside it. His other great theme is that our duties grow out of our roles. Being a son, a brother, a citizen or a human being each carries its own obligations.

Seneca

Seneca was born at Corduba in Spain, around 4 BC (one leading scholar dates his birth between 4 and 1 BC). His father was the writer known as Seneca the Elder. In AD 41 Seneca was accused of adultery with Julia Livilla and condemned to death, but the emperor Claudius commuted the sentence to exile on Corsica. Eight years later Agrippina had him recalled to Rome to tutor the young Nero.

When Nero came to power in 54, Seneca became one of his chief advisers. His influence faded after 62, and he twice tried to retire. In 65, after a failed conspiracy against Nero, the emperor ordered Seneca to take his own life. It is thought unlikely that Seneca was part of the plot.

Seneca wrote many prose works on moral questions, as well as letters. The readings in this book come from his shorter essays, traditionally called dialogues, and from On Benefits, a long work in seven books about giving and receiving. Most of the dialogues are addressed to a particular person: his brother Novatus (later called Gallio), his younger friend Serenus, Paulinus, probably a relative, a grieving mother named Marcia. Seneca writes as a man still struggling, and he often lets an imagined reader object, marking the objection with quotation marks. His style is quick and pointed, built for memorable sentences.

Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius was born in Rome on 26 April 121. In 138 the emperor Hadrian adopted Antoninus on condition that Antoninus in turn adopt Marcus and Lucius Verus. Antoninus, later called Pius, ruled from 138 to 161 in a reign remembered as the most peaceful of its era. Among Marcus's teachers, Rusticus had the greatest Stoic influence on him, and lent him a copy of Epictetus.

Marcus became emperor in 161, sharing power with Lucius Verus until 169. He fought long wars against northern peoples, among them the

Marcomanni, the Quadi and the Iazyges. He died on 17 March 180, either at Vindobona or near Sirmium; the sources differ.

The Meditations were probably written in those years, around 171 to 175, in the field. They fill twelve books, written in Greek, and they read as a private notebook: reminders, arguments with himself, short lists, quotations. The familiar title was probably added later; the Greek heading attached to the work means roughly to himself. Because Marcus is talking to himself, his translator George Long has him say thou and thee. The voice is that of a man under great pressure, reminding himself every day what he believes.

How the Year Is Arranged

The fifty-two readings fall into four quarters of thirteen weeks, each with a theme. The three authors take turns through every quarter, so you will hear all three voices on each theme.

The first quarter, Weeks 1 to 13, is about **what is in our power**. It begins with the opening of Epictetus' Discourses and its basic distinction, and it explores what follows from it: inner freedom, steadiness in trouble, and the daily work of making progress.

The second quarter, Weeks 14 to 26, is about **the passions and our judgments**. Here the readings look at how fear, anger and desire arise, how habits form, and how the Stoics tried to catch a judgment before it hardens into a passion. Seneca's On Anger is a main source.

The third quarter, Weeks 27 to 39, is about **duty and other people**: our roles, the giving and receiving of kindness, difficult people, friendship, and the Stoic idea that all human beings are parts of one body.

The fourth quarter, Weeks 40 to 52, is about **death, time and the whole**. The Stoics wrote about death often, not to dwell on it but to loosen its hold, so that a person could live the present day fully and without fear. This quarter also includes readings on grief, on the shortness and length of life, and on our place in the universe.

A few words on using the practices. They are exercises in attention and habit, the kind the Stoics themselves recommended, adapted for ordinary modern life. They are not therapy and not a substitute for the help of friends or professionals when life is hard. If a reading on loss or death arrives at a raw moment, it is fine to set it aside and return to it later. The Stoics would be the first to say that the right moment for a lesson matters.

A Note on the Texts

The readings come from three nineteenth-century translations. George Long (1800–1879), a classical scholar, published his translation of Marcus Aurelius' Meditations in 1862 and of Epictetus' Discourses and Enchiridion in 1877. Aubrey Stewart (1844–1918), a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, published his translation of Seneca's On Benefits in 1887 and of the shorter dialogues in 1889. Both translations have long been in the public domain.

Seneca's Moral Letters to Lucilius do not appear here. The standard older translation, by Richard M. Gummere, appeared between 1918 and 1925, and Gummere lived until 1969, which places it outside the rules this series follows for its texts. Stewart's versions of the dialogues and On Benefits provide a full and varied Seneca without it.

Earlier volumes in this series print the Enchiridion and the Meditations complete. This book returns to a few passages from each where the theme of a week calls for them, but most of its Epictetus comes from the longer Discourses.

Every reading is copied exactly from its source, without modernizing or correction. The translators' spelling is British (honour, labour, travellers), and their English is sometimes formal or old-fashioned. Long uses thou for Marcus speaking to himself, and he often adds an alternative rendering in round brackets, as in difficulties after circumstances at 9.1. Square brackets in the Marcus readings are also his. In two places Long prints a Greek word in parentheses, and the notes point these out. Two misprints in the source texts are left as printed and marked in the notes: temping for tempting at 15.1, and carried way for carried away at 23.1.

The numbers in the margin belong to this book: 4.2 means Reading 4, paragraph 2. Each week's reading line also gives the passage's place in the original work. For Epictetus, that is the book and chapter of the Discourses or the chapter of the Enchiridion. For Seneca, it is the work and chapter (and book, where a work has several). For Marcus, it is the book and paragraph in this series' edition of Long's Meditations. Other editions sometimes divide Marcus's paragraphs differently, so their numbers can differ by a few; if you compare translations, search for a phrase.

The translators' own notes and the markers for them have been left out. The Notes on the Texts at the back are new.

First Quarter · Weeks 1 to 13

What Is in Our Power



Week 1: The Gift of the Will

Reading 1. *The Gift of the Will. Epictetus, Discourses I.1, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 As then it was fit to be so, that which is best of all and supreme over all is the only thing which the gods have placed in our power, the right use of appearances; but all other things they have not placed in our power. Was it because they did not choose? I indeed think that, if they had been able, they would have put these other things also in our power, but they certainly could not. For as we exist on the earth, and are bound to such a body and to such companions, how was it possible for us not to be hindered as to these things by externals?

2 But what says Zeus? "Epictetus, if it were possible, I would have made both your little body and your little property free and not exposed to hindrance. But now be not ignorant of this: this body is not yours, but it is clay finely tempered. And since I was not able to do for you what I have mentioned, I have given you a small portion of us, this faculty of pursuing an object and avoiding it, and the faculty of desire and aversion, and, in a word, the faculty of using the appearances of things; and if you will take care of this faculty and consider it your only possession, you will never be hindered, never meet with impediments; you will not lament, you will not blame, you will not flatter any person."

3 Well, do these seem to you small matters? I hope not. Be content with them then and pray to the gods. But now when it is in our power to look after one thing, and to attach ourselves to it, we prefer to look after many things, and to be bound to many things, to the body and to property, and to brother and to friend, and to child and to slave. Since then we are

bound to many things, we are depressed by them and dragged down. For this reason, when the weather is not fit for sailing, we sit down and torment ourselves, and continually look out to see what wind is blowing. It is north. What is that to us? When will the west wind blow? When it shall choose, my good man, or when it shall please Aeolus; for God has not made you the manager of the winds, but Aeolus. What then? We must make the best use that we can of the things which are in our power, and use the rest according to their nature. What is their nature then? As God may please.

Reflection: This is the opening chapter of the Discourses, and its lesson is the one Epictetus returns to all his life: a few things are in our power, and most are not. In 1.2 he imagines Zeus explaining the limits of his gift. The body is only "clay finely tempered," but the faculty of "using the appearances of things" is truly ours. Appearances are the impressions that things make on us, before we decide what they mean. The sailing image in 1.3 is practical: people who cannot sail sit watching the wind. Epictetus does not pretend the wind is unimportant. He says only that it is not ours to manage, and that fretting over it adds a second trouble to the first.

Practice: Each evening this week, write two short lists about the day: what went wrong that was not up to you, and what choices were. Notice which list took more of your attention.

Question: What is your north wind at present, the thing you keep checking although you cannot change it?

Week 2: The Inner Retreat

Reading 2. *The Inner Retreat. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations IV.3, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Men seek retreats for themselves, houses in the country, seashores, and mountains; and thou too art wont to desire such things very much. But this is altogether a mark of the most common sort of men, for it is in thy power whenever thou shalt choose to retire into thyself. For nowhere either with more quiet or more freedom from trouble does a man retire than into his own soul, particularly when he has within him such thoughts that by looking into them he is immediately in perfect tranquility; and I affirm that tranquility is nothing else than the good ordering of the mind. Constantly then give to thyself this retreat, and renew thyself; and let thy principles be brief and fundamental, which, as soon as thou shalt recur to them, will be sufficient to cleanse the soul completely, and to send thee back free from all discontent with the things to which thou returnest. For with what art thou discontented? With the badness of men? Recall to thy mind this conclusion, that rational animals exist for one another, and that to endure is a part of justice, and that men do wrong involuntarily; and consider how many already, after mutual enmity, suspicion, hatred, and fighting, have been stretched dead, reduced to ashes; and be quiet at last.—But perhaps thou art dissatisfied with that which is assigned to thee out of the universe.—Recall to thy recollection this alternative; either there is providence or atoms, fortuitous concurrence of things; or remember the arguments by which it has been proved that the world is a kind of political community, and be quiet at last.—But perhaps corporeal things will still fasten upon thee.—Consider then further that the mind mingles not with the breath, whether

moving gently or violently, when it has once drawn itself apart and discovered its own power, and think also of all that thou hast heard and assented to about pain and pleasure, and be quiet at last.—But perhaps the desire of the thing called fame will torment thee.—See how soon everything is forgotten, and look at the chaos of infinite time on each side of the present, and the emptiness of applause, and the changeableness and want of judgement in those who pretend to give praise, and the narrowness of the space within which it is circumscribed, and be quiet at last. For the whole earth is a point, and how small a nook in it is this thy dwelling, and how few are there in it, and what kind of people are they who will praise thee.

Reflection: Marcus wrote these notes to himself, which is why he says thou. The rich of his day sought country houses and seashores; Marcus reminds himself that a better retreat is always at hand, to "retire into thyself." The retreat is not empty. It is stocked with a few short principles, and the passage runs through them like a checklist. Annoyed with other people? Remember that "rational animals exist for one another." Unhappy with your lot? Whether the world is ordered by providence or is only a chance concurrence of atoms, complaint changes nothing. Hungry for fame? Remember how soon everything is forgotten. Each answer ends with the same refrain, "be quiet at last." The dashes mark Marcus raising objections against himself.

Practice: Write three or four short sentences that steady you, the kind Marcus calls "brief and fundamental." Keep them on a card or in your phone, and read them once a day in a quiet minute.

Question: If you had only a minute to step back into yourself, which single thought would you want to find waiting there?

Week 3: Out of Reach

Reading 3. *Out of Reach. Seneca, On the Firmness of the Wise Person IV, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 "What then? Will there be no one who will try to do an injury to the wise man?" Yes, someone will try, but the injury will not reach him; for he is separated from the contact of his inferiors by so wide a distance that no evil impulse can retain its power of harm until it reaches him. Even when powerful men, raised to positions of high authority, and strong in the obedience of their dependents, strive to injure him, all their darts fall as far short of his wisdom as those which are shot upwards by bowstrings or catapults, which, although they rise so high as to pass out of sight, yet fall back again without reaching the heavens. Why do you suppose that when that stupid king clouded the daylight with the multitude of his darts, that any arrow of them all went into the sun? or that when he flung his chains into the deep, that he was able to reach Neptune? Just as sacred things escape from the hands of men, and no injury is done to the godhead by those who destroy temples and melt down images, so whoever attempts to treat the wise man with impertinence, insolence, or scorn, does so in vain. "It would be better," say you, "if no one wished to do so." You are expressing a wish that the whole human race were inoffensive, which may hardly be; moreover, those who would gain by such wrongs not being done are those who would do them, not he who could not suffer from them even if they were done; nay, I know not whether wisdom is not best displayed by calmness in the midst of annoyances, just as the greatest proof of a general's strength in arms and men consists in his quietness and confidence in the midst of an enemy's country.

Reflection: Seneca addressed this essay to his younger friend Serenus, and like many of his works it argues with an imagined reader, whose objections appear in quotation marks. The claim is bold: no injury can reach the wise person, because what such a person values cannot be taken. Seneca's examples come from the Persian king Xerxes, who invaded Greece in 480 BC. His archers were said to darken the sun, and he had chains thrown into the sea. Neither the sun nor the sea god was harmed. Seneca does not say that no one will try to hurt the wise. He says that the attempt misses its mark, and that calm in the midst of annoyance is the best proof of strength.

Practice: When someone is rude to you this week, picture the words as arrows falling short of the sun. Then answer, if an answer is needed, only the part that deserves one.

Question: Which kind of slight still reaches you most easily, and what exactly in you does it hit?

Week 4: What Is Mine

Reading 4. *What Is Mine. Epictetus, Discourses I.1, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 What then should a man have in readiness in such circumstances? What else than this? What is mine, and what is not mine; and what is permitted to me, and what is not permitted to me. I must die. Must I then die lamenting? I must be put in chains. Must I then also lament? I must go into exile. Does any man then hinder me from going with smiles and cheerfulness and contentment? Tell me the secret which you possess. I will not, for this is in my power. But I will put you in chains. Man, what are you talking about? Me in chains? You may fetter my leg, but my will not even Zeus himself can overpower. I will throw you into prison. My poor body, you mean. I will cut your head off. When then have I told you that my head alone cannot be cut off? These are the things which philosophers should meditate on, which they should write daily, in which they should exercise themselves.

2 Thrasea used to say, I would rather be killed today than banished tomorrow. What then did Rufus say to him? If you choose death as the heavier misfortune, how great is the folly of your choice? But if, as the lighter, who has given you the choice? Will you not study to be content with that which has been given to you?

3 What then did Agrippinus say? He said, "I am not a hindrance to myself." When it was reported to him that his trial was going on in the Senate, he said, "I hope it may turn out well; but it is the fifth hour of the day"—this was the time when he was used to exercise himself and then take the cold bath—"let us go and take our exercise." After he had taken

his exercise, one comes and tells him, You have been condemned. To banishment, he replies, or to death? To banishment. What about my property? It is not taken from you. Let us go to Aricia then, he said, and dine.

4 This it is to have studied what a man ought to study; to have made desire, aversion, free from hindrance, and free from all that a man would avoid. I must die. If now, I am ready to die. If, after a short time, I now dine because it is the dinner-hour; after this I will then die. How? Like a man who gives up what belongs to another.

Reflection: Later in the same opening chapter, Epictetus turns the distinction of Week 1 into a drill: "What is mine, and what is not mine." His examples come from Rome under Nero, a generation before his own teaching. Thrasea Paetus was a senator and leading Stoic who was condemned in AD 66. Rufus is Musonius Rufus, Epictetus' own teacher. Agrippinus, a Stoic known to us mainly from Epictetus, was banished from Italy. The story of 4.3 is almost comic: told that his case is being heard, Agrippinus goes to take his exercise; told he is banished, he asks only about his property, then sets off to dine. Epictetus wants us to see that this calm was learned. These are things philosophers should "write daily."

