



## **Ancient Messages for a Wondrous New Year**

**By Doug Bloom, Jan-04-2021**

With the new year upon us, we are well into an annual season of redefinition and hope: new meanings, new initiatives, new promises to ourselves. A clean slate awaits us all.

We also are coming off a most difficult year for many if not most of us: a pandemic; loss of social structures; distance from loved ones; civil unrest; a contested election; partisanship; increased unemployment, hunger, and homelessness... (and the list goes on).

What many of us struggled with in 2020 was our internal voice and its imposition on our experience of happiness, or in many cases its lack thereof. The internal witness to the demonstrations of “no-longer-normal” in our lives was simultaneously outraged, saddened, and shocked. We internalized the outer messages and were left exhausted.

2020 was difficult. 2020 pulled the veil off “normalcy” and exposed us to the challenge faced by all of us as humans – how do we coexist, and prosper, and share in an admittedly complex and sometimes dangerous world? 2020 left many of us wondering how 2021 and beyond really can be different, be “normal”, not in the outcomes per se but rather in our experience of satisfaction with them?

The thinking here is not so much on the tactical approaches we pursue. What we do is ultimately dependent on a LOT of factors – situations, resources, skills, experiences, energy, access, connections, interests... What we need to learn is, regardless of what we do or what we create for ourselves, how our mental and emotional context (how we perceive and experience our lives internally) drives our level of satisfaction with life.

So... what do we do?

It has been said, there are no new thoughts, and great ideas are recycled. Perhaps that is true. Perhaps a look backwards will show us an enlightened path forward? For insight as to how we might create the best outcome for ourselves in 2021, perhaps we consider some wisdom from the teachings of great philosophers.

Wikipedia describes Stoicism as a “Hellenistic philosophy founded in Athens [Greece] in the early 3rd century BC”. History shows Stoicism began with the teachings of Zeno of Citium and evolved over the next five centuries through the Roman Empire, and includes the teachings of Epictetus, Seneca, and the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius in the 3rd century AD.

More modern-day Stoicism can be found in works such as Ryan Holiday’s, [The Obstacle is the Way](#), which describes the principals of Stoicism and shares related examples of people who have lived them. More modern-era readers and followers of the Stoics include a wide range from politics, athletics, music, literature and more: Theodore Roosevelt, George Washington, Bill Clinton, James Stockdale, James Mattis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom Brady, Joe Maddon, Nassim Taleb, and John Steinbeck to name a few.

The basic tenants of Stoicism are: Wisdom, Justice, Courage, and Moderation. According to the Stoics, a life goes off the rails when these are in short supply. At their core, Stoicism is a mindfulness practice centered on finding balance in life, in not being rattled by the highs and the lows, and to treat all of life’s developments as a gift.

The Stoics left behind hundreds of pages of text and hundreds if not thousands of ideas on which to contemplate. That said, let’s examine a few in the context of building towards a FANTASTIC 2021 from the lessons of 2020 regardless of what it has in store for us.

1. **Embrace your fate:** Epictetus wrote, “Amor fati” – love your fate. The lesson here is about accepting our circumstances (situations, actions, people, opportunities, etc.), good or bad, without rejecting any portion of them. The Stoics identify the necessity of fully owning one’s fate as the prerequisite to fully experiencing life. We must all learn to be OK with what has happened and/or happens, regardless. Further, all journeys have a goal and a path, AND a starting point. Until we fully embrace and relax

with and see the opportunities provided to us by “where we are standing” at any point along the journey, we will not make permanent changes in our lives. To quote Seneca, “Fate leads the willing and drags along the reluctant.”

- 2. There is no growth without discomfort:** Seneca wrote, “A gem cannot be polished without friction”. The belief we can make major changes either individually or as a society without discomfort, division, adversity, etc. is a panacea. Again, just as we must embrace our fate we must not run from discomfort. We must seek to experience any difficulties experienced in growth as the price for new ways of being. We must learn to coexist with diversity and discomfort, to expect it to be patient with it.
- 3. We only control ourselves so focus on yourself:** Epictetus challenges us with, “We should always ask: “Is this something that is, or is not, in my control?” Consider how much time people spend being upset with and/or revisiting/reinventing things they cannot control. Clearly, we cannot control what has happened (the past) or what will happen when it happens (the future). Even if not buried in the past or the future, many of us still waste the opportunity to control what IS happening (the present) by focusing on controlling others, controlling perceptions, or controlling outcomes. In a nutshell our lives are not determined by “how the ball bounces”. Our lives are defined by “what we do WHEN the ball bounces”.
- 4. Wisdom comes from listening:** Zeno of Citium is quoted with having said, “The reason we have two ears and only one mouth is so we might listen more and talk less” (and I was under the belief this was a quote from my parents!) As lives have become more distanced and isolated, people become more overwhelmed to the point where phone calls or Zoom meetings can be clumsy, disintegrated, jumbled. Distancing both physically and over time REQUIRES us to listen more and speak less if we are to have productive communication. The goal is not to just listen to what is shared, rather to listen to the motivation for sharing. The question to ask is, “What does the speaker desire me to do, to think, or to feel?” It is at that level of insight where true listening occurs.
- 5. Remember you will die:** Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, all wrote about death in their meditations. The reality that we are mortal and finite was certainly an important consideration for them. They all wrote about how fleeting our time alive might be and to live each day as if it were one’s last. Marcus Aurelius, the most powerful person in his purview, wrote how contemplating his “smallness” in time and space reminded him to keep things in perspective. There was not an approach from a sense of dread, rather to free one to live a life of gratitude, engagement, humility, courage, and satisfaction without regret, (again) regardless the circumstances. The Stoics REMIND us to enjoy each day, to focus on the moment, and to resist the yoke of “controlling tomorrow”. As a nation, and for many of us individually, 2020 has reminded us that life is precious and fleeting, and that our most precious gift is our “now”, our “today”.

Stoicism flourished in the Hellenistic Age and early Roman Empire in Greece and Rome until the advent of Christianity. The lessons from the Stoics provide a framework for living in the moment with grace, wisdom, courage, gratitude, and virtue:

1. Be grateful for everything in your life without rejections.
2. Focus your energies ONLY on what you can control in the present moment.
3. Slow down and experience your life (and the people in your life) mindfully, with courage and without judgement.

Simple stuff, right? Perhaps it is!

*Here is wishing you a GREAT 2021 and beyond!*