

September 20th
LIFE ISN'T A DANCE

"The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing, because an artful life requires being prepared to meet and withstand sudden and unexpected attacks."

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 7.61

Dancing is a popular metaphor for life. One must be limber and agile and go along with the music. One must feel and follow and flow with their partner. But anyone who has tried to do something difficult, where there is competition or an adversary, knows that the dancing metaphor is insufficient. Nobody ever gets up on stage and tries to tackle a dancer. The dancer never gets choked out by a rival.

For a wrestler, on the other hand, adversity and the unexpected are part and parcel of what they do. Their sport is a battle, just like life. They are fighting an opponent as well as their own limitations, emotions, and training.

Life, like wrestling, requires more than graceful movement. We have to undergo hard training and cultivate an indomitable will to prevail. Philosophy is the steel against which we sharpen that will and strengthen that resolve.

September 21st
MAINTAIN COMPOSURE, MAINTAIN CONTROL

"When forced, as it seems, by circumstances into utter confusion, get a hold of yourself quickly. Don't be locked out of the rhythm any longer than necessary. You'll be able to keep the beat if you are constantly returning to it."

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 6.11

We're going to get caught off guard from time to time. Not just by "black swan" type events—a terrorist attack or a financial panic—but also by minor, unexpected occurrences. Your car battery dies, your friend cancels at the last minute, you suddenly don't feel well. These situations have a way of throwing us into confusion and disarray. We've made an assumption about the world and built plans on top of that assumption. Now that the assumption has collapsed, so too might our organization or understanding.

That's perfectly OK! It happens. A line of infantrymen will face withering attacks—what's key is that they don't allow chaos to reign. Musicians will experience technical difficulties and lose their place from time to time. In both cases, it just matters that they get back into position as quickly as possible.

The same is true for you today. The order and the peace might be interrupted by a new circumstance. OK. Get a hold of yourself and find your way back.

September 22nd
NO PAIN, NO GAIN

“Difficulties show a person’s character. So when a challenge confronts you, remember that God is matching you with a younger sparring partner, as would a physical trainer. Why? Becoming an Olympian takes sweat! I think no one has a better challenge than yours, if only you would use it like an athlete would that younger sparring partner.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 1.24.1–2

The Stoics loved to use metaphors from the Olympics, especially wrestling. Like us, they saw sports as both a fun pastime as well as a training ground to practice for the challenges one will inevitably face in the course of living. As General Douglas MacArthur once said, in words later engraved at the gymnasium at West Point:

UPON THE FIELDS OF FRIENDLY STRIFE
 ARE SOWN THE SEEDS
 THAT, UPON OTHER FIELDS, ON OTHER DAYS
 WILL BEAR THE FRUITS OF VICTORY.

Everyone has found themselves outmatched by an opponent, frustrated by some skill or attribute they have that we don’t—height, speed, vision, whatever. How we choose to respond to that struggle tells us about who we are as athletes and who we’ll be as people. Do we see it as a chance to learn and get stronger? Do we get frustrated and complain? Or worse, do we call it off and find an easier game to play, one that makes us feel good instead of challenged?

The greats don’t avoid these tests of their abilities. They seek them out because they are not just the measure of greatness, they are the pathway to it.

September 23rd
THE MOST SECURE FORTRESS

“Remember that your ruling reason becomes unconquerable when it rallies and relies on itself, so that it won’t do anything contrary to its own will, even if its position is irrational. How much more unconquerable if its judgments are careful and made rationally? Therefore, the mind freed from passions is an impenetrable fortress—a person has no more secure place of refuge for all time.

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 8.48

Bruce Lee once made an interesting claim: “I fear not the man who has practiced ten thousand kicks once,” he said, “but I fear the man who has practiced one kick ten thousand times.” When we repeat an action so often it becomes unconscious behavior, we can default to it without thinking.

Training in the martial arts or combat is a deeply thoughtful study of movement. We sometimes think of soldiers as automatons, but what they’ve actually built is a steady pattern of unconscious behaviors. Any of us can build these.

When Marcus says that a mind can get to a place where “it won’t do anything contrary to its own will, even if its position is irrational,” what he means is that proper training can change your default habits. Train yourself to give up anger, and you won’t be angry at every fresh slight. Train yourself to avoid gossip, and you won’t get pulled into it. Train yourself on any habit, and you’ll be able to unconsciously go to that habit in trying times.

Think about which behaviors you’d like to be able to default to if you could. How many of them have you practiced only once? Let today be twice.

September 24th
IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU

“Being unexpected adds to the weight of a disaster, and being a surprise has never failed to increase a person’s pain. For that reason, nothing should ever be unexpected by us. Our minds should be sent out in advance to all things and we shouldn’t just consider the normal course of things, but what could actually happen. For is there anything in life that Fortune won’t knock off its high horse if it pleases her?”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 91.3a–4

In the year 64, during the reign of Nero, a fire tore through the city of Rome. The French city of Lyons sent a large sum of money to aid the victims. The next year the citizens of Lyons were suddenly struck by a tragic fire of their own, prompting Nero to send an equal sum to its victims. As Seneca wrote about the event to a friend in one of his letters, he must have been struck by the poetry—one city helping another, only to be struck by similar disaster not long after.

How often does that happen to us? We comfort a friend during a breakup, only to be surprised when our own relationship ends. We must prepare in our minds for the possibility of extreme reversals of fate. The next time you make a donation to charity, don’t just think about the good turn you’re doing, but take a moment to consider that one day you may need to receive charity yourself.

