

REGISTRY REPORT

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New Stoa News

First Annual Marcus Aurelius Conference, April 24-26, 2010. At last, the Stoic community is taking a quantum leap from cyberspace into the real world here on planet Earth. To celebrate Marcus Aurelius's birthday (April 26), a conference of Stoics, that's you and me, will take place in San Diego, California, on April 24-26, 2010. That's only six months from now, so mark your calendar and come together with us. More details will follow as they evolve.

Mentors Wanted. The College of Stoic Philosophers is too successful. We have five mentors and could use several more. If you are thirty years old, have a Bachelor's Degree or above, and have a great affection for our philosophy, then you could be a mentor at the College. Please email and talk to Erik Wiegardt at: cyberstoic@aol.com. This is an altruism position.

Writers Wanted. We still need interviewers and creative types to help us design and grow into our new Ezine format. Please email Jules Evans jjrevans@hotmail.com if you would like to be a member of the staff of our new and improved publication. This is an altruism position.

New Members

Giuseppe Alfonsi (1981-) is a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology in Montreal, Canada. He states that, "I am currently receiving training in CBT (cognitive-behavioral therapy), a modern application of basic Stoic techniques that have been shown to be able to heal a variety of mental ailments. I was drawn to Stoicism when I first encountered it in a philosophy class as an undergraduate. I remember being drawn to the quiet confidence that underlies Epictetus' writings. I would call myself a pragmatic Stoic and believe the most important task for this generation of stoics is to be able to integrate Stoicism with modern science and politics. We need to translate the teachings of Stoicism into modern times."

Brian Burg (1989-). "I've been very involved with philosophy for some time and was surprised it had taken me so long to look into the details of Stoicism. It amazed me how exact its views were to my own that I had developed from other sources and insights. I'm glad I can now put it to a name and be involved in a community of like-minded individuals."

Peter D Hodge (1965-). "I'm a New Zealander, and I live in Wellington, NZ. I've worked in government, the army, and the private sector. I write about global affairs, ideas and influences at my blog, The Strategist. The writings of Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus were a revelation to me,

as they resonated with my own beliefs. Stoicism challenges the way I think about and perceive things. It helps me make sense of my life."

Dean Kakridas (1967-) works for Frog Design in Austin, Texas. He states that, "My family hails from a small village in Sparta, Greece, and I consider myself a Greek-American. About 3-years ago, I noticed that my self-generated views on living a Good Life very much resembled the Ancient Stoic teachings of Chrysippus, Epictetus and Seneca by default, and I was instantly drawn to Stoicism as a school of life. I am interested in becoming a member of New Stoa to learn from practicing modern day Stoics and further hone my understanding and ability to make Stoicism a rich and fulfilling part of my life."

Yaroslav Levchenko (1984-) is a master's candidate in English Literature who resides in Luhansk, Ukraine. He says of Stoicism, "I've been an adherent of teaching and philosophy of Seneca the Younger for some 7 years after reading his *Moral Letters to Lucilius*. His ideas concerning the hardships and turmoils, how to overcome them, how to keep inner firmness among the instability of human existence, have always attracted me and stimulated my positive attitude to all the aspects of my life, seem they positive or negative 'from the outside'."

Michael Ramsay (1976-) lives in Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada, and is the owner of the small business, Huffey Daaj. He writes, "The basis of my entire life philosophy is Stoic Ethics. I look forward to reading more and meeting like-minded people."

Anthony R. Sanchez (1965-) works as a Computer Science Engineer in Costa Rica. He writes, "Since my teen years I have had an interest in philosophy, basically in ethics and in forming a code of conduct I could feel comfortable with and that made sense to me. That quest made me work out some personal beliefs that I later found to be congruent and immensely complemented with Stoic principles, and so I began studying on my own. It is something I have never stopped doing, and which has been very rewarding helping me find a bit of inner peace. I would be very pleased to be able to join others and share in their experiences and wisdom."

Ken Stasiak (1955-). "I am a software implementation project manager living just outside of Chicago, Illinois. After a lifetime of struggling with personal and professional stresses I have found genuine relief and tranquility through Stoic practice. I am most indebted to the work of Epictetus, but I have also gained extraordinary insight from the writings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. Most recently, William B. Irvine's, *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, has become a daily source of inspiration and guidance for me. I am grateful for the opportunity to share the Stoic philosophy of life with other like-minded people."

