

The Invincible Man

Teaching resilience

by Col Thomas Gordon

In 1965 CMDR James Stockdale was shot down when bad weather forced him to dive below the clouds to attack a secondary target—a line of boxcars guarded by a 57mm anti-aircraft gun. He was able to eject, and while floating down into enemy territory, he had a moment to reflect and

“Stop talking about what the good man is like, and just be one.”¹

—Marcus Aurelius

mentally prepare himself for the horrors that lay ahead. Stockdale said to himself, “I am leaving this world and entering the world of Epictetus.”²

Epictetus was a freed slave and Stoic sage in ancient Rome. While completing his masters at Stanford, Stockdale was introduced to Epictetus’ teachings by his mentor and philosophy professor, Dr. Philip Rhineland. In stoic philosophy, Stockdale discovered what it meant to be invincible. “The invincible man,” claimed Stockdale, “is he who cannot be dismayed by any happenings outside of his control.”³ As a prisoner of war (POW), Stockdale learned that “invincible” did not mean impervious. He and his fellow POW were routinely broken by their tormentors, yet day after day, they spiritually regrouped and continued to persist.

In the midst of the current global pandemic, an economic recession, and a crisis of confidence in our leaders and institutions (exploited by our adversaries’ information operations), our resilience is being put to the test. Such calamities do not have to break us; however, these horrible experiences can

>Col Gordon is the Director of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. His 29-year career includes multiple command and staff tours.

be phenomenal opportunities. When discussing post-traumatic stress, Gen James N. Mattis, USMC(Ret), turned the conversation into a lesson on post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is an exercise in spiritual wellness. Spiritual wellness reflects a personal belief system that gives meaning to our purpose and enables one to find balance in the world. Spirituality here is not synonymous with religion.⁴ As military professionals, we are comfortable designing training programs to improve physical fitness. Our professional military education continuum is designed to develop the mental acuity required to pierce the fog of war and find clarity

... yet day after day, they spiritually regrouped and continued to persist.

in the chaos of combat. But how do we improve spiritual health? How can we develop a consistency of character that is impervious to disease, despair, or even defeat? How do we build an emotional and spiritual “parapet” resilient to targeted strikes against our confidence and will to fight? The Stoics found these answers in a spiritual wellness system that gave purpose to their lives in service to something greater than themselves; a system that enabled them to reconcile

good and evil to ensure their actions aligned with their beliefs.

- What is my purpose in life?
- What/Who do I serve that is greater than myself?
- How do I reconcile good versus evil?
- Do my values match my life?⁵

By the time one enters military service, our personal code, belief system, or religion should be developed well enough to calibrate his own moral compass. I am not suggesting replacing one’s faith; rather, Stoicism is offered as an alternative framework to make one’s own belief system more resilient. Stoic philosophy offers a series of coping techniques, a form of spiritual Jiu Jitsu that enables the practitioner to redirect a blow and control their response irrespective of their circumstance. Stoic tenets offer an introspective search for real purpose. The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, wrote, “He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.” Critics of Stoicism, however, conflate the philosophy with an unhealthy, emotion suppressing, personality trait. Far from unfeeling, Stoicism promotes character traits such as empathy and humility that are conspicuously absent from the Marine Corps’ leadership traits.

The Stoics

Stoicism is an ancient Greek moral philosophy which dates to the fourth century BC, believed to be “fathered” by a bankrupt dye merchant by the name Zeno of Citium. Having lost his ship and business in a storm, Zeno wandered Athens in search of answers. At first, he encountered the Cynics who believed that the only thing that mattered in life was character and everything else was worthless. Later, he became a pupil of Socrates who was not as quick to dismiss external advantage;

though cautioned that such positions were only good if used wisely.⁶ Zeno combined the teachings of the Cynics and Socrates into a pursuit of moral wisdom. Since Zeno and his followers gathered on a painted public porch in Athens, they became known as “men of the porch,” or Stoics.⁷

