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“We Suffer More in Imagination than in Reality”: Reading the Stoics with Millennials

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**“WE SUFFER MORE IN IMAGINATION THAN IN REALITY”:
READING THE STOICS WITH GENERATION Z**

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Abstract

For our students, “the future” is no longer an exciting place full of progress and adventure, but a vast haze of uncertainty. The lofty claims that “you can be anything” or “you can change the world,” the encouragement of radical self-creation, the stripping away of all tradition in order to liberate “the self” – these things that we viewed as gifts for the new generation have instead become terrible burdens. Now, every political opinion, however uninformed, is from the sacred core of one’s identity; every free decision, however small, leads to chaotic and infinite consequences; every plan, no matter how rigorous, might still collapse in failure. Failure is true death – which means that success is the only life. If reality is to have any shape or purpose in the future, they conclude, it is to come from their own iron will in creating it ex nihilo. But, of course, none are strong enough for such a feat. And so their worries fill pages of cultural commentary and social science journals, while the students themselves fill the halls of college counseling offices, as the future rushes madly on. Our students, in other words, are ripe for Stoicism. This essay grows out of my own reflections on teaching Stoic philosophy, especially the writings of Epictetus and Seneca. It is a comparison of the social science literature on the current generation and the response from the Stoics. It does not presume that Stoicism is the perfect response to our students’ anxiety, or that Stoicism alone is sufficient for a full view of human flourishing: the essay only means to point out how receptive our students are to Stoic philosophy and what it has to offer as a critical part of a liberal education, and how it might serve as a conduit to better things – the simple truth that socially liberating, self-inventing, world-changing success is a far lesser thing than ordering one’s own soul for a life well lived.

I had the chance to teach a course on classical history a few years ago. After exploring the major historians and primary documents, we had an extra two weeks at the end. So I decided to conclude the class with *Dialogues and Essays* of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4-65 AD), the famous Roman Stoic and tutor to young Emperor Nero. I knew Seneca to be highly readable and enjoyable, and thought he would offer a fine way to end the semester with the lighter side of the ancient mind. And the class suddenly turned sublime.

It was one of those moments that every teacher lives for but so rarely experiences – students not only reading but remembering every detail and taking it so much to heart. The conversation overflowed in well outside the classroom, with groups of them dropping by my office and emailing me to talk about Seneca and the calming effect his works had on them – it’s not all about success and power after all? That the ordering of my soul is more important? Students who were not enrolled in the class started showing up. Tears, excitement, wide-eyed amazement that an ancient Roman philosopher could speak so directly to their own lives. What in the world happened? Of all the great books I teach, why Seneca?

This paper grows out of my thoughts about that experience, and my own investigation into the worldview and anxious condition of soul I find in my students today as I continue to teach them the Stoics. As we know, they are driven by the same notions of success as previous generations, and they approach it with the same angst as everything else in their self-created lives. (We say: “Time to choose your major, freshmen.” They hear: “Thou shalt choose thy destiny, 19-year-old.”) Thankfully, the value of liberal arts remains apparent to students, something better and more elevating, and more attuned to what they really need, regardless of major. It is not them but we who turn college into career prep, and the mad scramble for success. Our students may go along with that, but deep down, they know better – and when the

opportunity is sincerely presented, they are especially willing to set aside the frantic pursuit of power and genuinely ask the great overarching question: what is a good life? No reading does that more effectively, I have found, than the writings of ancient Stoics.

One could say a great deal about Stoicism as a whole – its Platonic predecessors, its development, and its influence on Romans and subsequent Christians, etc. – but for the purposes of this paper, I will focus primarily on Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4-65 AD), the famous tutor to young Emperor Nero and masterful writer of letters, essays and dialogues, and Epictetus (55-135 AD), the freed slave turned teacher of Stoicism.

