

Community Circles

The Pursuit of More, with Rev. Melanie Eyre

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“Erase the false impressions from your mind by constantly saying to yourself, I have it in my soul to keep out any evil, desire or any kind of disturbance – instead, seeing the true nature of things, I will give them only their due. Always remember this power that nature gives you.”

~ Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, 8.29

Hundreds of years ago, the Stoics gave us a philosophy for happiness that still resonates today. As a matter of fact, the Stoic approach is experiencing a renaissance of sorts as more and more people realize how wonderfully suited this philosophy is to the challenges and opportunities of our modern world.

The Stoics believed that the goal of any philosophy is to enable us to live a happy life. Indeed, if your philosophy does not result in a happy and meaningful life, they urge you to forget it and find another one. Any useful philosophy must fit our nature as rational human beings or it doesn't fit at all. It's our reason, informed by the study of philosophy, that gives us the capacity to live in a way that promotes our happiness.

The Stoics believed that we are not born knowing how to be happy, but that we need to work to develop this capacity. Do you agree?

So what did the Stoics mean by happiness? According to Seneca and others of this school, happiness consisted in living a life of virtue and personal integrity. Wealth, possessions, even good fortune are not required. ***Do you agree? What do you think adds up to a happy life? Why would living a life of personal integrity add up to a happy life?***

The good news is that whether we live such a life is always within our control. We always have a choice as to how we will behave regardless of life circumstances favoring or disfavoring us. Although we may have little or no control over the circumstances affecting us, when we maintain our integrity in the face of tragedy or good fortune, we maintain our equanimity, sense of self, and self-respect.

In this regard, the Stoics teach us to give no time to worry over those elements of life we cannot control, but to put our focus on those things we can impact. This is one of the central teachings of Stoicism, and it sounds so easy but in practice it is not. ***How does this work for you? Is this a teaching that helps you, and if so how?***

To help with this principle, the Stoics gave us the practice of *premeditatio malorum*, or meditating on troubles we fear may come. Examine them fully, realizing this event may come to pass. If it does, we are prepared. If it doesn't, we are grateful. ***What is your response to this***

practice? Have you tried it, and what was your experience? Isn't this the same as worrying, which they just told us not to do?

Closely related to this practice is the Stoic principle (and practice) of *amor fati*, or love of fate. Our lives are enriched by all of life and are diminished when we turn away or hide from any of it. As Marcus Aurelius put it “A blazing fire makes flame and brightness out of everything that is thrown into it.” We don't wish for anything to have happened differently. Instead, we welcome life, as it happens – all of it. *Is this a tall order? To you, is there any point in this principle? What would that point be?*

Ryan Holiday, author of many works on the Stoics, wrote about a gratitude practice he uses based on the principle of *amor fati*. Instead of listing those positives in his life (for which he was surely grateful) he modified his list to identify those challenges, disappointments or outright failures that had been his best teachers. He reflected on what each had taught him, how he had learned through them to live a life of greater happiness.

What is your thought on this practice? As you list those items in your life for which you're grateful, does your list ever include the challenges you've faced?