

OFF-CURRICULUM

The *Notes*.

Short pieces on how the mind works, and the old ideas that still apply to a modern life.

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Watch Your Thoughts.

On the discovery that the voice in our head isn't actually us.

Sit somewhere quiet for two minutes and try not to think.

Within seconds, the mind starts. The conversation from yesterday, the thing we forgot to do, the email we need to answer, the "to-do" list...the thoughts just arrive, on their own, uninvited, and we follow them down whatever rabbit hole they want to take us.

We don't choose them. We just obey them.

And here's the part most of us never stop to notice: we treat whatever the mind says as if it's true. If the thought says *you're not enough*, we feel not enough. If it says *this is going to go wrong, or is going to be hard*, we expect it to go that way. The thought arrives, we take it as fact, and we move through the day on it.

It's wild when you stop and think about it. We let a voice we never even hired make most of the decisions in our heads.

The Stoics figured this out a long time ago.

Marcus Aurelius (who was the emperor of Rome, not someone with a lot of free time on his hands) kept a private notebook where, on every page basically, he reminded himself:

The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.

MARCUS AURELIUS · MEDITATIONS, BOOK V.16 ·
C. AD 170

He had to write that down. Not because it was a new idea, but because forgetting it was the default. Even for him.

James Allen, centuries later, put the same idea this way:

As he thinks, so he is; as he continues to think, so he remains.

JAMES ALLEN · AS A MAN THINKETH · 1903

Not a thought once. The thoughts we continue to think. Over years, the repetition wins.

Both of them were pointing at the same thing. The thoughts running through our heads matter more than almost anything else we're going to do today.

So...who's choosing them?

Here's the move I came across that actually changed things for me.

We don't have to argue with the thought. We don't have to fight it. We don't have to replace it with a "positive" one.

We just notice it.

A thought arrives, anxious or comparing or replaying something or judging ourselves or catastrophizing about Tuesday, and we name it quietly, just to ourselves. *Anxious thought. Comparison thought. Replaying thought.* That's it. That's the whole move. Detach from it, almost "robotic-like". Snap out of it the moment you notice it.

Something quiet happens the first time we actually do this. The thought gets smaller. Not because we wrestled with it. Because being seen, for most thoughts, is the end of their power. They've been running on the assumption that they're us. The moment we watch one happening, instead of being inside it, it loosens. We're suddenly the one watching, not the one being moved.

This isn't positive thinking. It isn't the "good vibes only" thing.

Positive thinking is the move where we fight the dark thought and try to replace it with a sunnier one. That doesn't work for long, because the dark thought always comes back, and we spend our lives in a tug of war we can't actually win.

The work is more honest than that. We see the thought, we name it, we ask quietly: is this actually true? Most of the time, looked at directly, it isn't. The catastrophe the mind is rehearsing hasn't happened. The verdict it's delivering on us is based on some belief installed years ago that we've never actually examined. The comparison it's running between us and someone else is selective and unfair to both of us.

We don't have to win against the thoughts. We just have to stop assuming they're telling us the truth.

The thing nobody told us:

We're not our thoughts.

We're the ones watching them.

That shift, kept up day by day, makes almost everything else lighter.

The Script We Were Handed.

On the life most of us are living that we never really chose.

Most of us are not actually living the lives we chose.

That sounds dramatic when you read it the first time...it isn't, really. It's just the math.

By the time we were old enough to think about what kind of life we wanted, we had already absorbed thirty thousand opinions about what a good life looked like. From parents, teachers, neighbours, the kids we grew up next to, movies, commercials, the whole machinery of family and school and culture running in the background of every childhood.

Get the education. Get the credential. Get the job. Buy the house. Find someone. Have the kids. Stack the milestones. The good life follows.

By the time we noticed any of it, if we ever did, it had been operating for decades and was indistinguishable from our own thinking.

That's the script.

The script doesn't feel like a script when we're inside it. It feels like life. Like the natural order of things. Like a series of choices we're making, freshly, every day.

Most of those choices are not actually fresh. They're the script running, again, the way it has been running for years. We do the thing we were going to do anyway, and we tell ourselves we chose it.