The general Stoic teaching is that we should simply recognize what is in our power and what is not, and then realize that the most important thing, the goodness of our own soul, falls within the zone of our own control. Life may throw all kinds of things at us – misfortune and luck, joy or sorrow, euphoria or grief – but in the end, with practice, we can learn to manage all of these things by simply ordering our perception of them with reason, and aligning all passions and desires with Nature, which is supremely well-ordered. This is not to say that we should hedge ourselves in by rejecting things that might cause suffering the way Epicurean philosophers did. Nor did it mean having a snarky disdain for everyone else's values like Diogenes the Cynic, who demanded that he alone was truly free even as he was always dirty and naked and slept in a big pot. Stoics, by contrast, were out and about, present in their communities, caring for families and friends, and even engaged in public life. But instead of complaining about disorder in the world, they recognized what an evil thing complaining itself could become, and therefore focused on ordering the one thing they did have control over: their own souls. Stoicism was concerned about a lot of things, but it directly addressed what has become the defining force of our age: anxiety. They assured readers, though, that anxiety really is a needless thing that we can

overcome simply with the power of our minds: if we cultivate goodness within us, then what can truly hurt us?

Stoic philosophy speaks to all people in all generations, of course, so it's not surprising that modern interpretations of Stoicism have enjoyed a large audience in recent years. Search "stoic" on Amazon.com, and, aside from the more academic titles, we get *The Obstacle Is the Way* (2014), *Unshakable Freedom* (2016), *The Daily Stoic* (2018) (which comes with a study journal), and *The Good Life Handbook* (2018). Or, for those who prefer Stoicism with an edge, there is *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* (2016). But it is hard to tell how serious people are about studying the Stoics for their own sake, and how much of it simply throws the Stoics into the mix of self-help books, especially those who stylishly offer "ancient wisdom" that seems to confirm doubts about modern life. For those who pursue "natural alternatives" to everything from dish soap to diapers, what could be more alluring than the Stoic mandate to "follow Nature"? For those who want "mindfulness," what could be better than "tranquility of mind," as the Stoics understood it.

Leaving aside the popular repackaged and sugar-coated Stoicism, this essay focuses on the college-age student we all know. In this essay, I examine the current literature on anxiety of Millennials and Generation Z, whether from research psychology, media criticism, philosophy and history, and I point out how they correspond with the writings of the Stoics. There is a wide array of topics I could explore – politics, religion, relationships, etc. – but I assume these things will be thoroughly addressed elsewhere. Instead, I focus on the more fundamental things that the Stoic philosophers examined: individualism; the nature of Fortune and chance; and perceptions of time; and how it all relates to liberal arts education.

I write for those of us who meet these students in our liberal arts classes, those who believe that true education matters to each individual life, those who hold that the college experience ought to be a transformative time of intellectual and spiritual awakening. I propose that we should avoid teaching Stoicism as a passing mention in a philosophy survey or western civ class, and focus on teaching the writings of the Stoics themselves.

On the Self and the Soul

Psychologist Jean M. Twenge, an authority on the present generation, has a thorough chapter devoted to her own research on anxiety in *Generation Me* (2014). She points out the shift in depression and anxiety from older to younger Americans, and how “these problems are a rite of passage through adolescence and young adulthood.” And it is appearing at younger and younger ages, turning from teenage angst to a defining feature of childhood. Summarizing her own research, she was stunned to find that “anxiety increased so much that the average college student in the 1990s was more anxious than 85% of students in the 1950s and 71% of students in the 1970s.” So too with younger children: those as young as 9 “were markedly more anxious than kids had been in the 1950s.” What we would call “normal” schoolchildren in the 1980s “reported higher levels of anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s.”¹

The irony, of course, is that our students’ anxiety occurs during a time of extraordinary peace and prosperity for multitudes of ordinary Americans. Despite grave predictions, we’ve had no major military conflicts that impact life at home; despite a few recessions and financial woes, we’ve had no major economic depression; and even with a wildly emotional political

¹Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me, Revised and Updated: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Atria Books: 2014), pp. 106-107.

landscape, we've seen no major upheavals or revolutions. Most of the public drama we witness is really a series of media symbols that have no real impact on day-to-day life.

So why not jubilation and thanksgiving? Why the anxiety? Twenge argues that it has more to do with the direction of cultural development as a free society than anything psychology alone can identify: "Our growing tendency to put the self first leads to unparalleled freedom," she writes, "but it also creates an enormous amount of pressure on us to stand alone." It is the obvious downside to the radical sort of freedom we've given ourselves: "when we are fiercely independent and self-sufficient, our disappointments loom large because we have nothing else to focus on."² All the steps in American cultural development – Jacksonian democracy, westward expansion, patriotic Americanism, etc. – conclude with all the same struggles, worries and triumphs now occurring within the microcosm of "the self."

