

REGISTRY REPORT

an eMagazine publication for the
Stoic community since May 2007

Stoicus communitas : Stoikos koinonia



October 2009: Issue 23

Published for New Stoa, a Cybercity

Erik Wiegardt, Editor

Jules Evans, Associate Editor

New Stoa News

Writers Wanted. We need interviewers and creative types to help us design and grow into our new Ezine format. Please email cyberstoic@aol.com if you would like to be a part of the new and improved publication. Tell us what you would like to see and do, and we may just have a place for you. All suggestions appreciated. Remember, we don't have a budget, so keep your expectations in the stratosphere. For now.

New Members

Joe Steiner (1948-) is a retired explorer who currently lives in San Fransisco, USA. His interests include sailing, biking, archery, motorcycle travel, and camping. Joe writes: "Forgive and forget for all. Unconditional love to family members. The past is gone. Rewriting the history is a crime. Present is to be accepted. Plan for tomorrow, but be ready for adversity. In any relations you can control only 50%, which is you. So, there is no reason to blame anybody else for your mistakes and misfortunes. Enjoy life - it might be your last chance."

Spotlight

on

Uri Wernik, PsyD

interview by Jules Evans



Dr. Uri Wernik

Uri Wernik is a 64-year-old clinical psychologist who has lived most of his life in Jerusalem. He was born in Germany and came to Israel with his parents, holocaust survivors, when he was three years old.

He says: "As a man of advanced years, I've had the misfortune to participate in a few wars." One incident in particular sticks in his mind, when he used a Stoic perspective to cope with a highly traumatic situation:

"It was during the Six Day War, between Israel and many Arab nations. I was an army reservist, serving as a medic in the

Engineering Corps. We were fighting the Egyptian army at the Suez Canal: we were on one side, and on the other was a tower from where Egyptian soldiers were shooting at us.

“Two Israeli armoured personnel carriers were moving across the terrain, both of them exposed. I was in the second vehicle. The first vehicle took a direct hit from the artillery on the tower. I saw injured people from the vehicle flying through the air. I had to run and give first aid. So I started running like an idiot, across the exposed terrain, because that was my duty.

“And I was discovered by the enemy, who all started shooting at me with guns, with heavy artillery. And the bullets were getting closer and closer to me. And I was completely sure that I was going to die. At such moments, you can get religious. In fact, I remember that I cursed God. But I accepted my fate. I said to myself, 'What will happen, will happen. There's nothing you can do to change it now.'

“And at the last moment, an Israeli air force plane appeared and dropped a bomb. No more tower. I was saved. Well, for a while after that, I was really happy and carefree. 'Who cares about anything,' I thought, 'as long as you are alive.' But of course, after a while you remember the other stuff.”

After the war, Uri became a psychologist. He studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and completed his doctoral studies at the University of Illinois in the US. He initially resisted joining any particular school of psychology, though he says “it was quite difficult, remaining independent.” Finally, he considered training in Jungian psychoanalysis, “because it seemed to have more of a sense of the importance of culture than other schools.”

But, as he was poised on the verge of following that path, he had what he describes as a Jungian dream telling him why he shouldn't become a Jungian:

“I was in a market-place in Cairo. It may have been in the Hellenic period. And there was a guy in the market selling bottles, beautiful bottles of water, sold at very high prices. He was a great salesman. I was really admiring his talent. And then I came across another stall in the market-place, and there was a guy selling the same water but in very simple bottles, and they were selling for peanuts. Very cheap. And the labels on these bottles were written in Greek.

“And it became clear to me that my resources were more from ancient Greek philosophy than from particular current schools of thought. Typically, people like the new and disregard the old. They like the flashy packaging, the sense of new discovery. But most of modern psychotherapy ideas, have already been said before. There's a sort of historical poverty, an ignorance of what has come before.

“Take the new hot thing at the moment - Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT as they call it. It's the latest fad. But there's no realisation there that acceptance has always been part of psychology, right all the way back to the Stoics, and further.”

Dr. Wernik regularly uses Stoic techniques and brings in the figure of Epictetus in his therapy practice. He says: “Epictetus has a powerful voice, he speaks in metaphors, in simple parables. It is like Jesus in a way. And his emphasis on what you can control and what you cannot is of course useful for many people, though not for all cases.”

He finds that Stoicism can be combined easily with Jewish teachings: “I was once treating an ultra-Orthodox Jew, and I introduced some ideas of Epictetus', and said they were from a Gentile. And the Orthodox Jew quoted a passage from the Eichah Rabbah to me: 'If anyone says there is wisdom among the Gentiles, believe it'.”