This is what *autopilot* actually means. Not the daydreaming-while-driving sense. The deeper one. Living a life shaped by rules we did not write, beliefs we don't really question, taking in things we did not select, sprinting toward outcomes we never stopped long enough to decide on. *Do I really want or need this? And why?*

The strange part is that the autopilot life can look completely fine from the outside. Some of them look enviable. The cost is something quieter. It shows up in the gap between what's happening and what would have been happening if we had been paying attention and chose differently. The conversation we did not have because the script did not leave room for it.

The decade we spent climbing a ladder because we'd been told the climb was the point (or because that's what everyone does), and the question of whether we wanted to be at the top of that particular ladder did not surface until the climb was nearly done. Once on top, looking down and thinking, perhaps this ladder was leaning against the wrong wall...by then it's almost too late.

Thoreau got out of bed one morning in 1845 and walked into the woods to live in a small cabin he built himself, on land he borrowed from a friend. He stayed for two years and wrote a book about it. The most quoted line from that book is the one we should sit with the longest:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU · WALDEN, "ECONOMY" ·
1854

He wasn't being mean about it when he wrote that. He was being honest. Most people, he was observing, were living lives they hadn't really chosen, on terms they hadn't really set, hoping somewhere along the way it would start to feel like theirs. It usually didn't.

Here's why he went to the woods, in his own words:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU · WALDEN, "WHERE I LIVED, AND WHAT I LIVED FOR" · 1854

He didn't go to escape. He went to find out what was actually his, underneath everything that had been handed to him. Separate from all the external, material people, places, things.

You don't have to go to the woods.

You don't have to quit your job, leave your city, or throw out the script. The script is not going anywhere. It's been running for decades, and it knows how to argue for itself. What you can do is start watching it. The same way we noticed thoughts in the last piece. Without arguing. Without trying to win.

Notice the assumption you don't remember choosing. Notice the ambition that doesn't actually belong to you. Notice the thing you keep telling yourself you want because you've been told you should want it. Notice the version of yourself you've been performing.

Most people who actually shift their lives don't do it by throwing everything out. They do it by stepping back, getting better at seeing what's running, day by day, and choosing where to push back.

The script keeps running. That's the point.

We don't get free of it. We get the ability to see it and choose against it, when we want to, again and again, with increasing speed.

That is what living deliberately actually means.

Don't Death Grip the Outcome.

On doing the thing, trusting the process, and the cost of needing the outcome.

There's a strange pattern that shows up in almost every domain of high performance.

The harder you grip the outcome, the worse you tend to do.

Watch any negotiating table. The person who needs the deal too badly does not walk out with the best terms. They walk out with terms a calmer person could have done better than.

Watch any athlete. The one overthinking the shot misses it. The one playing for fun, in the moment, drains it. Watch anyone trying to force a difficult conversation to go a particular way. It almost always goes a worse direction than if they had relaxed into it.

It's strange when you stop and notice it...but the harder we want something specific to happen, the more we tend to mess up the very actions that would have made it happen.

This is the effort paradox.

The ancients figured this out a long time ago.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, written roughly twenty-five hundred years ago, has Krishna telling Arjuna something that has carried into almost every serious tradition of thought since:

You have the right to work, but never to the fruit of work.

BHAGAVAD GITA 2.47 · EASWARAN TRANSLATION
· C. 5TH CENTURY BCE

That line does a lot of work in not very many words. Your right, your business, the only thing you actually control...is the action. Not the result. Not the praise or the reward or the score or the recognition. Those happen outside you. You don't make them happen by gripping them harder. You make them hap-

pen, when they happen at all, by doing the work the moment in front of you actually requires.

The Stoics arrived at the same place from the other side of the world a few centuries later. Epictetus, who had been born into slavery and ended up teaching philosophy, opened his manual with this line:

Some things are in our control, and others not.

EPICTETUS · ENCHIRIDION 1.1 · C. AD 125

Within our control: our actions, our judgments, the standard we hold ourselves to. Not in our control: the outcome, the other person's response, the timeline, the body, the market, the weather. The first column is what we work on. The second column is what we accept as it comes.

We can do our part. We cannot make the rest happen.

Here's the part most of us miss.

