



Battle of Mount Whitney and Other Essays

by

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Cover photo of the author (left) and fellow hikers atop Mount Whitney in front of the stone hut. Elevation: 14,505 feet; 4,421 meters.

Introduction

These essays were written to be read aloud. I read them aloud in my final polishing to make them as conversational in tone and tempo as possible. In fact, most of the first two parts, "Porch Monologues" and "Dark Album," were made into YouTube videos. I wouldn't even know how to find them now. They've drifted off into cyberspace somewhere.

These are a kind of *hypomnemata*, following the style of classical journaling done by Marcus Aurelius in his collection of works subsequently named, *The Meditations*. I won't speak for Marcus, but nearly all of my *hypomnemata* resulted from real experiences in the real world that caused me a moment's pause. Often I was surprised and disappointed by my "unstoic" reaction to an event. When that happened the event and the relevant Stoic principles stayed in my consciousness until I wrote it down. I've always wanted to do this, but it's only been in the past three years that I gave myself permission to take the time necessary. All of them were written in the past three years.

You may be happy or unhappy to find that most of these essays only have a few lines directing your attention to Stoic philosophy. Occasionally, the Stoic lesson is implied, not plainly stated. This is not a book of theory. It's a book of real situations and concerns that gnawed at my thoughts until I took them out of my head to look at them. While I writing them down I sometimes gave myself quite a lot of freedom to let my mind wander into my personal past or into loosely relevant bits of flotsam and jetsam that came to mind. There are very few textbook references, because this is not a work of scholarship. If you are a scholar, then I hope you find these essays to be a little respite from your usual Herculean labors.

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Porch Monologues

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Cake Boy

I like cake and pie and ice cream and donuts and sweet rolls and pastries. I used to love cinnamon twists, but I haven't seen them in years. I don't think they sell them in bakeries anymore. Maybe they never did. Anyway, I haven't seen them since I worked in a bakery as a boy. Maybe we only made them in our bakery.

That was my first job. I started working in a bakery when I was 13. Some kids had part time jobs after school; mine started before. I learned how to wake up by an alarm clock at 4:30 AM, get dressed, walk the half-mile or so in the dark to be at work by 5. I don't know why bakers started that early morning tradition. It seems to me they could have gone to work at 5 PM just as well. I guess the pastries wouldn't have been as fresh if they did.

I earned 45 cents an hour and never saw a penny of it. What little I made all went to pay for my private, religious school education. My parents were very devout. My boss's name was Harvey Culbertson, a remarkable man of about 40 or 45 when I knew him. When you're 13 everybody over the age of 30 looks old.

He was tall, broad-shouldered and he seemed even taller and more broad-shouldered because all the other workers were teen-aged boys like me. He was remarkably patient and kind. In the 3 years I worked there I never saw him get angry or raise his voice at any of the stupid things we boys did. He's gone now. I liked Harvey. In those days he was one of the few adults I knew who would let us call him by his first name.

My wife has a lot of friends, so she has a lot of lunches and birthday parties to attend. For awhile, it seemed like every one of her gatherings

ended with cake, and she often brought me a piece. Her friends noticed this and asked her why always she saved part of her cake. She told them it was for me, because I really liked cake. After that some of them would give her a piece of theirs and tell her to take it home to "Cake Boy."

They don't seem to eat cake as much as they used to. I don't know why. Anyway, she doesn't bring it home as often anymore. I think they're all on diets.

Now, I'm sure some of you are wondering what all this has to do with Stoic philosophy. So, I'll tell you: nothing . . . and everything. Stoics have acquired something of a bad reputation for being austere and emotionless, even grim. Maybe this reputation was mostly started by misunderstanding Epicureans and Platonists, hedonists for sure, but it's true that some of us may *appear* that way. If we do it has more to do with individual personalities than it does with cake.

Cake has value. We're allowed to enjoy cake. It doesn't have ultimate value like justice or courage. I know that. You know that. Only a complete fool would suggest that having a piece of cake is as important as being fair or standing up for what you believe is right.

Socrates ate cake. Well, we only have one reference to him and cake, and on this one occasion he didn't get any because his wife, Xanthippe, had a fit of jealous rage when Socrates' friend Alcibiades sent him a nice cake. I guess she just threw it on the floor, and with her temper she probably stomped on it, too. Socrates just laughed and pointed out that now she wouldn't be getting cake. I'm glad I'm not married to someone like Socrates' wife.

Stoics say there are the three good emotions: Joy, caution, and wishing. Every Stoic should be cultivating of these three emotions. And, joy, caution, and wishing produce what we call six good emotional states: benevolence and friendliness, modesty and reverence, and laughter and cheerfulness. Let me say that again in case you were momentarily distracted: benevolence and friendliness, modesty and reverence, and laughter and cheerfulness. That's how you describe a Stoic.

Are you surprised? Then you don't really know Stoic philosophy. And it's for sure you don't know Cake Boy.

* *

Change Your Bra

I was walking on a treadmill at the gym the other day when I saw an advertisement flash up on the TV screen. The ad said, "Change your bra; change your life." I don't know if they used a comma or a semi-colon to

separate the two phrases. I'm not sure they used either. In fact, I didn't even look at the ad after that. I guess it was about buying a particular brassiere that would make you look better . . . in some way.

The only thing I remember is that hook: "Change your bra; change your life." That did stick with me all that day, and the next. I just thought about it a few minutes ago. It's not that I believe you can change your life by changing your bra, but I think what makes an ad like that effective is that some people think you can. A lot of folk are unhappy with their lives. Things are just not right: they are not rich enough, not thin enough, not as good-looking as they would like to be.

An astrologer once told me there were three reasons why people go to astrologers: money, health, and love. Many people are sick and tired of waiting for their life to be all they think it should be, so they ask the astrologer to see if the stars can help them change their life, usually something along the line of more money, better health, and when do I get to fall in love? People have been going to astrologers for thousands of years to help them with these three problems.

The ancient Greeks went to astrologers. Most Stoics believed in astrology back then. If everything in the cosmos is connected to and part of the whole, then the influence of the heavens must be affecting those of us here on Earth. Most Stoics today don't believe in astrology. They prefer astronomy.

The Greeks also had oracles to help them find their way. The Oracle at Delphi was the most famous. Socrates changed his life after the oracle said that among the Greeks there was no one who was wiser. He also had a daimon, a guardian spirit, as an adviser. Plato says Socrates would go into a trance when communicating with his daimon. Most Greeks believed in daimones, otherworldly spirit guides to look over and protect us. They believed each person had his own daimon assigned for just that purpose.

Socrates' daimon was quite a bit more active than most, but it would only advise him when he was doing the wrong thing. It never told him what to do . . . exactly. But, if you think about it, if the daimon tells you when you're wrong, then when it's silent it's kind of like telling you that you're right. "Should I go to Sparta today?" Silence. OK, I'm packing my bags.

According to Diogenes Laertius, Stoics believed in daimones. You can find that in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book 7, passage 151. I've thought a lot about the daimon, but it would take another essay to explore the possibilities. In any case, I've often thought it would be great to have a daimon as proactive as Socrates' daimon. I'm not sure I have one. If I do, then mine is either lazy and not doing its job, or it doesn't know how to do its job. Maybe I have a junior daimon.

It took me a long time to realize that if I really did have a daimon, it knew better than I did to keep its mouth shut – or whatever they use for mouths. I would probably become too dependent on it, kind of like the person who goes to an astrologer to plan each day. Before long we lose our problem-solving ability. We become weak with dependency and are no longer skilled at using our reason and life experience to guide our way. We become like those who really follow whatever they're told to do, whether it's your astrologer, your daimon, or the advertising agency that says if you change your bra you can change your life.

* *

Fake Smile

Did you ever notice that Joel Osteen, smiles *all the time* when he preaches. You know Joel Osteen, the Texas Protestant evangelist, huge church, must be 50,000 members televised all over the country on Sunday morning—as of this writing. He only talks about how to become a success. He never preaches about “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God,” the way preachers did when I was a boy.

No, he smiles all the time, nonstop, no matter what he's talking about. Lost your job? Smiles. Wife and the kids just went home to her mother's? Smiles. Homeless and haven't had anything to eat for three days? Smiles. That smile of his never drops. For a half hour he smiles. Amazing! So, I'm going to try that. Let's see if I can do that for just a few minutes. I'm going to fix a Joel Osteen smile on my face while I write the rest of this essay.

*

[Smiling as I write this.] Sometimes I think the Epicureans were right. The quiet life is best. I myself am inclined towards being a recluse: working in the garden, a few good books and friends, a home-cooked meal. There's certainly nothing wrong with these things, and whenever I have to deal with unpleasant people out in the world the quiet life becomes really attractive.

My first job out of college was working with insurance brokerage firms and corporations. Suit and tie, expense account, company car. The work was OK, but I couldn't stand my boss, and the feeling was mutual. I expected to be fired every day just because we disagreed on almost everything. [Still smiling.] There was a cultural revolution going on in America in those days, the 70s, and we were on opposite side in that war. After five years of waiting to get fired I finally fired myself. I left work one day and never came back. I dropped out and became a hippy, a flower child.

The Epicureans were right about the joys of staying home, out of the fray, chatting amiably with friends over a glass of wine. But most of us don't

have that freedom. We have to make a living, bills to pay. Duties. Not all of these duties are pleasant, and sometimes we have to hold our nose and wear a mask to do them. [Smiling.] But ours is a philosophy that believes in *noblesse oblige*. We know that tyranny flourishes on the day that good men and women stay away.

BTW, do you know that it's a physiological fact that if you smile, even when you're depressed, you will gradually begin to feel better. Your body doesn't know when you're faking it. Maybe Joel Ostein suffers from depression. Maybe that's why he smiles all the time regardless of what he is saying.

Well, I'm not Joel Ostein, and I'm already tired of smiling, so I'm going to stop now.

* *

Heroes are Boring

Someday we may be able to increase courage by taking a little pill and washing it down with a glass of water. But I don't think that's been invented yet. If it has been, it's probably illegal.

Some people get their courage from a bottle. That's an old saying. I don't know where it came from. It means that drinking alcohol makes some people more courageous than they normally would be. You see that kind of behavior in the movies all the time. Some guy looking for courage by taking a few slugs of whiskey. It always seems to be whiskey. I'm not sure if you can do it with beer or wine. At least not in American movies.

Some guys think that drinking is macho, manly. It's a rather juvenile idea, and some people have a hard time growing out of. I don't know what's so manly about just pleasuring yourself. That's all you're doing, you know. Sometimes people drink to forget, sometimes it's an escape from the stresses of life – there are a lot of stresses in life. Just driving on the freeway at rush hour becomes increasingly stressful as I get older.

We live in an age where every cop or fireman or soldier is called a hero – whether they do anything courageous or not. I guess we really yearn for the heroic action figure, some thread of redeeming goodness in a world steeped in self-serving cynicism.

Nobody calls people heroes who drive to and from work in rush hour traffic every day. But they should. Sometimes I'm amazed at the skill of the garbage truck drivers in my neighborhood – the way they can squeeze their big trucks through the narrowest spaces between parked cars on both sides of the street and still manage to lift the garbage cans up into the yawning maw behind them. These guys are real heroes in my opinion. They're always guys. I've never seen a woman drive a garbage truck. I'm not sure why.

Courage is not what many people think it is. Daredevils are not necessarily courageous. Jumping out of an airplane, even with a parachute, may scare you half to death, but if it doesn't scare me I'm not being particularly courageous. People who are afraid and still do what they know is necessary are the ones practicing real courage. Many people do this every day and they never expect to be called heroes. Usually they don't say a word about it.

People can be frightened by all kinds of things: going to the dentist, taking the car to a mechanic, disagreeing with a neighbor who has a bad temper, climbing up a ladder to clean clogged gutters, or picking up a dead bird that just broke its neck trying to fly through your window.

You don't need to be a cop or a fireman or a soldier to practice courage every day. Many times performing common duties takes all the courage we can muster. The Stoic teacher Epictetus defines our duties as: Piety—respect for the Stoic god, Nature; Family—being a good husband, son or daughter, brother or sister, father or mother; and, Civic Obligations—taking part in the affairs of your community. Many of these things are boring, but we do them anyway. Often they take courage. And for those who need courage to do the simple things, the common, often boring duties of everyday life, congratulations. I'm impressed. You are a Stoic and a hero.

* *

It Cares!

The other day I heard someone say that Nature is cold and indifferent.
EXCUSE ME?

- Nature created me, and I care.
- Nature created you, and you care. Probably.
- There are 7 billion people on this planet, and I'll bet you that at least 80% of them are by nature caring. 80% of 7 billion people is a lot of caring
- And that doesn't include our pets. They care! Of course they do.

Do you really expect me to believe that Nature is cold and indifferent. I mean, really

* *

Vampires & Werewolves

I don't often watch horror movies, but my wife was out of town visiting her sister, and I was at the public library when I saw this vampire movie

starring Ethan Hawke sitting there on the video shelf Isn't Ethan Hawke a great name? I've always liked that name. So anyway, I checked it out and brought it home.

It was pretty good, actually, for a horror movie. This one was set in the future, all glass and chrome, and almost everybody was a vampire then. I don't remember how that happened. There were a few regular humans left. Most of them were hooked up to blood-sucking machines to feed the vampires. Some of the normal humans had escaped and were in hiding. I jumped and yelled at all the scary parts. Lots of blood, of course.

I once saw an Abbott and Costello comedy about vampires and werewolves. Now there's an original idea: combining comedy and horror. Who would have thought horror could be funny? The movie was in black and white. I think Bela Lugosi was the vampire. I didn't recognize the werewolf.

The vampire seemed to be enjoying himself immensely, but the werewolf was such a tortured soul. I guess that's because being a vampire is full-time job and being a werewolf only happens when there's a full moon. The rest of the time they feel bad about all the evil they've done. Most of the time werewolves have the conscience of a human being, but vampires only have the conscience of a bat.

I think scary stories are written mostly for children. Some people get a laugh out of scaring children. I'm not sure why. Some people think it's important to scare children into being good. This has been going on for a long time in just about every culture, I guess. If you don't behave and do what you're told the wicked witch is going to throw you in her pot and eat you for supper. That sort of thing.

Some religious people like to scare their children with stories of Satan and his vast army of devils who have nothing better to do than to tempt nice people like you and me into being as bad as they are. If you like being bad, then you can join them in hell when you die. I guess that's where all the *really* bad stuff happens. I can't tell you about what they do in hell, because I've never been there.

There really *are* bad people, but they didn't get that way because they were bitten by vampires or werewolves or talked into being bad by servants of Satan. I don't believe there is any evil in nature; only in the choices human beings make as they go through life. People do bad things because they believe that what they are doing is in their best interest. They lie to avoid being found out—and they become a liar. They steal to get something they don't want to work for—and they become a thief. They kill because someone really makes them mad—and they become a murderer.

That's all that evil is. People making choices they think are in their best interest, but end up showing their ignorance and destroying their good name and noble character. They ignore the voice inside of them that

encourages them to live a life of greatness because they would rather have a new car.

There is no evil in Nature, because the other animals don't have the same choices we do. Bats that bite only do so because it's what they do to eat and survive. Same with wolves. Same with every other carnivore on the planet, but it doesn't make them evil. Everything on this planet takes nourishment from everything else on the planet. That's the way things are here in a material plane of existence. It's a little scary living here, sometimes, but life is not a horror story—unless you make it so.

* *

“Loser!”

What are you supposed to do when Nature made you one way and the world wants you to be another? The guy who said, “Follow your bliss,” Joseph Campbell, had a cushy career as a professor at a private university, lots of fame and fortune from his lectures and books, *and* a beautiful and accomplished wife. But what do you do when you follow *your* bliss and get nothing?

So, what are you supposed to do when the world begs for accountants, computer whiz-kids, engineers, nurses and doctors, and you have no talent for any of these jobs? What are you supposed to do when your natural abilities lead you to exactly those things the world *doesn't* want and you're revolted by those occupations that it does?

Are you supposed to keep trying time and time again to fit your round peg into the world's square hole—like some certifiably insane person? Are you supposed to accept your fate, bitter though it may be, and live a life of mediocrity with “Loser” tattooed across your forehead?

