

REGISTRY REPORT

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for the Stoic Community
Stoicus communitas:Stoikos koinonia



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Erik Wiegardt, Editor

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Opportunity Now

Now Taking Applications for Tutor at the College of Stoic Philosophers. Applicants must have at least a Master's Degree from an accredited institution. Teaching experience preferred but not required. A great opportunity to guide the growth of a new and exciting concept in distance education. This is a non-paying and part-time position. To apply, contact Erik Wiegardt now at cyberstoic@aol.com

New Members

Steven Paul Hamilton (1948-) lives in Blaine, Minnesota, and is "a short-haired 'child of the 60's' who came to Stoicism through Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. I will always be a *prokopton* and a *skeptikos*. Over the past few years I have been privileged to have been a pre-publication reader of Keith Seddon's books about Stoicism and Eastern philosophy, Robert Dobbin's new abridged translation of Epictetus's Discourses and a yet-to-be published new translation of Musonius Rufus edited by William Irvine."

Spotlight

on

Changing the World

editorial and interview
by Erik Wiegardt

In the last issue we were talking to Jeff Traylor, former prison counselor and author of The Epictetus Club, a book that has spawned Epictetus Clubs in a number of prisons throughout the country. We return to that interview now. But first, a few words about how our philosophy can change the world.

Whether the prisons of the world are formed by bars of steel or chains of ignorance, it amounts to the same thing in the end. And only by liberation from our compulsions and habits and attachments to *externals* can we be free. There are those who would have us believe that ours is a harsh philosophy, all cold showers and grim determination, and so it might appear to those who are blinded by their lust for wealth and power and sensual pleasures. But it is only their own pride and arrogance and cynical narcissism that shuts their eyes and ears and minds so that they cannot and will not see.

And who are these scoffers anyway? Are they the enlightened sages that we so respect and want to be? Of course not. They are hardly more substantial than the figments and illusions of the fears and imaginations of our discontent. Contentment, as you know, is not the fulfillment of what we want, but the realization of how much we already have.

As the saying goes: you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. That's true. However, if you haven't led the horse to water, how can you assume he is not thirsty? Before you came to the Stoa, were you not thirsty for the teachings of philosophy? Were you not seeking to be free from your own ignorance and unhappiness? Why else have we come together? Why else are we here?

Should we keep all the wisdom of Stoicism to ourselves alone? Of course not. We have been so constituted by Nature that we actually *want* to share what we know—whenever and wherever we get it. Seneca said that if he had to choose between having wisdom but not being allowed to share it, or being ignorant and never knowing wisdom at all, then he would prefer to remain ignorant. But we can share our wisdom, and we want to. When we have such an opportunity we must take it. Now. Procrastination is for the weak and uncertain, and we are neither.

In the last issue we were introduced to *The Epictetus Club*, a book that is evolving into an organization of Epictetus Clubs, actual group meetings in a number of state prisons around the USA. Jeff Traylor, a former prison counselor, wrote the book and started the clubs. But he is only one man. We can help. This issue continues the interview with Jeff and includes some suggestions for Stoic community involvement. Please give this *Registry Report* your careful attention.

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The Interview (Continued)

ERIK: Have you considered going non-profit and applying for grants to make the book available in prisons nationwide? Certainly, even in these tough economic times there must be some philanthropic people and organizations that can see the value in such a program for criminal rehabilitation?

JEFF: I have not applied for grants, but that is because I am averse to a lot of paperwork and hoops. I would be happy to consider partnering with someone in bringing these clubs into more prisons, community centers, schools, etc., if the partner would do the grant-writing. I know the clubs would be a tremendous asset to the community, and I envision them as possibly being ongoing community service/social clubs that young people could belong to after they finish the book/discussion group phase of the program. Kind of a positive gang alternative with T-shirts and jackets. (I have a bumper sticker that is getting some attention here: "Nothing stops a bullet like good thinking." - Epictetus Club)

ERIK: Good thinking. I'm going to switch gears for a minute. Excuse me for asking, but how do you live? Being a volunteer for the Katrina clean up and aftermath can't pay that well. Do you have much in the way of royalties from your books?

