

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.

THE DAILY STOIC

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.

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.

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October 8th A HIGHER PLEASURE

“Yes, getting your wish would have been so nice. But isn’t that exactly why pleasure trips us up? Instead, see if these things might be even nicer—a great soul, freedom, honesty, kindness, saintliness. For there is nothing so pleasing as wisdom itself, when you consider how sure-footed and effortless the works of understanding and knowledge are.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 5.9

Nobody can argue that pleasure doesn’t *feel* good. That’s pretty much what it does by definition.

But today Marcus Aurelius is reminding you—just as he reminded himself—that those pleasures hardly stand up to virtue. The dopamine rush that comes from sex is momentary. So is the pride of an accomplishment or the hearty applause of a crowd. These pleasures are powerful, but they wear off and leave us wanting more. What lasts longer (and remains more within our circle of control)? Wisdom, good character, sobriety, and kindness.

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October 9th

SET THE STANDARDS AND USE THEM

“When the standards have been set, things are tested and weighed. And the work of philosophy is just this, to examine and uphold the standards, but the work of a truly good person is in using those standards when they know them.”

—EPICTETUS, *DISCOURSES*, 2.11.23–25

We go through our days responding and reacting, but it's rare to really pause and ask: *Is this thing I'm about to do consistent with what I believe?* Or, better: *Is this the kind of thing the person I would like to be should do?*

The work of living is to set standards and then *not* compromise them. When you're brushing your teeth, choosing your friends, losing your temper, falling in love, instructing your child, or walking your dog—all of these are opportunities.

Not, *I want to do good*—that's an excuse. But, *I will do good in this particular instance, right now*. Set a standard; hold fast to it. That's all there is.

October 11th

HONESTY AS OUR DEFAULT

“How rotten and fraudulent when people say they intend to ‘give it to you straight.’ What are you up to, dear friend? It shouldn’t need your announcement, but be readily seen, as if written on your forehead, heard in the ring of your voice, a flash in your eyes—just as the beloved sees it all in the lover’s glance. In short, the straightforward and good person should be like a smelly goat—you know when they are in the room with you.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS, *MEDITATIONS*, 11.15

All of us have used phrases like that before. “I’m going to be straightforward with you here . . .” “I’ll be honest . . .” “No disrespect but . . .” Empty expressions or not, they prompt the question: If you have to preface your remarks with indicators of honesty or directness, what does that say about everything else you say? If you say you’re being honest *now*, does that mean you usually aren’t?

What if, instead, you cultivated a life and a reputation in which honesty was as bankable as a note from the U.S. Treasury, as emphatic and explicit as a contract, as permanent as a tattoo? Not only would it save you from needing to use the reassurances that other, less scrupulous people must engage in, it will make you a better person.

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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.