Epictetus said that if I tried to do any work for which I had no talent, then I would be making two mistakes: I'd do a lousy job in the one for which I was ill-suited; and, I wouldn't have time to do what I could do well. Oh goody—another follow-your-bliss endorsement. That's great if fate showers you with good fortune, but what if it doesn't?

Maybe it *would* be better to be a mediocre accountant, living a life of quiet desperation, as Thoreau said, than to be a poet or artist, always unemployed and a burden to society and your family, because you can't make a living, so you turn to alcohol or even stronger drugs just to feel good about yourself for a few minutes before returning to a life of poverty and humiliation? What *are* you supposed to do?

What can you do when you're caught between a vocational rock and a hard place? Really, there's only one good solution: be a Stoic. The world

always needs Stoics. Why? Because anyone who is able to shoulder his or her responsibilities and maintain a noble character regardless of their station in life is a joy and a credit to the human race.

Be a Stoic. *Ignis aurum probat*. Fire-gold-testing. The refining fire of adversity will only make the gold of your character shine all the brighter. *Ignis aurum probat*. If you are doing the best that you can to take care of your corner of the world, no matter how large or small, you will acquire another kind of greatness.

Marcus Aurelius, Caesar, Roman Emperor of the world, didn't like his job either. It wearied and depressed him. He didn't like treacherous backstabbers and sycophants, and he didn't like the cruelty of warfare, and yet he lived in the midst of palace intrigue and on foreign battlefields for years on end, most of his life. He wanted to be a Stoic philosopher, not an emperor, but he could only fit in the consolations of philosophy for a moment here and a moment there. He used these moments to write his *Meditations*.

Marcus didn't like being emperor, and there were no doubt times when he didn't think he was very good at it, but in fact he was. His Stoicism guided his actions and his naturally kind heart made him one of the five great Roman emperors of history. To us Stoics, he was the greatest of them all.

Be a Stoic. A noble character will make it possible for you to excel in life regardless of the position fate has for you. Even if your talents are mediocre, even if you never know fame or fortune, even if some days it takes everything you've got just to put one foot in front of the other, when you're a Stoic you are the best that you can be, and there is no higher calling. More than anything else in the world today we need Stoics. The day you become a Stoic you stop being a loser. I guarantee it.

* *

Gloom, Despair

If it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all

I'm an Aries. That means my Sun is in Aries, but in my case so is my Mercury and Venus. They're all Conjunct, actually Casimi, which means they're right on top of each other. My Moon is in Gemini—and is my Ruling Planet. It Conjuncts Uranus in Gemini, too, and the two of them Trine my Neptune in Libra and my Rising Sign in Aquarius. That makes two Grand Trines in air signs, and if you know anything about natal astrology (the configuration of the planets in our solar system at the moment of birth), then that should tell you something about me.

Stoics in antiquity were interested in astrology. Stoics have always believed that everything is a part of one, grand whole, and that everything affects everything, more or less. I don't think astrology is a bad thing, necessarily, but some people abuse it by becoming dependent upon it. If it seems to you that you already read this earlier, you did. I'm repeating myself for emphasis.

I like having 2 Grand Trines in my natal chart, but I have aspects that are not so great, too. I'm not lucky. My Jupiter, the planet of good fortune, is in square or opposition to every planet it touches. Astrologically speaking, that means if it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all. Stoics may have once believed in astrology, but they didn't have much interest in luck. That's because we believe that a Stoic can be happy in every time and place. We actually teach how that's possible.

I've noticed that people who are lucky are seldom interested in astrology. You don't go to the doctor when you're well. Astrology is more attractive to people whose lives are not measuring up to what they think it should be. Some go to astrologers; some go to Tarot card readers; some prefer getting their answers from a Ouija board. If you're desperate enough you'll try anything. Just ask someone facing death with an incurable disease. Same thing. All of a sudden faith healers, witch doctors, and coffee enemas become very attractive.

Some people go to philosophy instead of astrologers when they discover something strange even alienating about our familiar world. Stoics always said our philosophy was like a doctor for the soul. And it is. But we have to study the theory. No shortcuts there. We have to study and know that our only control is in the choices we make. That's the first step. Then we have to learn what choices boost us up and which ones pull us down. After we know that, then we have to put that knowledge into practice, practice, practice. Every day.

Becoming dependent upon answers from the Great Beyond encourages weakness, but becoming dependent upon our own reason encourages strength. Strength of mind. If we are always looking outside ourselves for the answers we become dependent upon that outside source. Pretty soon, it's hard to make a move without consulting our astrologer or Tarot reader or the Ouija board. That kind of dependency encourages weakness.

Nature gave us reason for a reason. Philosophy should be our reference point. Knowing what we believe, why we believe it, and then putting it into practice builds courage, strength and self-reliance.

Strength is more valuable than luck. The choice is ours.

* *

The Key: *Prosochē* (pro-so-key)

Life should be lived the same way you listen to Beethoven or Mozart – with total attention on the unfolding present, listening to each note in combination with other notes as they arrive and pass away. I'm talking about classical music here, not pop tunes, because pop music isn't complex enough to demand your whole attention. It's best for children, elevators, and shopping malls.

There is no past, the past is gone, it's over. There is no future; the future isn't here yet. It doesn't exist. Pure science fiction. There is only the present. There's only Nature playing its grand symphony for each of us to appreciate in the present. Watch! Listen! Pay attention. *Prosochē. Prosochē. Prosochē.*

This attention, this mindfulness on the present, isn't an invention of the mystics of the East. The Stoics have been talking about what they called *prosochē* for more than 2000 years. Attention is **the** fundamental Stoic attitude. Listen to Marcus Aurelius:

Book 2, 17: "Human life is but a point in time, and the substance of it is constantly changing . . . in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a flowing stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and a vapor..."

Book 3, 10: "Throw away everything but this: everyone lives only in this present time, which is an indivisible point, and all the rest of that life is either in the past or in the future."

Book 4, 43: "Time is like a river made up of events in a violent stream. As soon as the event has been seen, it is carried away, and another comes in its place, and it too is carried away."

Prosochē. Attention on the present. Mindfulness is the key to *being* a Stoic. I'm not talking about studying to be a Stoic, I'm talking about *being* one. *Why* is it the key? Because attention on the present makes it possible for us to regulate the dark passions. Being in the present eliminates concern for the past or anxiety for the future. Attention to the present both increases our wisdom in dealing *immediately* with events as they appear even as it increases our serenity while we do so.

Book 7, 54: "Everywhere and at all times, it is up to you to rejoice piously at what is occurring at the present moment, to conduct yourself with justice towards the people who are present here and now, and to apply rules of discernment to your present representations so that nothing slips in that is not objective." Attention on the present moment. Mindfulness. *Prosochē.* Life is like a classical symphony. Watch and listen carefully as each note arises and passes away. And now you know the key to being a Stoic.

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DARK ALBUM

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Being Dead

I just finished reading a book about death. I didn't learn anything, so I won't mention the name of it. I guess the reason I didn't learn anything is because nobody really knows what death is like for sure. There are psychics who claim to communicate with the dead, and I've heard they can be useful, especially if you're looking for the gold coins Uncle George hid before he died.

I like some of the expressions we use for dying. Some say the dead person passed; some say he passed away. I prefer the longer version, passed away. It seems more respectful. You can also say that Uncle George croaked, kicked the bucket, or bought the farm, but only if you're talking to someone who didn't know him very well. You wouldn't say that to his widow.

I heard a dead man croak once. Actually, he burped, loudly. I was living and working at a mortuary, working my way through college, and I used to go out on "first calls." I guess they called it first calls because it's their first priority, picking up the dead.

An old man had died in a cabin in the woods. He was lying on his bed in an awkward position and the other mortuary worker and I had to lift him into a seated position before we put him on the gurney. We both put an arm under his shoulders and lifted. He said, "Burp," and all the fermented food in his stomach came up and splashed on us. It really stunk. Incredibly bad. You could smell it for days.

Stoics don't have any one certain idea about death – what it is, what lies beyond the grave. We don't promise heaven or hell as so many religions do. Nobody can *really* know for sure until we get there. We all want something nice, of course, but we may get nothing at all.

Of all the Stoics, I think Emperor Marcus Aurelius thought about it the most. It's one of the main themes in his book of philosophy exercises we call the *Meditations*. His conclusion is that if it's in nature's best interest for us to go on living in some form after death, then we will. He doesn't doubt that nature can manage it, but it's only going to bother if it's in the best interest of the *whole*, the whole of nature, not just people.

I don't believe in heaven or hell, but I suspect that if the energy of our consciousness does go on existing in some form, then we would probably be attracted to different kinds afterlife. Really pious persons who enjoy quiet orchestral music and lofty thoughts would be attracted to a serene and gracious afterlife—and to other people who also liked such places. A slick hustler by the name of Lucky Eddie would probably want heaven to look and sound a lot like Las Vegas – with much looser slots.

Like *does* attract like, and birds of a feather *do* flock together. The quietly pious person who ended up in a Las Vegas afterlife might think he was in hell. The Las Vegas lounge lizard who ended up in a heavenly library would *know* he was.

I think I could adjust to either. I don't want to complain. Whatever Nature can manage is fine with me.

* *

The French Goose

Now, I want to talk about cruelty to animals – in this case the French goose. The French didn't invent cruelty to animals. As early as 2500 BC, the ancient Egyptians learned that many birds could be fattened for slaughter, and they began the practice of force feeding. We know that they did this from a scene carved into a royal tomb that shows workers grasping geese around their necks in order to push food down their throats. At the side there are tables piled with more food pellets, probably roasted grain, and a flask for moistening the feed before giving it to the geese.

This practice of geese-fattening spread from Egypt to the Mediterranean, but it wasn't until the Roman period that the delicacy of goose liver that becomes extremely high in fat from force feeding is mentioned in written literature as a distinct food. In Rome they used to fatten their geese with dried figs.

In French, *foie* means liver and *gras* means fat, and the process used to make a liver high in fat is called *gavage*, which means “to gorge.” This is how they force their geese to gorge. The geese used in *foie gras* production

are usually kept in a building on straw where the force feeding is started an average of two weeks before they're slaughtered.

On the first day, the goose is fed a pound or 500 grams of corn mash, which is increased gradually until by the end of the gorging period they are getting an average of four pounds or 2000 grams of feed a day. The feed is pushed down a funnel fitted with a long tube which forces the corn mash down the bird's throat with either an auger or a pneumatic pump.

This process greatly changes the physiology of the goose. It enlarges the liver to many times its normal size, impairing liver function, and it expands the abdomen to the point where it is difficult for birds to walk. *Gavage* also scars the esophagus and would cause death if the force feeding were continued much longer. Mercifully, the goose is slaughtered just before it is forced to gorge itself to death. The *pate de foie gras* made from these grossly swollen livers is bursting with fat and a distinctive flavor that commands a great price. A pound of *pate de foie gras* will cost you more than 10 times as much as the most expensive beef steak that you can find at your local butcher shop.

Are such practices in keeping with the Stoic motto: live according to Nature? No. They are cruel and unnatural in the extreme. Now it's true that geese will naturally fatten themselves in Autumn in preparation for their long migratory flights. But some humans, in a love of hedonistic luxury, take this natural inclination out of Nature and make a painful mockery of it for the benefit of those who are willing to pay outrageous prices for the privilege of eating a food that is neither healthy for themselves or anyone or anything else involved, especially the goose.

In *Letters from a Stoic*, Seneca, a Roman Stoic of enormous wealth, knew what he was talking about when he said, "The things that are truly necessary require no great effort for their acquisition; it is only the luxuries that call for so much labor." Later in the same passage, he goes on to say, "Nature was not unkind to humanity...It is we who have made everything difficult for ourselves through our disdain for what is easy. Houses, shelter, creature comforts, food, and all that has now become the source of vast trouble, were once ready at hand, free to all, and obtainable for little effort. It is we who have made all those things expensive, we who have made them admired, we who have caused them to be sought for by numerous and complicated ways. Nature makes no great demands. It is luxury that has turned its back upon Nature. Each day we compound our desire for luxuries, and in all ages these desires have been gathering strength and promoting our vices."

Stoics know better. We know that happiness does not come with a pound of liver pate from a tortured French goose, but from living simply and

according to nature. Nature is our guide to life. I, personally, won't eat the fat liver of a French Goose. I know better, and now I hope you do to.

* *

Buddha's Tooth

Here is an old story about a traveling merchant who lived in India. One day, when the merchant was visiting his mother, he happened to mention where he was planning to travel on his next business trip. Now this merchant's mother was a very devout Buddhist, so when his mother heard where he was going she became very excited and said that the city he was going to was not far from the birthplace of Gautama the Buddha. She implored her son to pick up a religious icon that she could have for her meditation alter. The son promised that he would.

The merchant did go on his business trip and did very well. So well, in fact, that he completely forgot about the promise he had made his mother to get a sacred icon from the Buddha's birthplace for her alter. On the way home, he remembered and began feeling bad about his oversight, the forgotten promise to his mother. At that very moment he saw a dead dog lying by the side of the road. He stopped his caravan and went over to the dead dog. He paused briefly, then pulled out one of its teeth, wiped it cleaned, wrapped it in a colorful silk scarf, and went home a happy man.

The next time he visited his mother, she asked if he had brought her an icon as he had promised, whereupon he pulled out a lovely box wrapped in ribbon and silk. "This," he said, "is a tooth from lord Buddha himself." Well, his mother was overjoyed and immediately place the dog's tooth on a small pedestal at the center of her alter.

From that day onward, the mother meditated and prayed to that tooth with a devotion that became noteworthy even among the most religious members of her village. Days became months and years, and the mother never stopped her prayers and meditation and devotion right up to the day of her death. When she died, the villagers gathered around and witnessed a light of many colors and beauty ascend from the old woman's bed, so pure and holy had she become.

*

Religions, no matter what their preachers preach or icons they sell, provide a vehicle for human spirituality. The problem comes when the faithful are encouraged by their priests to shun or even kill those who are not of their faith. At one time or another in human history nearly all religions have sanctioned killing those who disagree with their doctrines. The blood of the victims, if brought together in one time and place, would fill rivers, great

lakes, perhaps even oceans, and the psychological trauma to all would be heartrending. No matter how sublime the religious teaching, someone sometime will twist its original meaning to satisfy some personal perversion or blood lust, and the hatred and killing begins anew.

Stoicism is an enlightened alternative to the dark and bloody side of religion, because it is based upon reason, not faith, and its principals are not fixed in stone. Our understanding evolves with our evolution, and at the same time the Stoa can still provide a vehicle for devotion and other human spiritual needs. In the 2300 years of our existence, I have never heard of anyone who was killed because he or she didn't want to follow our philosophy. Stoics have no need for angry religious leaders, bloodshed, or dog-tooth icons; and, our only *real* dogma we firmly believe is that our happiness is invariably increased when we live in agreement with nature.

* *

Stoic Killers

People are killing their children a lot these days. Just in my neck of the woods we've had eight in the last 3 months that I know of. West of here two girls were drowned in their swimming pool by both mom and dad; just South a man strangled his two kids, and a few days later in the same part of town another man killed both of his young sons before burning them up in a fire at his house.

A few days ago and a few miles East a man shot his 14-month-old daughter in the head as she lay sleeping in his pickup. And, a woman not far North of me drove up to the top of a 4-story parking building and threw her 7-month old baby off the roof where he landed on the concrete below. Then she drove home.

The last two killers were most interesting because the father was said to be out of his (expletive deleted) mind when he did it. That's what his mother-in-law said just before he shot and killed her, too. But the woman who threw her baby off the roof was said to be quite calm.

The police pulled her over while she was driving home, someone saw her do it, took down her license plate number, then called 911. When the police pulled her over, they said she was polite and cooperative – and *stoic*. That's right, they said she was stoic.

Oh dear.

It's surprising how often depraved killers are described as stoic. Too often, really. Of course that's the adjective not the noun. The killers themselves are not Stoics with a capital 'S' or they wouldn't be killers in the

first place, but 99% of the public don't know the difference. To them someone who is stoic is the same as someone who is a Stoic.