With such radical individualism, what our students mean by success is nothing like Thorsten Veblen's "conspicuous consumption" or the values of Vance Packard's "status seekers." It might contain many of the same elements, but success has taken on a new significance for the current generation: more than money or status or respect, more than old-fashioned power or even good looks, success is now about the *creation of meaning*. We were giddy with excitement over such ideas in the 1990s: autonomous self-creation was the major theme of multiple films and TV shows; it saturated children's entertainment and became the central theme of "child-centered" education. But now, for the generation who has inherited those ideals, the freedom to "define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life" is no longer a right, but a burdensome and often overwhelming duty.³

² Ibid., 109.

³ *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* 505 U. S. 833, 851 (1992).

Stoicism meets this mentality exactly where it is at. It speaks the same language of individualism. But there is one major difference: what we call “the self,” Stoics called “the soul.” The soul is a mysterious thing, but the least a Stoic can say is that it is “something that is solid, balanced, and more beautiful in that part which is more hidden,” Seneca writes. “And it is not situated far away: it will be found, you need only know where to stretch out your hand; as it is, we pass by things that are near us, as though we are in darkness, and stumble over the very objects we desire.” The soul is not closed up within itself and desiring only itself; it is instead connected to the universe, knowing that a well ordered soul is simply a mirror reflection of a beautiful and well-ordered cosmos. Leaving aside all other philosophers (or therapists), we are invited to join Seneca in saying that “Nature is the guide I choose,” meaning that “wisdom lies in not wandering from her path and in moulding oneself in accordance with her law and example.”⁴

According to Epictetus, the major question is not “What makes him anxious?” but “What is it that he wants?” If we don’t prioritize that question, we are distracted by the effects of our desires rather than scrutinizing the desires themselves – and practicing the Stoic art of assessing the real value of things desired, and, if they are found wanting, letting them go. “For unless he wanted something that that was not within his power, how could he still be anxious?”⁵ The freedom that follows is always a greater treasure than the object of desire itself. Peace is not the things we possess, but in the empty space where the clutter used to be; joy is not in success, but in the lightness that comes from admitting that it doesn’t really matter.

Epictetus likens it to the anxiety of a musician before a concert: does the anxiety about the crowd drown out love for his music? Maybe it should be the other way around: a true musician should be more worthy of the music than of the crowd. Strenuous practice will follow

⁴ Seneca, “On the Happy Life,” in *Dialogues and Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 86-87.

⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.13 in *Discourses, Fragments, and Handbook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 98.

naturally, and the musician will simply do what he always does when the performance comes. “Where he has skill, then, he has self-assurance too,” Epictetus writes. “If the things... that lie outside the sphere of choice are neither good nor bad, and those that lie within the sphere of choice are subject to our control, and no one can either take those away from us or impose them on us unless we wish it, what room is left for anxiety?”⁶ It is, in other words, a matter of leaving aside what the self wants and asking what the soul really desires. The object of the soul’s desire can only be good, and the pursuit of it can only be fulfilling.

On the Fear of Safety

But here it is worth asking what the conditions of advanced modernity have done to the soul’s greatest tests, found only suffering and struggle. The ordinary forms of suffering that have long tormented mankind – disease, disaster, or political strife – are largely eliminated by technology and careful planning, and whatever suffering is left over through loss and grief can be softened with therapy.

But that is a description of our students’ parents, who grew up in the prosperous 1980s and 1990s. The new generation lives with an entirely different threshold for what constitutes pain and suffering. As research psychologist Jonathan Haidt and civil liberties attorney Greg Lukianoff write in *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2018), this is largely due to the overprotective tendencies of parents – not in their sensible desire to protect children from the suffering they themselves experienced, but the desire to shelter children from suffering itself, whether real or imagined. It is one of the “*problems of progress*,” a term that “refers to bad consequences produced by otherwise good social changes.” The economic system that produces

⁶ Ibid., 99.

vast abundance also causes obesity; communication technology keeps us instantaneously connected, but also creates unprecedented forms of mental health; infrastructure and public safety are great blessings of the modern nation-state, but they remove the challenges that were so formative of the best qualities in our ancestors. “Comfort and physical safety are boons to humanity,” Haidt and Lukianoff write, “but they bring some costs, too. We adapt to our new and improved circumstances and then low the bar for what we count as intolerable levels of discomfort and risk.”⁷

