

MODULE 8 • GUEST ESSAY

The Inadequacies of the Invincible

Michael Gibson

2017 – 2022 • ENCOUNTER BOOKS

EDITOR'S NOTE

This essay first appeared on Medium in 2017. It was republished in 2022 in Gibson's excellent semi-biography *Paper Belt on Fire*.

APPENDIX • GUEST ESSAY

The Inadequacies of the Invincible

James Stockdale's A-4 Skyhawk was on fire.¹ All the warning lights were flashing mad: fire alarms, hydraulic failure, electrical failure. Flak had hit his attack jet as he pulled it off a target. His plane was now hurtling just above the trees at 575 miles an hour. It was a beast out of control. There was nothing Stockdale could do. He had to punch out. Eject. Quick. Tick. Tick—boom!—eject.

His parachute opens. He is somewhere above North Vietnam, floating 200 feet over a small village. It's Sep-

¹ All of Stockdale's quotes in what follows and the details of his life and prison experiences are drawn from two of his moving books: James B. Stockdale, *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot* and James B. Stockdale, *A Vietnam Experience: Ten Years of Reflection*. On Stoicism, see William B. Irvine, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*; A. A. Long, *Stoic Studies*; F. H. Sandbach, *The Stoics*. For criticisms of stoicism: Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* and Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*.

tember 9, 1965. Stockdale figures he has maybe thirty seconds at the outside before his feet hit the ground. Rifle shots whir through the air. He whispers to himself in his descent, “Five years down there, at least.” There is a lot of fighting left to this infernal war in which he’ll now be a pawn. “I’m leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus.”

Stockdale believed he would be a prisoner of war for five years. He sensed Epictetus would help him survive it. Who the hell was Epictetus?

Three years before this, before his plane was blown out of the sky, Stockdale received a book from his philosophy professor, Philip Rhinelander. He had stopped by Rhinelander’s office one last time before leaving Stanford’s campus to return to active duty. Stockdale had finagled his way into Rhinelander’s tutelage when he should have been devoting his time to studying international relations. He was making a mid-career pit-stop in grad school on the way to getting a desk in the Pentagon. Philosophy wasn’t meant to be part of that, but Stockdale was hooked. He couldn’t get enough. That day, Rhinelander handed him the collected teachings of a Roman slave, a Stoic named Epictetus. The collection had been put together nearly 1,900 years ago. Handing him the book, Rhinelander said, “You are a military man—take this booklet as a memento of our hours together. It provides a moral philosophy applicable to your profession.” It was a bit foggy how this dead slave’s ancient teachings were relevant to air combat and cutting-edge aeronautics. He was a fighter pilot in the Navy. What

would a dead Stoic have to say about flying A-4s and supersonic F-8 Crusaders? He thought his teacher had no idea what his job required. This ancient rag was irrelevant.

Three years later, floating down like a mote of dust to his captors, Stockdale believed his professor was right.

Stoic Ethics

The core of Stoic ethics is virtue, *arete* in the Greek, which connotes a blend of excellence, skill, strength, and valor—not a thing to be attained, like an Olympic gold medal or an Oscar, but a way of life, a way of doing things, a way of being. And if *arete* secures us anything at all, it is the fulfillment of our highest potential as humans, *eudaimonia*, sometimes translated as happiness in English, but its sense is less of a mood or a feeling and more akin to flourishing, like a majestic redwood fully grown in the sun.

The Stoics parted company from Aristotle and his students, not without controversy, by distilling the practice of virtue solely down to the exercise of the will and the purification of motive. For them, the success or failure of our actions is not our business. What matters is the inner citadel of one's soul, over which nobody else has control. So, what you or I might call the goods of life—wealth, health, family, lovers, friends—the Stoic is morally indifferent to, for what defines the sage is not that he possesses these good things or spends time with loved ones, but how he feels about their relationship to

himself. No one is made good simply by having these good things; nor is a life filled with them necessarily a good one. Take what we cherish away, and without virtue, without *arete*, then our lives and our souls would crumble.