It's unfortunate, really. We certainly have our work cut out for us – changing peoples understanding of that word. I'm glad the lady was polite and cooperative, *that's* certainly Stoic behavior, but what she had just done to her baby was certainly *not* the behavior of a Stoic. Stoics don't kill their children. But I'm sure you already knew that.

It's interesting to compare the two most recent killers: one was out of his mind with rage when he killed his baby and the other was apparently – stoic, emotionless. Of course, Stoics don't approve of either insane rage or being emotionless when we kill babies. We don't approve of killing babies, period.

Advertising people say it doesn't matter what you say about a product as long as people remember the name. Well, that may be true, but I wish killers, even the polite and cooperative ones, were not referred to as being stoic.

* *

Consciousness Raising

Here we go again.

In a recent article of *The Washington Post* (14 APR 13), the leading newspaper of the US National Capitol, one of their journalists wrote a front-page article about the most recent bellicose rhetoric to come out of North Korea. In this article the previous dictator Kim Jung-il was referred to as “stoic.”

In brief, here are a few items I gleaned from Wikipedia about the so-called stoic, Kim Jung-il:

- Hedonist: his chef claims he had his private jet flying around the world for his special wines, lobsters, and other delicacies—this was the source of his belly paunch, the only one seen in a country full of starving people.
- Pornography buff: he reportedly had a massive collection of pornography films which he enjoyed in his 17 personal palaces and resort lodges located around the country.
- According to North Korean media propaganda and his personal biography, Kim Jung-il could walk and talk before the age of six months, he could control the weather according to his mood, wrote six operas and performed elaborate musicals, and he is referred to by the Koreans as a god.
- According to a 2004 Human Rights Watch report, North Korea under his absolute and tyrannical dictatorship was among the most repressive governments in the world. He was accused of crimes

against humanity for creating and prolonging the famine of the 1990s.

- A consortium of psychologists studied the dictator and found that he had six personality disorders also exhibited by Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Saddam Hussein. These disorders are: sadistic, paranoid, antisocial, narcissistic, schizoid and schizotypal.

Is this a Stoic? Does this resemble *anything* Stoics believe in or aspire to becoming? No, of course not. This is the ignorance and misunderstanding we have lived with and will likely see over and over for years to come. For a long time I just ignored these ridiculous characterizations, but I have come to believe that silence is a mistake. Now, I make a point of correcting every media slander made against us. I consider it my responsibility to be a part of the general consciousness raising effort that will be required to erase the ignorance that thinks it's OK to call a hedonistic, perverted, narcissistic madman a Stoic. I take the time to write and email a letter to the editor, and it seems to me that every *real* Stoic should be part of this educational process.

* *

Suicides

We had a rather famous suicide here recently, just a few miles away. A young woman hung herself in the Wrigley Mansion in Coronado. Strange case. When they found her she was naked, hanging from a rope, her hands were tied behind her back, her feet were also tied, and she was gagged with a shirt stuffed in her mouth. They found a cryptic suicide note painted in black on the back of her bedroom door. It said, "I saved him; now we'll see if you can save me." Her parents are not convinced it was a suicide. For one thing the family religion teaches that people who commit suicide go straight to hell.

18th century English philosopher, David Hume, asked what kind of god would make a creature who was *capable* of committing suicide – the only creature who can knowingly commit suicide – then punish him with eternal damnation if he actually does it?

Stoics don't believe in gods that like to play tricks and mind games on their creations. Nature created reason. And, Stoics don't believe that suicides go to hell. Stoics have never *encouraged* suicide, but we've always believed it was permissible, sometimes it's even reasonable:

1. *Great pain*. If you're pain is so great you can no longer function rationally, and there's no end in sight, then suicide is a reasonable option.

2. *Uncontrollable addictions*. If you are ruining your life and the lives of others around you by an addiction you cannot overcome, then suicide may be preferable to living such a foolish life.
3. Same with people who are *morally compromised* beyond help, people who cannot control their lusts, such as rapists, pedophiles, sadists, and torturers. These people obviously have damaged DNA and would do the world a favor by not using anymore of our natural resources.
4. *Rationally compromised*. People who are brain dead – we would recommend having an advanced directive made out to give permission to hospital staff to pull the plug. I suppose that also includes people suffering from advanced and incurable dementia such as Alzheimer's.
5. *Altruists*. Altruists? There are times when the most idealistic among us will sacrifice their own welfare to save the life of another, such as the person who faces down certain death to save another life.

The most famous contemporary Stoic in the world is probably Adm. James Stockdale. He was an altruist. He was also one of the most decorated officers in the US Navy and became a three-star Admiral and eventually a candidate for vice president.

When he was a young Navy flier in the Vietnam war he was shot down, captured, and held mostly in solitary confinement for 7 years, tortured repeatedly. When he discovered that his captors were going to use him for propaganda he slit his scalp with a razor to purposely disfigure himself. When they covered his head with a hat, he beat himself with a stool until his face was swollen beyond recognition. When Stockdale was later discovered with information that could implicate his friends and fellow inmates he slit his wrists in an attempt to commit suicide so they could not torture him into confession. He didn't die because his captors found him and patched him up before he bled to death.

He credited his Stoic beliefs for his surviving all those years of confinement and torture. He lived into his 80s in the town of Coronado, not far from where the young woman supposedly committed suicide—for reasons unknown.

* *

Exile

Many Americans are inclined to up and walk away from situations that become uncomfortable rather than stay and suffer through them. This country was made up of people with that inclination from the beginning. I guess it's in our blood. Whether they emigrated from their native land to escape persecution or seek their fortune, America was, and still is,

populated by people who were willing to reject and leave their family, friends, country, and everything they knew about life in order to begin again. Today, we have the freedom to continue that wanderlust, always searching for the better place to be. If things are bad in Oregon, move to Texas. If things get bad in Texas, move to California. And so on. Most of us don't have deep roots the same way those who stayed in the Old Country do.

To this day I still don't have a sense of home. My parents moved so many times when I was a child that no one city or region has that kind of home-feeling for me. I've lived in the greater San Diego area more than 25 years, as of this writing, the longest I've lived anywhere, but I don't really have any strong identification with it. I chose to live here on the basis of a rational calculation, primarily based upon the fact that it is close to the Pacific Ocean—my only geographical identity; and, the weather—I prefer sunshine to rain. No family or friends here. As I said, the Pacific Ocean is probably the closest thing I have to a sense of home. I've lived on both sides and in the middle of the Pacific. It's my ocean.

So, when people speak of the various factions of the political landscape in their region of the world it makes me think of my own. Most Americans know nothing about political philosophy and are consistently inconsistent in their views. The only thing our political leadership can count on is economics. Americans vote their pocketbook. In that regard, we are much the same as most regions of the world today. If we Americans are doing well we can and often do tolerate the most outrageous ignoramuses and egregious malfeasance imaginable.

Currently, I live in a fractious and *verbally* violent environment, but I'm not going anywhere. Too old. I mostly just "tune it out." There are times when I am convinced that democracy, as it practiced in this country, is impossible. Occasionally I think there's hope, but not often. In almost all respects one could say I am and always have been an exile in my own land. I'm alone, but I'm not alone.

* *

Dream Tests

Every now and then, not very often, I have dreams that seem more like tests of character than the usual flotsam and jetsam of my dream world. I had one of those last night – it was about 3 AM actually, I checked my watch when the dream woke me up. This was not only a test of character but it presented a conundrum that I'm still working on.

The dream started with a group of people, maybe six or seven, standing around somewhere. I didn't see any kind of environment – no trees

or grass or walls or carpets – just people standing together in a gray foggy dream world. I didn't recognize any of them. At first. One person made a comment, something about the difficulty women had in getting dressed. Some dumb comment like that. I joined that stupid statement with one of my own. I said that I didn't know as much about women getting dressed as I did about them getting *undressed*. I regretted saying it immediately, of course. No one laughed.

My wife, she was suddenly there, my wife said in a disgusted tone of voice that apparently I was under the influence of Kate to have come up with a comment like that. Kate was and still is one of my wife's two or three best friends. After she said that, my wife walked away in a huff, and I noticed Kate standing in the group. Understandably, her mouth was open with astonishment.

I felt obliged to say something, but it took me a minute, because I was nearly as surprised as Kate. When I recovered I came to her defense by saying that she had nothing to do with it, that when it comes to making a fool of oneself she was an amateur compared to me. At that point, the dream ends.

So, here's the test as I see it: Is it better to come to the aid of someone unjustly accused, as Kate was, or remain silent and loyal to a close companion and friend, as my wife is? I chose justice over loyalty. Did I pass or fail the test?

If I passed the test, then loyalty is not a virtue. It can't be a virtue, because Stoics say that virtues are always good on each and every occasion.

If I failed the test, then justice is not a virtue, because Stoics say that virtues are always good on each and every occasion.

Personally, I think I passed the test. What do you think?

* *

Orchid & Lilly

Orchid is upset. Oh, sure, its blossoms are pretty enough, all seven of them, and they've been blooming for at least two months now – which is a really long time as flower blossoms go. But, ever since wife brought home that bouquet of Lilies, Orchid has been upset.

It looks at Lilly's impossibly huge and voluptuous blossoms, and how can it help but feel puny and insignificant? And, to make matters worse—the smell. The entire parlor is practically vibrating with Lilly aroma. It's enough to make one gag. “How can my caregivers stand that smell,” Orchid wonders?

It's not fair. God is not fair. Oh, sure, Orchid knows it's pretty enough, some might even say precious, but compared to that damn Lilly wife

brought in here Orchid feels so small. How come Lilly gets to be so big and showy and dominating, and Orchid has to just sit quietly in its shadow?

Orchid is upset, but it's also almost ready to feel better. It knows that in a week or two Lilly's blooms will be drooping and hanging down their ugly heads like some deflated weather balloons. Death. Lilly will be dead. Good.

Orchid can hardly wait.

* * *

BATTLE OF MOUNT WHITNEY

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Battle of Mount Whitney

The Four Variables: Altitude, Endurance, Weather, and Fear

Altitude sickness was a constant worry. At 14,500 feet, Mount Whitney is the tallest mountain in the contiguous 48 States. Above 12,000 feet, the airline industry is required to have oxygen pumped into the cabin for all passengers—who are mostly sitting around doing nothing. We weren't sitting around doing nothing. By the time we reached 12,000 feet we had been climbing almost continuously for six or seven hours and breathing was labored.

When altitude sickness appears your symptoms may include headache, diarrhea, dizziness, nausea, heart palpitations, disorientation, or all of the above. When it strikes in full force you're done. You must go back down. To continue on is foolhardy at best, because you can incur permanent brain damage or death. The only way you can prevent altitude sickness is to practice shorter high altitude climbs before the big one. That, and climbing slowly helps the body to adjust. We did both.

Our climb lasted from 2:05 AM to 8:15 PM, the 18th of September. There were three of us in our group: My wife, her friend Cindy, and me. We had an hour at the top, two stops for substantial food breaks, 20-30 minutes each, plus numerous other breaks for a quick snack, a photo, or for a toilet break behind a rock. In total, it took 15-16 hours of actual hiking. None of us had significant altitude or endurance issues.

Endurance

Endurance is the variable over which one has the most control. However, to be physically capable of climbing a mountain, any mountain,

one must have at least an average level of fitness and be in reasonably good health. Five years earlier I was a semi-invalid. I was housebound and bed-ridden two or three days a week with lone atrial fibrillation (LAF). Pretty funny acronym but the condition itself was not. Without warning and for no apparent reason, my beating heart rate would accelerate until it was pumping so fast that it stopped beating altogether and just quivered. I was diagnosed with this disability when I was 59, and it precipitated an early retirement.

When LAF happened, I would have to quickly sit down or lie down or fall down, because I was no longer capable of standing. My head would ache from a lack of oxygen, my heart would ache from the exertion, and I would be psychologically depressed. These episodes would last off and on for the better part of a day and keep me on the couch or on the bed all day and sometimes into the night. The longest episode I had lasted intermittently for about 18 hours. The day after the more difficult LAF events I was usually to weak and tired to do anything but lay about. I had all the usual tests, and of course the cardiologist wanted me to take Coumadin (aka Warfarin, aka rat poison) and other drugs, but I refused.

One day, about four years ago, I decided I wasn't going to do this anymore. I was meditating regularly, and perhaps that gave me the courage to decide that I would rather be dead than live as an invalid. Whatever the reason, it just occurred to me one day that I would never again give in to LAF. I decided that the next time I had an episode I would simply go on about my business as if nothing was happening. Ignore it. If that caused me to have a stroke or heart attack, fine. That was the risk I would take. From that day forward my LAF left me.

It took me more than three years to get into the kind of shape where I could claim to be a normal 68-year-old. I was reasonably fit, but nothing special. I still had the arrhythmia that often accompanies the LAF condition. In fact, I still have it today as I have had virtually every day for the past 20+ years. But I ignore it. To climb Mount Whitney I trained with near total focus for about seven weeks. My training consisted of four aspects: diet, meditation, gym workouts, and climbing, climbing, climbing. I pushed my old carcass as hard as I dared without incurring injury serious enough to keep me from going forward. It worked.

Weather

No control. Of all the variables weather is the least of one's ability to control. First, in order to climb Mount Whitney we had to make a reservation six months earlier and we didn't get our first choice. You climb on the day the National Park Service allows and you deal with the weather Nature gives you. The weather was perfect, in our case, which is often not the case. In fact, the day before we climbed the wind was blowing in such fierce gusts

that most of those who tried could not make it to the top and turned back at Trail Crest. Two days before that they had hail. The week before that they had snow. Fierce and sudden lightening storms are common, especially in September. It was September.

Fear

There was only one of the four variables that deeply affected me that day: fear. Neither my wife nor her friend had that problem. I did. About seven hours into our ascent, about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the way up the dreaded 97 Switchbacks, I began to notice how close the trail ran to deep drop-offs onto the rocks below. As we ascended higher, the rocks below were correspondingly further down, and the edge of the trail to the bottom became more vertical. I became more and more fearful of falling.

The trail was wide enough, and I was seldom more than a foot or so from the edge of death, but being that close set me up for a very anxious climb the rest of the way. Constantly moving forward actually helped; stopping to take a break or have a snack did not. When one or the other of our small group wanted a brief rest I clutched the nearest large rock, looked down at my feet, and didn't move. I thought maybe the others were stopping as often as they did out of consideration for my advanced age, so I told them to stop stopping. I was a little testy when I said it.

By the time we reached Trail Crest, the end of the 97 switchbacks, I had been in a constant state of gnawing fear for more than an hour. It was at that point that the fear factor was multiplied I don't know how many times, but as I see it in my mind's eye right now three days after the climb I still feel fear at the memory of it. The drop-offs became more vertical, often absolutely vertical, and the rocks below were even further away— 2000 feet and more, straight down. And, the path became more narrow and rocky. At times the way up was more of a rock scramble than a path. I was functioning on will power alone.

For another hour or more I struggled on. No one else seemed to be bothered. I recall a young woman prancing up to the edge of one precipice, downright giddy and giggly: "Look at me," she seemed to be saying. "Take my picture! Take my picture!" she actually said. Just to see her and her companions casually playing with death made me even more afraid. I couldn't look at them, and I couldn't look at the scenery or the mountains in the distance. I could only look at the rocks on the trail directly in front of my feet and constantly remind myself that courage was not the absence of fear but the ability to work through the fear one had.

Finally, we reached the summit. I would have liked to celebrate, to feel some relief and joy of accomplishment, but for the hour we were there all I could think about was the fact that we would soon be going through the same extreme fear zone all over again. This time I would be more tired and

more susceptible to stumbling or making a misstep to disaster. The fear that had obsessed me subsided only slightly while we were at the top, and I impatiently waited for the others to enjoy the moment so we could leave. In that hour I did *not* go to the edges of the summit to see how high up we were. I did *not* look at the grand views 360° all around. I didn't even look at those who did these things. All I saw and all I could allow myself to see were the rocks around the Summit Hut in front of me where I stood or sat quietly in the middle of the top.