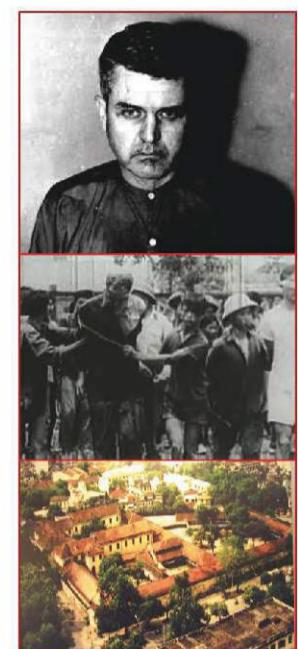
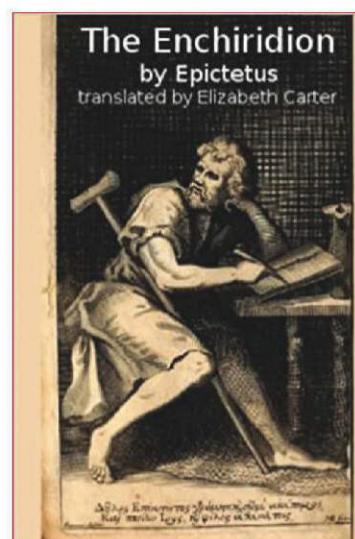
In a “post-honor society,” Michael Evans, writing in the *Naval War College Review*, suggests a return to Stoicism as a moral philosophy to underpin our professional military ethos.⁸ Throughout the millennia, Stoicism resonated with great statesmen and military leaders alike. Perhaps the most famous Stoic, Marcus Aurelius, led the Roman legions in war in Gaul as a Roman Emperor. Other famous Stoic generals included Rome’s Scipio Africanus, Prussia’s Frederick the Great, and the legendary World War II U.S. Army Chief of Staff, GEN George C. Marshall.

Stoic philosophy today is undergoing a revitalization. This Stoic renaissance, made possible by popular depictions of Marcus Aurelius and the rediscovery of his *Meditations*, led to the adoption of Stoic tenets in fields outside of philosophy. Contemporary advances in clinical psychology’s cognitive theory of emotions incorporates tenets of Stoic philosophy into psychotherapy. The most renowned modern Stoic psychologist was the Holocaust survivor and author, Viktor Frankl. His seminal book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, chronicles his torment in a Nazi concentration camp and how he later used the experience to assist others. Donald Robertson, psychotherapist and author of *How to think Like a Roman Emperor*, adapted the stoic theories of subjective consciousness, cognitive distancing, and catastrophic thinking techniques into clinical practice.⁹

In pursuit of moral wisdom, the stoics are guided by the cardinal virtues of courage, justice, and temperance. To discipline, in ancient Greece, was to teach. Stoics warn that emotions cannot be trusted as they can rob you of your agency. For example, the Roman Stoic philosopher, Seneca the Younger, equated anger with “temporary madness.”¹⁰ A true Stoic is indifferent to everything but good and evil, yet this dualist battle can only be waged within.



The Invincible Man



“The invincible man is he who cannot be dismayed by any happenings outside of his control.”

-James Bond Stockdale

2

(Image provided by author from the Director’s Leadership Discussion #17, Marine Corps University.)

To the Stoic, there is no such thing as being a victim.*

Epictetus wrote “a man cannot harm you without your permission.”¹¹ Instead, Stoics believe the greatest injury that can be inflicted upon a person can only be administered by himself when he destroys the good man within.

Critics of Stoicism confuse the Greek philosophy (uppercase Stoicism) with the personality trait (lowercase stoicism). The stoic personality trait is associated with unhealthy emotional suppression and common stereotypes of manliness. Unfortunately, this detracts from a deeper discussion the Stoics offer on character, spiritual wellness, and resiliency. The Stoics were not impulsive robots but encouraged empathy and collective resolve. Writing the *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius offered, “Don’t be ashamed to need help. Like a soldier storming a wall, you have a

mission to accomplish. And if you’ve been wounded and you need a comrade to pull you up? So what?”¹²

On Character

The axiom, “character is fate,” is a tenet of Stoicism. In my book, *Marine Maxims, 50 Leadership Lessons on How to Turn Principles into Practice*, character development is a central theme. Maxim #44 states, “talent can get you to the top but only character will keep you there.” Character, in this sense, is synonymous with integrity.¹³ Knowing the path you are on and calibrating your moral compass are integral to discovering moral wisdom.