When we're gripping the outcome, we're not really doing the action. We're somewhere else. Running the result in our heads,

replaying what we want, projecting forward into the moment we get the thing. We're bracing, stressing, operating from fear of not getting it. And fear-based performance is, almost always, worse performance.

This shows up everywhere. On a deal table. On a tennis court. In the middle of a difficult conversation with someone we love. In the slow work of getting healthy again, or building a business, or writing something, or raising kids. The gripped version of us is operating from worry. The relaxed version is operating from presence. Presence wins the round, almost every time.

The practice itself is small.

Do the next thing in front of you, the one that moves you toward where you want to go (this part matters; you can't be doing the opposite and expect to get there). Then do the next one. Then the next. Daily. The actions compound, quietly, in a way you cannot really watch in real time, and one day you look up and the thing has happened, or something better than the thing has happened. It didn't look like a moment. It looked like a thousand small actions you mostly forgot you were doing.

The way to make this stick is to actually stop watching the scoreboard for a while. Do the work for the work, and let where it lands land. It takes some faith. Not the religious kind. A quiet faith in the process and progress itself, and in the belief that consistent daily action will eventually produce its own results.

The grip is what was costing you. Loosening it is the actual move.

You don't have to stop caring. You just have to stop needing.

Do the thing.

Don't grip the outcome.

Take it easy.

Effort without attachment. Action without desperation.

The Art of Assent.

On the gap between what happens and what we make it mean.

Something happens, and a thought arrives about it.

Someone is short with you in an email, and the thought arrives: he disrespected me. A deal goes quiet, and the thought arrives: this is falling apart. A plan changes, and the thought arrives: everything is ruined. The thought feels like a fact. It arrives with such speed and certainty that we almost never question it. We just believe it, and then we act on the belief.

The Stoics noticed something about this sequence that most people miss. There are three steps, not one.

First, the impression. Something happens and a thought about it arrives in the mind, on its own, uninvited. We do not control which impressions show up. They arrive like weather.

Second, assent. This is the step almost no one notices. After the impression arrives, the mind either agrees with it, accepts it

as true, signs off on it...or it does not. It can pause. It can examine. It can decline to believe the thought just because the thought showed up.

Third, the action. Once we have assented, once we have accepted the impression as true, the impulse to act follows on its own. We fire off the email. We spiral. We make the call we should not make.

The whole game is in the second step. The impression is not up to us. The assent is.

Epictetus built his entire teaching on this. His most quoted line is about exactly this gap:

Men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by the opinions about the things.

EPICTETUS · ENCHIRIDION 5 · C. AD 125 ·
GEORGE LONG TRANSLATION

The thing that happened produced the impression. The disturbance did not come from the thing. It came from the opinion, the assent, the agreement we gave it. Two people can

have the exact same thing happen to them and live two completely different experiences of it, because they assented to different opinions about it.

Here is what gets clear when we start to watch this in ourselves.

Most of our suffering is not caused by what happens. It is caused by the speed at which we believe our first impression of what happens. The impression arrives, we rubber-stamp it instantly, and the impulse runs before we have looked at anything. He disrespected me, so I fire back. This is falling apart, so I panic. Everything is ruined, so I give up. In every case, we skipped the only step that was actually ours.

The practice is to live in the gap. When the impression arrives, do not sign off on it yet. Pause. Look at it. Ask whether it is true, or whether it is just an impression presenting itself as true. The short email might be a busy person, not a disrespectful one. The quiet deal might be a slow deal, not a dead one. The changed plan might be a redirection, not a ruin. You do not have to believe the first thing your mind hands you.

This is not positive thinking. It is not pretending the impression is wrong. It is refusing to assent automatically. Sometimes the impression is accurate, and you assent to it after looking. Sometimes it is distorted, and you let it pass. Either way, you have done the one thing the Stoics said was always in your power. You decided what to believe, instead of being told what to believe by a thought that arrived on its own.

The impression will always arrive. That part is not yours.

The assent is the whole of your freedom.

Adversity Is the Training.

On meeting difficulty as the curriculum, not the interruption.

Difficulty arrives and we treat it as an interruption.

This was not part of the plan. This is not what was supposed to happen. We complain about it, push back on it, look for ways around it, ask what we did to deserve it, run scenarios in our head about how to make it go away. None of this changes the situation. Most of it makes the situation worse, because we are spending our energy fighting the fact of the difficulty instead of meeting it.

