

STOIC HYPOMNEMATA

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ignis aurum probat

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Prosoche Term
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These *hypomnemata* were written as I was a student of the Marcus Aurelius School in 2020. They were edited and compiled in February 2021.

1. Awake at Ungodly Hours

My body is half-dead. My muscles shut down so I don't live out my dreams. My brain gets ready for cleansing. Deep asleep, I hear a siren far away. I'm not sure it's real. Perhaps I'm dreaming. The alarming noise gets closer and louder. Now it's very loud. I struggle to open my eyes and stop my nightmare. My body is paralyzed. Then she slaps my butt.

Next month we'll have our 10th anniversary. We don't need many words at this point, a slap in the butt from my wife carries a ton of meaning, much like a sayable. The slap means *it's my turn*, it also means the siren is not a nightmare but very, very real. It's my two-year-old daughter! And she feels lonely.

I'm up, I mutter. But my legs don't want to move, I have to drag them. I force my body to leave that sweet paralysis while lamenting each step I take.

Amalia calms down quickly. She only needs to know I'm there. She grabs my finger and makes sure I don't leave. She's fine now. I'm awake now. With nothing to do, I start thinking about sleep. It's been my obsession for the past 2 years. I read extensively about sleep because I want to perform at a high level during the day. I'm imagining my daughter's brain cleansing itself from bad toxins. My wife's brain is cleansing out beautifully as well. My four-year-old son's mood is been regulated and all of them will feel like a fresh piece of lettuce in the morning. I probably won't enjoy that freshness. It will take some time before I can fall back asleep if I do at all.

Fully awake now I think about Enchiridion 25. Something like the host of a party may sell tickets for flattery and attention. Epictetus' point I think is that everything costs something. Perhaps waking up at this ungodly hours is the price I have to pay for having healthy kids. It may be the price I pay so my wife can have a good day and carries on her mission. It's the price I pay so my daughter doesn't feel alone. It's the price I pay for the privilege of raising a family.

My sister would pay thousands of dollars for the opportunity to wake up at ungodly hours and attend to her own cranky baby. I ordered Amalia on storkbabies.com and got her, but my sister wasn't that lucky. Her order was rejected by Fate with a note that said *not now*. Seeing my situation from her perspective, I realize how lucky I am to have gotten my order. I now WANT to pay this price. For the first time (since the siren incident), I smile. Then remember Epictetus olympic pep-talk.

"And whatever you encounter that is painful or pleasant or popular or unpopular, keep in mind that now is the contest, and here right now are the Olympic games, and that postponement is no longer an option, and that your progress is saved or ruined by a single day and a single action." (Enchiridion 51)

Right now, at this ungodly hour, it's time to prove I not only know my theory—it's time to act like a Stoic.

2. Thirst for Knowledge or Thirst for Buying?

As a teenager, I would have cringed at the thought of having to read a book. Today, I love books more than most things. At any given time, there might be 3 or 4

on my desk. I have plenty of books I haven't read yet. Nevertheless, I often want to buy more. My excuse is that to become a better Stoic; I need to *know* more. It's a false judgment. The truth is: I buy a book in part because of how *buying* feels. Since I have formed a habit of assenting to the impression that I need new books, I no longer take time to examine the impression. I skip the assent stage because my belief (that books are good and I "need" them) supports the irrational impulse to buy. Often when I realize I have assented to a false impression, I'm already in the middle of buying. It's hard to stop then. My behavior reminds me of Chrysippus' running metaphor.

*"If our judgment is clouded by passion, however, the rational faculty is weakened and a reasonable response is more difficult. We do things and say things that can often be regrettable. On this subject, Chrysippus compared a man who was walking with one who was running down a hill. The walking man could check himself at any moment and stop. The man running down the hill was like a man in the throws of passion, and it was only with great difficulty that such a man could check himself and come to a halt."*¹

I don't learn when I buy a book. I learn when I spend time with single ideas. At some point, I should leave my books behind and put into practice what I learned.

Musonius said: *"Suppose there are two musicians. One understands musical theory and talks about it most fluently, but is not able to sing or to play the cithara or lyre. The other is ignorant of theory, but plays the cithara and lyre well and can sing. Which one would you want as a performer? Which one would you want as music teacher for a child ignorant of music?" He answered, "The one who is able to perform."*²

The following passages inspired this hypomnemata:

*"Forget your thirst for books; so that when your end comes you may not murmur, but meet it with a good grace and with unfeigned gratitude in your heart to the gods."*³

*"You must stay with a limited number of writers and be fed by them if you mean to derive anything that will dwell reliably with you. One who is everywhere is nowhere."*⁴

¹ Wiegardt, E. (2004). *Path of the Sage* [Kindle Paperwhite version]. Retrieved from amazon.com

² Rufus, Musonius, Cynthia Ann Kent King, and William Braxton Irvine. In *Musonius Rufus: Lectures & Sayings*, 34. United States: Createspace, 2011.

