

REGISTRY REPORT

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New Stoa News

Michel Daw, the College webmaster and librarian, has set up a blog on New Stoa's *Multimedia* page. As an experiment in blogging, he is going to publish the book, *Words of the Ancient Wise: A Day Book of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius* in a daily feed. If you are interested in following along, go to the *Multimedia* page on New Stoa and look for Michel's blog.

New Members

Peter Andes (1991-) is a student who lives in Berlin, Maryland, who writes, "I believe Stoicism will provide a path that will allow me to lead a better and more fulfilling life. I am interested in becoming a member of New Stoa to further explore the benefits and study the practices of this philosophy."

Trevor Davis (1989-) is a university student in Ontario, Canada, majoring in Criminal Justice with a Philosophy minor. "Over my many years of studying philosophy, both in school and at home, I eventually began to see the world with new eyes. I stumbled upon Stoicism a few years later and realized that my beliefs and temperament already defined me as a Stoic. I have done my best to be a practicing Stoic ever since."

Eric Ederer (1967-) is a public health graduate student at Michigan State University. He has experience with Eastern practices including Buddhist meditation, Yoga, and Vedanta. Eric is involved with the Great Books Foundation. He found in Stoic teachings practical truths to deal with the sometime difficult challenges of living in the everyday world. Eric is interested in applying Stoicism to social service, especially health care.

Ryan Holiday (1987-) lives in Los Angeles, California, where he is a strategist.

Alexis Kindig (1980-) lives in Oxnard, California, where she is a freelance writer. She wrote, "I am very pleased to know that there are so many people who take their Stoicism seriously. Stoicism is indeed a living, relevant practice, not a dusty relic of antiquity."

Shane Schneider (1966-) lives in Lyons, Kansas, where he works in development for a member station of National Public Radio (NPR). He said, "I have studied Eastern religions/philosophies extensively, especially Zen, Vedanta and Taoism. In my practice of Zen, I've noticed distinct similarities between it and Stoicism. I'm also deeply interested in ancient history, particularly Greek and Roman. I am a longtime admirer of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and the

Emperor Julian (the so-called Apostate). I have great respect for classical paganism and philosophy."

Robb Weigel (1980-) lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where he is an entrepreneur.

Movie Review

“Groundhog Day”

by Leslie Johnson, Ph.D.

I read this review posted by Stoic community member, Professor Johnson, on his Facebook home page and wanted to share it with all of the Stoic community. It should be noted that this review "wasn't intended as a publication but was written for the young daughter of a friend who was interested in philosophy. In the Stoic tradition it was intended to form rather than inform." EW

Groundhog Day is one of my favourite films. And, yes, I watch it again and again!

In the film, Phil is an egocentric TV weather forecaster who is assigned to cover Groundhog Day in the small town of Punxsutawny. This annual event takes place because folklore says that if a groundhog comes out of his hole on that day and sees his shadow, six more weeks of winter will follow. If no shadow appears, there will be an early spring. Phil is dismissive of the event and the small town people who celebrate it. He finds reporting on the whole thing beneath his dignity.

Phil spends the night before the ceremony in a local guest house. Getting up in the morning he treats everything, including the town's ceremony, with disdain. After the ceremony he is annoyed to find that an unexpected snowstorm traps him in the town for another night.

When Phil wakes up to the radio alarm on the second morning something very odd happens: it is the day of the groundhog ceremony all over again. Everything that happened on the previous day repeats itself but he alone is aware it. The radio is playing the same song; a man at the top of the stairs and the guest house owner say the same things; a tramp holds his hand out for a gratuity; an old acquaintance recognizes him from way back and not yesterday; the Groundhog Day ceremony remains the same; the unexpected snowstorm traps him in the town for another night. And so it goes on, day after day.

The misanthropic Phil finds himself trapped in the same day repeatedly. Each new day he awakes to the familiar repetition that only he is conscious of. At first Phil responds with bewilderment. Then contempt: he risks his life, he breaks the law. Then despair: he kills himself. But, nothing he does prevents him from waking up to the same day again and again. Finally, he figures out a constructive response to his situation.