Uri points to the influence of Hellenistic philosophy on Jewish philosophy, on figures like Maimonides and Philo of Alexandria, and in particular he says the teachings of Ecclesiastes, on which he has written a book, have a distinctive Hellenistic and Stoic flavour.

He says: “The most frequent word in Ecclesiastes is 'given', as in, what God has given, what are the inescapable facts of the situation. And the author says we have to accept what's given. For example, in a court, there will be injustice, that's given. Accepting the world as it is, that's the given. There's the idea of accepting the verdict of God, which is quite Stoic.”

Uri himself is a sceptic about the existence of God or divine providence. Indeed, he has written a book on chance as the ruling principle of the universe, and on the therapy of accepting the role of chance in our life. But he says: “Whether it's chance or the mysterious workings of God, things still happen, and you have to learn to accept them and carry on. There is still 'the given'.”

The idea of accepting 'the given' relates to what Uri thinks is the most powerful idea or technique in Stoicism: the idea, particularly well expressed by Epictetus, of playing one's role well. Uri says: “This idea is so strong, so powerful.”

In Epictetus' *Enchiridion* we find this idea:

Remember that you are an actor in a play, the character of which is determined by the playwright; if He wishes the play to be short, it is short; if long, it is long; if He wishes you to play the part of a beggar, remember to act even this adroitly; and so if your role is a cripple, an official, or a layman. For this is your business: to play admirably the role assigned you, but the selection of the role is Another's.

Uri says: “I often tell my clients (he refuses to see them as “patients”), 'you didn't choose to be in this situation. Life is a play we didn't write.' But we can choose to play the role we have been given well.

“For example, a lady came to see me, who was dying from cancer. She didn't choose to die from cancer. But she is not the first person to play that role. And there is a way to do it well, and a way to do it badly. Playing it badly is to have everyone pity you, and to wait for you to disappear, and to complain bitterly. Playing it well is to give people an example of how to accept your situation, to use the situation to talk to your children and husband about their life, to show people that even such a terrible situation can be turned to good account. And this is what she did.

“Another person came to see me, a guy whose wife had an affair. It was a completely shattering discovery for this man. On the one hand, you have an affair, and it can be trivial, not significant at all. But once it's discovered, it can be awful. So I told this man about Epictetus, about how difficult his life was, how he was a slave, then he was tortured, then exiled. And how he still spoke about playing your role well, whatever role you have been assigned - the slave, the exile, the beggar.

“I told him: 'You're in a play. You didn't write it. There are different roles - the happy husband, the betrayed husband. How do you play your role well, and how badly? If you played it badly, you would become suspicious, aggressive, you would begin to generalize about women, maybe become misogynistic. What is the good way to play it?' Starting to think along these lines he found some guiding principles in times of turmoil.”

* * * *

The Porch

The Annual California Roast

by Erik Wiegardt

Every year about this time, my wife and I talk about making an inventory of those items we want to be able to quickly grab as we run from the fires. I'm talking about the annual California wildfires. Other

regions of the world suffer from floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and tsunamis, but Californians, especially Southern Californians, suffer every late summer and autumn through the threat of wildfires. What's a Stoic to do?

I know you don't care, and I'm not asking you to. The point of this brief essay is to remind us all of a phrase many have forgotten. Here's a recent quote from the *Associated Press* that reminded me of this wonderful phrase.

A resident of Los Angeles, recently evicted by one of our annual wildfires, said: "We saw the flames. My daughter got really scared," she said. But *she was philosophical*: "You have to surrender to the natural forces when you choose to live here. It's about nature doing its thing'."

"She was philosophical." I suspect that what the reporter meant but probably didn't realize it was that after being scared, she became Stoic. In other words, the daughter's first reaction was fear followed by the calm of Stoic reasoning, as evidenced by the later comment: "It's about nature doing its thing."

Are we allowed to feel fear when we see flames approaching our house? Of course. Such a reaction is the Primary Impulse given to us by Nature to help us survive. Then we use reason, also given to us by Nature, to help us allay our fears and be "philosophical." Not only is a Stoic free from being emotionally overwhelmed by the Primary Impulse of fear, the Stoic's cooler head is better able to cope with such emergencies.

When people say someone was *being philosophical* they are talking about us. It is the wisdom of the Stoic who understands "it's about nature doing its thing." Aligning one's will with the greater Will of Nature is our motto: *Live in agreement with Nature*. Whenever you hear of someone *being philosophical* you can be reassured of the lasting power of the Stoa.

In the meantime, I've got to get that inventory started. This year for sure!

* * * *

Thank you for reading,

Erik