

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.

September 30th
YOU CAN'T TOUCH ME

"If you lay violent hands on me, you'll have my body, but my mind will remain with Stilpo."

—ZENO, QUOTED IN DIOGENES LAERTIUS,
LIVES OF THE EMINENT PHILOSOPHERS, 7.1.24

Zeno is not claiming magic powers but simply that while his body can be victimized, philosophy protects his mind—cultivated under his teacher, Stilpo—with an inner fortress whose gates can never be broken from the outside, only surrendered.

Look at Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, the boxer wrongly convicted of homicide who spent nearly twenty years in prison. He would say, "I don't acknowledge the existence of the prison. It doesn't exist for me." Of course, the prison literally existed, and he was physically inside it. But he refused to let his mind be contained by it.

That's a power that you have too. Hopefully you'll never have to use this power in a situation of violence or grave injustice; however, in the midst of any and every kind of adversity, it is there. No matter what's happening to your body, no matter what the outside world inflicts on you, your mind can remain philosophical. It's still yours. It's untouchable—and in a way, then, so are you.

October 1st
LET VIRTUE SHINE BRIGHT

“Does the light of a lamp shine and keep its glow until its fuel is spent? Why shouldn’t your truth, justice, and self-control shine until you are extinguished?”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 12.15

Seneca, repeating Heraclitus, writes that “we mortals are lighted and extinguished.” The light of reason suffuses the universe. Whether the wick of your lamp is being lit for the first time, after a long period of darkness, or even right before the proverbial big sleep, it makes no difference.

Here is where you are right now, and it’s as good a place as any to let virtue shine and continue to shine for as long as you exist.

October 2nd
THE MOST VALUABLE ASSET

“But the wise person can lose nothing. Such a person has everything stored up for themselves, leaving nothing to Fortune, their own goods are held firm, bound in virtue, which requires nothing from chance, and therefore can’t be either increased or diminished.”

—SENECA, *ON THE FIRMNESS OF THE WISE*, 5.4

Some people put their money in assets—stocks, bonds, property. Others invest in relationships or accomplishments, knowing that they can draw on these things just as easily as others can draw funds from a bank account. But a third type, Seneca says, invests in themselves—in being a good and wise person.

Which of these assets is most immune to market fluctuations and disasters? Which is most resilient in the face of trials and tribulations? Which will never abandon you? Seneca’s own life is an interesting example. He became quite wealthy as a friend of the emperor, but as Nero became more and more deranged, Seneca realized he needed to get out. He offered Nero a deal: he would give Nero all his money and return all of Nero’s gifts in exchange for complete and total freedom.

Ultimately, Nero rejected this offer, but Seneca left anyway, retiring in relative peace. But one day, the executioners came with their mortal decree. In that moment, what did Seneca rely on? It wasn’t his money. It wasn’t his friends, who, although they meant well, were a considerable source of grief and mourning. It was his virtue and inner strength.

It was Seneca’s most trying moment—his last and his finest.

October 3rd

A MANTRA OF MUTUAL INTERDEPENDENCE

“Meditate often on the interconnectedness and mutual interdependence of all things in the universe. For in a sense, all things are mutually woven together and therefore have an affinity for each other—for one thing follows after another according to their tension of movement, their sympathetic stirrings, and the unity of all substance.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 6.38

Anne Lamott once observed that all writers “are little rivers running into one lake,” all contributing to the same big project. The same is true in many industries—though sadly, even inside the same company, people selfishly forget they’re working together. As human beings we all breathe the atoms that made up our ancestors and flow into the same earth when we die.

Over and over again, the Stoics reminded themselves of the interconnectedness of life. Perhaps that was because life in Greece and Rome was particularly harsh. Animals and people were slaughtered senselessly to amuse the masses in the Colosseum (events lamented in the Stoic writings). Countries were conquered and its citizens sold into slavery to expand the empire (the futility of which the Stoics also lamented). This kind of cruelty is possible only when we forget how we’re related to our fellow human beings and the environment.

Today, take a moment to remember that we are woven together and that each of us plays a role (good, bad, or ugly) in this world.

October 4th

ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL

“That which isn’t good for the hive, isn’t good for the bee.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 6.54

Inherent in the Stoic concept of *sympatheia* is the notion of an interconnected cosmos in which everything in the universe is part of a larger whole. Marcus Aurelius was one of the first writers to articulate the notion of cosmopolitanism—saying that he was a citizen of the world, not just of Rome.

The idea that you’re a bee in the hive is a reminder of this perspective. Marcus even states the reverse of that idea later in his *Meditations*, just so he doesn’t forget: “That which doesn’t harm the community can’t harm the individual.”

Just because something is bad for you doesn’t mean it’s bad for everyone. Just because something is good for you definitely doesn’t mean it’s good for everyone. Think of the hedge fund managers who bet massively against the economy—they profited by rooting for essentially everyone and everything else to fail. Is that who you want to be? A good Stoic understands that proper impulses, and the right actions that arise from them, naturally carry the good of the whole, which is the wise person’s only good. Conversely, good and wise actions by the whole are what’s good for the individual.

October 5th
WORDS CAN'T BE UNSAID

“Better to trip with the feet than with the tongue.”

—ZENO, QUOTED IN DIOGENES LAERTIUS,
LIVES OF THE EMINENT PHILOSOPHERS, 7.1.26

You can always get up after you fall, but remember, what has been said can never be unsaid. Especially cruel and hurtful things.

October 6th
LOOKING OUT FOR EACH OTHER

“It’s in keeping with Nature to show our friends affection and to celebrate their advancement, as if it were our very own. For if we don’t do this, virtue, which is strengthened only by exercising our perceptions, will no longer endure in us.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 109.15

Watching other people succeed is one of the toughest things to do—especially if we are not doing well ourselves. In our hunter-gatherer minds, we suspect that life is a zero-sum game—that for someone to have more means that we might end up with less.

But like all parts of philosophy, empathy and selflessness are a matter of practice. As Seneca observed, it’s possible to learn to “rejoice in all their successes and be moved by their every failure.” This is what a virtuous person does.

They teach themselves to actively cheer for other people—even in cases where that might come at their own expense—and to put aside jealousy and possessiveness. You can do that too.