# THE DAILY STOIC INTERVIEWS

20 INTERVIEWS ON STOICISM WITH SCHOLARS, ENTREPRENEURS, BESTSELLING AUTHORS AND MANY MORE!

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# INTRODUCTION

"Go straight to the seat of intelligence," Marcus Aurelius told himself two thousand years ago, "your own, the world's, your neighbor's." What he meant by that was that the philosopher must avail themselves of the knowledge and wisdom of the world, including that which was already contained within them.

One of the most most common literary forms in ancient Greece and Rome was the dialogue. These—mostly hypothetical—conversations between illustrious statesmen, between a philosopher and a fool, between a student and his teacher from antiquity fill thousands of pages and hundreds of books. Cicero, long a student and admirer of the Stoics, would himself write many, including *On the Orator*, *On Friendship*, *On Old Age*, as well as *On the Ends of Good and Evil,* in which at one point Cicero would engage in an imaginary dialogue with Cato the Younger on Stoicism.

It was only appropriate then, when we founded DailyStoic.com in 2016, that we would use this platform to conduct as many dialogues as we could with wise men and women, statesmen, leaders, athletes, authors and philosophers. Unlike Cicero's dialogues, ours are real. We really did get to discuss philosophy with bestselling author of *48 Laws of Power* Robert Greene, Georgetown and Naval Academy professor Nancy Sherman, philosopher Alain de Botton, investor and entrepreneur Kevin Rose, SouthWest Energy CEO Tewodros Ashenafi, the late political philosophy professor Peter Lawler, the *New Yorker*'s Elif Batuman, professor and martial artist Daniele Bolelli, *The Power of Meaning* author Emily Esfahani Smith, cognitive-behavioural psychotherapist Donald Robertson, NBC's *Sunday Night Football* anchor Michele Tafoya and many others. Instead of waiting until they had left this world and *guessing* or *approximating* what they might have said, as Plato did with Socrates or Cicero with Cato, we were fortunate enough to actually ask—to get them on record and on topic. Or rather, we got in person, over the phone or via email, and ask them the kind of questions and get the kind of answers that contain the kind of timeless wisdom designed to last through the ages.

Needless to say, we learned quite a bit. It was from Michele Tafoya, who likes to read a page of Stoic philosophy each morning, that we learned how to respond to the inherent unfairness of life.

> *"Life is unfair. That is a fact. If life were fair, no child would ever die. If life were fair, everyone would look the same. If life were fair, cupcakes and potato chips would*

*be good for you. Accepting that life is not fair is liberating. It reminds you that there are some things with which you have to deal and accept. Why play the victim? It doesn't get you anywhere. I don't accept illogical unfairness — like being paid less than someone doing the same job I'm doing. But I do accept that there are people on TV who are much prettier than I am. I accept that I have to exercise and diet to look the way I want. I accept that I have to freeze my tail off during some games while Al and Cris sit in a warm booth with hot chocolate! These are things I signed up for."*

It was author Emily Esfahani Smith who told us how to find awe and transcendence in the busy modern world.

*"For transcendence, I make sure to regularly spend time in places that inspire awe in me, like in nature or at the art museum. I've found that technology can be a real barrier to both transcendence and belonging, so I'm trying to get some control over my addiction to it. Instead of checking social media or the headlines before I go to bed, I try to read a poem or listen to some music as I meditate. I don't always succeed, but no one said trying to live a meaningful life is easy!"*

And from the late Peter Lawler we learned that one is never inwardly a slave.

*"The lesson of Epictetus is that the rational man is never inwardly a slave, no matter what his political and material circumstances happen to be. As the novels of the contemporary Southern Stoic Tom Wolfe—often called "the novelist of manliness"—show, Epictetus rises in the Southern imagination as Stoicism gets democratized. In A Man In Full, Wolfe has a completely down-and-out character who finds inner freedom by actually coming upon a copy of Epictetus' writing, and he ends up knowing exactly what to do to preserve his dignity all by himself in a maximum security prison. And that novel ends, with a character on fire as a born-again Zeussian—or a Stoic."*

Although all these interviews are available online—many of them emailed via the daily email we do at DailyStoic.com—it is in this volume that they have been collected, edited and arranged together for the first time. We knew that we had conducted a number of interviews in the first year and half of the site's existence, but it was shocking to see them all laid out. Since July 2016, we interviewed over 40 people from 7 countries and asked them close to 250 questions. Their answers would tally more than 100,000 words (and counting since we are still publishing interviews and have many more to come).

For this volume, we have taken the very best interviews and collected them here for you. Contained within these pages are exercises and practices that you can incorporate in your daily life like the one Emily suggested above. We asked many of our interviewees for their favorite quotes from the Stoics, which you can reflect, meditate and journal on, book recommendations, or simply learning about their personal journeys and how they discovered philosophy.

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# An Interview with the Master: Robert Greene on Stoicism

Except for the Stoics themselves, no one has influenced me as a reader and writer more than Robert Greene. Which is why I was nervous but excited to interview Robert about Stoicism and this ancient philosophy has influenced his work over the years. It's not everyday that one gets the opportunity to interview their idol and mentor–about their favorite topic no less–so I did not take the idea lightly. In fact, I was originally reluctant to impose, but now, having done so, I am so glad that I did. I hope you are too.

As you'll see below, Robert Greene has been reading and studying Stoic philosophy for over 30 years. During our interview, he walked to his shelf and pulled down a dog-eared copy of Seneca. He did the same for a copy of Marcus Aurelius, and could remember the very camping trip where he'd taken most of the notes that filled that couple. He even pointed out what some of the shorthand in it meant—AF, for *amor fati*.

For those of you who are not familiar with Robert's work, you should be. His books *The 48 Laws of Power* and *33 Strategies of War* are classics that have been read by world leaders and military generals. His books *The 50th Law* and *Mastery* not only feature stoic philosophy, they are meditations on some of the most essential values of life: fearlessness, workmanship, mastery (inner and external mastery). Combined, his five books have sold millions of copies and will deservedly adorn bookshelves for hundreds of years. Be sure to follow Robert on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram or sign up for his email list for news about his next book.

In the meantime, enjoy this interview:

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**I remember many years ago in an interview you did for PowerSeductionandWar.com you were asked about the stoics—specifically, Marcus Aurelius–and you had said you hadn't studied them much for your books on power and war since they didn't have great reputations as generals or leaders. What made you decide to look to the Stoics for your other books?**

Well, that's weird to hear that quoted back to me but I guess it's true. I didn't read Marcus Aurelius until I wrote *48 Laws of Power*, so I came to him a bit late. I was struck by his quote about the boxer who is struck in the face in the ring–he can't complain, he understands that this is part of life and he must deal with it.I may have found the quote just as I was finishing the book. It didn't apply to 48 Laws or *Art of Seduction*, it wasn't until *50th Law* that the Stoics really fit for what I was writing. That's when I started mining them. The book that introduced me to the stoics was *Letters from a Stoic*. That's the title of the edition that Penguin put out and I have. Here, I am pulling it off my shelf now to look at it. I probably read this books for the first time when I was 23 or 24. I loved it. I carried it with me everywhere. That book has been with me, along with Machiavelli and a few others, and seeped into my brain for a long time.

My copy has all my weird notes in from when I was 23. It had a big impact on me. I think the reason is that when you're at that age you're kind of searching and looking for like a father figure and the way the letters are written it's kind of like a father giving you advice–the way my father never would have been. The books that have had a big impact on me tend to seep through everything.

*The 50th Law* was about dealing with fear and that was so relevant to the Stoics. It allowed me to bring in Seneca and reintroduced me to Marcus who is probably my favorite of the Stoics. I did use them a little for *Mastery*. I am using them a fair amount of my next book, *The Laws of Human Nature*.

As someone who is very much into Zen Buddhism, Stoicism is probably the closest thing to it in the Western sense. What's so nice about it is that it's not only a hardcore philosophy but it's also quite poetic. It makes you contemplate the weirdness of life and the sublimity of things. It's just a beautiful philosophy. My long winded answer is is that seeps into all your books–Seneca and Marcus Aurelius most of all.

**Is there a quote or passage you like best from the Stoics?**

I've always loved this quote from Marcus Aurelius:

> *"Like seeing roasted meat and other dishes in front of you and suddenly realizing: This is a dead fish. A dead bird. A dead pig. Or that this noble vintage is grape juice, and the purple robes are sheep wool dyed with shellfish blood. Or making love—something*

> *rubbing against your penis, a brief seizure and a little cloudy liquid. Perceptions like that—latching onto things and piercing through them, so we see what they really are. That's what we need to do all the time—all through our lives when things lay claim to our trust—to lay them bare and see how pointless they are, to strip away the legend that encrusts them."*

I've tried to bring that across in my writing. For instance, to deconstruct things like power and seduction and to see the actual elements in play instead of the legends surrounding them. So many people have this conception of power as being something that only involves world leaders, is some separate realm of human endeavor, when in fact people are constantly angling for power in the simplest things they do in life. I also wanted to accomplish that in *Mastery* in chapter 4, See People as They Are. Ignore people's words, the front they present and see what they are really up to. My new book is completely devoted to this idea.

**Seneca was a wily power broker who tutored Nero. Do you think his role as a Machiavellian leader undermines his philosophy? Or do you like him for that?**

You should know that answer to that! That's why I like Seneca. He's flawed. He's *a human being*. He tried to change the course of Roman history by turning Nero into a philosopher king.

I think it's worth saying, we don't know much about Nero or how bad he really was. If you read different sources, you find that Seneca was a brilliant tutor and Nero had an excellent education. Seneca loved money, that's for sure. He accumulated a fortune. He could be quite Machiavellian in his handling of Nero, which I would never hold against him. But he most definitely lived according to his principles. His death was one of the most moving things in all of history. If anyone embodies stoicism it is Seneca in the way that he died, the courage he displayed. Anyway, if you're going to mess with power in the world and try to change things you're going to get your hands dirty.

**In *The 50th Law*, you talk about the concept of *amor fati*—a love of fate. Obviously this originated with Nietzsche but it's a very Stoic idea. Why is that such an important idea?**

I came upon that through Nietzsche. He was obsessed with those two words. Going back some thirty years for me, when I read about this concept I just found it so exciting. It is linked with his concept of the eternal recurrence. Basically, this means that you live your life according to the principle that if you were to have to repeat the same actions as in the past, you would do them the same way. In other words, be at one with your fate and give your actions the weight of eternity. Stop wishing for something else to happen, for a different fate. That is to live a false life.

Through Nietzsche, I discovered *amor fati*. I just fell in love with the concept because the power that you can have in life of accepting your fate is so immense that it's almost hard to fathom. You feel that everything happens for a purpose, and that it is up to you to make this purpose something positive and active. It depends on how you see things, how you interpret this fate. It's all what you discuss so well in *The Obstacle is the Way*.

*Amor fati* is something I notice a lot more in Marcus Aurelius. I have the habit of putting "AF" in the margins whenever I feel there is something related to amor fati, and my very beat up copy of the Meditations is full of "AFs". It's just that he expresses the idea in so many different ways without using those words.

**How do you use philosophy–whether it's Stoicism or any other ancient way of thinking—in the course of your life today?**

Philosophy used to be about helping people in their daily lives, overcoming fears of death, finding the appropriate path to follow, how to deal with impossible people, how to maintain one's dignity. Then in the 20th century it became so abstract and so divorced from daily life that only a handful of graduate students care anymore about philosophy. The one thing that cannot be denied is that we all must die. Philosophy no longer deals with that basic truth. It's all about pseudo-intellectual problems. But that is what so much of academic life is like these days.

The Stoics and philosophers up to Nietzsche tried to simplify matters instead of needlessly complicate them. They are not trying to impress you with their flowery or lofty rhetoric, with the cleverness of their reasoning, but instead they try to help you live your life. I take to their writings as if it were water in a desert. I mean many of the ancient philosophers, not all of them.

As a simple example, I take Seneca's advice to heart: thinking often of my mortality, actively imagining the end of my life, and how I will accept it. This is not morbid but a way to make a person appreciate every moment of life and not have such a wretched fear of death that makes people refuse to think of it. That is a major impact Seneca has had on my daily life and I would be a lot poorer without it.

# Stoicism in the Military: An Interview with Professor Nancy Sherman

Many of history's great military leaders have naturally gravitated towards Stoic philosophy and its ready prescriptions for resilience, courage and duty. Frederick the Great rode with the Stoics in his saddlebags, George Washington put on a play about Cato at Valley Forge, and more recently General Mattis carried Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* with him on deployments. Both Cato and Marcus Aurelius saw war and civil war first hand.

This is why we wanted to reach out to Professor Nancy Sherman, who is not only a professor of Stoicism but specifically an expert on Stoicism in the military, writing the book *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind*. If you are not yet familiar with Professor Sherman, her credentials as a scholar are unparalleled. She is a distinguished University Professor and Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University and holds a Ph.D. from Harvard University in philosophy, where she received Harvard's George Plympton Adam's Prize for the most distinguished doctoral dissertation in the area of history of philosophy. She is the author of several other books, including *The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of our Soldiers*.

In our interview below we ask Professor Sherman about how and why she decided to focus on the connection between Stoicism and the military, why the philosophy has a deep appeal in the military, her time with James Stockdale and much more! Enjoy this interview with Nancy Sherman, and you can stay up to date with her work by visiting her website, nancysherman.com.

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**You are well known in the Stoic community for your work *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind*. Can you tell us why you decided to write the book and what brought you to philosophy?**

*Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind* has its origins in my time at the U.S. Naval Academy in the mid-nineties when I served as their first Distinguished Chair in Ethics. I was brought in at the height of a cheating scandal and was asked to help "morally remediate" the midshipmen. I was never quite sure what that term meant, but what followed was my developing an ethics curriculum for the Academy, some of

which is still in place. The reading that resonated most with midshipmen and officers alike was Epictetus's *Handbook*. What I discovered was that the military community knew the ethos of "sucking it up" better than most. In the face of war and long and ugly deployments, the idea that one can fortify one's self-sufficiency and happiness through discipline and mental (and physical) exercises really appealed to them. They were hungry for readings that could help them understand their own ways of standing up to loss and deprivation.

I am an ancient philosopher by training and so I thought it would be really important for that community to tangle with the ancient texts, not just superficially, by reading a little Epictetus or Marcus here and there, but by thinking about the blessings and curses of being stoic. That's the origin of *Stoic Warriors*. In writing the book, I came to think that Seneca was a much underrated philosopher in the academic community. And part of my own "tangling" with texts led to my really appreciating his writing and his own struggles with being stoic and understanding its limitations.

My own journey to philosophy began as an undergraduate through an eliminative process. I came to college with this oversized question: What did it mean to be human? And I thought an elite school like Bryn Mawr, where I was headed, would be just the place to find some answers. I thought anthropology might be the discipline that held the secrets. But intro. anthropology was a physical anthropology course—bones and dessicated artifacts; that wasn't going to do it for me. So I turned to English. And while I adored reading literature, the critical skills we honed had more to do with literary style and analysis than the meaty questions themselves to do with living a good, human life. I then turned to psychology. We worked with lab rats in those days, and I named mine, "Absalom," as I was fixated on Faulkner then. But Skinnererian behavioral psych., and rewarding animals with food pellets when they pressed levers in order to condition the response, wasn't quite what I imagined as answering the big question. Finally, after a brief romance with political science and political philosophy, I fell into philosophy. Aristotle is my real philosophical love, and he left a trail of questions in *the Nicomachean Ethics* that the Stoics picked up, to do with control, agency, and luck and their role in happiness. I began to sort out some of those questions in my first and second books, *Fabric of Character* and *Making a Necessity of Virtue*. *Stoic Warriors* was a way of deepening Aristotle's worries by considering just how much control we have in our lives and what we lose when we push that desire for control too far. The books that followed *Stoic Warriors* and forming a kind of trilogy, *Untold War* and *Afterwar*, were further ways of exploring the real (and sometimes tragic) collisions of good character, resilience, and luck in war and its aftermath.

**Frederick the Great rode with the Stoics in his saddlebags, George Washington put on a rendition of Cato at Valley Forge, today even General Mattis carries Marcus Aurelius with him on deployments. Why is that you think Stoicism and soldiering have such a deep connection?**

Stoicism has deep appeal to the military. You are sailor, say a midlevel officer on a ship; you're headed for home after a long deployment in the Persian Gulf. You and your fiance have set a wedding date set for August 1. But your ship gets turned around and you're redeployed, heading back to the Persian Gulf for an unanticipated redeployment. You have to cancel the wedding and rescind all the invitations. You have no idea now when you're going to get home and when and if you are going to get married. The example is a trivial one, but it points to the pervasive uncertainty of life as a military person. Here is where Epictetus's voice offers solace. "Some things are up to us and some are not…. About the things that are not up to us, be ready to say, "You are nothing in relation to me."

The idea of letting go is part of the appeal of Stoicism to the military. Certainly the sailor I worked with who told me this story found consolation in remembering Epictetus.

Being a good soldier, sailor, marine, wingman, depends on smarts, moral conscience (saying 'no' to unjust wars and unjust conduct), leadership, strategy and technical skills, resilience, and much much more. But it also depends on accepting that certain things are beyond one's control and due to the fog of war, the overwhelming lethality of the enemy, the incompetence of leaders you depend on, sheer contingency, and more. As humans, especially in war, where the devastation is so awful, we often want to take responsibility, fill in the gaps of our limited agency and anguish about what we could have and should have done. That is the nature of what I call the moral guilt that comes with "accident luck," and the sense of strict liability it can bring on. The guilt can be reasonable, understandable, yet still not track real culpability. Sometimes we are somewhat responsible for bad things, but not entirely and we don't quite know how morally and psychologically to mitigate the feelings of guilt and shame. Being able to draw the line between your virtuous agency and what merely happens to you is a useful skill. And it can be psychologically critical.

Still, Stoic writing can at once be hyperbolic and nuanced. What you can't control ought to be a matter of indifference: "Be prepared to say that it is nothing to you." But the Stoics also teach that what we can't fully control, we must still care about and "select," in

their lingo, as "preferred indifferents" or "disselect" as "dispreffered indifferents." We go for positive goods, for health, friendship, love objects, and avoid negative ones, death, life threat, and so on, but without the clingy attachments or aversions that can derail our happiness. I, myself, am not sure we can both "select" and "disselect" those goods and bads as the Stoics ask us to and yet stand toward them with the kind of equanimity that the Stoics demand. And that's not just because most of us aren't sages. It's because emotional attachments to those things we love requires real vulnerability. If you give that up and armor yourself against loss, you give up the possibility for real love.

The lesson here is from Cicero. He lost his beloved daughter Tullia in the winter of 45 BCE in childbirth and retreated from Rome to the Tusculan hills to immerse himself in Stoic self-help literature in order to find ways to cope with his profound grief. "My sorrow is stronger than any consolation," he writes to his friend Atticus. "I try all I know to bring my face if not my heart back to composure, if I can. While I do this I sometimes feel I am committing a sin, at others that I should be sinning if i failed to do it." The *Tusculan Disputations* lays bare his struggle to find solace in Stoic tonics. The first step is external, to control comportment, in a good Roman way. This, it seems, he is able to do. But to convince himself at a deeper level that he didn't suffer real loss, that his own happiness is not now marred, is something he cannot bring himself to accept. Tullia is not just a preferred indifferent. She is a genuine good and a genuine, non-fungible component of his happiness. What Cicero lays bare is an Aristotelian teaching that stands at sharp odds with Stoic teachings. As Cicero puts it, in a voice critical of the Stoics: "It is not within our power to forget or gloss over circumstances which we belive to be evil, at the very moment they are piercing us. They tear at us, buffet us, goad us, scorch us, stifle us—and you tell us to forget them?" (T.D. 3.35)

I think we need to read and reread Cicero as we read the Stoics. For he, and to some degree Seneca, remind us routinely of the limits of Stoic aspirations.

**You've had the rare honor to interview James Stockdale, who is probably the most well-known of the modern Stoics and arguably tested it under some of the most extreme circumstances. Can you tell us about what interviewing him was like?**

I interviewed Jim Stockdale several times, but the last time was near the end of his life in his home in Coronado, California. Stockdale knew Epictetus's H*andbook* by heart, and he could recite its lines seamlessly in his own James Cagney-like voice. When I listened to him, I came to think for a short while I was actually hearing Epictetus, or

at least, some American re-incarnation of him! Jim Stockdale was part of a team that included Sybil, his wife and co-author of their book, *In Love and War*. Stockdale's release from seven and a half years as a POW in the Hanoi Hilton had much to do with her tireless work in Washington, including a famous visit with President Nixon, on behalf of the POW's and those missing in action in Vietnam. She was far from a quiet, demure wife. And she made it clear to me during my visit that day in Coronado that Stoicism was not her cup of tea, even if it was her husband's. Their attachment to each other was unmistakeable. Their remarkable correspondence and the uncanny way they buried their secrets in those highly censored letters was a testament of their courageous love and sheer smarts as a couple that worked together in the most extreme adversity.

Stockdale, you know, was not a converter. He told me repeatedly that while Stoicism was his salvation, he didn't preach it to others. In solitary confinement, the POW's would tap out in code to those on the older side of the wall: "Are you ok?" He did that once and began, somehow, getting a bit preachy and Stoic. The responses from the other side stopped. There was dead silence. His listener had stopped listening. He told me, he concluded from thereon, more or less: They had their ducks lined up one way. I had my ducks lined up another way. And that's where we left it.

That said, as senior officer, he was head of the chain of command in prison, and Stoicism informed his command, both in terms of rules of governance within the chain and rules of engagement with guards. The theme was clearly Epictetan: "We are the masters of our fate," which I describe at length in *Stoic Warriors*.

**Speaking of James Stockdale, the Stoic most closely associated with him is Epictetus. There's that famous quote when his helicopter was shot in Vietnam, "I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus." Yet we've found Epictetus is often the hardest to start with (and also had the least military experience). When you taught at the Naval College, was there a specific Stoic you felt was the most accessible? That your students were most interested in?**

The midshipmen and officers at the Naval Academy, and I have to say, my Georgetown undergraduate students in general, find Epictetus very appealing. The epigrammatic style, the can-do philosophy, the sense of agency, positive thinking, and empowerment, all resonate. But I also routinely teach Seneca. And I think Seneca, and his corpus as a whole, is far more interesting and nuanced. Seneca struggles hard with shedding tears and yet controlling them, with the different levels of emotional response—from

physiological arousal to full-fledged assented evaluations, to wanting to give up worldly goods to being wed to them. He is honest in telling us that he is the Stoic doctor as well as the Stoic patient "lying ill in the same hospital." "Listen to me, therefore, as you would if I were talking to myself." He gives us permission to grieve. He is very much the moral progressor, and not a sage or saint. His epistles and essays are well worth reading and rereading.

**There is a sense in your book that Stoicism is in part a flawed philosophy, or at least, an incomplete one. Why do you think that is? What do you feel Stoicism is missing for our modern life—and modern warriors?**

Stoicism has blessings and curses. If we think we are bullet proof, whether as civilians or soldiers, we are sorely misled and put ourselves in grave psychological danger. At bottom, we become unprepared for loving and losing and being the kinds of object that can be loved or lost, by parents, spouses, and children alike. In war and peacetime, as combatants or noncombatants, we may face unspeakable horrors and life threats and indignities, large and small. But the very numbness that can be so adaptive to survival, can also erect walls that stand in the way of human attachment and trust. I am all for Stoic teachings of empowerment of agency. But we are, as Marcus Aurelius knew well, citizens of the universe, attached to each other, and deeply affected by the social worlds and practices and institutions of which we are a part. To forget our membership and responsibilities in the social world and how that affects our life chances is to forget who we are.

**Are there any Stoic practices you've adopted in your own life? Any favorite passages or practices?**

Relevant to the above remarks, there is a passage of Marcus I often bring to mind. It is fairly graphic and drives home its point vividly:

"If you have ever seen a dismembered hand or food or head cut off, lying somewhere apart from the rest of the trunk, you have an image of what a person makes of himself, so far as in him lies, when he refuses to associate his will with what happens and cuts himself off and does some unneighborly act. You have made yourself an outcast from the unity which is according to nature…you have cut yourself off." (*Meditations* 8.34, see *Stoic Warriors* , ch.7.)

The cultivation of empathy is critical, and what Marcus is calling for is a real affective and visceral appreciation that we are citizens of the cosmos or universe. Cicero repeats the thought in a more cerebral tone that Kant will pick up on in his Enlightenment philosophy. We owe duties of respect to all humans, says Cicero: "We must exercise a respectfulness toward men, both towards the best of them and also towards the rest….In short we ought to revere, to guard and to preserve the common affection and fellowship of the the whole of humankind." (*On Duties,*1.153-160; *Stoic Warriors* , ch.7*.)*

And so, respect, for the Stoics, is the cement of the global community. We support and sustain each other. Who we are, normatively speaking, owes much to those deep levels of just institutions and benevolent ties, and our hope in them. That teaching needs to be put side by side with any take-home lesson about Stoic individual empowerment and self-sufficiency. The Stoics were globalists. Their vision of virtue and goodness stopped not individual or small polis, but with the global community.

