

October 12th
ALWAYS LOVE

“Hecato says, ‘I can teach you a love potion made without any drugs, herbs, or special spell—if you would be loved, love.’”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 9.6

In 1992, Barbara Jordan addressed the Democratic National Convention and railed against the greed and selfishness and divisiveness of the previous decade. People were ready for a change. “Change it to what?” she asked. “Change that environment of the 80s to an environment which is characterized by a devotion to the public interest, public service, tolerance, and love. Love. Love. Love.”

Love. Love. Love. Love. Why? Because, as the Beatles put it, “In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.” Not just in politics, not just in tolerance, but in our personal lives. There is almost no situation in which hatred helps. Yet almost every situation is made better by love—or empathy, understanding, appreciation—even situations in which you are in opposition to someone.

And who knows, you might just get some of that love back.

October 13th

REVENGE IS A DISH BEST NOT SERVED

“The best way to avenge yourself is to not be like that.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 6.6

“How much better to heal than seek revenge from injury. Vengeance wastes a lot of time and exposes you to many more injuries than the first that sparked it. Anger always outlasts hurt. Best to take the opposite course. Would anyone think it normal to return a kick to a mule or a bite to a dog?”

—SENECA, *ON ANGER*, 3.27.2

Let's say that someone has treated you rudely. Let's say someone got promoted ahead of you because they took credit for your work or did something dishonest. It's natural to think: *Oh, that's how the world works*, or *One day it will be my turn to be like that*. Or most common: *I'll get them for this*. Except these are the worst possible responses to bad behavior.

As Marcus and Seneca both wrote, the proper response—indeed the best revenge—is to exact no revenge at all. If someone treats you rudely and you respond with rudeness, you have not done anything but prove to them that they were justified in their actions. If you meet other people's dishonesty with dishonesty of your own, guess what? You're proving them right—now everyone *is* a liar.

Instead, today, let's seek to be better than the things that disappoint or hurt us. Let's try to be the example we'd like others to follow. It's awful to be a cheat, to be selfish, to feel the need to inflict pain on our fellow human beings. Meanwhile, living morally and well is quite nice.

October 14th

DON'T GET MAD. HELP

“Are you angry when someone’s armpits stink or when their breath is bad? What would be the point? Having such a mouth and such armpits, there’s going to be a smell emanating. You say, they must have sense, can’t they tell how they are offending others? Well, you have sense too, congratulations! So, use your natural reason to awaken theirs, show them, call it out. If the person will listen, you will have cured them without useless anger. No drama nor unseemly show required.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 5.28

The person sitting next to you on the plane, the one who is loudly chattering and knocking around in your space? The one you’re grinding your teeth about, hating from the depth of your soul because they’re rude, ignorant, obnoxious? In these situations, you might feel it takes everything you have to restrain yourself from murdering them.

It’s funny how *that* thought comes into our heads before, you know, politely asking them to stop, or making the minor scene of asking for a different seat. We’d rather be pissed off, bitter, raging inside than risk an awkward conversation that might actually help this person and make the world a better place. We don’t just want people to be better, we expect it to magically happen—that we can simply will other people to change, burning holes into their skull with our angry stare.

Although when you think about it that way, it makes you wonder who the rude one actually is.

October 15th

GIVE PEOPLE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

“Everything turns on your assumptions about it, and that’s on you. You can pluck out the hasty judgment at will, and like steering a ship around the point, you will find calm seas, fair weather and a safe port.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 12.22

“**E**ven a dog,” Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “distinguishes between being stumbled over and being kicked.” Yet if you’ve ever accidentally stepped on your dog, you know that the first reaction is usually a bark or a yelp or a quick snap of the jaws. In the instant, there is no distinction—just pain. Then it sees who it was, hears your soothing voice, and goes right back to wagging its tail.

A virtuous person does not jump to hasty judgments about other people. A virtuous person is generous with assumptions: that something was an accident, that someone didn’t know, that it won’t happen again. This makes life easier to bear and makes us more tolerant. Meanwhile, assuming malice—the most hasty of judgments—makes everything harder to bear.

Be deliberate and accommodating with your assumptions about other people and you’ll find, as Marcus says, calmer seas and fairer weather.

October 16th
SPREAD THE WORD

“Some people with exceptional minds quickly grasp virtue, or produce it within themselves. But other dim and lazy types, hindered by bad habits, must have their rusty souls constantly scrubbed down. . . . The weaker sorts will be helped and lifted from their bad opinions if we put them in the care of philosophy’s principles.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 95.36–37

Stoicism is not an evangelical religion. You’re not obligated to save anyone—there’s no risk of hell if a soul remains in ignorance of the teachings of Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius.

But now that you’ve learned and studied a better path, you can be of service to others. You can share your wisdom or insight with a friend or stranger—remembering that behavior is always a better example than a lecture.

Everyone deserves to benefit from “philosophy’s principles” as Seneca put it. If you see someone who is in need of help, or has asked for guidance, provide it. You owe them that much.

