November 9th

ALL IS FLUID

"The universe is change. Life is opinion."

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.3.4b

In Plutarch's *Life of Theseus,* he describes how the ship of Theseus, an Athenian hero, was preserved by the people of Athens in battle-ready condition for many centuries. Each time a board decayed, it would be replaced until eventually every stick of wood in it had been replaced. Plutarch asks: Is it still the ship of Theseus, or is it a new one?

In Japan, a famous Shinto shrine is rebuilt every twenty-three years. It's gone through more than sixty of those cycles. Is it one shrine, 1,400 years old? Or sixty consecutive shrines? Even the U.S. Senate, given its staggered elections, could be said to have never been fully turned over. Is it the same body formed in the days of George Washington?

Our understanding of what something *is* is just a snapshot—an ephemeral opinion. The universe is in a constant state of change. Our nails grow and are cut and keep growing. New skin replaces dead skin. Old memories are replaced by new memories. Are we still the same people? Are the people around us the same? Nothing is exempt from this fluidity, not even the things we hold most sacred.

November 10th
ALWAYS THE SAME

"Think by way of example on the times of Vespasian, and you'll see all these things: marrying, raising children, falling ill, dying, wars, holiday feasts, commerce, farming, flattering, pretending, suspecting, scheming, praying that others die, grumbling over one's lot, falling in love, amassing fortunes, lusting after office and power. Now that life of theirs is dead and gone . . . the times of Trajan, again the same . . ."

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 4.32

Ernest Hemingway opens his book *The Sun Also Rises* with a Bible verse: "One generation passeth, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever. The sun also riseth, and the sun goeth down, and resteth to the place where he arose." It was this passage, his editor would say, that "contained all the wisdom of the ancient world."

And what wisdom is that? One of the most striking things about history is just how long human beings have been doing what they do. Though certain attitudes and practices have come and gone, what's left are people—living, dying, loving, fighting, crying, laughing.

Breathless media reports or popular books often perpetuate the belief that we've reached the apex of humanity, or that this time, things *really are different*. The irony is that people have believed that for centuries.

Strong people resist this notion. They know that with a few exceptions, things are the same as they've always been and always will be. You're just like the people who came before you, and you're but a brief stopover until the people just like you who will come after. The earth abides forever, but we will come and go.

November 11th

IT'S NOT THE THING, IT'S WHAT WE MAKE OF IT

> "When you are distressed by an external thing, it's not the thing itself that troubles you, but only your judgment of it. And you can wipe this out at a moment's notice."
>
> —Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 8.47

Imagine you've dreamed of a life in politics. You're young, you're vigorous, and you've held increasingly powerful positions over the course of your career. Then at thirty-nine, you start to feel run down. Your doctors tell you that you have polio and your life will never be the same. Your career is over—right?

This is the story of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, now widely regarded as one of America's greatest political leaders. He was, at middle age, diagnosed with polio after spending years preparing for and dreaming about the presidency.

It's impossible to understand FDR without understanding this disability. The "external thing" was that he was crippled—this was a literal fact—but his judgment of it was that it did not cripple his career or his personhood. Though he was certainly the victim of a then incurable disease, he wiped away—almost immediately—the victim's mentality.

Let's not confuse acceptance with passivity.

November 12th
THE STRONG ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY

"If we judge as good and evil only the things in the power of our own choice, then there is no room left for blaming gods or being hostile to others."

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 6.41

A sign on President Harry Truman's desk read, THE BUCK STOPS HERE. As president, with more power and control than pretty much anyone else, he knew that, good or bad, there wasn't anyone he could blame for stuff other than himself. There was no one to pass the buck to. The chain ended there, in the Oval Office.

As the president of our own lives—and knowing that our powers begin and end with our reasoned choice—we would do well to internalize this same attitude. We don't control things outside that sphere, but we do control our attitudes and our responses to those events—and that's plenty. It's enough that we go into each and every day knowing that there is no one to pass the buck to. It ends with us.

November 13th
NEVER COMPLAIN, NEVER EXPLAIN

"Don't allow yourself to be heard any longer griping about public life, not even with your own ears!"

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 8.9

Not only do even the most fortunate of us complain, it often seems like the more fortunate we are, the more time we have to do so. Marcus Aurelius was a reluctant chief executive—just as you might be a reluctant accountant, kid's soccer coach, or lawyer. Or perhaps you generally like your job, but you could do without a few of its attendant responsibilities. Where does that thinking get you? Nowhere, other than in a negative state of mind.

It calls to mind a motto of British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli: "Never complain, never explain." He said this because, like Marcus, he knew that the burdens of responsibility were immense. It's so easy to complain about this or that, or to try to make excuses and justifications for the things you've done. But that doesn't accomplish anything—and it never lightens the load.

November 14th
YOU CHOOSE THE OUTCOME

"He was sent to prison. But the observation 'he has suffered evil,' is an addition coming from you."

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 3.8.5b–6a

This is classic Stoic thinking, as you've gathered by now. An event itself is objective. How we describe it—that it was unfair, or it's a great calamity, or that they did it on purpose—is on us.

Malcolm X (then Malcolm Little) went into prison a criminal, but he left as an educated, religious, and motivated man who would help in the struggle for civil rights. Did he suffer an evil? Or did he choose to make his experience a positive one?

Acceptance isn't passive. It's the first step in an active process toward self-improvement.

November 15th
EVERYTHING IS CHANGE

"Meditate often on the swiftness with which all that exists and is coming into being is swept by us and carried away. For substance is like a river's unending flow, its activities continually changing and causes infinitely shifting so that almost nothing at all stands still."

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.23

Marcus borrows this wonderful metaphor from Heraclitus, who said, "No man steps in the same river twice." Because the river has changed, and so has the man.

Life is in a constant state of change. And so are we. To get upset by things is to wrongly assume that they will last. To kick ourselves or blame others is grabbing at the wind. To resent change is to wrongly assume that you have a choice in the matter.

Everything is change. Embrace that. Flow with it.

November 16th
HOPE AND FEAR ARE THE SAME

"Hecato says, 'cease to hope and you will cease to fear.' . . . The primary cause of both these ills is that instead of adapting ourselves to present circumstances we send out thoughts too far ahead."

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 5.7b–8

Hope is generally regarded as good. Fear is generally regarded as bad. To a Stoic like Hecato (known as Hecato of Rhodes), they are the same—both are projections into the future about things we do not control. Both are the enemy of this present moment that you are actually in. Both mean you're living a life in opposition to *amor fati*.

It's not about overcoming our fears but understanding that both hope and fear contain a dangerous amount of *want* and *worry* in them. And, sadly, the want is what causes the worry.