**Last question: What are you working on next?**

I have long been interested in the emotions and how we cultivate and express them. I also have done modern dance much of my adult life. I'm now combining those interests and thinking about emotional expression, in part, in dance. I had a fellowship last year at NYU's Center for Ballet and the Arts and began to think about these issues in earnest. It's, of course, a continuation of my interest in the Stoics, who put forth one of the most sophisticated and enduring account of the emotions.

# David "DHH" Heinemeier Hansson: The Entrepreneurial and Unstoppable Stoic

In our interview with Daniele Bolelli we said how there is a certain class of people who can't be placed in a single category. Their interests and accomplishments span multiple industries and fields and are often at complete odds with one another. David "DHH" Heinemeier Hansson is one of them. He is the creator of the widely popular programming framework Ruby on Rails, he is the founder & CTO at Basecamp, he is a *New York Times* best-selling author, a Le Mans class-winning racing driver, as well as a talented photographer. David has also been an outspoken critic of many so called "best practices" in Silicon Valley—from the growth at all costs mentality to the cult of workaholism. It turns out, he is also a deep admirer and student of the Stoics. We've seen references to Stoicism in his writing online but it was only after his interview on the Tim Ferriss podcast that we understood how deeply DHH has studied Stoic philosophy and how big of a part it played in his life.

In the interview below DHH shares some of the most important techniques from Stoicism that help him cope with success, achieve tranquility, key book recommendations and much more.

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**Can you tell us how you first encountered Stoicism? Was it a specific book or author? Do you remember your reaction?**

The first book on Stoicism I picked up was William Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life* back in 2014. I've heard references to Stoicism before that, but it was Irvine's book that really gave me the full tour of the philosophy, and it instantly resonated with me.

Partially because I had already independently been practicing many of the Stoic principles, like negative visualization and detachment. So I was already running the partial, home-grown version of Stoicism as my personal operating system. Thus upgrading to the full-fledged philosophy through the writings of Aurelius, Seneca, and others was both easy and enlightening.

It's funny, because this trajectory, to have independently arrived at a set of conclusions about life and the world, then finding them validated in a grander sense, is the same one that readers of my books *REWORK* and *REMOTE* often write me about. That you think you're the only one in the world with these thoughts, and therefore less willing to commit fully, or even acknowledge them. Then you discover a crystallized version of these thoughts and it fills you with confidence and vigor.

It also serves as an important way to define who you are and what you believe to yourself. That feeling when something is just right for you, that it just clicks, is rare and valuable. The only other time I can really say that I've found that at a grand scale like this is with the programming language Ruby.

**In your Quora session earlier this year, you mention that in Stoicism you found a "kindred thought for mental coping mechanisms I had employed since childhood." Can you tell us what you mean by that? Is there a specific coping mechanism you might recommend to our readers that you've taken from Stoicism?**

The key mechanisms from Stoicism that I had been practicing since childhood were negative visualization, detachment, and deliberate comfort-zone expansion. All three of these techniques helped fortify my drive and my tranquility. I've had all sorts of ups and downs in my life, as has most anyone. But I think having this bag of tricks has helped me weather the challenges better than most.

In some ways, I think the Danish mentality is a very easy fit for the Stoic philosophy. There's this broad sense that whatever hits you, "it could always be worse". We said that many times in my family. It helps put negative events into a broader perspective. Whatever I'm going through as a kid or young adult in one of the richest, happiest, equal countries in the world, well, it's probably not that bad compared to whatever just about anyone else outside of the 1st world or our time had to endure. That doesn't mean that your own problems aren't real or that they don't suck, just that they're pretty far from the worst that could happen, and thus easier to cope with.

**In one of your popular pieces, "Try harder to be someone else," you mention envying the tranquility of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. What does that tranquility represent to you? How have you been working to get closer to it?**

"Trying harder to be someone else" is another technique I've used since childhood. Picking role models and emulating their thoughts and actions until they become part of yourself. I find that to fit right in with the Stoic ideal of mental self-improvement and strengthening. So naturally upon discovering the writings of the great Stoic masters, like Aurelius and Seneca, I instantly employed the same technique to become more like them, and thus get closer to their fortitude.

For me, tranquility is the ultimate in personal control and perspective. Control over your emotions, your reactions, and the perspective to let all the little (and big) things in daily life flow by without putting you off course. That's not an easy state of mind to obtain when you're also passionate about being the best human you can be, doing the best work you can do, and pushing society forward. But it's an ideal I keep returning to. Whether it's in some technical discussion, sporting situation, or dealing with a 4-year old's tantrums. Being deliberate about this pursuit has raised my baseline of happiness and given me more time to appreciate more of life.

**You are a creator of the popular programming language Ruby on Rails, the founder of Basecamp, a best-selling author and a Le Mans class-winning racing driver. Instead of asking whether you credit Stoicism to help you achieve any of that, what about: How has Stoicism helped you enjoy and appreciate success? Clearly you live a good live, you've made quite a bit of money, you have nice things (nice cars especially)–people see the Stoics as being austere and joyless, but it's more than that. How do Stoicism and a rich life overlap in your eyes?**

Stoicism has been instrumental in coping with success. Yes, I say coping, even though I'm sure that'll get an eye roll from plenty of people. The old adage of "I've never seen an unhappy person in a Lamborghini" is something plenty of people truly believe, but boy are they wrong. I've known miserable people with hundreds of millions to their net worth and carefree, happy people living paycheck to paycheck.

Now, don't get me wrong: Wealth and success absolutely can help to raise your baseline. Not having to worry about money for groceries, health care, education, and other basics is a real benefit. But there's a large underbelly of new and largely unexplored problems and challenges that come with that. Seneca and Aurelius were both fantastically wealthy and successful people, and they show that such trappings do not absolve the mind from the burden of learning to live a good life.

I explored this theme in my Medium post on "The day I became a millionaire", so I won't repeat all the points here. But I'll say that Stoic philosophy has been absolutely key to being able to deal with the situation without being trapped. I used negative visualization every week to imagine what life would look like if it all went POOF!, as it frequently does for wealthy people. I actively search to tie my happiness to something more durable than fame or accomplishments or material things. One of the worst things that can happen to people who seem to have it all is that they start fearing losing it all. I mentally embrace losing it all, such that if it does happen, I'll be able to cope just fine.

**One of our favorite posts from you is your article RECONSIDER. You basically say: Stop copying what everyone else is doing. Opt out of the endless competition and workaholism. Find your own path. Stick do it. This echoes Seneca in many ways. How do you think Stoicism can help ambitious young people (particularly in Silicon Valley) who are trying to figure out their path in life?**

I think Stoicism can help anyone, and certainly also the extremely ambitious. It help puts the pursuit in a broader perspective. Nobody is going to care or remember whether you flipped some startup for $100M in 50 years. Your time in the limelight is short, and, in my opinion, ultimately unrewarding. Trading the best decades of your life to compress work into it so you can live in retired leisure afterwards is a mistaken pursuit. Life isn't meant to be conquered.

I've made all the money in the world, and the vast majority of my favorite things don't require any of it. Programming Ruby. Reading. Learning. Playing video games. Taking photos. Playing with my kids and talking with my wife. Yes, I get to enjoy some activities at the edges, like motor racing, that wealth made possible, but they're a small sliver of the pie of happiness, and I'd be just fine without it (I know this because I was).

It's both scary and liberating to arrive at a point where you basically could buy anything. Or retire and do nothing. It forces you to confront the fact that happiness and a good life isn't correlated very well with neither of those things. No matter how hard people strive to get them.

**You are an avid learner and reader and you had a lot of book recommendations in your interview with Tim. What are some books that you think the Daily Stoic audience will enjoy and learn from?**

I'd start with *A Guide to the Good Life*, then *On the Shortness of Life* by Seneca, then *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, then *The Daily Stoic*. In that order. And my wife recently picked up *How to Be a Stoic*, which she's been enjoying a lot too. It's not like you need to read 100 books on Stoicism to get it. The basics are pretty simple, but living them consistently is hard. So returning to the same key texts will serve you well.

**Last question: Favorite Stoic quote?**

> *"Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested."* — Seneca

# Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking: An Interview with Oliver Burkeman

Oliver Burkeman is a writer for *The Guardian* based in New York. He's also helped bring stoicism to a mass audience with his popular book, *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*. The book, which has a chapter based on Seneca, explores the upsides of negativity, uncertainty, failure and imperfection. In other words, instead of gushy, hazy-headed "Fake it 'till you make it" thinking, Burkeman looks at the real psychological and therapeutic effects of realism, of unflinching self-honesty and resilience.

We interviewed him over email to find out what drew him to Stoicism and how it can help people.

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**What was it that motivated you to write *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*? Were you frustrated with the plethora of self-help literature that focused uniquely on positivity? Was it a personal exploration you felt you needed to do?**

I'd been writing my Guardian column on psychology for a while when began to see a pattern emerging. Most of the self-help approaches that seemed to actually work had something in common: they weren't about trying to eradicate negative emotions through willpower, or steamrolling them with upbeat thoughts. Instead they were about taking a stance of interest, or even acceptance, toward negative states like insecurity, uncertainty, sadness, failure and so on. I didn't know at the beginning that this was an old, old idea – much older than positive thinking.

Your book is well known in the Stoic community for its chapter on Seneca. What drew you to that? Why did you decide to write about such an ancient topic alongside modern ideas from people like Eckhart Tolle?

Well, to be clear, I'm a totally half-assed Stoic (though I try to be Stoic about that). I simply plundered a handful of ideas from Stoicism – mainly the ones that echoed other insights I encountered on what I came to call the "negative path to happiness". Though

there are countless areas of difference, the commonalities between Stoicism, Buddhism, "non-dual" ideas like Tolle's, and some therapeutic techniques – like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy – are downright spooky. If deeply thoughtful people are reaching the same conclusions even when separated by thousands of miles or thousands of years, it's probably time to conclude that they're the truth.

**Was there a particular Stoic idea or exercise that you think people would benefit most from? Is there one that has stuck with you?**

By far the one that stuck with me the most was the "premeditation of evils" or negative visualization – thinking soberly about worst-case scenarios, asking yourself how badly a given choice or event could work out, rather than trying to persuade yourself everything will go fine. This is immensely reassuring, in almost every case, firstly because you discover you were fearing a scenario many times worse than any that could actually occur; and secondly because, even if things do go badly, you'll feel more prepared and resilient. There might still be fear, but there'll be no fear of fear on top of that. I ask myself "what's the worst case scenario here?" multiple times a day. (Sometimes I ask other people, too, to try to be helpful, but it generally annoys them.)

**Do you have a favorite stoic quote?**

If I'm allowed a paraphrasing of Eckhart Tolle, who of course wouldn't call himself a Stoic… "Do you have a problem now?" This is a tremendously powerful question, I think, and insofar as it draws attention to the role of thoughts in causing distress, I think it counts.

**You've talked in the book about how striving with all our might to be happy essentially eliminates the possibility. This sounds very counterintuitive to most people. Can you tell us why that is so?**

The most down-to-earth way to explain this is just as a matter of how we're designed, in a cognitive sense. Trying really hard to directly alter your emotions or thoughts is bound to backfire. Tell yourself you're only going to think positively, and you end up scanning your mind for traces of negativity, which isn't a positive way to live. Trying to make yourself calm down makes you stressed instead. Bereaved people who try not to feel grief end up having more problems with grief, and so on. (When you think about it, if

we could switch off emotions like fear through the power of thought, we wouldn't have survived for long, in evolutionary terms.) A more "spiritual" answer would probably bring in Buddhist ideas about the self: our efforts to make everything "go our way" inadvertently reinforce the very ego that is the source of suffering.

**Do you have a daily routine that incorporates any of what you studied in the book? Any chance it is something you picked up from Seneca? Tell us about your daily practices and what benefits you see from them.**

My daily routine is a real mashup: meditation (Buddhism); morning pages (which comes from Julia Cameron, and probably counts as "new age"); and working in 90-minute focus blocks whenever possible (from Tony Schwartz). I think the Stoicism part is more of a flavor that suffuses all of them. So in meditation I'll seek to be accepting of negative circumstances, like tiredness or anxiety or whatever; in morning pages I'll often find myself exploring worst-case scenarios, or gratitude in the Senecan sense (understand the fragility and contingency of the relationships and possessions you currently enjoy, and you'll value them more).

**And as a final question, what is next for you?**

I'm writing a book about time. (Although I'd probably back away in alarm from anyone who said those words to me at a party.) Ultimately it's about the shortness of life, and what psychology can tell us about using our brief time well. So that's Stoicism again, really: Seneca's On The Shortness of Life is still one of the most penetrating examinations of the matter. Life's not really short, he insists; it's that we go systematically wrong in how we use it.

# Stoicism In Professional Sports: An Interview with NFL Exec Michael Lombardi

Michael Lombardi might be one of the most quiet but influential executives in the NFL. He won two Super Bowls, 30 years apart—one under Bill Walsh and one under Bill Belichick. More than just coaching strategies, he's notorious in the league for the ideas he's spread. He was one of the first executives to study the science of scouting players for character (detailed here in this fascinating ESPN piece). To my eternal gratitude, he's also responsible for bringing Stoic philosophy to the NFL (detailed here in this *Sports Illustrated* piece), and in the process popularizing my book *The Obstacle Is The Way*. I was as surprised as anyone to hear that that Seattle Seahawks began looking at Stoicism because it was recommended to the *by the Patriots* shortly after their Super Bowl win over the Seahawks.

But it makes sense when you understand Mike. Mike has been consuming and studying philosophy for years. Through his tireless recommendations and reputation as a thought leader in the sport, he's managed to bring ancient philosophy to elite athletes not just in football but in professional sports at large. Mike is also a former General Manager of the Cleveland Browns and has been in executive positions in teams such as the Oakland Raiders and the Philadelphia Eagles. He was also an analyst and commentator for the NFL Network and is currently working on a book, which will include lessons learned from his experience with football greats such as Bill Walsh, Belichick and Al Davis. You can also catch him at Fox Sports where he is currently a football commentator.

But instead of talking sports—which could be done anywhere—I wanted to talk to Mike about ancient philosophy and how it works as a strategy for anyone, in any career.

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**What was your first exposure to Stoicism? How has your study progressed since then?**

For Christmas one year my wife bought me a copy of *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius which sent me down the path of learning more about being a Stoic. I then took the 30-day Stoic challenge as well as enrolled in Donald Robertson online class each November. It has been a gradual learning experience for me as well. Reading the works of Seneca, or

Epicurus provides me with a great start of the day. In a profession that has many outside influences, it is always good to remind yourself each day to worry and work on only that you can control.

**Most people would probably not think that NFL coaches would have a penchant for studying philosophy—let alone ancient philosophy. Why is that assumption wrong? Why is it important for coaches to mine ancient history and philosophy? What do they get out of it?**

People involved with sports, especially football coaches, have always studied the great leaders. And many of these Stoics are great leaders of men, therefore there is much to learn. Times may change, technology may change, issues may change, but leading, motivating does not change. Often in professional sports people from the outside have ideas and judgments that create doubt in doing what is right—and you must learn how not to let others control your thoughts and emotions. Sounds Stoic, right?

**What professional athlete or coach (past or present) best represents the ideals of Stoicism to you? Why?**

Basketball great Tim Duncan of the Spurs comes to mind as a great Stoic. He was all about the team, he was mentally tough and he always was in control of his emotions and thoughts. His self-control and discipline were incredible. When he missed a tap-in during the Miami game and smacked the floor it was one of the few times he let go of his feelings. Greg Popovich who I don't know personally appears to have the quality of a great Stoic as does Bill Belichick. Belichick is always in the moment, always preaching to the team to worry about things they can control and don't listen to the noise. Tom Crean the head basketball coach at Indiana is a good friend and has many great stoic qualities. His search for knowledge and improvement is remarkable however his willingness to share his thoughts and ideas is incredible.

**One of the things you worked on with the Patriots was scouting for character. As Heraclitus says, "character is fate"—is that your belief too? Did you find ways to teach or build character with athletes?**

I believe past performance will predict future achievement in all aspects of life. Defining character is the most difficult challenge in the evaluation process because determining

character is not a direct assessment. You have to understand the culture, the backgrounds, the method a prospect developed and the environment surrounding him. It is not how it appears through my eyes, rather how he makes decisions based on his world. That requires not beginning with the end in mind when you are assessing character.

**Do you incorporate any Stoic practices into your daily routine?**

Each morning I have a routine which includes reading and preparing for the day. Making sure I only worry about those things I can control and not let my mind race from A to G and just focus on A to B and then C.

**What is one thing professional coaches emphasize with their athletes that anyone from the general public can practice today to perform better in everyday life?**

Control the things you can control and only worry about them. Stay in the moment, don't listen to the negative or the positive, be grounded and most of all keep striving for improvement. One day at time is critical and as UCLA Basketball coach John Wooden once said, "If you don't have time to do it right now, when will you have time to do it right later?"

**Do you have a favorite stoic passage or quote?**

I love Seneca and love this quote by him.

> *"Most powerful is he who has himself in his own power."*

# On Stoicism and Not Giving a F*ck: An Interview with Mark Manson

I was at a small private dinner a few weeks ago and someone complained about being stressed and overworked. They asked for a book recommendation and so I began to tell them about a book I'd recently read and liked, *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* by Mark Manson. As I said this, the person sitting next to us overheard and with a big smile on their face, reached into their bag and pulled out their own marked up copy, which they were in the middle of.

It was quite an exchange—not only of the odds of recommending a book that another person at the table was in the middle of reading but because just a few years earlier I'd sat across the table from Mark Manson himself and watched him hem and haw about whether he should do a traditionally published book or just keep writing for millions of people on the internet. The encounter I'd just witnessed was exactly the kind of thing I wanted him to realize was possible if he took the time to publish (and so was being featured on Chelsea Handler's Snapchat, hitting the *New York Times* Bestseller list and all the other awesome stuff that's happened for him).

Today, Mark's book is on fire and for good reason. It's funny, it's wise, it's different than most other self-help books. I wanted to interview him here to talk about why this book is resonating with people—why telling them they shouldn't care is working as an inspirational message. Most of all, I wanted to connect this modern, clever message with ancient philosophy, because Mark and Marcus Aurelius have a lot more in common than one might think.

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**One of the things I said when I was blurbing your book was the happiness and success has always been the art knowing what to—and what not to—give a fuck about. Actually Marcus Aurelius says something like that, that we shouldn't give the little things more time and thought they deserved. That's what your book is all about. My question to you is: What's subtle about that?**

It's subtle because it's not always easy to determine what those "little things" in life actually are. Little things, when we're caught up and fretting about them, often *appear*

to be big and meaningful and world-changing in the moment they are happening. "No, seriously guys, this new app idea is going to change the world!" That type of thing. We've all been there. And it's only in hindsight, with a proper amount of self-reflection and skepticism that we're able to say, "Oh wait, that was actually pretty stupid and ego-driven."

What's required is a certain level of meta-awareness—the ability to observe one's own thoughts, biases and tendencies and make judgments on them from a higher cognitive level. I believe this is something that is subtle for most people, and they definitely don't grow up automatically knowing how to do it. In fact, in my life, I've found it's incredibly difficult and must be practiced and fought for constantly. I see my book simply as tool to helping people to do that.

**Early on in the book you take aim at the "all of the 'How To Be Happy' shit that's been shared eight million times." You say that the root problem is modern culture's perpetual focus on positivity. Can you elaborate on that?**

I think our culture has confused "positivity" — i.e., what *feels* good — with Capital-G "Good" in an ethical sense. From a philosophical point of view, we can say that good experiences are not always pleasant, and pleasant experiences are not always good.

But if you're watching viral YouTube videos and beer commercials all day, that quickly gets lost. I think consumer-culture and its marketing has a vested interest in keeping people chasing "highs" all the time, and due to their dominance in the culture, everyone's default mode is assuming that a "Good Life" basically equates to feeling good.

Unfortunately, I think a large chunk of the conventional self-help material out there plays right into this as well, and I take aim at it accordingly. Feeling sad? Take this seminar and you'll feel great! Frustrated at work? Here's a course that will have you making millions in no time!

For one, life's not that simple (obviously). But more importantly, our painful or unpleasant or "negative" experiences are often the most useful and valuable experiences of our lives. So, to try to constantly avoid negativity ultimately hinders us.

**Another overlap with the Stoics in your book is how you approach death. The book ends on a very moving note about you losing a close friend in high school and in the chapter you touch on 'the sunny side of death.' What do you want people to know about their mortality? What should they be thinking?**

Death is important for a couple reasons. The first is that death creates scarcity in our life, which therefore gives our decisions meaning and value. From a practical point of view, it therefore makes sense that we keep our own deaths in mind when deciding how to use our time. There's that old cliché that "No one on their deathbed ever wished they spent more time at the office." Well, it's a cliché for a reason: it's a useful heuristic for evaluating our life decisions.

The second reason thinking about our death is important is because it's the only way, even if for a moment, to remove our ego from the equation. What would the world look like without you? Would it be a better place? A worse place? How so? Why? What can you do to affect that? Ultimately, I think as humans we all care deeply about our life's legacy, and contemplating our own mortality is the only real way to approach that question of legacy honestly.

**Have you read any of the Stoics and who is your favorite? And if not, what books and authors have shaped you the most? In the book we see Alan Watts quoted a lot, but I'd be curious to hear who else you'd recommend.**

I took some philosophy classes back in university and we read some Seneca and Epictetus, if I recall correctly. I also took a pretty rigorous philosophy class on logic, and to this day that may be the most useful course I've ever taken in my life.

Since then I've read a bit more of Seneca and Aurelius' *Meditations* and liked them a lot. The Stoics have always appealed to me (I remember my professor telling the story about Alexander the Great offering Diogenes anything in the world, to which he replied, "Yes: please stop standing in my sunlight," and thought that may have been the most bad-ass thing I had ever heard), but I never deep-dived into them like you or some others have.

What I did deep-dive into early in my life was Zen Buddhism and I've only discovered recently (partly thanks to your work) how much overlap there seems to be between the Zen and Stoic traditions. Zen is very much the no-BS, minimalist, get-over-yourself

branch of eastern philosophy, similar to how Stoicism is in western philosophy. Whereas a lot of Buddhism concerns itself with stages of enlightenment, various precepts and moral codes, and even power structures and hierarchies, Zen is just like, "Shut up, sit down and observe your thoughts – oh, and by the way, what you perceive as 'you' doesn't actually exist." I loved the minimalist approach of it.

Later, I studied a lot of psychology. And the biggest impression I got from psychological research was how unreliable our brains are at handling truth. To me, that just cemented a lot of the Zen/Stoicism ideas of "not knowing" and maintaining skepticism about one's own feelings and biases.

**Self-reflection and introspection—such as having an evening routine to reflect on your day and behavior—was very important for the Stoics. I think your book does a great job at pushing the reader to do so and you write about peeling 'the self-awareness onion.' How has doing that changed your life? What did you learn about yourself in writing about these topics?**

One of the hazards of existing in the self-help space is that people automatically tend to assume that: a) just because I wrote about it, means I mastered it; and b) that I'm only writing this stuff for *their* benefit and not my own.

My writing is my therapy, pure and simple. It always has been. Even back when no one read it. Everything on my blog and in my books is written because it's something I personally struggled with at some point or continue to struggle with today. Writing, even if it's just basic journaling, has a fantastic way of clarifying your thoughts and feelings in ways that make them more manageable. So I encourage everybody to write down their thoughts, in any capacity.

I'm also a big proponent of therapy and meditation for the same reason. Basically, any exercise that gets you observing your own thoughts and feelings and getting that separation from them – that meta-awareness – is going to be incredibly useful and impactful in all areas of your life.

**Which exercise or idea from the book do you see readers find the most benefit from and rave about?**

The Self-Awareness Onion has been a bit of a hit, not just because of its utility, but also because of its humor (punchline: self-awareness is like an onion, there are always more deeper layers to peel back, and the further you get the more likely you are to spontaneously start crying).

The 'Do Something' Principle from the chapter about failure has also been a hit with readers since even before the book. It's a handy little trick to help people get through emotional resistance and procrastination. Hell, if I was a cool kid, I might even call it a "life hack."

Admittedly, the book is light on specific actionable take-aways. That was intentional though. When writing a book about values (and the importance in the reader discovering his/her *own values*), I felt strongly that I should refrain from being too directive as much as possible.

**Tough question as an author. How did you personally prepare for the notion that the book might not do well? Was that something you thought about? Did you consider reviews or sales figures? And now that it has done quite well—by almost every metric—how are you making sure that doesn't screw up what you care (and don't care) about?**

I love this question. This is something that never gets asked but probably should be.

