November 1st
ACCEPTING WHAT IS

"Don't seek for everything to happen as you wish it would, but rather wish that everything happens as it actually will—then your life will flow well."

—EPICTETUS, *ENCHIRIDION*, 8

"It is easy to praise providence for anything that may happen if you have two qualities: a complete view of what has actually happened in each instance and a sense of gratitude. Without gratitude what is the point of seeing, and without seeing what is the object of gratitude?"

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 1.6.1–2

Something happened that we wish had not. Which of these is easiest to change: our opinion or the event that is past?

The answer is obvious. Accept what happened and change your wish that it had not happened. Stoicism calls this the "art of acquiescence"—to accept rather than fight every little thing.

And the most practiced Stoics take it a step further. Instead of simply *accepting* what happens, they urge us to actually *enjoy* what has happened—whatever it is. Nietzsche, many centuries later, coined the perfect expression to capture this idea: *amor fati* (a love of fate). It's not just accepting, it's *loving* everything that happens.

To wish for what has happened to happen is a clever way to avoid disappointment because nothing is contrary to your desires. But to actually feel gratitude for what happens? To love it? That's a recipe for happiness and joy.

November 2nd
BINDING OUR WISHES TO WHAT WILL BE

"But I haven't at any time been hindered in my will, nor forced against it. And how is this possible? I have bound up my choice to act with the will of God. God wills that I be sick, such is my will. He wills that I should choose something, so do I. He wills that I reach for something, or something be given to me—I wish for the same. What God doesn't will, I do not wish for."

—Epictetus, *Discourses*, 4.1.89

When General Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote to his wife on the eve of the invasion of Normandy, he told her, "Everything we could think of has been done, the troops are fit, everybody is doing his best. The answer is in the lap of the gods." He'd done everything he could—and now, what would happen would happen and as Epictetus might say, he was ready to bear whatever that was. In fact, Eisenhower had written another letter that night and prepared it for release in case the invasion failed. If failure was what God—or fate or luck or whatever you want to call it—willed, he was ready.

There is a wonderful lesson there. The man in charge of perhaps the most powerful army the world had ever assembled, on the eve of the most expertly organized and planned invasion the world will hopefully ever know, was humble enough to know that the outcome ultimately belonged to someone or something bigger than him.

And so it goes with all our ventures. No matter how much preparation, no matter how skilled or smart we are, the ultimate outcome is in the lap of the gods. The sooner we know that, the better we will be.

November 3rd
FOLLOWING THE DOCTOR'S ORDERS

"Just as we commonly hear people say the doctor prescribed someone particular riding exercises, or ice baths, or walking without shoes, we should in the same way say that nature prescribed someone to be diseased, or disabled, or to suffer any kind of impairment. In the case of the doctor, prescribed means something ordered to help aid someone's healing. But in the case of nature, it means that what happens to each of us is ordered to help aid our destiny."

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.8.

The Stoics were masters at analogies and used them as a tool to help strengthen their reasoning.

Here, Marcus observes how willingly we will put up with unpleasantness if commanded to by the magic words "doctor's orders." The doctor says you've got to take this nasty medicine, and you'll do it. The doctor tells you you have to start sleeping hanging upside down like a bat. You'll feel silly, but soon enough you'll get to dangling because you think it will make you better.

On the other hand, when it comes to external events, we fight like hell if anything happens contrary to our plans. But what if, Marcus asks, a doctor had prescribed this exact thing as a part of our treatment? What if this was as good for us as medicine?

Well, what if?

November 4th
NOT GOOD, NOR BAD

"There is no evil in things changing, just as there is no good in persisting in a new state."

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.42

When people say change is good, they're usually trying to reassure someone (or themselves). Because instinctively we view change as bad—or at least we're suspicious of it.

The Stoics want you to do away with those labels altogether. Change isn't good. The status quo isn't bad. They just *are*.

Remember, events are objective. It's only our opinion that says something is good or bad (and thus worth fighting against or fighting for). A better attitude? To decide to make the most of everything. But to do that you must first cease fighting.

November 5th
A HIGHER POWER

"This is the very thing which makes up the virtue of the happy person and a well-flowing life—when the affairs of life are in every way tuned to the harmony between the individual divine spirit and the will of the director of the universe."