Practice: Choose one small routine you will keep whatever the day brings, as Agrippinus kept his exercise and his dinner. Keep it each day this week, especially on a hard day.

Question: What would it mean, in a setback you face now, to go on "like a man who gives up what belongs to another"?

Week 5: Rising to the Work

Reading 5. *Rising to the Work. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations V.1, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 In the morning when thou risest unwillingly, let this thought be present —I am rising to the work of a human being. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to do the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world? Or have I been made for this, to lie in the bedclothes and keep myself warm?—But this is more pleasant.—Dost thou exist then to take thy pleasure, and not at all for action or exertion? Dost thou not see the little plants, the little birds, the ants, the spiders, the bees working together to put in order their several parts of the universe? And art thou unwilling to do the work of a human being, and dost thou not make haste to do that which is according to thy nature?—But it is necessary to take rest also.—It is necessary: however nature has fixed bounds to this too: she has fixed bounds both to eating and drinking, and yet thou goest beyond these bounds, beyond what is sufficient; yet in thy acts it is not so, but thou stoppest short of what thou canst do. So thou lovest not thyself, for if thou didst, thou wouldst love thy nature and her will. But those who love their several arts exhaust themselves in working at them unwashed and without food; but thou valuest thy own nature less than the turner values the turning art, or the dancer the dancing art, or the lover of money values his money, or the vainglorious man his little glory. And such men, when they have a violent affection to a thing, choose neither to eat nor to sleep rather than to perfect the things which they care for. But are the acts which concern society more vile in thy eyes and less worthy of thy labour?

Reflection: Here an emperor argues with his bedclothes, and the dashes mark the excuses of the part of him that wants to stay warm. Marcus answers each one. Plants, birds, ants and bees all do their work; human work is to act with reason and for others. Rest is necessary, he grants, but nature sets bounds to it, as it does to eating and drinking, and he notes wryly that we go beyond those bounds in eating and drinking but stop short of them in our work. Then he turns to craftsmen who forget meals for love of their art. If a dancer loves dancing that much, why should we value our own nature, and the work it gives us, any less?

Practice: On waking, before you reach for anything, say Marcus's sentence to yourself: "I am rising to the work of a human being." Then name one task for the day that serves someone besides you.

Question: Which of your daily tasks do you love as the turner loves turning, and which do you merely get through?

Week 6: Happiness and Virtue

Reading 6. *Happiness and Virtue. Seneca, On a Happy Life XVI, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 True happiness, therefore, consists in virtue: and what will this virtue bid you do? Not to think anything bad or good which is connected neither with virtue nor with wickedness: and in the next place, both to endure unmoved the assaults of evil, and, as far as is right, to form a god out of what is good. What reward does she promise you for this campaign? an enormous one, and one that raises you to the level of the gods: you shall be subject to no restraint and to no want; you shall be free, safe, unhurt; you shall fail in nothing that you attempt; you shall be debarred from nothing; everything shall turn out according to your wish; no misfortune shall befall you; nothing shall happen to you except what you expect and hope for. "What! does virtue alone suffice to make you happy?" why, of course, consummate and godlike virtue such as this not only suffices, but more than suffices: for when a man is placed beyond the reach of any desire, what can he possibly lack? if all that he needs is concentred in himself, how can he require anything from without? He, however, who is only on the road to virtue, although he may have made great progress along it, nevertheless needs some favour from Fortune while he is still struggling among mere human interests, while he is untying that knot, and all the bonds which bind him to mortality. What, then, is the difference between them? it is that some are tied more or less tightly by these bonds, and some have even tied themselves with them as well; whereas he who has made progress towards the upper regions and raised himself upwards drags a looser chain, and though not yet free, is yet as good as free.

Reflection: Seneca addressed On a Happy Life to his elder brother Gallio. This chapter states the central Stoic claim: "True happiness, therefore, consists in virtue." Things linked neither to virtue nor to vice are neither good nor bad. Seneca piles up the promises of virtue in grand style, then becomes more honest. Perfect virtue belongs to the sage. Most of us are only "on the road to virtue," and still need some favor from Fortune. His image for progress is a chain. Some people are bound tightly, some have even tied themselves, but the one who is making progress "drags a looser chain." The aim is not to pretend we are already free, but to loosen the chain a little at a time.

Practice: Pick one bond that tugs at you, perhaps a need for praise or a habitual comfort, and loosen it a little: go without it once this week, and notice that you are still yourself.

Question: Where in your life do you drag a looser chain than you used to, and what loosened it?

Week 7: Prepared All One's Life

Reading 7. *Prepared All One's Life. Epictetus, Discourses II.2, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Consider, you who are going into court, what you wish to maintain and what you wish to succeed in. For if you wish to maintain a will conformable to nature, you have every security, every facility, you have no troubles. For if you wish to maintain what is in your own power and is naturally free, and if you are content with these, what else do you care for? For who is the master of such things? Who can take them away? If you choose to be modest and faithful, who shall not allow you to be so? If you choose not to be restrained or compelled, who shall compel you to desire what you think that you ought not to desire? who shall compel you to avoid what you do not think fit to avoid? But what do you say? The judge will determine against you something that appears formidable; but that you should also suffer in trying to avoid it, how can he do that? When then the pursuit of objects and the avoiding of them are in your power, what else do you care for? Let this be your preface, this your narrative, this your confirmation, this your victory, this your peroration, this your applause (or the approbation which you will receive).

2 Therefore Socrates said to one who was reminding him to prepare for his trial, "Do you not think then that I have been preparing for it all my life?" By what kind of preparation? "I have maintained that which was in my own power." How then? "I have never done anything unjust either in my private or in my public life."

Reflection: This chapter, titled Of Tranquillity, speaks to someone about to go to court. Epictetus borrows the parts of a formal speech, preface, narrative, confirmation and peroration (the closing appeal), and says that a will in agreement with nature can serve as all of them. The verdict belongs to the judge. How you bear it belongs to you. Then he offers Socrates, who was tried at Athens in 399 BC on charges of impiety and corrupting the young, and was condemned to death. Asked whether he was preparing his defense, Socrates answered that he had been "preparing for it all my life." His preparation was simply to have done nothing unjust, in private or in public.

Practice: Before a meeting, interview or hard conversation this week, write down in one line what you want to keep in yourself whatever the outcome, such as honesty or courtesy. Afterward, judge yourself only by that line.

Question: If you were judged tomorrow, what in your ordinary life would count as your preparation?

Week 8: Wherever I Am Cast

Reading 8. *Wherever I Am Cast. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations VIII.46–48, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 See that thou secure this present time to thyself: for those who rather pursue posthumous fame do consider that the men of after time will be exactly such as these whom they cannot bear now; and both are mortal. And what is it in any way to thee if these men of after time utter this or that sound, or have this or that opinion about thee?

2 Take me and cast me where thou wilt; for there I shall keep my divine part tranquil, that is, content, if it can feel and act conformably to its proper constitution. Is this change of place sufficient reason why my soul should be unhappy and worse than it was, depressed, expanded, shrinking, affrighted? And what wilt thou find which is sufficient reason for this?

3 Nothing can happen to any man which is not a human accident, nor to an ox which is not according to the nature of an ox, nor to a vine which is not according to the nature of a vine, nor to a stone which is not proper to a stone. If then there happens to each thing both what is usual and natural, why shouldst thou complain? For the common nature brings nothing which may not be borne by thee.

Reflection: These are three short entries from Marcus's notebook. The first deflates the hope of fame after death: the people of the future will be much like the people we find hard to bear now, and they too will die. The second, "Take me and cast me where thou wilt," was probably

written on campaign, far from Rome. Wherever he is sent, he says, he can keep his "divine part tranquil," the reasoning part of himself that the Stoics thought of as a share in the divine. The third says that each creature meets what belongs to its nature. Marcus does not deny that things are hard. He claims that we have a capacity to meet them.

Practice: When you find yourself somewhere you did not choose this week, a waiting room, a delayed train, a dull meeting, ask what you could do well right there, and do it.

Question: Is there a place you were sent, or a situation you were cast into, where you did better than you expected?

Week 9: The Rough Young Man

Reading 9. *The Rough Young Man. Epictetus, Discourses I.24, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 It is circumstances (difficulties) which show what men are. Therefore when a difficulty falls upon you, remember that God, like a trainer of wrestlers, has matched you with a rough young man. "For what purpose?" you may say. Why, that you may become an Olympic conqueror; but it is not accomplished without sweat. In my opinion no man has had a more profitable difficulty than you have had, if you choose to make use of it as an athlete would deal with a young antagonist. We are now sending a scout to Rome; but no man sends a cowardly scout, who, if he only hears a noise and sees a shadow anywhere, comes running back in terror and reports that the enemy is close at hand. So now if you should come and tell us, "Fearful is the state of affairs at Rome, terrible is death, terrible is exile; terrible is calumny; terrible is poverty; fly, my friends; the enemy is near," we shall answer: "Be gone; prophesy for yourself; we have committed only one fault: that we sent such a scout."

2 Diogenes, who was sent as a scout before you, made a different report to us. He says that death is no evil, for neither is it base. He says that fame (reputation) is the noise of madmen. And what has this spy said about pain, about pleasure, and about poverty? He says that to be naked is better than any purple robe, and to sleep on the bare ground is the softest bed. And he gives as a proof of each thing that he affirms his own courage, his tranquillity, his freedom, and the healthy appearance and compactness of his body. "There is no enemy near," he says; "all is peace." How so, Diogenes? "See," he replies, "if I am struck, if I have been

wounded, if I have fled from any man." This is what a scout ought to be. But you come to us and tell us one thing after another. Will you not go back, and you will see clearer when you have laid aside fear?

Reflection: Epictetus loved images from athletics. A good trainer pairs a wrestler with a tough partner, and a difficulty, he says, is God doing the same for us. Then the image changes to a scout sent ahead to report on the enemy. A frightened scout sees danger everywhere: "terrible is death, terrible is exile." Diogenes of Sinope, the Cynic philosopher who lived in deliberate poverty in Athens in the fourth century BC, made the opposite report, and Epictetus often holds him up as a model. Diogenes found no enemy near, because he did not count poverty, pain or a bad name as enemies. The proof he offered was not an argument but his own courage and freedom.

Practice: Name one difficulty you are facing as your rough young man. Each day this week, write one sentence on what it is training in you: patience, skill, honesty or something else.

Question: Whose reports about life's dangers do you tend to believe, and how reliable a scout have they proved?

Week 10: Knowing Our Strength

Reading 10. *Knowing Our Strength. Seneca, On Peace of Mind VI, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 We ought, however, first to examine our own selves, next the business which we propose to transact, next those for whose sake or in whose company we transact it.

2 It is above all things necessary to form a true estimate of oneself, because as a rule we think that we can do more than we are able: one man is led too far through confidence in his eloquence, another demands more from his estate than it can produce, another burdens a weakly body with some toilsome duty. Some men are too shamefaced for the conduct of public affairs, which require an unblushing front: some men's obstinate pride renders them unfit for courts: some cannot control their anger, and break into unguarded language on the slightest provocation: some cannot rein in their wit or resist making risky jokes: for all these men leisure is better than employment: a bold, haughty and impatient nature ought to avoid anything that may lead it to use a freedom of speech which will bring it to ruin. Next we must form an estimate of the matter which we mean to deal with, and compare our strength with the deed we are about to attempt: for the bearer ought always to be more powerful than his load: indeed, loads which are too heavy for their bearer must of necessity crush him: some affairs also are not so important in themselves as they are prolific and lead to much more business, which employments, as they involve us in new and various forms of work, ought to be refused. Neither should you engage in anything from which you are not free to retreat: apply yourself to something which you can finish, or at any rate

can hope to finish: you had better not meddle with those operations which grow in importance, while they are being transacted, and which will not stop where you intended them to stop.

Reflection: On Peace of Mind is addressed to Serenus, the friend of Week 3, who held an office in Rome under Nero. In this chapter Seneca gives plain advice about taking on work. Make three estimates: of yourself, of the task, and of the people involved. Know your temper: some people cannot hold their tongues, and should keep away from places where a sharp word can ruin them. Know the load: "the bearer ought always to be more powerful than his load." Beware of tasks that breed more tasks, and of commitments that grow while you are in them and do not "stop where you intended them to stop." Peace of mind, for Seneca, begins with honest arithmetic.

Practice: Before you say yes to any new commitment this week, ask Seneca's three questions: am I suited to it, is the task the size it looks, and are these the right people to do it with?

Question: Which of your present commitments has grown well beyond where you meant it to end, and what would a wise limit look like now?

Week 11: Material for Virtue

Reading 11. *Material for Virtue. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations VII.64, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 It is in thy power to live free from all compulsion in the greatest tranquility of mind, even if all the world cry out against thee as much as they choose, and even if wild beasts tear in pieces the members of this kneaded matter which has grown around thee. For what hinders the mind in the midst of all this from maintaining itself in tranquility and in a just judgement of all surrounding things and in a ready use of the objects which are presented to it, so that the judgement may say to the thing which falls under its observation: This thou art in substance [reality], though in men's opinion thou mayest appear to be of a different kind; and the use shall say to that which falls under the hand: Thou art the thing that I was seeking; for to me that which presents itself is always a material for virtue both rational and political, and in a word, for the exercise of art, which belongs to man or God. For everything which happens has a relationship either to God or man, and is neither new nor difficult to handle, but usual and apt matter to work on.

Reflection: Marcus imagines the worst, the whole world shouting against him or wild beasts tearing his body, and asks what could stop the mind from judging calmly even then. He gives the mind two short speeches. Judgment says to the event: this is what you really are, whatever people think of you. The word in square brackets is Long's addition. Use says: "Thou art the thing that I was seeking." Whatever comes is "a material for virtue," the raw stuff on which good action works. This is one

of the most practical ideas in Stoicism. The question shifts from why this has happened to what can be made of it.

Practice: When something unwelcome lands in front of you this week, greet it silently in Marcus's words, "Thou art the thing that I was seeking," and ask what it lets you practice.

Question: What recent trouble turned out, looking back, to be "usual and apt matter to work on"?

