OPENING WORDS

“Like the Stoics, [Henry David] Thoreau was interested in developing a philosophy of life. According to the Thoreau scholar Robert D. Richardson, “His was always the practical question, how best can I live my life.” Today we will look at the Stoic philosophy of life that influenced Thoreau and has also influenced modern approaches to psychotherapy.

(Pp 211-212 in A Guide to the Good Life by William B. Irvine)

READING: “ADVICE FROM A 2000-YEAR-OLD SLAVE”

The reading comes from the book The Secret of Shelter Island by Alexander Green. This book is a collection of short essays or meditations all having to do with the meaning of a good life. This reading comes from Green’s essay: “Advice from a 2000-Year-Old Slave”.

“If a citizen of ancient Greece or Rome were magically transported into the modern era, he would be astounded by the current state of agriculture, transportation, housing, medicine, architecture, technology, and living standards.

But humanity itself would offer few surprises. We remain the same flawed human beings we always were, struggling with the same deadly sins our ancestors wrestled with millennia ago. That is why ancient philosophers still speak to us—if we listen. The wisdom of the classical world transcends place and time.

The Stoic philosophy, for example, dominated the ancient world for nearly 600 years, beginning in the late 4th century B.C.E. . . .

One of the great exponents of Stoicism was a slave named Epictetus, born around 55 C.E. in the eastern outreaches of the Roman Empire.

Epictetus had few advantages in life. Aside from being born into slavery, he was crippled. And he was poor, living a simple life in a small hut with no possessions.

Yet he became one of the leading thinkers of his age. As his reputation for wisdom grew, people flocked to hear him. One of his most distinguished students was the young Marcus Aurelius Antonius, who eventually became ruler of the Roman Empire.

Epictetus was not one for airy theories. In his view, the job of philosophy is to help ordinary people deal with the challenges of everyday life. And his words, captured in The Art of Living, are as wise today as when he spoke them nearly 2,000 years ago:
‘We cannot choose our external circumstances, but we can always choose how to respond to them.’

‘He is wise who doesn’t grieve for the things he doesn’t have, but rejoices for the things he does have.’

‘A good death can only come from a good life.’

Today Epictetus is widely recognized as the world’s first philosopher of personal freedom… Ironic, isn’t it? A man born into slavery was among the first to show us the path to personal liberation.”

(This reading is from “Advice from a 2000-Year-Old Slave” which appears on pages 37-40 in the book The Secret of Shelter Island, 2009, by Alexander Green.)

SERMON: THOREAU AND THE STOICS

Transcendentalist (and one-time Unitarian minister) Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “I like the silent church before the service begins better than any preaching.”

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I hope you find some of what I am going to say to be a little better than silence.

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A number of years ago I came across a line in Thoreau’s book, Walden that bothered me. The line is this: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” I think this statement bothered me because I felt that there were many moments in my own life when I have had that feeling of “quiet desperation.”

For example, I can remember a Friday in the middle of my teaching career when I could tell by half way through the first period of the day that my lesson plan was not working well. The students were not engaged, they were mentally planning their weekends, and I was too tired to improve the lesson on the spot. By the end of the day, I was worn down physically and emotionally, realizing that I had done a mediocre job of teaching.

But it was not over yet. As soon as my teaching duties were over, I rushed to Shawnee Mission North to begin my track coaching duties at the North Relays. As soon as I got there, it started raining—but the meet went on as scheduled and was not over until 10:45 at night. By that time I
was cold, wet, exhausted, and had been teaching and coaching for 15 straight hours. Standing there in the rain and realizing that I had 20 more years of this before retirement, I knew exactly what Thoreau meant by “quiet desperation.”

But let’s get back to Thoreau. To try to understand what Thoreau meant, I read Walden and articles about Thoreau. I found that Thoreau had been influenced by the thinking of the Stoics and so this motivated me to find out what Stoic philosophy was and how it ties into the thinking of Emerson and Thoreau.

Thoreau was born in 1817 in Concord, Mass. His father had a pencil-making business. In 1833, Thoreau entered Harvard College. He graduated in 1837 and the graduation address was given by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Soon after college, Thoreau began attending Transcendentalist meetings at Emerson’s home. He was urged by Emerson to start a journal, which became a lifelong project.

