

October 25th  
**TWO TASKS**

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“What, then, makes a person free from hindrance and self-determining? For wealth doesn’t, neither does high-office, state or kingdom—rather, something else must be found . . . in the case of living, it is the knowledge of how to live.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 4.1.62–64

**Y**ou have two essential tasks in life: to be a good person and to pursue the occupation that you love. Everything else is a waste of energy and a squandering of your potential.

How does one do that? OK, that’s a tougher question. But the philosophy we see from the Stoics makes it simple enough: say no to distractions, to destructive emotions, to outside pressure. Ask yourself: *What is it that only I can do? What is the best use of my limited time on this planet?* Try to do the right thing when the situation calls for it. Treat other people the way you would hope to be treated. And understand that every small choice and tiny matter is an opportunity to practice these larger principles.

That’s it. That’s what goes into the most important skill of all: how to live.

October 26th

## THREE PARTS, ONE AIM

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“The best and the greatest number of authors have asserted that philosophy consists of three parts: the moral, the natural, and the rational. The first puts the soul in order. The second thoroughly examines the natural order of things. The third inquires into the proper meaning of words, and their arrangements and proofs which keep falsehoods from creeping in to displace truth.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 89.9

**T**hese three parts—the moral, the natural, and the rational—have one aim. As different as they are, they have the same purpose: to help you live a good life ruled by reason.

Not in the future, but right now.

October 27th

**WE REAP WHAT WE SOW**

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“Crimes often return to their teacher.”

—SENECA, *THYESTES*, 311

It's ironic that Seneca would have one of his characters utter this line. As we know, for many years Seneca served as the tutor and mentor to the emperor Nero. There is a lot of evidence that Seneca was, in fact, a positive moral influence on the deranged young man, but even at the time, Seneca's contemporaries found it strange that a philosopher would serve as the right hand to such an evil person. They even used the Greek word *tyrannodidaskalos*—tyrant teacher—to describe him. And just as Shakespeare observed in *Macbeth*, “Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return / To plague th'inventor,” Seneca's collaboration with Nero ultimately ended with the student murdering the teacher.

It's something to think about when you consider whom to work with and whom to do business with in life. If you show a client how to do something unethical or illegal, might they return the favor to an unsuspecting you later on? If you provide a bad example to your employees, to your associates, to your children, might they betray you or hurt you down the road? What goes around comes around, is the saying. Karma is a notion we have imported from the East, along similar lines.

Seneca paid a price for his instructions to Nero. As has been true throughout the ages, his hypocrisy—avoidable or not—was costly. So too will be yours.

October 29th  
**CHARACTER IS FATE**

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“Each person acquires their own character, but their official roles are designated by chance. You should invite some to your table because they are deserving, others because they may come to deserve it.”

—SENECA, *MORAL LETTERS*, 47.15b

In the hiring process, most employers look at where someone went to school, what jobs they've held in the past. This is because past success can be an indicator of future successes. But is it always? There are plenty of people who were successful because of luck. Maybe they got into Oxford or Harvard because of their parents. And what about a young person who hasn't had time to build a track record? Are they worthless?

Of course not. This is why *character* is a far better measure of a man or woman. Not just for jobs, but for friendships, relationships, for everything. Heraclitus put it as a maxim: “Character is fate.”

When you seek to advance your own position in life, character is the best lever—perhaps not in the short term, but certainly over the long term. And the same goes for the people you invite into your life.

October 30th

## WHO GETS THE LION'S SHARE?

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“Aren’t you ashamed to reserve for yourself only the remnants of your life and to dedicate to wisdom only that time can’t be directed to business?”

—SENECA, *ON THE BREVITY OF LIFE*, 3.5b

In one of his letters, Seneca tells a story about Alexander the Great. Apparently as Alexander was conquering the world, certain countries would offer him pieces of their territory in hopes that he’d leave them alone in exchange. Alexander would tell them, writes Seneca, that he hadn’t come all the way to Asia to accept whatever they would give him, but instead they were going to have to accept whatever he chose to leave them.

According to Seneca, we should treat philosophy the same way in our lives. Philosophy shouldn’t have to accept what time or energy is left over from other occupations but instead we should graciously make time for those other pursuits only once our study is finished.

If real self-improvement is what we’re after, why do we leave our reading until those few minutes before we shut off the lights and go to bed? Why do we block off eight to ten hours in the middle of the day to be at the office or to go to meetings but block out no time for thinking about the big questions? The average person somehow manages to squeeze in twenty-eight hours of television per week—but ask them if they had time to study philosophy, and they will probably tell you they’re too busy.

October 31st  
**YOU WERE BORN GOOD**

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“The human being is born with an inclination toward virtue.”

—MUSONIUS RUFUS, *LECTURES*, 2.7.1–2

**T**he notion of original sin has weighed down humankind for centuries. In reality, we're made to help each other and be good to each other. We wouldn't have survived as a species otherwise.

There is hardly an idea in Stoic philosophy that wouldn't be immediately agreeable to a child or that doesn't jibe with common sense. The ideas within it go to the core of who we are and what we know to be true. The only things they conflict with are the various inventions of society—which usually serve some selfish interest more than they benefit the common good.

You were born good. “All of us have been made by nature,” Rufus said, “so that we can live free from error and nobly—not that one can and another can't, but all.” You were born with an attraction to virtue and self-mastery. If you've gotten far from that, it's not out of some inborn corruption but from a nurturing of the wrong things and the wrong ideas. As Seneca has pointed out, philosophy is a tool to strip it all away—to get back to our true nature.

November 1st  
**ACCEPTING WHAT IS**

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“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

**S**omething 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.

**BINDING OUR WISHES TO WHAT WILL BE**

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“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

**W**hen 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.