The Step

At last we went down, closer and closer to The Step, that one step in particular that frightened me above all others. There were many, many steps that could have been my last, but this one step I couldn't get out of my mind. I still can't. I can see it as clearly in my memory as if I were standing in front of it now, and every time I see it in my mind's eye I can feel my heart beat faster. I would have to step down about 6" onto The Step. The actual dimensions of it were about 14" wide and 18" long, a single step separating two boulders. There was no way around it. There was a flat rock wall with no hand holds going up to the left, and a drop falling thousands of feet straight down on the right. The surface of The Step itself appeared to be an accumulation of dirt and decomposed granite built up and canted at about a 20° angle *in the direction of the sheer drop on the right*.

It was impossible to step from one boulder to the other without using The Step. That is, it was impossible in my present state of fear. The decomposed granite was loose. The slightest slip and down I would fall. I didn't want to think about it, but it was all I could think about, and at last I was there. The Step was in front of me. Without hesitation, I placed the weight of my left foot on it as lightly and quickly as I could, then swung my right foot around and up to the boulder on the other side. The boulders before and after it were not much larger, but they were at least solid rock and free of debris. The Step was behind me.

I was glad to get past that point in the journey, but I still had a long way to go. When at last we got to Trail Crest, the top of the 97 switchbacks, I was surprised and happy to find that I was less fearful of the Switchbacks than I had been on the way up. Perhaps that was because compared to what I had already been through they did not seem nearly so dangerous. There were moments when I had to look away from the edge in order to keep going, but I was no longer in the state of fear I felt on the way up. Fear came only occasionally and nearly subsided when the danger was passed.

By the time I reached Trail Camp only the deep memory of intense fear, more than four hours of intense fear, remained. It remains still. I think of it at various times during the day, and I wake up at night and think about it some more. I will never climb Mount Whitney again—of that I'm certain. I

will climb again, but I don't need to return to that battleground. It's done. It's over. I survived. And now I have to heal both body and soul before going on.

* *

Being Old

I've always wanted to be old. Ever since I was a little boy I've wanted to be old. Maybe that's because of my grandfather. He was always an old man in my eyes, and I loved him. Grandpa, his name was Orville Sullivan Jones, never amounted to much in the eyes of the world. I often heard my mother say how lazy he was. But I didn't care. He always had time for me, and I always looked forward to hearing his stories about cowboys and Indians he knew when he was a boy.

Some people are very sensitive about telling you how old they are. In western culture, especially in America, being old is something we're supposed to be ashamed of. One reason for that may be because we live in a consumer society, and the most valued members of such a society are those who buy stuff. Old people don't buy as much stuff as young people because they already have what they need, and their wants are *not* what they used to be.

Another reason is because a lot of people get fat, flabby, wrinkled, sickly, and kind of ugly when they get old. It's true. This unfortunate physical decline has something to do with the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics, but it's also true that a lot of people stop trying to take care of themselves, and then they make things worse.

I don't mind being old, and I'm not reluctant to tell people how old I am when they ask. I'm 68 years old as I write this—in case you are wondering. Actually, I may be 69, depending on your point of view. If you believe that life begins when you're born, then I'm 68. If you believe that life begins at conception, then I'm 69.

I can hardly wait to be 80. That seems like a really good age. When I'm 90, I'll probably be like those people who make sure you know how old they are. "I'm 90 years old," they say proudly at every opportunity. And, if they don't get the opportunity they'll tell you anyway.

I'll probably be like that. I'll brag about how old I am, and it won't matter who I tell: clerk in the grocery store, the guy working out next to me at the gym, children I pass on the street. I'll tell them how old I am even if they don't ask.

I like being old.

What's the Point?

Recently, someone asked me if just by *knowing* the right way to live you would automatically live that way. In other words, If you know you're not *supposed* to be afraid, because there is really nothing to fear, does that mean you will stop *feeling* fear?

No. That's not how it works for most of us. Apparently Socrates thought you would stop feeling a bad emotion when you rationally knew it was unnecessary, but, then, Socrates was—Socrates. So what's the point of Stoic philosophy if you can still feel bad even after knowing there is nothing to feel bad about? Good question. A couple of years ago reality gave me a great opportunity to learn and examine the answer.

I bought a used car. It was the first car I had bought in 21 years, and I had forgotten how difficult that process could be. Well, it may be fun for you, but I find it nothing short of bewildering. I made a lot of mistakes. Three big ones. The man I bought it from, it was a private party purchase, still owed quite a lot of money on the car and wanted several thousand dollars cash in addition to what he owed the car company. This is really boring stuff for me, so I'll get right to the point:

1. I forgot to ask for a receipt for the cash I gave him,
2. I didn't get a copy of the Transfer of Title form I sent to the finance company, and
3. I didn't get a copy of the cashier's check I sent to the finance company. Actually, I did get a copy, but when I looked at it later I could see that the numbers on the check had been cut off in the copying process. The young man I bought the car from had done the copying.

By the time I got home with my car I was beginning to wonder if it actually was my car. What's worse, I didn't know the guy I had just bought it from, but he didn't seem like what you would call an upstanding citizen. He was a bit of a hustler with a very unstable residence and work history. I had asked. I began to wonder if I had just turned over almost all the cash I had in the bank to someone who intended to rob me blind.

I didn't sleep well that night. Or the next night. During the day, every time I thought about what I had done I was sick to my stomach. I could feel my blood pressure elevating even though I don't normally have high blood pressure, and my stress level became very uncomfortable.

Isn't that amazing? Here I am, a Stoic, and I'm suffering all this anxiety over a stupid car and the cash in my bank account? I know better. I also know that only my intentions matter. What the other person did or didn't do was of no concern to me. But knowing all this didn't help. I was

“sweating bullets,” and all the self-talk, the inner discourse, didn't seem to make me feel any better. I knew exactly how a Stoic was *supposed* to feel in this situation, but I didn't feel that way at all. I was kicking myself from one side of the house to the other for being so stupid.

You can say, “Well, why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that?” But that's completely beside the point. The point is, I was feeling bad, uncertain, anxious, and I didn't know how to stop it. So, if I'm feeling this way even after I know better, even after I know that the outcome of this petty transaction is of no consequence to the nobility of my character, then what's the point of all our philosophizing, all our certainty about the value of Stoicism in smoothing out the rough spots in life? I was in one of these rough spots, and all I knew for sure was that I had no control over either the outcome or in how I was feeling. I would simply have to trust the honesty of a stranger and stop worrying about it. But how?.

There are two lessons to learn here: Feeling bad can be very useful for learning purposes; and, just imagine how much worse I would be feeling and for how much longer I would be feeling it if I didn't have Stoic principles guiding my reasoning faculty.

There isn't any doubt that feeling bad can be instructive. Nature has a way of letting us know when we are or are not operating in a manner that's harmful to our physical or psychological health. When we have a hangover in the morning nature is telling us we had too much to drink the night before. When we feel fear, anxiety, grief, anger, jealousy, and so on, nature is telling us we have another kind of lesson to learn.

When I'm anxious about losing my money because I was not sufficiently knowledgeable and alert in my business transactions, the anxiety I feel is an important lesson being taught: namely, I need more practice in such situations, and I need to pay more attention. This is how we acquire prudence, the practical brother of wisdom. Next time I will know what to do. It's all just a learning experience. How can this be a bad thing?

Patience is going to be required. With patience the anxious feelings will soon pass. The only situation in which they don't quickly subside is when I tell myself over and over that the guy who sold me the car is a crook, he is evil, and I need to teach him a lesson he will never forget. When I do that the discomfort is sustained and encouraged by my own mental torment. Another form of that torment is when I'm feeling sorry for myself. “Oh god, why does this always happen to me? I'm broke. I'm ruined. What's going to become of me—and on and on and on.”

So, that's the point. Knowing Stoic principles makes the lesson of this learning experience clear, and it makes unpleasant feelings go away much faster. We can still feel discomfort, but a Stoic never throws gasoline on the flames of raging emotions with the kind of ignorance that comes from

putting all our values on matters of indifference. My intentions were noble, but my skill was poor. Nothing more. My character is unsullied. If the seller of a car chooses to take advantage of my ignorance and naiveté, then he must answer to his own character. Nothing more.

* *

Content Not Being Content

My belly is too big. It's not huge. It's not even what you'd call a pot belly, but it's bigger than I think it should be. At my age, extra padding around the waist is common. I guess it has something to do with my dwindling production of testosterone, the male hormone. When I was 30 I didn't have to worry about my belly being too big. I didn't even think about it. But, things change.

I have a sampler, framed and hanging on my wall. I can see it from where I am sitting right now. For those who are unfamiliar with samplers, they've been around for about 500 years, but they're not as common as they used to be. Basically, a sampler is embroidery thread stitched on a piece of cloth produced as a demonstration of skill in needlework. Some have complex designs and decorations, but mine is rather plain. It has a simple border around the edges with this wise saying about contentment stitched in the middle. It says, and I quote:

“Contentment is not the fulfillment of what you want,
but the realization of how much you already have.”

Anonymous

The needlework that spells out these words is a little crude, not very straight or polished, as if it were done by a 7-year-old child—without much supervision. I doubt that it actually *was* done by a child. Maybe the one who did it didn't care about showing skill in needlework. It appears they were content to being just barely adequate. That's OK. I still like it. In fact, I'm the one who bought it and hung it on the wall.

The only thing is, it hangs right beside a large mirror which I can also see from where I'm sitting right now. And, I can clearly see that my belly is too big. Or, maybe it's not. Let me read that wise saying about contentment again.

* *

We are the Borg

"We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

If you're a Trekkie, you know exactly what I just said, and what I meant. If you've never watched any of the Star Trek TV shows or movies, then you may wonder if I've lost my mind. For those of you who don't watch TV or didn't watch any of these shows or movies, I'll attempt to briefly explain what a Borg is.

They are actually called the Borg Collective, billions of drones in a hive of aliens from many parts of the galaxy, some of them human. They are drones, rather than individual personalities, because there are no individuals in the Collective. All of these creatures are technically, electronically linked together and act in unison without a hierarchy of officers or overlords. (Well, there is a queen that appears late in the Voyager Series, but I didn't like her. She seemed contrived and alien to the whole concept of Borg, so she was dismissed from my mind.) As a member of the Collective you hear all other members in your head. You are never alone.

Borg drones look mostly like ghostly pale humanoids but tend to walk with a glassy-eyed stare, kind of like zombies, and they have various implanted electronic appendages and applications linking them to each other and to their space ship. Each ship may have a thousand drones, or more, and the ships travel through the galaxy seeking out life forms to assimilate. The Borg are an incredibly powerful fighting force, because they have all the latest technology, and they are feared by all other alien species, especially those who highly prize their individuality and personal thoughts. Basically, everyone not a Borg. No one wants to become a single-minded Borg Collective drone.

The Borg may be profoundly ruthless, but they are also highly idealistic when it comes to one specific objective. They seek the most advanced intelligence in the universe from any and all sources. Perfection is their goal, and they will not allow any interference in its acquisition. They assimilate the knowledge of all the most advanced species by capturing and bringing a few of them into the Collective, then destroying the rest.

The Borg have killed billions without cause or concern. They have no conscience. Conscience is irrelevant. If you don't have anything of interest to assimilate, then they either ignore you or kill you, depending upon whether you are a potential threat to them. In either case, you and your kind are irrelevant. The lure of perfection is powerful, and drones never willingly leave the collective. It never even occurs to them, because they don't think like individuals. Therefore, they never rebel or attempt to undermine group efforts and goals.

*

A few days ago I watched my wife get out of bed and immediately access the information on her iPhone. She's a master at social networking. She was networking at breakfast while she ate her cereal. When she drove

her Prius to work she had her iPhone connected to the speakers via Bluetooth so she could talk to people while she operated the car without taking her hands off of the wheel or her eyes off of the road.

When she came home she was plugged in during dinner, continuing to send or read texts from others in her Collective. She kept at it all through the movie we watched together, and I had to keep prompting her to look at the screen whenever an important scene came up so she wouldn't miss the sense of it. She was still staring at her iPhone after I went to bed.

Her behavior is quite normal. Last month, the San Francisco Police Department released security camera footage from a light-rail train showing one of the passengers being shot and killed. Not an unusual event in America today, but what is more interesting is that the shooter took out a handgun, pointed at the victim across the aisle and no one even noticed. In fact, he aimed the gun, put it down, aimed it again and put it down, repeatedly, before finally shooting the victim. It was clear from the security camera footage that no one saw a thing. They were completely oblivious to the drama of their surroundings because they were so busy looking at their computers, iPhones, and other electronic devices until the shot was fired. Then they looked up.

It occurred to me that perhaps it would be more convenient for those who are living their lives immersed in the social collective if they had their electronic devices implanted. I checked the Internet to see if computer implanting research had begun. Yes, it has. Earlier this year, researchers at Brown University created the first wireless, implantable, rechargeable, long-term brain-computer interface. It has already been implanted in pigs and monkeys without any problems. Humans are next, the researchers say.

We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile.

* *

Killing Villagers

The other day I Googled my birthday just to see if there were any famous people born on that day. There were, actually. I don't know if that means anything. There were quite a variety of different people: the most famous was probably Leonardo Da Vinci. There were some actresses: Emma Thompson was born on my birthday. So was Elizabeth Montgomery. I always liked her on "Bewitched."

There were a lot of NFL football players. 67 all told. I guess football players like to be born on my birthday. There were some rather questionable characters, too: a couple of porn stars and Kim Il-sung, the North Korean Dictator. He was the father of Kim Jong-il and grandfather of Kim Jong-un the one in power there now. There were the writers James Joyce and Henry

James. Guru Nanek Dev, the founder of the Sikh religion was listed there. I've always liked the Sikhs, but it's not because their founder and I share the same birthday.

I wasn't listed there, of course, and another person that I know was born on my birthday wasn't listed there either, but he really should have been. Of all the so-called famous people born on my birthday I would rather be like this man than any of the others on the list. Hugh Thompson was his name, and he was a US Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam. He was the man who single-handedly stopped the My Lai massacre.

*

I don't know if you remember this story, but on March 16, 1968, unarmed civilians – basically, defenseless old men, women, and children – in the South Vietnam village of My Lai were sexually abused, beaten, tortured, mutilated, and killed by an American Army platoon led by 2nd Lt. William Calley who was following what he believed were the orders of his company commander, Captain Ernest Medina. A total of 347 villagers died that day. They were all unarmed and incapable of resistance. The only American that was injured shot himself in the foot so that he wouldn't have to participate in the slaughter.

As fate would have it, Army helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson just happened to be flying over this area while the massacre was going on. When Thompson looked down he saw directly below him a great number of village women and children, injured and dying, lying in a ditch. He landed his chopper to investigate. When he confronted Platoon Leader Calley, who outranked him, they had a heated exchange ending in Calley ordering him to get out and not interfere. Thompson was furious.

He got back in his helicopter and flew to where he could see a group of villagers cowering from advancing members of Calley's Platoon. Thompson deliberately landed his chopper between the civilians and the soldiers and told his crew to return fire on the soldiers if they were fired upon. In other words, he ordered his crew to shoot fellow Americans if necessary. Then he called in an evacuation team to get the villagers out of there and flew directly to headquarters where he angrily confront the Colonel in charge of the operation. The Colonel radioed Captain Medina and ordered the killing to stop immediately.

*

I don't know if the helicopter pilot was a Stoic, but he was definitely acting like one in his defense of the innocent. But, clearly he was angry, and that is something we Stoics are supposed to avoid on all occasions, or are we? When is anger ever justified? If we give it another name, such as righteous indignation, can we properly express it? Are we ever allowed to feel anger when we see a great injustice taking place before our very eyes?

What if a street thug is mugging an old lady? Isn't anger, the anger at this injustice, actually a stimulus prompted by Nature to take action and intervene? Isn't that adrenaline rush that accompanies our anger at such times a useful biological tool in survival of the self, as well as in the restoration of harmony in the species?