The Stoics saw this clearly. They flipped the frame.

In their view, the hard thing was not the interruption to the work. The hard thing was the work. The difficulty arriving in your day was not a sign that something was wrong. It was the friction by which you became capable of more. The adversity was the training. Not the obstacle to it.

Epictetus, who had been a slave before he became a teacher of philosophy, wrote:

Difficulties show a person's character. So when a difficulty befalls you, remember that god, like a trainer, has matched you with a tough sparring partner.

EPICTETUS · DISCOURSES 1.24.1 · C. AD 108 ·
HARD TRANSLATION

The image is precise. A trainer who cared about you would not give you weak opposition. They would give you exactly what you needed to develop the next layer of skill, even if it cost you in the moment. The discomfort was not a punishment. It was the curriculum.

The same idea ran across Stoic philosophy. The hard thing was not the violation of life. It was the means by which a person actually became capable. Seneca, who wrote his letters from inside one of the most pressurized lives in Rome, returned to this theme often. The mind that has been tested becomes the mind that can stand.

Here is what gets clear when we start to practice this.

The relationship we have to difficulty determines almost everything about how it shapes us. When we treat every hard moment as a violation, we get weaker over time, because we keep fighting reality. When we treat every hard moment as training, we get stronger, because we keep working with it. Same difficulty. Two different ways of being shaped by it.

This is not about pretending the difficulty is good. It is about choosing the frame that makes the difficulty useful. The hard conversation. The deal that fell apart. The result you did not get. The thing you did not see coming. None of these need to be reframed as gifts. They need to be met as training. The training does not require you to be grateful for the workout. It just requires you to do the workout.

The shift is small. Notice when you are fighting the fact of the difficulty. Notice the voice that says this should not be happening. Drop the argument with reality. Then ask the question that actually moves you forward: what is this asking me to develop?

That question changes the workout into a lesson. And the lessons compound, the way they always do, into a strength that wasn't there before.

The obstacle was the curriculum.

It always was.

The Way That Doesn't Force.

On wu wei, releasing the grip, and the kind of action that actually moves things.

Some of the worst stretches of my life had the same cause.

I was forcing something. A deal that wasn't moving. A version of life I had pictured and was determined to make happen. A result I needed by a certain date. In each case, I doubled down. I pushed harder. I gripped tighter. The harder I gripped, the further the thing seemed to move from me. The harder I pushed, the more resistance I generated. I told myself this was discipline. It wasn't. It was forcing.

The shift came when I stopped.

Not stopped caring. Not stopped working. Stopped forcing. I let the day be what it was. I worked with what was actually in front of me rather than what I wanted to be in front of me. I stopped trying to bend the outside world to match the picture in my head and started responding to the world as it actually

was. The pressure dropped. The work got easier. And the things I had been forcing started to move on their own.

The Taoists named this two and a half thousand years ago. The phrase is *wu wei*. It is often translated as "non-action" or "non-doing," but the more careful rendering is "not acting from constructs," meaning not acting from the picture we have built in our heads about how things should be. Wu wei is the practice of dropping the constructed picture and responding to the actual situation.

Lao Tzu wrote, in the chapter Chad Hansen titles "Primitive Lack of Desire":

Ways fix on not acting from constructs.

LAO TZU · TAO TE CHING, CHAPTER 37 · CHAD
HANSEN TRANSLATION

The line sounds dense, but it is practical. The natural unfolding of things, what Lao Tzu calls the Way, is committed to not acting from the constructs we build. Most of our suffering comes from acting on those constructs. The picture we have built. The result we have already decided is the right

one. The shape the day should take. When we release the construct, the resistance drops, and the situation moves.

The image Lao Tzu returns to most often is water. Water does not force its way. It flows around obstacles. It finds the lowest path. And given enough time, water wears down stone. The hardest thing in any landscape gives way to the softest. Not because the softest is stronger. Because the softest is not trying.

Here is what gets clear when we start to practice this.

The things we have been trying hardest to make happen are usually the things we have been trying hardest to control. The control is the obstacle. We are creating the very resistance we are then trying to push through. The deal we cannot close is the deal we are gripping. The relationship that will not bend is the relationship we are trying to bend. The result that will not arrive is the result we have been demanding instead of building toward.

