

Stoicism at 3 a.m.
By
Daniel E. White March 30, 2026

Dad raised me to be a Stoic. Maybe not intentionally, but he pointed me time after time to Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If."

"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 impostors just the same";
"If you can fill the unforgiving minutes
With sixty seconds worth of distance run..."

These seem like fairly Stoic attitudes to me. Alas, there are no Stoics in my bed at 3 a.m.

Stoic philosophy emerged in Greece and Rome more than 2,000 years ago. Its teachings explored how to "respond to hardship, live with virtue and cultivate inner strength. A key Stoic was Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor and military leader whose private journal was published centuries later as *Meditations*," wrote author Dave Roos.

Roos explained that, by confronting his fears and shortcomings, [meeting triumph and disaster, treating those impostors the same way], Aurelius organized his life such that little blew him off course. "Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be. Be one," wrote Aurelius, "Be tolerant with others and strict with yourself."

I would not be surprised if I learned that Kipling kept a copy of *Meditations* on his desk.

Roos looked at the careers of three American Presidents whose lives reflected lessons from *Meditations*. Indeed, there is ample evidence that each was conversant in the approach to life articulated by Aurelius and modeled their actions accordingly. Roos's work drew on commentary written by Dr. Nancy Sherman, philosophy professor at Georgetown University.

When his older brother Lawrence married into the influential Fairfax family, the young George Washington was introduced to philosophy—especially Marcus Aurelius and Plutarch, whose works they considered required reading.

For Washington, "a successful military or political leader needed to cultivate virtues like moral goodness, generosity and courage. These were lessons he absorbed directly from Stoic writers and other classical philosophers," explained Professor Sherman. "The philosophical movement that began with Socrates moved away from conspicuous honor toward inner virtue."

Citing Sherman, Roos wrote, "Thomas Jefferson was a voracious reader and well-versed in classical philosophy. He identified himself as an 'Epicurean,' a follower of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus, who taught that the point of life was to attain pleasure (or tranquility) by limiting both desire and fear. But when friends asked for book recommendations, Jefferson frequently listed works by Stoics like Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius."

Sherman noted that Jefferson asked, "How much pain have cost us the evils which have never happened!" This meditation on unnecessary suffering echoes another statement by Epictetus: "Man is not worried by real problems so much as by his imagined anxieties about real problems."

Theodore Roosevelt was an avid reader of Stoic philosophy—he took copies of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus on his South American expedition to explore the River of Doubt. He would have been familiar with this famous line from *Meditations*: "Choose not to be harmed, and you won't feel harmed. Don't feel harmed, and you haven't been."

"The Stoics taught that our emotional lives are determined by the value judgements we make, and so they are—in principle—completely within our control," wrote Roos. "Thus, feeling harmed is a choice. No one can upset you by an insult if you don't care what they think, or if you interpret their action as a product of their problems rather than a reflection on you. It's all a matter of interpretation and judgement."

My professional mentors modeled for me dependability, reliability, the capacity to figure out what the real issue might be and focus on enabling the best solution possible, given the circumstances. "Losing" my head would have served no one's interests. So, project confidence, even when uncertain, look after the well-being of one's colleagues, even if one or some have slipped up, keep one's eyes on the prize, no matter how distant the prize seems at the time.

That's how I wanted to be seen. Probably still do. Whether that effort produced "triumph" or "disaster" or something in between is for others to judge.

All those aspirations, though, too often melt away in the early morning hours when I wake up staring at the ceiling, struggling to get back to sleep. Past errors, worries about the future, and confusion about the present insinuate themselves into my brain. Eventually, I get to sleep again, my brain probably exhausted by all of the un-Stoic thinking of the previous minutes, sometimes hours.

My inner Kipling is disappointed, of course. I wish I could report a surefire way to stop the fruitless anxiety that flares its hottest in the darkest hours of the early morning. If you know a way, please let me know. The best I can offer is that sometimes a good laugh at myself can break the cycle of negativity: the Stoic returns. But why must I go through the cycle in the first place?

Equanimity might be an apt word to summarize what Roos' three model Presidents might have displayed, the capacity to deal with what is rather than what has been or what might be. Certainly, it describes a quality for which I strive.

Perhaps Aurelius would encourage me to understand that the 3 a.m. disruptions to my equanimity are just par for the course of being human. But he would caution, don't let them rule your life.

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