Week 12: No More Delay

Reading 12. *No More Delay. Epictetus, Enchiridion LI, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 How long will you then still defer thinking yourself worthy of the best things, and in no matter transgressing the distinctive reason? Have you accepted the theorems (rules), which it was your duty to agree to, and have you agreed to them? what teacher then do you still expect that you defer to him the correction of yourself? You are no longer a youth, but already a full-grown man. If then you are negligent and slothful, and are continually making procrastination after procrastination, and proposal (intention) after proposal, and fixing day after day, after which you will attend to yourself, you will not know that you are not making improvement, but you will continue ignorant (uninstructed) both while you live and till you die. Immediately then think it right to live as a full-grown man, and one who is making proficiency, and let everything which appears to you to be the best be to you a law which must not be transgressed. And if anything laborious, or pleasant or glorious or inglorious be presented to you, remember that now is the contest, now are the Olympic games, and they cannot be deferred; and that it depends on one defeat and one giving way that progress is either lost or maintained. Socrates in this way became perfect, in all things improving himself, attending to nothing except to reason. But you, though you are not yet a Socrates, ought to live as one who wishes to be a Socrates.

Reflection: The Enchiridion, or Handbook, is the short summary of Epictetus' teaching that his student Arrian compiled. This chapter comes

near its end, and it is a call to stop postponing. You know the principles; you have agreed to them; what teacher are you still waiting for? Epictetus speaks to a "full-grown man," not a beginner, and he refuses the excuse of more time. Every test, pleasant or painful, is the contest, and it happens now. The words in round brackets are Long's alternative translations. The chapter ends with Socrates, not as a standard to despair of, but as a direction: live "as one who wishes to be a Socrates."

Practice: Choose one improvement you keep putting off "day after day." Do the first small part of it today, and write the date beside it.

Question: What permission or moment are you still waiting for before you begin?

Week 13: The Wise Man Is Real

Reading 13. *The Wise Man Is Real. Seneca, On the Firmness of the Wise Person VII, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 You have no cause for saying, as you are wont to do, that this wise man of ours is nowhere to be found; we do not invent him as an unreal glory of the human race, or conceive a mighty shadow of an untruth, but we have displayed and will display him just as we sketch him, though he may perhaps be uncommon, and only one appears at long intervals; for what is great and transcends the common ordinary type is not often produced; but this very Marcus Cato himself, the mention of whom started this discussion, was a man who I fancy even surpassed our model. Moreover, that which hurts must be stronger than that which is hurt. Now wickedness is not stronger than virtue; therefore the wise man cannot be hurt. Only the bad attempt to injure the good. Good men are at peace among themselves; bad ones are equally mischievous to the good and to one another. If a man cannot be hurt by one weaker than himself, and a bad man be weaker than a good one, and the good have no injury to dread, except from one unlike themselves; then, no injury takes effect upon the wise man; for by this time I need not remind you that no one save the wise man is good.

Reflection: Serenus had objected that the Stoic wise man is a fiction, found nowhere. Seneca admits he is rare, appearing only "at long intervals," but points to Marcus Cato, known as Cato the Younger (95–46 BC), the Roman Stoic who opposed Julius Caesar and died at Utica. For Seneca, Cato proved the ideal could be lived. The rest of the passage is an

argument in steps: what hurts must be stronger than what is hurt; wickedness is not stronger than virtue; therefore the good cannot be hurt. As the quarter on what is in our power closes, the point is not that we are already sages, but that the ideal is worth steering by.

Practice: Write down the name of one person, living or from history, whose steadiness you admire. Note one specific thing that person did, and try something like it once this week.

Question: Does a model you can never fully match help you or discourage you, and why?

Second Quarter · Weeks 14 to 26

The Passions and Our Judgments



Week 14: Apply the Rule

Reading 14. *Apply the Rule. Epictetus, Discourses III.3, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Against (or with respect to) this kind of thing chiefly a man should exercise himself. As soon as you go out in the morning, examine every man whom you see, every man whom you hear; answer as to a question: What have you seen? A handsome man or woman? Apply the rule. Is this independent of the will, or dependent? Independent. Take it away. What have you seen? A man lamenting over the death of a child. Apply the rule. Death is a thing independent of the will. Take it away. Has the proconsul met you? Apply the rule. What kind of thing is a proconsul's office? Independent of the will, or dependent on it? Independent. Take this away also. It does not stand examination. Cast it away; it is nothing to you.

2 If we practiced this and exercised ourselves in it daily from morning to night, something indeed would be done. But now we are forthwith caught half asleep by every appearance, and it is only, if ever, that in the school we are roused a little. Then when we go out, if we see a man lamenting, we say, "He is undone." If we see a consul, we say, "He is happy." If we see an exiled man, we say, "He is miserable." If we see a poor man, we say, "He is wretched: he has nothing to eat."

Reflection: The second quarter turns to the passions and the judgments beneath them. Epictetus offers a morning exercise: test each impression as you go out. Is this thing dependent on the will, or independent of it? If independent, "Take it away." Out of context this can sound

cold, as when he applies it to a parent grieving a child. But look at 14.2. His target is our quick verdicts about other people: "He is undone," "He is happy," "He is miserable." We pass these judgments all day, half asleep, and they teach us what to fear and crave. The exercise is to catch them and ask whether they "stand examination."

Practice: On one walk or commute this week, notice your snap verdicts about the people you see: lucky, pitiable, important. For each, ask Epictetus' question, "Is this independent of the will, or dependent?"

Question: Which of your quick verdicts about other people would least survive examination?

Week 15: The First Movement

Reading 15. *The First Movement. Seneca, On Anger II.4, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

1 Furthermore, that you may know in what manner passions begin and swell and gain spirit, learn that the first emotion is involuntary, and is, as it were, a preparation for a passion, and a threatening of one. The next is combined with a wish, though not an obstinate one, as, for example, "It is my duty to avenge myself, because I have been injured," or "It is right that this man should be punished, because he has committed a crime." The third emotion is already beyond our control, because it overrides reason, and wishes to avenge itself, not if it be its duty, but whether or no. We are not able by means of reason to escape from that first impression on the mind, any more than we can escape from those things which we have mentioned as occurring to the body: we cannot prevent other people's yawns temping us to yawn: we cannot help winking when fingers are suddenly darted at our eyes. Reason is unable to overcome these habits, which perhaps might be weakened by practice and constant watchfulness: they differ from an emotion which is brought into existence and brought to an end by a deliberate mental act.

Reflection: On Anger, in three books, is addressed to Seneca's brother Novatus. This chapter describes how a passion grows in stages. First comes an involuntary jolt, "a preparation for a passion," as automatic as yawning when others yawn or blinking at a sudden movement. Then comes a thought that seems reasonable: I have been wronged, so I ought to take revenge. Last comes the passion proper, which has overridden

reason and no longer asks what is right. The Stoics held that the first jolt is not our fault and cannot simply be removed. What is ours is the second step, our agreement. (The word "temping" in this passage is a misprint for tempting.)

Practice: When you feel a sudden jolt of irritation this week, name it silently as a first movement, as you might note a yawn. Then wait a moment before you agree with the thought that follows.

Question: Can you remember catching an emotion at its first stage, before it became a passion? What helped you do it?

Week 16: Stripping Things Bare

Reading 16. *Stripping Things Bare. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations VI.13, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 When we have meat before us and such eatables we receive the impression, that this is the dead body of a fish, and this is the dead body of a bird or of a pig; and again, that this Falernian is only a little grape juice, and this purple robe some sheep's wool dyed with the blood of a shellfish: such then are these impressions, and they reach the things themselves and penetrate them, and so we see what kind of things they are. Just in the same way ought we to act all through life, and where there are things which appear most worthy of our approbation, we ought to lay them bare and look at their worthlessness and strip them of all the words by which they are exalted. For outward show is a wonderful perverter of the reason, and when thou art most sure that thou art employed about things worth thy pains, it is then that it cheats thee most. Consider then what Crates says of Xenocrates himself.

Reflection: Marcus describes a habit of seeing things as they are without their packaging. A fine dish is a dead fish or bird; Falernian, a highly prized Roman wine, is grape juice; a purple robe is wool dyed with shellfish. The point is not to despise food, wine or beauty, which would be another kind of distortion. It is to see through the glamour and the grand words that make us overvalue things and envy those who have them. "Outward show is a wonderful perverter of the reason," he writes, and it cheats us most when we feel most sure. The closing sentence

points to a remark by Crates about Xenocrates that Marcus does not record.

Practice: Choose one object of status that tempts you this week, a brand, a title, a gadget, and describe it to yourself in plain words, as Marcus describes the wine and the robe.

Question: Where has outward show most recently cheated you?

Week 17: Habit Feeds Habit

Reading 17. *Habit Feeds Habit. Epictetus, Discourses II.18, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Every habit and faculty is maintained and increased by the corresponding actions: the habit of walking by walking, the habit of running by running. If you would be a good reader, read; if a writer, write. But when you shall not have read for thirty days in succession, but have done something else, you will know the consequence. In the same way, if you shall have lain down ten days, get up and attempt to make a long walk, and you will see how your legs are weakened. Generally then if you would make anything a habit, do it; if you would not make it a habit, do not do it, but accustom yourself to do something else in place of it.

2 So it is with respect to the affections of the soul: when you have been angry, you must know that not only has this evil befallen you, but that you have also increased the habit, and in a manner thrown fuel upon fire. When you have been overcome in sexual intercourse with a person, do not reckon this single defeat only, but reckon that you have also nurtured, increased your incontinence. For it is impossible for habits and faculties, some of them not to be produced, when they did not exist before, and others not be increased and strengthened by corresponding acts.

Reflection: This chapter is titled How We Should Struggle Against Appearances, and it opens with a simple rule: we become what we repeatedly do. Read, and you become a reader; lie in bed for ten days, and your legs weaken. The same holds for the passions. An outburst of anger is not a single event; it feeds the habit, like "fuel upon fire," and makes

the next outburst easier. The hopeful side is in the last line of 17.1. A habit is not only stopped but replaced: "accustom yourself to do something else in place of it." Epictetus is less interested in single victories than in the slow building of character.

Practice: Choose one habit to weaken and one to put in its place. Each time the old impulse comes this week, do the new thing instead, and keep a simple tally.

Question: What habit of yours has grown by small repetitions you hardly noticed, for good or ill?

Week 18: The Greatest Remedy

Reading 18. *The Greatest Remedy. Seneca, On Anger II.29, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 The greatest remedy for anger is delay: beg anger to grant you this at the first, not in order that it may pardon the offence, but that it may form a right judgment about it:—if it delays, it will come to an end. Do not attempt to quell it all at once, for its first impulses are fierce; by plucking away its parts we shall remove the whole. We are made angry by some things which we learn at secondhand, and by some which we ourselves hear or see. Now, we ought to be slow to believe what is told us. Many tell lies in order to deceive us, and many because they are themselves deceived. Some seek to win our favour by false accusations, and invent wrongs in order that they may appear angry at our having suffered them. One man lies out of spite, that he may set trusting friends at variance; some because they are suspicious, and wish to see sport, and watch from a safe distance those whom they have set by the ears. If you were about to give sentence in court about ever so small a sum of money, you would take nothing as proved without a witness, and a witness would count for nothing except on his oath. You would allow both sides to be heard: you would allow them time: you would not despatch the matter at one sitting, because the oftener it is handled the more distinctly the truth appears. And do you condemn your friend offhand? Are you angry with him before you hear his story, before you have cross-examined him, before he can know either who is his accuser or with what he is charged. Why then, just now, in the case which you just tried, did you hear what was said on both sides? This very man who has informed against your friend, will say no more if he be obliged to prove what he says. "You need

not," says he, "bring me forward as a witness; if I am brought forward I shall deny what I have said; unless you excuse me from appearing I shall never tell you anything." At the same time he spurs you on and withdraws himself from the strife and battle. The man who will tell you nothing save in secret hardly tells you anything at all. What can be more unjust than to believe in secret, and to be angry openly?

Reflection: Seneca's remedy for anger is the simplest one: delay. Anger burns hottest at first, and if it waits it will die down. Much of the chapter is about hearsay. Many of the things that make us angry come to us secondhand, from people who are mistaken, malicious or eager to stir up trouble. Seneca's comparison is the law court. You would not decide a small money case without witnesses and both sides heard, so why condemn a friend at once on a whisper? The informer who will not repeat his story openly "hardly tells you anything at all." Seneca's advice protects friendships as well as tempers.

Practice: This week, when you hear something that makes you angry about a person, wait at least a day before acting on it, and if you can, hear that person's side first.

Question: "What can be more unjust than to believe in secret, and to be angry openly?" Can you recall a time you did this, or had it done to you?

Week 19: How the Soul Harms Itself

Reading 19. *How the Soul Harms Itself. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations II. 16, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 The soul of man does violence to itself, first of all, when it becomes an abscess and, as it were, a tumour on the universe, so far as it can. For to be vexed at anything which happens is a separation of ourselves from nature, in some part of which the natures of all other things are contained. In the next place, the soul does violence to itself when it turns away from any man, or even moves towards him with the intention of injuring, such as are the souls of those who are angry. In the third place, the soul does violence to itself when it is overpowered by pleasure or by pain. Fourthly, when it plays a part, and does or says anything insincerely and untruly. Fifthly, when it allows any act of its own and any movement to be without an aim, and does anything thoughtlessly and without considering what it is, it being right that even the smallest things be done with reference to an end; and the end of rational animals is to follow the reason and the law of the most ancient city and polity.

Reflection: Marcus lists five ways the soul injures itself. It resents what happens, as if it could secede from nature. It turns away from people, or moves against them in anger. It lets pleasure or pain overpower it. It pretends, saying or doing things insincerely. And it acts without aim. The list is striking because none of these harms comes from outside. The phrase "the most ancient city and polity" means the universe itself, which the Stoics pictured as one city shared by all reasoning beings (com-

pare Marcus's "political community" in Week 2). To harm oneself, for Marcus, is to fall out of one's place in that city.

Practice: Pick the one of Marcus's five harms you know best, and watch for it each day this week. Write down one moment when you caught it.

Question: Which of the five seems least like a harm to you, and why might Marcus count it as one?

Week 20: How Will It Turn Out?

Reading 20. *How Will It Turn Out? Epictetus, Discourses IV.10, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 The difficulties of all men are about external things; their helplessness is about externals. What shall I do, how will it be, how will it turn out, will this happen, will that? All these are the words of those who are turning themselves to things which are not within the power of the will. For who says, "How shall I not assent to that which is false? how shall I not turn away from the truth?" If a man be of such a good disposition as to be anxious about these things, I will remind him of this: Why are you anxious? The thing is in your own power: be assured; do not be precipitate in assenting before you apply the natural rule. On the other side, if a man is anxious (uneasy) about desire, lest it fail in its purpose and miss its end, and with respect to the avoidance of things, lest he should fall into that which he would avoid, I will first kiss (love) him, because he throws away the things about which others are in a flutter (others desire) and their fears, and employs his thoughts about his own affairs and his own condition. Then I shall say to him: if you do not choose to desire that which you will fail to obtain, nor to attempt to avoid that into which you will fall, desire nothing which belongs to (which is in the power of) others, nor try to avoid any of the things which are not in your power. If you do not observe this rule, you must of necessity fail in your desires and fall into that which you would avoid. What is the difficulty here? where is there room for the words, "How will it be?" and "How will it turn out?" and "Will this happen or that?"