I absolutely thought about it. And while painful and uncomfortable, I think it helped me keep my priorities straight – or rather, to give a fuck about the right things.

Basically, I would ask myself, "If I knew for certain nobody was going to buy this book, would I still write this? Would I still be proud of this?" And if the answer was ever no, then I knew I was on the wrong track.

As far as how the success is affecting me, if it has at all, I haven't been conscious of it. Honestly, being a writer is such an abstract thing – you never get to see the people reading your work. Harper sends me sales numbers and I'm like, "Wow, that's a lot,"

and then go back to eating my breakfast or whatever. I think it's different for me though because I was already being read by millions of people through my blog, so I was already used to the attention and criticism to an extent.

One thing I always keep in mind: our culture forgets quickly these days. There's no guarantee the book will keep selling. There's no guarantee the next thing I write will be good. There's no guarantee that all these people that think I'm great today will care or even remember me in five or 10 years. So yeah, I had a big successful book launch. But this too, like everything else, will pass. And soon, I will be that same guy waking up each morning, staring at a blank Word document, wondering what to say next and wondering if anybody will care to read it. And that's the way it should be.

# Stoicism in the NFL: Interview with Sunday Night Football's Michele Tafoya

Michele Tafoya is one of the most familiar faces in professional football with over 200 games in her career. Since 2011, more than 20 million people tune in each Sunday night to see her as the sideline reporter for NBC's *Sunday Night Football*. Though might seem like a strange credentials for an interview on DailyStoic.com considering that we typically interview writers and professors, but in fact, Michele has been a powerful advocate for Stoicism and diligent student of the philosophy over the last few years. It was partly through her influence that *The Obstacle is the Way* made its way through the NFL and the 2016 Summer Olympics. She is also a big fan of the Daily Stoic book and regularly shares passages from the book with her followers on Twitter.

Michele was kind enough to answer our questions and her answers are absolutely incredible. She shares the best advice she's seen in the NFL coming from some of history's best coaches, her favorite book recommendations, how she has overcome incredible personal adversity with lessons learned, the self-talk she uses in challenging moments, and much more.

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**You've covered over 200 NFL games at this point, you've seen big wins, blown games, great teams, bad teams, and interviewed some of the most talented players and brilliant coaches. What have been the more philosophical lessons that you have observed or heard over the years?**

San Antonio Spurs head coach Gregg Popovich often used to remind his players in the huddle, "Don't skip steps." As talented, practiced, and skilled as his players were, he always reminded them not to skip any part of the play, to stick with fundamentals.

More than one NFL coach often employs the following three words: "Do your job." That sounds simple. But many players are tempted to "help" others during a play, and that can lead to a breakdown in the play. With 11 players trying to perform an offensive or defensive play to perfection, each must do his job and his only.

**We have you partly to thank for spread Stoicism through football, you'd heard about *The Obstacle is the Way* from Mike Lombardi (who we interviewed), and you passed it along to many others from there. People probably don't immediately think sports -> philosophy or even sports -> reading, but clearly that's a big part of what elite performers do. Have you found that athletes and coaches have a hunger for reading? Why do you think that is?**

Players and coaches read more than just their playbooks. I often see books in players' lockers and on coaches' desks. It makes sense to me that elite athletes would want any and every edge to help them perfect their game. More and more, athletes realize that mental performance is enhanced by philosophical teachings. John Wooden put all kinds of life lessons into writing. I recently saw that Seahawks head coach Pete Carroll was reading, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* by Greg McKeown. Rays pitcher Chris Archer found motivation from *Relentless: From Good to Great to Unstoppable* by Tim Grover. And Kirk Cousins, the Washington Redskins QB, recommended *Winning* by Jack Welch. Those are just a few examples of athletes searching for wisdom through reading.

**Breaking into journalism as a woman and specifically into the mostly male sports journalism world, there must have been many moments of frustration and unfairness and adversity. How did you not let that get to you? Is there anything you learned from that that you think other people trying to make it other fields might benefit from?**

Criticism is a difficult but necessary part of my job. I can remember some very frustrating and hurtful moments. But I had a few "go-to" bits of self-talk that helped me through:

1) I'm not identifying myself as a female sports reporter. I'm a sports reporter. This notion helped me focus on the job at hand rather than what people's perceptions of me were.

2) Life is unfair. That is a fact. If life were fair, no child would ever die. If life were fair, everyone would look the same. If life were fair, cupcakes and potato chips would be good for you. Accepting that life is not fair is liberating. It reminds you that there are some things with which you have to deal and accept. Why play the victim? It doesn't get you anywhere. I don't accept illogical unfairness — like being paid less than someone doing the same job I'm doing. But I do accept that there are people on TV who are

much prettier than I am. I accept that I have to exercise and diet to look the way I want. I accept that I have to freeze my tail off during some games while Al and Cris sit in a warm booth with hot chocolate! These are things I signed up for.

3) Don't let the dishrags get you down. My husband calls the small worries in life "dishrags." Someone can throw one at you, but it doesn't hurt. Annoying, yes. Harmful, no. What are some examples of dishrags? Someone criticizes your hair. You give the bartender a $50 bill, and he swears you gave him only twenty. A player or coach publicly denies giving you the quote he gave you. All of these are survivable.

4) Taking the high road is never a mistake.

**People associate the NFL with toughness and resilience, but your own life has required its fair share of that. You've talked publicly about a number of personal struggles you've had. What would you tell someone who is going through a difficult period right now? Is there anything that you think Stoicism helps with?**

I wish I had stoicism in my life much earlier. It would have gotten me through some pretty tough times. My advice to people experiencing difficulties is, "Read *The Obstacle is the Way* by Ryan Holiday"! Seriously! I have recommended your book to many people because of the useful wisdom it offers. Late in the 2015 NFL post-season, I had to work a game in Minnesota in extreme cold — 6-below-zero. I was dreading the game for two weeks. What was I going to wear? How could I possibly survive the entire game in that temperature? How painful was it going to be? Finally, about five days ahead of the game, I said to myself, "The obstacle is the way. Embrace this challenge. Learn through the preparation. Strengthen my mind through the experience. Collaborate with my on-field team on creative ways to endure. And enjoy the challenge." My anxiety melted away. (See what I did there?? Melted??))

As I reflect on my difficulty having children, I realize that the obstacle was the way. After many years of trying, we finally had my son. After his birth, my husband and I decided to adopt our next child. The obstacle — infertility — was the way to our daughter. She is one of the greatest treasures in our lives.

Stoicism is not always easy to practice consistently. But the concepts are simple and can be applied to every aspect of life.

**What is your favorite Stoic quote? Or one that you think of often?**

Honestly, the phrase "The obstacle is the way" is one I think about whenever I run into a problem. When I get aggravated over the amount of time I have to spend in a waiting room, I try to find a productive way to spend that time. When I see something unjust, I look for ways to make a difference. After I recently broke my leg, I had to put aside my active lifestyle. As frustrating as this obstacle has been, I have tried to learn from it. How can I manage my weight without exercise? What is the best use of my time while stuck in a chair most of the day? How can I put dishes away while on crutches?? And I realized I could do more than I thought! I also gained a new empathy for others who are in pain.

Another comes from Marcus Aurelius, "You have power over your mind – not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength." I preach this to my children every day!

**And which one of the Stoics do you like best? Who resonates the most with you?**

Marcus Aurelius is probably my favorite Stoic. He teaches that you, and you alone, are responsible for your happiness. I've learned that my mind is much more powerful than I realized. Phrases like, "Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself, in your way of thinking," are undeniable. He also inspires virtuosity, which I love. "The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury." "Reject your sense of injury and the injury itself disappears."

**Thank you for being such a fan of *The Daily Stoic* but we are curious what other books would you recommend to our readers? What have been the books that have most impacted your life?**

I am a huge fan of Ayn Rand. I've read every one of her books, and they have all impacted the way I see the world. I recently read *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz, and I found that there was some intersection with Stoicism. I adore history, and Benjamin Franklin's autobiography gave me a great perspective on how difficult life was in early America, and how relatively easy we have it today. I have read most of John Wooden's books. I also enjoy reading (and listening to) radio host Dennis Prager, whose knowledge of all religions gives him a unique platform. Regarding fiction, you can't beat Charles Dickens and Jane Austen!

# Stoicism and the Art of Happiness: An Interview with Donald Robertson

It was an honor to interview Donald Robertson about stoicism–as he's been a selfless and prolific contributor to the world of stoic philosophy for a long time. If you are not yet familiar with his work, you should be. He is a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapist, trainer, and author who specialises in the treatment of anxiety and the use of CBT. He is the author of *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness*, *The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy* and several other books. Our favorite piece from him is actually this biographical sketch he's written about Marcus Aurelius. It's just one of many examples of his illustrative and helpful analysis.

We had a million questions for him: How did he discover Stoicism? How does he apply it in his practice? What are the most valuable and powerful Stoic exercises? What does his own personal Stoic routine look like? How can Stoicism help with anxiety? What message did he want to give to the Stoic community?

After you read the interview make sure you visit Donald's site where he offers much more Stoic wisdom and thank him for all his great work.

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**Before we get into it, can you briefly tell us how did your interest in Stoicism begin? I remember reading that you were exploring Buddhism but found it unsatisfactory and turned to Stoicism? Can you tell us about that?**

Well, when I was in my early twenties, I studied philosophy at Aberdeen University. I also took courses in the history of Indian religions there, and was involved with the Buddhist society. I had a general interest in things like self-hypnosis, meditation, self-help, psychotherapy, and philosophy. These things felt like they were all competing for my attention, though, and I wanted to somehow integrate them. It wasn't until after I left university and began working as a counsellor and psychotherapist that I discovered Stoicism. It was one of the few philosophies I knew absolutely nothing about but it turned out to be the one I'd been looking for all along! I stumbled across Pierre Hadot's book *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision* and that led me to read another three books by him that deal more with Stoicism. It seemed to offer a practical philosophy of life

that was more familiar to me than Buddhism, more rational, and more down-to-earth. There's a sense of déjà vu when you first begin to study Stoicism because our culture is full of things influenced by it. The first thing it made me think of was the scene about carpe diem from Robin Williams' film The Dead Poets' Society. Of course, that phrase, seize the day, comes from the Odes of Horace, and Horace had studied and wrote about Stoicism, as well as the Epicurean philosophy. Stoicism reminded me of other tropes familiar from poetry and later authors, such as memento mori, ubi sunt, and the view from above. It seemed like a more practical and down-to-earth alternative to modern academic philosophy; like a more Western alternative to Buddhism; like a more rational and less faith-based alternative to Christianity… And of course, Stoicism was the inspiration for modern cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), one of my other major interests. However, not much had been written about the many parallels between them, so I started writing articles and giving talks on that subject, around 2004, which eventually evolved into my first book on Stoicism: *The Philosophy of CBT* (2010).

To go back to Buddhism, my father was a Freemason, and his interest in mysticism inspired me to begin studying Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, among other things, when I was a teenager. I was initially drawn to them all to some extent but slowly became frustrated by the obscurity of some Eastern writings. The Dao De Jing, for example, says that running a state is like frying small fish. I had no idea what that might mean! Likewise, our history of religions class were told how the Dalai Lama had explained the Buddhist doctrine that we have no self, and yet somehow something that's not a self is reincarnated, as like one stone hitting another stone and causing a chain reaction. None of us could make head nor tail of that explanation, though. Stoicism seemed less cryptic to me and many of the ideas and phrases resonated with other things I'd learned from Western philosophy and literature. Also, I believe that observing our relationship with our thoughts in general, with mindfulness, is far more important than periods of seated meditation. Whereas many people today believe that "mindfulness" is an ancient Buddhist invention, the truth is the English word was seldom used until the 1970s. It seemed to me that people were unwittingly Westernising Buddhism, viewing it through the lens of our culture, and perhaps even imposing a concept of mindfulness on it that owed more to Hellenistic philosophies, particularly Stoicism.

Stoicism gave me a philosophy that was consistent with my other interests and with many of the concepts and practices I later came to employ in CBT. Buddhism is a very mixed bag, and very diverse. There's more than one Buddhism, if you like. However, in general, I felt Buddhist ethics were too focused on the individual attaining subjective

peace of mind, nirvana, and not enough about the quality of our actions. Buddhist virtue is often presented as merely a means to the end of attaining nirvana, whereas for Stoics virtue is the end itself. To put it crudely, Buddhism, even of the Mahayana variety, seemed a good philosophy for monks but not for heroes. The Stoics warn us that it's hypocrisy to accept values ourselves that we wouldn't find admirable in other people and it seems to me that it's not very admirable to treat virtues like justice as merely a means to some personal end. Stoicism, on the other hand, values practical wisdom and virtue and seemed to offer a philosophy of life that's more actively engaged with real life, and other people.

**You are a psychotherapist and have a written a fascinating book on the connections between Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and Stoicism. Can you briefly explain what CBT is and how its origins are rooted in Stoicism?**

Well, it may surprise many people to learn that a form of cognitive psychotherapy has actually been around since the start of the 20th century. For decades, the founder of what was called "rational psychotherapy", a famous Swiss psychiatrist called Paul Dubois who was influenced by Seneca, represented the main rival to Freud and psychoanalysis. His approach became completely eclipsed by psychoanalysis, though. Then behaviour therapy became popular in the late 1950s, scientific research on psychotherapy started to take off, and that led to a resurgence of interest in the use of reason in psychotherapy. Albert Ellis was the pioneer of the new wave of cognitive therapy in the 1950s and 1960s. Ellis read Marcus Aurelius as a youth. He later abandoned his training in psychoanalytic therapy to develop what he called "Rational Therapy", or later "Rational-Emotive Behaviour Therapy" (REBT), which he said was inspired by Stoicism. Indeed, in addition to Ellis' many references to the Stoics, REBT has many concepts and techniques, which appear to be derived from the Stoic literature. Then Aaron Beck developed "cognitive therapy" in the 1960s and 1970s, and he also cited the Stoics as the philosophical inspiration for his approach, but said very little more about them. By the 1990s, the more broadly defined cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), which drew on Ellis, Beck, behaviour therapy, and other authors working along similar lines, had become the dominant model of modern evidence-based psychotherapy.

The central doctrine of Ellis, and later Beck, was the cognitive theory of emotion. This holds that our emotions are a combination of different factors, the main one being our thoughts or beliefs (cognitions). For example, Beck said that when we feel fear it's because at some level we believe we're about to be harmed. That's virtually identical to

the Stoic theory of fear, recorded over two thousand years earlier. This was an important innovation in modern psychotherapy because people tend to dismiss their problematic emotions as irrational and involuntary. People say "that's just how I feel", that it's not true or false. However, if we focus instead on the beliefs underlying feelings such as fear, well, those are obviously true or false. "I'm frightened people will think I'm an idiot"; well, what if it turns out they actually don't? So we can help people to articulate those beliefs better, and bring them into awareness. Then we can help them question how helpful they are, to evaluate how rational they are in terms of the evidence, and to carry out experiments in daily life to test out whether they're true or false in practice. For instance, people with panic attacks very often (but not always) believe the sensations of pain and tightness in their chest, etc., are symptoms of an impending heart attack. Therapists nowadays will construct tests to prove to them that they're mistaken: it's just harmless anxiety, muscle tension, and nothing to do with having a heart attack. We now know that panic attack sufferers typically misinterpret their own bodily sensations in a threatening manner. When the belief is removed, the anxiety tends to diminish, and the same basically goes for feelings such as anger or sadness as well. Ellis oriented most of his clients to the fundamental concepts of cognitive therapy in their initial assessment sessions by teaching them the famous quote from Epictetus: "It's not things that upset us, but our judgements about things." I think he actually gave them that Stoic saying in writing to take home and read, as part of what we now call the "socialisation" phase of treatment.

**I'd be curious to hear from your work experience, what are the Stoic exercises and techniques you've found resonate the most with patients? Which ones do you see have the biggest positive impact?**

That's a more complicated question than it might seem at first… For me the most important aspect of Stoicism isn't the armamentarium of techniques but the central doctrines of their ethical philosophy. However, therapists have to be value-neutral, so we can't really teach an ethical doctrine to clients, although I've met many clients who had already read the Stoics and thought that way. Stoic Ethics and the philosophy as a whole have been very important to my work as a therapist. Albert Ellis argued that it's fundamentally having rigidly absolutistic demands about life that make us neurotic, such as "People must respect me!" That's quite similar in some ways to the Stoic doctrine that emotional disturbance is caused by the belief that external things are intrinsically good or bad, such as "People disrespecting me is bad." The Stoics teach us to think: "I'd prefer it if people respect me, but if they don't that's not worth getting upset about."

That's what we call "Stoic indifference", and it's the centrepiece of their philosophy, but it's more a value judgement than a technique. It actually requires adopting a set of moral values that are radically different from those adopted by the majority of people around us. The Stoics refer to this as undergoing "conversion" to a very different world view and set of values.

On the other hand, when it comes to using Stoic techniques in CBT, well, we already have modern versions of many Stoic techniques, which we usually have to follow closely in evidence-based practice as part of standard protocols. So the Stoic versions can inform what we do, but mainly as therapists we're focusing on the modern equivalents of things like role-modelling (the Sage), or imaginal exposure to feared events (premeditatio malorum), etc. If someone asked me, though. what's the most powerful technique in modern therapy, I'd say exposure therapy. It's arguably the most robustly scientifically-supported technique in the whole field of psychotherapy research. Exposure Therapy is just a form of behaviour therapy where we ask people to repeatedly face their fears, for longer than normal, in a controlled manner, sometimes in reality and sometimes in their imagination. The Stoics, especially Seneca, refer many times to doing something very similar, with fears of poverty, exile, death, and illness, etc. That's one of the most powerful strategies in modern therapy, right there, and it's been around in its modern form for over half a century now. In terms of things that are more uniquely ancient, well, that would have to be the View from Above. That's what Hadot called the practice of contemplating life as if it were being viewed from an Olympian perspective, high above, or viewing the present moment from a cosmological point of view, as very small and transient. There's not really a common strategy in modern therapy that's equivalent to the View from Above, unlike most other Stoic techniques. However, people love doing it, and they find it very powerful. I've created scripted versions of that technique and used it on workshops with hundreds of participants over the years. What we lack, therefore, is strong empirical evidence from controlled trials showing its benefits.

**This is a question we like to ask everyone: Do you have a favorite Stoic quote? Is there an exercise you find yourself going back to time and again?**

That changes but at the moment I like a story about Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, told by Diogenes Laertius. One day Zeno overheard an arrogant young man attacking the writings of the philosopher Antisthenes, doing a bit of a hatchet-job on them, to the amusement of a small crowd who had gathered around him. (Antisthenes was a prolific and accomplished writer, one of Socrates' most highly-regarded followers,

and had died a couple of generations earlier.) Zeno interrupted the young man and asked him what he'd learned of value from Antisthenes' writings. He said he'd learned nothing worthwhile. Zeno replied that he should ashamed, therefore, to expend so much time and energy picking holes in the writings of a philosopher without having first taken time to learn what he can from him that's actually of value.

I like that story because I feel that philosophical debate at its worst is merely nit-picking and destructive. It's all too easy, and in fact lazy, to pick holes in a philosophical theory, without first trying to learn what you can of value from it. That's similar to what philosophers sometimes call The Principle of Charity nowadays, that where we're not sure what someone means, because of ambiguity, we should consider the most rational or favourable interpretation first, and give them the benefit of the doubt rather than assuming they're stupid.

The psychological exercise I go back to most often is probably the one I call The Stoic Fork, which is the first one mentioned in Epictetus' *Handbook*, and the one he refers to most frequently in *The Discourses*. We're told to repeatedly remind ourselves of the distinction between our own actions and things that happen to us, or between what's "up to us" and what is not. That's good advice in most situations, but especially when you're feeling upset about something or stressed.

**You've been active in the Stoicism community for a long time. You've published several books, you run a Facebook group, you're active on reddit. What do you think about the state of the Stoicism community today? Where do you see it going in the future?**

I think the Stoic presence online has surprised everyone by its growth. When I wrote *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* I talked about how there was a Yahoo group with over a thousand members. Well, now our Facebook group is actually approaching twenty thousand members. The Stoics, particularly, Epictetus, warn us not to be diverted by trivial philosophical chit-chat and rhetoric. Well, there's definitely a tension between that and the way social media works. People don't seem to be able to resist the urge to post dumb jokes and snarky comments in response to serious questions about life and philosophy. That's okay in moderation, perhaps, but sometimes it seems to predominate and can stifle more meaningful discussion about Stoicism online. Then at the opposite end of the scale we have the people who get into long-winded academic quibbles, again something the Stoics keep warning us to avoid. However, overall, I believe that the

Internet is a force for good because it allows people to form communities dedicated to Stoicism whereas twenty years ago these people would perhaps have been isolated in that regard, and left to study Stoicism alone, without the support and good ideas that can come from others.

**Going back to therapy, there are now over 40 million adults in the United States who are affected with anxiety. You specialize in anxiety treatment and I would be interested to know what you think more people need to know about anxiety and maybe what role Stoicism can have in helping with some of those issues people face?**

Oh boy, where do I start? I guess the main thing I'd say is very general: that we know so much about anxiety now that it really does feel that we should be teaching more of it to our children. Then on to specifics: anxiety abates naturally over time, under the right conditions. That's been known for over half a century, we call it the "habituation" of anxiety. If you take someone with a severe spider phobia and put a spider on their hand what happens to their heart rate? It goes up. It will roughly double within thirty seconds or so. However, what happens to their heart rate next? Most anxiety clients will say "Um, it gets worse?" Actually, it will very slowly start to reduce back toward its normal resting level or thereabouts. That normally takes roughly half an hour, although it can vary a lot. Most people would "escape" the situation long before then, though, by brushing the spider off and running out the door. So their anxiety will only reduce slightly and will continue to be a problem in the future. However, suppose you have someone else there encouraging you to persevere a bit longer, usually a therapist, you wait long enough for your anxiety to at least half, and you don't do anything else that might interfere with the process. Well then the next time you encounter a spider, your heart rate will still increase, but not as much, and it will reduce more quickly. And if you keep doing that repeatedly, exposing yourself to your fears for longer than normal, then pretty soon your anxiety will permanently reduce to a fairly negligible level. Everyone should know that's how anxiety, in its simplest form, works. Of course, there are more complex forms of anxiety than simple animal phobias, and so sometimes we need to do other things as well, but exposure therapy of that kind is the basis of most modern forms of anxiety treatment.

How does Stoicism help? Well, it teaches us a great many things of value in relation to anxiety. As we know, it teaches us to remember what's up to us and what isn't, which I believe is important and can be very powerful. However, it also teaches a basic strategy that Epictetus tells his students to use first if their emotions are overwhelming. He says

we should take a step back from our thoughts and remind ourselves that they're just impressions in our mind and not literally the things they claim to represent. Modern therapists call this "cognitive distancing" and there's growing evidence that it's one of the simplest and most powerful ways of responding to emotional distress. Everyone should learn how to do that too.

**Do you have a daily Stoic routine? What does it look like if you do? Or is there an exercise that you'd like to incorporate in 2017 that you haven't already?**

Yes. I spent years studying training methods for psychological skills, and teaching these to other therapists. So I became more interested in the general format of skills training. There's a great book on that, an overlooked classic, called *Stress Inoculation Training*, written by one of the pioneers of CBT, Donald Meichenbaum, in the 1980s. It's good to have a structure, so I incorporated some elements of his behavioural skills training framework into the Stoic Week Handbook and our Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training (SMRT) course. In the evening, I try to review the events of the day in my mind three times, and to see what I can learn from how things went, how close I came to living in line with my core values, and achieving specific goals. The next morning, influenced by that, I try to plan the day ahead and to prepare in advance for the possibility of failure or setbacks. Then during the day, I try to be mindful of other Stoic concepts and practices, and particularly how my value judgements are affecting my feelings, and whether I'm slipping into placing more value on external things than upon my own character and intentions. That forms a kind of ongoing learning cycle: preparation, application, review, and repeat…

For the future, I'd like to try to focus more on Stoic empathy. This is an integral part of Stoic Ethics, and heavily indebted to Socrates. The Stoics try to imagine other people as realistically as possible and to understand how their valued, and errors, are influencing their behaviour. As a kind of coping statement or maxim, Epictetus taught his students to say "It seemed right to him", when faced with someone who is upsetting you. That doesn't stop us challenging or opposing bad behaviour but it should encourage us to try to understand other people and to see them as mistaken rather than merely wicked. I think that's a much more helpful way to deal with conflict. There are many more strategies recommended by the Stoics for dealing with other people and I'm particularly interested in this interpersonal dimension of their teachings.