Michael Wibbeke (1970-) was born in Germany and moved to U.S. at the age of 30. "I currently live in San Diego, California. I came to Stoicism while reading Helmut Schmidt's book *Ausser Dienst* (Out of office). In this book, the former German head of state describes how the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius helped him deal with his fears during the war."

Quote of the Month

Unlike Epicureanism, which quickly froze into a fixed dogma, Stoicism developed and became more complex, comprehensive, and plausible. It forms a system of interconnected doctrines confirming and supporting each other. Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus never managed as much; and the Stoics' successors in the history of philosophy have produced nothing more comprehensive and systematic.

Terence Irwin, *Classical Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 181.

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Spotlight On

The Stoic Mayor

interview and story
by Julian Evans

At the age of 19, Sam Sullivan, a lanky, athletic teenager from Vancouver, British Columbia, broke his spine in a skiing accident, and lost the use of his arms, legs and body. For six years, he battled with depression and suicidal impulses. Then he managed to get a philosophical perspective on what had happened to him, so that his spirit wouldn't be crushed along with his body. He says:

I played many different mind games to get a perspective on what had happened to me – I don't mean games in a frivolous sense, but in the philosophical sense. For example, I imagined I was Job [the Old Testament prophet], and God was looking down on me and saying, 'anyone can manoeuvre through modern society with two good arms and two good legs, but let's take away the use of his arms, legs and body - now things are starting to get interesting, now let's see what the guy's made of'.

The young Sam displayed a typically Stoic approach to disaster, seeing adversity as an opportunity to test one's powers of agency and resilience. As Epictetus wrote:

"Difficulties are the things that show what men are. Henceforth, when some difficulty befalls you, remember that God, like a wrestling master, has matched you with a rough young man. For what end? That you may become an Olympic victor, and that cannot be done without sweat."

Sam's spiritual recovery from his injury involved a transformation from a passive victim of adversity to an active victor over it. He started to take control over the things he could take control over. He worked to regain the use of his biceps and interior deltoids. He contacted an engineering firm, and an engineer helped him devise technology to, for example, open the curtains, keep the freezer door open, cook TV dinners. He says: "I could solve problems. When you're an able-bodied person, you don't really have a lot of focus. When you're disabled, you have to plan everything."

He started to use his can-do energy to improve the life of others in the disabled community. He campaigned for better access for the disabled on Vancouver's streets, public transport and public services. He helped design sailing boats that could be used by the disabled, and campaigned for public funding for their introduction. He helped introduce disabled rock-climbing to Vancouver.

This sort of NGO activism gradually led him into local politics. He says: "I increasingly came up against the local government in my campaigning, and somebody I knew suggested I go into politics."



Mayor Sam Sullivan

So I did. In 1993, I successfully ran for a seat on Vancouver's City Council, running on the Non-Partisan Alliance (NPA) party ticket." Sullivan served on the Council for the next 12 years.

Then, in 2004, when his party sought a candidate for the 2005 mayoral elections, Sullivan's name was suggested – by that stage he was the party's only member of the City Council. He says: "I drew up list of ten people who I thought would make a good mayor, and I went to them and asked them if they would run. They all turned it down, so I ran. And to my great surprise, I won."

One of his earliest international responsibilities as mayor of Vancouver was to travel to Turin for the closing ceremony of the 2006 Winter Olympics, and there to accept the Olympic flag from the mayor of Turin, in preparation for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver. He joked that it was strange Vancouver was sending the city's worst skier to the event.

Sullivan accepted the ten-foot Olympic flag and placed it in a special holder on his wheelchair, and then rotated his wheelchair to twirl the flag. He says he had practised the manoeuvre in car parks at night in Vancouver. The moment was seen by millions of viewers, and Sam was subsequently flooded with "around 5,000 emails, letters and phone calls, a lot of them from disabled people saying they had been inspired by the moment, though really, I don't consider accepting a flag as one of the great achievements of my mayoralty".

Sam says that part of the inspiration for his life of political activism comes from his admiration for the Stoics:

One of the things that most attracts me to Stoicism is the commitment to public life, the engagement with society. Think of Zeno, hanging out on the painted porch, right in the centre of the action. Yet it also has the ascetic angle, the idea of detachment from worldly values. It's the idea you can fully engage with the world and still have that detachment running through your life.