But that need not be the case. Instead, the Stoic implores you to consider: how deep may these so-called goods clutch into our hearts? Are they really necessary? We shouldn't believe, like crying children who have lost a toy, that losing the goods of life can hurt us. Quite the opposite. Often these very things can make our lives worse. We are twisted into the worst sorts of vice by hitching our innermost self to the fate of these external goods, jealously trying to protect them, greedily trying to possess more of them, debasing ourselves to hold on to them, to make permanent what can't last. It is all an endless torture. But the Stoic sage knows the way out. He can cultivate a moral, and therefore emotional detachment from these spurious goods, knowing that the sum of his worth factors no possessions in. Why feel grief for something over which you have no control?

Meanwhile, the other matters you and I might call bad—death, disease, catastrophe, poverty, imprisonment, undeserved notoriety, bodily harm, a broken heart—the Stoic sees them as neutral raw material or as the training ground for virtue. How do you conduct yourself undergoing these supposed bad things? How do you respond to them? How do you feel about them? That's the crux of it all. Not that anything in particular happened to you. In and of themselves, these events do not cause

you to act badly. To the contrary: crisis, trauma, and deprivation could become strong material for virtuous action. The only thing that matters when our backs are to the wall is whether you let what is outside of your control rob you of your dignity. These events cannot touch the inner citadel of your soul. To the Stoic in extremis, there is always something unmanly about begging for your life in tears in the moments before your death.

“Philosophy does not promise to secure anything external for man,” Epictetus tells us in *The Discourses*, the book Rhinelanders had given to Stockdale. “To make the best of what is in our power, and take the rest as naturally happens.”²

And what has the universe placed in our power? “The power to deal rightly with our impressions” or “impulses”—in short, the way we respond to events, objects, and people. All else remains beyond our control. Your grief, your joy, your sorrow, your passion—they’re up to you. Therefore, the task of living well is to discipline our judgment about what is good. If you attend to this emotional response—examine it, train it, discipline the mind not to chase what merely appears to be good—then, Epictetus says, “you will not do a single thing against your will, you will have no enemy, and no one will harm you because no harm can affect you.”

“Who, then, is the invincible man?” Epictetus concludes. “He whom nothing outside the sphere of choice

² Epictetus. *The Discourses: The Handbook, Fragments*.

can disconcert.” We may not be able to control events, but our inviolable freedom is found in choosing how we respond to those events.

Prison

Stockdale’s guess about being a prisoner for five years proved wrong. It ended up being closer to eight, with four years in solitary confinement wearing leg irons in an old French dungeon in Hanoi. He quickly learned there would be a lot of important things outside of the sphere of his choice.

As soon as his feet hit the ground that day in September, and he unfastened his parachute, he was overwhelmed by a mob of North Vietnamese militants. They pummeled him. Some had clubs. They shattered one of his legs and broke a bone in his back. He knew right away his leg would never properly heal. He wouldn’t walk on it without crutches for a year.

Imprisoned, he was broken and humiliated. “You will help me,” one captor told him. “You don’t know it yet, but you will.” But what about medical attention? His leg? His back? His wounds? “You have a medical problem, and you have a political problem,” his captor said. “In this country we handle political problems first.”³ To coerce confessions, they would often bind him in tourniquet-tight ropes that cut the blood flow to his limbs. Then his interrogators would jackknife him forwards

³ James B. Stockdale. *A Vietnam Experience: Ten Years of Reflection*.

and down, his head towards his ankles, which were both secured in lugs attached to an iron bar. The blood would rush to his head. He would feel his upper body circulation slow to a near stop. Next, his arms were twisted upwards towards the ceiling. Then, pain. He would feel the most extreme pain. And then the panic of a world enclosing smaller...and then smaller...and then smaller to black. He tried his best to withhold information—all the captured pilots did—but eventually Stockdale would scream out true answers to the questions his interrogators would ask. It was inevitable. With their techniques (learned from their French colonial governors), the North Vietnamese could reduce a confident ace to a self-loathing mess in ten minutes. Even the most resilient could not last more than thirty minutes. This became known as “taking the ropes.” He and his fellow American airmen would hold out for as long as humanly possible, eventually submit, give up whatever secrets they had, and confess guilt for things they never had done into tape recorders for propaganda. Afterwards they were thrown into a “cold soak,” a month of isolation to ruminate upon their crimes.

