

**A Stoic or Aloof?**  
by  
**Daniel E. White December 2, 2024**

In one of the periodic messages the universe seems intent on sending me, Epictetus and the philosophy of Stoicism has muscled in. The most vivid message was part of the Ken Burns film on Benjamin Franklin where, though I have taught about Franklin many times in many contexts, I learned about Franklin's self-control in a trying time.

In January 1774, the Privy Council of the British empire convened at a place called The Cockpit to consider a petition from the Massachusetts House of Representatives to have the Governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, removed from office. In its petition, the colony argued that the removal "would serve the king's best interest...because Hutchinson had forfeited the confidence of the legislative bodies..."

As a representative of the colonies in London, Franklin appeared on behalf of Massachusetts. The meeting occurred only a few days after news of the Boston Tea Party had reached England.

Once the purpose of the hearing had been formally announced, Solicitor General Wedderburn began a one-hour diatribe attacking Franklin. His premise was that "Franklin and his little coterie from Boston" (Wedderburn missed the fact that Franklin was from Philadelphia) "were conspiring to subvert the allegiance of the king's subjects and destroy the peace of the province." (Source: National Archives—Founders on Line)

Observers noted that "Franklin betrayed nothing that would add to his enemies' satisfaction...he stood conspicuously erect, without the slightest movement of any part of his body...keeping his countenance as if his features were made of wood." Franklin was a fan of Epictetus, the Roman slave-turned-Greek philosopher who articulated the philosophy of Stoicism.

Benjamin Franklin had wanted to spend the rest of his days in London as a loyal British subject. In the Cockpit, he was transformed into a rebel. The philosopher, Edmund Burke, present that day, later wrote: "a great empire and little minds go ill together."

Part of the Stoic's thinking was that "it is only our opinions and principles that render us unhappy...every desire degrades us and renders us slaves of what we desire...all external adventures are not our own...and do not properly belong to us. Thus prepared, we shall never be carried away by opinions."

Sounds like hard work, not being carried away by opinions and recognizing that every desire degrades us because of the power it has over us. Simpler is his assertion that we have no power over external things. We should concentrate on the things we can control, governed by reason, unmoved by the irrational, which is evil.

The Wikipedia entry for Epictetus includes reference to the importance placed on his philosophy by a modern-day American hero, Admiral James Stockdale. Stockdale, for seven-and-one-half years a captive in North Vietnam, credits his reliance on the philosophy of Epictetus for sustaining his sanity. He noted, as he was in his parachute, "I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus."

In concluding his book, *Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus's Doctrines of Human Behavior in a Laboratory* (1993), Stockdale wrote: The emotions of grief, pity, and even affection are well-known disturbers of the soul. Grief is the most offensive: Epictetus considered the suffering of grief as an act of evil. It is a willful act, going against the will of God to have all men share happiness."

Still sounds like hard work, such control over one's passions. Grief seems understandable when a loved one dies. Affection connects us to others, and in others we often find the comfort and companionship that is essential to our contentment. Epictetus says we cannot control loss, but we can control our reaction to it. Intellectually, control like Franklin and Stockdale exhibited and advocated might seem worth pursuing. Real life might say otherwise.

Dad loved Kipling's poem, "If." A framed copy was on the wall of his study. From time to time, he would read it to me, clearly hoping that I would come to love the poem as well. It worked. "If you can keep your head when all about you; Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster; And treat those two imposters just the same:" I know Kipling's view of "being a man" has been influential as I have comported myself in my life.

I know little about Kipling's philosophy but if "If" is an indication, he liked Epictetus.

The rub: where is the boundary between the self-control where reason governs the emotions, and being seen as cold, uncaring, aloof? Neither Epictetus nor Stockdale nor Kipling seem worried about that.

I have been blessed with a 63 year-long love affair that has been obviously shared with someone I cannot control. Judy is clearly external to me but essential to my happiness. It makes a hole when someone about whom I care dies—is that an indication of grief?—but I have come to accept that, as I age, there will be more holes happening. Injustice and unfairness still tick me off.

Such is the price of life, People of a Certain Age, navigating through uncertain waters, striving to be the best "me" any of us can be. Epictetus was unassailably right: each of us chooses how we react to the events of our lives.

Click here to email your comments to Dan: [danwhitehi@gmail.com](mailto:danwhitehi@gmail.com)