The notion of “safety” has undergone a stunning transformation. Once, it meant consumer advocacy that demanded government investigations into car seats and toys that posed a choking hazard. But the movement went through “concept creep”: nearly all of its goals were achieved by the power of consumer advocacy groups and government bureaus, but the safety movement kept moving, and became “*emotional safety*.” Talk of student safety exploded in 2015 as Generation Z arrived on American college campuses and immediately started demanding vast accommodations to protect their well-being. “Safetyism,” as the authors call it, had reached its highest end. Those who went out of their way to accommodate students, though, overlooked one common-sense fact: “Research on ‘post-traumatic growth’ shows that most people report becoming stronger, or better in some way, after suffering through a traumatic experience.”⁸

The Stoics make our students wonder what they are missing out on with all this safety. What growth are they being deprived of in all this safety, which they so naturally expect and demand? What experiences might be making them wiser? “It is true that to be always happy and to pass through life without any mental distress is to lack knowledge of one half of nature,”

⁷ Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, in their much-touted book, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), pp. 13-14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

Seneca writes. We may think we are good, or we may actually be good – “but on what do I base this if Fortune denies you the opportunity to demonstrate your worth?” The anxiety of our age, it seems, may very well be a form of grief over lost opportunity that the age denies them. “You are unfortunate in my judgment,” Seneca says, “for you have never been unfortunate.”⁹

We shouldn’t wish for suffering, of course. But this is not because such a wish is foolish, but because suffering is simply not something we ourselves can choose. We may take risks and succeed, or we may go in dangerous places and survive. But true suffering only comes from Fortune. Imaging Fortune as a gladiator, Seneca says, who “looks for the bravest men to match with her, and passes some men by with scorn.”¹⁰ If we are passed over, we should still see value in anticipating and imagining suffering. The tragic story is always more interesting because it reveals what bravery we have – or if not, what bravery we should desire if we were in the lead character’s situation. Indeed, when everything is shaken, only the best qualities of the human heart are still standing. And weren’t those the things that mattered all along?

For this reason, do not “live in dread of what the immortal gods apply like spurs to our souls: disaster is the opportunity for true worth,” Seneca writes. “It would be just to describe as wretched those who are dulled by excessive good fortune, who remain at rest, as it were, in dead calm upon an untroubled sea.”¹¹

The demand for “safe spaces,” I propose, is actually fulfilled quite well by the teachings of the Stoics. They offer a sense of safety that really matters, which even the most sensitive college administrators could never provide. Consider Seneca’s offer: “Withdraw, then, to these more peaceful, safer, and greater things!” The truest safe space, it turns out, is one fortified by

⁹ Seneca, “On Providence,” *Dialogues and Essays*, 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

virtue, and the thing protected is not the delicate self, but the noble soul. “Many things worth knowing wait for you in this manner of life – the love and exercise of the virtues, the ability to forget the passions, the knowledge of living and dying, the state of deep repose.”¹²

We are in the habit of thinking that the anxiety of the current generation is itself a form of suffering that requires treatment. But the Stoics make us wonder if it might be the other way around: what if the anxiety is not about shivering in terror about what bad things *might* happen, but instead a deeper worry about what might *not* happen?

On Seeing Time Rightly

Some critics have argued that it is the result of a progressive attitude that has become old, worn out, and no longer confident in itself, resulting in an anxiety-inducing perception of time. By the 1990s, “we weren’t looking forward to anything in particular so much as we were simply looking forward,” Douglas Rushkoff writes. “With each passing year, we seemed to be closer to some sort of chaos attractor that was beckoning us toward itself. And the closer we got, the more time itself seemed to be speeding up.” Rushkoff’s book, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (2013), brilliantly sums up the grand conclusion of advanced modernity: time is no longer moving forward on the clear trajectory it once had; now “[o]ur society has reoriented itself to the present moment,” he writes. “Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It’s not a mere speeding up, however much our lifestyles and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things. It’s more of a diminishment of anything that isn’t happening right now – and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is.”¹³ So much of the present anxiety is therefore due to our popular perceptions of time: it is no longer a continuous thing, with the

¹² “On the Shortness of Life,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.