Stockdale remembers spending his first New Year’s as a prisoner shivering without a blanket, his legs in irons, hands in cuffs, lying in three days’ worth of his own piss and shit. That was only three months in.

There were about fifty Americans imprisoned in the beginning. Week after week, month after month, more and more pilots and back-seaters were blown out of the sky by MiGs, missiles, and cannon fire. Many died in

the air, but some ejected and floated down to prison. Over the years the total would accumulate to nearly five hundred. As a wing commander, Stockdale was the senior officer among them. He felt it was his duty to lead his fellow prisoners and maintain their cohesion as a group. They developed a secret community, a network mainly held together by tapping codes to each other through the prison walls. But these tapped codes didn't always stay secret. And sometimes the North Vietnamese would find notes or catch whispers and gestures. Every time they were caught, to the ropes they'd go.

Tortured and returned to their cells, the pilots slumped in shame. As strong as their wills were, there was always a breaking point. They would give their interrogators what they asked for, but they would cling to a tiny shred of defiance in making the torture team work for everything they took. Back among their friends, the pilots would weep, "I'm a traitor," utterly ashamed of the secrets they had cried out.

But their friends would respond, "There are no virgins in here; you should have heard what I told them." No one ever lashed out at someone for being weak. Everyone recognized his own fragility. But by relating each other's stories of defiance, always through wall taps, there emerged a band of brothers that was stronger together than any one alone.

Of Stoicism, Stockdale concluded: "It's a formula for maintaining self-respect and dignity in defiance of those who break your spirit for their own ends." He came to believe something Rhinelanders had argued at Stanford,

an outlook that had more of the flavor of Job than Epicurus: life is not fair; there is no double-entry moral bookkeeping in the universe, balancing out the good and the bad. Lots of bad things happen to good people for no reason. The only proper reckoning is the state of your inner self, the workings of your conscience, the purity of motive, your integrity. To the Stoic, and for Stockdale, the most grievous harm that can be done to anyone is not physical torture, but the harm a person can do to himself by shattering his own will—a suicide of conscience—destroying the good man within. What he most keenly remembered and felt was the remorse over breaking himself in confession and the shame of caving in too early.

After nearly eight years, the North Vietnamese released Stockdale, and he returned in 1973 to what he felt was the world of yakety-yak. Sadly, if anyone has heard of Stockdale today, more often than not it isn't because of his lectures on moral philosophy, but because of his terrible performance as Ross Perot's running mate in the debates during the 1992 presidential campaign. At one point on live TV, his hearing aid was turned off and so he didn't hear the moderator's question. Stockdale fumbled. A parody on Saturday Night Live made him look confused and dim. It was a total disaster. That became the lampoon skit, "Who am I? Why am I here?" and the crowds laughed at Stockdale's confusion.

Never a good politician, he instead wrote and spoke widely over the years about his prison experience, always grounding it in the context of Epictetus, Solzhenitsyn,

and Dostoevsky—all of whom spent time enslaved or imprisoned. A syllabus for his philosophy course at the Naval War College runs from Socrates to Mill to Camus. His most lengthy essay on Stoicism carries the subtitle, “Testing Epictetus’s Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior.”

Stockdale died at his home in San Diego in 2005. He was eighty-one. If he were alive today, he would be shocked to discover just how big a commercial fad Stoicism had become.

Going Mainstream

“Stoicism is the new Zen,” a columnist for the Financial Times proclaimed in 2016.⁴ Over at the New Yorker, Elif Batuman doubled down: “Born nearly two thousand years before Darwin and Freud, Epictetus seems to have anticipated a way out of their prisons.”⁵

As it was for the Romans, so it became for the American apex during the 2010’s. Stoicism had secured its place as the ethos of choice for the continent-jumping, (self-proclaimed) industry-disrupting, CrossFit Millennial; self-help for the young TED Man, for sensitive people with the desire to do something great, but whose idea of greatness is a TechCrunch article and a keynote at South by Southwest for the janissaries of the Internet revolution.

⁴ Philip Delves Boughton. *Silicon Valley is Philosophical Over Trump’s Victory*, The Financial Times.

⁵ Elif Batuman. *How to Be a Stoic*, The New Yorker.

The popular cult of Stoicism had managed to whittle the philosophy down from withstanding the iniquity of Roman tyrants to the task of managing disappointment and ten thousand unread emails. Inbox zero hero.