**What's next for you?**

I'm organizing next year's Stoicon 2017 conference in Toronto. So that should keep me pretty busy! I emigrated from the UK to Canada a few years ago and I've been living in Nova Scotia. However, I'm planning to move on soon and start a new training business, teaching different evidence-based psychological skills to the general public and corporate clients. I'm hoping to incorporate Stoicism into that too. I'm also working on some ideas for a couple of new books on philosophy, probably one going into a bit more detail about how to do various Stoic psychological exercises, written in very plain language. I have a five-year old daughter and I find myself increasingly wanting to write things that she can read. She's a big fan of Hercules and Diogenes, and she quite likes Socrates as well. I turn anecdotes about the Stoics and other ancient philosophers into stories for her, and adults seem to like those too. So I'm hoping to try out a new style of writing in some of my books.

**Finally, is there a message for the Daily Stoic community—or the Stoicism community at large—that you'd like to give?**

Yes. I'd like to remind everyone that Stoicism is first and foremost an ethical philosophy. It's a radical theory about the nature of the good, or what's most important in life. The psychological techniques are all subordinate to that. That's not to say people can't cherry-pick concepts and techniques from Stoicism but the deeper worldview and set of values is, in my opinion, of much greater value at the end of the day. I'd also observe that Stoicism is growing in popularity and social media is a big part of that. Technology is bringing people together like never before. But our greatest strength is also our greatest weakness. There's a temptation to get diverted by academic chit-chat about Stoicism and memes and superficial things. It requires self-discipline to remain focused and to make social media work for us, rather than against us, especially as groups grow larger and larger and risk being flooded with trivia. Stoicism offers powerful ideas about empathy and community, which can and should guide us in making our online life more harmonious and conducive to wisdom and virtue.

# Philosophy, Fighting, and Martial Arts Mythology: An Interview With Daniele Bolelli

There are certain individuals who can't be put into a single category. Daniele Bolelli is one of those people. He is a successful author, a university professor, a professional martial artist and a podcast host (and a philosopher and a father and a historian). Perhaps you know him for his cult classic, *On the Warrior's Path*, a philosophical exploration of the martial arts or because of his podcasts, The Drunken Taoist and History on Fire, nominated as one of iTunes Best of 2015. Maybe you've even trained under Daniele who holds a fifth degree black belt in kung fu san soo-a style and fought professionally in mixed martial arts (MMA).

Daniele was generous with his time and our interview covers many subjects. How to face our fears and perform at our best? Why he rejects overspecialization? What is the role of the martial arts and character-building? Why Taoism is the philosophy that influenced him the most and how it can be supremely pragmatic? How do we find what Nietzsche calls 'the hero hidden in your soul'? This and much more, in our interview below!

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**You have a beautiful line that echoes the Stoics in one of your essays. It goes "Victory or defeat are largely out of my control, but putting up a good fight… putting up the kind of fight that makes the earth shake and the gods blush… this I can do." Was this always a deep rooted belief—focusing uniquely on your actions and not the outcome—that you had? Or was this a lesson that you had to relearn over and over?**

I don't think too many human beings are naturally above caring about victory and defeat. It's imprinted in us to care about the outcome of our actions. While this may be natural and normal, the problem is that we can never fully control the outcome. Usually, in life there are too many variables at play. So, no matter how mightily we strive or how intense our effort, odds are that at least some of the time we will come up short of our goals. And what makes things even more complicated is that the more attached you are to the outcome, the more tension and fear you will experience at the thought of possibly facing a crushing defeat—which reduces our effectiveness, since part of our energy is trapped in the jaws of fear. Paradoxically enough, the more you focus on giving your

all rather than outcome, the less fear will hold you prisoner. And the less fear holds you prisoner, the higher the odds that you will perform at your peak potential and actually get the outcome you desire. I am fascinated with this idea because it offers a concrete tool to better ourselves. I struggle with this all the time because–like most people–I care deeply about outcomes. So, for me this is an ongoing practice.

**As a professor, it looks like you reject the idea of 'specialization' and in your classes you teach a diverse range of subjects. Can you tell us more about this approach? Why did you decide to follow this path when academics are known for deeply focusing on only one subject matter? And in general, just looking at all the projects that you are involved in, it seems like you take this way as a guiding principle in life as well?**

On the surface, specialization looks great. Why wouldn't you want to become the foremost expert in your chosen field? The problem is that usually it requires a heavy price to pay. By forcing you to dedicate yourself 100% to one field and one field only, specialization robs us of a more inclusive perspective. When this happens, specialization loses its connection to the rest of existence. In my perspective, the goal of any field of knowledge should be to elevate the overall quality of our lives–and this can only happen when we integrate the insights from different fields, since Life is greater than any one field. Academics are often a perfect example of the dangers of overspecialization. By diving too deeply in the minutia of a single field and being unable to draw connections to all the aspects that make life great, they lock themselves into an intellectual ghetto. The only people who care about their work are usually the few other specialists in the field. I'm interested in the opposite process—go deep enough within a field in order to bring back the treasures I find to share with non-specialists so that they can use them to brighten their existence. It is not a coincidence that a guy like Dan Carlin (who is not a professional historian) is heads and shoulders above any historian in his ability to communicate the insights of history to the general public.

**I loved your book *On the Warrior's Path: Philosophy, Fighting, and Martial Arts* and I highly recommend it to our readers. I imagine someone not familiar with the work would be surprised at the intersection of the two subjects. Can you tell us a bit more about the overlap between philosophy and martial arts?**

Martial arts speak a universal language. Everyone understands conflict since we all experience it in one form or another. And physical fighting is the rawest, most primal type of conflict that we can all relate to. Martial arts practice is a great tool for coming

to terms with fear and for learning how to deal with conflict. If people practicing martial arts limit their experience to the technical knowledge of physical combat, they miss out on what martial arts can teach them about how to handle conflict in all other aspects of life. Technical knowledge is a great start. It provides the foundation. But learning how to execute the perfect armbar or a beautiful spinning back kick is not nearly as important as learning how to apply the insights gained on the mat and in the ring to the battles we all face in everyday life. A philosophical approach to martial arts does just that—it allows to extend the benefits of martial experience to something greater than only physical combat. Martial arts stop being just 'martial arts' and they turn into a way of life. As Miyamoto Musashi put it, "The true science of martial arts means practicing them in such a way that they will be useful at any time, and to teach them in such a way that they will be useful in all things."

**A theme that comes up throughout the book is that, at the core of it, martial arts training provides us with tools to forge our character. I think people often forget that character-building aspect—whether it is in martial arts or any other type of training. Can you elaborate on that idea for our readers?**

Character-building is the most important task any of us can tackle. People often get overly enamored with the specific detail of their field rather than remembering that ultimately any field is only as good as it helps us become more effective and better as human beings. If martial arts are just about martial arts, then screw them–they are not that important. But if martial arts (or any other field for that matter) offer us the instruments to reforge our character, then it would be foolish to miss this chance. Zen warns us not to get lost looking at the finger pointing at the moon, and focus on the moon itself. The way I see it, the details of any field are the finger, while character-building is the moon.

**In *Ego is the Enemy*, I used an analogy you gave me—sweeping the floor. I think philosophy is a lot like that. You don't learn it once, or think about it once. You have to do it every day. Is there one exercise or one though you return to most? Anything specifically from the Stoics?**

Marcus Aurelius wrote his *Meditations* in order to remind himself of how he wanted to behave in everyday life. I think this is key—to find some type of daily ritual that puts us in contact with our highest ideals, with what Nietzsche calls 'the hero hidden in your soul.' Visualizing the person you want to be, focusing on specific characteristics, and

imagining how this person would react in particular circumstances is a useful way to try to embody these ideals into reality. Regardless of what the fans of 'positive thinking' say, no amount of visualizing a positive outcome ensures it will happen. But visualizing how we want to face what Life dishes our way is a much more realistic, and useful approach.

**Ok, last one about books. You have quite an extensive list on your website with book suggestions. What have you read recently that you've loved and you'd strongly recommend?**

My relationship with reading has changed dramatically over the last couple of years. Ever since I started the History on Fire podcast, I have to put over 200 hours of research into each episode. Considering that I try to release one episode a month, this means that I haven't had a chance to read a book for pleasure in the last two years. I spend monstrous amounts of time reading impossibly dry history texts so I can dig for the gold nuggets that I can then use to tell a kickass story. The upside is that I am getting to create some pretty epic content. The downside is that I don't get to read for fun anymore.

**You've said that no other philosophy influences your worldview as much as Taoism. Why is that? What draws you to it? I am curious because I've heard from a lot of people that they find the *Tao Te Ching* a mystery (and that's putting it lightly!)**

The *Tao Te Ching* is as good (or bad) as the translation you get. Some translations are just awful. I get nothing out of them. Others are brilliant. Over time, I received plenty of messages from people who were interested in Taoism, but run into the stumbling block of some bad translations. It's for this reason that I created a series of lectures about Taoist philosophy—in order to give people an easier introduction to what I consider an essential subject. The main thing that attracts me to Taoism is that it doesn't require any kind of faith. It's a clearcut description of the way the universe works—whether we believe in it or not. When you strip Taoism to its essential elements, one of its key aspects is that understanding its principles gives you the keys to becoming more effective in any aspect of life. In that sense, Taoism can be supremely pragmatic, and quite helpful.

# How To Be A Stoic:
# An Interview With Author Elif Batuman

There's been quite a surge of stories on Stoicism lately—appearing everywhere from influential blogs to prestigious outlets like *Sports Illustrated*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Atlantic.* One of the pieces that caught our attention was "How to Be a Stoic" in *The New Yorker*. It's by Elif Batuman, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and author of *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*. Her stories have appeared in *Best American Travel Writing* and *Best American Essays* anthologies.

Her piece is a wonderful exploration of Epictetus and so we reached out to learn more about Elif and her relation to Stoicism. How does she use it on a day-to-day basis? What are the common misconceptions about the philosophy? How did she first discover it? What are some characters in literature that embody Stoicism? Was there anything off-putting about a philosophy that appears to have a 'male-bent'?

We are grateful to Elif for agreeing to do this interview and her generous answers which you can read below. Enjoy!

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**History tends to show that Stoicism is often popular during times of difficulty or uncertainty. Was that true in your case? I was curious if you could give our readers a bit of a background regarding your story of discovering Epictetus and how it has helped you?**

Yes, I had just started a new job in a new country (Turkey), where there was a certain amount of political tension. I was also in the middle of a problematic long-distance relationship, and living in a remote area. I had gotten really behind on work in the previous months (my first book, *The Possessed*, had just come out, so I was doing travel and publicity for that, and then also I had had some personal issues), and had deliberately sought out this kind of isolated living situation so I could catch up, but then I ended up feeling really lost and alone. I was also doing some reporting, I was working on a story for the *New Yorker* about soccer fan groups in Istanbul, which involved hanging out with a milieu I wasn't really used to, often late at night—it was a stressful time.

**You mentioned that you first discovered Epictetus back in 2011 and you wrote about him more than five years later. Did you read any of the other Stoics in between? I can only assume he made a strong impression on you and was wondering how often did his ideas come to mind over the years in your daily life? Was it something that was a constant presence or it was more in specific situations?**

That piece I wrote was just about Epictetus, and I only had 750 words, so it's a bit schematic. My actual route to the Stoics was more circuitous. I'm sure I had been introduced to Stoic ideas in the past, but the first time they really registered with me was in Istanbul in 2010 or 2011 when I read Sarah Bakewell's wonderful *How to Live: Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*. It's kind of a self-help book in the form of biographical essays about Montaigne. For me, all the most helpful advice came from the Stoics. (Montaigne as you probably know was really influenced by Stoicism, especially Seneca, though also Epictetus, and also the Epicureans.) I wanted to know more about the Stoics, so I bought *A Guide to the Good Life: The Art of Stoic Joy*, by William B. Irvine, which was a terrific introduction to the basic ideas and how they could be applied to daily life. After that I read Seneca's *Dialogues and Essays,* Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations,* and Epictetus's *Enchiridion.*

I liked Marcus Aurelius and Seneca, too, but Epictetus was definitely my favorite—I think he's the funniest. With Marcus Aurelius you have this world-weary emperor who is kind of a mystic; Seneca writes in this flowery Latin, he's a famous tragedian and a speechwriter for Nero, so he has that whole thing going; but Epictetus is born a slave, and then he becomes a teacher, and *all* he cares about is teaching. I was teaching undergraduates at the time, and I felt like Epictetus had been working on this same eternal puzzle that I was, of how to get young people to do what's difficult, to make them think that things are worthwhile, to rally their spirits, and it felt like finding this great friend and ally.

After I read the *Enchiridion*, I got the *Discourses and Selected Writings*, the Penguin Classics one edited by Robert Dobbin, which was marvelous, even better than the *Enchiridion* I had downloaded for free online somewhere. Next I tried reading Musonius Rufus, Epictetus's teacher—he was great, too, but I thought the ideas were more forcefully expressed in Epictetus. Then I read Tad Brennan's *The Stoic Life*, where he summarizes a lot of Chrysippus's ideas, but you know, Chrysippus really isn't for me, the whole thing about how everyone who isn't 100% wise is 100% "vicious" seems kind of theoretical and alienating to me. I prefer what I take to be Epictetus's view, viz. that we're all

struggling constantly, none of us will be perfect, but we can always get better, and that improvement is not just not worthless, it's actually the most meaningful thing there is.

**At least online (and of course, historically) Stoicism seems to have a predominant number of males. Many of them hear about it from action movies like Gladiator or the military or now, with its popularity in sports, it might get passed to them in the locker room. I'm curious about two things. One, as a woman, was there anything off putting about that male-bent? Two, since the actual philosophy itself is universal and can help anyone, what can be done to recreate your experience and exposure to philosophy?**

Well, I never saw "Gladiator" and have never served in the military or spent much time in a men's locker room, so I can't really speak to the "male bent" that Stoicism might have in those venues. As a reader in the privacy of my home, I didn't find there was anything off-puttingly male about Stoic philosophy. I guess Epictetus talks about beards in a way I can't really identify with, but I don't think that's a major cornerstone of his belief. And Musonius Rufus wrote in a really moving way about how he thought women and men should have the same education in philosophy, that women are just as capable as men of applying and benefiting from philosophical ideas. And Seneca does write those letters to women, including his mother, so clearly he thinks Stoicism can help women.

I think there's a common misconception about Stoicism, that it's about forcing yourself to somehow not feel emotions; that's probably an idea that would appeal more to men than to women (since, from childhood, boys are encouraged to be macho, while girls are encouraged to be in touch with their emotions). But the thing I love about Epictetus is that it's really all *about* handling emotions. He's like, "You're definitely going to feel this incredibly powerful thing, but guess what, it's not a law that dictates what you think or how you act—you're perfectly free, and in fact duty-bound, to consult your reason and say, 'OK, feeling, duly noted, but you are just a feeling and not the truth.'" I think that's maybe an *especially* useful message for women, because of how little girls are educated, or at least how they were when I was little. I think for a lot of women (as well as men), there's a tendency to think: "Oh my God, I already felt this, so the bad thing already happened." And Epictetus is all about realizing, "Bro, nothing bad has happened yet, everyone has feelings, now just take a moment and evaluate what the truth is."

**In your *New Yorker* piece, you mention Epictetus's line about ignoring small slights— "For such a small price, I buy tranquillity," and how useful it has been. Are there other exercises or quotes that you'd point to as practical and helpful?**

Oh man, I use so many of them every day. Definitely, the one about the bathhouse: "If you are heading out to bathe, picture to yourself the typical scene at the bathhouse—people splashing, pushing, yelling and pinching your clothes. You will complete the act with more composure if you say at the outset, 'I want a bath, but at the same time I want to keep my will aligned with nature.'" I actually thought that at a hamam in Istanbul once and it really helped! I use it all the time on the subway and also at the airport.

Another great trick is when he's like, "You know how if someone else tells you that something bad happened to them, you're like, 'Oh, too bad, that's life,' but if something bad happens to you, you're like, 'I am the unhappiest of mortals?'" Oh I found the quote: "When somebody's wife or child dies, to a man we all routinely say, 'Well, that's part of life.' But if one of our own family is involved, then right away it's 'Poor, poor me!' We would do better to remember how we react when a similar loss afflicts others."

I haven't had to use that one with a big loss, but for little things it really works. Last week I was having bureaucratic trouble with my health insurance. I imagined I was listening to a friend tell me about making such calls, and thought about how I would be like, "Oh, too bad, insurance can be a pain"—I definitely wouldn't have been like, "Oh my God, you unfortunate person, your whole week must have been ruined, *what* did you do wrong that this happened to you, how could you have avoided it?"—which is kind of how I felt about it myself, when I didn't stop to think about it.

**You are both a fantastic writer and a scholar—writing for the New Yorker, n+1, Harper's Magazine among others and you hold a doctoral degree from Stanford in comparative literature. I'd love to know if there are any fictional characters that you think embody Stoicism that you can point us to? Or any other works of fiction that you think the Daily Stoic readers would love? (Also I want to ask if you've read Memoirs of Hadrian by Marguerite Yourcenar?)**

I actually find Stoicism to be very present in the works of Charlotte Bronte's novels *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. (She calls it "stoicism" or "Christian stoicism" or "Christian composure.") Both those novels are about a young woman who really has no social value in the Victorian social marketplace—poor, orphaned, no social connections, not

beautiful—Bronte is really cold and brutal about this. Those girls don't have a single thing you need to make a good marriage, which at that time is the only thing standing between an unconnected young woman and a whole humiliating, possibly long, life as a drudge and a dependent. There are these amazing passages in both books, towards the end, where the character realizes (or thinks she realizes) that love isn't going to work out for her, that the guy who she thought liked her is going to maybe choose someone a little younger, richer, or more beautiful—so she resigns herself to being a teacher, to doing her duty, to a life without romance—and you really feel both the difficulty and the freedom of that resignation. It's really brutal and moving.

Dostoevsky has some pretty stoical characters, too, like Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Of course he's also a Christian. In general if you're talking about the 19th-century European novel (my grad school beat…), Stoicism is going to be in there through some version of Christianity. But I mean the affinity between Stoicism and Christian thought is one of the ways Stoicism has survived since antiquity.

Epictetus does also make a cameo in J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*.

**I know you have another book coming very soon, this time "a novel about not just discovering but inventing oneself." Can you tell us a bit more about it? I also wanted to say that the cover is absolutely beautiful.**

Thank you! I love the cover. It's a semi-autobiographical novel called *The Idiot*. The main character, Selin, is 18, the book takes place in her first year of college, and she's a perfect example of someone who doesn't know about Stoicism, who takes emotions for truth and finds signs everywhere, in all her almost physical, visceral, emotional reactions—and then every now and then she stops and is like "Are you fucking *kidding* me? This is life?" I'm hoping to write more books about Selin in the future, and, if I live long enough, I would love to do one where she discovers Epictetus.

## What Is 'Southern Stoicism'? An Interview with Professor Peter Lawler

*(Professor Peter Lawler has sadly passed away, and this was one of his last interviews.)*

Most people's introduction to the so-called "Southern Stoicism" is in the writings of one of the great novelists, Walker Percy (Percy happened to come from a long line of Stoics as you'll see). And anyone interested in this specific offshoot of Stoic philosophy and American history inevitably find themselves drawn to Peter Lawler who has deeply studied the subject matter. Peter is a Dana Professor of Political Science at Berry College in Georgia. He is also the editor of the quarterly journal *Perspectives in Political Science* and is the author of multiple books and has written about Southern Stoicism for *The National Review*. We reached out to him to ask about his definition of Southern Stoicism, for more book recommendations, and much more. As you will see below he was incredibly generous with his answers and you will undoubtedly walk away from this interview with a deeper understanding of both the American South and Ancient Rome. Enjoy!

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**A lot of our readers have a good understanding of Stoicism, but it might be a surprise to hear that there is such thing as Southern Stoicism. Can you elaborate a bit on that?**

Well, I learned from Alexis de Tocqueville—author of the best book on America and the best book on democracy—the antebellum South had the virtues and vices of any aristocracy. Well, its vices were more vicious because of the unprecedented monstrosity of soul-destroying race-based slavery. But that doesn't mean virtues weren't there, and that even we might still benefit from them as sources of strength where we middle-class democrats are weak. Tocqueville didn't talk up the possible contribution the classical orientation of much of Southern education might make to America, because he thought all that was distinctive about the South would eventually dissolve into the universality of middle-class life. The slave-based regime, he knew, was doomed, and justly so. Tocqueville was mostly rightly about would happen, but not completely so. The virtues and a softer version of the aristocratic vices persisted after the war: The aristocrats came back to power for a whole, and Southern literature emerged as the consciousness of dispossessed aristocrats, in Faulkner, Walker Percy, the Agrarians, and many others.

Not only that, but distinctively Southern virtue persists in an increasingly democratic form, and the evolution of Southern literature reflects that. The South, as a whole, remains more honorable and violent, less materialistic and more spiritual, than the rest of the country. Consider the disproportionately Southern composition of our armed forces, and that Mississippi genuinely is the most Christian state in the country.

On the precise category of "Southern Stoicism," I discovered in an essay by Walker Percy ("Stoicism in the South"). Percy was raised by his "Uncle Will"—William Alexander Percy, the great poet, exemplary community leader, and a remarkably self-conscious and consistent follower of Marcus Aurelius. He believed himself to part of an aristocracy of wisdom and virtue extending across time and place from Pericles to Marcus Aurelius to George Washington and Robert E. Lee. Will Percy was, as Walker Percy wrote, quite a one of a kind. He was a gay racist aristocrat who opened his home to both the Southern Agrarians (who were more than a bit racist) and the African-American leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes. Under his watch, Greenville MS was a cultural center and had one of the best public school systems in the country.

Walker Percy and Shelby Foote labored to gets B's and C's in English. He also was an American patriot, loved in military service during World War I, and was very in love with life despite the kind of loneliness that accompanied being gay in those days. He took great joy in sharing his love with others through poetry. His complacent racial paternalism was his biggest and unwittingly cruel self-deception.

So Will Percy was quite a singular Stoic. Walker learned from his of the pervasiveness of the tradition of Southern Stoicism among the leaders of the agrarian South: Their devotion to the classical virtues of magnanimity, generosity, and courage as men born to rule themselves and others, Walker Percy claims, was a real form of natural human excellence that flourished for a while in our otherwise modern country. In Percy's novels, the virtues of Stoic leaders are displayed, but he typically concludes that Stoicism culminates in nihilism when it class-based support dissolves. And Stoic virtues were inadequate to confront the challenge of the Civil Rights movement, with its clamoring claim for rights by people whom the Stoics believed to be under their paternalistic protection. Walker Percy also suggested, if you look closely, that there still might be a place for ironic Stoics even today, for those unable to be happy with either being Christians or morally clueless middle-class consumers and producers.

Well, one more thing; Walker Percy developed in both philosophic prose and in the narratives of novels a kind of indigenous American Thomism—a for of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas for our time and place. This was a huge intellectual accomplishment, even if turns out not to be one that swept our nation. Thomas Aquinas, of course, brought together the philosophy of Aristotle with the revelation of Christianity, which meant modifying the proud moral virtue displayed by both the Greek Aristotle and the Roman Cicero with the humility of the Christian. Walker Percy actually writes that in his novel *The Moviegoer*, the whole history of the West is recapitulated in one weekend in a New Orleans suburb. The wandering of the Roman patricians reading Greek philosophers (as in Marcus Aurelius) is brought together with the wandering of the Christian pilgrim on the road. That wouldn't have been possible without the contribution of Southern Stoicism. Percy may have surpassed the Stoics, but he never dispensed with them.

**Walker Percy is one of the first Southern writers to talk explicitly about Stoicism, you said that one of the reasons for that is that all the Southerners before him were too consumed by defending slavery or segregation. But Stoic themes are all throughout the Civil War. Gallantry, doing one's duty as they understood it, honor, quiet suffering. Yet the elephant in the room of course is the exploitation of all those people, the terribleness of slavery. It strikes me as fitting that Thomas Wentworth Higginson who led one of the first black regiments for the Union was a translator of Epictetus, a former slave. How does one reconcile the fact that the Southern aristocracy took Marcus Aurelius as a guide yet defended something as abhorrent as slavery?**

Percy said there was hardly any antebellum Southern literature because all the literary energy was used up defending slavery. Many of those defenses were both ingenious and deeply repulsive. But we can't forget that the Roman patricians had slaves, and they regarded the work of slaves as indispensable for supporting their noble leisure and great deeds. So in a way taking Marcus Aurelius as a model was one way of vindicating slavery and later the racial paternalism of segregation. It is also true that Southerners admired the philosopher-slave Epictetus as much as the philosopher-emperor.

