

## Living the Best Possible Life:

### Epictetus' Prescriptions for Clarity, Ease, and Serenity

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Over 20 years ago when my book *The Art of Living: The Classical Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness* was published I didn't know anyone who was interested in Stoicism, much less Epictetus. Even the *New York Times* couldn't pronounce Epictetus' name when they interviewed me.

But Epictetus loomed large in my world, because in a very real way he saved my life. I have since learned with humility and gratitude that Epictetus' key ideas, accessibly expressed, have literally saved other people's lives. Over the years I've received letters from readers from every walk of life, especially from those who have traversed dire circumstances that exceed anything I could ever imagine or bear up under.

Because what is Epictetus' Stoicism any more than it is *adversity management*? I mean adversity spanning the challenges of every day life as well as acute, life-threatening adversity, such as that borne by soldiers in the throes of war. I've received many letters from soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan who somehow came upon Epictetus' teachings in *The Art of Living* and were pulled back from the brink of despair and even suicide. This has led me to fiercely believe in vernacular philosophy and the value of popularizers. Of course we need primary sources and exacting scholars, but we also need *useable, applicable, and transformative* philosophical texts that can immediately comfort and help readers productively move forward. Reading vernacular philosophy can invite readers who would otherwise be repelled by primary philosophical texts to

eventually turn to those sources when they have experienced the value that Stoic philosophy in particular has to offer.

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So what is so compelling about Epictetus' Prescriptions for the Best Possible Life? Even before I understood Epictetus' teachings, his noble themes and values were, for me, magnetic: particularly his emphasis on discernment, morality, and character building. I had never felt in tune with the summer of love generation, even though they are supposedly my cohort. This mentality seemed vapidly thrill-seeking, narcissistic, and feelings-driven. Epictetus drew me in because he offered an unapologetic moral teaching refreshingly free of sanctimony, dogma, or divine punishment.

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Before we fly dive in to Epictetus' teachings, I want to pull back to address what I consider to be the most crucial question embedded in Epictetus' teachings. It is:

#### WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH A MOMENT?

Please pause and consider this, because it's probably one of the most important questions you could ever ponder. There's a lot you can do with a moment: you can reach out and hug someone, you can apologize, you can pull the gun's trigger, you can put that drink down and have it be your last, you can make the difficult phone call.....well you fill in the blank. The other thing we can do with a moment is waste it by underestimating its power to change everything. The possibilities are endless AND infinitely *consequential*.

The moral spirit of Epictetus' teachings is always concerned with the **decisional instant**. This is our point of power. It is the locus of the only power we have. For all said and done, Epictetus would ask us: Over what do we have control? Where does your sovereignty lie? Certainly not in what he calls externals: other people's opinions, the

temperature outside, physical laws, etc. We are sovereign over one thing only and that is what we think/say/or DO with this moment right here. That's powerful, because everything, and I mean everything, emanates from this moment and radiates and rami-fies out into the future.

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Epictetus' Stoicism is a therapeutic tradition. His teachings are meant to be corrective medicine for disaffected or lost souls. I want to describe three soul afflictions that are embedded the human condition and Epictetus' Prescriptions or tonics for these diseases.

**FIRST:** The first common malaise for which Epictetus offers a tonic is our disordered thinking which causes us to mistakenly try to control or manage what Epictetus would call **externals**, and the consequent suffering we heap on others from our vain efforts to do so.

Epictetus (as well as our other esteemed Stoics) tutor us in a deep acceptance of what really is, the is-ness of any given situation; not lazy acquiescence, but an acceptance of reality so radical that it can only give rise to what I call BIG GRATITUDE.

Here are some personal reflections on Stoic radical acceptance and Big Gratitude.

### **A Story:**

It isn't always easy to accept the way things really are, and it certainly isn't always easy to feel gratitude.

Perhaps someone has said to you, "Hey it's **all** good...."

It. is. *not*. **all**. good.—

C'mon: it was *not* all good when one of my kids came home in the middle of college with sorrowful eyes and an eating disorder. It was not all good when my husband lost his first born son or when his former wife, my dear friend Tina, discovered she had breast cancer and died

very soon after, or when Terry and I lost *our* own baby. It was not all good when I was living on tortillas, peanut butter, and spare change scavenged in between couch cushions after falling from being the Ivy League wunderkind into abject squalor, lying in fetal position felled by depression and addiction.

It is indeed not “all good,” but as Epictetus would remind us, it’s not all bad either.