Reflection: Epictetus diagnoses anxiety with a single observation: "The difficulties of all men are about external things." The worried questions, what will happen, will this or that come about, are all about matters outside our will. No one lies awake asking how to avoid assenting to a falsehood, though that is the one worry fully in our power. When Epictetus meets someone anxious about his own desires and aversions, he says he would kiss him, because at least that person is looking in the right place. The words in round brackets are, as usual, Long's alternatives. The cure he offers is to desire nothing that is in the power of others.

Practice: When you catch yourself asking "How will it turn out?" this week, write the worry down. Beneath it, add one line naming the part that is yours to do today.

Question: Which of your recurring worries is entirely about something in another person's power?

Week 21: The Evening Review

Reading 21. *The Evening Review. Seneca, On Anger III.36, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 All our senses should be educated into strength: they are naturally able to endure much, provided that the spirit forbears to spoil them. The spirit ought to be brought up for examination daily. It was the custom of Sextius when the day was over, and he had betaken himself to rest, to inquire of his spirit: "What bad habit of yours have you cured today? what vice have you checked? in what respect are you better?" Anger will cease, and become more gentle, if it knows that every day it will have to appear before the judgment seat. What can be more admirable than this fashion of discussing the whole of the day's events? how sweet is the sleep which follows this self-examination? how calm, how sound, and careless is it when our spirit has either received praise or reprimand, and when our secret inquisitor and censor has made his report about our morals? I make use of this privilege, and daily plead my cause before myself: when the lamp is taken out of my sight, and my wife, who knows my habit, has ceased to talk, I pass the whole day in review before myself, and repeat all that I have said and done: I conceal nothing from myself, and omit nothing: for why should I be afraid of any of my shortcomings, when it is in my power to say, "I pardon you this time: see that you never do that anymore? In that dispute you spoke too contentiously: do not for the future argue with ignorant people: those who have never been taught are unwilling to learn. You reprimanded that man with more freedom than you ought, and consequently you have offended him instead of amending his ways: in dealing with other cases of the kind, you should look carefully, not only to the truth of what you say, but also whether the person to

whom you speak can bear to be told the truth." A good man delights in receiving advice: all the worst men are the most impatient of guidance.

Reflection: Quintus Sextius was a Roman philosopher of the first century BC who blended Pythagorean and Stoic teaching. Seneca describes his nightly habit of questioning himself before sleep, and then his own version of it. When the lamp is out and his wife has fallen silent, Seneca reviews his whole day. The tone is the striking thing. He is a judge, but a fair one, who can say "I pardon you this time." The faults he finds are ordinary: arguing too hotly, correcting someone too bluntly. The aim of the review is not punishment. It is a calmer sleep and a better tomorrow.

Practice: For a week, end each day with Sextius's questions: "What bad habit of yours have you cured today? what vice have you checked? in what respect are you better?" Be as fair to yourself as Seneca is.

Question: When you look back over your day, what tone does your inner judge take, and is it a fair one?

Week 22: What We Forget

Reading 22. *What We Forget. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations XII.28, translated by George Long.*

1 When thou art troubled about anything, thou hast forgotten this, that all things happen according to the universal nature; and forgotten this, that a man's wrongful act is nothing to thee; and further thou hast forgotten this, that everything which happens, always happened so and will happen so, and now happens so everywhere; forgotten this too, how close is the kinship between a man and the whole human race, for it is a community, not of a little blood or seed, but of intelligence. And thou hast forgotten this too, that every man's intelligence is a god, and is an efflux of the deity; and forgotten this, that nothing is a man's own, but that his child and his body and his very soul came from the deity; forgotten this, that everything is opinion; and lastly thou hast forgotten that every man lives the present time only, and loses only this.

Reflection: This short entry from the last book of the Meditations is a list of things Marcus forgets whenever he is troubled. There are eight of them. All things happen by nature. Another's wrong is not our harm. What happens now has always happened. All people are kin, not by blood but by intelligence. Each person's mind is something divine. Nothing, not even the body, is truly our own. Everything is opinion. And each of us lives, and loses, only the present moment. Marcus does not say he lacks these thoughts. He says he forgets them. Much Stoic practice is simply remembering.

Practice: Copy the eight reminders onto a card in your own words. When you are troubled this week, read down the list and see which one you had forgotten.

Question: Which of these reminders is hardest for you to believe, and which is easiest to forget?

Week 23: The True Athlete

Reading 23. *The True Athlete. Epictetus, Discourses II.18, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 This is the true athlete, the man who exercises himself against such appearances. Stay, wretch, do not be carried way. Great is the combat, divine is the work; it is for kingship, for freedom, for happiness, for freedom from perturbation. Remember God: call on him as a helper and protector, as men at sea call on the Dioscuri in a storm. For what is a greater storm than that which comes from appearances which are violent and drive away the reason? For the storm itself, what else is it but an appearance? For take away the fear of death, and suppose as many thunders and lightnings as you please, and you will know what calm and serenity there is in the ruling faculty. But if you have once been defeated and say that you will conquer hereafter, and then say the same again, be assured that you will at last be in so wretched a condition and so weak that you will not even know afterwards that you are doing wrong, but you will even begin to make apologies (defenses) for your wrongdoing, and then you will confirm the saying of Hesiod to be true,

With constant ills the dilatory strives.

Reflection: This passage closes the chapter that began in Week 17. The real athlete trains against appearances, the vivid impressions that sweep reason away. "Great is the combat, divine is the work," and the prize is freedom. Epictetus compares the struggle to a storm at sea, when sailors called on the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, the patrons of seafarers. Then he warns about the person who loses and promises to win next

time, and next time again, until wrongdoing becomes a habit to be excused. The verse at the end is from Hesiod's Works and Days. (In 23.1, "carried way" is a misprint for carried away.)

Practice: When a strong impression grips you this week, fear, craving or anger, pause and say to yourself, "Great is the combat, divine is the work." Then take one breath before you act.

Question: Where in your life are you saying that you "will conquer hereafter," and what would winning today look like?

Week 24: If Nothing Hinders

Reading 24. *If Nothing Hinders. Seneca, On Peace of Mind XIII, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 It was, I imagine, following out this principle that Democritus taught that "he who would live at peace must not do much business either public or private," referring of course to unnecessary business: for if there be any necessity for it we ought to transact not only much but endless business, both public and private; in cases, however, where no solemn duty invites us to act, we had better keep ourselves quiet: for he who does many things often puts himself in Fortune's power, and it is safest not to tempt her often, but always to remember her existence, and never to promise oneself anything on her security. I will set sail unless anything happens to prevent me, I shall be praetor, if nothing hinders me, my financial operations will succeed, unless anything goes wrong with them. This is why we say that nothing befalls the wise man which he did not expect—we do not make him exempt from the chances of human life, but from its mistakes, nor does everything happen to him as he wished it would, but as he thought it would: now his first thought was that his purpose might meet with some resistance, and the pain of disappointed wishes must affect a man's mind less severely if he has not been at all events confident of success.

Reflection: Seneca begins with Democritus, the Greek atomist of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, who taught that peace of mind comes from avoiding needless business. Seneca adds a Stoic habit: make plans, but hold them with a silent condition. "I will set sail unless anything hap-

pens to prevent me." This is not pessimism. The wise person is not spared bad luck, but is spared the shock of it, having expected all along that a plan "might meet with some resistance." Disappointment, Seneca says, hurts less when we were never sure of success. The habit costs nothing and softens many blows.

Practice: For one week, add a quiet *if nothing prevents me* to each of your plans, at least in your own mind. Notice how a setback feels when a plan made this way falls through.

Question: Which of your plans do you hold as if Fortune had promised them to you?

Week 25: The Dye of Thought

Reading 25. *The Dye of Thought. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations V.16, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Such as are thy habitual thoughts, such also will be the character of thy mind; for the soul is dyed by the thoughts. Dye it then with a continuous series of such thoughts as these: for instance, that where a man can live, there he can also live well. But he must live in a palace;—well then, he can also live well in a palace. And again, consider that for whatever purpose each thing has been constituted, for this it has been constituted, and towards this it is carried; and its end is in that towards which it is carried; and where the end is, there also is the advantage and the good of each thing. Now the good for the reasonable animal is society; for that we are made for society has been shown above. Is it not plain that the inferior exist for the sake of the superior? But the things which have life are superior to those which have not life, and of those which have life the superior are those which have reason.

Reflection: "The soul is dyed by the thoughts." Marcus takes the image from cloth: whatever we steep the mind in, it will take on that color. So he chooses his dyes. Where a person can live, he can live well, even, Marcus adds dryly, in a palace. The rest of the passage moves into Stoic argument about purpose: each thing is made for an end, and the end of a reasoning creature is society, life with others. The ranking of living things at the close reflects the thought of his time. The opening image needs no argument at all.

Practice: Notice the thought you return to most often this week. Ask whether it is a dye you want your mind to take, and choose one sentence to repeat in its place.

Question: If your mind takes the color of your habitual thoughts, what color has it been taking lately?

Week 26: Not Seeing Everything

Reading 26. *Not Seeing Everything. Seneca, On Anger III.11, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 It is better not to see or to hear everything: many causes of offence may pass by us, most of which are disregarded by the man who ignores them. Would you not be irascible? then be not inquisitive. He who seeks to know what is said about him, who digs up spiteful tales even if they were told in secret, is himself the destroyer of his own peace of mind. Some stories may be so construed as to appear to be insults: wherefore it is best to put some aside, to laugh at others, and to pardon others. There are many ways in which anger may be checked; most things may be turned into jest. It is said that Socrates when he was given a box on the ear, merely said that it was a pity a man could not tell when he ought to wear his helmet out walking. It does not so much matter how an injury is done, as how it is borne; and I do not see how moderation can be hard to practise, when I know that even despots, though success and impunity combine to swell their pride, have sometimes restrained their natural ferocity. At any rate, tradition informs us that once, when a guest in his cups bitterly reproached Pisistratus, the despot of Athens, for his cruelty, many of those present offered to lay hands on the traitor, and one said one thing and one another to kindle his wrath, he bore it coolly, and replied to those who were egging him on, that he was no more angry with the man than he should be with one who ran against him blindfold.

Reflection: "It is better not to see or to hear everything." The person who hunts for what others say about him, Seneca warns, destroys his

own peace. Some slights can be set aside, some laughed at, some pardoned. He gives two examples. Socrates, struck on the ear, only joked about wearing a helmet on his walks. Pisistratus, tyrant of Athens in the sixth century BC, refused to be stirred against a drunken guest who insulted him. If even a tyrant could hold back, Seneca asks, how hard can moderation be for us? The quarter on the passions ends with a practical point: much anger begins with curiosity.

Practice: This week, do not go looking for what anyone says about you: no searching, no asking around. When you hear a slight by chance, choose one of Seneca's three responses: set it aside, laugh at it, or pardon it.

Question: What would you lose, and what would you gain, by knowing less about what others say of you?

Third Quarter · Weeks 27 to 39

Duty and Other People



Week 27: The Busybody and the Ungrateful

Reading 27. *The Busybody and the Ungrateful. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations II.1, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Begin the morning by saying to thyself, I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful, and of the bad that it is ugly, and the nature of him who does wrong, that it is akin to me, not only of the same blood or seed, but that it participates in the same intelligence and the same portion of the divinity, I can neither be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him. For we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another then is contrary to nature; and it is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn away.

Reflection: The third quarter turns to duty and other people, and it opens with one of Marcus's best-known passages. Each morning he prepares himself for the people he will meet: the busybody, the ungrateful, the arrogant, the deceitful. This is not cynicism. He expects such behavior because it comes from ignorance of good and evil, and he reminds himself that the wrongdoer is still kin to him, sharing "the same intelligence." His closing image is physical: people are made to work together like hands, feet, eyelids and the two rows of teeth. To be vexed with others and turn away from them is to act against that design.

Practice: Each morning this week, name to yourself one difficult person you may meet, and add Marcus's reason for patience: that person is "akin to me."

Question: What changes when you think of a difficult person as a relative rather than an opponent?

Week 28: What Our Names Promise

Reading 28. *What Our Names Promise. Epictetus, Discourses II.10, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Consider who you are. In the first place, you are a man and this is one who has nothing superior to the faculty of the will, but all other things subjected to it; and the faculty itself he possesses unenslaved and free from subjection. Consider then from what things you have been separated by reason. You have been separated from wild beasts: you have been separated from domestic animals (*προβάτων*). Further, you are a citizen of the world, and a part of it, not one of the subservient (serving), but one of the principal (ruling) parts, for you are capable of comprehending the divine administration and of considering the connection of things. What then does the character of a citizen promise (profess)? To hold nothing as profitable to himself; to deliberate about nothing as if he were detached from the community, but to act as the hand or foot would do, if they had reason and understood the constitution of nature, for they would never put themselves in motion nor desire anything otherwise than with reference to the whole. Therefore the philosophers say well, that if the good man had foreknowledge of what would happen, he would cooperate towards his own sickness and death and mutilation, since he knows that these things are assigned to him according to the universal arrangement, and that the whole is superior to the part, and the state to the citizen. But now because we do not know the future, it is our duty to stick to the things which are in their nature more suitable for our choice, for we were made among other things for this.

2 After this remember that you are a son. What does this character promise? To consider that everything which is the son's belongs to the father, to obey him in all things, never to blame him to another, nor to say or do anything which does him injury, to yield to him in all things and give way, cooperating with him as far as you can. After this know that you are a brother also, and that to this character it is due to make concessions; to be easily persuaded, to speak good of your brother, never to claim in opposition to him any of the things which are independent of the will, but readily to give them up, that you may have the larger share in what is dependent on the will. For see what a thing it is, in place of a lettuce, if it should so happen, or a seat, to gain for yourself goodness of disposition. How great is the advantage.

Reflection: Epictetus taught that our duties can be read from our names: human being, citizen, son, brother. Each role carries its own promises. As a human being you have reason; as "a citizen of the world" you must act like a hand or a foot that understood its place in the body. Then come family roles. His account of a son's duty, to obey "in all things," reflects an ancient household, and many readers will want to qualify it. His account of a brother's duty is gentler and more surprising: give way over things outside the will, and gain goodness of disposition in exchange. A lettuce or a seat is a small price for that.

Practice: List three roles you hold, such as friend, neighbor, colleague or parent. For each, ask Epictetus' question, "What does this character promise?" Act on one answer this week.

Question: Which of your roles asks the most of you at present, and what exactly does it ask?

Week 29: What a Benefit Is

Reading 29. *What a Benefit Is. Seneca, On Benefits I.6, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 What, then, is a benefit? It is the art of doing a kindness which both bestows pleasure and gains it by bestowing it, and which does its office by natural and spontaneous impulse. It is not, therefore, the thing which is done or given, but the spirit in which it is done or given, that must be considered, because a benefit exists, not in that which is done or given, but in the mind of the doer or giver. How great the distinction between them is, you may perceive from this, that while a benefit is necessarily good, yet that which is done or given is neither good nor bad. The spirit in which they are given can exalt small things, can glorify mean ones, and can discredit great and precious ones; the objects themselves which are sought after have a neutral nature, neither good nor bad; all depends upon the direction given them by the guiding spirit from which things receive their shape. That which is paid or handed over is not the benefit itself, just as the honour which we pay to the gods lies not in the victims themselves, although they be fat and glittering with gold, but in the pure and holy feelings of the worshippers.