If we are attracted to the cardinal virtue of justice, isn't it natural that we would be repulsed by its antithesis, injustice? As Stoics, we know that the street thug is not really harming the old lady by robbing and injuring her, that he is only compromising the nobility of his own character, but isn't there another issue at work here? Isn't the social fabric being torn in this time and place, and are we Stoics to do and say nothing, calmly going about our business with indifference? Aren't we more likely to intervene with the prompting of anger than if we simply observe such acts with bemused serenity? And, can't altruism in the defense of others be a kind of anger in action that blindly hurls one into harm's way regardless of consequences?

He fired at the baby with a .45 [revolver]. He missed. We all laughed. He got up three or four feet closer and missed again. We laughed. Then he got up right on top and plugged him.

[My Lai Massacre eyewitness testimony of an American soldier as recorded in *Peers Inquiry*]

Hugh Thompson was exactly two years older than I am. He died in 2006. Clearly his actions that day by confronting two superior officers and ordering his men to fire on their own troops if fired upon was courage fueled by anger at the perception of grievous injustice. I also believe his actions were noble and Stoic. When anger is controlled and channeled into courageous and altruistic action in the performance of one's duty and in the restoration of justice, sanity, and human decency perhaps it should be given another name. If we can claim that true courage is not the absence of fear but the going forward despite our fear, can we not also claim that true altruism, true heroism is not the absence of fear or anger but the going forward on behalf of another despite our fear or anger?

* *

"Liar! Thief!"

You never know when you're going to be ambushed by another person's foolishness.

"Are you calling me a thief" I asked?

"Just let me check your pack," he said.

"To hell with you! I don't have time for this [expletive deleted]!" I said

rather loudly. I was suddenly very angry. This guy was calling me a liar and a thief, and my immediate, unprocessed reaction was one of incredulity combined with anger. I turned around and headed up the mountain.

When I was a Christian boy, the feeling I had at that moment is what we called "righteous indignation." Martin Luther once said that when he grew weary of the long struggle that consumed him in the Protestant Reformation he only needed to remember the abuses he saw when he was still a priest in the Catholic Church and his anger would keep him going, keep him fighting on. That's righteous indignation.

On the day I had my confrontation with the man who indirectly called me a liar and a thief I was training to climb Mount Whitney. The climb was two weeks away and I was focused. I was doing an 11-mile hike up and down the backside of Cowles Mountain, San Diego. Half way down the backside I made a left turn onto a path that ended up in a park in the town of Santee. I had been to Santee and was on my way back at the junction going up the backside of Cowles. And I was tired. I stopped by the side of the path just before heading up the steepest grade in the whole climb.

While I was standing there having a drink of green Rooibos tea I had with me, I noticed the sun was coming up at an angle that required I take out my sunglasses. It was sunrise, and I had been climbing since 5 AM. It was early September, the hottest month of the year in San Diego. It was hot. I was sweating. The sun was in my eyes. I had been climbing for nine miles, and I was tired. I had just finished my Rooibos, mopped my brow, and put on my sunglasses when some guy, more than 30 years younger than I am, came rushing up with a knitted brow plainly worried about something.

"Have you seen any sunglasses around here," he asked? "No," I said and looked around as I hoisted my pack up and onto my back. I didn't need a pack for this climb; it was the weight I needed for training. I had all the items I would be taking with me on the Mount Whitney climb stuffed in the pack. He was looking all around where I was standing while I adjusted the length of my trekking poles.

"Are you sure you haven't seen any sunglasses here," he asked again? "No," I said again.

"I was just talking to a woman who said she picked them up and put them on the post right where you're standing," he said. I was standing next to a post where I had temporarily hung my pack. "I haven't seen them," I said, and turned to go.

"You haven't seen any sunglasses here," he asked again—for what seemed to me to be the 6th or 7th time? "No!" I said emphatically. I was beginning to realize that he didn't believe me, that basically he thought I was lying. "I have *not* seen your sunglasses." That's when he asked if he

could check my pack to see if they were in there. And, that's when I told him to go [expletive deleted] himself.

I was suddenly flooded with adrenaline pumping anger. In fact, I was angrier than I had been in years, and I couldn't resist turning around to or three times while I started my climb to call back even more choice expletives. This was real anger. I wasn't just faking it for instructional purposes. When I yelled back at him, he insisted again that I stop so he could look in my pack. I just kept climbing.

Stoics are never supposed to get angry. Sages are presumably beyond anger and are never bothered by it. I don't think they're even allowed righteous indignation. But, regular Stoics like me do get angry occasionally, especially when they are falsely accused of being a liar and a thief—and other times too, I suppose. I don't ever remember being accused of being a liar and thief before that day and somehow the shock of it made me lose all my Stoic calm and composure. The greatest shock came when I became cognizant of the depths of my anger.

Of course I know the rational reason for not being angry when falsely accused, but knowing why I shouldn't get angry and not getting angry are not the same thing. And, there's the matter of personality, much of which is derived from one's genes. Of all my siblings I was the one who inherited my father's anger. He inherited it from his mother. I don't know who she inherited it from, but her anger often exploded into rage, and just as often manifested itself as physical violence. She was a beautiful woman, so she got away with it. She married a kind man, patient and long suffering, he would have to be, and my father's anger was a somewhat diluted version of hers, but it still strayed into brief episodes of physical violence. My anger never resulted in physical expression; except for the yelling and expletive deleted part.

I've known people who rarely get angry; they simply don't have it in them. They are by nature placid and easygoing, affable on all occasions. Both of my grandfathers were like that. Neither one had any ambition either, but I don't think that was because they were constitutionally incapable of anger. Were they Stoic sages? No. They were just born the way they were. Were they especially wise? No, they were just born without a seething cauldron of internal intensity. We take what we get and do what we can with it. If we learn Stoic philosophy we learn to monitor emotional excesses as best we can, but for some of us there are times when it's difficult.

I puzzled over this incident for days. It's been many years since I got angry like that. What happened? It's been many years since I used foul expletives to a man's face. Obviously I'm still capable of it—not yet a sage. The only good thing to come from this experience was that I climbed this steepest section of Cowles Mountain in record time. Adrenalin can serve a practical purpose.

Addictions

Substance abuse. Let's consider drinking, an old and hotly contested example. When does drinking become a vice? Do you control your desire to drink, or does it control you? Has it become an obstacle to reason and subsequently to the practice of virtue? If yes, then it's a vice and a source of unpleasantness in the world. Stoics traditionally encourage drinking in moderation and shun drunkenness. In chapter 12 of the *Discourses*, Epictetus says, "Train yourself to make but a moderate use of wine - not to drink a great deal, to which some are so foolish.."

Can those who drink a great deal be living conformably with nature? No. Why not? Let's examine what alcohol does: it distorts reality. When a person is drunk, the natural states of emotion are transformed. Irritation all too quickly escalates into anger then rage, disappointment descends into depression, sadness begets weeping, courage becomes recklessness, friendliness gushes with maudlin sentiment, and joy expands to giddy euphoria.

When a person is drunk, emotions are exaggerated, and thus they are even more difficult to manage. Chrysippus' example of the excesses of emotion as being like a man who tries to stop when he is running downhill is exactly correct here. It's far more difficult for him to slow down and stop than if he were simply walking. This is the effect of excessive consumption of alcohol.

When I was in law enforcement I read of a study conducted in a jail in the Southwest where each person arrested and booked was subject to drug testing. More than 85 per cent were legally drunk or under the influence of some other drug at the time they were booked into jail. Another study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University placed the figure at 80 per cent and showed that alcohol was related to violent crime more often than illegal drugs.

The National Center study also outlined what this costs the taxpayer in United States. By 1997, more than 1.7 million adults were behind bars, costing \$35 billion for state prisons and \$3 billion for federal prisons. Those are 1997 dollars. The annual cost of drug treatment, education, job training, and health care costs an average of \$6500 for each inmate, which does not include all other expenses such as housing, food, clothes, and supervision. The costs are much higher now.

Pleasuring yourself. The following is straight talk, no beating around the bush, no mincing of words: Smoking and drinking are neither macho nor cool; they don't make you tough or sexy. The truth is that doing drugs, any

drug, is just pleasuring yourself. Nothing more. What you see around you and in the movies, the tough guys and bad girls smoking and drinking, these are just fictional fantasies. When you live in the kind of world we live in the one who does not smoke and does not drink is the one who is really tough. They are tough enough to face reality day after day, year after year, without freezing their rational faculties and escaping into oblivion.

I'm not talking about those who are hiding in a religious cult or monastery where the rules of membership require abstinence. What I'm talking about is living and working in the real world today. Those abstainers who resist peer pressure will be harassed and ridiculed. Repeatedly. Guarantee it. In some circles those who can face reality cold turkey may be secretly admired, but not in all. That's the risk you take, and it will require courage. Courage is tough and macho. Courage takes strength. Pleasuring yourself is just pleasuring yourself. Big deal. I'm not impressed.

It's important to know what's going on here, and I'm going to speak from the perspective of the male, because I am one. When a boy is growing up he looks up to grown men to know how to be a man. When a boy sees that men drink and smoke and grow hair on their face, he associates that with manliness and can hardly wait to be old enough to be a man. Unfortunately, no one tells the boy that having hair on your face is nature's way of identifying you as a man, but drinking and smoking is not. Well, sometimes boys get the word about temperance, but usually it's from someone who is a health fanatic or a religious fundamentalist, and neither are manly to a boy. As a result, boys become men and often live their entire lives without ever questioning whether drinking and smoking are really manly.

Much of what you believe about the tough guy image of smokers and drinkers is created by Hollywood and Madison Avenue ad men and women. I suppose everyone knows that movie producers rake in huge fees in product placement and great piles of money from the tobacco and alcohol industries to show their stars smoking and drinking, but perhaps not everyone knows how effective advertisers are in creating the macho image.

Do you know the story of the Marlboro Man? In the 1950s when the tobacco industry was first confronted with the health facts about their product, they answered the challenge with filtered cigarettes to "filter out the harmful effects of tars and nicotine." They didn't, of course, but the industry soon had an even more difficult problem. Philip Morris created their first filtered cigarette, Marlboro, but only women would buy them. Filters were for sissies. Effeminate. To counter this impression, Philip Morris created an ad campaign showing America's favorite masculine myth, the cowboy, and the Marlboro Man was born. Introduced in 1955, it quickly became the leading and most famous American cigarette around the world. Its image was pure macho.

There you have it, the macho image of smoking and drinking is pure fiction, but it's also important to repeat what I said earlier. Stoics don't actually condemn smoking or drinking. However, we do frown on behaving like an intoxicated fool, because it is unseemly, indecorous, and ignoble.

Heraclitus says that a dry soul is best, good advice, but we don't embrace temperance to satisfy the commandments of some god. That's rubbish! Taking care of your health is a good idea, but it is not a virtue in and of itself unless you want to lump it in with prudence and lump prudence in with wisdom—which is proper. If you want to smoke and drink, fine, I don't care, but don't tell yourself and don't expect me to believe there is anything cool, sexy, or macho about it. They are nothing but chemical addictions to pleasuring yourself. Don't expect me to be impressed.

I know about all this temperance stuff from personal experience; I didn't get it from a book. I indulged and overindulged on various drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, for most of my adult life before I realized that I was still a 12-year-old trying to be a real man. At the peak of my indulgence, I drank about a fifth of whiskey every couple of days and smoked black cigars most of every day. And, I inhaled. Ooh, tough guy. And, of course, it felt good. After a number of years, quite a number of years, my health was shot, my marriage was rocky, and I lived on an emotional roller coaster—high one minute and down the next. I tried continuing my addictions in moderation, but found it to be thoroughly annoying, kind of like a mosquito whining in my ear. Impossible to live with after awhile. So, I quit. Even after I quit, it was years before I recognized what I had been doing all those years: pleasuring myself and only myself, pure and simple. What's so manly about that?

Pleasure does *not* equal Happiness. We Stoics have always disagreed with the Epicureans on this score. However, there is a time when such a notion can be arguably true, but it's all in your mind. We are still on the subject of substance abuse. For example, when you drink a lot, it doesn't take long before you associate drinking with good times, because you always make a point of drinking when you're having a good time. In fact, most drinkers create good times so that they can drink. As the saying goes: any excuse for a drunk. "It's Tuesday. Let's drink to that!" With such a pairing, just as in the case of Pavlov's dogs, pretty soon pleasuring yourself with alcohol equals happiness. Pavlov's bell rings; the dogs salivate. Remember, I'm only using drinking as an example for all addictions.

Not long after alcohol is associated with happiness, it goes one step further. It *becomes* happiness. The only time you are truly happy is when you're drinking. Part of the reason for that is the pairing; the other part is that your body is reacting to the flood of alcohol, a depressant, that makes you feel good for awhile but mostly like crap all the rest of the day. That is

why it's so difficult to quit such addictions. Getting the chemicals out of your system, detox and withdrawals, is child's play compared to the long term psychological addiction that comes from pairing drinking with happiness. I know this. I've been there. It took me about five years to restore joie d' vivre, the joy of life, after I quite drinking. This is a fluid and individual number. It may be more or less for you. But, the important news is that joy will return. Eventually.

* *

Genghis Khan (1162-1227)

When the Buddha was asked if there was life after death or eternal extinction, he said "Neither." Then he admonished the inquirer and said that by even asking such a question he showed that he was still in love with his worthless life and this world where all is suffering. Despite this clear and primary Buddha teaching, the Tibetan Buddhist believes in so many agonizing hells that you would think it was another religion entirely.

When Jesus Christ preached love, mercy, turning the other cheek, and that it was easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than a rich man getting into heaven, what were the conquistadors thinking when they killed and enslaved the native Americans to load up their ships with gold? I mean, if these were the followers of Christ, had they learned nothing?

When Mohamed told his followers to convert the infidels or kill them . . . Oh wait; they're still doing that. Well, at least they're consistent.

But, here's a man that no one seems to remember anymore, except for the lies that built his reputation, and I find the injustice of it appalling. Genghis Khan. Do you know the story of Genghis Khan? He was one of the most enlightened leaders in the history of the world. As far as I know he was *the* most enlightened leader in the history of the world, and look what happened to him and his reputation. He is all the proof you need that the winner writes the history books.

Here was a man who conquered, created, and administered the greatest empire ever known, much greater than Alexander the so-called Great, and in less than a century all of his amazing reforms were made null and void. In less than a century, he became synonymous in the emerging Western nations with the incarnation of evil. A monster of mythical proportions. He most certainly was not.

When the other leaders of the world were torturing any who they suspected of foul play; Genghis forbade torture. When the other leaders of the world were trying to kill all whose religious beliefs conflicted with their own; Genghis required tolerance for all religions in his vast realm. When the

other leaders of the world were taxing their citizens into poverty, guaranteeing generations of peasants; Genghis immediately cut taxes in half for the citizens of every city he conquered. When the other leaders of the world exempted themselves from the same draconian laws they used to control the commoner; Genghis required one law for all. And, it was a fair and just law. When other conqueror killed and enslaved to make themselves and their empire rich, Genghis had nothing but contempt for riches and luxury. He believed he was placed on Earth to benefit humankind, not to rob them.

Genghis was unfairly and inaccurately perceived by the leaders of the world in his day who were terrified of him. He and his armies were a far greater warriors than any they could muster. But, they wrote the literature and history books we read, making it up as they imagined it. They assumed he was as bad as they were—and worse. He was neither, but his reputation remains that of a monster. When Down's syndrome was first discovered in the 19th century, those who suffered from this mental impairment were called Mongolian Idiots after the hatred and fear the West still imagined of the Mongols, based upon the prejudices against Mongol warriors that lived, fought, and died so many centuries before.

Stoics have also been unfairly described by those who wrote the philosophy books for a millennium, but a few scholars are finally setting the record straight. We are not taciturn, severe, cold as stone, emotion-repressed, and inhumane. We are joyful, warm, and kind, and I for one am glad the world will finally know. Now, when are we going to exhume the *real* Genghis Khan.

* * *

PEDANTICS

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Evolution

“Grandma's Lullaby”

Oh, don't you remember a long time ago
when two little babies whose names I don't know
were lost in the woods on one bright summer day
and stolen by bad men I heard people say.

The sun it went down and the moon gave no light,
the poor little babies were in such a fright.
They wept and they crept and they wept and they cried.
The poor little babies they laid down and died.