Releasing the grip is not surrender in the weak sense. It is not giving up. It is letting the situation be what it is, doing the next

right action, and trusting that consistent action without forcing is what actually moves things over time.

The two pieces I have written on this site, *Don't Death Grip the Outcome* and *Playing Not to Lose*, are both pointing at the same thing from different angles. One is about gripping the result. The other is about gripping what we already have out of fear. Both are forms of force. Both are obstacles disguised as commitment. The move underneath both is the same one Lao Tzu was pointing at twenty-five hundred years ago.

Stop forcing.

Do the next right thing.

Move with the current.

Let the work do what it does.

That is the move.

Negative Visualization.

On the Stoic practice that sounds like negative thinking and produces the opposite.

Negative visualization sounds bad.

The phrase makes most people picture someone sitting in a dark room thinking about everything that could go wrong. Catastrophizing on purpose. Manifesting failure. The wellness industry has spent the last twenty years telling us to do the opposite. Think positive. Visualize success. Picture the life you want and the universe will bring it to you. Negative visualization, on its face, sounds like exactly the thing you are not supposed to do.

It isn't that. It's actually closer to the opposite.

The Stoics had a phrase for it. *Premeditatio malorum*, the premeditation of evils. The practice is simple. You sit, briefly, and you go through your day. The meeting that is coming up. The

conversation you have been putting off. The deal that could move sideways. The phone call you might get. You ask, honestly, where could this go wrong. What could break. What would I do if it did. You are not catastrophizing. You are not predicting the future. You are taking inventory of the points where things could turn, so that when they do, you are not meeting them for the first time in the moment they arrive.

Seneca wrote about this two thousand years ago:

He robs present ills of their power who has perceived their coming beforehand.

SENECA · LETTERS TO LUCILIUS 91.4 · C. AD 64

What sounds dark on the surface produces, in practice, two of the most useful states a person can carry through a day.

The first is defused fear. The thing we have not faced has more power over us than the thing we have. When we have already walked the worst in our imagination, the actual worst, when it comes, arrives smaller than we feared. The dread that runs in the background of most days is the dread of things we have refused to look at. Looking at them, deliberately, deflates them.

The second is appreciation. When you sit with the possibility of the day going badly and then it goes well, you notice it differently. Not as a given. As something that worked out. The deal that did not fall through. The meeting that landed clean. The conversation that went better than you expected. You catch yourself seeing what did not go wrong, which is the actual texture of most decent days, and which we almost never see when we are not paying attention.

This is the part that distinguishes the practice from negative thinking. Negative thinking is passive. It happens to us, when we are anxious and the mind is running on its own. The catastrophizing runs in a loop and produces nothing except more catastrophizing.

Negative visualization is deliberate. We choose the moment. We choose the duration. We choose the topic. We sit with it briefly, on purpose, and then we come back. Negative thinking runs us. Negative visualization, we run.

The practice itself is small. Once or twice a week. Five minutes is enough. Sit. Go through what is ahead. Find the points where it could break. Sit with them briefly, ask yourself how

you would meet them, and then let the imagining end and the day return.

The fear shrinks.

The appreciation grows.

The day shows up sharper.

All three from a practice that sounds, on first read, like it should produce none of them.

Everyone Is Fighting Their Own Battle.

On what we don't see in others, and why this perspective is mostly for us.

Notice what we do when someone is rude to us.

The driver who cut us off in traffic. The colleague who snapped. The customer who blew up over something small. The friend who didn't reply. The cashier who could barely make eye contact.

Our default response is to take it personally. Or to make a story about who they are. He's a jerk. She's selfish. They're rude people. We label them and move on.

What we almost never do, in the moment, is consider the possibility that the person we just judged is carrying something we cannot see.

The man who cut us off may have just gotten a phone call we wouldn't wish on anyone. The colleague who snapped may be in the third month of a quiet collapse at home. The customer who blew up may have been told that morning that someone close to them is dying. The friend who didn't reply may be sitting on the bathroom floor unable to face anything yet. The cashier may have buried a parent two weeks ago.