At the center of the mania for all things Stoic stands Ryan Holiday. In 2014 he published a book on how Stoicism can teach you “how to get unstuck, unfucked, and unleashed.”⁶ The marketing guru and strategy consultant called it *The Obstacle is the Way*, after a line by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Holiday uses anecdotes about generals, inventors, industrial titans, and just about anyone else who’s accomplished anything to offer object lessons in the effectiveness of Stoic principles. We are invited to join a Macy’s balloon parade of Frederick the Great, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and George Washington, all of whom Holiday says “explicitly studied and practiced Stoicism.”

“There is no good or bad without us,” Holiday writes, echoing his Stoic role models. “There is only perception.” In 2016, Holiday then followed up his best-selling *Obstacle* with *The Daily Stoic*, which offers “a daily devotional of Stoic insights and exercises,” a regimen that has long been—we are assured—“the secret weapon of history’s great figures from emperors to artists and activists.”⁷

⁶ Ryan Holiday. *The Obstacle is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph*.

⁷ Ryan Holiday. *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living*.

Next up in the parade is Tim Ferriss, the Stakhanov of Silicon Valley, who hosts a popular podcast with millions of listeners each week, in which he “deconstructs world class performance” through interviews with famous people. The author of the Four Hour book series says he has read Seneca’s *The Moral Letters to Lucilius* more than one hundred times, and that it has been his constant companion for at least ten years. For Ferriss, “Stoicism is a no nonsense philosophical system.” He is interested in results, not metaphysics. And, admittedly, it is true that certain Stoic practices have inspired modern therapies for depression that have found success, in particular cognitive-behavioral therapy. So this is no tail-chasing academic exercise. We’re not writing esoteric definitions on invisible blackboards in non-existent chalk. “Think of it as the ideal operating system for thriving in high stress environments,” Ferriss says.

Reading Holiday’s *Obstacle* or listening to Ferriss’s *Tao of Seneca*, I can’t help but get swept away by their stoic gusto. But along the way I would suddenly awake from this carnival to realize how far we’ve come from the old Stoa. My favorite such moment is when Holiday uses General Ulysses S. Grant’s attack on Vicksburg in 1863 to illustrate Epictetus’s maxim to “persist and resist.” Now hold yo’ hosses right there partnah! When asked by a group of congressmen about his bellicose general, Abraham Lincoln didn’t ask what stoic philosopher the man had read. No, Lincoln asked what brand of whiskey the alcoholic loved to drink. The congressmen Lincoln was talking to didn’t know the answer. “I

urged them to ascertain and let me know,” Lincoln recalled. “For if it made fighting generals like Grant, I should like to get some of it for distribution.”

“Real strength lies in control or...the domestication of emotions,” writes Holiday. Or in the case of Grant, in getting drunk and ordering other men into the inferno.

I am an admirer of both Holiday’s and Ferris’s work, but does this kind of Stoicism really serve us?

Wallace

On the night of September 12, 2008, Karen Green came home to discover that her husband, David Foster Wallace, had hanged himself from the patio rafters. He is widely considered the greatest writer of his generation—a “once-in-a-century-talent,” his editor said. Many critics rank his *Infinite Jest* as the greatest novel of the 1990’s. He was forty-six.⁸

Like James Stockdale, Wallace is best known by the public for something other than his best work. In 2005 Wallace gave a commencement address at Kenyon College. It didn’t take long for it to go viral and get packaged as a best-selling book.⁹ From time to time the talk resurfaces: in May 2013, millions of people in a single

⁸ D. T. Max. *The Unfinished: David Foster Wallace’s Struggle to Surpass Infinite Jest*, The New Yorker. See also Jonathan Franzen, “Farther Away” and “David Foster Wallace” in *Farther Away: Essays*.

⁹ David F. Wallace. *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*.

night watched a video homage to the address before the Wallace estate shut it down.

