

Marcus Aurelius: How to Escape from the Three Great Untruths

From the Gregory Hays translation of *Meditations*,
selected by Jon Haidt to accompany *The Coddling of the American Mind*

Preparation: Put yourself in a philosophical frame of mind

Awaken; return to yourself. Now, no longer asleep, knowing they were only dreams, clear-headed again, treat everything around you as a dream. Meditation VI:31.

To watch the courses of the stars as if you revolved with them. To keep constantly in mind how the elements alter into one another. Thoughts like this wash off the mud of life below. VII:47.

You can discard most of the junk that clutters your mind—things that exist only there—and clear out space for yourself:

... by comprehending the scale of the world

... by contemplating infinite time

... by thinking of the speed with which things change—each part of every thing; the narrow space between our birth and death; the infinite time before; the equally unbounded time that follows. IX:32.

*Reject the Untruth of Fragility (What doesn't kill you makes you weaker);
Meditate instead on antifragility*

Our inward power, when it obeys nature, reacts to events by accommodating itself to what it faces—to what is possible. It needs no specific material. It pursues its own aims as circumstances allow; it turns obstacles into fuel. As a fire overwhelms what would have quenched a lamp. What's thrown on top of the conflagration is absorbed, consumed by it—and makes it burn still higher. IV:1.

Just as nature takes every obstacle, every impediment, and works around it—turns it to its purposes, incorporates it into itself—so, too, a rational being can turn each setback into raw material and use it to achieve its goal. VIII:35.

To be like the rock that the waves keep crashing over. It stands unmoved and the raging of the sea falls still around it. It's unfortunate that this has happened. No. It's fortunate that this has happened and I've remained unharmed by it—not shattered by the present or frightened of the future.... So remember this principle when something threatens to cause you pain: the thing itself was no misfortune at all; to endure it and prevail is great good fortune. IV:49.

*Reject the Untruth of Emotional Reasoning (Always trust your feelings).
Meditate instead on your ability to create your own reality via the appraisals you choose*

The things you think about determine the quality of your mind. Your soul takes on the color of your thoughts. Color it with a run of thoughts like these: Anywhere you can lead your life, you can lead a good one. V:16.

Nothing that goes on in anyone else's mind can harm you. Nor can the shifts and changes in the world around you. —Then where is harm to be found? In your capacity to see it. Stop doing that and everything will be fine. Let the part of you that makes that judgment keep quiet even if the body it's attached to is stabbed or burnt, or stinking with pus, or consumed by cancer. IV:39

Choose not to be harmed—and you won't feel harmed. Don't feel harmed—and you haven't been. IV:7.

You don't have to turn this into something. It doesn't have to upset you. Things can't shape our decisions by themselves. VI:52.

Today I escaped from anxiety. Or no, I discarded it, because it was within me, in my own perceptions—not outside. IX:13.

*Reject the Untruth of Us vs. Them (Life is a battle between good people and evil people).
Meditate instead on our common humanity*

To feel affection for people even when they make mistakes is uniquely human. You can do it, if you simply recognize: that they're human too, that they act out of ignorance, against their will, and that you'll both be dead before long. And, above all, that they haven't really hurt you. They haven't diminished your ability to choose. VII:22.

When people injure you, ask yourself what good or harm they thought would come of it. If you understand that, you'll feel sympathy rather than outrage or anger. VII:26.

Blame no one. Set people straight, if you can. If not, just repair the damage. And suppose you can't do that either. Then where does blaming people get you? No pointless actions. VIII:17...

When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They are like this because they can't tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own—not of the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine. And so none of them can hurt me. No one can implicate me in ugliness. Nor can I feel angry at my relative, or hate him. We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are obstructions. II:1.

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