I learned the lyrics of this song from my father. He learned it from his mother. I don't know where she learned it. As you may have guessed it is offered here for a reason. That reason is an important one, so I had to get your attention with this song.

The ethical evolution of a human being begins with love of the self and ends with the love of all humanity. From self-love to other-love; from egoism to altruism. In Stoicism this ethical evolution was called *oikeiosis* by the early Greek Stoics.

Oikeiosis (oy-KAY-o-sees). The doctrine of appropriation. This remarkable concept is the reason, the foundation, and the starting point of Stoic ethics. Here's a brief outline, a quick refresher for those who haven't thought about *oikeiosis* for awhile. But first, a translation of the word.

A.A. Long prefers "well-disposed;" the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 2nd ed., prefers "affinity;" and if you are not too uncomfortable with the word 'love', as I've discovered some of us tend to be, that could also be used here – not as a translation of the word, but as an understanding of the concept. The self-love of an infant, love of family as a child, love of country as a patriot, even love of beauty and the pursuit of truth are all *appropriate* and natural activities for which humans have an affinity or are well-disposed. Personally, I prefer affinity or love when speaking of *oikeiosis*, but I will be using A.A. Long's *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 2nd ed., (California, 1986) as my primary resource for this brief outline.

Oikeiosis is the primary impulse of all living creatures, including human beings. Paradoxically, virtue actually begins as self-love. In *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius wrote, "An animal's first impulse, say the Stoics, is to self-preservation," And again, "The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof (D.L. Bk. VII. 85)." This is the benevolence of Nature, the beginning of ethics for the Stoic and the end of the discussion for the Epicurean and hedonist. Unlike those who believe that pleasure is our ultimate good and goal, Stoics believe that our reasoning faculty, the *hegemonikon*, expands our self-love into stages of ethical evolution that achieve a higher good.

Cicero detailed five stages (Fin iii 20-I), but I will only outline three:

1. Care for the self and its needs. The primary impulse.
2. Able to make rational distinctions between those things which are in agreement with Nature and those which are not.
3. Selecting and living by those things that are in agreement with Nature.

As the rational mind develops, our self-love, or affinity for that which is dearest to us, *can* expand to include the family, then the community, a romantic partner, then our children, and so on. Each stage retains the stage before it as one evolves ethically. However, despite the developing rational faculty, ethical evolution is *not* automatic. Many people do *not* gain in wisdom as they get older; they only gain in weight. Without effort, then, we get stuck in stage one or two; otherwise all people would become wise and virtuous. Obviously, they do not. It takes an act of choice and will to evolve from the primary impulse of infantile ego, stage one, to selecting and living by those things that are in agreement with Nature, stage three.

When the individual has acquired the mature capacity for reason and chooses to live conformably with Nature, s/he has evolved to an entirely new realization. When the final stage is achieved, the individual realizes life on a higher plane than all previous stages, and virtue is good for its own

sake. Self-love has evolved through love of family, spouse, children, country, and finally a love for all humanity. This is where *oikeiosis* ultimately leads: from self-love to lover of humanity, from egoist to altruist and the philanthropist.

* *

The Body Garden

Epictetus said, *If Nature had trusted even a horse to your care, would you have overlooked and neglected him? . . . Consider your body as committed to you, instead of a horse. Wash it, rub it, take care that no one will turn away from you in disgust [Discourses, book IV, ch. 11]. For we ought not to frighten the world from philosophy by the appearance of our persons; but to show our serenity of mind, as in all other ways, in the care of our persons.* [ibid].

*

What does the new Stoic look like? Does living in agreement with Nature mean we all look and dress alike? Does it mean we are at Nature's whim and mercy when it comes to personal appearance and grooming? What if we are born with a cleft palate or club foot? Are we supposed to just grin and bear it, or can we have it fixed? What about body hair and fingernails and toenails? Do we just let it all grow out as long as Nature dictates? Must every man wear a philosopher's beard? What about your teeth? Does living according to Nature mean that you should not be concerned with oral hygiene, fillings, crowns, bridges, and denture and just let them fall out when they get rotten? What about dyes, skin creams, cosmetics, and plastic surgery to camouflage or physically alter the sags, bags, droops, wrinkles, fades, moles, spots, and blotches of aging? Is that allowed? What's the new Stoic to do?

After many years of cultivating my home garden, it's more natural for me to resolve of this question as if I were a gardener. What's to be done with a bush that's lopsided, grass that's grown too high, weeds that are crowding the flower bed, and ear wigs that are eating the loquat leaves? These are questions a gardener faces on a daily basis, and I believe we can approach our grooming the same way. Living in agreement with Nature means that you act in a rational and reasonable manner just as Nature intended by creating you with the ability to do so. Other animals cannot brush their teeth or till and plant a garden, but human beings can. Unlike the other living things on this planet, human beings have opposing thumbs and rational minds. Nature made us that way.

We also have an appreciation for beauty, which inspires our grooming and hygiene. If you think of your skin and hair as if it were a body garden, you would quickly realize that to live in agreement with Nature gives you a great deal of latitude. Nature is very tolerant of well-meaning gardeners, even those who operate from the position of benign neglect. The gardener learns over the years that Nature is a very good partner – good at recovering from most of your mistakes and quick to reward you when you show a little skill. You will never know a better friend.

How you cultivate your body garden is a reflection of who you are and the stage of life in which you are living. You may approach it with the delicate touch of an eye surgeon or with the meat cleaver blows of a butcher. You may have the subtle sensitivity of an artist or you may prefer the layered certainty of mortuary makeup. The Stoic motto of living in agreement with Nature includes living in agreement with your own nature. There is no one way to appear as a new Stoic. *We are a school of philosophy, not a school of fish.*

How can any man or god dictate a single style for all people for all eternity? There are **no** absolutes here. Individuality is more natural than regimentation. No two snowflakes are exactly alike. No two fingerprints are exactly alike either. Nature has given us a reasoning mind and an attraction to beauty in combination with inherent differences. It's all a matter of intent. Nature gave each of us the landscape, the mind, and the tools to work carefully or casually with our body garden. But I agree with Epictetus that it's best not to frighten the world away from philosophy by our appearance. That is part of the agreement when you're living in agreement with Nature.

* *

Doubt

You may ask yourself, "How do I know Stoic philosophy is true?" You don't. You may ask yourself, "How do I know any philosophy is true?" You don't.

Philosophy is theory and speculation based upon reason. When any philosophical idea becomes proven fact, then it ceases to be philosophy and becomes science. I didn't just make this up. I learned it from John Searle, a Berkeley professor who is widely regarded as one of the world's leading philosophers. I don't know if he really *is* one of the world's leading philosophers, but that's what his publisher says he is. I read it on the cover of one of his books.

Some years ago, I completely lost all confidence in the truth of Stoic philosophy and became a skeptic. Oh, I'm not talking about the skeptics of today. They're not *real* skeptics. They're just atheists pretending to have an open mind. No, I'm talking about the real thing, the Pyrrhonian Skeptic. If you've never heard of them that's probably because they haven't been around for about 2000 years. Those were the true skeptics, kind of like agnostics today, except they codified their ideas and turned them into a philosophy.

They said, "We don't know if things in our world are what they appear to be; and, on top of that, we *can't* know. We only have the information our senses give us, and that may not be what's really there at all. In addition to our unreliable senses, we don't know if anything is true. For every point of view, there is an opposite and perhaps equally valid point of view." The technical term for that is *Ou Mallon*. Then, to show the world that they were first class thinkers they added logical consistency and said, "We can't know what the world truly is; or, maybe we can." . . . I was a Pyrrhonian for several years.

You may ask yourself, "Why would a good Stoic become a Pyrrhonian?" Well, because it gave me freedom from dogmatic intellectual commitment. Let me say that again: *I found freedom from dogmatic intellectual commitment.*

When I first came to that realization it was like, "Oh my god! I'm free from all this philosophical stuff! I never have to read another deadly dull philosophical tome again." Then reality set in, or what our familiar world masquerades as reality, and I discovered that brute facts have a way of knocking some of us down, over and over, until we take up the search for reasonable explanations once again. I found that I *needed* Stoic beliefs, philosophical beliefs based upon reason so that I could see clearly the right thing to do when I was confused by doubt or fear.

You may ask yourself, "What is the difference between philosophical beliefs and religious beliefs?" Simply this, Stoics follow reason instead of faith. Our beliefs are based upon reason instead of myths and unlikely stories about talking animals and ghosts and strange gods. Until one of these animals or ghosts or gods talks to me personally, reason is all I've got, and I intend to hold onto to it tightly.

* *

Lady Gaga

2500 years ago, Heraclitus, the Stoic's cosmologist, said, "For what thought or wisdom have they. They follow the poets and take the crowd as

their teacher (fragment 102 of John Burnet's translation of 1908). What is he talking about, "They follow the poets and take the crowd as their teacher?" Following the poets of his day would be largely the same as following the Hollywood culture today. And, taking the crowd as their teacher would be the same as following the opinions and fashions of the crowd. Being like everybody else. Fitting in.

Early the other morning, I was walking past the theater and concert hall of a nearby university campus when I saw a lot of commotion and a lot of trucks. 22 trucks, big rigs, 16-wheelers all lined up at the theater trade entrance. Out in front by the ticket offices I saw a long line of people sitting or lying on the sidewalk. This was at least 12 hours before the ticket office would even be open. They were saving their place in line to get the best seats.

I asked myself, "What great genius of the age is coming to our town, what profound event is about to take place in my lifetime? I mean, 22, 16-wheelers? Why are these people shivering here on a cold and cloudy morning 12 hours before they can even buy their tickets?"

When I got closer, I asked one of the people in line what was going on? She looked at me like I had just crawled out from under a rock. "Lady Gaga is coming," she said—with the awe and reverence one might expect at the Second Coming of Christ.

I went back and counted the trucks again. Yup, 22, and that was just for the *equipment!* I also counted 11 touring buses for the crew. Really big, beautiful fancy buses with Lady Gaga's name painted all over them. All that energy and effort going into a concert for a pop singer—one whose appearance is remarkably plain, when you take off her wild fashions and makeup, and one whose voice is even *less* remarkable? It's said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but am I *completely* deaf and blind?

Decimus Juvenal, the Roman poet who lived at about the time of Epictetus, almost 2000 years ago, had something to say about this in his satires. He said, "The people that once bestowed commands, Consulships, Legions, and all else, now concerns itself no more, and longs eagerly for just two things—bread and circuses."

No question about the circuses. The amount of money commanded by entertainers dwarf all other incomes in our country. A second-rate, TV actor in a silly sitcom can earn 10X the annual salary of the President of the United States, currently the most powerful person in the world.

And, of course, we all know about how much we long for bread. The latest statistics on obesity in America indicate that 1/3 of us are obese. Not fat, OBESE! 1/3. Bread and circuses. Obesity and Lady Gaga. The poet Juvenal also wrote that "Honesty is praised and starves."

What did Heraclitus say 2500 years ago, "For what thought or wisdom have they. They follow the poets and take the crowd as their teacher?" It was true again in the Roman Empire 500 years later. Is it any different today? Has anything changed in 2500 years?

* *

Garden Snails

Some months of the year I get more snails in my garden than I do at other times. I don't know why. I've never paid much attention to the life cycle of garden snails. For the purposes of this essay it doesn't really matter why. The point is, I don't want them in my garden at all. Ever. I don't like the way they chew up the tender young leaves with their nasty little teeth.

I don't like killing things, except for mosquitoes and cockroaches and termites and spiders and houseflies. I don't *enjoy* killing them, but I do. I'd rather not kill snails either, but I like the plants in my garden better than I like them. So, they have to go.

One way to get rid of snails is to just pluck them off the plant and toss them in the street. I've done that. They generally don't make it back before a car or a bird gets to them. Sometimes I put them all in a plastic bag, then tie off the top and toss it in the garbage. That way they die of suffocation somewhere between here and the garbage dump. At least I think that's what happens to them. I've never followed them to see how they actually died.

Suffocation seems like a really unpleasant way to go, but that's because I think about it as a human being. I don't think snails are smart enough to feel sorry for themselves while they're dying. When I have a lot of snails I usually put them all together in a plastic bag. I don't know if they prefer to die alone or with others nearby.

I could toss them over into the neighbor's yard. That way they would at least have a fighting chance. His yard is not nearly as nice as mine. His plants are always bone dry over there, and most of them are dead. And, it's always so messy. His yard is his own private garbage dump – old couches and mattresses and piles of leaves and dead branches, tires . . . you get the picture. If he doesn't care about his yard what difference would it make if I toss my snails over there?

I wouldn't do it when he was at home. He's got a really bad temper and takes offense easily. I once picked up a small, nondescript stone about the size of a plum that I thought was on my side of the property, just a common little rock like you see on the side of any road, and he came running out of his house screaming at the top of his voice, "YOU PUT THAT BACK!"

"Well, it's on my side of the property line," I said. He stomped over and showed me a small metal disc by the sidewalk. "That's the property line," he said, loudly. Sure enough. The little rock had been at least 2 inches over the line. I put it back.

I *could* throw my snails over the fence into the neighbor's yard, but I probably shouldn't—even when he's not at home. It's not that I'm afraid of his temper, or that I would be doing any more damage to his yard than he has already done to it. There's something else.

One of the duties of life is to be neighborly, to be respectful of other persons – as well as their property. Whether or not they deserve respect or neighborliness is beside the point. If I don't do my duty as a good neighbor, then I'm compromising *my* noble character. Throwing snails into my neighbor's yard is not the action of a good neighbor – regardless of what kind of person he is.

I still don't like killing snails. I've heard that if you put them in a pan of stale beer they will drink themselves to death. That puts a literal meaning to the old saying, "dead drunk." At least they wouldn't suffer from a hangover. I don't have any beer around the house. Maybe death in a plastic bag is better than the slow, lingering starvation they would probably get from landing in the neighbor's yard.

* *

Small Talk

The other day I was thinking about the times we live in. What should we call this age? There was the Hunter/Gatherer Age. That one lasted a really long time. Then there was the Agrarian Age. I think that age was named after the invention of farming – when we could get our food by putting a fence around it. Kind of like shooting fish in a barrel. Then there was the Industrial Age. Some countries are still trying to figure out how to mass produce things.

There are those who call this the Information Age. That sounds nice except I always associate information with learning, and there seems to be a lot less of that than there is just plain, small talk. I think we should call it the Blather Age. We've got YouTube and Twitter, and Facebook, and LinkedIn, and Skype and cell phones and iPods, iPhones, Blackberries, and texting, and I'm sure there will be a lot more of these small talk opportunities by the time you read this.

Everyone is different, of course, and some need small talk more than others, but I've noticed that those of us who are *not* hooked up to all this constant blather are becoming fewer and fewer. We will probably be extinct soon—like the hunters and gatherers.

I never liked small talk. I don't find it as difficult to endure as Calvin Coolidge apparently did. He was the 30th President of the United States, early 20th century. And, he was famously silent, Silent Cal they called him. He was quite unusual for a politician.

Once when Silent Cal had to go to an official dinner party, the host placed him right next to some Washington socialite who was known for her gift of gab, a real blatherskite. The lady turned to Calvin as soon as he sat down and whispered to him confidentially, "Mr. President, our host bet me \$100 I couldn't get 3 words out of you all night." The President turned to her and said, "You lose."

I don't know why President Coolidge was so quiet, but as for me, the closer I get to Nature the less I need small talk. The Hunter-Gatherers of the past Age were also famously silent. Native Americans, the hunters and gatherers of early America, thought the white settlers were all blatherskites—and those folks were mostly farmers and woodsmen. I can just imagine what they would think of people today.

President Coolidge eventually died—as we all do. When the woman who sat next to him at that famous Washington dinner party was told that Silent Cal had died, she sniffed, "How can you tell?"

And now I feel an overwhelming desire to go out and work in the garden.

* *

The Last Straw

I like last straws. You know the kind I mean. You take it and take it, over and over, some physical or psychological unpleasantness from some one or some organization or some activity, and at last something snaps inside, and you say, "That's it! I'm not going to take it anymore!" Or words to that effect. That's a last-straw situation. That's the last straw that broke the camel's back.