¹³ Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Penguin, 2013), pp. 11; 14.

present serving as a link with the past, passing into the future. Instead, the links are broken, and the present is all we know. Time is no longer an organic process of growth, but as an infinite procession of overwhelming “nows,” each a universe unto itself, but none of them connected with the others.

Seneca identifies this condition as an “agitation of mind,” a sense of worry that is not caused by things in particular but develops on its own; the things we usually worry about are often the result of this mentality imposing itself on reality. So why does the mind say such things? According to Seneca, it is “tormented by inconstancy and boredom and an unending change of purpose.” Anxiety is not simply a life of worry alone; it alternates with habits of sloth – in fact, it is more often defined by sloth, while anxiety is only the major symptom. The insomniac sleeps in; the mind full of ambition is usually idle. The anxiety is not in the insomnia or ambition, but in the indecision about what to do with *free time*. “This is the source of that boredom and dissatisfaction, of the wavering of a mind that finds no rest anywhere,” Seneca writes. “[H]ence comes grief and melancholy and the thousand fluctuations of an uncertain mind, held in suspense by early hopes and then reduced to sadness once they fail to materialize.” What is worse, such anxiety “makes men loathe their own leisure.”¹⁴ Leisure is not simply free time per se; it is the right use of that free time, spent in activities that are most fulfilling. It is time spent in a way that is unaware of time, because the pleasures involved enrapture us – and time stops. Boredom, however, is loathing for time – a desire for distraction to speed things up, and therefore a longing for death.

What is time for our students? The disorganized view it as vast empty spaces of boredom, held together only by moments of panic – the essay is due, the exam day has arrived –

¹⁴ Seneca, “On Tranquility of Mind,” *Dialogues and Essays*, pp. 116-117.

summoning all energy and ingenuity to get through to the reward: another vast space of boredom and distraction. The better-organized view time as a massive solid whole that moves forward faster than their management skills can handle. In neither case, though, do they see time as valuable: time is either a waste or a burden, both of which intentionally make life short.

The truth is that “[w]e do not receive a life that is short, but rather we make it so; we are not beggars in it, but spendthrifts.” Just as vast wealth can be squandered, so too can a meager fortune be turned into a great one; “so our span of life has ample measure for one who manages it properly.”¹⁵ Seneca calls this the greatest blind spot in the human mind: money is coined by sovereign power and protected by law; nearly always revered by individuals who earn it, and compels dangerous risks; it is hoarded and invested, worried about and fought over. Time, however, is wasted without a thought.

So how do we learn to treat time like the treasure it really is? That is a challenging question, not only for our students, but for advanced modernity in general, especially when we struggle to see the difference between work and play – and especially when what we mean by play is usually something mentally and emotionally laborious. Much of the blame for our students’ anxiety is put on communication technology, their use of social media, and the obsession with constantly maintaining a digital image. But, if we take Stoic teaching seriously and recognize the difference between outer impressions and inner responses, we should see that it is not the technology that causes anxiety, but the vast amount of unrestful time it consumes.

The current generation of high school kids has been called the iGen, since the digital screen has been the defining force that shapes their worldview. According to one survey, Jean Twenge reports, iGen students “spent an average of 2 ¼ hours a day texting on their cell phones,

¹⁵ Seneca, “On the Shortness of Life,” *Ibid.*, 140.

about 2 hours a day on the Internet, and 1 ½ hours a day on electronic gaming, and about a half hour on video chat in the most recent survey. That totals to six hours a day with new media – and that’s just during their leisure time.” If we compare that to measures of happiness (are you “very happy,” “pretty happy,” or “not very happy”) to the various leisure activities, “we can see which activities create joy and which are more likely to create misery.” In all the data, “there’s not a single exception: all screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness.”¹⁶

So what is leisure, and why is it so important to use leisure well? Clearly it is not free time per se, but free time used rightly, in a way that fulfills the purpose of time itself. Seneca makes exactly this point, along with many ancient philosophers and even ordinary people: we do not rest in order to work, but work in order to be at rest – and by rest, everyone meant play. “We must allow our minds some relaxation,” he writes. Again, sloth is not the opposite of frantic busyness, but the condition: “mental effort permanently sustained produces in the mind certain sluggishness and lethargy.”¹⁷ Sluggishness and lethargy are often equally busy as busyness itself: they produce the same mental exhaustion as hard labor does to the body, leaving time only for sleep. True leisure, though, is the ability to redeem the hours between working and sleeping, and find in them the greatest sources of happiness.