As far as we know, Seneca truly *lived* these words. Just a year or so after writing this letter, he was falsely accused of plotting against Nero. The price? Seneca was sentenced to commit suicide. As the historian Tacitus relates the scene, Seneca’s closest friends wept and protested the verdict. “Where,” Seneca asked them repeatedly, “are your maxims of philosophy, or the preparations of so many years’ study against evils to come? Who knew not Nero’s cruelty?” That is: he knew it could happen to him too, and so he was prepared for it.

September 25th
THE VULNERABILITY OF DEPENDENCE

“Show me someone who isn’t a slave! One is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to power, and all are slaves to fear. I could name a former Consul who is a slave to a little old woman, a millionaire who is the slave of the cleaning woman. . . . No servitude is more abject than the self-imposed.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 47.17

We’re *all* addicts in one way or another. We’re addicted to our routines, to our coffee, to our comfort, to someone else’s approval. These dependencies mean we’re not in control of our own lives—the dependency is.

“Anyone who truly wants to be free,” Epictetus said, “won’t desire something that is actually in someone else’s control, unless they want to be a slave.” The subjects of our affection can be removed from us at a moment’s notice. Our routines can be disrupted, the doctor can forbid us from drinking coffee, we can be thrust into uncomfortable situations.

This is why we must strengthen ourselves by testing these dependencies before they become too great. Can you try going without this or that for a day? Can you put yourself on a diet for a month? Can you resist the urge to pick up the phone to make that call? Have you ever taken a cold shower? It’s not so bad after the first couple of times. Have you ever driven a friend’s car while the nicer one you own was in the shop? Was it really that bad? Make yourself invulnerable to your dependency on comfort and convenience, or one day your vulnerability might bring you to your knees.

September 26th
WHAT TIME OFF IS FOR

“Leisure without study is death—a tomb for the living person.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 82.4

You deserve a vacation. You work hard. You sacrifice. You push yourself. It's time for a break. Hop a plane, check into your hotel, and head to the beach—but tuck a book under your arm (and not a trashy beach read). Make sure you enjoy your relaxation like a poet—not idly but *actively*, observing the world around you, taking it all in, better understanding your place in the universe. Take a day off from work every now and then, but not a day off from learning.

Maybe your goal is to make enough money so that you can retire early. Good for you! But the purpose of retirement is not to live a life of indolence or to run out the clock, as easy as that might be to do. Rather, it's to allow for the pursuit of your real calling now that a big distraction is out of the way. To sit around all day and do nothing? To watch endless amounts of television or simply travel from place to place so that you might cross locations off a checklist? That is not life. It's not freedom either.

September 27th
WHAT WILL PROSPERITY REVEAL?

“For even peace itself will supply more reason for worry. Not even safe circumstances will bring you confidence once your mind has been shocked—once it gets in the habit of blind panic, it can't provide for its own safety. For it doesn't really avoid danger, it just runs away. Yet we are exposed to greater danger with our backs turned.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 104.10b

There's an old proverb that money doesn't change people, it just makes them more of who they are. Robert Caro has written that “power doesn't corrupt, it *reveals*.” In some ways, prosperity—financial and personal—is the same way.

If your mind has developed a certain cast—the habit of panicking, in Seneca's example—then it won't matter how good things get for you. You're still primed for panic. Your mind will still find things to worry about, and you'll still be miserable. Perhaps more so even, because now you have more to lose.

This is why it's foolish to hope for good fortune. If you were to hope for one thing, you could hope for the strength of character that's able to thrive in good fortune. Or better, *work* for that kind of character and confidence. Consider every action and every thought—think of them as building blocks of your indestructible character. Then work to make each one strong and significant in its own right.

September 28th
YOU HOLD THE TRUMP CARD

“How appropriate that the gods put under our control only the most powerful ability that governs all the rest—the ability to make the right use of external appearances—and that they didn’t put anything else under our control. Was this simply because they weren’t willing to give us more? I think if it had been possible they would have given us more, but it was impossible.

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 1.1.7–8

We could look at the upcoming day and despair at all the things we don’t control: other people, our health, the temperature, the outcome of a project once it leaves our hands.

Or we could look out at that very same day and rejoice at the one thing we do control: the ability to decide what any event means.

This second option offers the ultimate power—a true and fair form of control. If you had control over other people, wouldn’t other people have control over you? Instead, what you’ve been granted is the fairest and most usable of trump cards. While you don’t control external events, you retain the ability to decide how you *respond* to those events. You control what every external event means to you personally.

This includes the difficult one in front of you right now. You’ll find, if you approach it right, that this trump card is plenty.

September 29th
YOUR ACTUAL NEEDS ARE SMALL

“Nothing can satisfy greed, but even a small measure satisfies nature. So it is that the poverty of an exile brings no misfortune, for no place of exile is so barren as not to produce ample support for a person.”

—SENECA, *ON CONSOLATION TO HELVIA*, 10.11b

It can be beneficial to reflect on what you used to accept as normal. Consider your first paycheck—how *big* it seemed then. Or your first apartment, with its own bedroom and bathroom and the ramen you gladly scarfed down in the kitchen. Today, as you’ve become more successful, these conditions would hardly feel sufficient. In fact, you probably want even more than what you have right now. Yet just a few years ago those paltry conditions were not only enough, they felt great!

When we become successful, we forget how strong we used to be. We are so used to what we have, we half believe we’d die without it. Of course, this is just the comfort talking. In the days of the world wars, our parents and grandparents made do with rationed gas, butter, and electricity. They were fine, just as you have been fine when you had less.

Remember today that you’d be OK if things suddenly went wrong. Your actual needs are small. There is very little that could happen that would truly threaten your survival. Think about that—and adjust your worries and fears accordingly.