The lesson of Epictetus is that the rational man is never inwardly a slave, no matter what his political and material circumstances happen to be. As the novels of the contemporary Southern Stoic Tom Wolfe—often called "the novelist of manliness"—show, Epictetus rises in the Southern imagination as Stoicism gets democratized. In *A Man In Full*, Wolfe has a completely down-and-out character who finds inner freedom by actually

coming upon a copy of Epictetus' writing, and he ends up knowing exactly what to do to preserve his dignity all by himself in a maximum security prison. And that novel ends, with a character on fire as a born-again Zeussian—or a Stoic.

**Can you tell us why Harper Lee's character Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* represents an ideal of the Southern Stoic virtues?**

The first thing to remember here is Atticus Finch is literally the only exemplary literary hero shared by virtually all Americans today. And he is a Southern Stoic. Consider the name Atticus, not a Lee family name! The character was named after the Roman patrician-philosopher who was Cicero's best friend—not exactly a Stoic, but a sort of Stoic fellow traveler. Atticus's virtue was magnanimity, deploying his singular virtues and character to save the rule of law from a mob in his particular community. For the most part, Atticus, although admired by everyone and even the community's representative in the legislature, lives a very marginalized life, spending a lot of time alone with his thoughts and his books  But he does his duty–not out of love and charity, but because he couldn't live with himself if he didn't. If you look closely, Atticus isn't perfect on the justice front, but as an honorable man he abhors all that is common and trashy—including the cruelty of racism. His great achievement is to have, in the crucial respect, democratized Southern Stoicism by defending the one place all  American men and women are undeniably equal—before the law. It's corny but true: He turns Southern Stoicism into American Stoicism without ceasing to be Southern: He's quietly the best shot in the county.

**Aside from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, can you give our readers recommendations on books and movies that closely embody Stoicism—particularly Southern Stoicism—in your opinion? I know you've written about Friday Night Lights' coach and I'd love to hear you elaborate on that.**

There's a relatively recent tradition in Southern literature and film that's all about democratized Southern Stoicism.  It might begin in Charles Portis' under-appreciated *True Grit* (which is infinitely more insightful than the two movie versions). It continues, as mentioned above, in the novels of Tom Wolfe. It's also found in the writing of Horton Foote and the films based on it, in the perfect films of our best director, Jeff Nichols (Mud and Loving),  and in Clint Eastwood's American Sniper.  Because so much democratized Stoicism finds its home in Texas and Arkansas, I'm half-jokingly touting the emerging discipline of "Texarkansan Studies."

READ TRUE GRIT! There you have democratized chivalry and no racism whatsoever among the admirable characters. The magnanimous Rooster Cogburn is a kind of outlaw by nature who rode with the most outlaw part of the Confederacy—Quantrill's raiders in Missouri.

A special place of honor has to be given to the best TV show ever—Friday Night Lights. There an honorable and hugely rational football coach—Eric Taylor—who cultivates and defends maybe the most genuine form of meritocracy (aside from military service) remaining in our country—high-school football. There honor and violence—disciplined by rules and not ending in death (although life-altering injuries)—produce a community of warriors that transcends the social boundaries of race and class. And that classy band of brothers is protected by their coach from the manipulative vulgarity of the trashy white oligarchy who run the town. The talents of Eric Taylor are those of a true aristocrat of talent and virtue that exists across time and space, and he does as well in leading men in inner-city Philadelphia as he does in Dylan Texas. His "Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose" is, if you think about it, perfectly Stoic.

What about sexism? Well, Coach Taylor has, sometimes grudgingly, quite the egalitarian marriage to a woman ever bit a natural aristocrat as he is. And she teaches him to appreciate the intellectual virtues and those adept at practicing them. The Coach can't imagine, for good reason, a woman actually playing top-level football, but he recognizes the right woman can be a coach. And he follows his wife's pursuit of scholarly excellence to Philly.

For more on Southern Stoicism, please read my *American Heresies and Higher Education*.

# How to Be a Stoic: An Interview With Massimo Pigliucci

We first interviewed Professor Massimo Pigliucci back in 2015 after his popular piece in *New York Times* on Stoicism became one of the most shared and viewed articles on the site. And today, with the release of his new book on stoic philosophy we decided to again reach out and ask him about all the imaginary conversations he had with Epictetus in the book (a once common literary structure that is sadly rare these days). We also used the opportunity to ask him about useful Stoic exercises we can apply in our day-to-day to pop culture recommendations to his thoughts on the rise in popularity—and accompanying criticism—of Stoicism. Enjoy the interview that follows and don't forget to check out his new book, *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life*, which is out now.

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**Your new book offers an exploration of Stoicism through conversations with Epictetus. How did you decide to take this approach? (People think it's a lot easier to write about the Stoics than it is, don't they? It's really quite hard to add anything new when Seneca and Marcus were such flawless writers.)**

Exactly. It's not just that Seneca and Marcus were flawless writers, it's that there are a number of very good books out there written by modern authors, including yours. So I felt that the only reason for me to add a new entry to the canon was if I had something new to say, or a new way of saying it.

I picked Epictetus because today he is the least well known of the great Stoics, and also because I have been immediately fascinated by his wicked sense of humor and his bluntness. The other reason is that I have occasions to disagree with him in the book (for instance, about his conception of God and Providence), which offered me the opportunity to put forth my own update of Stoicism for the 21st century.

Each chapter in the book begins with an imaginary dialogue between me and Epictetus, who plays the role of my personal "daimon," as the ancient Greeks called it. We are walking down the streets of Rome — where he lived for some time, and where I was actually writing the book — and things happen to me, and I ask him how a Stoic would

deal with them. It's an interesting exercise of self-discovery, talking to your daimon, I highly recommend it. Just not in public, at least not if you talk out loud…

**How do you feel about the rise in popularity of Stoicism and the corresponding rise in critics? Obviously this is something your work has played a part in growing, but at the same time, I can't imagine you think the audience is still quite small (compared to say Buddhism or even something silly like the law of attraction)**

Right, Stoicism is clearly growing, but we are not even in the ballpark of Buddhism. Though there is no reason we shouldn't be. In fact, I think of Stoicism as the Western equivalent of Buddhism, with a lot of similarities between the two philosophies (and some differences, of course).

I actually tried to study Buddhism for a bit, but the parts I managed to get exposed to felt too alien, couched in cultural, linguistic, and conceptual terms that did not resonate with me. By contrast, when I picked up Epictetus, or Marcus, or Seneca, I immediately felt at home.

I think the same is potentially true for a lot of people who haven't been exposed to Stoicism yet, which is why I wrote the book and I keep a very active blog (howtobeastoic.org) recounting my personal exploration of Stoicism. It has changed my life for the better, I think and hope it will change others as well.

But yes, there are critics, some of them fairly harsh, if not downright vicious. I'm not sure why they are so afraid of the (limited, really) success of Stoicism, but of course Stoics have dealt with critics for millennia, this is just one more iteration.

**What do you think Stoicism provides someone like you or me—or really anyone putting themselves out there and launching something—on the eve of a scary, intimidating thing like a book release? How have you used Stoicism as manage the process of publishing and now marketing?**

Good question. I keep reminding myself of the metaphor of the archer. As Cicero put it in the third volume of *De Finibus*, where he has Cato the Younger explain Stoic doctrines, an archer will do whatever he can in order to hit the target, but once the arrow leaves the bow, the actual outcome is not up to him. Hitting the target is, Cicero says, "to be chosen but not to be desired" (DF III.22)

That's the way I think about my book, or really anything else I try to accomplish in my life: I put forth my best effort, and I'm doing my best so to reach people who may benefit from it. But I regard the actual outcome in terms of sales, attention, etc., as a preferred indifferent. It really relieves a lot of pressure, you know…

**Aside from the Stoic canon, what books—or even movies and documentaries—would you recommend to our readers who want to live a meaningful life? What would be some good complements to the typical Stoic reading list?**

In terms of books or documentaries, I would say the biographies of people who have good qualities of character and may therefore provide a role model against which to measure ourselves in order to improve. As Seneca says, "you can never straighten that which is crooked unless you use a ruler." (*Letters to Lucilius*, XI, On the Blush of Modesty, 10) And I would particularly suggest to seek women role models, since the classic Stoic canon is lacking in that respect (not a particularly Stoic fault: pretty much every literature before the late 20th century was deficient in that department).

Specifically, off the top of my head: *The Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank; *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi; *12 Years a Slave*, by Solomon Northup; *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Viktor Frankl; *Mandela, by Tom Lodge*; *Tom Paine: A Political Life*, by John Keane; *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, and Phaedo*, by Plato, on the life of Socrates. There are, of course, many, many others.

In terms of movies, I actually have an occasional column on my blog dedicated to movie characters or situations that present a good occasion for a modern Stoic to reflect and learn from. For instance, Agent Foster in *Imperium*, with Daniel Radcliffe; Mark Watney, in *The Martian*, with Matt Damon; the Russian spy Rudolf Abel, played by Mark Rylance, in *Bridge of Spies*; Dalton Trumbo, played by Bryan Cranston, in *Trumbo*.

**You've interacted with many aspiring Stoic students over the years. What have you found are the most beneficial Stoic exercises that people really feel have changed their lives for the better?**

The philosophical diary, especially done in the way Seneca suggests: "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 to-day? 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. … I make use of this privilege, and daily plead my cause before myself. … 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?' A good man delights in receiving advice: all the worst men are the most impatient of guidance." (On Anger, III.26)

It certainly helps me not just to reflect on what I've done during the day and prepare to do it better the next time, over time it also generates a kind of constant attitude of mindfulness throughout the day, since you know you'll have to face your conscience in writing every evening.

Also, the *premeditatio malorum*, thinking ahead to the possible bad stuff that can happen under whatever circumstances you will likely face during the day. Some people engage in dramatic versions of it, like envisaging one's death. But that, I think, ought to be left for advanced students, and even then only occasionally. It is much more useful when applied to mundane things, as Epictetus does in the *Enchiridion* (IV): "When you're about to embark on any action, remind yourself what kind of action it is. If you're going out to take a bath, set before your mind the things that happen at the baths, that people splash you, that people knock up against you, that people steal from you. And you'll thus undertake the action in a surer manner if you say to yourself at the outset, 'I want to take a bath and ensure at the same time that my choice remains in harmony with nature.'"

I do that every time I go to a movie theater, because almost invariably some jerk will whip out his cell phone thinking that he absolutely has to check his messages regardless of how much the glare interferes with other people's enjoyment of the movie going experience. It has been really useful in order to preemptively cultivate the sort of inner calm that will not ruin my and my friends' evening.

# The School of Life:
# An Interview With Alain de Botton

The philosopher and author Alain de Botton has dedicated his life to seeking answers—for himself and others—to one of life's chief questions: How do we live a good life? His prolific body of work has helped bring accessible philosophy to millions of people through bestselling books like *The Consolations of Philosophy*, *How Proust Can Change Your Life* and *Status Anxiety*, his widely popular TED talks on religion for atheists and meritocracy, and his own school, The School of Life. (This short video from The School of Life on Stoicism, narrated by Alain, is fantastic.) We were honored that he responded with enthusiasm to our interview request (proof again that he is a real and selfless advocate for philosophy of all kinds).

Below you will find one of the most exhaustive and remarkable interviews that we have published (and if you could see how quickly he got the answers back you almost wouldn't believe it). Alain thoughtfully explains to us the role and value of philosophy in everyday life, what philosophy can learn from pop music, why we should study Augustine in parallel with the Stoics and much more. Enjoy this wide-ranging interview with the one and only, Alain de Botton!

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**You've been a huge advocate about the value of philosophy to help us lead better lives, both with your own books like *The Consolations of Philosophy*, documentary series, as well as the The School of Life. Part of the reason you and others have had to advocate for philosophy is that many people don't see the practical benefits. Why do you think that is? How did philosophy go from its more practical roots to whatever it seems to be today?**

People are understandably confused about what philosophy is. From a distance, it seems weird, irrelevant, boring and yet also – just a little – intriguing. But it's hard to put a finger on what the interest really is. What are philosophers? What do they do? And why does one need them?

Luckily, the answer is already contained in the word philosophy itself. In Greek, *philo* means love – or devotion – and *sophia* means wisdom. Philosophers are people devoted to wisdom.

Though a rather abstract term, the concept of 'wisdom' isn't mysterious. Being wise means attempting to live and die well, leading as good a life as possible within the troubled conditions of existence. The goal of wisdom is fulfilment. You could perhaps say 'happiness' but 'happiness' is misleading, for it suggests continuous chirpiness and joy, whereas 'fulfilment' seems compatible with a lot of pain and suffering, which every decent life must by necessity have.

So a philosopher or 'person devoted to wisdom' is someone who strives for systematic expertise at working out how one may best find individual and collective fulfilment. In their pursuit of wisdom, philosophers have developed a very specific skill-set. They have, over the centuries, become experts in many of the general, large things that make people not very wise. Six central ones have been identified:

We don't ask big questions

What is the meaning of life? What should I do with my work? Where are we going as a society? What is love? Most of us have these questions in our minds at some point (often in the middle of the night), but we despair of trying to answer them. They have the status of jokes in most social circles: and we get shy of expressing them (except for brief moments in adolescence) for fear of being thought pretentious and of getting nowhere. But these questions matter deeply because only with sound answers to them can we direct our energies meaningfully.

Philosophers are people unafraid of the large questions. They have, over the centuries, asked the very largest. They realise that these questions can always be broken down into more manageable chunks and that the only really pretentious thing is to think one is above regularly raising naive-sounding enquiries.

We are vulnerable to errors of common sense

Public opinion—or what gets called 'common sense'—is sensible and reasonable in countless areas. It's what you hear about from friends and neighbours, the stuff that's just assumed to be true, the stuff you take in without even thinking about it. The media pumps it out by the gallon every day. But in some cases, common sense is also full of daftness, error and the most lamentable prejudice.

Philosophy gets us to submit all aspects of common sense to reason. It wants us to think for ourselves, to be more independent. Is it really true what people say about love, about money, about children, about travel, about work? Philosophers are interested in asking whether an idea is logical–rather than simply assuming it must be right because it is popular and long-established.

We are mentally confused

We're not very good at knowing what goes on in our own minds. We know we really like a piece of music. But we struggle to say quite why. Or someone we meet is very annoying, but we can't pin down what the issue is. Or we lose our temper, but can't readily tell what we're so cross about. We lack insight into our own satisfactions and dislikes

That's why we need to examine our own minds. Philosophy is committed to self-knowledge – and its central precept – articulated by the earliest, greatest philosopher, Socrates – is just two words long: Know yourself.

We have muddled ideas about what will make us happy

We're powerfully set on trying to be happy, but go wrong in our search for it on a regular basis. We overrate the power of some things to improve our lives – and underrate others. In a consumer society, we make the wrong choices because, guided by false glamour, we keep on imagining that a particular kind of holiday, or car, or computer will make a bigger difference than it can. At the same time, we underestimate the contribution of other things – like going for a walk, tidying a cupboard, having a structured conversation or going to bed early – which may have little prestige but can contribute deeply to the character of existence.

Philosophers seek to be wise by getting more precise about the activities and attitudes that really can help our lives to go better.

Our emotions can send us in dangerous directions

We are inescapably emotional beings but regularly forget this uncomfortable fact. Occasionally certain emotions – certain kinds of anger, envy or resentment – lead us into

serious trouble. Philosophers teach us to think about our emotions, rather than simply have them. By understanding and analysing our feelings, we learn to see how emotions impact on our behaviour in unexpected, counterintuitive and sometimes dangerous ways. Philosophers were the first therapists.

We panic and lose perspective

We are constantly losing a sense of what matters and what doesn't. We are – as the expression goes – constantly 'losing perspective'. That's what philosophers are good at keeping a hold of. On hearing the news that he'd lost all his possessions in a shipwreck, the Stoic philosopher Zeno simply said: 'Fortune commands me to be a less encumbered philosopher.' It's responses like these that have made the very term 'philosophical' a byword for calm, long-term thinking and strength-of-mind, in short, for perspective.

What we call the 'history of philosophy' is made up of repeated attempts over the centuries to address ways in which we are unwise. So, for example, in ancient Athens, Socrates paid special attention to the problem of how people get confused in their minds. He was struck that people didn't quite know what they meant by key ideas – like courage or justice or success – even though these were the main ideas they used when talking about their own lives. Socrates developed a method (which still bears his name) by which you can learn to get clearer about what you mean by playing devil's advocate with any idea. The aim isn't necessarily to change your mind. It is to test whether the ideas guiding your life are sound.

A few decades later, the philosopher Aristotle tried to make us more confident around big questions. He thought that the best questions were those that ask what something is for. He did this a lot and over many books, asked: What is government for? What is the economy for? What is money for? What is art for? Today he would be encouraging us to ask questions like: What is the news media for? What is marriage for? What are schools for? What is pornography for?

Also active in Ancient Greece were the Stoic philosophers, who were interested in panic. The Stoics noticed a really central feature of panic: we panic not just when something bad occurs, but when it does so unexpectedly, when we were assuming that everything was going to go rather well. So they suggested that we should arm ourselves against panic by getting used to the idea that danger, trouble and difficulty are very likely to occur at every turn.

The overall task of studying philosophy is to absorb these and many other lessons and put them to work in the world today. The point isn't just to know what this or that philosopher happened to say, but to aim to exercise wisdom at an individual and societal level – starting now.

The wisdom of philosophy is – in modern times – mostly delivered in the form of books. But in the past, philosophers sat in market squares and discussed their ideas with shopkeepers or went into government offices and palaces to give advice. It wasn't abnormal to have a philosopher on the payroll. Philosophy was thought of as a normal, basic activity – rather than as an unusual, esoteric, optional extra.

Nowadays, it's not so much that we overtly deny this thought – we are always getting snippets of wisdom here and there – but we just don't have the right institutions set up to promulgate wisdom coherently in the world. In the future, though, when the value of philosophy is a little clearer, we can expect to meet more philosophers in daily life. They won't be locked up, living mainly in university departments, because the points at which our unwisdom bites – and messes up our lives – are multiple and urgently need attention right now.

**Is there anything you've found with the many people you and the team at The School of Life have reached that seems to be the best introduction to philosophy for beginners?**

At The School of Life, we're very concerned with ways to make philosophy more seductive and appealing to a mass audience. We want, if you like, for philosophy to learn the right lessons from pop music.

When pop music started in a big way in the 1960s, it seemed at times like an especially silly medium, favoured by hormonal school girls and connected up with delinquent and tediously bizarre behaviour.

By contrast, philosophy had a reputation for being deeply serious and impressive – the natural home of the big ambition to understand ourselves and transform the world through ideas.

But since the 1960s, philosophy has stalled and pop has conquered the world. It is now the foremost medium for the articulation of ideas on a mass scale. This explains why, if it is to survive, philosophy must study pop; part of its salvation lies in understanding pop's techniques so as to be able to become, in crucial ways, a little more like it.

There are a host of critical lessons philosophy can learn from pop. For a start, pop teaches us about charm. The great pop songs are bewitchingly, dazzlingly charming in the manner in which they get their messages across: they know exactly how to wear away our defences and enter our imaginations with easy grace. It's a reminder that it isn't enough for ideas to be correct. For them to become powerful and deliver on their promises, they need to know how to win over an audience. Pop is the most seductive force the world has ever known; it has more – and more devoted – adherents than all religions put together. It is more deeply loved, more trusted, and a more constant companion in our joys and sorrows than any other art form.

Pop has become powerful in part because it has cleverly understood the division of labour. Those who can sing and hold the crowd may not be the same as those who know how to write music or arrange instruments. Pop is unashamed about uniting talent wherever it finds it, so that the final result can combine the most beautiful face with the finest voice, the best score and the most beguiling instrumental arrangement. Pop has overcome the Romantic hangup about the unique creator, it knows that the most intimate, heartfelt result may be the outcome of large-scale institutional collaboration.

Pop teaches us too about compression. It knows our lives are busy and has an extraordinarily ambitious sense of what could be achieved in under three minutes. Like all other art forms, pop is trying to communicate ideas, but it bypasses the more resistant intellectual parts of the mind. All the usual obstacles to reaching another person are stripped away in the name of visceral intimacy. Pop achieves what Pericles, Lincoln, Dickens and Proust were attempting – and spectacularly exceeds all of them. It provides the ultimate demonstration of the 19th-century theorist Walter Pater's tantalising assertion that 'All art aspires to the condition of music.'

Like religion, pop knows that repetition is key. It works its effect through being heard again and again. It would prefer to grab three minutes from you every day, than three hours every two months. Like religious incantation, it is interested in working upon our souls cumulatively.

Pop is intelligent in not being afraid of simplicity; it is too wise to be held back by pedantry or erudition. It knows that our emotional needs are in essence obvious: to be encouraged, to be held, to be jollied, to be reassured when we are alone, to be told something beautiful and uplifting. It doesn't suffer from high art's perverse addiction to subtlety. It accepts that the core of our minds may be astonishingly basic in its structure.

Pop is ultimately the master of collective euphoria. It possesses what churches and politicians would like, but are so rarely able to secure. It has worked out how to generate shared moments of deep emotion about important things. In the stadium, the singer functions as a high priest, for whom the flock might be ready to make major sacrifices; they would, in their benign frenzy, be willing to go anywhere.

That philosophy needs to learn from pop doesn't preclude that pop needs – of course – to learn quite a bit from philosophy as well. Pop currently touches on the big themes but doesn't, as yet, properly take up many of the opportunities that lie its way. It is lacking in ultimate ambitions.

In the future, we need pop musicians to take up the challenge of investigating the deepest truths, of getting behind transformative concepts and of making these into the things we'll sing about in front of the bathroom mirror with our hairbrushes – so that they become the background sounds of our inner lives. The world waits for a redemptive synthesis between philosophy and pop.

**Nassim Taleb has talked about taking a 'via negativa' approach—solving problems through elimination rather than addition. What do you find are the biggest impediments to achieving a more wise, serene and meaningful life? Any behaviors that the philosophers can warn us against?**

Most of us are rather interested in being normal. We want to belong – and worry about ways in which we don't quite. No matter how much we praise individualism and celebrate ourselves as unique, we are, in many areas, deeply concerned with fitting in.

It's therefore unfortunate that our picture of what is normal is in fact – very often – way out of line with what is actually true and widespread. Many things that we might assume to be uniquely odd or disconcertingly strange about us are in reality completely average and ubiquitous, though simply rarely spoken of in the reserved and cautious public sphere.

The idea of the normal currently in circulation is not an accurate map of what is actually customary for a human being. We are – each one of us – far more compulsive, anxious, sexual, high-minded, mean, generous, playful, thoughtful, dazed and at sea than we are ever encouraged to admit.

Part of the reason for our misunderstanding of our normality comes down to a basic fact about our minds: that we know through immediate experience what is going on inside us, but can only know about other people from what they choose to tell us – which will almost always be a very edited version of the truth.

We know what we've done at 3am, but imagine others sleeping peacefully. We know our somewhat shocking desires from close up; we are left to guess about other people's from what their faces tell us, which is not very much.

This asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge-of-others is what lies behind loneliness. We simply can't trust that our deep selves can have counterparts in those we meet, and so we stay silent and isolated. The asymmetry encourages shyness too, for we struggle to believe that the imposing, competent strangers we encounter can have any of the vulnerabilities and idiocies we're so intimately familiar with inside our own characters.

Ideally, the task of culture should be to compensate for the failings of our brains by assisting us to a more correct vision of what other people are normally like – by taking us, in a realistic but seductive way, into the inner lives of strangers. This is what novels, films and songs should constantly be doing: defining and evoking states of mind we thought we were alone in experiencing – in order to alleviate our shyness and loneliness.

We are particularly bad at recognizing how normal it is to suffer and to be unhappy. Around relationships, for example, we constantly operate with an image of the bliss of others which mocks and undermines our own efforts to keep going with many flawed but eminently 'good enough' unions. We find it hard to bear in mind that more or less everyone is, beneath a cheery surface, intermittently profoundly sad and rarely not anxious.

We become embarrassed too by our close-up knowledge of our own sexuality, which appears necessarily more perverse than that of anyone we know. It almost certainly isn't.

We simply haven't been told the full story.

Ideally, art works would offer us a hugely consoling truth: that our hidden worries, the nagging anxieties we keep to our chests and our stranger thoughts and impulses don't actually make us strange; on the contrary they are precisely what make us normal. One great goal of the love novel, for instance, should be to tell us what love and long-term relationships are really like; so that our own tribulations do not appear so readily as signs that everything is going wrong – but rather that our sufferings are proof that we are in line with common human experience.

Our culture often tries to project an idea of an organised, poised and polished self, as the standard way most people are. We should discount any such myth. Other people are always far more likely to be as we know we are – with all our quirks, fragilities, compulsions and surprising aspects – than they are to be like the apparently 'normal' types we meet in social life.