Reflection: On Benefits, a long work in seven books addressed to Aebutius Liberalis, is Seneca's study of giving, receiving and gratitude. Here he defines his subject. A benefit is not the thing handed over, the money, the gift, the favor, but the goodwill behind it. The object is neutral, neither good nor bad; the spirit makes it a kindness or not. Seneca compares it to the honor paid to the gods, which lies not in the animals

offered in sacrifice, however splendid, but in the feelings of the worshipers. A small gift given well, he implies, can outweigh a great one given badly.

Practice: Give one small kindness this week where the object matters little: a note, an hour of your time, a meal. Pay attention to the spirit in which you give it.

Question: What is the best gift you have ever received, and how much of its worth lay in the thing itself?

Week 30: The Vine and Its Grapes

Reading 30. *The Vine and Its Grapes. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations V.6, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 One man, when he has done a service to another, is ready to set it down to his account as a favour conferred. Another is not ready to do this, but still in his own mind he thinks of the man as his debtor, and he knows what he has done. A third in a manner does not even know what he has done, but he is like a vine which has produced grapes, and seeks for nothing more after it has once produced its proper fruit. As a horse when he has run, a dog when he has tracked the game, a bee when it has made the honey, so a man when he has done a good act, does not call out for others to come and see, but he goes on to another act, as a vine goes on to produce again the grapes in season.—Must a man then be one of these, who in a manner act thus without observing it?—Yes.—But this very thing is necessary, the observation of what a man is doing: for, it may be said, it is characteristic of the social animal to perceive that he is working in a social manner, and indeed to wish that his social partner also should perceive it. —It is true what thou sayest, but thou dost not rightly understand what is now said: and for this reason thou wilt become one of those of whom I spoke before, for even they are misled by a certain show of reason. But if thou wilt choose to understand the meaning of what is said, do not fear that for this reason thou wilt omit any social act.

Reflection: Marcus describes three kinds of giver. The first counts each favor as a debt to be repaid. The second does not say so, but privately keeps the account. The third is like a vine that bears grapes and

wants nothing more, and moves on to the next season's fruit. Then an imagined objector, marked by dashes, protests: surely a social creature should notice its social acts? Marcus agrees that awareness is not the problem. The problem is wanting others to come and see. The aim is to do good the way a bee makes honey, as part of what one is.

Practice: Do one good turn this week that no one will know came from you. Then, like the vine, move on to the next.

Question: Which of Marcus's three kinds of giver are you most often, and with whom?

Week 31: Why Be Angry with Medea?

Reading 31. *Why Be Angry with Medea? Epictetus, Discourses I.28, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 What is the cause of assenting to anything? The fact that it appears to be true. It is not possible then to assent to that which appears not to be true. Why? Because this is the nature of the understanding: to incline to the true, to be dissatisfied with the false, and in matters uncertain to withhold assent. What is the proof of this? Imagine (persuade yourself), if you can, that it is now night. It is not possible. Take away your persuasion that it is day. It is not possible. Persuade yourself or take away your persuasion that the stars are even in number. It is impossible. When then any man assents to that which is false, be assured that he did not intend to assent to it as false, for every soul is unwillingly deprived of the truth, as Plato says; but the falsity seemed to him to be true. Well, in acts what have we of the like kind as we have here truth or falsehood? We have the fit and the not fit (duty and not duty), the profitable and the unprofitable, that which is suitable to a person and that which is not, and whatever is like these. Can then a man think that a thing is useful to him and not choose it? He cannot. How says Medea?

'Tis true I know what evil I shall do,
But passion overpowers the better counsel.

4 She thought that to indulge her passion and take vengeance on her husband was more profitable than to spare her children. It was so; but she was deceived. Show her plainly that she is deceived, and she will not do it; but so long as you do not show it, what can she follow except that which appears to herself (her opinion)? Nothing else. Why then are you angry

with the unhappy woman that she has been bewildered about the most important things, and is become a viper instead of a human creature? And why not, if it is possible, rather pity, as we pity the blind and the lame, so those who are blinded and maimed in the faculties which are supreme?

5 Whoever then clearly remembers this, that to man the measure of every act is the appearance (the opinion)—whether the thing appears good or bad: if good, he is free from blame; if bad, himself suffers the penalty, for it is impossible that he who is deceived can be one person, and he who suffers another person—whoever remembers this will not be angry with any man, will not be vexed at any man, will not revile or blame any man, nor hate nor quarrel with any man.

Reflection: Epictetus starts from a point about belief: no one can assent to what appears false. When people do wrong, it is because the wrong appeared good to them. His example is Medea in Euripides' tragedy, who kills her own children to punish their father, Jason, who has left her. She knows the act is evil, yet her passion persuades her that revenge is worth more. Epictetus does not excuse her. He says that she "has been bewildered about the most important things," and that the right response to such blindness is pity rather than anger, as we would pity someone blind or lame. The argument is demanding, but it changes how we see an enemy.

Practice: When someone wrongs you this week, try finishing the sentence, It seemed right to them because... You need not agree. You are only trying to see what appeared to them.

Question: Is pity, as Epictetus suggests, a better response than anger to someone who has done wrong? Is there anything it leaves out?

Week 32: Giving Promptly

Reading 32. *Giving Promptly. Seneca, On Benefits II.2, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 It is unpleasant, burdensome, and covers one with shame to have to say, "Give me." You should spare your friends, and those whom you wish to make your friends, from having to do this; however quick he may be, a man gives too late who gives what he has been asked for. We ought, therefore, to divine every man's wishes, and when we have discovered them, to set him free from the hard necessity of asking; you may be sure that a benefit which comes unasked will be delightful and will not be forgotten. If we do not succeed in anticipating our friends, let us at any rate cut them short when they ask us for anything, so that we may appear to be reminded of what we meant to do, rather than to have been asked to do it. Let us assent at once, and by our promptness make it appear that we meant to do so even before we were solicited. As in dealing with sick persons much depends upon when food is given, and plain water given at the right moment sometimes acts as a remedy, so a benefit, however slight and commonplace it may be, if it be promptly given without losing a moment of time, gains enormously in importance, and wins our gratitude more than a far more valuable present given after long waiting and deliberation. One who gives so readily must needs give with good will; he therefore gives cheerfully and shows his disposition in his countenance.

Reflection: Seneca knows how hard it is to ask. It is unpleasant, he says, "to have to say, 'Give me.'" So the best giver notices a need before it is spoken, and spares the friend the embarrassment of asking. If we miss

the moment, we can at least say yes at once, so that it seems we were only reminded. His image comes from the sickroom: plain water given at the right moment can work like medicine. A small help given promptly, Seneca says, wins more gratitude than a large one given after long delay. Speed is itself a sign of goodwill.

Practice: Notice one need of a friend, neighbor or colleague before that person has to ask, and meet it promptly this week.

Question: What makes asking for help hard for you, and how might you spare someone else that difficulty?

Week 33: A Portrait of Antoninus

Reading 33. *A Portrait of Antoninus. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations VI.30, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Take care that thou art not made into a Caesar, that thou art not dyed with this dye; for such things happen. Keep thyself then simple, good, pure, serious, free from affectation, a friend of justice, a worshipper of the gods, kind, affectionate, strenuous in all proper acts. Strive to continue to be such as philosophy wished to make thee. Reverence the gods, and help men. Short is life. There is only one fruit of this terrene life, a pious disposition and social acts. Do everything as a disciple of Antoninus. Remember his constancy in every act which was conformable to reason, and his evenness in all things, and his piety, and the serenity of his countenance, and his sweetness, and his disregard of empty fame, and his efforts to understand things; and how he would never let anything pass without having first most carefully examined it and clearly understood it; and how he bore with those who blamed him unjustly without blaming them in return; how he did nothing in a hurry; and how he listened not to calumnies, and how exact an examiner of manners and actions he was; and not given to reproach people, nor timid, nor suspicious, nor a sophist; and with how little he was satisfied, such as lodging, bed, dress, food, servants; and how laborious and patient; and how he was able on account of his sparing diet to hold out to the evening, not even requiring to relieve himself by any evacuations except at the usual hour; and his firmness and uniformity in his friendships; and how he tolerated freedom of speech in those who opposed his opinions; and the pleasure that he had when any man showed him anything better; and how religious he was

without superstition. Imitate all this that thou mayest have as good a conscience, when thy last hour comes, as he had.

Reflection: Marcus begins by warning himself against being "made into a Caesar," dyed in the colors of power (compare the dye of Week 25). His remedy is an example: his adoptive father, the emperor Antoninus Pius, whose reign from 138 to 161 is remembered as one of the most peaceful of the empire. The portrait that follows is detailed and affectionate. Antoninus examined things before deciding, ignored slander, lived simply, kept his friends, welcomed opposition and was glad to be shown a better idea. Marcus even notes his regular habits of body, an unvarnished detail. Here duty to others is learned the way a craft is learned, by watching a master.

Practice: Choose one trait from Marcus's portrait, perhaps that Antoninus "did nothing in a hurry," and practice it deliberately for a week.

Question: Whose example would you most like to follow "as a disciple," and what one habit of theirs could you take up now?

Week 34: The Rod of Hermes

Reading 34. *The Rod of Hermes. Epictetus, Discourses III.20, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Can advantage then be derived from these things? From all; and from him who abuses you. Wherein does the man who exercises before the combat profit the athlete? Very greatly. This man becomes my exerciser before the combat: he exercises me in endurance, in keeping my temper, in mildness. You say no: but he, who lays hold of my neck and disciplines my loins and shoulders, does me good; and the exercise master (the aliptes, or oiler) does right when he says: Raise him up with both hands, and the heavier he (*ἐκεῖνος*) is, so much the more is my advantage. But if a man exercises me in keeping my temper, does he not do me good?—This is not knowing how to gain an advantage from men. Is my neighbour bad? Bad to himself, but good to me: he exercises my good disposition, my moderation. Is my father bad? Bad to himself, but to me good. This is the rod of Hermes: touch with it what you please, as the saying is, and it will be of gold. I say not so: but bring what you please, and I will make it good. Bring disease, bring death, bring poverty, bring abuse, bring trial on capital charges: all these things through the rod of Hermes shall be made profitable. "What will you do with death?" Why, what else than that it shall do you honor, or that it shall show you by act through it, what a man is who follows the will of nature? "What will you do with disease?" I will show its nature, I will be conspicuous in it, I will be firm, I will be happy, I will not flatter the physician, I will not wish to die. "What else do you seek?" Whatever you shall give me, I will make it happy, fortunate, honored, a thing which a man shall seek.

Reflection: The chapter's title in Long's translation is That We Can Derive Advantage from All External Things. The wrestler's sparring partner helps him by being heavy and rough; so the abusive neighbor helps us by giving practice in patience and mildness. Epictetus mentions a saying about the rod of Hermes, which turns whatever it touches to gold, and then claims the power for the will. Bring disease, poverty, even death, and he will make something good of each. Note what he says of illness: he will bear it, not flatter the doctor, and "not wish to die." The point is to meet trouble, not to seek it.

Practice: Treat one irritating person this week as your sparring partner. After each encounter, note what it gave you practice in: patience, mildness, restraint.

Question: Is there anything you could not turn to good in Epictetus' sense? Where does the idea stop working for you?

Week 35: Two Commonwealths

Reading 35. *Two Commonwealths. Seneca, On Leisure IV, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 Let us grasp the fact that there are two republics, one vast and truly "public," which contains alike gods and men, in which we do not take account of this or that nook of land, but make the boundaries of our state reach as far as the rays of the sun: and another to which we have been assigned by the accident of birth. This may be that of the Athenians or Carthaginians, or of any other city which does not belong to all men but to some especial ones. Some men serve both of these states, the greater and the lesser, at the same time; some serve only the lesser, some only the greater. We can serve the greater commonwealth even when we are at leisure; indeed I am not sure that we cannot serve it better when we are at leisure to inquire into what virtue is, and whether it be one or many: whether it be nature or art that makes men good: whether that which contains the earth and sea and all that in them is be one, or whether God has placed therein many bodies of the same species: whether that out of which all things are made be continuous and solid, or containing interstices and alternate empty and full spaces: whether God idly looks on at His handiwork, or directs its course: whether He is without and around the world, or whether He pervades its entire surface: whether the world be immortal, or doomed to decay and belonging to the class of things which are born only for a time? What service does he who meditates upon these questions render to God? He prevents these His great works having no one to witness them.

Reflection: The addressee of On Leisure is uncertain; it may have been Serenus. In this chapter Seneca sets out a Stoic idea: we belong to two commonwealths, one vast, containing gods and human beings and bounded only by the sun, and one assigned by birth, such as Athens or Carthage. Public life serves the smaller. But a person at leisure can serve the larger by inquiry, asking what virtue is and how the universe is made. The questions listed belong to what the Stoics called physics. Seneca's last line is lovely: such a thinker ensures that the great works of God do not go without a witness.

Practice: Spend one unhurried half hour this week on a question about the world that has no practical use to you at all, about stars, cells or history. Count it as a form of citizenship.

Question: Which commonwealth do you mostly serve, the greater or the lesser, and is that the balance you want?

Week 36: If Anyone Despises Me

Reading 36. *If Anyone Despises Me. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations XI.18, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 Suppose any man shall despise me. Let him look to that himself. But I will look to this, that I be not discovered doing or saying anything deserving of contempt. Shall any man hate me? Let him look to it. But I will be mild and benevolent towards every man, and ready to show even him his mistake, not reproachfully, nor yet as making a display of my endurance, but nobly and honestly, like the great Phocion, unless indeed he only assumed it. For the interior parts ought to be such, and a man ought to be seen by the gods neither dissatisfied with anything nor complaining. For what evil is it to thee, if thou art now doing what is agreeable to thy own nature, and art satisfied with that which at this moment is suitable to the nature of the universe, since thou art a human being placed at thy post in order that what is for the common advantage may be done in some way?

Reflection: Marcus divides responsibility neatly. If someone despises or hates him, that is the other person's affair; his own affair is to give no just cause for contempt, and to stay kind. He would even show the other person the mistake, gently and honestly, "like the great Phocion." Phocion (c. 402 to 318 BC) was an Athenian statesman and general nicknamed the Good, who was put to death by hemlock. Marcus adds a skeptical aside, "unless indeed he only assumed it," a reminder that even admired examples may have been partly performance. What matters is the

inside, not the show. Each person stands at a post, doing his part for the common good.

Practice: When someone shows you contempt this week, try Marcus's division: "Let him look to that himself." Then look to your own conduct, and leave theirs alone.

