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MARCUS AURELIUS' SIX (6) TIMELESS OBSERVATIONS ON LIFE

POSTED ON AUGUST 8, 2008 BY MICHAEL MILES



Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was Roman emperor from 161 until his death in 180. A great thinker, Marcus embodied Plato's ideal of the philosopher king to a considerable extent. He was a strong emperor, engaging in various wars in defense of the Roman empire for his entire reign, but he was also greatly concerned with social justice and welfare, even going so far as to sell his own possessions to alleviate people's suffering from famine and plague (from which he died).

Marcus left behind a corpus of writing which, despite its antiquity, offers us some truly timeless wisdom. Here are six lessons we can learn from his observations on life.

Lesson 1: We Are Responsible for Our Own Experience of Life

"Such as are your habitual thoughts; such also will be the character of your mind; for the soul is dyed by the color of your thoughts."

Much has been made recently of the (so called) 'law of attraction.' Before 'The Secret,' a wealth of writers had tapped into the idea that what happens in our mind is the most important thing in shaping our experience of life. From Norman Vincent Peal's 'Amazing Power of Positive Thinking,' and Joseph Murphy's 'Power of the Subconscious Mind' to Wallace Wattles 'Science of Getting Rich,' all were taking about a truth which Marcus understood so many centuries ago.

Viktor Frankl said that between what happens to us and our response to it, there is a gap, and in that gap lies our whole experience of life. Steven Covey, in his 'Seven Habits' called our ability to widen this gap 'being proactive.' It is the first habit of a highly effective person to cultivate an awareness that s/he is in control. To coin a phrase, life is what you make it.



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Lesson 2: Everything Changes

“Time is a sort of river of passing events, and strong is its current; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place, and this too will be swept away.”

I keep a sign posted over my desk at work. It reads ‘this too will pass.’ It is a reminder to me that, whatever I am experiencing in life, it will disappear and be replaced with something else. Only one thing is certain – everything changes. People who know this and tap into the natural course of change can be very successful. Let’s take one area as an example – the stock market. People who bought stock after the dot com crash, knowing that the market would rebound after such a dramatic fall, reaped enormous rewards. Those who sold when prices had become stupidly inflated and wildly disconnected from earnings, knowing that the market couldn’t keep on rising forever, also did well.

Clinging on to the way things were can be a source of great misery. The past is gone and it’s never coming back; the present is already changing. So why complain that things used to be better? There are opportunities if only we can see that change is coming.

Lesson 3: Live a Real Life

“It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.”

I recently picked up a copy of Felix Dennis’ book ‘How to Get Rich’ while waiting for a flight recently. It’s a great read – unlikely to make you rich I suspect, but full of wonderful observations. In the first chapter, Dennis (who is ‘one of the richest self-made men in Britain, according to the back sleeve of the book) tells us that one of the main obstacles to being rich is comfort – a regular paycheck, a pension, a nice title, stock options. In other words, people don’t want to risk losing what they have. In other words, they are afraid. They are not living the life they want because they are scared they might lose more than they gain.



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In the British comedy 'The Office,' Tim is set to leave his dead end job and go to university when he is given a small promotion. This persuades him to stay at work because although, as he puts it, he has 'rolled a three and could very well roll a six,' going to university might not work out – he might end up 'rolling a one.'

Taking risks is no easy thing, but when we come to the end of it all, shall we regret that we stayed too much in our comfort zone?

Lesson 4: Be Grateful

"When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive – to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love."

Marcus clearly understood that gratitude is an important commodity to possess. We take so many things for granted, and only when we lose them do we stop to think just how important they were to us. If you cannot sleep because you have stomach ache or you have injured yourself, you will quickly become grateful for a good night's sleep!

Every day is a gift, and there are so many, many things to be happy about. We all have problems and we all suffer lack and privation, but why not focus on the good things we have? If you can read this, then you have had an education and you are probably rich enough to own a computer and pay for an Internet connection. Make a list of things you can be grateful for – you might be amazed at how long it is!

Lesson 5: Be Detached

"Receive wealth or prosperity without arrogance; and be ready to let it go."

Felix Dennis, in his book 'How to Get Rich,' speaks plainly about the real meaning of wealth. It is nothing, he says. It isn't real. Getting rich, he writes, is just a game. If we take the pursuit of wealth (or anything else, for that matter) too seriously, we are likely to fail. In the Bhagavad-Gita, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna, 'Plunge into the heat of battle, and keep your heart at the lotus feet of the Lord.' He is saying, I think, that the battle of life is a game – we must play it with all our heart, but we must not be



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attached to the outcome. In this detached state, we can be ready and open to receive wealth or success. We can pursue these things with energy and passion, but if we cling to them, or pursue them as something of importance, they are likely to elude us.

Lao Tze, who lived seven hundred years before Marcus Aurelius, wrote:

*“Those who take hold of the world and act on it
Never, I notice, succeed.
The world is a mysterious instrument,
Not made to be handled.”*

It seems that Marcus understood this paradox.

Lesson 6: All Is Well

“Everything is unfolding as it must, and if you observe carefully, you will find this to be so.”

In 1373, Julian of Norwich was suffering from a severe illness. Believing she was near death, she had a series of visions. In one of them, Jesus appeared to her and said, ‘All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.’

The idea that things are unfolding as they should is a common theme in the mystical traditions of the world. Anthony de Mello, in his wonderful book ‘Awareness,’ writes ‘When you awaken, when you understand, when you see, the world becomes right...You’ll never explain it... Life is a mystery, which means your thinking mind cannot make sense out of it.’

The world looks like a big mess to me, but if we take Marcus’ advice, sit quietly, abandon our opinions, and simply observe, then perhaps we shall indeed see that ‘all is well.’

Read more at <http://www.pickthebrain.com/blog/marcus-aurelius/#zHP7QlORueJEpJoq.99>