**You talk about the Stoics a bit in your books, but I get the sense that you see it as a somewhat flawed or incomplete philosophy. Is that fair? Is there something you do admire about the Stoics? Any favorite quotes?**

You'll know from reading my work just how much I admire the Stoics – it's a strand that runs through all my writing. I especially admire Seneca and his quote: What need is there to weep over parts of life? The whole of it calls for tears. I love the Stoic approach to anger. We start to reduce the danger of anger through the insight that not everything that makes sad makes us angry. We may be irritated that it is raining, but we are unlikely ever to respond to a shower by screaming. We aren't overwhelmed by anger whenever we are frustrated; we are sent into a rage only when we first allowed ourselves to believe in a hopeful scenario which was then dashed suddenly and apparently without warning. Our greatest furies spring from unfortunate events which we had not factored into our vision of reality.

We typically think of anger as a dark and pessimistic state of mind. But behind anger lies a surprising emotion: optimism. The angry are, beneath their ranting, possessed of some recklessly optimistic notions of how life might go. They are not merely in a destructive fury, they are in the grip of hope.

The person who shouts every time they encounter a traffic jam betrays a faith, at once touching and demented, that roads must always be (mysteriously) traffic-free. The person who loses their temper with every new employee or partner evinces a curious belief that perfection is an option for the human animal.

Serenity therefore begins with pessimism. We must learn to disappoint ourselves at leisure before the world ever has a chance to slap us by surprise at a time of its own choosing. The angry must learn to check their fury via a systematic, patient surrender of their more fervent hopes. They need to be carefully inducted to the darkest realities of life, to the stupidities of others, to the ineluctable failings of technology, to the necessary flaws of infrastructure. They should start each day with a short yet thorough premeditation on the many humiliations and insults to which the coming hours risk subsequently subjecting them.

One of the goals of civilisation is to instruct us in how to be sad rather than angry. Sadness may not sound very appealing. But it carries – in this context – a huge advantage. It is what allows us to detach our emotional energies from fruitless fury around things that (however bad) we cannot change and that are the fault of no-one in particular and – after a period of mourning – to refocus our efforts in places where our few remaining legitimate hopes and expectations have a realistic chance of success.

**In one of his letters, Seneca urged us to "choose ourselves a Cato"—a role model to look up to, to measure ourselves against. Who are the people—dead, alive or even fictional—that you consider as role models and look up to?**

How do you build a better world? There are so many well-known, urgent places you might start: malaria, carbon emissions, tax evasion, the drug trade, soil erosion, water pollution…

Donald Winnicott deserves his place in history because of the dramatic simplicity of his approach. He proposed that the happiness and future satisfaction of the human race depended ultimately not so much on external political issues, but on something far closer to home: the way parents bring up their children. All the sicknesses of humanity were, in his view, in essence consequences of a failure of parental provision. Fascism, delinquency, rage, misogyny, alcoholism, these were only the symptoms of poor childhoods that the collective would have to pay for. The road to a better society begins in the nursery.

Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) was an English paediatrician, who early on in his career became passionate about the then new field of psychoanalysis. He was analysed by James Strachey, who had translated Freud into English, and became Britain's first medically-trained child psychoanalyst. He worked as a consultant in children's medicine at the Paddington Green Children's Hospital in London, and also played a crucial role in public education around child-rearing, delivering some 600 talks on the BBC, tirelessly lecturing around the country and authoring 15 books, among which the bestselling Home is Where We Start From.

It must have felt very odd, in 1954, to tune into BBC Radio at prime time and hear someone with a gentle, intelligent voice arguing incisively against the idea that babies cry 'to get attention' or that sending seven year olds to boarding school might be a good idea so as to 'toughen them up.'

It was rather strange, too, that Winnicott should even have been English, given that his country was notorious, then as now, for its lack of tenderness and its resistance to introspection (and its commitment to irony, detachment and sarcasm instead). As he pointed out: 'The Englishman does not want to be upset, to be reminded that there are personal tragedies all over the place, that he is really not happy in himself; in short, he refuses to be put off his golf.'

And yet Winnicott's brand of psychoanalysis was, on closer inspection, peculiarly English. He wrote pragmatic, homespun prose, expressing the deepest ideas in plain, unadorned language. There was no German incomprehensibility or abstraction here. There was also a characteristic English modesty about what he saw as the point of child psychoanalysis. He wanted to help people to be, in his famous formulation, 'good enough' parents; not brilliant or perfect ones (as other nations might have wished), but just OK. And that was because he displayed, to a high degree, the downbeat, modest, realistic, temperament which is the particular glory of the English mind.

In an early paper, he announced his project as such: 'I find it useful to divide the world of people into two classes. There are those who were never 'let down' as babies and who are to that extent candidates for the enjoyment of life and of living. There are also those who did suffer traumatic experiences of the kind that result from environmental letdown, and who must carry with them all their lives the memories of the state they were in at moments of disaster. These are candidates for lives of storm and stress and perhaps illness.'

It was this second category that he wanted to save and spare in the next generation. So what would it take, in his eyes, to encourage the 'good enough' parent? Winnicott put forward a number of suggestions:

*Remember that your child is very vulnerable*

Winnicott begins by impressing on his audience how psychologically fragile an infant is. It doesn't understand itself, it doesn't know where it is, it is struggling to stay alive, it has no way of grasping when the next feed will come, it can't communicate with itself or others. It is an undifferentiated, unindividuated mass of competing drives. It isn't a person. The early months are hence an immense struggle. Winnicott's work never loses sight of this, and he therefore repeatedly insists that it is those around the infant who have to 'adapt', adapt so as to do everything to interpret the child's needs and not impose demands for which the child is not ready.

A child who has adapted to the world too early, or who has had inappropriate demands made upon it, will be a prime candidate for mental problems, just as health is the result of an environment that can respond appropriately to the child, which can keep elements of reality at bay, until the small creature is ready.

At worse, a depressed mother might prematurely force an infant to be 'cheerful', to be together because she was not; a child of very angry, unstable parents might be terrified from expressing any of its darker emotions; or a child of intrusive parents might be prevented from developing a capacity to be alone.

*Let a child be angry*

Winnicott knew what violence, what hate there could be in a healthy infant. Referring to what happens if a parent forgets a feed, he cautioned: 'If you fail him, it must feel to him as if the wild beasts will gobble him up.'

But though the infant might sometimes want to kill and destroy, it is vital for the parents to allow rage to expend itself, and for them not in any way to be threatened or moralistic about 'bad' behaviour: 'If a baby cries in a state of rage and feels as if he has destroyed everyone and everything, and yet the people round him remain calm and unhurt, this experience greatly strengthens his ability to see that what he feels to be true

is not necessarily real, that fantasy and fact, both important, are nevertheless different from each other.'

Winnicott interpreted violent feelings against parents as a natural aspect of the maturational process: 'For a child to be brought up so that he can discover the deepest part of his nature, someone has to be defied, and even at times hated, without there being a danger of a complete break in the relationship.'

This is why he appreciated and spoke out for difficult adolescents, the sort that scream at their parents and try the odd bit of stealing from their purses. They were proof of children who had been properly loved and could hence dare to defy and test the adult world: 'A normal child, if he has confidence in mother and father, pulls out all the stops. In the course of time, he tries out his power to disrupt, to destroy, to frighten, to wear down, to waste, to wangle, and to appropriate. Everything that takes people to the courts (or to the asylums for that matter) has its normal equivalent in childhood… If the parents can stand up to all the child can do to disrupt the parents' world, things will settle down.' (Winnicott is almost always deeply encouraging in his tone).

*Make sure your child isn't too compliant*

Parents are delighted when infants and children follow their rules. Such children are called good. Winnicott was very scared of 'good' children. He had a messier view of childhood. The point of the early years was to be able to express freely a lot of 'bad' feelings without consequences, and without fear of retribution.

However, there might be parents who could not tolerate too much bad behaviour and would demand compliance too early and too strictly. This would lead, in Winnicott's formulation, to the emergence of a 'False Self' – a persona that would be outwardly compliant, outwardly good, but was suppressing its vital instincts; who was not able to properly balance up its social with its destructive sides and that couldn't be capable of real generosity or love, because it hadn't been allowed fully to explore selfishness and hate. Only through proper, attentive nurture would a child be able to generate a 'True Self'.

In Winnicott's scheme, adults who can't be creative, who are somehow a little dead inside, are almost always the children of parents who have not been able to tolerate

defiance, parents who have made their offspring 'good' way before their time, thereby killing their capacity to be properly good, properly generous and kind (for the compliant personality is in truth only a fake version of a responsible, giving self).

*Let your child be*

Every failure of the environment forces a child to adapt prematurely. For example, if the parents are too chaotic, the child quickly tries to over-think the situation. Its rational faculties are over-stimulated (it may, in later life, try to be an intellectual).

A parent who is depressed might unwittingly force the child to be too cheerful – giving it no time to process its own melancholy feelings. Winnicott saw the dangers in a child who, in his words, has to 'look after mother's mood'.

Winnicott had a special hatred for 'people who are always jogging babies up and down on their knees trying to produce a giggle.' This was merely their way of warding off their own sadness, by demanding laughter from a baby who might have very different things on its mind.

The primordial act of parental health for Winnicott is simply to be able to tune out of oneself for a time in the name of empathising with the ways and needs of a small, mysterious, beautiful fragile person whose unique otherness must be acknowledged and respected in full measure.

*Realise the gravity of the job you've taken on*

Many of the parents Winnicott saw were worn down by their labours. Winnicott tried to bolster them by reminding them of the utmost importance of what they were doing. They were, in their own way, as significant to the nation as the Prime Minister and the Cabinet: 'The foundation of the health of the human being is laid by you in the baby's first weeks and months. This thought should help when you feel strange at the temporary loss of your interest in world affairs. It is not surprising. You are engaged in founding the mental health of the next generation.' Winnicott called parenting: 'the only real basis for a healthy society, and the only factory for the democratic tendency in a country's social system.'

Of course, there will be errors. Things go wrong in childhood. And that's what psychoanalysis is for. In Winnicott's eyes, the analyst in later years acts as a substitute parent, a proxy 'good enough' figure who 'is in a position of the mother of an infant'. Good analysis has things in common with those early years. Here too, the analyst should listen without forcing the patient to get 'better' ahead of time. She shouldn't force a cure down his or her throat, she should provide a safe place where bits of childhood that weren't completed or went awry can be recreated and rehearsed. Analysis is a chance to fill in the missing steps.

In his descriptions of what parents should do for their children, Winnicott was in effect referring to a term which he rarely mentioned directly: love. We often imagine love to be about a magical intuitive 'connection' with someone. But, in Winnicott's writings, we get a different picture. It's about a surrender of the ego, a putting aside of one's own needs and assumptions, for the sake of close, attentive listening to another, whose mystery one respects, along with a commitment not to get offended, not to retaliate, when something 'bad' emerges, as it often does when one is close to someone, child or adult.

Since Winnicott's death, we've collectively grown a little better at parenting. But only a little. We may spend more time with our children, we know in theory that they matter a lot, but we're arguably still failing at the part Winnicott focused on: adaptation. We still routinely fail to suppress our own needs or stifle our own demands when we're with a child. We're still learning how to love our children – and that, Winnicott would argue, is why the world is still full of the walking-wounded, people of outward 'success' and respectability who are nevertheless not quite 'real' inside and inflict their wounds on others. We've a way to go until we get to be 'good enough.' It's a task – Winnicott would have insisted – that's in its own way as important as curing malaria or slowing global warming.

**And one final question, our readers are pretty familiar with Stoicism. What are some other schools of thoughts that you recommend that they pick next? Or even specific philosophers or books?**

Augustine has to come next. In the late 4th century, as the immense Roman Empire was collapsing, the leading philosopher of the age, St Augustine, became deeply interested in possible explanations for the evident tragic disorder of the human world. One central idea he developed was what he legendarily termed Peccatum Originale: original sin.

Augustine proposed that human nature is inherently damaged and tainted because – in the Garden of Eden – the mother of all people, Eve, sinned against God by eating an apple from the Tree of Knowledge. Her guilt was then passed down to her descendants and now all earthly human endeavours are bound to fail because they are the work of a corrupt and faulty human spirit. This odd idea might not be literally true, of course. However, as a metaphor for why the world is in a mess, it has a beguiling poetic truth, as relevant to atheists as believers. We should not – perhaps – expect too much from the human race, Augustine implies. We've been somewhat doomed from the outset. And that can, in certain moods, be a highly redemptive thought to keep in mind.

# Renowned Illusionist Derren Brown on Stoicism and Why More or Less Everything is Absolutely Fine

Derren Brown is Britain's most celebrated illusionist and magician who has gained worldwide fame for his seemingly psychic abilities and has been dubbed a "real-life Jedi master." Derren has stunned audiences with mind-blowing performances (such as his Russian Roulette stunt on live TV, which has nearly 3 million views on YouTube) and has been called "Britain's answer to David Blaine." One quick search on YouTube and you can spend countless hours watching his performances that will leave you wondering for days.

What Derren is less known for is his study of philosophy—specifically the Stoics—and the fact that he wrote a whole book about it: *Happy: Why More or Less Everything is Absolutely Fine* (which the great Alain de Botton raved about). But of course less known hardly means less impressive. We were very excited to interview Derren and got to ask him about his own Stoic exercises that help him day-to-day, about his research process, his criticisms of both Stoicism and today's self-help industry, and much more. Derren's thoughtful answers are wonderful to read, and you are welcome to join the 2.4 million people who follow him on Twitter to stay up to date with his work.

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**Stoicism is at the heart of your book *Happy*. Can you tell us when did you first discover the philosophy and what was your first impression? Why did it resonate so powerfully with you that you were inspired to root your book in it?**

I discovered the Stoics through reading Montaigne. I stopped halfway through his volume of essays to find out who this chap Seneca was that he kept mentioning. Certainly he seemed to have appealing ideas. From there I discovered the world of the Stoics and the wider Hellenistic context. It resonated with me in the way that things tend to when they articulate something that stirs within you but has never found a voice. As someone who had come into performing and TV and so on without any ambition beyond being able to enjoy the here and now, it was a huge relief to read that my modest preferences weren't just childish or somehow lacking. It's easy to feel like a kid in a world of grown-ups when you're a performer surrounded by producers and the like. Likewise

I have never suffered from any real stress or anxiety, and it was enlightening to read a philosophy based on means of avoiding it. So it wasn't therapeutic in the obvious sense, but it resonated deeply with my own way of life.

**You've said that *Happy* should be categorized as "an anti-self-help, self-help book." What is your view of the current self-help literature and where do you think they fall short? What were you trying to accomplish with yours?**

I had internalized the thinking of the Stoics and built on and fleshed out my own undeveloped thoughts on the matter of what happiness might mean. I felt they offered a much more helpful message than the nonsense of 'believe in yourself and set goals' and so on, which leads to so much feeling of failure and confusion. I wanted to offer a therapeutic message that I felt was of far deeper worth than the panicked and ill-thought through messages we are fed today by that self-help world.

**You've spent more than three years of research writing this book. What are some rabbit holes that you found fascinating and immersed yourself in them? What have been the most important ideas that you discovered during that process that made it into Happy?**

I was so impressed again and again by the wisdom of not trying to control those things you cannot; by the mantra of 'It's fine' in the face of how things are working out beyond the limited remit of your thoughts and actions. A recurring theme in the book is an x=y diagonal in life: of how our aims and goals balance out with what life throws back at us. When Freud created psychoanalysis, he had no intention of making people happy: it was to restore 'natural unhappiness'. Life, he felt, warrants some pessimism. Nowadays we look to be unnaturally happy and we worry that we've failed if we're not. The Greeks lived and breathed all this because they of course understood tragedy. Today, we pretend that fortune doesn't exist or wield any power, and thus we end up with a very inflated attitude towards our desires and how the world should accommodate them. Take *The Secret* for example. It's an extension of the infant's urge to scream out and expect the world to provide. That's no way of being as a grown-up.

However, I finished the book with a sense of where the Stoics might fall a little short, and this has been most instructive. They offer a very robust sense of self, and at the same time an easy relationship with fate and fortune and an effective means of avoiding disturbance. These are hugely helpful things. But there are some important points,

which I think one can also keep in mind, without discrediting the Stoics at all. After all, growing up is all about tolerating ambiguity, isn't it? Realising that the story we tell ourselves is not the truth. So I don't think it needs to undermine a general appreciation for Stoic methods to entertain some thoughts that are complementary, even occasionally conflicting. Conflict of ideas only matters if one is determined to be rigid, which is not a great place to be.

So firstly, Martha Nussbaum's note that rather than being a Stoic rock standing strong against the crashing waves, why not be a porous rock, through which the waves can roll and flow? The Stoics talk of sentry guards, of being poised and ready for attack: I think there is a less *tense* approach where we can retain the robustness but move in more easy accord with circumstance. Flow, porousness. This leads me to the second point: the Stoics are not hot on openness, compassion, community, love. It is so important, I think, to find ways to 'unself' (Iris Murdoch's term), to get out of ourselves and connect with something outside of one. Things in life seem to always get better if we don't make them about *us*. You'll do a better job in any field I can think of if it isn't all about you. And we should seek out and find those feelings of open connection, where we can meet the world with love. We're probably at our best during those times, and happiest, are we not? The Stoics don't quite give us that: it's sort of there, but it's not their strong point. So I think if we can combine a Stoic starting point with openness and connection towards the world, then we're in a good place.

Thirdly, I'm not convinced that avoiding disturbance is always a good thing. How, after all, do we move forward and develop in life? By recognising anxiety. We don't leave our job and get a new one unless we accept it's making us unhappy. We don't cross the road on our own without letting go of Mummy's hand. We are unlikely to find the person who is right for us without first embracing the fact that our current partner isn't. There are many times when we are well advised to accept anxiety and let it sit, rather than always avoiding it. Rilke talks about how some people live in a large, room, others in a small room, and others just stay by the window. Stoicism can lead to that: if we avoid all anxiety, how to we ever move forwards, live largely, find meaning and develop? Again, this idea is not incompatible with Stoicism (the first Stoics were from the East of course, so a sort of mindful acceptance of anxiety is in there), but it's worth bearing in mind. I speak as one who is so adept at avoiding stressful situations that I recognised myself in Rilke's seated, static figure.

**Do you regularly practice any Stoic exercises to help you navigate your day-to-day? Do you have physical reminders of Stoic ideas around you, do you constantly recall certain quotes, specific questions that you journal over, etc.?**

I do reflect on my behavior – I know I let myself down in the stressful situations that arise when you're performing. It's not quite a nightly retrospective meditation but I do remind myself. The biggest thing for me is, when I find myself irritated or feeling annoyed, to let that thought sink in: 'This is fine. It's actually fine'. It always is, of course. It's fine because it's (at least for the most part) nothing to do with me. Even if it takes a while to properly take root, it guides me to better behavior with the people in question. I can at least fake it for a while and act accordingly, because I know *intellectually* that it's the case before I feel it. Without that yardstick, we're so vulnerable to the well-meaning efforts of our sympathetic friends, which tend to inflate our annoyance.

**Do you have a favorite Stoic?**

My soft spots are for Marcus and Epictetus, and later, Schopenhauer if we can extend the parameters a little. And my puppy Doodle. When she pulls something over and it falls on her, she jumps for a moment and then carries on with whatever she was doing before. If a sofa-chewing beagle-basset cross can be a Stoic, she's a good one.

# Ethiopian Entrepreneur and CEO Tewodros Ashenafi on Stoicism and Overcoming Adversity

We had the incredible opportunity to interview Tewodros Ashenafi, the Ethiopian entrepreneur and CEO of SouthWest Energy. Earlier in his life he survived a plane crash, and he reached out to say how much Stoic philosophy has helped him to thrive and emerge stronger afterwards. He is an avid fan of Marcus Aurelius and rereads *Meditations* often, which he discovered while studying at Columbia University and considers it part of his *modus operandi* to pick it up during challenging periods. We were of course honored to hear from him and decided to ask him questions about what must have been a harrowing experience and also, what's it like being a CEO of large company and how Stoicism helps him on a day-to-day basis. Enjoy!

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**You told us that you re-read *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius many times since first picking it up in college. Tell us the story of how you were introduced to *Meditations*. And why do you find yourself re-reading it so often?**

I come from a prominent family in Ethiopia. When a Communist Revolution took place in 1974, a number of my family were executed and most of our possessions were nationalized. I then went to the US to boarding school, then I had the privilege and opportunity to attend Columbia College of Columbia University in New York City. Columbia has a wonderful Core Curriculum, where every student has to study the literature humanities, contemporary civilization, etc. In one of my classes, I was introduced to *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. Ever since my first reading of this Classic, it struck an incredible chord with me. Over the years, as part of my *modus operandi* when going through challenging periods and situations, I always go back to it.

**You have survived a plane crash and numerous other adversities. What were the key principles and ideas that helped you endure and thrive? What was your self-talk like in those moments?**

Naturally, the plane crash was one of the defining moments of my life. It is difficult to explain the fear I felt in the few minutes when the engines failed and we were going down. I had to force myself to be calm and steady my Spirit. I said my Prayers and

the Stoic philosophy of "what is meant to be shall be" helped steady my Spirit. I truly believe that the Divine Protection, it not being my time to go from this earth, and the fact that I steadied my Spirit helped me survive the crash unscathed.

**And as a CEO of a large company, how do you find that the thinking of someone like Marcus helps you shape your own behavior in your day-to-day of leading the organization? Some people might think that philosophy and commerce are at odds (though in truth, Zeno the first Stoic, was a merchant) but clearly you don't see it that way.**

I have had an opportunity to start and grow a number of business. I wholeheartedly believe that Stoic philosophy is even more relevant in this day and age of vast quantities of information, decision overload and general business war, in various spectrums. One needs a guiding philosophy to navigate through these paradigm-shifting times.

**Given what you've faced in your business, the stresses of international finance, the difficulties of building something in Ethiopia of all places, what have you learned about adversity? Do you see it as a test? Something to put up with? Do you enjoy or thrive in moments like that?**

Adversity is like oxygen for someone who is out to accomplish anything worthwhile in this world. I am a believer of the archetypal warrior (in business) where he or she is tested by numerous challenges, obstacles, defeats etc. It is in the passing of these tests that one emerges in order to fulfill one's Destiny.

**Have you read much of the other Stoics? Is there a quote from them or from Marcus that you really love that you could share?**

I have also read and re-read Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, which is also one of my favorites. A favorite quote from Marcus:

> *"VI. To be cheerful, and to stand in no need, either of other men's help or attendance, or of that rest and tranquility, which thou must be beholding to others for. Rather like one that is straight of himself, or hath ever been straight, than one that hath been rectified."*

**Any advice you'd have for young people, someone in college just picking up Marcus Aurelius as you did?**

Read it and absorb it with the utmost seriousness, and try to make it a part of your psyche.

**What are you currently working on and are excited about?**

Try to accomplish something which has never been done before in my country indigenously.

# Professor Mark Ralkowski on Stoicism, Louis C.K.'s Philosophy and Humor as a Spiritual Exercise

Several years ago, the television host Charlie Rose picked a strange phrase to describe the comedian Louis C.K: "philosopher-king." The cynical, brash and vulgar Louis CK called a philosopher? But the truth is you can find philosophy anywhere (and many of most prominent Stoics were anything but academics). Nor is Charlie Rose the only one to notice the philosophical side of Louis CK. Professor Mark Ralkowski is the editor of *Louis C.K. and Philosophy: You Don't Get to Be Bored*—a wonderful book, in which twenty-five philosophers examine the wisdom of Louis C.K, and Professor Ralkowski specifically makes the case for a Stoic interpretation of Louis. We decided to reach out to Mark to ask him more about the analogies between Louis and Marcus Aurelius, how his students react to Stoicism and what it is like discussing comedy in the classroom, the value of humor as a spiritual exercise, the connections between Heidegger and Stoicism, and much, much more.

We want to thank Mark for being generous with his time. His questions are thoughtful and you will never see Louis C.K. and philosophy in the same way. Enjoy our interview with professor Mark Ralkowski!

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**In your essay on Louis CK in *Louis C.K. and Philosophy: You Don't Get to Be Bored* you make many connections between Louis CK and Stoicism. For instance, the character Dr. Bigelow in Louis's show Louie sounds like a Stoic. Can you tell our readers how you first started making the connections between Louis CK and Stoicism? And can you point to some specific examples to illustrate the parallels?**

My first encounter with Louis C.K. was while watching The Daily Show in 2006. This was back in the day when we were looking for relief from the Bush presidency. We were very innocent then! Louis caught my attention that night because I had never heard anyone talk about kids and parenting that way. He said his 1-year-old daughter was boring ("have you ever seen a baby before? That's what's going on."). And he called his 4-year-old an "asshole" for interrupting him and his wife with a story about a dog. "Like I really give a shit about the dog she saw—like that was going to be a great story: that she

saw a dog." And it was hilarious because it was the kind of thing everyone has felt but rarely or never said. It felt cathartic in the same way Curb Your Enthusiasm often does.