October 19th

GOOD HABITS DRIVE OUT BAD HABITS

“Since habit is such a powerful influence, and we’re used to pursuing our impulses to gain and avoid outside our own choice, we should set a contrary habit against that, and where appearances are really slippery, use the counterforce of our training.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 3.12.6

When a dog is barking loudly because someone is at the door, the worst thing you can do is yell. To the dog, it’s like you’re barking too! When a dog is running away, it’s not helpful to chase it—again, now it’s like you’re both running. A better option in both scenarios is to give the dog something else to do. Tell it to sit. Tell it to go to its bed or kennel. Run in the other direction. Break the pattern, interrupt the negative impulse.

The same goes for us. When a bad habit reveals itself, counteract it with a commitment to a contrary virtue. For instance, let’s say you find yourself procrastinating today—don’t dig in and fight it. Get up and take a walk to clear your head and reset instead. If you find yourself saying something negative or nasty, don’t kick yourself. Add something positive and nice to qualify the remark.

Oppose established habits, and use the counterforce of training to get traction and make progress. If you find yourself cutting corners during a workout or on a project, say to yourself: “OK, now I am going to go even further or do even better.”

Good habits have the power to drive out bad habits. And habits are easy to pick up—as we all know.

October 20th
MARKS OF THE GOOD LIFE

“You have proof in the extent of your wanderings that you never found the art of living anywhere—not in logic, nor in wealth, fame, or in any indulgence. Nowhere. Where is it then? In doing what human nature demands. How is a person to do this? By having principles be the source of desire and action. What principles? Those to do with good and evil, indeed in the belief that there is no good for a human being except what creates justice, self-control, courage and freedom, and nothing evil except what destroys these things.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 8.1.(5)

What's the meaning of life? Why was I born? Most of us struggle with these questions—sometimes when we're young, sometimes not until we're older. Rarely do we find much in the way of direction. But that's simply because we miss the point. As Viktor Frankl points out in *Man's Search for Meaning*, it is not our question to ask. Instead, it is *we* who are being asked the question. It's our lives that are the answer.

No amount of travel or reading or clever sages can tell you what you want to know. Instead, it is *you* who must find the answer in your actions, in living the good life—by embodying the self-evident principles of justice, self-control, courage, freedom, and abstaining from evil.

October 21st
HEROES, HERE AND NOW

“Such behavior! People don’t want to praise their contemporaries whose lives they actually share, but hold great expectations for the praise of future generations—people they haven’t met or ever will! This is akin to being upset that past generations didn’t praise you.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 6.18

Alexandria, the city in Egypt, still bears the name of its founder, Alexander the Great, some 2,300 years after he set foot there. How cool would it feel to have a city named after you for so many centuries? To know that people are still saying your name?

Here’s a thought: it wouldn’t be cool. Because, like Alexander, you’ll be dead. You’ll have no idea whether your name lasted down through the centuries. No one gets to enjoy their own legacy—by definition.

Worse, think of all the horrible things Alexander did to achieve what he did. He fought pointless wars. He had a terrible temper—even killing his best friend in a drunken fight. He was ruthless and a slave to his ambition. Is he really so admirable?

Instead of wasting even a second considering the opinions of future people—people who are not even born yet—focus every bit of yourself on being the best person you can be in the present moment. On doing the right thing, right now. The distant future is irrelevant. Be good and noble and impressive now—while it still matters.

October 22nd

IT'S EASY TO GET BETTER. BUT BETTER AT WHAT?

“So someone’s good at taking down an opponent, but that doesn’t make them more community-minded, or modest, or well-prepared for any circumstance, or more tolerant of the faults of others.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 7.52

Self-improvement is a noble pursuit. Most people don’t even bother. But among those who do, it’s possible for vanity and superficiality to corrupt this process. Do you want six-pack abs because you are challenging yourself and committing to a difficult goal? Or is it because you want to impress people with your shirt off? Are you running that marathon because you want to test your limits or because you’re running away from your problems at home?

Our will shouldn’t be directed at becoming the person who is in perfect shape or who can speak multiple languages but who doesn’t have a second for other people. What’s the point of winning at sports but losing in the effort to be a good husband, wife, father, mother, son, or daughter? Let’s not confuse getting better at *stuff* with being a better *person*. One is a much bigger priority than the other.

October 23rd

SHOW THE QUALITIES YOU WERE MADE FOR

“People aren’t in awe of your sharp mind? So be it. But you have many other qualities you can’t claim to have been deprived of at birth. Display then those qualities in your own power: honesty, dignity, endurance, chastity, contentment, frugality, kindness, freedom, persistence, avoiding gossip, and magnanimity.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 5.5

It’s easy to blame our circumstances. One person curses that they weren’t born taller, another that they’re not smarter, with a different complexion, or born in a different country. It’d be hard to find a single person on this planet—from supermodels on down—who doesn’t think they’re deficient in at least some way. But whatever your perceived deficits are, remember that there are positive qualities that you can develop that don’t depend on genetic accidents.

You have the *choice* to be truthful. You have the *choice* to be dignified. You can *choose* to endure. You can *choose* to be happy. You can choose to be chaste. You can choose to be thrifty. You can choose to be kind to others. You can choose to be free. You can persist under difficult odds. You can avoid trafficking in gossip. You can choose to be gracious.

And honestly, aren’t the traits that are the result of effort and skill more impressive anyway?