The MacArthur Fellow spoke to the Kenyon graduating class that day about the importance of empathy. It was a simple message and Wallace knew it, but, as Wallace said, “banal platitudes can have life-or-death importance.” Half of Wallace’s appeal lies in his self-effacing, intellectually playful attitude. He tells us he is a student of the genre of commencement speeches, with their didactic little parables and “rhetorical bullshit.” A satirical commencement speech about other commencement speeches—how devilishly funny! But then chip away his intellectual playfulness and we arrive at the ghost of Epictetus. At the thematic heart of his talk, Wallace serves us old wine in new bottles:

“Learning how to think” really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot or will not exercise this kind of choice in life, you will be totally hosed.¹⁰

Wallace says he’s going to break free from the typical commencement clichés to tell us something that no one ever really talks about at graduation. He’s going to tell us how to deal rightly with soul-crushing boredom and routine, how to overcome the day-in and day-out frus-

¹⁰ David F. Wallace. 2005 *Kenyon College Commencement Speech*.

trations of long checkout lines at the grocery store and traffic jams packed with SUVs:

*If you've really learned how to think, how to pay attention, then you will know you have other options. It will actually be in your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars—compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things.*¹¹

Wallace's 1,079 page novel *Infinite Jest* famously (or infamously) contains 388 endnotes. If he had one here, he'd have to *cf.* the Stoics—right down to the “unity of all things.” “The only thing that’s capital-T True,” Wallace tells the graduating class, “is that you get to decide how you’re going to try to see it.” He offers a warning about the world they’re about to enter. The routine real world is going to crowd in on you and grind you down in a repetitive rat race, and the simple truths are going to be forgotten, gradually slipping away from your awareness, not because they are useless, but because they’re simple, just like the way a word loses its meaning when you repeat it over and over. And in place of those simple truths, he says, a nattering voice will dominate your life, lording it inside your skull-sized kingdom, unconsciously—that’s the worst part of it!—convincing you to worship external goods like wealth, health, sex, fame, and power.

¹¹ Ibid.

But there is a way out of this torture. Choosing how you respond to the world, Wallace concludes, “is real freedom.”

In the hours before Wallace hanged himself, he organized and tidied the drafts of his last unfinished novel and left them in the house garage. The drafts, published posthumously as *The Pale King*, tell the story of a group of low-level IRS employees and how they cope with the boredom of their bureaucratic, soul-sucking jobs.

Wallace left a note with the drafts of the novel in the garage:

Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (Tax Returns, Televised Golf) and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Instant bliss in every atom.

Wallace never made it out of the desert. This power he implored Kenyon's graduating seniors to exercise—to change how we feel about anything in the world, to create our own meaning in a flick of the mind alone, to find bliss even in reviewing IRS tax forms, to see even the pettiest frustration like Muzak in a crowded supermarket as not only meaningful but sacred—was in the end a fatal mirage.

Wallace had taken Nardil, an antidepressant, for almost twenty years. Feeling stable and also a bit fearful of the drug's long-term physical side effects, he tapered off it and onto other safer medications, but they didn't help.

His depression came to rule him, and it wouldn't budge in the last year of his life. His doctors administered twelve electroconvulsive therapy sessions, sending electric shocks through his skull to trigger short seizures. It didn't help.

When the greatest writer of a generation commits suicide, we should read him in part as a canary in the coal mine. It may be that biological facts meant Wallace's depression was something outside of his control. Suicide is not always preventable. But judging by the popularity of his writing, and the critical acclaim for his ideas, he was attuned to the spirit of the age. In seeing how he was lost, we might catch our own resemblance in the mirror.

Prozac, Celexa, Tofranil, Wellbutrin, Lexapro, Paxil, Zoloft—something on the order of thirty million Americans have prescriptions for at least one antidepressant. About 2 million Americans admit they're addicted to painkillers. One in ten teenagers take medication for ADHD. Opioids kill more Americans per year than guns.

The CDC estimates about 93,000 people died from drug overdose in 2020, up more than 20,000 from the previous year. This is more than double the total from a decade earlier in 2010. The staggering, soaring rate of increase over the decade was driven by the spread and availability of fentanyl, which is fifty times more potent than heroin. About 57,000 deaths of the total for the last year were due to this grim synthetic opioid. That's

equivalent to the total number of American deaths during the entire Vietnam War.