To encapsulate the human experience I have a pet expression: Many. Meanings. All. Happening. At. Once. (MMAHAO) Each moment our senses imbibe a riot of information while our minds clamor with observations, insights, emotions, memories, ideas, and the further ramifying connections they spawn. Love and pain, joy and sorrow, wonder and devastation. So very many meanings all happening at once.

Last summer my daughter Misha got married. The bucolic scene from her waterside ceremony was breathtaking. The food smelled great. Misha was a radiant bride and she was marrying a man who cherishes her. The past year had brought an embarrassment of riches for me, my husband Terry, our six children, their spouses and partners, and our four precious grandchildren. We have so much, on the face of it, to be grateful *for*.

Yet, acceptance and simple gratitude were **not** what this mother-of-the-bride was feeling, but rather a farrago of joy, pride, grief over the recent tragic death of a much-too-young friend, tenderness, despair over the world’s violent chaos, optimism inspired by the capable, idealistic young adults in attendance. As my daughter said “I do,” and I thought my head and heart would explode I held the fragility of everything, along with an inexpressible mighty thankfulness. I was overcome by confusing pathos *AND*, thanks to Epictetus, gratitude for the ALL of it: the past losses and mistakes we thought would freeze and define the rest of our lives, but didn’t; the wrongs that await righting; the unexpected altruisms, the stranger’s smile, the tear drop.

Aren’t we all holding our MANY MEANINGS ALL HAPPENING AT ONCE?

Aren’t you?

Is it possible to feel true acceptance and gratitude without qualification?

I think our Stoics would tell us we don’t need to worry about that. I believe Epictetus would urge us to climb up a rung on the gratitude hierarchy to a gratefulness more encompassing, whose embrace is wider than “I am grateful for *x*. Or, I am grateful that *y* didn’t happen.

ninety-three years of lucky breaks, triumphs, and the chance he had to introduce crucial questions of social justice into North American public conversation through his trenchant sitcoms. He also described titanic failures, terrifying financial reversals, and withering mental illness. However, when Mr. Lear considers each of his life events, here's what this unwitting Stoic says, "Even **this** I get to Experience!"

This is Big Gratitude, that stems from Epictetus' teaching that our acceptance of life as it really is with an attendant gratefulness that transcends personal or proximate circumstance and affirms that *Life itself* (with all its as yet undisclosed Great Meanings) has absolute value. Epictetus teaches us that we can be grateful simply for our chance to play our part in the human story and to honor with dignity the incomprehensible great mystery we inhabit together.

Because Life is miraculous:

For example, here **we** are together—this motley group of Stoicism enthusiasts with our private joys, anxieties, sorrows, regrets, hopes, fears, losses and aspirations.

Together.

With ALL our Many Meanings All Happening at Once.

And.....Even *this* we get to experience!

**SECOND:** Our next Ailment of the soul is disordered self-defended thinking. I call this malady the disease of Irony. The antidote for this disease is self-scrutiny applied with kindness.

### **Another Personal Story I trust you can relate to:**

A couple years ago I had an extraordinary experience in an ordinary place. I flew with one of my daughters to what was for me an exotic place: a dinky one horse town in the middle of the middle of the Midwest. I was handing my daughter off to her freshman year of college at a small liberal arts school. It was in this unprepossessing town in Iowa that I learned one of Epictetus' most important lessons about thinking straight and seeking to organize my thoughts, words, and deeds toward *arete*, virtue in service of *eudaimonia*, a flourishing life.

The thing I noticed about the people in this Iowa town was that they were absolutely not cool....**and** they did not care that they were not cool, which actually made them really cool, but that's another conversation.

This itty bitty town was extraordinary because IT IS AN IRONY-FREE ZONE.

Notwithstanding the cosmopolitan character of my daughter's brainy small college, the people I met in Iowa were refreshingly plain spoken. No glibness. No guile. No calculated casualness. No irony.

The irony of which I speak is not the literary device, but irony the attitude: a toxic posture towards life where human interaction and conversation are carried out giving sincerity and earnestness no breathing room. Wit must be acerbic. Observation must be mordant. Otherwise simple meanings must be wrapped in a ponderous insulation of impatient, righteously indignant (though not necessarily informed) aspirational sophistication. Irony favors cleverness over kindness. Epictetus busts us for this all the time.

Irony is behavior and speech that convey meanings opposite to their power-signifying literal meanings. Irony animates messages that project foregrounded ostensible meanings, erecting a screen in front of and granting immunity to other unavowed, often mean-spirited actual meanings. It's not saying outright what you mean nor taking responsibility for it.