³ Aurelius, Marcus, and Maxwell Staniforth. "Book Two." In *Meditations*, 45–46. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1964.

⁴ Séneca Lucio Anneo, Margaret Graver, and A. A. Long. "Letter 2." Essay. In *Letters on Ethics: to Lucilius*, 26–26. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

3. I am Four Personae

This *hypomnemata* was inspired by Cicero's On Duties 1.107-115

Cicero makes reference to four "personae," roles or morally relevant descriptions. They are the universal; the individual; the accidental or situational; and the self-chosen.

I pause to see my roles.
I listen to my soul.
I study Fate at work.
I know what I control.

I walk and notice All.
I'm made of rhythmic bones.
I hug uncertainty.
I nudge the sage in me.

I see and miss Nature.
I teach "right" behavior.
I disagree with Fate.
I see an amateur.

I count my shy footprints.
I have duty in me.
I miss color in life.
I find it in what's mine.

I fill my lungs with air.
I exhale tuneful airs.
I see my kids down sick.
I recall they were fit.

I'm one with all the things.
I see purpose in being.
I fill joy when I wish.
I'm cautious not to miss.

I'm looking from above.
I am myself the whole.
I am one point in time.
I'm destined to evolve.

4. True Vocation

My wife has a friend who volunteers to raise other women's babies when they can't (or don't want to) keep them. This woman has four kids herself, and five months ago, she welcomed a foreign newborn to the gang. Why go through all that? Why not chase preferred indifferents instead?

We *are All*, the Whole, the Cosmos. It sure looks like we are separate entities, but after connecting the dots, it is possible to see how everything contributes to a bigger organism. Delving further into Stoic physics makes it possible to assimilate the interaction between All—each body playing its individual role, each body fulfilling a purpose. And that purpose is inevitably connected to the rest of the body. The evolution of each body must then be analogous to the evolution of the Whole.

We can *choose* to prioritize the health of the Whole and work for the cosmopolis. Or we can decide to chase preferred indifferents that benefit us only. Yet when we Stoics decide to prioritize All, we choose to maximize the impact of our actions. We do so because we believe with Heraclitus that we are all One. Choosing to extend one's *oikeiōsis* to include the Whole is challenging. Nonetheless, logic validates this as right action.

My wife's friend is doing a fantastic job, consciously, or intuitively. She is a better cosmopolitan than me, even though she may have never heard of Stoicism. I'm not feeling bad about it. Knowing people like her inspires me to make an equal contribution. It may be years before I have the maturity to accomplish a similar feat. But I'm in no rush; I'm awake now. It's great to be awake.

5. Angry at the Wagon of Fate

The other day I went on a bike tour with my kids to the forest. We recently bought a bike with a wagon that my kids love; they sing and laugh while I pedal them around. I am not much of an explorer (not with kids anyway) and always stick to the trails I know. However, the trail that leads home was blocked due to construction. So I decided to take a new trail I believed could get us home. My kids were hungry, and I felt rushed to get home. Then a flat

tire.

I didn't want that challenge. After about an hour of struggling to fix the tire, I led us to the main street and managed to get us home. However, that extra hour is one I will not easily forget. I got angry when my kids asked me what I was going to do about it. As I tried to solve the problem, my oldest son (4 years old) kept asking why? "Why a flat tire? Why don't you know how to fix it? Why can we not eat now? Why! Why! Why!"

I was not a Stoic. But I observed myself not being a Stoic—as if watching myself on a T.V. show—and still didn't have the guts, willpower, or experience to assent to the truth. The truth is that my situation was only an inconvenient incident and nothing evil. Once I got home, I couldn't believe I acted unStoic. To counter my irrational actions, I came up with a plan.

*"Initiation is more than the reception of doctrines, it is at root a personal experience leading to an inner change."*⁵

I will see the events in the forest as my initiation. My forest experience can serve as a revelation or discovery, an event I *can* be grateful for. Having failed caused me to assent to more adequate impressions the entire week.