Phil starts to live the day allotted to him and in doing so he lives a life he has never lived before. An interesting example of this is his encounter with death. It turns out that the old tramp whom he meets each morning, dies later in the day. Phil has started to take notice of the tramp and comes to discover his death later in the day. Phil cannot accept it. He tries unsuccessfully day after day to keep the old tramp alive. Only when Phil stops trying to force death to relent does he find compassion for the living. He begins to use his knowledge of how the day will unfold to help people. He seeks and finds the freedoms given to him in his day: So that he can catch him, everyday Phil walks past a tree from which a boy falls; So that he can save him, everyday Phil sits at a restaurant table close to a man who will otherwise choke on this food. Slowly Phil goes

through a transformation. He learns to ice sculpt. He learns to play jazz piano. On his umpteenth groundhog ceremony he gives a new speech to camera. He says that '... basking in the warmth of their hearths and hearts, I couldn't imagine a better fate than a long and lustrous winter.' He accepts his winter without discontent. He accepts the conditions of his life and learns the pleasures it affords to him. He learns to live authentically and use the tools of acceptance, positivity, and generosity. He becomes a local personality.

When Phil is first assigned to the job he pursues the new open-hearted TV producer Rita, to no avail. As Groundhog day repeats itself he cynically manipulates the situation to maneuver her into bed. He says all the right things, or nearly so. Still to no avail. He just isn't a person of good character.

After his transformation Rita falls in love with the good man he has become. They sleep together chastely in his guest house room. They drop off after a long and eventful day lived authentically. She is there when the alarm sounds the next morning. Finally, it is the day after Groundhog Day. Phil is liberated to move on.

Phil was forced to stop and treat each day like a world unto itself and decide how to use it. In the end, he breaks through to become a person where intimacy, creativity, and compassion come naturally. Phil builds himself into a worthwhile person.

The film is actually an accessible explanation of the significance of Nietzsche's notion of 'eternal recurrence' [The Gay Science]. In this reworking of a Stoic idea, he asks us to imagine that you are fated to relive every moment of your life again and again without cessation. In each reliving there would be nothing new and no detail left out. Everything – 'each sigh, each thought, each painful experience, each joyful moment' – would be repeated again and again and in the same sequence. 'If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would change you ..., or perhaps crush you.'

Nietzsche's doctrine is no idle speculation, it is a practical check on authenticity in living. For each and every act we are about to do, we could ask the question, 'Would you want this now and innumerable times more?' Think about it. How well would you have to become disposed to yourself and to life if you were to wish nothing but the eternally repeated confirmation of your choice? Groundhog Day is dedicated to explaining this philosophy.

One of the key points about the film is that we only take responsibility for our lives when we fully grasp that there is no alternative to our current one, that we are thrust upon this world in a given time and place and with certain endowments. Nothing will alter that. But it seems that only if we were forced to live the life we have led repeatedly without end would we begin to take our decisions seriously.

The film also expresses Nietzsche's [Heraclitus'] idea that 'Character is fate'. When we get beyond denial and resentment and accept our situation, we can become who we are capable of being. This is why the notion is a moral philosophy: Even if nature hands us heavy baggage, we are responsible for cultivating our character. Nietzsche argued that any world outlook that privileges some other future or ideal world over the world of 'here and now' necessarily devalues human life and is a threat to its flourishing. In the world of 'here and now' what is virtuous is to contribute to all that betters a human soul. To find our freedoms. To behave as if one's very existence were a work of art.

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl says, "...everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." (1963, p. 104)

"Day by day, what you do is who you become." Heraclitus

Spotlight

on

STEVEN PAUL HAMILTON

Show me a person who is sick and happy, in danger and happy, dying and happy, in exile and happy, in disgrace and happy. Show that person to me for, by the gods, I wish to see a Stoic. If you cannot show me such a one, at least show me one who is forming, one who has shown a tendency to be a Stoic. Do me this favor. Do not begrudge an old man seeing a sight which I have not yet seen.