We don't know. We almost never know. And in the absence of knowing, we tend to fill the gap with the most uncharitable explanation available...because the uncharitable explanation requires the least imagination on our part.

The idea is older than most people realize.

In 1897, a Scottish minister and writer named Ian MacLaren wrote a line that has carried for over a century:

Be pitiful, for every man is fighting a hard battle.

IAN MACLAREN · 1897

The word *pitiful* in 1897 didn't mean what it means now. It meant *full of pity*. Compassionate. Capable of seeing what was hard for someone else.

Same idea. A hundred and twenty-something years ago.

The practice this points to is simple.

When someone is sharp with us, or cold, or distant, or rude, we run a different default. Not the one that labels them as a bad person. The one that asks...what might be happening for them that I can't see?

We will almost never know the answer. That isn't the point. The point is the question. The question changes how we hold the moment.

We can still set our own boundaries. We can still walk away from people who treat us badly. The practice doesn't require us to absorb anything we shouldn't. It just changes the story we are telling ourselves about the person, in the first half-second after their behavior.

What is easy to miss is that this practice is not primarily for them.

It is for us.

When we label someone as rude, selfish, or wrong, we are the ones who carry the charge afterwards. We replay the moment. We stew. We tell the story to ourselves and sometimes to other people. The other person, meanwhile, has moved on with whatever battle they are actually fighting, and is not thinking about us at all.

The shift in perspective diffuses the charge before it can take us with it. The question *what might be happening for them that I can't see* is not really about them. It is the move that prevents us from getting hijacked by someone else's bad moment, and keeps our state of mind ours.

The man who sees someone struggling and responds from clarity, instead of offense, is not being soft. He is operating from a steadier place. The reactive man is the one who just got borrowed by someone else's mood.

And the story we tell ourselves about that one person is not really about that one person. It is also a story we are telling

ourselves about the world. Every uncharitable read of a stranger is another small vote for the idea that the world is hostile, that people are out to get us. Every charitable read is another small vote for the idea that most people are doing the best they can with what they were given, which, mostly, they are.

We become what we keep noticing. That works in both directions.

Everyone is fighting a battle we cannot see.

Including the person who was just rude.

Default to kindness.

Mostly, for our own sake.

Playing Not to Lose.

On the fear we mistake for responsibility, and the cost of holding too tight.

Watch a man who is afraid of losing his job.

He doesn't quite say what he thinks in meetings. He doesn't push back when he should. He doesn't ask for what he's worth. He doesn't say no to the bad decision his boss is making. He laughs at the joke that wasn't funny. He stays an extra hour to be seen staying. He plays small in the exact places where his actual value would show up.

He calls this being responsible.

It isn't. It's fear, wearing the costume of responsibility. And the strange thing is, the fear isn't even protecting the job. It's quietly making him replaceable.

The same pattern shows up across other fronts. The man gripping the house too tightly stops enjoying living in it. The man gripping the career stops actually building it, because building requires risk and risk is what he's most afraid of. The man gripping the income stops investing in himself, because investment is uncertain and certainty is what fear wants. In every case, the fear is presented to him as a survival tool. In every case, it's degrading the thing it claims to protect.

We don't see this because the fear talks to us in the voice of common sense. It says...you have obligations, you have people who depend on you, you can't be reckless. Which is true. But what fear smuggles in under the word *reckless* is anything outside the smallest possible safe move. Real reckless is a different category. What fear calls reckless is usually just the thing you actually need to do.

Here is where most of us push back. *Easy to say, when you don't have what I have to lose. I have a mortgage. I have kids. I have a career I built over twenty years. I can't afford to not be afraid.*

The push-back sounds correct. It isn't.

The men who first wrote down these ideas were not men with nothing to lose. Marcus Aurelius was the emperor of Rome. He had everything. Seneca, who wrote the *Letters to Lucilius*, was at points the wealthiest man in Rome. Epictetus, who wrote the *Enchiridion*, taught Roman senators. His students were the men with the houses, the careers, the political influence, the inheritances.

The teaching on the fear of losing was not designed for the man who has nothing. It was written by men who had everything, for other men who had everything. The whole question they were chewing on was...how do you live well, act well, decide well, when you have so much that the fear of losing it could ruin every move you make?