To add to that grim stat, over the last two decades, the American suicide rate has been steadily growing, despite greater spending and renewed efforts to help. More awareness campaigns, the expansion of suicide prevention programs, and increased mental health advocacy have all failed to reverse the trend, much to the confusion and frustration of researchers and healthcare providers. Maybe the loss would be worse without these efforts, but we can surely do better. The causes of suicide are not fully understood.¹² Psychiatry's encyclopedia of mental disorders, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM for short, features three hundred distinct diagnoses for various mental health issues.¹³ The DSM's diagnostic criteria still rely on pattern-matching observable behavioral symptoms, the same method used by psychiatrists two hundred years ago. Yet we still do not know what causes these disorders.

The number of books published on the topic of happiness jumped from fifty to over four thousand in less than a decade during the 2000's. People are looking for ways to cope, but an external disarray has anesthetized our inner lives. Americans confirm with greater and greater force T. S. Eliot's observation that "human kind

¹² Craig Bryan. *Rethinking Suicide: Why Prevention Fails, and How We Can Do Better*.

¹³ Allan Horwitz. *DSM: A History of Psychiatry's Bible*.

cannot bear very much reality.” The mortality rate for white men in poor regions of America began to increase in the late 1990’s and has consistently gone up since. Two economists, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, have tracked these “deaths of despair,” whose causes include suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholism. They estimate some 600,000 Americans would still be alive if progress had gone on as expected in the 1990’s.¹⁴ This truly is devastation.

In the despair and the numbing, we can see the outlines of the quest of our era, the quest for greater calm and security, the easing of pain, the resistance to change. Granted, for many mental health issues, we need faster scientific progress. The ocean of our ignorance is vast. All the same, it is also true that we have become a society dissatisfied with the way things are. But instead of risking change to an external world that angers or saddens or bores the hell out of us, we have chosen to focus on how we respond to it. We have chosen, instead, to Netflix and chill. Sometimes with pills.

We seem to be content with 5G streaming, but disturbed by our standards of living; happy with life in a virtual paradise, but surrounded by a physical purgatory; trigger-warned into a safe space with heart-emojis all around; child-proofed for \$60,000 a year in tuition; segregated by income, zip code, and college degree. Ask your doctor if Diplomatis and Universelectin are right

¹⁴ Anne Case and Angus Deaton. *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism*.

for you. Read our ad in Good Housekeeping. Did you get the e-vite from the planner of today's protest?

Beyond Invincibility

I have laid out the facts as I see them in all of the preceding pages. Progress in science, education, health, energy, transportation, agriculture, and so on has stalled. The consequences of this trend are much, much worse than feeling boredom in a long line at the grocery store or being stuck in traffic behind an asshole driving an SUV. All I ask is, what are we going to do about it?

“Question 46: Would you be happier with more control over what happens in your life or more control over your response to what happens?” Gregory Stock, Ph.D. *The Book of Questions*.

“Did I preach these things in prison?” James Stockdale writes. “Certainly not.”

The truth was, despite the consolation it gave him, Stockdale never thought Stoicism would help his tortured cellmates. He never tapped Epictetus's maxims in code through the prison walls to his friends. “You soon realized that when you dared to spout high-minded philosophical suggestions through the wall, you always got a very reluctant response. No, I never tapped or mentioned Stoicism once.”

Still, years later, people would want to know how they survived for so long. What kept the captured pilots going? Stockdale's answer was not Epictetus and the Stoics. It was the man next door. “Anybody who has

been there knows that a neighbor in the cell block becomes the most precious thing on earth.”

Three things kept Stockdale alive, and none of them were Stoic principles. Survival came down to cultivating a sense of belonging, purpose, and stewardship. Over a century ago, Emile Durkheim found that people are more likely to commit suicide when they are separated from their communities.¹⁵ Durkheim noticed it was soul-destroying, not liberating, for people to be completely free from the bonds and expectations their relationships placed on them. The North Vietnamese prison wardens used this fact to their advantage.

Isolation obliterates. Separating each prisoner from his friends, the North Vietnamese could kick out the props supporting the pilots one by one. These men were welded into a family. They had been together in tight places. They had come to depend on each other. Exclusion eroded that sense of belonging. When you're in isolation for so long, there is a point at which the power of decision is lost. Alternatives creep into the mind and you become less certain of things. Your memories of language, poetry, and history slip away. Alone, anyone would grow so depressed after a year of solitary imprisonment that, according to Stockdale, they “would be willing to buy human contact at the price of collaboration with the enemy.”