Question: How do you tell the difference between correcting someone "nobly and honestly" and making "a display of my endurance"?

Week 37: Where the I and the Mine Are Placed

Reading 37. *Where the I and the Mine Are Placed. Epictetus, Discourses II. 22, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 For this reason if a man put in the same place his interest, sanctity, goodness, and country, and parents, and friends, all these are secured: but if he puts in one place his interest, in another his friends, and his country and his kinsmen and justice itself, all these give way being borne down by the weight of interest. For where the I and the Mine are placed, to that place of necessity the animal inclines: if in the flesh, there is the ruling power: if in the will, it is there: and if it is in externals, it is there. If then I am there where my will is, then only shall I be a friend such as I ought to be, and son, and father; for this will be my interest, to maintain the character of fidelity, of modesty, of patience, of abstinence, of active cooperation, of observing my relations (towards all). But if I put myself in one place, and honesty in another, then the doctrine of Epicurus becomes strong, which asserts either that there is no honesty or it is that which opinion holds to be honest (virtuous).

Reflection: This passage comes from Epictetus' chapter On Friendship. His claim is that every creature inclines toward wherever it places its interest, "the I and the Mine." If my interest lies in money, reputation or comfort, then friends, family and even justice will give way whenever they compete with it. If my interest lies in my own will, in being faithful, modest and patient, then being a good friend is no longer a sacrifice. It is my interest. Epictetus is realistic about why friendships break, and his an-

swer is not more sentiment but a different idea of what is good for us. The last line names Epicurus, whose view he rejects here.

Practice: Think of one friendship strained by money, time or credit. Ask where you have placed the I and the Mine in it, and make one move that puts fidelity first.

Question: Can you think of a friendship that survived a test because both people valued something above their own advantage?

Week 38: The Free Part of a Slave

Reading 38. *The Free Part of a Slave. Seneca, On Benefits III.20, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 It is a mistake to imagine that slavery pervades a man's whole being; the better part of him is exempt from it: the body indeed is subjected and in the power of a master, but the mind is independent, and indeed is so free and wild, that it cannot be restrained even by this prison of the body, wherein it is confined, from following its own impulses, dealing with gigantic designs, and soaring into the infinite, accompanied by all the host of heaven. It is, therefore, only the body which misfortune hands over to a master, and which he buys and sells; this inward part cannot be transferred as a chattel. Whatever comes from this, is free; indeed, we are not allowed to order all things to be done, nor are slaves compelled to obey us in all things; they will not carry out treasonable orders, or lend their hands to an act of crime.

Reflection: Slavery was everywhere in the Roman world, and Seneca writes from the side of the owners: "we are not allowed to order all things to be done." His claim is that slavery reaches only the body. The mind remains free and cannot be bought or sold, and even a slave may refuse an order to commit a crime. The idea of an inner freedom no master can take is real and powerful; Epictetus, the author of a third of this book, was born a slave. But a reader should also notice what the passage does not say. It does not question the institution itself, and the inner freedom it praises does nothing to lighten the chains.

Practice: Notice one moment this week when you are under someone else's direction, at work or elsewhere, and name to yourself the part of you that remains your own.

Question: Seneca says the mind "cannot be restrained." Does that truth comfort, or can it be used to excuse injustice?

Week 39: The Severed Hand

Reading 39. *The Severed Hand. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations VIII.36, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 If thou didst ever see a hand cut off, or a foot, or a head, lying anywhere apart from the rest of the body, such does a man make himself, as far as he can, who is not content with what happens, and separates himself from others, or does anything unsocial. Suppose that thou hast detached thyself from the natural unity—for thou wast made by nature a part, but now thou hast cut thyself off—yet here there is this beautiful provision, that it is in thy power again to unite thyself. God has allowed this to no other part, after it has been separated and cut asunder, to come together again. But consider the kindness by which he has distinguished man, for he has put it in his power not to be separated at all from the universal; and when he has been separated, he has allowed him to return and to be united and to resume his place as a part.

Reflection: The quarter on duty and other people closes with a vivid image. A hand or foot cut off and lying apart is what a person becomes who resents what happens, separates himself from others, or acts against them. But the passage turns hopeful. Unlike a severed limb, a person can rejoin the whole, and Marcus calls this power a special kindness granted to human beings. The Stoic picture of humanity as one body, which runs through this quarter from Week 27 on, here becomes a picture of reconciliation: it is always possible to come back.

Practice: Mend one small break this week: send the message, make the call, or offer the apology you have been putting off.

Question: Where have you cut yourself off lately, and what would returning look like?

Fourth Quarter · Weeks 40 to 52

Death, Time and the Whole



Week 40: Life Is Long Enough

Reading 40. *Life Is Long Enough. Seneca, On the Shortness of Life I, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 The greater part of mankind, my Paulinus, complains of the unkindness of Nature, because we are born only for a short space of time, and that this allotted period of life runs away so swiftly, nay so hurriedly, that with but few exceptions men's life comes to an end just as they are preparing to enjoy it: nor is it only the common herd and the ignorant vulgar who mourn over this universal misfortune, as they consider it to be: this reflection has wrung complaints even from great men. Hence comes that well-known saying of physicians, that art is long but life is short: hence arose that quarrel, so unbefitting a sage, which Aristotle picked with Nature, because she had indulged animals with such length of days that some of them lived for ten or fifteen centuries, while man, although born for many and such great exploits, had the term of his existence cut so much shorter. We do not have a very short time assigned to us, but we lose a great deal of it: life is long enough to carry out the most important projects: we have an ample portion, if we do but arrange the whole of it aright: but when it all runs to waste through luxury and carelessness, when it is not devoted to any good purpose, then at the last we are forced to feel that it is all over, although we never noticed how it glided away. Thus it is: we do not receive a short life, but we make it a short one, and we are not poor in days, but wasteful of them. When great and kinglike riches fall into the hands of a bad master, they are dispersed straightaway, but even a moderate fortune, when bestowed upon a wise guardian, in-

creases by use: and in like manner our life has great opportunities for one who knows how to dispose of it to the best advantage.

Reflection: The last quarter turns to death, time and the whole, and it begins with Seneca's best-known claim: "We do not have a very short time assigned to us, but we lose a great deal of it." The essay is addressed to Paulinus, probably Pompeius Paulinus, who oversaw Rome's grain supply. The saying of physicians he quotes, that art is long and life short, opens the Aphorisms of Hippocrates. Seneca's answer to the old complaint is an accounting: life wasted in luxury and carelessness feels short, while the same span well used is ample. "We are not poor in days, but wasteful of them." The essay is less about death than about attention.

Practice: Keep a rough record of your time for two ordinary days. Then choose one hour you would rather spend differently, and spend it that way.

Question: Where is your life wasteful rather than short?

Week 41: Three Thousand Years

Reading 41. *Three Thousand Years. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations II.14, translated by George Long.*

1 Though thou shouldst be going to live three thousand years, and as many times ten thousand years, still remember that no man loses any other life than this which he now lives, nor lives any other than this which he now loses. The longest and shortest are thus brought to the same. For the present is the same to all, though that which perishes is not the same; and so that which is lost appears to be a mere moment. For a man cannot lose either the past or the future: for what a man has not, how can anyone take this from him? These two things then thou must bear in mind; the one, that all things from eternity are of like forms and come round in a circle, and that it makes no difference whether a man shall see the same things during a hundred years or two hundred, or an infinite time; and the second, that the longest liver and he who will die soonest lose just the same. For the present is the only thing of which a man can be deprived, if it is true that this is the only thing which he has, and that a man cannot lose a thing if he has it not.

Reflection: Marcus offers an argument that can startle. Whether you live three thousand years or thirty, you lose only the present, because the past and future are not yours to lose. So the longest life and the shortest come to the same at the end. Behind this is the Stoic picture of a universe that runs in great cycles, where "all things from eternity are of like forms and come round in a circle." Many readers find the argument more con-

soling than convincing. Its practical point is clearer: the present is the only time we actually have, and it deserves our full attention.

Practice: Once a day this week, stop for one minute and attend fully to what is in front of you. Marcus says the present is "the only thing which he has."

Question: Does Marcus's argument that long and short lives lose the same thing comfort you, trouble you, or both?

Week 42: Against the Fear of Death

Reading 42. *Against the Fear of Death. Epictetus, Discourses III.26, translated by George Long.*

❧

As a lion bred in the mountains trusting in his strength.

2 Relying on what? Not on reputation nor on wealth nor on the power of a magistrate, but on his own strength, that is, on his opinions about the things which are in our power and those which are not. For these are the only things which make men free, which make them escape from hindrance, which raise the head (neck) of those who are depressed, which make them look with steady eyes on the rich and on tyrants. And this was (is) the gift given to the philosopher. But you will not come forth bold, but trembling about your trifling garments and silver vessels. Unhappy man, have you thus wasted your time till now?

3 "What then, if I shall be sick?" You will be sick in such a way as you ought to be.—"Who will take care of me?"—God; your friends—"I shall lie down on a hard bed."—But you will lie down like a man.—"I shall not have a convenient chamber."—You will be sick in an inconvenient chamber—"Who will provide for me the necessary food?"—Those who provide for others also. You will be sick like Manes.—And what also will be the end of the sickness? Any other than death?—Do you then consider that this the chief of all evils to man and the chief mark of mean spirit and of cowardice is not death, but rather the fear of death? Against this fear then I advise you to exercise yourself: to this let all your reasoning tend, your exercises, and reading; and you will know that thus only are men made free.

Reflection: This chapter is addressed To Those Who Fear Want. It opens with a line of verse about a lion and turns it into a picture of the free person, whose strength lies in clear opinions about what is and is not in our power. Then comes a dialogue with a worried student. What if I fall sick? Who will care for me? Each question gets a plain answer: friends, those who care for others, a hard bed borne bravely. Manes was a slave's name; Long notes that the Cynic Diogenes once had a slave so named. Epictetus' conclusion is that the root of meanness and cowardice is not death but "the fear of death."

Practice: Write down one worry about illness or loss that you carry. Beside it, as Epictetus does in 42.3, write what you could still do well if it came true. If the worry feels too heavy, choose a smaller one.

Question: What would you do differently if your fears about the future had less hold on you?

Week 43: Seize the Day

Reading 43. *Seize the Day. Seneca, On the Shortness of Life IX, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

1 Can anything be mentioned which is more insane than the ideas of leisure of those people who boast of their worldly wisdom? They live laboriously, in order that they may live better; they fit themselves out for life at the expense of life itself, and cast their thoughts a long way forwards: yet postponement is the greatest waste of life: it wrings day after day from us, and takes away the present by promising something hereafter: there is no such obstacle to true living as waiting, which loses today while it is depending on the morrow. You dispose of that which is in the hand of Fortune, and you let go that which is in your own. Whither are you looking, whither are you stretching forward? everything future is uncertain: live now straightaway. See how the greatest of bards cries to you and sings in wholesome verse as though inspired with celestial fire:—

"The best of wretched mortals' days is that
Which is the first to fly."

4 Why do you hesitate, says he, why do you stand back? unless you seize it it will have fled: and even if you do seize it, it will still fly. Our swiftness in making use of our time ought therefore to vie with the swiftness of time itself, and we ought to drink of it as we should of a fast-running torrent which will not be always running. The poet, too, admirably satirizes our boundless thoughts, when he says, not "the first age," but "the first day." Why are you careless and slow while time is flying so fast, and why do you spread out before yourself a vision of long months and years, as many as your greediness requires? he talks with you about one day, and that a fast-

fleeting one. There can, then, be no doubt that the best days are those which fly first for wretched, that is, for busy mortals, whose minds are still in their childhood when old age comes upon them, and they reach it unprepared and without arms to combat it. They have never looked forward: they have all of a sudden stumbled upon old age: they never noticed that it was stealing upon them day by day. As conversation, or reading, or deep thought deceives travellers, and they find themselves at their journey's end before they knew that it was drawing near, so in this fast and never-ceasing journey of life, which we make at the same pace whether we are asleep or awake, busy people never notice that they are moving till they are at the end of it.

Reflection: Seneca returns to Paulinus with a sharper point: "postponement is the greatest waste of life." People plan elaborately to live well later, and in the meantime lose today. The "greatest of bards" is Virgil, whose Georgics Seneca quotes: the best days of wretched mortals are the first to fly. Seneca reads closely. The poet says not the first age but the first day, as if to shrink our grand schemes to a single day that is already passing. His closing image is of travelers so absorbed in talk that they arrive before they notice. Busy people, he says, reach the end of life the same way.

Practice: Name one thing you have been saving for someday, and do some real part of it this week.

Question: What are you postponing until you can live better, and what would it mean to "live now straightaway"?

Week 44: The Ripe Olive

Reading 44. *The Ripe Olive. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations IV.50, translated by George Long.*

1 Think continually how many physicians are dead after often contracting their eyebrows over the sick; and how many astrologers after predicting with great pretensions the deaths of others; and how many philosophers after endless discourses on death or immortality; how many heroes after killing thousands; and how many tyrants who have used their power over men's lives with terrible insolence as if they were immortal; and how many cities are entirely dead, so to speak, Helice and Pompeii and Herculaneum, and others innumerable. Add to the reckoning all whom thou hast known, one after another. One man after burying another has been laid out dead, and another buries him: and all this in a short time. To conclude, always observe how ephemeral and worthless human things are, and what was yesterday a little mucus tomorrow will be a mummy or ashes. Pass then through this little space of time conformably to nature, and end thy journey in content, just as an olive falls off when it is ripe, blessing nature who produced it, and thanking the tree on which it grew.

Reflection: Marcus counts the dead: doctors, astrologers, philosophers, heroes, tyrants, and whole cities. Helike in Greece was swallowed by earthquake and sea in 373 BC; Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried by Vesuvius in AD 79, less than a century before Marcus wrote. The list could feel bleak, but it ends in one of his gentlest images. Live through this short time in agreement with nature, he says, and end "just as an olive falls off when it is ripe, blessing nature who produced it, and thank-

ing the tree on which it grew." The emphasis falls on contentment and gratitude, not on loss.

Practice: Spend a few minutes this week remembering people you have known who have died. For each, name one thing you are grateful to have received from them.

Question: What would it mean for you to end an ordinary day as Marcus's olive falls, blessing and thanking?