The New York Times commentator and author, David Brooks, suggests the meaning of the word character has changed from altruistic traits such as generosity, self-sacrifice, and selflessness, to more egocentric qualities like grit, resilience, and tenacity.¹⁴ The ancient Greek philosophers applied an introspective approach to defining character. Aristotle and Plato professed that one’s character is discovered in the pursuit of virtue and the avoidance of vice. The Stoics held that your character is formed by your inner confrontations. As Brooks writes in *The Road to Character*: “Character is a set of dispositions, desires, and

*This statement does not invalidate that one can be assaulted; Epictetus as a slave was maimed, Frankl’s entire family was exterminated in Auschwitz, and Stockdale was systematically tortured into confessing false crimes. Though wronged, they retained their free will. They refused to surrender their dignity, retaining agency over their response.

habits engraved in the struggle against your weakness.”¹⁵

The ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, particularly the Stoics, believed that a proper education was key to character development. They advocated for a balanced education, grounded in philosophy yet practical in application. Socrates believed philosophy represented mankind’s attempt to answer the ultimate question: the purpose of life. On the morning of his execution, Socrates equated his philosophy with a lifelong meditation on his own mortality.

“A moral education is impossible without the habitual visions of greatness.”¹⁶

—Alfred Whitehead

The students at the Naval War College (from 1977 to 1979) and The Citadel (from 1979 to 1980) did not have far to look for an inspirational example to emulate. Their College President spent seven and half years as a POW in North Vietnam. Routinely tortured and abused, Jim Stockdale inspired the POWs in the Hanoi Hilton until they were repatriated in 1973 as U.S. involvement in Vietnam ended. In 1976, he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his courageous leadership and personal sacrifices while in captivity. Though crippled from his wounds, he was promoted to Vice Admiral and completed his career as the President of the Naval War College until retirement in 1979. As the Naval War College President, he taught a course titled “Foundations of Moral Obligation,” popularly known as “The Stockdale Course.” Within Newport’s stone buildings, he introduced aspiring senior officers to Stoic philosophy and explained how it saved his life and preserved his honor in Vietnam. Later, in a speech at Stanford in 1994, Stockdale professed that the challenge of education is not to prepare the student to profit from success but to prepare

them for failure.¹⁷ Stockdale held that “true education is the best insurance against losing your bearings, your perspective, in the face of disaster, in the face of failure.”¹⁸

So what did VADM Stockdale learn from Epictetus and how he was able to apply those lessons as a POW in Hanoi and how are these lessons relevant today amidst a global pandemic and the scourge of veteran suicide? Such trials do not have to be matters of life and death. The stresses associated with the continuous cycle of deployments, permanent change of station orders, and general uncertainty can have corrosive effects on the strongest military family. How then do we get through these struggles and what good, if any, can come from it?

Embrace the Suck

The Stoics believed that goodness comes from suffering. Seneca the Younger wrote “disaster is virtues opportunity.”¹⁹ He went on to say that “true character can’t be revealed without adversity.” The Stoics hold that just as gold is tried by fire, a person’s character is forged by misfortune. Drawing from their Cynic philosophical roots, the Stoics believed character is built by enduring hardships, austerity, and

through exercise. They viewed discomfort as an opportunity to exercise wisdom and strength of character. To the Stoic sage, pain and pleasure are neither good nor bad; it is one’s response that matters. Victor Frankl wrote: “If there is meaning in life at all then there must be suffering”²⁰

Admittedly, in my book *Marine Maxims*, I overuse the “embrace the suck” adage.²¹ I do so because it resonates well with Marines. Marines do not want it easy and most yearn for a real challenge. Provided there is a purpose to their misery, Marines welcome the hardship they share together. Nothing builds unit cohesion like tough, realistic training in the most austere environments. Marines take pride in being hard and sharing adversity. The more arduous the task and the more miserable the conditions, the greater the sense of accomplishment and the stronger affinity with the other members of the team.

One of my favorite excerpts from *Meditations* is Marcus Aurelius’ own “embrace the suck” maxim. He wrote: “Everything that happens is either endurable or not. If it is endurable, then endure it. Stop complaining. If it is unendurable, then stop complaining. Your destruction will mean its end as well.”²²