If they were going to survive, something had to be done. Right and wrong were up for grabs. There was no

¹⁵ Emile Durkheim. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*.

cohesion in the group. Cardboard imperatives to obey the Code of Conduct were worse than nothing. Stockdale came up with a plan. He gave the group some rules: “we must all take torture before we do this and this and this.” By “this” he meant a confession or submitting to what is false. And what was the threshold for that? “Not less than significant pain.”

The group grew tighter because it felt like they were fighting back. Their lives started making sense. They had a sense of purpose.

Still, the men would come back from torture full of remorse—they should have held out longer before they submitted. They felt unworthy and full of shame. “I can never face my friends again.” But tapping through the walls Stockdale and the others would tell the tortured that they themselves had all done that and worse.

This was the fighting and mending process: defiance against their captors, then shame, atonement, and catharsis through the band of brothers. The pilots found release in common knowledge. No matter what they were forced to say under torture, they shared the details through the wall. Their communion strengthened their resolve. It gave them the endurance they needed. To omit friends like these from an account of what truly matters—as the Stoics do—was for Aristotle to paint a thin portrait of life. In prison, Stockdale learned it was a life that couldn’t be lived at all.

Against the Stoics, the Greek epic and tragic poets held that powerful emotions, including negative emotions like sorrow and fear, could be sources of wisdom.

The poets knew that our emotions let us feel through what we care about, and that catharsis, whether individual or shared, is an important piece of our psychological well-being.

From Homer to Aeschylus to Sophocles, the poets portrayed lives made richer and deeper by external goods necessary to our flourishing. They also showed how we can be broken by that which lies beyond our control. In response, the Stoics recategorize these external goods as “preferred indifferents.” That way one shouldn’t feel so bad about losing them, even if that indifferent happens to be your child. But the tragic poets of Greece—and Plato wanted to banish them for this—invite us to live in the thundercloud, to grieve profoundly in the communion of the theater for the loss of what we love—not to shut our eyes to suffering, but to affirm life and the world as beautiful in spite of it.

I judge the character of a civilization in its relationship to pain. There are things outside our control that we feel deeply about. These things matter. Fight for them. A future worth having is only to be achieved by paying its price. Live in the thundercloud, even as a ship without a mast, barely better than drifting its way home, but still set in its reckoning on some monstrous and infinite sea. Above all, try to get home.

The rise of Stoicism™ is a sign of a civilization in decline. There is something decadent about a society trying to escape its own loss through a sour-grapes philosophy. Let us face reality. The answer isn’t the self-induced trance of a yogi withstanding the flames or learn-

ing how to dream of the tropics while freezing in a snowstorm. Is how we feel on the inside the only important thing in life? Is it even a priority? Or can something be bad, no matter how we feel about it? Some of us dream of fire and poetry and marvel at the suggestion of mysteries and immensities beyond. We will keep reaching for them and, as Stockdale calls on us to do, come together with our friends, decide what we require of each other, and turn back the tide of decline.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't try to master our volatility when the chips are down, or that powerful reactions to false beliefs are healthy. Our emotions can be off, ill-fitting to a situation. But perhaps all we need is a good night's rest, less junk food, some time with friends, and good exercise. All of these help us gain emotional stability better than the sphincter-squeezing contortions of Stoic impulse control.

Learn to feel anger at the right things in the right moment at the right intensity. That is *arete*. Such virtue will take attention and discipline, but if you can't trust your emotion's guidance, you will totally get hosed.

*For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*¹⁶

So far, pure David Foster Wallace. Most people quote the line and leave it here. Perhaps, like Wallace, Shakespeare flirted with moral relativism. We can't really say, because the line is not Shakespeare's; it's Hamlet's. And

¹⁶ William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*.

he's shaking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern off his tail to avenge the death of his father, the king. Hamlet goes on:

*O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.*¹⁷

Alas, poor Wallace! What Hamlet knew well and Wallace didn't is that the free movement of the mind is only a misdirection—an infinite jest caught in an infinite nutshell.

We have bad dreams for a reason. Kings have been usurped. It is time to overthrow the usurpers.



¹⁷ Ibid.