—Chrysippus, quoted in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 7.1.88

In undergoing a twelve-step program, many addicts struggle most with step 2: acknowledging a higher power. Addicts often fight this one. At first they claim it's because they're atheists or because they don't like religion or because they don't understand why it matters.

But they later realize that this is just the addiction talking—it's another form of selfishness and self-absorption. The actual language of the step is pretty easy to swallow: "[We] came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." Subsequent steps ask the addict to submit and let go. The second step really has less to do with "god" than those other steps—the letting go. It's about attuning to the universe and discarding the toxic idea that we're at the center of it.

It's no wonder that the Stoics are popular with those in twelve-step programs. It's also clear that this wisdom is beneficial to us all. You don't have to believe there is a god directing the universe, you just need to stop believing that *you're* that director. As soon as you can attune your spirit to that idea, the easier and happier your life will be, because you will have given up the most potent addiction of all: control.

November 6th
SOMEONE ELSE IS SPINNING THE THREAD

"If the breaking day sees someone proud,
The ending day sees them brought low.
No one should put too much trust in triumph,
No one should give up hope of trials improving.
Clotho mixes one with the other and stops
Fortune from resting, spinning every fate around.
No one has had so much divine favor
That they could guarantee themselves tomorrow.
God keeps our lives hurtling on,
Spinning in a whirlwind."

—SENECA, *THYESTES*, 613

The novelist Cormac McCarthy was living in a motel room when he heard a knock at the door. It was a messenger—he'd been awarded the MacArthur "genius" grant and $250,000. Unexpected events can be good as well as bad.

Who could dream of such an unexpected twist? Who but Clotho, one of the three Greek goddesses of fate, who "spins" the thread of human life? To the ancients, she was the one who decided the course of the events of our lives—some good, some bad. As the playwright Aeschylus wrote, "When the gods send evil, one cannot escape it." The same was true for great destiny and good fortune.

Their resigned attitude might seem strange to us today, but they understood who was really in control (not them, not us!). No amount of prosperity, no amount of difficulty, is certain or forever. A triumph becomes a trial, a trial becomes a triumph. Life can change in an instant. Remember, today, how often it does.

October 7th
A SELFISH REASON TO BE GOOD

"The person who does wrong, does wrong to themselves. The unjust person is unjust to themselves—making themselves evil."

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 9.4

The next time you do something wrong, try to remember how it made you feel. Rarely does one say, "I felt great!"

There is a reason there's often vomit at crime scenes. Instead of the catharsis the person thought they'd feel when they let themselves get out of control or when they got their revenge, they ended up making themselves sick. We feel a version of this when we lie, when we cheat, when we screw someone over.

So in that split second before your ill-gotten gains kick in, ask: *How do I feel about myself?* Is that moment when fear rises in your throat because you suspect you may get caught really worth it?

Self-awareness and wrongdoing rarely go together. If you need a selfish reason to not do wrong—put yourself in touch with these feelings. They're a powerful disincentive.

November 8th
ACTORS IN A PLAY

"Remember that you are an actor in a play, playing a character according to the will of the playwright—if a short play, then it's short; if long, long. If he wishes you to play the beggar, play even that role well, just as you would if it were a cripple, a honcho, or an everyday person. For this is your duty, to perform well the character assigned you. That selection belongs to another."

—EPICTETUS, *ENCHIRIDION*, 17

Marcus Aurelius didn't want to be emperor. He wasn't a politician who sought office, and he wasn't a true heir to the throne. As far as we can tell from his letters and from history, what he really wanted was to be a philosopher. But the powerful elite in Rome, including the emperor Hadrian, saw something in him. Groomed for power, Marcus was adopted and put in line for the throne because they knew he could handle it. Meanwhile, Epictetus lived much of his life as a slave and was persecuted for his philosophical teachings. Both did quite a lot with the roles they were assigned.

Our station in life can be as random as a roll of the dice. Some of us are born into privilege, others into adversity. Sometimes we're given exactly the opportunities we want. At other times we're given a lucky break, but to us it feels like a burden.

The Stoics remind us that whatever happens to us today or over the course of our lives, wherever we fall on the intellectual, social, or physical spectra, our job is not to complain or bemoan our plight but to do the best we can to accept it and fulfill it. Is there still room for flexibility or ambition? Of course! The history of the stage is littered with stories of bit parts that turned into starring roles and indelible characters that were expanded in future adaptations. But even this begins with acceptance and understanding—and a desire to excel at what we have been assigned.