JEFF: As far as income is concerned, we sold a lot of our stuff before coming to volunteer in New Orleans, plus we live pretty simply. We also had some savings, and we were happy to get rid of our car when we decided to stay here. This is a pattern we have used for previous adventures. We are using book sales and savings to bridge us until the next more "regular" income source is established, which

may come from the volunteer work I am doing with these community groups, or something totally different, or not at all. I generally subscribe to the indirect pay model—you do the right thing, follow your purpose, and you'll get what you need.

ERIK: I think that takes a lot of courage. Very Stoic. Maybe you can give our readers some sense of what your life is like today in New Orleans. What do you do in an average day? What did you do today, for example?

JEFF: I started today by packing, processing, and loading a box of Epictetus Club books onto the back of my bike to take them to UPS. The order was from a university bookstore in Minnesota for a criminal justice class there. The professor uses the book as a required text. (My wife and I have gone green in this urban environment, so I rely primarily on my bike, but occasionally on the bus and streetcar, and almost always on the ferry to get me across the river to the French Quarter and CBD—that is what they call the downtown here, short for Central Business District.)

I then dropped off a copy of the book and the discussion guide at the new District Attorney's office in the CBD. The new DA wants to use diversion as a major tool in addressing the crime problem here, which is the main obstacle to recovery, and I think Epictetus Clubs would be a great fit.

I then set up a meeting with a local program called Resurrection After Exoneration (RAE). That program just moved into an old building they renovated in one of the neighborhoods. The group is comprised of people who were wrongfully incarcerated, some for decades, and have been released. They want to provide life skills services to offenders and exonerees returning to the community, and I want to be part of that. Some of the exonerees might also make good facilitators for the discussion/diversion group, giving them a sense of purpose by helping young people who need adults in their lives.

I am also active with a grass roots group we started to fight blight that engenders crime. It is called Broken Windows, after the theory that if one window is not repaired, it leads to further deterioration and ultimately to crime. We have had some success with cleaning up a couple of commercial sites in the neighborhood, and I touched base with one of the "blighters" who is cooperating in the improvements.

Finally on the "work" front, I received a nice report from a prison librarian who is using the Epictetus Club book and discussion guide, and she described how the guards are finding that their jobs are easier in the unit that has the program. I also had fun – I rode around the French Quarter, picked up a few groceries, and ate good New Orleans food (red beans and rice with chicken) and watched the steamboats on the river while waiting a few minutes for the ferry, then caught my boat back home for a nap.

ERIK: After all that I'm sure a nap was warranted. Since talking to you, I've been wondering how you actually get your books into prisons and get Epictetus Clubs started?

JEFF: I contact prison librarians by email through a directory. So many want to preview the book and are interested in a possible discussion group that I've had to stop until I can get more books. I also received an email today from a group called "Books Through Bars." They collect donated books and forward them on to prisoners. For now, I am planting seed books in prisons that will sprout into discussion groups.

I have made a starter kit available for prison librarians that includes five copies of the book, the discussion guide, a reproducible flier, and reproducible Epictetus Club certificates for the group graduates. The starter kits are \$99, plus shipping, and additional copies can be added to the starter kit for \$19.95 each. The starter kits are then sold to the prisons. Some prisons order hundreds of books each year, some order just a few. The discussion groups are much more cost effective than therapy

groups, and in this economy that is a good selling point. More than a dozen prison librarians requested a copy of the book today to review, and those books might be seeds that will grow into discussion groups. We'll see.

ERIK: I think there should be an Epictetus Club in every prison in the world. Period. Stoicism is ideal for the rehabilitation of both attitude and mind. To that end, your book is an excellent "Bible," because it presents great thoughts in a language and context any prison inmate would readily recognize. Do you think members of the Stoic community should be directly involved with Epictetus Clubs in prisons?

JEFF: I don't see people from the outside going into the prison to do groups. The clubs will be run from inside by staff and inmates. The prison will want to do it as they learn of the positive experiences of others and from reading the book. I'm offering a review copy at my expense which at the least goes on a prison library shelf or, even better, starts a group. As I am sending out the requested books, I will follow up with an emailed poster that the librarian can post in the dorms and cellblocks letting the inmates know that a new book is in the library and asking the inmates to check it out and let the librarian know if they would like to discuss it in a group. Then they can order the starter kit and start the group for less than a hundred bucks. These groups then sometimes spread to the living units in some cases. I try to learn from each step, and create a new next step, so it is always changing.