Some of us were weaned on this stuff. And we get plenty of reinforcement. I remember the conversations I had while living among uber-educated urban East Coast amused cynics whose structure was:

Clever Utterance: Touché;

Riposte: Touché;

Counter-Riposte: Touché,

*Repeat as necessary.*

The structure of these exchanges is a perfect example of "mis-meeting," a term Martin Buber coined to describe a meeting with another person that tragically could have been

an authentic encounter, but instead devolved into mere transaction: I use you. You use me. Bye for now. See ya next time.

Irony is necessary for the irreverence of, say, the novels of Kurt Vonnegut, but I'm talking about the irony on the streets, the moral environment we inhabit and casually, ratify through our speech and action. Here's the deal with irony: its self-flattering sub-text is "I am so wise and weary; I know so much about the world's sad little ways." But, what it really means is "I am terrified and don't want you to know it, and I don't know anything for sure."

Epictetus would counsel us that irony is the currency of the arrogantly ignorant. Complacency is its game. Because irony is infatuated with its barbed criticisms of everything, it fails to offer any solutions to the imperfections and problems it gleefully hints at. It is defeatism, cheap thrill, and dead end, reveling in everything being all messed up and there's nothing we can do about it. It disguises itself as light social lubricant (hey, can't you take a joke?) while ignoring actual human suffering or derisively chuckling at the absurd and comic, rather than caring for the pitiable or having a go at the fixable.

Epictetus would say irony is the lazy go-to stance of the coward. While hiding out in a husk of apparent levity, it tries to conceal what it doesn't know, which is practically everything. It crouches behind a hail-fellow-well-met bush, lest it be caught in a moment of vulnerable sincerity. It thrives on the axiom that things are going from bad to worse; everyone knows it, and there is not a darn thing we can do about it except ruefully laugh. ("Can I top that drink off for you?")

Irony is a deadly roadblock to the Stoic notion of the flourishing life as it is the obverse of shame.

It's a poison deployed to hurt others first, before they hurt us, or to deprecate ourselves. It is a boring two-switch setting: defense or offense. Irony's number one job is to negate the significance of this moment. It punishes the very impulse to confer significance on anything or anybody. It militates against caring and sucker punches honest

conviction. It bullies the innocent who ventures a simple question. Irony regards our lives and our hopes as a pathetic, trivial joke. It corrodes the soul, pollutes the spiritual ecology by undermining trust in others and in ourselves. It's the monstrous expression of our failed attempt at burying our fears and self-loathing.

The really stinky thing about irony is how coercive and contagious it is. In order for any conversation to advance there has to be implied, accepted common ground, however unspoken. When irony is introduced into the social milieu, it tugs at others to respond in kind, recruiting confederates.

My visit to Iowa's irony-free zone made me realize how sick my own trigger-happy ironic impulses were making me. I turned to Epictetus who reminded me to undergo disciplined introspection and a reorientation in the direction of virtue. As a result I am against unbridled irony and I am for the things it attempts to subdue, humiliate, and kill: gentleness, sincerity, exuberant thought, and a tremulous faith in human goodness with the possibility of improving conditions and people.

The people in Iowa were whip smart, curious, community-minded, and empathetic. They were aware of other people's feelings and went to pains not to hurt or insult them. When they said something, they meant it. Their Stoic humility reminded me of the best of Epictetus' and since that experience I have gone on an irony-free diet and enjoyed a serenity that continues to sustain me.

I wish this serenity for all of you. Let's just drop that junk!

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**THREE: SOUL AFFLICTION #3** Elevating the tug of feelings over *logos*, clear thinking. Epictetus' tonic is to articulate your personal code and navigate your life in accordance with it.

Why do we need a code?

The Stoic answer is to save us from our feelings. So many people and traditions extol the idea of listening to our feelings as a guide to our behavior. “Isn’t it better to just love one another?” Or to “feel compassion?” When I was younger I sampled many different spiritual traditions and learned to meditate, which I loved and still do. When I meditated I felt welcome feelings of peace and compassion. Great. But, I bet you know what’s coming. As tranquil as I felt, as at-one with everyone I felt, those feelings didn’t make me do anything, nor did they compel me to refrain from doing self-serving or foolish things. Ecstatic feelings or feelings of at-oneness are swell, but they don’t in and of themselves lead to right action nor prevent us from taking immoral action.