In 1845, Thoreau built a small cabin on property owned by Emerson on Walden Pond. There he lived for the next two years and two months. It was not as rustic and lonely as you might imagine. He was only two miles from Concord and would usually talk to people daily as he walked in the woods around the pond.

Why did he isolate himself in a small, windowless cabin, for two years? Here is what Thoreau says in his book Walden: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.”

Thoreau was not yet 30—his friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, described him as “a young man with much of wild original nature still remaining in him.”

I think the central clue to his two year experiment at Walden Pond was his desire to “live deliberately” in other words he wanted to develop a coherent philosophy of life. What were the central ingredients of that philosophy? Thoreau tells us to: “simplify, simplify.”

In his book on Stoicism titled A Guide to the Good Life, William B. Irvine has this to say: “Like the Stoics, Thoreau was interested in developing a philosophy of life. According to the Thoreau scholar Robert D. Richardson, ‘His was always the practical question, how best can I live my daily life?’, and his life itself can best be understood, says Richardson, as ‘one long uninterrupted attempt to work out the practical concrete meaning of the Stoic idea that the laws which rule nature rule men as well. Thoreau went to Walden Pond to conduct his famous two-year experiment in simple living in large part so that he could refine his philosophy of life and thereby avoid misliving: A primary motive in going to Walden, he tells us, was his fear that he would, ‘when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.’ “ (pages 211-212 in Irvine)
This, then, is the answer to avoiding a life of quiet desperation—it is to develop a philosophy of life that is both simple and principled. William Irvine states: “...Thoreau... doesn’t directly mention Stoicism or any of the great Stoics in Walden, his masterpiece, but to those who know what to look for, the Stoic influence is present. In his Journal, Thoreau is more forthcoming. He writes, for example, that ‘Zeno the Stoic stood in precisely the same relation to the world that I do now.’ “ (p. 211 in Irvine)

So my reading of Thoreau and Walden brought me to the Stoics. Who were the Stoics and what did they advocate?

Stoicism began with the Greek thinker, Zeno, who lived from 335-263 B.C.E.—this was the Hellenistic period of Greece after Alexander the Great. Zeno lived in Athens and he would lecture on the porch of a public building. The word for porch in Greek is “STOA”, and so people called his students Stoics which literally means “people who hang out on the porch.” “Zeno thought people should try to reach inner peacefulness. The best way to be peaceful was to be moderate in everything.” (web: www.historyforkids.org) Zeno lived during a turbulent period in Greek history and his emphasis on a life of moderation was perhaps an antidote to the volatile times. Zeno’s emphasis on balance and moderation in life has parallels with Confucianism and Taoism which had developed a bit earlier in China.

Zeno’s second emphasis concerned what we ought to do to live well—to flourish. Here he emphasized traits that could be called “being of good character.” This, by the way, was a central concern also of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

“Character is higher than Intellect” says Emerson. Another well known Emerson saying is: “What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say.” Emerson jokes: “The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons.”

For Zeno, and for Emerson, to live a virtuous life—one of good character—is also the recipe for happiness. Emerson says: “The reward of a thing well done is to have done it.” Zeno stated: “It is in virtue that happiness consists, for virtue is the state of mind which tends to make the whole of life harmonious.”

Zeno’s philosophy of Stoicism continued to be popular among the Romans. Three well known Roman Stoics were: Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. They added a third component to Greek Stoicism. Zeno had emphasized moderation and character. The Roman Stoics focused also on Tranquility.

The Stoics did not mean a zombie-like state when they talked about tranquility. They believed that humans were rational and should use reason to build better lives. What they meant by tranquility was an ideal state of mind in which negative emotions such as grief, anger, and anxiety have been banished and positive emotions such as joy are present (p. 39 in Irvine: A Guide to the Good Life).