Epictetus *Discourses*, Bk II, chapter 19

I was born with asthma and hay fever on June 17, 1948 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Doubts about my survival were so serious that I was baptized when I was about 10 days old. This was just the beginning of a number of chronic health conditions that I have developed and still have and that have influenced my study and adoption of Stoicism as a philosophy of life.

Ancestry on my father's side was Scotch, Irish, Danish and French; on my mother's side English and Dutch. My father never had a formal education beyond the 8th grade, which was not unusual at the time. My mother graduated from high school. Both ended up doing bookkeeping work for most of their working careers. Both are still alive. I am the oldest of four children—all still living.



Steven Paul Hamilton

I was the first person on my father's side of the family to go to college but I never finished. Poor health made me absent from school a lot and turned me into an extreme autodidact. In other words, school turned into a place that I went to to get credit for things I already knew. When I went to college this began to be a liability as I was interested in very large number of very different things, and I was unable to narrow them down.

I have been employed by the State of Minnesota for over 30 years and for the last 10 have been collecting rebates from drug companies to offset the use of taxpayers money to pay for medications used by people on public assistance.

I married at the rather late age of 33 1/2 to a woman from the Philippines and have two daughters, both of whom have now graduated from college.

Living in Minnesota and marrying a woman from the Philippines sounds like an interesting story. Could you tell us a little more about your family?

When I was growing up I never felt I was living in the right time (Western Classical antiquity) or the right place (Central or Far Eastern Asia). Because of the lack of time machines, when I decided it was time to get married – in my early 30's – I chose the Asian option. Through a back page ad in *Nation* magazine, I began corresponding with a number of women from Asia (mostly from the Philippines). Within a few months I found someone I felt I was compatible enough with to risk marrying for a lifetime; I only wanted to do this once. She is of Filipino, Chinese, and Spanish ancestry. We got married in her home town of Zamboanga City, Philippines, in December of 1981.

Our marriage has not been perfect, but none ever is. We have two daughters ages 26 and 23. The

older one lives in New York City (Brooklyn) and currently works for the College Board (the SAT, CLEP, and AP people) while studying to become a medical researcher or Physician's Assistant. The younger one works for the University of St. Thomas here in Minnesota and is about to enter graduate school at Marquette University to get an MA in Student Affairs.

Thank you. Earlier when you mentioned asthma, I immediately thought of Seneca and his breathing difficulties. I wonder how many Stoics have embraced philosophy in whole or in part because of confrontations with mortality.... You must be nearing retirement from civil service. Is that likely soon? If so, do you have any specific ideas about it?

I will qualify for early retirement with full pension as early as a year from now. However, there would be no health insurance, so I will likely have to work until I qualify for Medicare [at age 65. *The US is the only modern nation without universal health care, and private insurance premiums commonly exceed 50% of retirement income. EW*] There is also a possibility my wife and I will retire to the Philippines.

My fantasy retirement scenario is to complete or do over my college education at a school offering a classical education like St. John's College. My older daughter did her undergraduate studies at their Santa Fe, New Mexico, campus. I would then follow that up with a Master's Degree in Library Science and then work part-time at a public or college library. As an avocation I would like to proofread Stoic or Skeptic-related texts (like I have already occasionally done) and review related books on my own blog.

As that scenario will almost certainly not come true, I will settle for the proofreading and blogging. But being a Stoic, I will make the best of whatever presents itself when the time comes.

[How and when did you get started in proofreading?](#)

STEVEN: I have always had a knack for spelling (I received awards for it in elementary and high school) and I expanded it to proofreading in general (punctuation, clumsy phrasing, missing words, and the like). When, as a member of the International Stoic Forum, I saw that Keith Seddon had posted the manuscript of his translation of and commentary on *Epictetus' Handbook* and was offering copies of the book (when published) to the first five people who responded to his request for readers, I naturally had to be one of them. My contribution to that volume was actually rather limited. I found a few minor errors and complained about a few statements he made and that his commentary on one of the chapters was, basically, a "cop-out" (Chapter 40, about the role of women). I received, as promised, a signed and inscribed copy which I still have.