The last straw all by itself is not a big deal and probably wouldn't have bothered you much, except that the accumulated weight of all that unpleasantness, over and over, has finally made you mad as hell; and, as the saying goes, you're not going to take it anymore.

So, what are you going to do about it? If it really is the last straw it's going to force you to take some action to prevent it from continuing, right? Change. You're going to have to change—something! Last straws force you to change your life for the better. Adjust and evolve. That's the whole point. That's why I like them.

Positive effects *can* and often do come from negative causes, but only if you use your head and do your homework. Otherwise, you may be

jumping from the frying pan into the fire, or throwing the baby out with the bath water, but let's stick to one aphorism at a time.

How do we use our heads and do our homework? First, listen to your internal dialogue. What are you telling your self? What's so bad about that straw that broke your back? What kind of person are you? We're not all the same, you know. Listen to your self. Remember what you like and dislike and why? Be yourself. I know it sounds trite, but it's true. Being the best person Nature created is always the right solution. Do what you do best.

Epictetus said it as well as anyone ever said it. In the Handbook, #37, he said, "If you have assumed any character beyond your strength, you have both demeaned yourself in that, and neglected one which you might have filled with success."

If you don't know yourself well enough to know your strengths and weakness, then that's your homework. Be honest with yourself. Yes, I know, accountants do make more money than potters, but if you struggle to stay awake reading the ledger sheet and become serene when the potter's wheel is spinning, then you know your strengths and weaknesses. Find a way to change.

Don't make two mistakes by putting up with something that needs to change. That's how we evolve. If you are not following your nature, then you're not going to do that very well. In addition, you're going to be spending all that time doing mediocre work when you could be spending that time to do what you can do well, becoming excellent.

Stop it! Change. That's how we evolve as individuals and as a species. Nature made life that way—change, adapt, keep moving forward getting better all the time. That's what evolution is all about. As human beings we have the ability and responsibility to work with Nature in our personal evolution.

Kind of exciting isn't it! That's why I like last straws. It means something new, maybe something great, is just about to evolve, and you were not just there, you helped to make it happen. Good for you!

* *

Warning

There are those who think scholars and other academic types are special, living and working as they do in their ivory towers. The life of the mind seems like it's a bit closer to heaven than the real world down here in the rain-soaked, muddy trenches where the rest of us struggle to get by. Somehow it doesn't seem possible they have their bullies and sycophants just as we do. It's hard to believe that in their pursuit of truth they take

short cuts and cook the books just like regular folk. But they do. The one thing that surprises us commoners the most is that with all those brains and all that time for study and thought they can be just plain wrong, profoundly wrong, and without any good excuse for it.

It isn't enough that we Stoics have been misrepresented by the Platonists and Aristotelians that have dominated academia since the Dark Ages. It isn't enough that the name Stoic is frequently used to describe villains and heartless sociopaths, but even in the one subject in which we excelled above all others in antiquity we were sneered at and thrown on the intellectual dung heap by academics for nearly 2000 years.

Let me tell you the true story of Prantl and Zeller – just the most recent incarnations of this folly. Karl von Prantl was a 19th century German philosophy professor in Munich who was so obsessed with the greatness of Aristotle and his logic that he repeatedly denigrated the Stoics as bad copiers of Aristotle, saying our logic was tedious and of absolutely no value. He went on like this in his publications *ad nauseum*.

Because of Prantl's eminence in the tiny community of logicians his word was accepted without question. What his peers repeatedly failed to notice was that his numerous references to Stoic logic clearly showed he never understood it at all. He got everything wrong.

Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, we were harrumphed by academia again. Eduard Zeller, the late 19th century German logician at the University of Heidelberg was a great admirer of Prantl's work on Aristotle, and in his references to Stoic logic he basically parroted Prantl's misguided contempt, showing that he too never studied and never understood our logic.

Fortunately, our story has a happy ending. Finally, in the 1920s another academic came to the rescue. He was the eminent Polish logician Jan Lukasiewicz (wuka' jgevits), a professor at the University of Warsaw, who later joined the faculty at University College Dublin. After nearly 2000 years the world finally understood what Stoic logic was all about. Professor Lukasiewicz single-handedly restored our propositional logic to its proper place as the greatest logic of antiquity – not a copy of Aristotle, not inferior to Aristotle, but an original form of logic that was superior in every way to anything ever done before the 20th century.

Here's the warning: Just because an academic philosopher is eminent in his field does not mean he or she knows what he or she is talking about. Happily for the rest of us, eventually there may also arise a Lukasiewicz in the academic world who can set the record straight and deserve to be honored by the name of scholar.

* *

Infantile Narcissism

I know that the title of this essay is redundant. I know that infants are narcissistic pretty much by definition. I just liked the sound of these two words together, and sometimes being redundant helps us to emphasize and understand certain concepts.

Anyway, I was awakened this morning long before dawn's early light by an airplane, a single-engine, slow-flying, low-flying plane that was so slow and so low I think I heard the sound of each piston as it banged up and down over my bed. It's not the first time this has happened. In fact, it's annoyingly common.

5 AM. Why? Why did this person need to fly his or her plane over my house at 5 AM? I don't think it could have been a medical emergency, those are generally taken care of by life-flight helicopters. They're also noisy, but necessary, and it wasn't one of those. No, I can't imagine any reason why this person needed to wake up a thousand people at 5 AM with their noisy little plane. And slow? I think I could have walked faster than it was flying.

I called Gillespie Field, the nearest local airport where small, private planes usually come from, nearly 700 a day, mind you, because I wanted to ask them about their hours of operation. As is generally the case these days I was not able to speak to a live person, so I left a message with a Mr. X, what they call the Front Line Manager. He didn't return my call all day, even though I gave him my phone number and said 'please'.

I was a telemarketer once, for about a week. I rationalized taking a job like that because it was for the *Los Angeles Times*, and I was unemployed and desperate. You can always get a job as a criminal or a telemarketer in this country. I only lasted a week, because I decided I would rather starve than bother people just when they were sitting down to dinner.

I've been getting a lot of spam lately. One of the newer tricks is to attach spam to the email of one of your friends. Yesterday, I got one of those attached to my friend Greg's email. I got it two days in a row. He was very apologetic and said he tried to stop it but couldn't figure out how and didn't know what to do. I don't know either.

Stoic ethical philosophy actually begins with infantile narcissism. I mentioned that in another essay somewhere. Chrysippus said that nothing is dearer to every living creature than its own self. And that's OK. We've all got to start somewhere. But that's just *the beginning*. We all start out as infants who don't care about anything except getting what it wants. Grownups are supposed to know better. Most of us do. Eventually we grasp the value of the Noble Duties – taking care of family, then country, then humanity as a whole, the world soul. That's what ethical evolution is all about.

It's really pathetic to see grown up people who are stuck at the very beginning, the infantile narcissism stage, and can't seem to progress. If you are one of those, Stop it! It's time to evolve. There is a very clear and obvious progression from the starting point, the baseline, but it all begins with caring about someone *in addition to your self!*

Eventually, with a little effort, you can become a true adult just by being considerate, by caring about someone else. Wouldn't that be lovely? And then I wouldn't have to call the Front Line Manager of your airport, because *you wouldn't even want* to fly over my house with your noisy little plane at 5 AM.

* *

Stoic Feelings

If people say that you're stoic, then chances are you're not. You may be, but probably not. Why? Because 90% of the population do not know what a Stoic is, and 90% of those who think they do are probably wrong! They know the dictionary definition of a Stoic, and it's wrong.

General belief about Stoics is that we either don't have any feelings and emotions or that we repress them and are as cold as stone, which is absolute rubbish. This misunderstanding began in antiquity by competing philosophies that never really understood us. They still don't.

I'm going to set the record straight. Hang on to your hat. Here goes: *If the feeling has a name, then it's an emotion. Feeling first; emotion second. All animals have feelings, some observers suspect that even plants have feelings. But, only the smartest ones have emotions, positive and negative, and the positive emotions that are created come from correct reasoning while the negative emotions created come from faulty reasoning.*

Epictetus said in Book one, Chapter 18 of the *Discourses*: "If what the philosophers say be true, that all men's actions proceed from one source, namely feeling; that as they assent from a feeling that a thing is so, and dissent from a feeling that it is not, and suspend their judgment from a feeling that it is uncertain; so, likewise, they seek a thing from a feeling that it is to their advantage" And so on.

This brilliant insight is the source of all the trouble we Stoics have had from the beginning. It's really very simple, but at the same time it can be difficult to understand. Nature created feeling so that all living creatures could take care of themselves. I don't know HOW it created feeling, all I know is that it did.

Every living thing cares for itself above all other living things. As Epictetus just said, "[we] seek a thing from a feeling that it is to [our] advantage." That's the first principle of Stoic ethics. If you've read earlier

essays you know that already. What that means is that I, along with all living creatures, was created to care for myself more than I care about you or anyone else. You were created the same way. So was the family pet sleeping on the couch.

All of the sensory information from our environment that comes into us creates a feeling. That's what it is before the brain kicks in. Within seconds, psychologists say that within 3 seconds, a strong feeling of danger, for example, registers as a rational thought. There's a roaring lion or a large audience of people directly in front of me. Run!

Feelings are a good thing. They were created by Nature to serve a very valuable, even life-saving, purpose. But what we do with that feeling depends upon our belief *about* that feeling. That's what the reasoning mind does. If you don't have a reasoning mind you react to a feeling *instinctively*. Stoics say that as reasoning creatures we have a duty to react to feelings *reasonably*. That's all.

Of course, in cases of danger that require immediate action, such as a lion is crouching in front of us, the adrenaline of such a situation will likely overwhelm the reasoning faculty of even a sage, and we immediately prepare to fight or flee.

Feelings that are not immediately perceived as life threatening give the mind a chance to reason. If our reasoning is faulty it produces a negative emotion. The internal dialogue, the voice inside your head that talks to itself, says something like, "That jerk is flirting with my wife. I'm going to have to teach him a lesson," and the emotion of jealousy has taken hold.

That's the kind of emotion a Stoic cautions against. That's where we got our reputation of being against all emotions. We aren't. We define negative emotions as faulty reasoning about a situation. It's the internal dialogue that repeats a faulty belief over and over inside your head that created the emotion from a feeling. Our reasoning mind was also created by Nature and is thus a good thing. But when the reasoning mind makes a false judgment about the feeling, then that false judgment becomes an emotion.

The theologian and philosopher, Pascal said, "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of." Is that true? Yes, but only if you don't ask your heart what those reasons are. If you do, it won't take long to figure out the disconnect. It could be the heart is dead wrong, reacting instinctively to a situation that is better served with reason. Or, the heart may be correct. It may be seeing the issue from a perspective you haven't considered. The heart is not always wrong and not always right, but only reason will tell you which.

If your mind tells you one thing and your heart tells you another, then think about it, reason it out. "That guy is flirting with my wife and I want to

punch his lights out!" What can your reasoning faculty tell your jealous heart? "If she is in physical danger, then I will protect her."

On the other hand, if she doesn't want his flirtation advances, then she can deal with his foolishness in her own fashion. If she does want such attention and encourages it, then there is something else that needs to be considered. Your relationship may be on the rocks and need another kind of adjustment altogether. But to challenge the flirting guy to fisticuffs is exactly the kind of thing a Stoic would not do, because it shows a lack of thought, a lack of reason. A Stoic aspires to live according to Nature, and Nature made us to be reasonable. We do *not* strike first and ask questions later.

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WAITING

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What is a Stoic Philosopher?

What is a Stoic philosopher? One who knows Stoic principles and lives by them. You may think of a philosopher as a man, in the past it was usually a man, one who has a great intellect and who is often a professor at a renowned university. And, of course, our brilliant philosopher writes incomprehensible and abstract intellectual works of great linguistic density that is understood by 5% of the population. But that's not a Stoic philosopher. It could be, but not necessarily. A Stoic philosopher is one who knows Stoic principles and lives by them.

You may think that you could never be a philosopher because you don't have the kind of intelligence that makes you virtually incapable of functioning in any normal way. Can you even imagine a philosopher holding down a job in a bank or on a county road crew or as a drill instructor in the Army? A Stoic philosopher could. A Stoic philosopher is one who knows Stoic principles and lives by them.

A Stoic philosopher can be a man or woman of any race, color, or country of origin. And here's the best part: it has more to do with the nobility of your character than the nobility of your I.Q. *You* can be a Stoic philosopher. However, I should warn you: if you do this you will never be the same again. You will be unusual because your mind and heart and soul are no longer for sale, and not everyone will appreciate that. But you will.

* *

Mice People

When I was a very small boy and didn't know any better, I wanted to be an Indian when I grew up. I guess I should say I wanted to be a Native American when I grew up, but that doesn't make a lot of sense, does it? I was born here. Doesn't that automatically make me a native of America? Well, anyway, I recently read that Native Americans mostly call themselves Indians – even though they know they're not from India. It's all very confusing, and I don't want to talk about it any more.

I'm not sure how I got the idea that I wanted to be an Indian. I knew very little about them when I was a boy. My maternal grandfather would talk about them occasionally. When he was a boy he lived next to Red Cloud's tribe, and he played in their camp sometimes, but he didn't actually like them. He had the same prejudices as most American settlers in the West.

I lived with my parents in a tiny religious community in rural Oregon, and we didn't have TV or radio or newspapers. My parents were the same as the other parents in that community, and none of them wanted outside corrupting influences on their children. So, I don't know where I got the idea. I didn't know anyone else who wanted to be an Indian.

I spent a lot of time in the woods pretending to be an Indian. I took off my clothes, put chicken feathers in my hair, we had chickens, and I just wandered around alone in the woods for hours at a time. I don't remember actually *doing* anything. I was just there. My sister called me "Nature Boy."

*

The Lakotah Indians lived in the American Plains, that vast expanse at the center of our country. They had a brilliant way of understanding and describing people. It was a complex combination of psychology and cosmology that described life in a number of ways, but I will just talk about the four kinds of people there are in the world. They were named after four common animals the Lakotah lived with there on the Plains: Eagles, Buffalo, Bears, and Mice.

The Eagles were people with great vision and wisdom, such as chiefs and shamans. Buffalo people were providers, the hunters that supplied the tribe with all the physical means of survival: food, clothing, shelter. The Bears were the warriors, quick to anger and ready to fight at any provocation from outsiders. They were the protectors of the tribe. Everyone else was Mice People. The majority of the tribe, really. Unlike Eagles they had short-sighted vision, living life quietly with all that came their way as long as it was right in front of their noses.

I don't think we have any Mice People in the Stoic community. Until a few years ago, I corresponded by email with nearly everyone at one time or another, some I've emailed many times, and I have yet to meet a Stoic Mice

person. I don't think it's even possible at this time in our history as a people, we of the Stoic tribe. We've all come together from around the world, each with a separate vision of his own, united only by a philosophy that extends back over 2000 years. Most of us have spent a long time and considerable effort searching for the answers to life's difficult questions, and we've mostly done it on our own.

I'm looking forward to the day when we have Mice People in our community. I'm not sure when that will be, but probably not in my life time. These will be the second and third generation of 21st century Stoics who simply accept what has been handed down to them without a lot of fuss or question. They will be content to take care of the fine details of life that make up the fabric of our existence. Being a Stoic in the future will not seem so odd or weird, as it does today. We will still have leaders and warriors and business people, of course, but we will also have the blessing and bounty of many Mice People.

It will be a great day in Stoic history when the Mice People come.

* *

Don't be an Insect

This week it was too hot to eat, but I did it anyway. Old habits die hard. The other day I was eating my usual breakfast porridge with a small side of raw almonds. I also take a few vitamins just in case they're good for me.

I was eating the almonds one at a time when one of them tasted odd, somewhat chalky and slightly bitter. I spit it out. I don't often get a bad almond but this one certainly wasn't right. I examined it—or what was left of it. It was a multivitamin. I had picked up a vitamin instead of the almond. It was brown like an almond, and without paying attention to what I was eating it got chewed instead of swallowed with a glass of water.

We Stoics talk about mindfulness—and write about it. It's very Stoic, you know. In antiquity it was called *prosochē*. That's Greek for *attention*. Pierre Hadot, the French historian of philosophy, said it was *the* fundamental Stoic attitude.