That is the same question the man with the mortgage and the kids and the career is asking now.

Epictetus put it directly:

Never say of anything, I have lost it; but, I have returned it.

EPICTETUS · ENCHIRIDION 11 · C. AD 125 ·
CARTER TRANSLATION

The grip is the illusion. Nothing was ever permanently ours to begin with. Loosening the grip doesn't mean caring less. It means caring rightly. There is a way to love your kids and not be afraid of losing them. There is a way to want the career and not be a prisoner of it. The fear adds nothing to the love. It only contaminates the action.

Two thousand years later, a man named Napoleon Hill wrote a book about why most men never get what they are actually capable of getting. He spent a chapter on fear. He landed on the same place Epictetus did, in plainer English:

Fears are nothing more than states of mind.

NAPOLEON HILL · THINK AND GROW RICH,
CHAPTER 15 · 1937

A state of mind is a thing a man can change. The fear is real. The control over it is also real.

Watch a man who is not afraid of losing his job.

He says what he thinks. He pushes back when he should. He asks for what he's worth. He says no to the bad decision. He

invests in himself. He builds. He becomes, over time, the man
the company actually can't afford to lose.

The fear was never protecting anything.

The fear was the cost.

Stop playing not to lose.

Just play the game. Do your best. That's it.

One Day at a Time.

On the practice of letting tomorrow be tomorrow, and staying with today.

Most of us are not really living today.

We're somewhere else, worrying about tomorrow, replaying yesterday, running the long list of things we still haven't done, imagining the version of life that's supposed to arrive when we finally figure it out. The body is sitting in the chair, but the mind is somewhere five years from now, in a meeting that hasn't happened yet, prepping for an outcome it can't predict.

That's the trap. We're so busy time-travelling that the actual day we have is being half-lived.

The phrase *one day at a time* sounds simple. Maybe too simple. Most of us hear it and think it's a recovery slogan, or a thing you say when life feels overwhelming, and we move past it.

The phrase is older than that. Marcus Aurelius wrote, in a notebook he kept to himself two thousand years ago:

Wipe out the imagination. Stop the pulling of the strings. Confine yourself to the present.

MARCUS AURELIUS · MEDITATIONS, BOOK VII.29 ·
C. AD 170

He wasn't writing a self-help book. He was reminding himself, on the kind of day that was probably objectively terrible (he was running an empire, fighting a war, and grieving), that the only place his life was actually happening was right now. Not in his imagination of what was about to go wrong. Not in his rehearsal of all the things he should have done differently. In the present moment.

The same idea shows up across the Stoics, the Buddhists, the people who developed daily-practice traditions over the last two thousand years. The present is the only unit of time we actually live in. Everything else is a story the mind is telling itself about a time that isn't here.

Here's what gets clear when we start practising this.

Most of our suffering comes from being somewhere other than now. The anxiety about tomorrow is happening in our heads, today, while the actual tomorrow goes on being whatever it's going to be without our worry. The regret about yesterday is happening in our heads, today, while the actual yesterday is gone and can't be edited. We spend a lot of our actual time being half-present in our actual lives, because we're using most of our attention to live in time zones that don't exist.

And the work, the real work, can only happen in the day we're in. The book gets written one page today. The body changes by what we put in it and how we move it today. The relationship gets better by how we show up today. The career we want is built one decision, one conversation, one action, one small follow-through today. There's no other unit of time we can actually operate in.

The practice itself is small.

Wake up. Do today's piece of whatever you're building, not the whole project, not the year, not the eventual goal. Just today's piece. Be in the conversations you're in. Notice when the mind starts time-travelling and quietly bring it back. End the day having done what today could hold.

Don't carry tomorrow. Tomorrow will arrive on its own, and the version of you that handles tomorrow is the version that was rested and focused enough today. The version that spent today worrying about tomorrow is the version that will be exhausted when tomorrow gets here.

The strangest part is that the long game is built almost entirely out of these small days. Not out of any single big moment. Out of a thousand mostly-forgettable Tuesdays, lived well enough that the work got done, the people got cared for, the body got moved, the mind got fed.

A year of those is something. A decade of those is a different life.

But you can only ever be in one of them at a time.

Today is the only one you have.

One day at a time.