On the Stoic Path to Liberal Learning

Vivek Pandit, author of the first memoir for the times, *We Are Generation Z* (2015), reports that by the middle school years, many students “seemed to lose their natural

¹⁶ Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What That Means for the Rest of Us* (New York: Atria Books, 2017), 51.

¹⁷ Seneca, “On Tranquility of the Mind,” in *Dialogues and Essays*, pp. 138.

inquisitiveness” of their youth. “During this time, homework levels increased, but we did not have a clear understanding of why.” Schoolwork turned into busywork, which seemed to exist for its own sake rather than what it had to teach anyone: the interesting case study, the challenging novel, the historical lesson – all were replaced by tedious labor instead of joyful learning. Whether due to government programs that required “measurable outcomes,” or the ethos of so many teacher training programs, it became clear to Pandit that “extrinsic motivation actually *decreases* our interest and motivation.” Test scores and grades became the only tangible rewards, while the actual experience of learning became ephemeral. “Worse, this shift to extrinsic motivation then creates a competitive atmosphere in learning environments, which in turn creates a whole new set of obstacles toward successful learning.”¹⁸ Learning, then, is transformed into work, labor, and stress, now compounded by competition – superior test scores, superior college admissions, all feeding a hierarchy that has no concept of the beauty and excellent of the mind.

Stoic philosophers had little to say about formal education or school curriculum. At the same time, their teachings are keenly focused on what really matters when we learn. Of all the knowledge we can have and all the success it might bring us, what should a student really gain in the end? “Precisely what must be finest and most fitting for those who have received a true philosophical education, namely, peace of mind, fearlessness, and freedom,” Epictetus writes. Education always comes with certain value judgments about what is “good” for a student. The usual assumption, at least in modern public education, is that learning is the most critical public investment because it prepares students to be good citizenship able to make an enlightened contribution to democracy. Opinions may vary over what that looks like between the advocates

¹⁸ Vivek Pandit, *We Are Generation Z: How Identity, Attitudes, and Perspectives Are Shaping Our Future* (Dallas: Brown Books Publishing Group, 2015), pp. 70-71.

of “critical thinking” here and the “social justice warriors” there. But according to Epictetus, any politically or socially motivated kind of education misses the point: “we should put our trust not in the crowd, who say that only free men can be educated, but rather in philosophers, who say that none but the educated are free.” The worst tyrants are not out there in the world, but in our own hearts: it is our own passions that can enslave. “No one who lives in fear, then, or agitation, can be free, but anyone who is released from fear, distress, and agitation is realized by the very same course from slavery too.”¹⁹

This is precisely the difference between liberal education and servile education. What is liberal is free, and able to meditate on truths that are good for their own sake. It is partly the good of the things thought about – geometric axioms, the unchanging cosmos, and the nature of God – but is also the disposition of heart that is calm enough to think about eternal things. The stillness of eternity requires the same stillness in us if we are to think about it well. In contrast, someone bogged down by passions and worries is unable to focus in such a way and will not be free to encounter that kind of knowledge – nor will they have the disposition of heart to be free in general, whether personally or politically. The slavish mind views all knowledge as a tool, a means to some other end: it is the slave who has mastered the “race to success.”

But how does a teacher make the transition from one thing to another? This is what we’re really seeking when we struggle to teach liberal arts well and ensure that knowledge is not only memorized and utilized, but taken deeply into the heart of each student. It’s those rare and painstaking moments that make teaching worthwhile. It’s not that they simply “get it” or pass the exam, but *love* it, and see what is loveable in knowledge. We may praise the merits of eternal things and describe the serene joy that comes from studying them, but in the end, the

¹⁹ Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.1, in *Discourses, Fragments, and Handbook*, 72.

greater task, the preliminary task, is to shape the mind to receive liberal education – to teach it to be still – or else the treasure will flow right by.