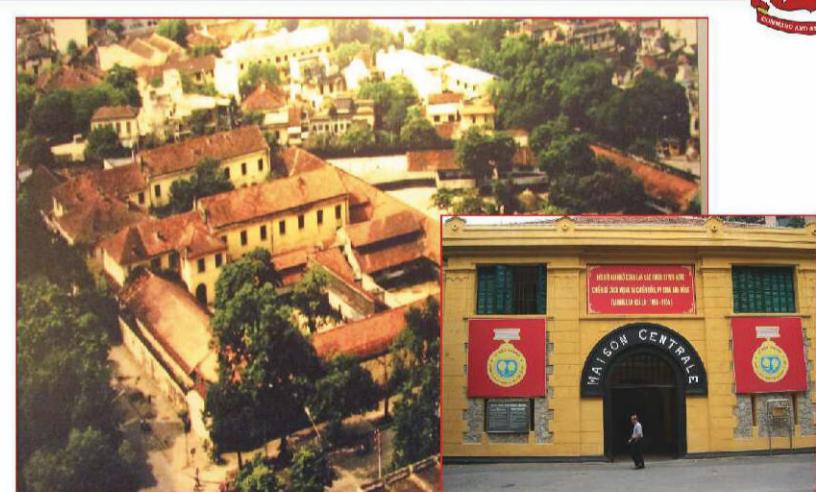


Fear Not



❑ Subjective Consciousness

❑ Cognitive Distancing



“Even though I may be a prisoner or a hostage, some measure of freedom remains to me.... in Hanoi we were helplessly confined and at the mercy of the enemy. Yet a crucial measure of freedom remained to us. We could collaborate with the enemy or refuse to do so. True, he had the power to make us confess to shameful things by torture.... But we had the power to make him begin all over again the next day....”

-VADM John Bond Stockdale

(Image provided by author from the Director’s Leadership Discussion #17, Marine Corps University.)

Serenity!

Peter Fretwell and Taylor Kiland's book, *Leadership Lessons from the Hanoi Hilton*, recounts VADM Stockdale's application of Stoicism during seven years of captivity in the Hanoi Hilton. The POWs in Hanoi were subjected to systematic torture, humiliation, and exploitation for as many as nine years, yet the vast majority demonstrated remarkable resilience and resolve. In fact, compared to other Vietnam veterans, they fared far "better" from the experience. In a study published by Dr. William Sledge, four percent of the POWs tortured in the Hanoi Hilton were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder compared to 30 percent of the conflict's veterans writ large.²³ The authors attributed the remarkable disparity to Stockdale's exemplary leadership and his ability to communicate. Incredibly, Stockdale was able to impart Stoic philosophic concepts, extend empathy, and steal resolve through a secret tap code.

The Serenity prayer is a religious appeal for subjective consciousness. Subjective consciousness, or the ability to distinguish what is in your power and what is not, is a tenet of Stoicism. The torment VADM Stockdale endured in the Hanoi Hilton was outside of his control. He and his prison mates broke at times under torture. They were not supermen. A Stoic feels pain, feels loss and suffers, but it is their response to these external forces that distinguish their character. The Stoics, though, aspire to retain agency over their response regardless of their circumstance.

Another useful Stoic concept in difficult times is cognitive distancing. Known in the field of psychology as rational emotive behavior therapy, the theory holds that people's interpretation of events determines their reaction. A Stoic would say that it is not the event that upset us, but it is our judgement about said event that does us harm. For example, the Stoics believe the fear of pain does more damage than pain itself because the fear of pain can injure your character. Instead, the Stoics discovered the paradox of acceptance—by accepting discomfort they experienced less suffering. By being "indifferent to indifferent things," the Stoics are able to channel their resolve



The Stoics



■ Four Cardinal Virtues

- Courage
- Justice
- Temperance
- Wisdom

■ Emotions Cannot Be Trusted

- Emotions Can Rob You of Agency

■ Empathy

- The Ability to "See Someone in the Round"

■ Critics Confuse the Greek Philosophy (Uppercase Stoicism) with the Personality Trait (lowercase stoicism)

"A man cannot harm you without your permission."

— Epictetus

(Image provided by author from the Director's Leadership Discussion #17, Marine Corps University.)

to things they can effect. Stockdale and his fellow prisoners accepted their fate and stopped struggling against things they couldn't control because doing so did more harm than good.²⁴ Quoting from *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius was blunt: "Think of yourself as dead. You have lived your life. Now take what's left and live it properly."²⁴

To Be or to Do

The most powerful book I ever read was Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. As mentioned, Frankl was a Holocaust survivor, a psychologist, and a Stoic. His thesis held that life is not a quest for pleasure or power, but for meaning. The greatest task a person can undertake is to find meaning in



#44 Talent Can Get You to the Top, But Only Character Will Keep You There



**■ "When you have integrity, that is all that matters."
"When you don't have integrity, that is all that matters."**

■ Sartre's Dictum: "A man is the sum of his acts."