But Louis really captured my interest when I saw him on Conan, riffing on the idea that "everything is amazing and nobody is happy." One of his examples was of a passenger on an airplane who was complaining about his chair not reclining enough, and the fact that he had to buy his sandwich. "How dare you, bitching about flying?! You're flying! You're sitting in a chair, in the sky! You're like a Greek myth right now." I couldn't believe it. What a wonderful description of flying! It was an obvious fact that was totally surprising (like Jerry Seinfeld's observation that driving is enjoyable because you're inside but you're outside, you're moving but you're still—all at the same time), and it was couched in a profound critique of Western culture that invited his audience to be humbler and more reverent toward the world. At that point, I started to follow his career a little bit. I looked for his interviews and waited for his standup material to come out as HBO specials.

Then he released his 2010 special Hilarious on his website. I put it on one night and my jaw dropped as I listened to him do his opening bit about being a dead person who hasn't died yet. He sounded just like Marcus Aurelius in his Meditations when he looks at human life from a cosmic perspective:

Most people are dead. Did you know that? It's true: out of all the people that ever were, almost all of them are dead. There are way more dead people. And you're all going to die. And then you're going to be dead for way longer than you were alive. It's like that's mostly what you're ever going to be. You're just dead people that didn't die yet.

If you didn't know any better, I might be able to convince you that Aurelius wrote this. It takes up the same "view from above" that Aurelius uses over and over again in his book; it looks at human life with a kind of cathartic detachment (Louis gets laughs from telling his audience that dead is what they are mostly going to be; Aurelius sought to quiet and focus his soul with reflections like this one), and it emphasizes many of Aurelius' favorite themes: mortality, finitude, and impermanence. Once I made this connection I was completely hooked, and I started to find philosophical ideas in a lot of Louis' writing. Consider two more examples. The first is a passage from the Meditations. The second is from a bit in Season Four of Louis' FX series Louie:

Look down from a height on the countless herds of men, and their countless rituals, and their various journeys through storm and calm, and the many different beings who

are born, live together, and are gone. Imagine, too, the life lived by others long ago, and the life that will be lived after your departure, and the life that is being lived at this very moment among alien peoples; and how many are not even aware of your name, and how many will soon forget it, and how many who now, perhaps, are praising you will very soon be deriding you; and reflect that neither remembrance nor fame nor anything else whatever is worth a passing thought (Meditations, 9.30)

Yeah, life isn't that long and then it's over. And, uh, a lot of people wonder what happens after that. What happens after you die? It's a big question for human beings. What happens after you die? Actually, lots of things happen after you die; just none of them include you. 'Cause you're not in anything anymore. But there's all kinds of shit: there's the Super Bowl every year, and there's a dog catching a Frisbee (Louie, Season Four, Episode 1).

Louis and Aurelius are making a very similar observation here, albeit for different purposes. Aurelius is working on himself with his meditation; he is moderating his passions and ambitions by looking at his finite and insignificant place in the history of time and being—despite being a Roman Emperor! Louis is transforming these kinds of facts into comedy. There's something humorous about the mismatch between our perceptions of ourselves (according to which our lives have great importance), on the one hand, and the brute facts of the matter, on the other hand (according to which we don't matter at all and we will soon be forgotten, regardless of our social status and accomplishments). One of the ideas I explore in Louis C.K. and Philosophy: You Don't Get to Be Bored is the extent to which humor itself might function as a kind of spiritual exercise. A great comedic bit stays with you (Jerry Seinfeld points this out in a wonderful HBO special called Talking Funny); if that bit isn't about something trivial—e.g., if it is about the unconscious or parenting or love or death—it might actually have the kind of therapeutic effect that Aurelius and other Stoics aimed for with their own writings. It has the capacity to stay with us, like a well-crafted Epicurean aphorism.

**In your essay you quote Pierre Hadot (a great scholar on Stoicism) as well as Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus. You clearly have a great deal of understanding of the philosophy and we'd be curious to know who is your favorite Stoic and why? Do you have a favorite Stoic quote?**

I have two favorites, and I can't choose between them. Marcus Aurelius is the first. Seneca is the second. In fact, if I had to take just a few books to a desert island, two of

them would be Aurelius' Meditations and Seneca's Letters from a Stoic. And if I had to choose between them, I would probably take Seneca's letters because they give one a glimpse into a complete world and life. Aurelius had a greater cosmic vision, but Seneca gives one a better sense of what it is like truly to live the life of a Stoic. And it is nothing like the life that critics imagine. He was not a cold, rational stone, as some suggest; he lived a full human life; you can feel it in his letters. He talks about friendship, money, creativity, raising children, death, old age, exercise, travel, wisdom, talking slowly, the importance of being able to spend time alone, what to read (and why one shouldn't read too much), having a good character, the value of philosophy, pleasure, grief, drunkenness, education, living simply, technology, pessimism, suffering, and so much more. As you read his letters, you get the feeling that he is talking directly to you. His advice still feels relevant. And more importantly, it is full of practical wisdom. Letters from a Stoicis the kind of book that you'll read and then pass on to a friend.

I have a hard time choosing favorite quotes, especially when it comes to these beautiful writers and thinkers, so I'll talk about this little passage from Epictetus' Handbook:

> *What upsets people is not the things themselves but their judgments about the things. (Epictetus, Handbook, 5)*

I love this passage because it captures the essence of Stoic ethics. The Stoics were like the Buddhists in suggesting that we suffer primarily because we are ignorant about the nature of reality, and that we can relieve ourselves from suffering by eliminating this ignorance, getting a correct vision of the world, and living accordingly. The Stoics thought a "correct vision of the world" meant accepting determinism and divine providence, and that is not appealing to many readers today. But we don't need to accept Stoic metaphysics in order to get something important from Epictetus' observation. For example, one might go simply as far as David Foster Wallace does in his 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, where he recommends a philosophy similar to Epictetus' to anyone with an interest in getting command over herself and her circumstances.

"Learning how to think" really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed…If you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type

situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, friendship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.

This is the part of Stoicism that influenced Viktor Frankl in his inimitable book, Man's Search for Meaning, which applies Stoic ideas to the most challenging circumstances human beings can face. He talks about using the freedom of thought to "transform personal tragedy into triumph." Frankl was also inspired by existentialist philosophers like Nietzsche, but it is not an exaggeration to say that his philosophy and psychotherapeutic practice of logotherapy is an elaboration of Epictetus' insight in passage #5 of his Handbook. And as I like to remind my students, there may be no better "proof" of the practical value of a philosophy than Frankl's successful therapeutic use of it at Auschwitz.

**Speaking of Pierre Hadot, do you have a favorite 'spiritual exercise' that you've learned from reading his works? It does not have to be from the Stoics.**

The one I find most helpful, especially since November 2016, is the practice of viewing things from the perspective of eternity, or from the perspective of history. From this perspective, no human life is significant, not even the lives of the world's most accomplished leaders. It's the idea that Aurelius is getting at in these three passages from his Meditations:

*Constantly reflect on how swiftly all that exists and is coming to be is swept past us and disappears from sight. For substance is like a river in perpetual flow, and its activities are ever changing, and its causes infinite in their variations, and hardly anything at all stands still; and ever at our side is the immeasurable span of the past and the yawning gulf of the future, into which all things vanish away. Then how is he not a fool who in the midst of all this is puffed up with pride, or tormented, or bewails his lot as though his troubles will endure for any great while? (5.23) Think of substance in its entirety, of which you have the smallest of shares; and of time in its entirety, of which a brief and momentary span has been assigned to you; and of the works of destiny, and how very small is your part in them. (5.24)*

*For all things are swift to fade and become mere matter for tales, and swiftly too complete oblivion covers their every trace. And here I am speaking of those who shone forth with wonderful brightness; as for all the rest, the moment that they breathed their last, they were "out of sight, out of mind." And what does it amount to, in any case, everlasting remembrance? Sheer vanity and nothing more. What, then, is worthy of our striving? This alone, a mind governed by justice, deeds directed to the common good, words that never lie, and a disposition*

*that welcomes all that happens, as necessary, as familiar, as flowing from the same kind of origin and spring. (4.33)*

One might wonder how this perspective of eternity could be beneficial for a person who takes it up. Why wouldn't these thoughts make a person feel despair at the hopelessness of life? If we are all just momentary ripples in the "perpetual flow" of time and being; if "hardly anything at all stands still," and if our short lives are lived between an infinite past and an infinite future, and we will all soon be "out of sight, out of mind," what does it all mean? Why does anything matter at all? According to Aurelius, we ask questions like these because we are stuck in our finite, individual perspectives. If we could take up the viewpoint of eternity, we could see beauty in everything.

*Bread, for instance, in the course of its baking, tends to crack open here and there, and yet these very cracks, which are, in a sense, offences against the baker's art, somehow appeal to us and, in a curious way, promote our appetite for the food. And again figs, when fully ripe, tend to split open; and in olives which are ready to drop, the very fact of their impending decay lends a peculiar beauty to the fruit. Ears of corn bending towards the earth, the wrinkled brows of a lion … and many other things are far from beautiful if one views them in isolation, but nevertheless, the fact that they follow from natural processes gives them an added beauty and makes them attractive to us. So if a person is endowed with sensibility and has a deep enough insight into the workings of the universe…he will be able to see in an old woman or an old man a special kind of mature beauty. (3.2)*

There is beauty in impermanence and the passage of time; there is beauty in human finitude and mortality. Aurelius thinks our lives lack cosmic significance, and that that is ok, because the cosmos itself is beautiful, and we are a part of it. We share in its order and divinity. It is humbling to look at the world from the cosmic point of view: even the most powerful people, and all of our most cherished accomplishments, seem trivial from this perspective. But this can also be a source of relief, especially during hard times. And it is always a healthy reality check, because it reminds us that we are making a contribution to something much larger than our individual lives and projects. Which is why people with the most "fevered egos" (to borrow a phrase from Bill Hicks) are the most pitiable; they are the most ignorant. They are the most out of touch with the way the world really is, and so they cannot recognize just how wondrous it is to be given the gift of life at all. Aurelius' idea here is similar to the message of Carl Sagan's famous talk about "The Pale Blue Dot":

I have found this "spiritual exercise"—the act of reflecting on things from a larger perspective—to be incredibly cathartic and nourishing. The catharsis comes from seeing that things don't matter as much as (or in the way that) we thought. The nourishment comes from the inculcation of humility and reverence. Earth is a beautiful and extraordinary place, and yet it is only a "fraction of a dot."

**At the beginning of the essay you mention your students' reactions to quoting Louis. They must love the idea of connecting one of the biggest names in comedy today with philosophy. What reactions do you get? Have you noticed them changing their relationship to philosophy because of that?**

I don't like to speak on behalf of my students, but we have had some fun with clips from Louis' shows. And I have heard students repeating his ideas during class discussions on many occasions, which confirms my hunch that a well-crafted bit can help with the internalization of a deep insight. It can change the way we think, and it can transform the way we look at the world. This is the way Trevor Griffiths puts the point in his play, Comedians:

*A real comedian—that's a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they want. A joke releases tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate the will and desire, it has to change the situation.*

In this respect, a "true joke" can perform the same function as a Stoic or Epicurean aphorism. I don't know whether connecting philosophical ideas to Louis' comedy has changed my students' relationships with philosophy, but it has made the job of introducing certain ideas easier.

**Can you tell us more also about teaching Stoicism to your students? What has been your approach? And what are their favorite Stoic exercises, ideas or criticisms of the philosophy?**

I teach Stoic texts as parts of larger courses. I've done this in classes that focus on the history of ancient philosophy, the origins and evolution of modern thought, the care of the self, and character. It helps to use the best written texts! Epictetus' Handbook

is probably the book that most people use in courses like these, but I've found that Seneca and Aurelius are much more effective at making an appealing case for Stoicism. It also helps to think about Stoicism alongside other ideas about the good life, the care of the self, and character formation. I find it particularly fun to teach Stoicism in connection with Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism (and even some modern thinkers, such as Nietzsche, Freud, Frankl, and Martha Nussbaum). I've already mentioned a connection with Buddhism; there are similar connections with Hinduism; these are really clear when you read, say, the Meditations right after reading and thinking about the Bhagavad Gita.

My students usually find Stoicism appealing in one respect, and too challenging in another. The appeal comes, at least in part, from the fact that these writers promise to help readers come to terms with big human challenges, e.g. with anger, sadness, death, impermanence, vulnerability, and the acquisition of wisdom. So much of higher education these days—the way we talk to young people about it, the way we talk about it with nervous parents who are paying the tuition, and the way we advertise majors and build departments—is focused on instrumental values, such as job preparation. Of course, it is important to plan ahead, and young people ought to be thinking about their futures. We all have to make a living. But we also have to figure out how to live our lives. No education can tell us what to do or who to be, but it can introduce us to worlds of thought that can nourish us for our whole lives. Students should prepare themselves for a job market, but they should also be given a chance to continue their educations as humans, i.e. to learn about history and world religions, and to develop their moral imaginations and skills in critical thinking. This is where a great Stoic writer like Seneca can have a role in anyone's life. He can be a dialogue partner who helps us learn how to think, and even helps us think about thinking. As he says in Letter XVI, we ought to be thinking about the whole of life, not just turning ourselves into money-making instruments.

[Philosophy] molds and builds the personality, orders one's life, regulates one's conduct, shows one what one should do and what one should leave undone, sits at the helm and keeps one on the correct course as one is tossed about in perilous seas. Without it, no one can lead a life free of fear or worry. Every hour of the day countless situations arise that call for advice, and for that advice we have to look to philosophy.

Maybe Seneca overstates the value of philosophy. Even some professional philosophers would say he does. But just the idea that philosophy in general, and Stoicism in

particular, might help us answer deep questions about what matters and what doesn't, who we ought to be and what kind of work we are best suited for, is a big part of what makes studying books like Letters from a Stoic appealing. What is happiness, and how can we live lives that will make us happy? What is justice, and how can we reshape our institutions and our own choices so that they better reflect it? How can we come to terms with our impermanence and mortality? A thinker like Seneca helps us see that we need answers of our own to these questions because each day we live answers to them. If we don't get serious about thinking for ourselves, we can be controlled by ideas that are not our own.

Students sometimes worry that Stoicism in particular recommends that we live cold and cerebral lives. They argue that the Stoics are wrong to value apatheia, because it is the passions, and even suffering itself, that make life meaningful. They also object to the metaphysical worldview, and in particular the determinism. The idea that we should give up trying to change the world and learn to want things to happen as they do happen (Epictetus, Handbook, #8) contradicts their aspirations to improve the world and make a lasting contribution. A lot of our discussions focus on which of these criticisms is most valid, and whether we can extract pieces of Stoicism that can work for us without asking us to give up characteristics and experiences that we feel are central to our lives.

**You are an expert on Plato and Heidegger and we were wondering, what are some observations or ideas from them that you'd recommend to students of Stoicism to consider in parallel of their study of the stoic philosophy?**

Plato's influence on Stoicism is well-documented. They borrowed a lot from his moral psychology, his optimistic worldview (although they reject his doctrine of an intelligible world), and his ethics. In particular, they inherit from Plato the ideas (i) that the universe has a rational order, (ii) that humans are a part of this rational order and so are essentially rational, (iii) that the emotions are non-rational and should be fully controlled by reason, (iv) that death isn't such a bad thing, (v) that the individual matters much less than the social whole, and (vi) that the unexamined life is not worth living.

The connections between Heidegger and Stoicism are less well understood, and for that reason they are more interesting. As I have noted, three of the themes that come up constantly in the writings of thinkers like Seneca and Aurelius are death, impermanence, and finitude. We have to come to terms with the constant flux of reality, the unwelcome processes of ageing and change, with death and loss, and the vastness of time and being—

we are, as Seneca says, tasked with steering our lives through a perilous sea. Heidegger's Being and Time deals with all of these issues in a radically new way, using a method that he, his mentor, and his famous students called Phenomenology.

Heidegger's philosophy is extremely challenging and technical, so I can only talk generally about these points here. In Being and Time, he provides his readers with new ways of thinking about and coming to terms with the guilt and anxiety that are ineluctable features of being human. In this respect, his philosophy has some things in common with Buddhism and Stoicism in particular. The very big idea is that we can live better lives if we get clear about ourselves and our world. His ideas in Being and Time are meant to provide us with that clarity. His "later philosophy" is also related to certain ideas in Stoicism. Most importantly, in works like The Question Concerning Technology, he says that we can transform ourselves and our relationship with the world, and even the way the world reveals itself to us, by relearning how to think. More specifically, we must learn to think beyond the categories we've inherited from our tradition. We must transcend "the history that we are," because the way we live reflects a history of ideas that are contingent and limited, while pretending to be necessary and exhaustive. If we can manage this, if we can truly relearn to think, we can begin to confront the world's most pressing problems, such as environmental degradation, exploitation, vulture capitalism, and much more. If you are looking for a very readable introduction to some of these ideas, I recommend reading Heidegger's "Memorial Address" in his Discourse on Thinking.

**What are you currently working on?**

I am finishing a book on Plato's political theory and the trial of Socrates. It is called The Apologies of Socrates: Plato's Trial of Athens. The manuscript is due before the end of the year, so it should come out in 2018. In the future, I will begin working on a book project about philosophy as a way of life.

# A Guide To The Good Life: An Interview With William B. Irvine

**There is the perception that practitioners of Stoicism tend to try to suppress their emotions or at least avoid acting on their emotions. Is that accurate? How do stoics treat positive and negative emotions differently, if at all?**

Ideally, a Stoic won't have many negative emotions to deal with, inasmuch as he will routinely take steps to prevent them from arising in the first place. If he does find himself experiencing a negative emotion, though, he will start applying Stoic advice on how to deal with it. If he is experiencing grief, for example, he will call to mind the advice given by Seneca in his *Consolations*. And after doing this, he will study the episode in an attempt to prevent it from recurring.

On the other hand, a Stoic will embrace positive emotions. Because he engages in negative visualization, he will likely experience many little moments of delight in the course of an ordinary day. He will also likely have an unusual capacity for the experience of joy.

**How does today's Stoicism differ from the Stoicism of ancient Rome? What would ancient and modern stoics agree on? What would they disagree about? How might their day-to-day practice of Stoicism differ?**

My own practice of Stoicism is very close to that of the ancient Roman Stoics. Although the world has changed since then, human nature is largely unchanged, and Stoicism is all about how to deal with our nature. It is about how beings who are half god and half animal can best live.

**In your book about stoic joy, *A Guide to the Good Life*, you make the point that stoic wisdom, though ancient, is still very much applicable to contemporary life. Do you find it challenging to live stoically? What technique(s) do you find most helpful for those who want to lead a stoic life?**

Yes, it is challenging to practice Stoicism. When you focus on one area of your practice, the other areas tend to slide. When you are experiencing a long stretch of tranquil living, you start assuming that your tranquility will never again be disrupted. That is precisely

when the Stoic gods are most likely to throw you a curveball—if not a beanball! I have been practicing Stoicism for more than a decade but can easily relate to those who have just initiated their practice. On some days, I feel like a novice myself!

**You are a Professor of Philosophy at Wright State University: How do your students react to Stoicism? Would you say that their interest is markedly different than other schools of thought you teach? Have you seen their collective reaction to Stoicism shift throughout the years?**

I periodically get to teach a class on Stoicism, and when I do, I am astonished by how receptive students are. I'm not sure I would have been that receptive back in my college days. But of course, at that time, I did not, in the philosophy classes I took, have any exposure to Stoicism as a philosophy of life. Back then, a philosophy professor who taught about "philosophies of life" would have been looked down on—and in some universities probably still would be.

**Who do you consider the most influential stoic philosopher to you personally? Why? Do you have a favorite stoic quote?**

I like all the Roman Stoics, but for different reasons. When I am dealing on an ongoing basis with annoying people, I turn to Marcus Aurelius. As Roman emperor, he had lots of experience dealing with annoying people. When I have an important decision to make, I turn to Epictetus and remind my self that there are things I can control and things I can't. When I find myself lusting for consumer goods, I turn to Musonius Rufus, who managed quite well on being banished to the desolate island of Gyaros. And when I am feeling sorry for myself, I turn to Seneca. He reminds us that no matter how bad things are, they could be much worse.

As far as favorite quotes are concerned, I have a hundred of them. The Roman Stoics are wonderfully quotable. This one comes from Marcus Aurelius: "The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing."

# Bestselling Author and Investor James Altucher on Choosing Yourself and Stoic Minimalism

It is hard to spend any time online and not encounter the works of James Altucher, easily one of the most prolific, vulnerable and fascinating writers working today. He is one of the few people who is extremely open about many of his losses and failures (his first answer in our interview is a story about him losing $9 million dollars). James has developed a unique philosophy of life, which he once quipped was a 'Stoic soup' mixing Stoicism and its more Eastern counterparts, Taoism and Advaita Vedanta. We got to ask James about his daily routines, his minimalism (which has been profiled in the *New York Times*), why he dubs comedians 'modern philosophers,' and much more. Enjoy our interview with the one and only, James Altucher! And if you are looking for a podcast episode to enjoy today, you should check out his chat with Ryan on Stoicism on James's widely popular podcast, *The James Altucher Show*.

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**There's a story we've heard you tell before about a phone call you were expecting to be good news and turned out to be bad news. Would you want to share that?**

I was on the set of the TV show "Billions". It hadn't yet aired but they were filming the pilot. And then I got a call in the middle of the day that almost ruined my year or my life, depending on how I took it.

First off, I was really excited to be on the set of "Billions". I had never been on the set of a drama before like this. Two of my favorite writers (Brian Koppelman and David Levien ("Rounders", "Ocean's 13", etc) were the creators of the show and Neal Burger ("Limitless") was directing this episode. It was fascinating to be there and just observe.

In the middle of the filming I got a message from a company I was on the board of, "Board meeting in 15 minutes!".

I went outside to take the call. The company was doing great. And at the last valuation, my stake was worth $9 million. This was definitely my prized possession. I thought this would be IT. GAME OVER! Maybe the company was being sold.

On the board call I got the news: the largest shareholder had not paid taxes. Which broke the rules of a loan Wells Fargo had given the company. Which meant, (long story short), Wells Fargo was going to immediately take over the company and sell off its parts and shut the company down.

$9 million to zero in a few minutes.

BOOM!

I was in shock. I was devastated. I went into immediate panic thinking this was going to make me go broke. I felt like throwing up.

And then I thought: for years I've been writing about how I learned over (a long period of) time how to recover from these situations.

Check the box on: physical health, emotional health (am I around good people), creative health, spiritual health.

Spiritual health is often a weird phrase. For me it simply means: surrender to events outside my control. I don't add "and then the best results will happen" and yet, that's what seems to happen.

I thought to myself: this is a perfect opportunity to once again try my own advice. Why not?

I went back to the rest of the show. There was another eight hours of filming. I enjoyed every minute of it. I felt panic also. I felt anxiety. I felt horror at my situation and what had happened. There's no gain in suppressing bad feelings.

But I also focused on the fun I was having. The learnings I was experiencing. Being around my friends. Watching creativity in action. Being healthy. And making sure every second I surrendered to the results.

It was the best day I had had in a long time!

Afterwards I told my friends who were on the set what had happened.

They said, "We had no idea! We thought you took a long bathroom break. You were joking around and asking questions for the rest of the day!"

And it was gratifying to me to see how fast my advice helped me. The only way an event becomes "bad" is if it paints it's darkness and pain over everything else you are doing. If you don't let that painting happen, then it won't.

Check the box every day on physical, emotional, creative, spiritual health. This won't put money in the bank, but it will make you rich.

**Someone asked you on Twitter that you seem very Stoic and wondered if you were a fan of Stoicism. Your response was "Stoicism, yes, but maybe more advaita vedanta. And Taoism. All mixed together. A stoic soup." Can you unpack this for us? Why are you a fan of Stoicism, and how did you discover it, but also what is 'advaita vedanta?' And we'd curious to hear more about your experiences with Taoism.**

The greatest problem we have as humans is that gray area between what we can control and what we can't. For instance, this morning I can try my best to write a good article. I can research, read, prepare, rewrite, start over, rewrite again, etc. I'm doing my best.

But some days I simply won't write well. And sometimes I'll write something that people hate. Either because it doesn't suit their style or they disagree with me or they dislike me for some other reason.

I choose "writing" for this example because it's something I deeply care about. I love to write for others. I love it when people like my writing. It makes me feel better.

Which is the gray area. Because even though part of my reaction to my own writing is based on the responses of others, I have "almost" no control over it. I can do what I can do: hard work, preparation, etc. But still, where my control ends, the entire rest of the world begins.

I have to remind myself constantly, I am just a drop of water in the ocean. And ultimately that drop of water dissolves and is absorbed by this giant ocean of life around us. And that's it. That's the summation of my life.