During the Holocaust, some Nazi prison guards wept as they mowed down women and children, but they still mowed down women and children. Feeling compassion for others can *point* toward right action, but it doesn’t help when doing the right thing comes at personal cost. Who hasn’t felt that pang for the homeless guy across the street, but did you cross the street to talk to him or give him money?

Epictetus repeatedly cautions us: feelings, even transcendent ones, fall short at best, and can misguide. Existential philosopher Martin Buber, who had been an ardent student of mysticism, was once visited by a young troubled student when Buber happened to be in the throes of feelings of mystical ecstasy. Because Buber was full of his private feelings of divine illumination, he was blind to recognizing the student’s immediate need born of pain and confusion. Buber later learned that the student had committed suicide. From that time forward Buber swore off the pursuit of rapture and espoused the value of a reason- and code-driven life. A code insures we don’t depend on the vagaries of feeling or merely improvised ad hoc self-styled virtue.

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I’ve battled debilitating depression since I was 15 years old. When this beast comes knocking, its favorite motif is a grotesque magnification of the regenerative cycle of life.

Not unlike those bugs you see in the summer pathetically conjoined on screen doors, we are born; we eat; we defecate; we reproduce; we die. Then it starts all over again. This *feeling* of futility is poison. It leads to self-righteous or helpless torpor. It solves nothing and can spread a lot of hurt to other people.

Epictetus taught me that such misplaced attention corrodes our souls. Stoicism reminds us to put our attention on ideas and actions that affirm the essential goodness and significance of life, that promote harmony among its constituent parts. Stoicism challenges, and I like to think vanquishes, misplaced attention: our numbness, pettiness, and the puny repetitive dramas that make us look like kissing cousins to those sadly stuck-together bugs.

Stoicism's counsel to point ourselves toward a virtuous life ennobles us by shifting attention from the usual crud: courting other people's good opinion, heedless acquisition of stuff, wanting to be better than everyone else, or merely longing to be thin, rich, and awesome. Stoicism compels us to make order, beauty, kindness, and harmony; to perform actions and use words that elevate our current situation, rather than debase it. Most importantly, Stoicism asks us to place our bets on meaning.

Epictetus' Stoicism taught me that the value in life lies in the meaning that happens in spite of us and because of our daring to care right here, right now. Stoicism asks us to give meaning the benefit of the doubt, by adopting a wild faith that this moment matters; our particular lives matter; our decisions matter; our actions matter. Our words matter. Our love matters. Our grief matters. Our searing pain matters. Our hopes matter. Our clumsy, foot-in-our-mouth efforts matter. I matter and YOU matter and because ALL of this matters, we need to tenderly act accordingly.

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Epictetus and his fellow Stoics wildly differed from one another, but they spoke as one emphatic voice in pointing out the true enemy of the best possible life: what might

be called living with a shrug, barreling through one's moments powered by half-decisions, willy nilly. Blatantly calculated evil is usually unmistakably identifiable and therefore uprootable, but the more commonplace mediocrities of thought, word, and deed are what undo a life by destabilizing our ideals and, in the aggregate, ultimately poisoning our collective moral, aesthetic, practical, and civic life. This pervasive stinginess of the spirit, which routinely passes itself off as plausible, acceptable, even welcome social behavior, not only insidiously poisons individual lives but quietly infects and degrades the social ecology as well.

Epictetus exhorts us to the discipline and self-awareness that staves off that dangerous shrug. Stoics advise that the opposite of putting *logos* at the center of our lives or purpose (*telos*) is gradual drift from our ideals in all of its guises: postponement of purposeful living, spiritual aloofness, not committing, half-measures, trivializing, or altogether ignoring what is truly important. Through culturing ourselves we fortify our character, our choices, and our commitment to the best possible life and our work within ourselves in turn upgrades the quality of life for all whom we encounter.

Epictetus summons us away from that insidious shrug to a life of earnest meaning-making. He reminds us that the flourishing life is our birthright, but we must speak up for it and act in its behalf. The flourishing life must be insisted upon, earned, fought for. We do this by deciding in an apparently indifferent world that our own small life and what we do with it matters. And we act accordingly so shame is sent packing, *logos* is made welcome, and meaning can make a home in us.

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I'm going to close now with a brief summary of everything I learned from Epictetus that I hope you will take to heart. People ask me "what have you learned from Epictetus' Stoicism that really changed your life?" It's really simple, but it's the most important thing I know.

This. One. Brief. Moment. IS. Everything: Everything.  
Thank you.