Week 45: The Measure of Grief

Reading 45. *The Measure of Grief. Seneca, To Marcia VII, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 "But," say you, "sorrow for the loss of one's own children is natural." Who denies it? provided it be reasonable? for we cannot help feeling a pang, and the stoutest-hearted of us are cast down not only at the death of those dearest to us, but even when they leave us on a journey. Nevertheless, the mourning which public opinion enjoins is more than nature insists upon. Observe how intense and yet how brief are the sorrows of dumb animals: we hear a cow lowing for one or two days, nor do mares pursue their wild and senseless gallops for longer: wild beasts after they have tracked their lost cubs throughout the forest, and often visited their plundered dens, quench their rage within a short space of time. Birds circle round their empty nests with loud and piteous cries, yet almost immediately resume their ordinary flight in silence; nor does any creature spend long periods in sorrowing for the loss of its offspring, except man, who encourages his own grief, the measure of which depends not upon his sufferings, but upon his will. You may know that to be utterly broken down by grief is not natural, by observing that the same bereavement inflicts a deeper wound upon women than upon men, upon savages than upon civilized and cultivated persons, upon the unlearned than upon the learned: yet those passions which derive their force from nature are equally powerful in all men: therefore it is clear that a passion of varying strength cannot be a natural one. Fire will burn all people equally, male and female, of every rank and every age: steel will exhibit its cutting power on all bodies alike: and why? Because these things derive their strength from nature, which makes no distinction of persons. Poverty,

grief, and ambition, are felt differently by different people, according as they are influenced by habit: a rooted prejudice about the terrors of these things, though they are not really to be feared, makes a man weak and unable to endure them.

Reflection: Seneca wrote this consolation around AD 40 to Marcia, daughter of the historian Cremutius Cordus, who had mourned her son Metilius for more than three years. He does not forbid grief: "we cannot help feeling a pang." He argues only that some mourning goes beyond what nature asks, shaped by habit and by what "public opinion enjoins." Some of his evidence, the comparisons with women and with peoples he calls savages, reflects prejudices of his time and adds nothing to his argument. Grief keeps its own time, and no essay can set it. Seneca's point is narrower: we can ask whether custom is adding weight to a sorrow.

Practice: If you are carrying a loss, let yourself feel it without judging how long it should last, and do one ordinary thing each day that the person you lost would have been glad to see. If the weight feels too great, talk with someone you trust.

Question: Seneca separates the grief nature brings from the mourning that custom expects. Have you ever felt that difference?

Week 46: A Point in Time

Reading 46. *A Point in Time. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations II.17, translated by George Long.*

1 Of human life the time is a point, and the substance is in a flux, and the perception dull, and the composition of the whole body subject to putrefaction, and the soul a whirl, and fortune hard to divine, and fame a thing devoid of judgement. And, to say all in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and vapour, and life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after-fame is oblivion. What then is that which is able to conduct a man? One thing and only one, philosophy. But this consists in keeping the daemon within a man free from violence and unharmed, superior to pains and pleasures, doing nothing without purpose, nor yet falsely and with hypocrisy, not feeling the need of another man's doing or not doing anything; and besides, accepting all that happens, and all that is allotted, as coming from thence, wherever it is, from whence he himself came; and, finally, waiting for death with a cheerful mind, as being nothing else than a dissolution of the elements of which every living being is compounded. But if there is no harm to the elements themselves in each continually changing into another, why should a man have any apprehension about the change and dissolution of all the elements? For it is according to nature, and nothing is evil which is according to nature.

Reflection: This passage from Book II is one of the most compressed in the Meditations. In a few lines Marcus surveys human life: time a point, the body a stream, the soul a dream, life a warfare and "a stranger's

sojourn." What can guide us through it? "One thing and only one, philosophy." By philosophy he means keeping the daemon, the divine part within, free from harm: unmoved by pleasure and pain, never acting without purpose or falsely, and accepting what is allotted. Death, in Stoic physics, is the dissolving of the elements into new forms, and Marcus asks why we should fear what nature does constantly.

Practice: Read 46.1 slowly once a day this week. Each time, choose one phrase from it and carry it with you through the day.

Question: Marcus says only philosophy can "conduct a man." What, in practice, guides you?

Week 47: When Friends Part

Reading 47. *When Friends Part. Epictetus, Discourses III.24, translated by George Long.*

1 Let not that which in another is contrary to nature be an evil to you: for you are not formed by nature to be depressed with others nor to be unhappy with others, but to be happy with them. If a man is unhappy, remember that his unhappiness is his own fault: for God has made all men to be happy, to be free from perturbations. For this purpose he has given means to them, some things to each person as his own, and other things not as his own; some things subject to hindrance and compulsion and deprivation, and these things are not a man's own; but the things which are not subject to hindrances, are his own. And the nature of good and evil, as it was fit to be done by him who takes care of us and protects us like a father, he has made our own.—But you say: I have parted from a certain person, and he is grieved.—Why did he consider as his own that which belongs to another? Why, when he looked on you and was rejoiced, did he not also reckon that you are mortal, that it is natural for you to part from him for a foreign country? Therefore he suffers the consequences of his own folly. But why do you or for what purpose bewail yourself? Is it that you also have not thought of these things? but like poor women who are good for nothing, you have enjoyed all things in which you took pleasure, as if you would always enjoy them, both places and men and conversation; and now you sit and weep because you do not see the same persons and do not live in the same places.—Indeed you deserve this, to be more wretched than crows and ravens who have the power of flying where they please and changing their nests for others, and crossing the seas without lamenting or regretting their former condi-

tion.—"Yes, but this happens to them because they are irrational creatures."—Was reason then given to us by the gods for the purpose of unhappiness and misery, that we may pass our lives in wretchedness and lamentation? Must all persons be immortal and must no man go abroad, and must we ourselves not go abroad, but remain rooted like plants; and if any of our familiar friends goes abroad, must we sit and weep; and on the contrary, when he returns, must we dance and clap our hands like children?

Reflection: This chapter warns against being moved by desire for things not in our power, and its example is ordinary: a friend leaves for another country, and one of you grieves. Epictetus is blunt. We enjoyed people and places as if we would have them forever, and now we weep. Crows and ravens move their nests without lament; reason, he argues, was not given us to make us more miserable than birds. His sneer at "poor women who are good for nothing" is a prejudice of his day. His real point is milder than his tone. Love people knowing they are mortal and free to go, and the parting will not undo you.

Practice: Write to someone who has moved away, or whom you now see less often. Enjoy the friendship as it is now, rather than mourning how it was.

Question: Epictetus is hard on those who weep when friends leave. Where is he right, and where does he go too far?

Week 48: The Willing Follower

Reading 48. *The Willing Follower. Seneca, On Providence V, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 I am constrained to nothing, I suffer nothing against my will, nor am I God's slave, but his willing follower, and so much the more because I know that everything is ordained and proceeds according to a law that endures forever. The fates guide us, and the length of every man's days is decided at the first hour of his birth: every cause depends upon some earlier cause: one long chain of destiny decides all things, public or private. Wherefore, everything must be patiently endured, because events do not fall in our way, as we imagine, but come by a regular law. It has long ago been settled at what you should rejoice and at what you should weep, and although the lives of individual men appear to differ from one another in a great variety of particulars, yet the sum total comes to one and the same thing: we soon perish, and the gifts which we receive soon perish. Why, then, should we be angry? why should we lament? we are prepared for our fate: let nature deal as she will with her own bodies; let us be cheerful whatever befalls, and stoutly reflect that it is not anything of our own that perishes. What is the duty of a good man? To submit himself to fate: it is a great consolation to be swept away together with the entire universe: whatever law is laid upon us that thus we must live and thus we must die, is laid upon the gods also: one unchangeable stream bears along men and gods alike: the creator and ruler of the universe himself, though he has given laws to the fates, yet is guided by them: he always obeys, he only once commanded. "But why was God so unjust in His distribution of fate, as to assign poverty, wounds, and untimely deaths to good men?" The workman cannot alter his materials: this is

their nature. Some qualities cannot be separated from some others: they cling together; are indivisible. Dull minds, tending to sleep or to a waking state exactly like sleep, are composed of sluggish elements: it requires stronger stuff to form a man meriting careful description. His course will not be straightforward; he must go upwards and downwards, be tossed about, and guide his vessel through troubled waters: he must make his way in spite of fortune: he will meet with much that is hard which he must soften, much that is rough that he must make smooth. Fire tries gold, misfortune tries brave men. See how high virtue has to climb: you may be sure that it has no safe path to tread.

Reflection: On Providence, addressed to Lucilius, asks why bad things happen to good people. This chapter gives the Stoic answer in its strongest form. Everything happens by an unbroken chain of causes, "one long chain of destiny," which binds even the gods; God gave the law once and now obeys it. The wise person's freedom lies not in escaping fate but in following it willingly: "nor am I God's slave, but his willing follower." Seneca adds that strong character needs hard material, as gold is tested by fire. Readers who do not share his belief in fate can still test the attitude: what changes when we accept what we cannot alter?

Practice: When something happens this week that you cannot change, say quietly, "I am constrained to nothing," and then ask what a willing follower would do next.

Question: Does the belief that "everything is ordained" make a person more responsible for his or her choices, or less?

Week 49: If There Are Gods

Reading 49. *If There Are Gods. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations II.11, translated by George Long.*

1 Since it is possible that thou mayest depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly. But to go away from among men, if there are gods, is not a thing to be afraid of, for the gods will not involve thee in evil; but if indeed they do not exist, or if they have no concern about human affairs, what is it to me to live in a universe devoid of gods or devoid of Providence? But in truth they do exist, and they do care for human things, and they have put all the means in man's power to enable him not to fall into real evils. And as to the rest, if there was anything evil, they would have provided for this also, that it should be altogether in a man's power not to fall into it. Now that which does not make a man worse, how can it make a man's life worse? But neither through ignorance, nor having the knowledge, but not the power to guard against or correct these things, is it possible that the nature of the universe has overlooked them; nor is it possible that it has made so great a mistake, either through want of power or want of skill, that good and evil should happen indiscriminately to the good and the bad. But death certainly, and life, honour and dishonour, pain and pleasure, all these things equally happen to good men and bad, being things which make us neither better nor worse. Therefore they are neither good nor evil.

Reflection: Marcus opens with a reminder that life could end at any moment, and draws from it a rule: let every act and thought be one you could stand by. Then he argues that death is not to be feared on any view.

If there are gods, they will not do us harm; if there are none, or they do not care, what is a world without them to us? He believes the gods exist and care, but he wants the argument to hold either way. The passage ends in a classic Stoic point. Life and death, honor and dishonor, pleasure and pain come alike to good people and bad, so they cannot be what makes a life good.

Practice: Before one task each day this week, ask whether you would be content to have it stand as your last piece of work, and do it accordingly.

Question: Marcus's argument is meant to hold whether or not the gods exist. Does it work for you on either view?

Week 50: No Time to Waste on Anger

Reading 50. *No Time to Waste on Anger. Seneca, On Anger III.42, translated by Aubrey Stewart.*

❧

1 Let us be free from this evil, let us clear our minds of it, and extirpate root and branch a passion which grows again wherever the smallest particle of it finds a resting-place. Let us not moderate anger, but get rid of it altogether: what can moderation have to do with an evil habit? We shall succeed in doing this, if only we exert ourselves. Nothing will be of greater service than to bear in mind that we are mortal: let each man say to himself and to his neighbour, "Why should we, as though we were born to live forever, waste our tiny span of life in declaring anger against anyone? why should days, which we might spend in honourable enjoyment, be misapplied in grieving and torturing others? Life is a matter which does not admit of waste, and we have no spare time to throw away. Why do we rush into the fray? why do we go out of our way to seek disputes? why do we, forgetful of the weakness of our nature, undertake mighty feuds, and, frail though we be, summon up all our strength to cut down other men? Ere long, fever or some other bodily ailment will make us unable to carry on this warfare of hatred which we so implacably wage: death will soon part the most vigorous pair of combatants. Why do we make disturbances and spend our lives in rioting? fate hangs over our heads, scores up to our account the days as they pass, and is ever drawing nearer and nearer. The time which you have marked for the death of another perhaps includes your own."

Reflection: Near the end of On Anger, Seneca draws on this quarter's theme to finish the argument of the second. The best cure for anger, he says, is to remember that we are mortal. Why waste our "tiny span of life" in feuds, when fever or old age will soon end every quarrel and death will part the fiercest pair of fighters? He does not want anger moderated, he says, but uprooted. The final sentence is pointed: "The time which you have marked for the death of another perhaps includes your own." Mortality, here, becomes a reason for peace.

Practice: Think of one quarrel or grudge you are keeping alive. This week, ask whether it is worth any part of your "tiny span of life," and take one step to let it go.

Question: Seneca thinks remembering our mortality makes anger seem absurd. Has that ever happened to you?

Week 51: A Small Part of the Whole

Reading 51. *A Small Part of the Whole. Epictetus, Discourses I.12, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 What then is the punishment of those who do not accept? It is to be what they are. Is any person dissatisfied with being alone? let him be alone. Is a man dissatisfied with his parents? let him be a bad son, and lament. Is he dissatisfied with his children? let him be a bad father. Cast him into prison. What prison? Where he is already, for he is there against his will; and where a man is against his will, there he is in prison. So Socrates was not in prison, for he was there willingly. Must my leg then be lamed? Wretch, do you then on account of one poor leg find fault with the world? Will you not willingly surrender it for the whole? Will you not withdraw from it? Will you not gladly part with it to him who gave it? And will you be vexed and discontented with the things established by Zeus, which he with the Moirae (fates) who were present and spinning the thread of your generation, defined and put in order? Know you not how small a part you are compared with the whole. I mean with respect to the body, for as to intelligence you are not inferior to the gods nor less; for the magnitude of intelligence is not measured by length nor yet by height, but by thoughts.

Reflection: This chapter, Of Contentment, argues that the punishment for refusing to accept one's lot is simply to remain in it unwillingly. A person who hates where he is lives in a prison of his own making; Socrates, who accepted his imprisonment, was not truly in prison at all. Then comes a line that gains force from Epictetus' life: "do you then on

account of one poor leg find fault with the world?" He himself was lame. The Moirae, the Fates of Greek myth, appear spinning the thread of each life. The chapter ends by turning from the smallness of the body to the greatness of the mind, measured not by size but by thoughts.

Practice: Name one thing about your body or circumstances that you resent. This week, practice speaking of it plainly and without complaint, and notice what it still leaves you free to do.

Question: How does it change the line about "one poor leg" to know that Epictetus was himself lame?

Week 52: One Light, One Soul

Reading 52. *One Light, One Soul. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations XII.32–34, translated by George Long.*

❧

1 There is one light of the sun, though it is interrupted by walls, mountains, and other things infinite. There is one common substance, though it is distributed among countless bodies which have their several qualities. There is one soul, though it is distributed among infinite natures and individual circumscriptions [or individuals]. There is one intelligent soul, though it seems to be divided. Now in the things which have been mentioned all the other parts, such as those which are air and matter, are without sensation and have no fellowship: and yet even these parts the intelligent principle holds together, and the gravitation towards the same. But intellect in a peculiar manner tends to that which is of the same kin, and combines with it, and the feeling for communion is not interrupted.

2 What dost thou wish? to continue to exist? Well, dost thou wish to have sensation? movement? growth? and then again to cease to grow? to use thy speech? to think? What is there of all these things which seems to thee worth desiring? But if it is easy to set little value on all these things, turn to that which remains, which is to follow reason and god. But it is inconsistent with honouring reason and god to be troubled because by death a man will be deprived of the other things.