If we are going to check the judgments of our internal dialogue, then we need to be aware of how we are reacting to every sensory impression and everything that comes into and out of us. All emotions, good and bad, flow from the judgments we have made. Marcus Aurelius often talks about being aware of the present moment, every moment. It's terribly important.

I've often thought that if I were an atheist, then learning and perfecting mindfulness would be the most important ability I could develop. If you have no hope of living beyond the present moment, and if that

present moment ceases with your last breath, then the least you can do is get the most out of each present moment possible. The only way you can maximize the reality of life while you still have it is to always live in the present, because that is where everything is happening. The past and the future don't really exist for us. The present is our only real reality.

Multitasking is the worst possible way to enjoy life. It may be efficient, and your boss may love you for it, but scattering our thoughts in this way makes it impossible to really know and enjoy what's happening as it happens. Life becomes a fast blur. The mind is flitting from one thing to another while trying to keep up with a third thing, or a fourth thing, and you're not living. This is being, or trying to be, an efficient machine. If you're eating—be there. If you're reading—be there. If you're walking—be there. If you're talking—be there, hear the words as you are saying them. Pay attention.

If you are not being mindful, if you are not paying attention, then you are only reacting instinctively, mindlessly, quickly and without focus, without reasoned judgment. You may as well be an insect. Now I can understand how you may prefer to daydream if you are doing a task that is tedious or distasteful. I've done it many times. You just put your body on autopilot and sail away—in your mind. Nature has given us that ability, and sometimes it's useful, but not all the time. Don't get addicted to it.

Practice mindfulness. If you're eating almonds—be there: see them, taste them, savor their fresh nutty flavor. It may be the last time you ever eat one. Make it memorable. Be mindful. All of life can be a celebration. The simplest act can be one of great beauty if you just look closely at it and watch it as it unfolds.

* *

Bill Gates, and others

*Everyone dies twice. The first time when your physical body dies;
the second time when no one remembers your name.*

Japanese saying

I like the word, philanthropy. It comes from two Greek words: *philos* and *anthropos*, which means a lover of humanity. Isn't that nice? Well, it could be and should be, but often it's not. I 'm sure most philanthropists mean well, or at least that's what they want everyone to think, but being a philanthropist and being an altruist is not necessarily one and the same thing. I'm sure some people become philanthropists because they like to see their name up in lights, proudly displayed for the world to remember—even after the physical body lays moldering in the grave.

In book one, Chapter 19 of *The Discourses*, Epictetus asks a man who was going to pay a lot of money to have his name written in a temple if he was planning to stand beside the inscription and tell everyone, "I am the person whose name is written there?"

Clearly this is the kind of "philanthropy" Marcus Aurelius talks about this in his *Meditations*, Bk 5, verse 6: He said, "One person who has done you a favor will openly claim credit for it. Another will secretly think of you as being in his debt. A third, hardly even knows what he has done. He is like a vine which has produced grapes and seeks for nothing more after it has produced its proper fruit. He is like the horse when it has run a race, a dog when it has tracked game, and a bee when it has made honey. The third man, when he has done a good act, does not call out for others to come and see, but he goes on to another act, just as a vine goes on to produce the grapes of a new season."

It could be that some philanthropists feel a little guilty about having so much while so many have so little. I read some statistics recently about wealth and income distribution. According to the United Nations University the richest 2% own half of the world's wealth. In America, the top 10% own 70% of America's wealth. And, here's an interesting statistic: Bill Gates alone has more wealth than 40% of the US population *combined*. That's one American having more wealth than the combined wealth of 120 million of his fellow Americans.

I don't know how Bill feels about that disparity, but he and his wife Melinda have become very public about giving most of his 60 billion dollars away. They are currently giving away literally billions of dollars to save lives, mostly in developing countries.

Hmm. Well, that sounds noble on the face of it. I guess. I saw a TV show where a camera followed them around while they were giving some of those billions away. One segment showed Melinda in a remote village in northern India where by providing simple health and hygiene care to newborn babies millions of deaths could be prevented. Something like 21 million infant deaths had been brought down to 9 million by these improvements. That's a gain in population of 12 million in this one corner of northern India alone!

Why am I not celebrating? They showed scenes of a typical village and it wasn't all agrarian bliss, I can tell you. Actually, it was filth, squalor, and abject poverty everywhere you looked. The sewage system was flowing through an open trench beneath the fresh water spigot the villagers had to use to get their drinking water – and no one appeared to know why they should care.

I guess the belief that you are saving lives feels more warm and fuzzy than financing public infrastructure projects like modern plumbing and

sewage treatment facilities, but what are all these lives you're saving going to do for employment to end their cycle of despair? By all means, promote health and hygiene *and birth control!* Perhaps no one had the courage to tell Bill and Melinda that India, in fact the whole world, *already* has more people than it can feed, clothe, and house.

If everyone on the planet had the same standard of living as the average American it would take *three* planets the size of Earth to provide the resources necessary to continue that lifestyle. If Bill Gates, et al, wanted to use their incomprehensible wealth to improve conditions on this planet, they should look to the true sources of human misery: ignorance, filth and squalor, and more children than can be fed and clothed. Don't double the population and make everyone live their lives in a toilet. To be a good *philos* and *anthropos*, a philanthropist, you must also be a good *philos* and *sophia*, a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. Start there.

* *

Allegory of the Doors

There was once a man who was walking on a path when he came to a great stone wall. This wall was so high and so wide that he couldn't climb over it or go around it, so he had to stop right where he was. He had heard about this wall from other travelers. They had called it the "Wall of Doubt." If this was the Wall of Doubt, then there must be doors in it, the Doors of Fate, and sure enough as he looked more carefully at the Wall he saw four doors framed in it.

He went to the first door and tried it, turning and pulling the door knob one way and another, but the door held fast and would not budge. The next door he tried he was able to open just a crack, certainly not wide enough for him to get through, and it stuck there, barely open. He couldn't push it open any further. The third door was like the first door and was impossible to open, but the fourth door opened rather easily with plenty of room for him to continue on his journey.

The man in our story was a Stoic, so he knew that if these were the Doors of Fate, and it certainly appeared that they were, it would be wise to for him to align his will with the will of Fate, and choose the door that opened readily. So, he did. He walked through the fourth door and continued on his path, knowing that he had made the correct choice.

*

"Hello?" I hear you say. "It's not like he really had a choice. Only one of the doors actually opened enough for him to go through, so it was really Fate

that made the choice, and he was just a passive and compliant follower. How can you say he even made a choice?"

Because he did. He chose the door Fate opened. He could have chosen any one of the other three doors. He could have stayed at one of the closed doors and pounded on it with determination and anger. He could have sat down and cried when it wouldn't open, and he could have shaken his fist at the gods because they were so uncooperative. But, he didn't. He was a Stoic, and he knew that he would be happiest when his will was in alignment with the will of Fate.

"But," I hear you protest. "Aren't we supposed to persevere even if at first we don't succeed? What if he could see through the door that opened a crack, and he could see that this was a path he really wanted? In that case, shouldn't he have tried harder to make this door work for him?"

Not necessarily. Remember where he is. This is the Wall of Doubt, not the Wall of Perseverance. There are four doors, not just one, and it isn't possible to know with certainty which door is the right one, the best one. When there is doubt, Fate can help us make our choice. We don't *have* to follow it. We can always refuse to continue on the path and put an end to our life.

Remember, not all walls are the same. There's the Wall of Doubt, The Wall of Perseverance, and the Wall of Decision. You know when you are at the Wall of Perseverance when there's just one door and it won't open. You know when you are at the Wall of Decision when two or more doors are open to you and you have to decide which one to pass through. But when you are at a wall with several doors and you try them all and only one opens, that's the Wall of Doubt, and the door that opens wide is the right one.

Take it.

* *

I don't know

I'm a Stoic, but I reserve the right to say, 'I don't know.' I'm a great believer in our motto, live in agreement with Nature, because I can do that and still keep an open mind. Stoics don't know everything there is to know about everything, and our understanding of Nature can evolve as we evolve. That's why I cannot be an atheist. I don't know the whole story.

Here's a story I heard from a Christian minister. One day, an atheist and God were standing around talking. The atheist was doing most of the talking, boasting, really, about how smart people were and how little they needed a god. "We can transplant hearts, replace various organs, build skyscrapers, and travel to the moon," the atheist said.

“Yes, and that really is impressive,” God said, “but can you create life from a handful of dirt?”

“Probably,” the atheist said, and he reached down to scoop up a handful of dirt.

“Hold on. Not so fast,” God said. “Get your own dirt.”

Once upon a time, people believed there were thousands of stars in the sky and that the twinkling lights we could see at night were gods or the departed souls of friends and relatives. Then with the aid of telescopes we could see they weren't gods or dead people and that there were not thousands but millions of them. Then we grouped them into galaxies and began to think of billions of stars. Now we can see that there are not just billions of stars but billions of galaxies, billions upon billions of lights twinkling in the night sky. And that's only the VISIBLE universe. There's an invisible universe we still don't know.

Dark energy makes up 74% of the Universe, and dark matter, the stuff that does not reflect or emit light makes up 22%. So, $74+22=96$, right? 96% of the cosmos is either dark energy or dark matter, which leaves only 4% for the gases, stars, planets, and galaxies that we can actually see. That's it! We see 4%. And what's worse, we don't even know what dark energy and dark matter really are. If we can't see or know what makes up 96% of our universe, how can we know for certainty that there is no god—or anything else for that matter? No pun intended.

What can we know for sure? There are so many ways to perceive the universe. Which one is the correct one? Compare the poor vision of human beings to that of the common housefly. Flies eyes are made up of *thousands* of individual lenses, what we call compound eyes. This annoying little disease vector is able to see both the polarization of light and color spectra in ways we know nothing of. And, they can detect even the slightest movement in a full, 360-degree spectrum. So, which one of us sees the world as it really is? I guess there's no question about which of us has the superior vision.

And, here's a new one to me. How about Gamma-ray vision? This kind of vision also rearranges our notions of reality in a spectacular way. With the Fermi space telescope we can now see an extreme universe of neutron stars, super-massive black holes, and particles moving at close to the speed of light smashing into gas in our galaxy. And that's just the visible universe NOW. What about tomorrow?

I don't know about dark energy or matter or gamma-ray vision, but I do know something about the world as perceived by a human being, nothing more or less. That's why I'm a Stoic. I don't know the whole story, or even very much of it, but Stoic philosophy seems to work best here in the human zone.

Astrology

Stoics in antiquity were interested in astrology because they believed that everything is a part of one grand Whole, and that everything affects everything, more or less. I don't think astrology is a bad thing, necessarily, but some people abuse it by becoming dependent upon it. It's not much of a science, despite what some astrologers will tell you, it's more like an art form in working with symbolic language, but such arcane operations of the mind is beyond the ability or patience of most people, and they prefer to leave it alone. That's OK. I can't blame them.

Astrology tells us that the minute we are born and take our first breath we are connected to the solar system at that exact moment in time. The location of the planets and their symbolic meaning tell us a great deal about our personality, and we become a living representation these planets and their relationships in the regions, called "houses," in the sky. Jupiter, the planet of good fortune (i.e., good luck), will either be a friend or a stranger to you according its location at the moment you were born.

I've noticed that people who are lucky are seldom interested in astrology. You don't go to the doctor when you're well. Astrology is more attractive to people whose lives are not measuring up to what they think it should be. Some go to astrologers; some go to Tarot card readers; some prefer getting their answers from a Ouija board. If you're desperate enough you'll try anything. Just ask someone facing death from an incurable disease. Same thing. All of a sudden faith healers, witch doctors, and exotic enemas become very attractive.

Many people go to philosophy instead of astrologers when they discover something strange even alienating about our familiar world. Stoics always said our philosophy was like a doctor for the soul. And it is. But we have to study the theory. No shortcuts there. We have to study and know that our only control is in the choices we make. That's the first step. Then we have to learn what choices boost us up and which ones pull us down. After we know that we have to put that knowledge into practice every day.

Becoming dependent upon answers from the great beyond encourages weakness, but becoming dependent upon our own reason encourages strength. If we are always looking outside ourselves for the answers we become dependent upon that outside source. Pretty soon, it's hard to make a move without consulting our astrologer or Tarot card reader or Ouija board. That kind of dependency is weakness.

Nature gave us reason for a reason. Philosophy should be our reference point. Knowing what we believe, why we believe it, and then putting it into practice builds courage, strength, and self-reliance.

Weakness or strength. The choice is ours.

Out of the Closet

There are those who suggest we remain quiet about being Stoics. Epictetus is one. He said that those who told all and sundry they were Stoic philosophers were like sheep who took a mouthful of grass and threw it up before it was digested. Instead we should eat the grass, digest it, then let it show in the beauty of our wool. Nice metaphor.

A very popular contemporary Stoic writer, an academic philosopher by profession, also says we should be quiet about being Stoics. He suggests that we should be "stealth" Stoics. I don't know about his metaphor. Was he saying that we should be like the stealth aircraft that is difficult to detect or track with radar? Are we supposed to be quiet about the Stoa because people might detect our interest in Stoic philosophy and give us a hard time about it?

This may have been good advice for the rich boys in Epictetus' class of 2000 years ago, but this is *not* the time for stealth. This may have been good advice for the timid, the fearful, and the shy, but we can no longer be quiet. The world needs us, they need us now, and the only way they're going to know we exist is to come out of the closet.

Say it to your self. Say it out loud. Say it to your family. Say it to your friends. Say it to anyone who will listen even if they don't want to hear it. Say it out loud and be proud that you follow the finest philosophy in the history of the world. Come out of the closet. Say it. Say it like you mean it. I am a Stoic!

* *

Do the Best You Can

Intention is everything to a Stoic. The misguided man who came up with the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions," was certainly *not* a Stoic. We don't believe it matters whether you hit the center of the target; it's the aim that counts. Another way of saying this is the old aphorism, "Just do the best you can." We don't hear that as much any more, not as often as we should. I don't know why. Maybe we've become too obsessed with being first, being successful regardless of the cost.

Albert Einstein was accused of laziness by his graduate professor when he was going to school. The professor told Albert that he was smart enough but unlikely to ever amount to anything because he was so lazy. I don't remember the professor's name. I'll bet you don't either.

It's important to remember that what is considered laziness in one culture may be considered normal in another. What about nature? Does nature prefer lazy people or workaholics? Does nature require each and everyone of us to be highly efficient every night and day? None of the other animals are.

Norman Rockwell, the 20th century American painter, claimed he worked from "exhaustion to exhaustion" every day. Every day. 364 ½ days of the year he painted in his studio. He *did* allow himself to take off Christmas morning to be with the family. One half day off every year.

Lazy Albert succeeded in science and workaholic Norman succeeded in art by just doing the best they could. The rest of us, the vast majority of humankind, both lazy and hard working alike, will never be known beyond a small circle of family and friends. We will never be rich and famous. No one will ever defer to us or refer to us with respect.

My maternal grandfather was considered lazy by his family, and perhaps he was. My grandmother and he were married for more than 60 years, and in all that time I guess she never tired of scolding him for his laziness. My mother always held him up as an example of the evils of laziness. And yet I adored him. He could tell stories for hours about all the cowboys and Indians he knew as a boy.

People liked him, and it was said that he never knew a stranger. When he was 70, he was elected Police Judge in his little town, even though he only had an 8th grade education. More than once he told me that a man should not work any more than he needed to put a roof over his head and beans on the table. He lived to be 86 years old and died in the middle of telling one of his many stories to a neighbor lady. His mind was sharp to the very end.

On the other side of the family, my paternal grandfather was shrewd and a hard worker who owned the largest business in town. You may have seen their product at your local supermarket. I never knew him, really, because he was too busy to bother with his grandchildren. I did hear people whisper that as a boss he was a real SOB. One family friend explained it by saying, "Well, when you make people work hard, of course they're not going to like you." He died comfortably well off and madder than a March hair.

I think that everyone, both lazy and hard workers alike, do the best they can most of the time. But all of us need to be encouraged on occasion, because there are times when life seems hard. When that happens, just do the best you can.

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