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MARCUS AURELIUS

Meditations

By:

Marcus Aurelius

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What people Say:

Glenn Russell

In many important ways, the reflections of Marcus Aurelius (121-180) crystallize the philosophical wisdom of the Greco-Roman world. This little book was written as a diary to himself while emperor fighting a war out on the boarder of the Roman Empire and today this book is known to us as

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The Roman philosophers are not as well known or as highly regarded as Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, or Zeno the Stoic - and for a simple reason: the Roman thinkers were not primarily interested in abstract theory; rather, they were concerned with behavior, that is, understanding how to live in the everyday world and putting their understanding into practice; the goal being to live the life of an authentic philosopher, to be a person of high character and integrity, to develop inner strength and a quiet mind and value such strength and quietude above all else. Indeed, to accomplish such a lofty goal, the Romans realized the need for radical transformation, a complete overhauling of one's life through rigorous mental and physical training, like turning base metal into pure gold. And once a person takes on the role of a philosopher, their deeds must reflect their words - no hypocrisy, thank you! Thus, it isn't surprising the Romans put a premium on memorizing and internalizing simple proverbs and maxims and employed the metaphor of philosophy as the medicine to cure a sick soul.

Turning now to Marcus Aurelius, we can appreciate how he imbibed the wisdom not only from the Stoics (along with Seneca and Epictetus, Marcus is considered one of the three major Roman Stoics), but he was also willing to learn from the schools of Epicurus, Plato and Aristotle. In the Greco-Roman world, being eclectic was perfectly acceptable; truth was valued over who said what.

We find several recurring themes in

: develop self-discipline to gain control over judgments and desires; overcoming a fear of death; value an ability to retreat into a rich, interior mental life (one's inner citadel); recognize the world as a manifestation of the divine; live according to reason; avoid luxury and opulence. But generalizations will not approach the richness and wisdom nuggets a reader will find in Marcus's actual words.

Thus, I conclude with my personal observations coupled with quotes from Book One, wherein Marcus begins by expressing heartfelt thanks to his family and teachers for the many fine lessons he learned as a youth. Here are four of my favorites:

"Not to have frequented public schools, and to have had good teachers at home" ----- After my own nasty experience with the mindless competition and regimentation of public schools, I wish I had Marcus's good fortune of excellent home schooling.

Brad Lyerla

When I was a freshman in college, I lived in a dorm. My roommate was on the football team. He would write inspiring things on poster board and hang them in our room often on the ceiling above his bed to motivate himself. He favored straightforward sentiments like "never give up."

The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius did not hang motivational posters for inspiration. Instead, he kept a journal in which he collected his thoughts about how to live well. MEDITATIONS is that book.

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Most people have heard that Aurelius counsels to expect the worst and you will never be disappointed. While that is part of what he has to say, it is not the most interesting of what he has to say. At his most thoughtful, Aurelius calls on us to ask the best of ourselves and never mind the behavior of others. His MEDITATIONS is a work of motivational advice to inspire us in the ways of stoicism. It is a manual for being a complete, mature adult. It is a guide for living a dignified, thoughtful life

Consider: "Suppose that a god announced that you were going to die tomorrow 'or the day after'. Unless you were a complete coward you wouldn't kick up a fuss about which day it was - what difference could it make? Now recognize that the difference between years from now and tomorrow is just as small." Book IV (Greg Hays trans., Modern Library)

Or: "Concentrate every minute like a Roman - like a man - on doing what's in front of you with precise and genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly, with justice. And on freeing yourself from distractions. Yes, you can - if you do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life,

and stop being aimless, stop letting your emotions override what your mind tells you, stop being hypocritical, self-centered, irritable. You see how few things you have to do to live a satisfying and reverent life? If you can manage this, that's all even the gods can ask of you." Book II.

And: "If at some point in your life, you should come across anything better than justice, honesty, self-control, courage - than a mind satisfied that it succeeded in enabling you to act rationally, and satisfied to accept what is beyond its control - if you find anything better than that, embrace it without reservations - it must be an extraordinary thing indeed - and enjoy it to the full." Book III

That these thoughts came from the most powerful man in the world, a man whose personal power so vastly exceeded the personal power of any American president that we have difficulty comprehending it, makes it all the more impressive. Aurelius continually writes that strength comes from humility, self-restraint and good humor towards others. He teaches us to accept what we cannot control and to trust what we know.

Riku Sayuj

Marcus Aurelius must have been a prolific reader. He sure was a prolific note-taker, for these meditations are surely his study-notes(?- after all he was a 'philosopher' from age 12). I don't know of the publishing system at the time but where are the detailed footnotes and references? Marcus Aurelius is quite a wise man or at least he read enough wise men. He sure nailed it as far as boring a reader is concerned. No better way to establish your book's wisdom quotient.

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I am being needlessly caustic of course(do note my rating above). The book is quotable in almost every page and is good to dip in to now and then, you might well find an aphorism that fits the mood just right every time. And that is why the book is a classic and so well-loved.

Don't read it as a scholar, you will end up like this reviewer. As I said earlier - He is like the wisdom of ages. Aargh :) Not that it is all bad - it is like reading an old uncles's notes after he has been preaching to you all your life.

Good that I am a stoic too. All ills are imaginary. Yes.

[Or perhaps it was easier to be a Stoic while stoned: The emperor was a notorious opium user, starting each day, even while on military campaigns, by downing a nubbin of the stuff dissolved in his morning cup of wine.]

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Phyllis Eisenstadt

THINK ABOUT IT!

Never before have I given a five star rating to a book of which I had only read 9%. However, this book is special in many ways, and if the beginning is any indication of the author's thoughts and

reflections, it merits this rating. I eagerly await my future readings of this splendid work.

Like the Bible, it can be opened to any page, and the passage will resonate with most people at various times in their life. Each passage stands by itself and is not dependent upon what had preceded

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Like the Bible, it can be opened to any page, and the passage will resonate with most people at various times in their life. Each passage stands by itself and is not dependent upon what had preceded it. Therefore, although I am in the midst of reading two other books, I pick this one up sporadically, read a few passages, and am not confused about plot and characters. Although the book was written in a manner easy to understand, it is anything but simplistic; it is profound and replete with wisdom. Further, it should be read slowly so that the reader may absorb the words and delight in the meditations of Aurelius. I have done much highlighting in order to remember certain passages, and I know I will reread them throughout the years.

Once again, my friend Steve Sckenda has recommended quality literature to his GR friends for which I thank him most sincerely.

Phyllis Eisenstadt