ERIK: As you know, Jeff, being a Stoic is incompatible with being a criminal. Stoicism fights criminal thinking outside here with us, and now you have made it possible to continue that fight inside. Beginning with prison rehab, I think an entire network of former inmate-members of Epictetus Clubs could be organized to help with the difficult process of reentry back into society. So little money and so much time.

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Oikeiosis

I'm sure every member of the Stoic community is a philosopher, or lover of wisdom (philo + *sophia*). But how many of us can truly say that we are philanthropists, or lovers of humanity (philo + *anthropos*)? And, is there any reason why we should be? Yes, I believe there is. *Oikeiosis*. This remarkable concept is the reason, the foundation, and the starting point of Stoic ethics. Here's a brief outline, a quick refresher for those who haven't thought about *oikeiosis* for awhile.

First, a translation of the word: A.A. Long prefers "well-disposed"; the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 2nd ed., prefers "affinity"; and if you aren't too uncomfortable with the word 'love', as I've discovered Stoics tend to be, that could also be used here – not as a translation of the word, but as an understanding of the concept. The self-love of an infant, love of family as a child, love of country as a patriot, even love of beauty and the pursuit of truth are all appropriate and natural activities for which humans have an affinity or are well-disposed. Personally, I prefer affinity or love when speaking of *oikeiosis*, but I will be using A.A. Long's *Hellenistic Philosophy*, 2nd ed., (California, 1986) as my primary resource for this brief outline.

Oikeiosis is the primary impulse of all living creatures, including human beings. Paradoxically, virtue actually begins as self-love. What Diogenes Laertius said, "An animal's first impulse, say the Stoics, is to self-preservation," Chrysippus affirmed, "The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof (D.L. Bk. VII. 85)." This is the benevolence of Nature, the beginning of ethics for the Stoic and the end of the discussion for the Epicurean and hedonist. Unlike those who believe that pleasure is our ultimate good, we believe that our reasoning faculty, the *hegemonikon*,

expands our self-love into stages of ethical evolution that achieve a higher good.

Cicero detailed five stages (Fin iii 20-I), but I will only outline three:

1. Care for the self and its needs. The primary impulse.
2. Able to make rational distinctions between those things which are in agreement with Nature and those which are not.
3. Selecting and living by those things that are in agreement with Nature.

As the rational mind develops, our self-love, or affinity for that which is dearest to us, *can* expand to include the family, then the community, a romantic partner, then our children, and so on. Each stage retains the stage before it as one evolves ethically. However, despite the developing rational faculty, ethical evolution is *not* automatic. Many people do *not* gain in wisdom as they get older; they only gain in weight. **Without effort**, then, we get stuck in stage one or two; otherwise all people would become wise and virtuous. Obviously, they do not. It takes an act of choice and will to evolve from the primary impulse of infantile ego, stage one, to selecting and living by those things that are in agreement with Nature, stage three.

When the individual has acquired the mature capacity for reason and chooses to live conformably with Nature, s/he has evolved to an entirely new realization. When the final stage is achieved, the individual realizes life on a higher plane than all previous stages, and virtue is good for its own sake. Self-love has evolved through love of family, spouse, children, country, and finally a love for all humanity. This is where *oikeiosis* ultimately leads: from self-love to lover of humanity, from egoist to altruist and the philanthropist.

If a man hasn't discovered something he will die for, he isn't fit to live.

Martin Luther King Jr., Detroit speech 1963

We are always looking for altruists and philanthropists to help us expand membership in the Stoic community. Although we have the greatest wisdom philosophy in the history of the world, there are still so few who know about it. This is what we are attempting to do at the Stoic Council: get out the message. This is what Jeff Traylor is doing with the Epictetus Clubs, teaching inmates there is a better way to live than being a habitual criminal. We have projects and we have goals and we have a great need for those who can volunteer their time.

We especially need business people, accountants, and lawyers who can help us create a non-profit tax-exempt charitable organization. This will be the financial foundation of our future. If you have expertise in this area or have a talent for this kind of work, *we need you!* But, know what you are doing. As Epictetus said, "If you have assumed any character beyond your strength, you have both demeaned yourself ill in that, and neglected one which you might have filled with success (Handbook #37)." If you have this strength, we need your expertise. We are planning for the next 1000 years. And together, we can change the world.

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Thank you for reading,

Erik