I have since then assisted with many of his other publications, including a delightful morning or two (via E-mail, of course) helping decide on a cover for *Stoic Serenity*. He is currently finishing a book on Stoicism and Cynicism and after that will be working on a new, complete translation of the *Discourses*. The recent Dobbin translation is heavily abridged. I hope to be able to help proofread both of them. Keith does an excellent job proofing his work and there is usually very little left to find.

[Let's shift gears a bit. So far we haven't really discussed how you came to be interested in Stoicism in the first place. What is your earliest memory of Stoic philosophy and when did you actually begin to think of yourself as a Stoic?](#)

Even as a child I had heard of and read brief biographical summaries of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus and a little bit about Stoicism itself. But none of it was presented to me in a format that caught my attention. My in-depth exposure to Stoicism as a life philosophy only began about six years ago after 30 years of forming and following an eclectic mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and iconoclastic Christianity.

This seeking of an alternative to conventional Western religion was heavily influenced by my chronically poor health. It is very difficult for me to verbalize the isolation I felt as a result of these conditions. I just did not fit in with what was going on around me. Not with the people or with the events.

I eventually had a near-nervous breakdown in my early twenties that was cushioned by exposure to the Tao Te Ching with its cyclical view of existence. I took from it a view that no matter how bad things look now, things will get better – especially if you have a non-possessive, non-clinging attitude toward life – both the good and the bad of it. This led to a study of Buddhism, which led back to a new look at first-century Christianity, which led to Epictetus' *Handbook*. I immediately felt that Epictetan Stoicism, augmented by that of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca, was where I should be. My poor health remains.

I have developed a long list of chronic conditions headed by osteoarthritis, IBS, and spondyloarthropathy. But, I am at peace with the universe and reasonably so with other people and with what happens to me. The iconoclastic Christianity also remains (i.e., my fascination with the *Didache*, a 1st Century catechism).

So, after Taoism, then Buddhism, then early Christianity you finally decided that Stoicism is where you should be. Why? Has it done anything to help with your health issues?

At the center of my use of Stoic philosophy as therapy for my chronic illnesses is what you could call the three NO's: NO judging, NO blaming, NO possessing. This applies to the psychological component as well as the physical. Do not judge the particular condition as good or bad – just find out the best way to handle it. It may be curable. It may not be. Be open to new ways of handling it. Do not blame yourself or others for the condition, but realize that only you are responsible for proper treatment. Do not make the condition(s) an integral part of your self-identity either by making yourself the "victim of a cruel disease that you can not escape" or by assuming that "I will emerge victorious against whatever the world throws at me." Following these three NO's will in themselves reduce the pain and suffering you feel and allow whatever other therapies you use try to do their thing in a less stressful environment.

I will be turning 61 in mid-June. Literally born "in the shadow of death" I never thought that I would live this long. Even though I was was one of those rare children who could see beyond the next few years, all I could see was the likelihood of sickness and disability. Probably college but not a family. Probably early total disability and certainly an early death. Somehow and somewhere along the line I developed the desire and ability to question my thinking and what was happening to me and change my attitude about it. It was only a few years ago that I discovered that this was at the core of Stoic thinking and practice – questioning impressions from the outside world, staying open to the future and not clinging to or trying to possess ideas or things. I have had reasonable success in doing those things, and so I am still here – married for 27 years, two children, still walking, and still working.

I like the three NO's. You also mentioned a fascination with the 1st century catechism, *Didache*. I found a brief quotation from Jonathan Draper (*Gospel Perspectives*, v. 5, p. 269) to help me know something about this subject:

Since it was discovered in a monastery in Constantinople and published by P. Bryennios in 1883, the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles has continued to be one of the most disputed of early Christian texts....It bears no date itself, nor does it make reference to any datable external event, yet the picture of the Church which it presents could only be described as primitive, reaching back to the very earliest stages of the Church's order and practice in a way which largely agrees with the picture presented by the New Testament, while at the same time posing questions for many traditional interpretations of this first period of the Church's life.... Athanasius describes it as 'appointed by the

Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of goodness' [Festal Letter 39:7].