■ Character is Fate

"Character is a set of dispositions desires and habits engraved in the struggle against your weakness."

— David Brooks, *The Road to Character*

(Image provided by author from the Director's Leadership Discussion #17, Marine Corps University.)

his life. Frankl is said to have discovered his answer in a Nazi concentration camp when he learned he was asking the wrong questions: “It is not what do I want from life,” he discovered, “it’s what does this life want from me? ... Where do my talents and gladness meet the world’s needs?” He concluded that “what man needs is not a tensionless state but rather a striving struggle for a worthwhile goal.”²⁶

Frankl’s struggle for a worthy purpose found an unlikely surrogate in the Pentagon in 1974. Col John Boyd, USAF(Ret), was a military theorist credited with the concept behind the Marine Corps’ maneuver warfare doctrine, air-to-air combat theory, and the design of the F-16 and F-15 fighters, yet his career came to an abrupt end. Having bucked his Service headquarters too many times, Boyd spent his final years in uniform walking the halls of the “Building” recruiting like-minded junior officers to join in his quest for change. Having been passed over for promotion, Boyd was careful they understood the costs of joining his rebellion. He offered them a choice: “Be someone—be recognized by the system and get promoted—or do something that will positively impact the Service or the Nation.”²⁷

Conclusion

Holistic wellness is achieved when our mental, physical, spiritual fitness are in balance. While we are comfortable talking about mental and physical fitness, spiritual fitness is something we are less adept in developing. Still, spiritual fitness is no different than other training; the optimal time to prepare is before a crisis. Resilience can be successfully taught; as leaders, we are morally obliged to ensure our Marines are spiritually ready to fight.

By incorporating Stoic tenets into our belief system, we can acquire the consistency of character that will make it impossible for another to do us harm. VADM Stockdale’s notion of “the invincible man” is predicated on subjective consciousness theory. Though he broke at times under torture, his extortionists never broke his will. He and his fellow POWs were able to endure with

dignity because they recognized what was in their control and what was not. In that sense, they were invincible. The Stoics hold that nothing is totally in your control except your own volition.

Stoic philosophy is rich in paradox. Ultimately, success can only be achieved

... *spiritual fitness is something we are less adept in developing ...*

within but if your telos is only to enrich yourself, you will never be satisfied. David Brooks wrote “a good life is impossible unless organized around a vocation.”²⁸ Intrinsically compelling vocations cannot be found in pursuit of personal desires, but only in the service of others. Just as Victor Frankl discovered the meaning of life in a Nazi concentration camp, Stockdale found his purpose in the Hanoi Hilton encouraging his fellow comrades. After an exhilarating wall tap message exchange, Stockdale repeated to himself: “I am right where I belong, I am right where I belong.”²⁹

Notes

1. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 2002).
2. Jim Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1995).
3. Ibid.
4. Donald Bostic, “Balancing the Five Pillars of Wellness,” (presentation, FBI Academy, Stafford, VA).
5. Ibid.
6. Michael Evans, “Captain of My Soul, Stoic Philosophy and the Western Profession of Arms in the Twenty-first Century,” *Naval War College Review*, (Newport, RI; Naval War College, 2011).
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Donald Robertson, “Mental Resilience: A Clear Guide for Facing Adversity,” (lecture, Marine Corps University, Quantico, VA: February 2020).
10. Donald Robertson, *How to Think Like A Roman Emperor*, (New York, NY: St. Martin Press, 2019).
11. Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, translated by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, (Sofia: Ayra Publishing, 2018).
12. *Meditations*.
13. Thomas Gordon, *Marine Maxims, 50 Leadership Lessons to Turn Principle into Practice*, (Publication forthcoming, 2020).
14. David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2015).
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*.
18. Ibid.
19. Seneca, *On Providence*, translated by Aubrey Stewart, (Independently published, 2017).
20. Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books, 1959).
21. *Marine Maxims*.
22. *Meditations*.
23. Peter Fretwell and Taylor Kiland, *Lessons from The Hanoi Hilton, Six Characteristics of High-Performance Teams*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013).
24. *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*.
25. *Meditations*.
26. *Man’s Search for Meaning*.
27. Robert Coram, *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War*, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 2002).
28. *The Road to Character*.
29. *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.