Seneca describes the teacher’s struggle perfectly: “no activity can be properly undertaken by a man who is busy with many things – not eloquence, and not the liberal arts [sic] – since the mind, stretched in different directions, takes in nothing at any depth, but spits out everything that has been, so to speak, crammed into it.” Even after college, even if students embark on successful and high-paying careers, it is probable that they never learned what they needed most: how to be human. “Nothing concerns the busy man less than the business of living” – and the more of life that passes by and the brief season of formal education disappears, “nothing is so difficult to learn.”²⁰

By contrast, those who have learned to redeem the time – to be slow, to be attuned to eternity – “only those who find time for philosophy are at leisure,” Seneca writes; “only they are truly alive.” Not only does it make the most of one’s own time, but joins together the whole story of human life: with philosophy, “they add every age to their own; all the years that have passed before them they requisition for their store,” he writes. It means becoming friends with Zeno, Pythagoras, and Aristotle, and a variety of great minds since who have left their books behind for us to read. “None of these will be ‘too busy’, none will fail to send his visitor away a happier man or more devoted to his host, none will allow any man to leave him empty-handed; by night and by day all men on earth can enjoy their company.”²¹

Here lies the great value of the Stoics: their writings are especially good at getting through to our students about why they are in college. Stoics do not represent the whole of liberal arts education, of course: there are a variety of great books, histories, and social sciences

²⁰ Seneca, “On the Shortness of Life,” in *Dialogues and Essays*, 146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

and philosophy to know. But we who love learning for its own sake should recognize the Stoics as the shock troops, as it were, of the liberal arts education, and the conduit through which a variety of other things may find acceptance.

Conclusion: On the Real Pursuit of Happiness

There are reasons Stoicism may not be entirely the right thing for addressing anxiety. Epictetus' famous quip, "wish that everything that comes about comes about should come about just as it does," shows how dangerously narrow the Stoic position can be.²² And, of course, the praise of suicide as a way of asserting one's own inner nobility is hardly praiseworthy. Nor is Stoicism necessarily open to the broad lessons to be drawn from other schools of classical philosophy – the praise for purity of the philosophic life according to Plato, the study of nature we find in Aristotle, or the help that might be drawn from conservatism according to Marcus Tullius Cicero, to name only a few. And, for all its points of kinship with Christianity and Christian character, Stoicism is hardly compatible with the fullness of the Gospel: the honor of sharing in the cross through one's own suffering is a major missing piece, while Epictetus' insistence that "you're a little soul carrying a corpse around" is difficult to square with the importance of the flesh in the Eucharist or the bodily resurrection of Christ.²³

Still, these things are forgivable when we consider the pragmatic value of Stoic teaching *for our times*, and for the current generation that is inheriting those times as they arrive in our classes. Here, an untrained mind, an illiberal mind, will let impressions push it around, and let it be shaped entirely by circumstances; but a mind that has examined itself and recognized the true freedom it enjoys in ordering its passions and testing its desire – that mind is truly happy. "[O]r

²² Epictetus, *Handbook*, Section 8, in *Discourses, Fragments and Handbook*, 289.

²³ Epictetus, Fragment 26, in *Discourses, Fragments and Handbook*, 286.

what prevents us from saying that the happy life is to have a mind that is independent, elevated, fearless, and unshakeable,” Seneca asks,

a mind that exists beyond the reach of fear and of desire, that regards honour as the only good and infamy as the only evil, and everything else as a trivial collection of things, which come and go, neither subtracting anything from the happy life nor adding anything to it, and do not increase or diminish the highest good?

Perhaps modern forms of therapy and anxiety treatments make this their goal, or perhaps they don't. It rests on one fundamental question: should anxiety simply go away, or should it be *resolved*? If it is trying to tell us that something is wrong – that we are depriving ourselves of something we need – why would we silence it? Resolution appears to be the wiser route. The soul that recognizes its own nature, as the Stoics teach, and the freedom that exists to order itself well is able to rise above not only anxiety but the whole slew of miseries that torment “the self.” The man with such a grounding in Stoic life, by contrast, “will be accompanied by continuous or cheerfulness and a profound happiness that comes from deep inside him, since he is one who takes pleasure in his own resources and wishes for no joys greater than those of his own heart.”²⁴

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²⁴ Seneca, “On the Happy Life,” in *Dialogues and Essays*, pp. 88-89.

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