*"Only the philosopher grasps the ultimate idea-realities and is thereby 'alone [among men] truly perfect'. The sight of the idea-realities forms the 'highest form of initiation'. This state is described as *eudaimonia* and is further characterized as 'standing above human concerns' and as 'being travel-companion of a god' and 'drawing close to the divine'."*⁶

Noticing my failure was the beginning of making a positive change. I am counting this event as my initiation because it was a form of awakening. I'm on the path to continue aiming toward right action and gladly accept, next time, my Fate and the will of Universal Nature.

⁵ Jeden, C. (2012). Initiation Chapter 9. In *Stoic Virtues Chrysippus and the Religious Character of Stoic Ethics* (p. 109). London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

⁶ Jeden, C. (2012). Chapter 10 Virtue and Happiness. In *Stoic Virtues Chrysippus and the Religious Character of Stoic Ethics* (p. 110). London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

6. Clean Streets Matter and Don't Matter

There's a narrow bridge two blocks from my house that pedestrians and drivers use as a shortcut. I use it to get home. One day, I noticed an old lady heaping up fallen leaves by the bridge. I kept seeing her, always busy at work with her rake. Another day, I was crossing the bridge and caught her without her rake. The street by the bridge was perfectly clean, and I wondered what she was up to. I slowed down to a walking pace and watched through my rearview mirror, intrigued. It turned out, the street was *not* perfectly clean; three or four leaves dared touch the floor.

"Man's heart is restless unless he has found, and fulfilled, meaning and purpose in life. It is characteristically human to find this meaning by reaching out for something other than itself"⁷

Is the old lady heaping up leaves for the sake of the community so that we can enjoy a clean bridge? Is that her purpose in life? I don't know. But as I write this, I am looking at one of my favorite pictures of Earth taken by the Cassini spacecraft. While Cassini studied the planet Saturn, scientists pointed its camera towards Earth and snapped a picture (below) worth the cost of the whole mission. Long ago, I decided this was my personal "view from above." From this far, Earth is just a blue marble; there is no difference between an old lady heaping up leaves and a young man earning a grammy award; no difference between good and bad. It's all insignificant, almost pointless, but somehow also magical and ethereal.

I don't have a conclusion for this *hypomnemata*. However, I'm learning to observe without judgment. An old lady heap up leaves; a Stoic drives by and observes her. Humans seem to be restless if they don't have a purpose. Earth looks like a marble from Saturn. Our actions may be insignificant *or* significant. Things are. Events are. Don't judge. Just watch. Observe. Take it all in. Then look at Cassini's picture one more time.

My View from Above

⁷ Frankl, V. E. (2014). *The will to meaning: Foundations and applications of logotherapy*. New York: Plume.



7. Bad luck is an opinion.

"No target is set up simply to be missed, and in the same way nothing that occurs in the world is bad in its own nature as such." (Enchiridion 27)

"What is crushing these people is not the event but their opinion about it." (Enchiridion 16)

1.

-When I was 14, my dad spent his evenings building a new house for us. I remember hiding, so I didn't have to go with him. He knew I was hiding and started reminding me in the morning that he'd be waiting for me at a set time. My job was to hand him tools, hold things straight, clean the area, simple stuff like that. I hated it.

-I learned discipline.

2.

-I sat at a café years ago and wrote in my journal something I noticed: *That cashier seems thrilled doing her job.* When I went to pay for my drink, she somehow made me feel special. I wrote in my journal: I want to enjoy life like

her.

-I learned that it is possible to do humble work and *decide* to enjoy it.

3.

-One day after an audition, I locked the door of a public bathroom and sat on a dirty floor to cry my heart out. Most orchestra auditions invite dozens of players for one position. The odds of getting a job are relatively low. But this time the orchestra only invited two musicians, me and one other guy. The odds of winning would never be higher. That grey day, the other musician went home with a smile, and I blamed the gods.

-I learned about Fate.

4.

-Covid-19 is spearing all over the world. It's been five years since I've been to Puerto Rico. I miss my culture, family, food. I cannot travel now. Besides, my kids need me here.

-I learned to prioritise what's really important.

5.

- My mom was born in the USA and loved fast foods. I was practically raised at McDonald's. When you've eaten chemically enhanced food designed to satisfy the taste buds and make you addicted for years, you can't wake up one morning and start eating vegetables. Today, I mostly eat organic food.

-I learned to face my bad habits.

8. Where's the Sage? Not here.

It's 2 pm, and I am walking along a busy main street. A car is parked right in the middle of the right lane leaving only the left lane for heavy traffic. Drivers get pissed. They honk and slap the air as if it made a difference. I stand there to watch—what an opportunity to flex my Stoic muscles.