If it's possible to be brief about such a provocative body of work, what part of the *Didache* do you find most fascinating and why?

STEVEN: The 1st century CE was the culmination of an era much like our own, but in miniature (sort of). Superpowers fighting an unending but mostly Cold War (Greece, Rome vs Persia, Parthia), often through intermediaries. Uncontrolled urbanization and economic centralization forcing rural inhabitants into overcrowded cities. Traditional religions failed to stop or make sense of the changes. New philosophies and religious groupings were spawned. Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism captured the allegiance of the Greek and Roman upper classes, while Judaism, Mithraism, the Orphic Mysteries, and Egyptian cults thrived among other ethnic groups, the lower classes, and the military.

Most people, then as now, wanted to be part of a community in a time of rapid and seeming unending and unstoppable change and uncertainty. If participation in civil life is not an option, participation in religious life became the obvious alternative (although a careful blending of the two is, for me, the ideal--but that is another story).

The *Didache* community (communities?) observed only two major rituals—baptism and a communion meal. Neither of these would be totally new to the converts; versions of them were to be found in faith traditions other than Judaism. To anyone who has read Stoic and Cynic texts from that period, especially the fragments of Musonius Rufus, should find the tone of the document very familiar. There is no conclusive hint of the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus in the document. One should be able to see why many people who would otherwise have gravitated to conventional Stoicism probably ended up becoming Christian instead.

The lesson of the *Didache* for me as a 21st Century Stoic lies in its reminder that reliance on good ethics, psychology and therapeutic technique do not insure a philosophy's survival as a viable movement. Some form of ritualism that meaningfully (but not coercively) binds its members together may also be required.

* * * *

The Porch and the Stoic Community

a few words from the Editor

Coincidences abound if you look for them. At the time Steven was writing about the need for a sense of community in the 1st century and today, I was reading the brief essay, "Defecting to Faith," by *New York Times* Op-Ed Columnist Charles M. Blow. He quotes a study done by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that questioned 3,000 people and found that the majority of people who were raised in homes without religion chose to join a faith later in life. He wonders why, then quotes the number one reason given. They "joined a religion because their spiritual needs were not being met." These new converts felt that *communities of the faithful* helped to fill a void in their lives.

Blow wrote, "While science, logic, and reason are on the side of the nonreligious, the cold, hard facts are just so cold and hard. Yes, the evidence for evolution is irrefutable. Yes, there is a plethora of Biblical contradictions. Yes, there is mounting evidence from neuroscientists that suggests that God may be a product of the mind. Yes, yes, yes. But when is the choir going to

sing? And when is the picnic? And is my child going to get a part in the holiday play?"

Then the columnist said something that spoke directly to me, to us, the Stoic community. "As the nonreligious movement picks up steam, it needs do a better job of appealing to the ethereal part of our human exceptionalism – that wondrous, precious part where logic and reason hold little purchase, where love and compassion reign. Its the part that fears loneliness, craves companionship and needs affirmation and fellowship. We are more than cells, synapses and sex drives.

"We are amazing, mysterious creatures forever in search of something greater than ourselves....Being regularly surrounded by a community that shares your convictions and reinforces them through literature, art and ritual is incredibly powerful, and yes, spiritual. The nonreligious could learn a few things from religion."

After reading Mr. Blow's column, I was reminded of a correspondence I had nearly 13 years ago with one of the earliest members of our Stoic community, the Rev. James Rigby. Reverend Jim, as I called him, is minister of the largest Presbyterian church in Austin, Texas. I wasn't as tolerant in those days, and I rather rudely asked him in one of our emails what was the point of being a Christian.

I've never forgotten his answer. Even without the benefit of the latest Pew study he knew. "Community," he said. With that answer he planted a seed that took ten years to sprout and grow. For ten years I tended the Registry, the Stoic community, without really knowing why. Finally Reverend Jim's understanding became my own. That was three years ago. Now I know, I really know, and I'm sure many of you do too.

Thank you for reading,

Erik