3 How small a part of the boundless and unfathomable time is assigned to every man! for it is very soon swallowed up in the eternal. And how small a part of the whole substance! and how small a part of the universal soul! and on what a small clod of the whole earth thou creepest! Reflecting on

all this, consider nothing to be great, except to act as thy nature leads thee, and to endure that which the common nature brings.

Reflection: The year ends near the close of the Meditations, with three entries that gather its great themes. The first is a vision of unity: one sunlight falling on many walls, one substance in many bodies, one mind seeming divided among many people. The second asks what in life is worth wanting, and answers: to follow reason and god. The third returns to scale, how small a share of time, matter and soul each person has. Yet the conclusion is not despair. It is a quiet charge to "act as thy nature leads thee, and to endure that which the common nature brings." That is the Stoic program in a sentence.

Practice: On a clear day this week, notice sunlight falling on many separate things and remember Marcus's "one light of the sun." Then look back over your year and choose one practice to keep.

Question: After a year with these three writers, what do you now count as truly great?

Notes on the Texts

1.1 Appearances: Long's word for the impressions things make on the mind. Epictetus holds that their right use is the one thing fully in our power, because we decide whether to assent to them.

1.3 Aeolus: in Homer's Odyssey, the ruler of the winds.

2.1 The dashes mark objections that Marcus raises against himself and then answers. Providence or atoms: whether the world is ordered by divine reason or is a chance concurrence of atoms, the same calm is open to us.

3.1 That stupid king: Stewart's note identifies him as Xerxes, the Persian king who invaded Greece in 480 BC. The darts recall the story in Herodotus that Persian arrows would block out the sun; the chains recall Herodotus' report that Xerxes threw fetters into the Hellespont and had the water whipped. Neptune is the Roman god of the sea.

4.2 Thrasea: Publius Clodius Thrasea Paetus, a senator and leading figure of the Stoic opposition to Nero, condemned in AD 66. Rufus: Musonius Rufus, Epictetus' teacher, as Long notes; Nero banished him in 65.

4.3 Agrippinus: Paconius Agrippinus, a Stoic known mainly from Epictetus, accused along with Thrasea and banished from Italy around 67. Aricia lay about twenty Roman miles from Rome on the Appian Way (Long's note).

6.1 Fortune: Seneca often speaks of chance as a person, Fortune, who gives and takes away (compare 24.1 and 43.1).

7.1 Preface, narrative, confirmation, peroration: the parts of a formal speech in court. The words in round brackets are Long's alternative rendering, as throughout his Epictetus.

7.2 Socrates was tried at Athens in 399 BC, charged with impiety and with corrupting the young, and was sentenced to death by hemlock.

9.2 Diogenes of Sinope (c. 413/403 to c. 324/321 BC), one of the founders of Cynicism, lived in poverty in Athens and is said to have sheltered in a large storage jar. Epictetus often holds him up as a model, along with Socrates.

11.1

12.1 Theorems (rules): the principles of Stoic teaching. Long gives his alternative word in round brackets.

13.1 Marcus Cato: Cato the Younger (95–46 BC), a Roman Stoic and opponent of Julius Caesar, who died at Utica in 46 BC.

14.1 Independent of the will: Long's phrase for things outside our power, as dependent on the will means things within it.

15.1 Temping: a misprint in the source text for tempting, left as printed. The involuntary first emotion matches what Stoic writers called pre-emotions, reactions that occur before assent; an account of them survives in Gellius.

16.1 Falernian: a highly regarded Roman wine. Xenocrates (c. 396/5 to 314/3 BC) headed Plato's school, the Academy. The saying of Crates about him to which Marcus points is not given here.

17.2 Affections of the soul: the passions, such as anger and desire.

19.1 The most ancient city and polity: the universe, pictured by the Stoics as one city shared by all reasoning beings (compare 2.1 and 28.1).

20.1 Kiss (love): Long gives a literal and a looser rendering side by side, as often.

21.1 Sextius: Quintus Sextius, a Roman philosopher born no later than 70 BC, who blended Pythagorean and Stoic teaching. Seneca's account of his nightly self-examination comes from this passage.

22.1 Efflux of the deity: an outflowing or share of the divine reason that, for the Stoics, runs through the whole universe.

23.1 Carried way: a misprint in the source text for carried away, left as printed. The Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, were patrons of travelers and especially of sailors.

23.2 Hesiod, Works and Days, as Long notes. In a later prose version the line says that the man who puts off his work is forever wrestling with ruin.

24.1 Democritus of Abdera (c. 460 to c. 370 BC), the atomist, held that peace of mind was the aim of life and that it came chiefly from avoiding too many occupations.

26.1 Pisistratus ruled Athens as tyrant three times, the last from 546 BC until his death around 528/527 BC.

27.1 The same portion of the divinity: for the Stoics, every human mind shares in the divine reason (compare 22.1).

28.1 Long prints in parentheses the Greek word, *προβάτων*, that he translates as domestic animals. A citizen of the world: the Stoic idea of the cosmos as one city, which Seneca develops at 35.1.

28.2 A son's duty to obey in all things is Epictetus' view, set in the households of his own time.

29.1 Victims: animals offered in sacrifice to the gods.

30.1 The dashes again mark an imagined conversation, here between Marcus and an objector.

31.1 As Plato says: Epictetus attributes to Plato the saying that every soul is unwillingly deprived of the truth.

31.2–3 Euripides, Medea 1079, as Long notes. The play was first performed in 431 BC. In it Medea, abandoned by Jason, kills Glauce, Creon and her own two sons to take revenge on him.

33.1 Antoninus: Antoninus Pius, Marcus's adoptive father, emperor from 11 July 138 to 7 March 161.

34.1 Aliptes: a Greek word, which Long glosses as oiler. *ἐκεῖνος*: the Greek word Long prints for he. The rod of Hermes: Epictetus calls it a saying; whatever the rod touched would turn to gold.

35.1 The questions Seneca lists belong to what the Stoics called physics, the study of nature and the divine, one of the three parts of philosophy with logic and ethics.

36.1 Phocion (c. 402 to 318 BC): an Athenian statesman and general nicknamed the Good, who was executed by hemlock in 318 BC.

37.1 Epicurus: Epictetus sums up his view as either denying honesty or making it whatever opinion holds to be honest.

38.1 Seneca writes as one of the masters (we are not allowed to order all things); Epictetus, whose words fill a third of this book, was born a slave.

40.1 Paulinus: probably Pompeius Paulinus, overseer of Rome's grain supply and probably a close relative of Seneca's wife. The essay is usually dated around AD 49, though one scholar argues for about 55. Art is long but life is short: the opening of the Aphorisms of Hippocrates.

42.1 A line of verse, which Epictetus applies to the person who relies on his own opinions.

42.3 Manes: a slave's name. Long notes that Diogenes had only one slave, named Manes, who ran away.

43.2–3 Virgil, Georgics III.66–67, in Stewart's English. The greatest of bards in 43.1 is Virgil.

44.1 Helice (Helike), a city in Achaea, was destroyed by earthquake and tsunami in the winter of 373 BC. Pompeii and Herculaneum were destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79.

45.1 Marcia was the daughter of the historian Aulus Cremutius Cordus. She had mourned her son Metilius for more than three years when Seneca wrote, around AD 40.

46.1 Daemon: the divine part within each person (compare 8.2).

47.1 Poor women who are good for nothing: a contemptuous phrase of Epictetus' day, printed as he spoke it.

48.1 The fates: Seneca speaks of fate both as a power and, in the plural, as persons, after Greek and Roman myth (compare 51.1).

49.1 Providence: the Stoic belief that divine reason orders the world and cares for it.

51.1 Moirae (fates): the Fates of Greek myth, pictured spinning the thread of each life. Epictetus was himself lame, though the sources disagree about the cause.

52.1

Glossary

Appearance: Long's word for an impression, the way a thing strikes the mind before we judge it. Stoics hold that we are responsible for whether we assent to appearances.

Assent: agreeing that an appearance is true. For the Stoics, assent is in our power, and a passion arises only when we assent to a mistaken judgment.

Benefit: in Seneca, a kindness, located in the goodwill of the giver rather than in the thing given.

Commonwealth: a state. Seneca's greater commonwealth is the whole universe of gods and human beings; the lesser is the city of one's birth.

Consolation: a letter or essay written to comfort someone in grief, as Seneca's To Marcia.

Cynic: a follower of the way of life of Diogenes of Sinope, who lived in deliberate poverty (9.2). Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, studied with the Cynic Crates.

Daemon: in Marcus, the divine part within each person.

Dioscuri: Castor and Pollux, patrons of travelers and especially of sailors.

Externals: everything outside our own will, such as body, property, reputation and other people's actions.

Fate: the Stoic chain of causes by which everything happens according to divine reason.

Fortune: chance, often spoken of by Seneca as a goddess who gives and takes away.

Good feelings: in Stoic teaching, the calm emotions of the wise person, such as joy and caution, which take the place of the passions.

Indifferent: anything that is neither virtue nor vice, such as health, wealth or fame. Such things can be preferred or not, but they cannot make a person good or bad.

Logos: reason, both the reason in each human mind and the divine reason that orders the universe.

Moirae: the Fates of Greek myth, pictured spinning the thread of each life (51.1).

Nature: for the Stoics, both the order of the universe and the nature of each thing. To live according to nature is to live by reason.

Passion: a strong emotion such as fear, grief, craving or excessive delight. The Stoics held that each rests on a mistaken judgment and is excessive and disobedient to reason.

Pre-emotion: an involuntary first reaction, such as a start or flinch, which comes before assent and so is not yet a passion. Seneca calls it the first emotion (15.1).

Preferred indifferent: an indifferent, such as health, that it is natural and normally right to choose, though it is not a true good.

Progress: the state of those on the road to virtue who are not yet wise. Long's Epictetus calls such a person one who is making proficiency.

Providence: the care of the divine reason for the world and for human beings.

Role: in Epictetus, one of the relationships (son, brother, citizen, human being) from which our duties arise.

Ruling faculty: Epictetus' term for the reasoning, choosing part of the soul (23.1). Marcus speaks of the divine part or the daemon within (8.2, 46.1).

Sage: the wise person, perfect in virtue. The Stoics admitted that such a person is extremely rare.

Stoa: a covered colonnade. The Stoics took their name from the Stoa Poikile, the painted colonnade in Athens where Zeno taught.

Stoic: a follower of the school founded by Zeno of Citium around 300 BC.

Virtue: excellence of character. For the Stoics, the only true good.

Will: Long's word for the faculty of choice, the Greek prohairesis, which Epictetus treats as the one thing truly our own.

Chronology

c. 300 BC · Zeno of Citium begins teaching in the Stoa Poikile in Athens.

c. 230–206 BC · Chrysippus leads the Stoic school.

95–46 BC · Life of Cato the Younger, who dies at Utica.

c. 4 BC · Seneca is born at Corduba in Spain (by some estimates between 4 and 1 BC).

AD 41 · Seneca is exiled to Corsica under Claudius.

49 · Seneca is recalled to Rome and becomes tutor to Nero.

c. 50 · Epictetus is born a slave at Hierapolis in Phrygia (some time in the 50s).

54 · Nero becomes emperor, with Seneca among his advisers.

65 · After the Pisonian conspiracy, Nero orders Seneca's death.

89 or c. 93 · Domitian banishes philosophers from Italy; Epictetus opens his school at Nicopolis.

c. 108 · Arrian studies with Epictetus and records his lectures.

121 · Marcus Aurelius is born in Rome, 26 April.

c. 135 · Epictetus dies.

138 · Antoninus Pius becomes emperor and adopts Marcus.

161 · Marcus becomes emperor, sharing power with Lucius Verus until 169.

c. 171–175 · Marcus probably writes much of the Meditations on campaign.

180 · Marcus dies, 17 March.

1862 · George Long's translation of the Meditations.

1877 · Long's translation of Epictetus' Discourses and Enchiridion.

1887–1889 · Aubrey Stewart's translations of Seneca's On Benefits and the shorter dialogues.

Further Reading

Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, 1998 (French original 1992). A study of Marcus's notebook and the Stoic teaching behind it.

Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 1995. Essays on ancient philosophy as practice, not only theory.

A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*, 2002. A scholarly account of Epictetus' thought.

Emily Wilson, *The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca*, 2014. A biography of Seneca.

James Romm, *Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero*, 2014. Seneca's life at the court of Nero, told as history.

Miriam T. Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics*, 1976. A detailed scholarly study of Seneca's public life.

John Sellars, *Stoicism*, 2006. A compact introduction to the school's logic, physics and ethics.

Brad Inwood, *Stoicism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2018. A brief, reliable overview.

Donald Robertson, *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius*, 2019. Marcus's ideas, applied to modern life.

William B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, 2009. A modern attempt to live by Stoic principles.

Sources of the Texts

- **George Long (1800–1879):** Epictetus, *Discourses*, translated 1877 (London: G. Bell), in the Standard Ebooks edition; Readings 1, 4, 7, 9, 14, 17, 20, 23, 28, 31, 34, 37, 42, 47 and 51. Long's notes and the footnote markers that point to them are left out.
- **George Long (1800–1879):** Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, translated 1877, in the Standard Ebooks edition of Epictetus' short works; Reading 12. Long's notes and footnote markers are left out.
- **George Long (1800–1879):** Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, translated 1862, in this series' edition of Long's text, with its paragraph numbering; Readings 2, 5, 8, 11, 16, 19, 22, 25, 27, 30, 33, 36, 39, 41, 44, 46, 49 and 52. Long's notes are left out; his square-bracketed additions stay in the text.
- **Aubrey Stewart (1844–1918):** Seneca, the shorter dialogues, published as *Minor Dialogues* (London, 1889), in the Standard Ebooks edition of the *Dialogues*, which gives the dates of Stewart's translations as 1887 to 1898; Readings 3, 6, 10, 13, 15, 18, 21, 24, 26, 35, 40, 43, 45, 48 and 50. Stewart's notes and footnote markers are left out.
- **Aubrey Stewart (1844–1918):** Seneca, *On Benefits* (London, 1887), in the same Standard Ebooks edition; Readings 29, 32 and 38. Stewart's notes and footnote markers are left out.

Edition Notes

The readings: The readings are reproduced word for word from public domain translations. Each translator, edition and date is listed under Sources of the Texts, with what this edition leaves out.

The apparatus: The introduction, headnotes, questions, reflections, practices, notes, glossary, chronology and reading list were drafted with the help of artificial intelligence and checked by hand against the readings and against published sources. Every quotation in them matches the readings printed in this book word for word, and every fact was checked against a published source before it was printed. The publisher keeps a record of the source checked for each fact. No quotation, fact or story was invented. The readings themselves are copied unchanged from the translations named under Sources of the Texts.

Locators: a note marked 3.4 refers to Reading 3, paragraph or line 4, as numbered in the margin.

Corrections: readers who find an error are invited to report it to the publisher. Corrections will appear in later editions.