Epictetus tells us “Know what you can control and what you can’t. Happiness and freedom begin with one principle: some things are within our control, and some things are not.” (p. 9 in Epictetus: A Manual for Living). Epictetus sounds like a modern psychologist in this 2000 year
old advice that is strikingly similar to the Serenity Prayer often attributed to the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. The Serenity Prayer begins: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.” Alcoholics Anonymous has adopted it as its favorite way to open or close a meeting. The actual origins of the prayer are unknown but according to Glenn Chesnut, professor emeritus of ancient history at Indiana University: “. . . if we take the ideas of the Serenity Prayer back to their beginnings, it was a very distinctive and easily identifiable Stoic philosophical position.” The Stoic philosophy dominated the ancient world for 600 years. After the death of Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, Christianity gradually replaced Stoicism. Both Christianity and Stoicism argued that people should live virtuous lives. Both argued that we should “love mankind”. But Christianity had one big advantage over Stoicism. Christianity promised that there is a heaven in which we live on for a wonderful eternity. “The Stoics, on the other hand, thought it possible that there was life after death but were not certain of it, and if there was indeed life after death, the Stoics were uncertain what it would be like.” (Irvine: A Guide to the Good Life, p. 210)

Gradually, Stoicism is making a comeback. Books, such as Irvine’s 2009 book: A Guide to the Good Life, are introducing people to the ideas of the Stoics. People are again reading the advice of the Stoics themselves. The Art of Living by Epictetus offers advice on virtue, happiness, and effectiveness that is just as valid today as it was 2,000 years ago. “Know what you can Control and What you Can’t.” “Events don’t hurt us, but our views of them can.” “The Good life is the life of inner serenity.” “Approach life as a banquet.” “Happiness can only be found Within.” All of these are quotes from The Art of Living by Epictetus.

Centuries before modern scientific psychology, the Stoics developed keen insights into human nature and techniques for developing a more successful approach to the challenges of everyday life.

One modern clinical psychologist who based his therapy on Stoic ideas was Albert Ellis. Ellis was trained in psychoanalysis but became discouraged with its results. In 1955, Ellis developed a new therapy that is now called Cognitive Behavior Therapy or CBT. The central argument of CBT is that many of our negative emotions of anxiety and depression are the result of faulty beliefs. For example the belief that: “I should be able to act so that all people will like me” will only lead to disappointment because it will always be impossible to get everyone to like you. Ellis attributes the origins of his approach to therapy to the Stoic philosopher Epictetus who said: “People are not disturbed by things, but by the views they take of them.” Today, Cognitive Behavior Therapy is one of the most widely used therapies in clinical psychology because research indicates that it is quite effective.

In 1942 the Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was arrested by the Nazis because he was Jewish. He spent the rest of the war in the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Dachau. His wife, a brother, and his parents died in the camps but somehow Frankl survived. In the years after the war, he developed a form of psychotherapy based on those experiences. In his best-selling book Man’s Search for Meaning, he states: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can
be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s own attitude in any given set of circumstances.” (Frankl: Man’s Search for Meaning, 1963)

This is exactly what the Stoics were arguing. Remember what Epictetus said? “Events don’t hurt us but our views of them can.”

So there you have it: a philosophy 2000 years old that still resonates today. In the movie “Dead Poets Society” the central character is an inspirational schoolteacher played by Robin Williams. He encourages his students, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.” Thoreau, like the Stoics before him, believed that the life that is disciplined and stripped to its essentials is the life that will be fulfilling and happy. And what is the happy life? We will leave the last word to Thoreau’s mentor: Ralph Waldo Emerson:

- To laugh often and much.
- To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children.
- To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends.
- To appreciate beauty.
- To find the best in others.
- To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition.
- To know even one life breathed easier because you have lived.”

THANKS

(Emerson, quoted on p. 67 in The Secret of Shelter Island by Alexander Green).

BENEDICTION

Most of you are familiar with the story of Randy Pausch. Randy was a professor of computer science and a UU. In 2006, at the age of 46, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. A year later he delivered his last lecture. It was not and academic lecture—the real purpose was to leave a lasting memory for his three young children. His lecture is truly inspiring and if you have not seen it, watch it on YouTube—it will bring tears of joy to your eyes. Randy was not a defeatist, he was not angry—he was positive and inspiring. Many of his comments in that last lecture sound like words from the Stoics.

Pausch: “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.”

Pausch: “It’s not about how to achieve your dreams, it’s about how to lead your life,. . . if you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself. The dream will come true.”

GO IN PEACE