It doesn't mean I shouldn't enjoy being this drop. What a pleasure it is to participate in life. But I'm just participating it. I'm not the ocean. And I have no influence over the waves that spin me around, or the sun that heats me, or the land all around that I could spill into.

On the one hand this sounds "stoic". Stoicism is not about avoiding pleasure. Pursue pleasure. Pursue knowledge. Pursue pursue pursue. But it's about surrender to what is not in our control.

This doesn't mean "give up". It means PURSUE. But the true freedom of Stoicism is found in surrender.

I view Stoicism as the practical philosophy behind surrender. Why fight the things you can't control? You can live a better life by doing what you love and always being aware that there are situations you need to surrender to.

I view either Taoism or Advaita Vedanta (two very similar philosophies at their core – one is from China, the other from India) as more eastern versions of stoicism.

In those two philosophies, the concept of "surrender" is not only practical and a path to freedom (as it is in Stoicism) but also as a path to love.

When we try to control a situation, we find ourselves hating aspects of it (the aspects we either can't control or that go against us). Replace "situation" with "relationship" and this is even more clear.

In Taoism or Advaita Vedanta, just like in Stoicism, "surrender" is the key that unlocks the prison door. The key is right there, on our side of the door. But so often we refuse to use it. We want someone else to release us from jail. We want someone to choose us. For a job. A promotion. A relationship. A book deal. Etc.

But the key is on our side! Nobody can unlock the prison door except us.

Perhaps the only difference (and I actually don't think there is a difference between the three philosophies) is that in these more eastern varieties of stoicism, surrender leads to a deep love for our life because we see how vast and awe-inspiring is the world and

nature that we can't control. Surrendering to it gives us a bigger view of what is around us. Rather than the small binary view of what we can control and what we can't.

**There was profile on you in *New York Times* last year ("Why Self-Help Guru James Altucher Only Owns 15 Things"). While the Stoics weren't ascetics per se, they did advocate cultivating self-reliance and preparedness to lose one's possessions. Seneca would practice what it was like to be poor (even though he was very rich). Do you have a reason for why you've stripped down to so little? How has it changed your life?**

For many reasons, I decided I don't want to own things anymore. The reasons can fill a book. I left town and hired a friend to go to my place and do one of four things with EVERY item in the place (40 years worth of items built up in every archaeological layer of my life): throw it out, give it away, keep it, sell it.

It took her a week with a truck and her whole family helping her. When we are young we can often move with a bag or two but after decades, that's often not possible.

My lease was also up on that apartment. So when I came back into town I had no home and only a carryon bag and the clothes I was wearing (plus one more outfit in the bag and a computer and a phone and a toothbrush).

And I've stayed the same ever since. If I buy one shirt, a shirt has to leave the carry on bag.

Do I miss things? Of course! The goal wasn't to always feel good. There was no goal. I just wanted to live this way. And it's ok to sometimes feel sad. So often we want to be vaccinated against sadness and sentimentality. But there is no vaccine. Every day I miss something.

But not thinking about possessions at all has also allowed me to explore more what is important to me. My health is important to me. Having good friends and loved ones. Being creative. Being spiritual (surrendering to what I can't control).

I've realized that I value experiences much more than any one belonging. Often I would buy something, use it, and then tire of it eventually.

Now, I think of experiences I can have, that I can learn from, that can be fun, and that maybe I can share with others. I look forward to them. I have them. And then I look back fondly on them.

This quest for experience has no goal. And no planned outcome. Nor do I have to store them later. I just experience them. My life has become much more enjoyable as a result.

This is just for me. It might not fit everyone (or anyone). And it might not fit me forever. Just now.

Nor is it "minimalist". Homeless people are minimalist.

I call it "Choice-ism". A larger part of my day is spent doing things I choose to do, instead of things that are chosen for me because of belongings of any sort.

And it has given me a greater appreciation that I can live under any circumstances. There is no one thing I "need" because I have given away everything. It's not practice for having nothing. I HAVE nothing.

**Two of your books have titles that could be Stoic epigrams: *Choose Yourself*(that is seize your own destiny and be self-reliant) and *The Power of No*(which is harder and more meaningful than saying yes to everything). What does life look like for someone who chooses themselves and wields the power of no?**

Often I write books not about things I am so good at, but things that have been hard for me, often for decades.

It's hard for me to say "no". It's hard for me to not value the opinions of others over my own opinion. I WANT to be chosen. I don't want to have to say "no" to people. It's scary!

But I was so unhappy for so long I had to dig into what was happening. We have only this life. And as I was getting older (I am 49), I desperately wanted to stop the train that was cascading forward into my eventual death. I wanted to jump off.

The only way was to realize all of the ways I was not choosing myself. All of the times I wanted to be chosen: to be chosen for a job, or a raise. To be chosen for a book deal or a TV deal. To be chosen by a customer or an employee or an acquirer of a business I started or invested in. Or to be "liked" by a reader. Or to be asked to lunch by someone I wanted to be friends with.

So many times I was miserable because any of the above (and much more) didn't happen. This is a big list of things I allowed to make me unhappy.

I outsourced my self-esteem to all of these events. And without them, my self-esteem would go down. My anxiety would go up. My self-hatred would be unavoidable.

So my "meditation" became a practice of catching myself when I realized I was waiting for someone to "Choose me". If a reader didn't like something I wrote, I just had to keep reading and writing and improve and do my best. Writing became more pleasurable (and actually, a lot better) once I stopped writing just to please.

This is a gray area, because good writing must appeal to an audience. But the gray area is that if you try to please all of the people all of the time, you end up pleasing nobody.

And this is the case with anything. If I realized I wanted to be chosen by a book publisher and I was anxious about it, I would stop and say, "no problem, I will self-publish". My self-published books have outsold my "traditionally published" books 20-1 at this point. I've written 18 books with about half self-published and half published by mainstream publishers.

If a woman I was in a relationship no longer liked me (this happens!) then I would do what I could but also surrender to the results. Life goes on. Not that I was so passive. Kindness is a side effect of not trying to control situations. And reaching for experience is often more fun and interesting than reaching for material items.

Often, the best thing for emotional health is to find what satisfies you from within, instead of outsourcing the choices about your happiness and self-esteem to others.

This is what "Choose Yourself" is about. it turns out that not only is this directly related to internal health but external health and even financial health.

If a boss doesn't choose you for a job then, guess what, perhaps this is time to start a business doing what you love. Or, in my case of publishing, I ended up making much more money by choosing myself (ironically, with the book titled "Choose Yourself"). If someone doesn't acquire a business, maybe then continue to build it until it is much easier to sell a year later, at a much higher price. And so on.

I don't always make the most money (I'm not a billionaire), but I have found more freedom than ever before. And financial freedom is often (but not always) a side effect of that.

And saying "no" is also a side effect. I've lost the most money, and the most in relationships, and the most in health, when I couldn't say "no".

But I don't like confrontation. It's hard for me to say "no". So I had to develop ways to better say "no" that were comfortable to me. And this is the topic of "The Power of No".

**You've gotten into standup comedy recently and you've talked about how comedians are a kind of modern philosopher. In some ways, they are one of the few types of figures we can trust. They say the truth. Is that how you approach your time on stage?**

I always thought I was funny. And I thought I was a good speaker. So when a club owner asked to go on stage for five minutes I said "yes".

I knew it would be incredibly scary and uncomfortable to me. As opposed to public speaking, you have to get a specific emotional and physical reaction in five minutes out of people who have no idea who you are. The light is on you and you MUST make them laugh.

It turned out to be 100 times more difficult than I could have imagined. There are so many micro-skills in comedy that are independent of each other. Not only humor (which is probably not even the most important), but likability, reading an audience and knowing how to react to each type of audience, structuring a joke and the variety of jokes there are, understanding the difference between a joke and a story, understanding the relationship between truth and humor and absurdism and when (or how) they can be connected. And on and on. So many skills!

I had to start from scratch with all of these skills. And each of these skills can be divided into sub-skills.

For instance, if you tell a joke and the crowd is silent…what does it mean?

Does it mean the joke was not funny (the obvious answer). But why did the last audience laugh the last time at the same joke?

Does it mean you didn't build likability enough? Does it mean the audience likes me but is low energy? Does it mean there are more men than women in audience and that particular joke doesn't work with men? Does it mean I didn't commit in the last syllable of the joke as much as I committed last time?

Did I switch words in the last sentence? (words that are said in the front of the mouth tend to be funnier than words that come from the back of the mouth- another sub-skill to learn about the actual "physical language" of comedy).

And in the micro-seconds you have to read an audience, you have to know how to react?

Some people leave the stage and say "bad audience". I never do this. No audience is "bad". That's like saying "bad world" when the world doesn't go the way I want it to go.

Surrendering in the case of comedy means constantly learning the skills needed, applying those skills, and then surrendering the results. In other words, trying my hardest to learn AND have fun no matter what.

This is all an intro to your question. Some jokes are "flat". They are there to quickly increase likability and get a quick laugh that you know the audience will most likely respond to.

And some comics often stick with those jokes. These are often very funny comedians. The audience is laughing the entire time. Nothing fun with that.

But often the best jokes, come from some place deep inside. If I tell a joke about parenting, for instance, that I know is funny (because people have laughed many times before, for instance) and an audience doesn't laugh, then that's ok.

I know the joke connects to a place deep inside of me. It's going straight from that deep place and forming itself into a premise (e.g. "no grown man would ever wake up and say 'I need to go to a ballet recital of mediocre 13 year old ballerinas today' ") that then goes from premise to a structured joke (acting out a specific example, maybe bringing absurdism into it, and then a punchline).

The final punchline might be absurd. But the entire joke is based in reality. Easy premises from my own life: difficulty in saying no, my problems in relationships and sex, losing money over and over, wanting to kill myself (yes, that can be funny), my problems with the way I look, and so many others depending on how crude I want to get or what I think the audience is ready for.

Ultimately, the best comedians show the gap between reality and expectations.

The world might always expect someone to be polite, for instance. But there are some situations where being polite just is not what you want to do or not what you believe in. By shedding light on these gaps, it allows the audience to experience, in a safe environment, a horrific and scary feeling but in such a way that it can be laughed at.

It's the relief of this tension, the unraveling of the hidden truth, that often creates the laughter.

A great example is every episode of "Curb Your Enthusiasm" created by Larry David, who also created "Seinfeld". Another example is often Louis CK or Dave Chappelle's standup, although the two have VERY different styles.

**The Stoics were fans of routines and habits and we know that you have your own daily exercises and habits. What does your current daily routine look like? Over the years, what have been the most helpful things that you've practiced that you'd suggest to our readers start today?**

Sleeping eight hours a day. Without energy, we can't function, we get sick, we can't be creative, we can't devote ourselves to the work we love, we can't cultivate our friendships to the best of our abilities. Sleep rejuvenates the brain and the body. If I could only choose one habit, as droll as it seems, sleep hygiene would be it.

After that: physical health (sleep, food, move), emotional health (being around good people), being creative (or playing) every day, and constant practice of surrendering the things I can't control.

# Kevin Rose on Fasting, Cold Showers and Loving One's Craft

Kevin Rose is one of the most prominent and prolific technologists in Silicon Valley. He famously founded Digg in his early twenties and later went on to invest in almost every major tech company in the last decade—from Foursquare to Twitter to Facebook. Most recently, he left New York City and moved back to California to join a venture capital firm after stepping down as CEO of HODINKEE, an online wristwatch magazine. Aside from his investment and entrepreneurial success, Kevin's other outlets include Foundation, an online video series where he interviewed Silicon Valley leaders (including Elon Musk), his monthly email newsletter The Journal and his own podcast, The Kevin Rose Show, where he "goes deep with fellow geeks from all walks of life."

Kevin has also shown a deep fascination with philosophy—especially Eastern—and has been a proponent of both fasting and cold showers as means of achieving resilience, self-discipline and mental clarity. We reached out to Kevin to ask more about his philosophy of life, favorite exercises, how was he first exposed to Stoicism, the benefits of fasting and cold exposure as well as learning more about his curiosity about the East. Enjoy!

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**One of Seneca's recommended practices for building resilience and conquering fear is through setting aside a certain amount of time to practice difficulty. One of those, of course, is fasting. You've been such a strong proponent of fasting that you built an app around it. Aside from the health benefits, do you find there is a philosophical component too? What does the process bring out for you?**

Fasting, especially multi-day, can be quite the emotional roller coaster. At first, I thought I could use willpower, but the gnawing feeling of hunger quickly depletes this. From here you have nothing left to do but surrender to it. Around this time the body begins to adapt, entering ketosis, and you start to regain your mental clarity. The fasting process wakes up the body and provides a challenge with a new set of feelings to appreciate.

**Following on that, you've also strongly recommended cold exposure and had tremendous positive experience with it. I feel like the Stoics would have been proponents of a cold shower in the morning, if only as a test of self-discipline. Is**

**that something you've found in it as well?**

Almost everyone hates the cold. When I tell friends about the showers and ice baths the #1 reaction is "I could never do that, I can't stand the cold." My feeling is that technology (primarily the conditioning of air, both hot and cold) has made us soft. We're kept in constant comfort. I try to incorporate practices in my life that mimic our ancestor's environments and their daily challenges. This can be simple things like walking in the rain without a jacket or wearing my sandals in the December snow when I take the dog out in the mornings.

**Tell us about your introduction to Stoicism. Was it through Tim Ferriss? Or do you remember your first encounter?**

I remember a dinner where Tim was wearing hideous shoes. Being a good friend, I proceeded to comment on how ridiculous and "80s businessman" they were. He laughed and said this was by design. He was learning how to embrace criticisms and not fear what others think of him. This was based on his reading of stoic philosophy. It was this combined with quotes in your book *Ego is the Enemy* that pushed me to learn more.

**Happen to have any favorite Stoic quotes or exercises?**

One thing I practice daily is surrender. I try to surrender to the earth as everything unfolds around me, not judging it, but accepting things as they are. This, of course, is easier said than done. One of my favorite quotes is from philosopher Alan Watts: "To have faith is to trust yourself to the water. When you swim, you don't grab hold of the water, because if you do, you will sink and drown. Instead, you relax and float."

**I'm curious if you have any thoughts to why Stoicism seems to be particularly popular these days with tech folks. Obviously someone like Tim has helped introduce it there, but if there wasn't something resonating, we wouldn't be hearing so much about it.**

It's difficult to say. Many technologists first entered tech out of curiosity, e.g. how does this machine work? I think that's just a love of learning. As I get older, I find myself extending this love for learning to exploring my psyche and improving as a human. Stoicism is a great prompt to kick off deep work and personal development.

**I remember reading that one of your favorite books is *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* and I wanted to chat a bit about Eastern philosophy. Following you, I've been impressed with the fact that you are an avid student of the East— you regularly go to Japan, clearly love tea and there are always these really fascinating references to Japan in The Journal. What is that draws you to the Eastern way of thinking? Do you see any commonalities between the schools?**

One time while visiting Tokyo I witnessed a man hand cleaning his mailbox for 15 minutes. He had a cloth and was slowly polishing it, making sure to clean out every groove. This appreciation for one's property along with taking pride in one's duties I find a rarity in the west. I've always "geeked out" on things, going deep and learning as much as I can about topics I care about — the Japanese take this to the extreme. You'll meet very specific artisans that are the absolute best at what they do, no matter how trivial the task may seem. It's not about money or fame, but the love of the craft. This is the way it should be. And since you asked about tea, I'll leave you with this:

> *"Drink your tea slowly and reverently, as if it is the axis on which the world earth revolves – slowly, evenly, without rushing toward the future." -Thich Nhat Hanh*

# The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters with Author Emily Esfahani Smith

How does one live a meaningful life? This is the question that author Emily Esfahani Smith has obsessed over for years and has thoughtfully written about in publications such as the *Wall Street Journal, New York Times, The Atlantic* and *TIME.* "I used to think the whole purpose of life was the pursuit of happiness," she opens her massively popular TED Talk, before going on to explain why she's come to believe that there is something much more important. This is also a theme in her wonderful book, *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters*. Certainly, a purposeful life was of the highest priority to the Stoics—and they spoke clearly about the emptiness of pursuing mere happiness and pleasure. We reached out to Emily after her fantastic article in the *New York Times* this month, which was a warning to young people today on the perils of chasing fame, to ask her a number of questions that she was kind enough to answer. Below you'll find daily exercises to help cultivate meaning in one's life, book recommendations, and much more. And if you want to learn more about her work, her website is emilyesfahanismith.com and you can also follow her on Twitter. Enjoy!

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**We first connected after your wonderful New York Times piece warning millennials against chasing fame—saying essentially that there is all sorts of important, meaningful work to be done and not all of it is going to be exciting and glamorous. Obviously Marcus Aurelius talked a lot about fame—call it worthless clacking of tongues and pointing out how few people remembered even the emperors who preceded him. Talk to us a little bit about the allure of bigness and world-changingness with people these days and why you believe that might be the wrong thing to chase.**

I think people have always yearned for greatness and recognition. We all want to know our lives matter and are significant in the grand scheme of things, after all. But today, this idea that a meaningful life must be an epic life is being inflamed, I think, by social media. On the internet, extraordinary lives look like the norm, and so we aspire for such lives ourselves. And yet, most of us will lead ordinary lives. Many of us won't live out our dreams or accomplish all of our major life goals. But that doesn't mean we can't lead profoundly meaningful lives.

The 20th-century psychologist Erik Erikson said that in order to lead a flourishing life, we must master a particular developmental task at each stage of life. When we're young, we're supposed to figure out who we are and what our purpose is. As we get older, we're supposed to shift the focus from ourselves to others and be "generative." That is, we're supposed to give back, especially to younger generations, by doing things like raising children, mentoring colleagues, creating things of value for our community or society at large, volunteering, etc. We each have the power to be generative. Fame and glamour are about the self—aggrandizing yourself. But generativity is about connecting and contributing to something bigger, which is the very definition of leading a meaningful life.

**Your widely popular TED talk, articles and book *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters* argue for the pursuit of meaning over happiness. What's the difference? Why should we pursue the former over the latter?**

Happiness is a positive mental and emotional state—the presence of positive emotions and the absence of negative ones. Meaning is bigger—it lies in connecting and contributing to something beyond the self. When people say their lives are meaningful, according to psychologists, it's because they believe three things about their lives: They believe their lives have worth and value; they believe their lives are driven by a sense of purpose; and they believe their lives are coherent.

I don't have any problems with happiness, of course. I like being happy and I want the people I love and care about to be happy, too. But I think the unending pursuit of happiness has led us astray. The real goal shouldn't be maximizing our own happiness, but leading a meaningful life. Viktor Frankl, the Holocaust survivor and author of Man's Search for Meaning, said that happiness cannot be pursued—that it ensues from leading a meaningful life. I think that's right—and certainly modern psychology research bears him out. When people devote themselves to doing meaningful things, like caring for a sick relative or studying hard for a test, they may not be as happy in the moment, but they experience a deeper kind of well-being down the road.

**You've recommended looking up at the night sky to feel awe and transcendence. It reminds us of a line from Marcus Aurelius, "Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them." What are other exercises and ideas would you recommend our readers implement in their day-to-day to help them find meaning?**

I'd recommend creating habits of meaning in your daily life. In my book, I talk about 4 pillars of meaning—belonging, purpose, storytelling, and transcendence. So find ways to build these pillars in your life. For example, after writing my book, I realized that storytelling—crafting a narrative about my life and life in general—was an important source of meaning for me, so I started keeping a journal where I process different experiences I'm having. For transcendence, I make sure to regularly spend time in places that inspire awe in me, like in nature or at the art museum. I've found that technology can be a real barrier to both transcendence and belonging, so I'm trying to get some control over my addiction to it. Instead of checking social media or the headlines before I go to bed, I try to read a poem or listen to some music as I meditate. I don't always succeed, but no one said trying to live a meaningful life is easy!

**You've mentioned the worrying trend of increasing suicide rates in the U.S.; more and more people feel like their lives simply don't matter. What would be the one or two things you'd tell someone who is apathetic and feels that their life is devoid of any meaning?**

I went to a conference a few years ago where high school students presented meaningful projects they were working on. One group of girls was putting together a book called "Dear Billy." Their friend Billy had recently committed suicide and so, to honor him, they had different people in his life write him letters as if he were still alive. The girls wanted this book to be a resource for despairing individuals to see that there are people who love and admire them—that they matter to their community. So I'd encourage an apathetic and hopeless person to remember their community—their friends, family, teachers, and neighbors. Think about the letters those people would write to you if they had the chance. Think about the letter you'd write to others if you had the chance. Well, come to think of it, why not write that letter this week and give it to them? In positive psychology, there's an exercise known as the "gratitude letter." You write a heartfelt letter of gratitude to someone and then present it to that person. It's a really powerful activity that lifts both people up and brings them closer together. Suicide and depression are often problems of alienation and isolation. So anything that strengthens those critical bonds of belonging will, I hope, remind people that their lives matter.

I'd also say this: I had a professor in graduate school who said the best cure for depression is volunteering. So much of meaning comes from knowing you have a role to play, that you're needed and valued by others. So engage with the world. Try on different roles. Adopt the one that fits you best. And remember what Erikson said about generativity.

Doing good in the world, even if on a small scale, can ripple out and make a difference.

**At one point Epictetus makes an appearance in your book—you mention how Albert Camus was reading him bedridden and trying to find solace. Have you read the Stoics? Can you tell us the story of your introducing to them if so? Any favorites?**

Yes I've read the Stoics. The first one I heard of was Marcus Aurelius. In high school, a thoughtful friend told me he was reading Meditations. This is embarrassing, but I'd never heard of Aurelius or his book so I looked it up, found out that Aurelius was a Roman emperor, and thought "Huh, I wonder what my friend likes about that book." I filed the book away in my head, but didn't come back to it until years later researching my own book, The Power of Meaning. The next stop was college, where I majored in philosophy. I also studied positive psychology in graduate school, so I encountered Stoic ideas in my studies. In classes, though, they were usually presented as an afterthought to Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato. But I remember being more intrigued by their ideas than those of the other philosophers we were learning about. I liked that they emphasized living a life of virtue over hedonism, and I also admired the idea that your mindset creates your reality. It was so prescient—so much modern research has borne out their wisdom. Plus, Stoicism seemed to acknowledge that life can be hard and messy, but still worthwhile, and that also appealed to me. I think part of my attraction to the Stoics was temperamental, too. Some people burn hot—they have passionate, fiery personalities. I'm not like that. I'm more, well, stoic!

**We've strongly recommended Viktor Frankl's very Stoic *Man's Search for Meaning*, which of course you've studied and written about in The Atlantic. Most of our readers have read and loved Frankl's book, so what are some other books they should follow up with? You're clearly extremely well-read and we always love to ask for book recommendations.**

There are so many to choose from! Where to begin. George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* is long and at times dense, but so worth the time and effort. It's about (among other things) a group of young people who are searching for meaning. They think they need to do something grand, but the lesson of the book is something we discussed earlier: Ordinary lives are full of meaning in the goodness they put into the world. Tolstoy is another author to read. The question of meaning is at the center of many of his works. I'd recommend his novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which is about a shallow man who, on his deathbed, realizes his life was meaningless. That sounds depressing, but there's

a ray of hope at the end of the story. Before Ilyich dies, he learns what truly makes life meaningful. *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel is also a beautiful commentary on meaning. In the novel, something horrible happens—and the question is: How does Pi make sense of it? What narrative does he craft? Our lives aren't just the way they are, as Pi points out. We make meaning out of them from the stories we tell. I also recently read a biography of Leonard Cohen, *I'm Your Man* by Sylvie Simmons, which was wonderful. Cohen was a real spiritual seeker, a man who cared about meaning. That comes across in the biography and, of course, in his music.

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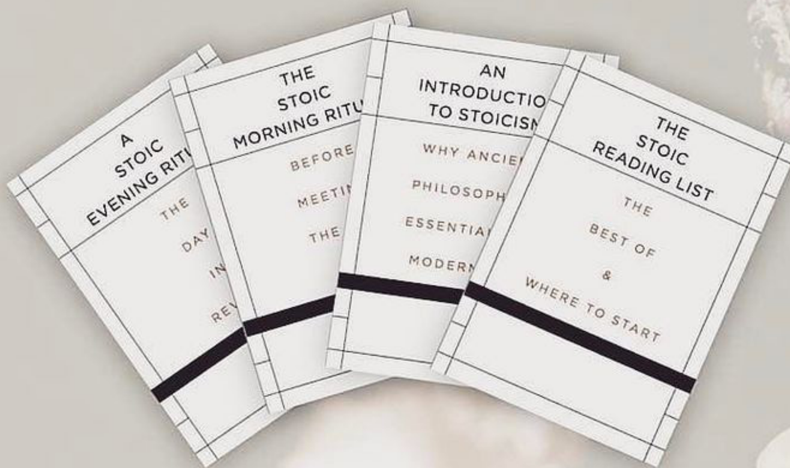


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