All of a sudden, the owner comes out of an adjacent dry cleaning shop. He was picking up his suits. Because the store doesn't have parking space, and

the nearest parking garage is far away, the middle-aged man decided to park his car right in front of the store and block hundreds of cars that use the avenue.

The man assented to the impression that "it is best to park in the middle of the street," probably because he doesn't pay for parking nor needs to walk a long distance. Passing the inconvenience onto others was preferable.

As the man returned to his car, other drivers honked madly. "I'm allowed to park here!" the man yelled. More honking. "What!? I'm not doing anything wrong!" Even more honking.

Instead of getting in his car and drive away, the man kept defending his decision. He didn't doubt his actions and felt a victim of the "backfire effect," which happens when one rejects the evidence [against one's beliefs] to believe even more decisive in one's irrational cause.

A tragic event in the man's life would have, perhaps, validated his actions. However, it's unlikely that disasters necessitate picking up clean suits. They demand a high level of cognitive activity, which the man (by holding his position) was not ensuing.

What's more likely is that the man was following an impulse, a presentation he has assented to so often that his soul no longer reviews it. As soon as the presentation hits the *hegemonikon*, it "knows" what to do, or rather, it does what it has irrationally done multiple times. The man is unaware of this and lets it happen, almost by instinct. In his mind, he is an individual, and whatever is good for *his* self is better than what is good for the whole. He doesn't understand that he is part of the whole, that everything he does for the whole he also does for himself.

Am I better than him because I am training as a Stoic philosopher? "Damn right, I am!" suggests my first impulse. But no, my rational faculty says I am *not* better than this man. I screw up my *prosochē*, perhaps as much as he does. And *if* I am a better person, officially declaring it (and believing it) will annihilate any humbleness I may possess. Things can snowball pretty quickly from there, and I can end up in false-impression territory. Marcus' stayed humbled, and he was an emperor. I shall bring his words with me in case I encounter another man parked in the middle of the street: "*Men exist for the sake of one another. Either teach them or put up with them.*"--*Meditations*, 8.59

9. How to Enter the Abstract World

The Muses never showed up. I waited for a year. My violin teacher insisted I kept trying. He said that until I found depth in the abstract world, I could not learn a new piece of music. He made it sound as if one could turn a doorknob and get access to it. It wasn't like that. I had questions. What's the entrance like? Do I need a key?

I understood nothing of the abstract world. Nonetheless, I tried to enter it every day. Luckily, after one unsuccessful year, my teacher decided I'd done enough. Although I hadn't made contact, I was allowed to start learning a new piece of music. I've passed my initiation. The uncertain work in the practice room, those deliberate repetitions, and my attitude toward the situation ultimately nursed my growth. I was a better violinist—that was my objective all along.

I share my story with students who naively believe playing the violin is a hobby. *It can be*, I tell them, but building skill is difficult and requires commitment. To enjoy violin playing, one must "be able" to play it, which demands that you *show up regularly* to practice. You cannot repeat a passage strategically without *showing up* to repeat a passage strategically. I showed up for a year because I wanted to become a professional violinist at any cost. I knew "why" I was showing up, which was all the motivation I needed. That's what I try to teach my students these days. Finally, to access the abstract world, the last thing one needs, in my opinion, is *time*.

One lucky day, you'll enter the abstract world where deep insight is gained, and answers about art and skill are unveiled. But to get there, you'll need momentum, high-quality repetitions, and time (patience). At least that's how I later met my first Muse. Moreover, I look forward to learning more about how the abstract world relates to Stoicism and the art of living well. After all, philosophy as a way of life is a skill.

This hypomnemata was inspired by the following quotes:

"Knowledge for the Stoics is thus not so easy to come by, but cognition is something that anyone can achieve. I can, for instance, assent to a whole host of adequate impressions relating to the movement and position of the sun and the moon, and the planets in the night sky. Each of these will be a cognition. But bringing all of these cognitions together into a systematic

unity and understanding how they relate to one another so that I have a proper grasp of the way in which the solar system functions is altogether another matter and significantly harder to achieve.”⁸

“After you have digested these principles, show us some resulting change in the commanding faculty of your soul, just as the athletes show their shoulders as the results of their exercising and eating, and as those who have mastered the arts can show the results of their learning. The builder does not come forward and say “Listen to me deliver a discourse about the art of building”; but he takes a contract for a house, builds it, and thereby proves that he possesses the art. (Diss. 3.21.3–4)

⁸ Sellars, J. (2006). *Stoicism* (p. 71). Berkeley: University of California Press.