Stoics believe that is our duty to engage in politics, because politics is the fulfillment of our nature as humans and children of the *Logos*. Every human has a 'fragment' of the *Logos* within them – their rational soul – and this means that all humans are connected. "We are all fellow citizens and share a common citizenship", Marcus wrote. "All are linked together by mutual dependence".

One consequence of this (religious) belief is that Stoics believe it is our duty to put up with each other's foibles, as brothers and sisters put up with each other, and to work to try and help each other through public service, despite the foolishness of most humans, and despite the risks and sacrifices of public service.

If politics has improved, and become fairer and more civilised since the days of the Roman Empire, it is because good people have had the courage to go into politics, despite the risks, setbacks and vested interests they will inevitably encounter.

Sullivan says:

Jumping into political life in the way that I did is a sacrifice, in a way. Politics is more depressing than it is exciting. For example, chairing public hearings, you encounter many people whose motivations often have little to do with the public good, and more to do with a private agenda. It can make one jaded, the type of demagoguery that goes on. If any honest person looks at it, there's not much critical thinking that happens there. There's a lot of bashing, a lot of 'gotcha' politics. It can be very hard for some to stomach.

The proper response to this kind of behaviour and environment is not to withdraw. It's to jump in, to try and put it on another vector. But you sometimes need to be Stoic not to be too depressed by what you encounter. I'd say to myself, 'Well, not so long ago politics was run by intimidation and thuggery. At least there's a lot less blood spilt today'.

Because the Stoic tries to dedicate themselves to the common good, that means they don't merely work for their own supporters, their own tribe or electoral base, if they get into office. We hear from the historian Eutropius, for example, that Aurelius "dealt with everyone at Rome on equal terms".

Sullivan says:

You have government and you have politics. They require different values. In politics, you have to rigorously favour your friends and oppose your enemies, but in good government you have to be impartial, and try to rule for all society. Once you're in government, you should pursue government. I have a disdain for those who see government as merely an extension of politics – it's harmful to the public good.

The Stoic tries to do what is right for the whole of society, rather than merely using government as a means to reward those who supported them. This idea, which perhaps seems obvious to us, was actually quite against the traditional Roman culture, which was rooted in the idea of debts, favours and family ties.

The Stoic strives to do the right thing, rather than what's most popular. Sullivan says: "There's a phrase of Marcus Aurelius' that I often think of – 'the empty praise of public opinion'. I don't think you can approach politics just to be popular. There's no point running for mayor just for the sake of being mayor. As Seneca put it, it's not how long you live but how nobly. Likewise, it's not how long you stay in power but what you do with it."

Sullivan adds:

I'm so not impressed with the judgment of public opinion. We've seen it be wrong so many times in history, at the most important times. That's why I got worried when I got high in the polls: it made me worry I was making really bad decisions. I'm more interested in the judgment of history – the judgment of intelligent people who have time to really consider what the issues were.

The Stoic politicians of the past reminded themselves that politics was a grubby business run among people "whose principles are far different from your own", in the words of Aurelius. Politics was far more a duty than a pleasure for the Stoics, and if necessity forced one to leave the political stage, then one can leave gladly, and use one's newly-recovered leisure to concentrate on one's true love: philosophy. And indeed, many of the great classics of Stoic literature were written by people who were banished from the political stage. Their greatest philosophical achievements were born from political set-backs and failures.

Sam Sullivan's time as mayor of Vancouver ended in 2008 when he was challenged for the leadership of the NPA party, and narrowly lost the vote. He says: "My rival persuaded the party that it would lose the election heavily if I was the candidate. In the end, he lost the election heavily himself."

Sullivan muses: "I was the incumbent, and 80% of incumbent mayors are re-elected. So my party turned what should have been a comfortable victory into a rout."

Does he resent his opponent for the damage he caused? "Sure, he damaged my political career, but I didn't mind that. In fact, I regularly toast him – he's the person who gave me back my freedom. Thanks to him, I can now do things like read books or go to the movies. I can make a commitment to do things with other people without making it contingent on there not being a crisis in the city. I actually prefer the contemplative life. Public service really is a sacrifice."

But he adds: "What I disliked more was the repudiation of our political traditions – this was one person deciding his political ambitions would be the defining feature of the party. After I lost the leadership of the party, I tried to reason my way through. Many said they were going to quit the party.

I convinced them not to, I said, 'suck it up, go into the election, and try to minimise the damage'. It was clear the party was going to do badly, but I thought that if the public thought they'd seen a murder, it couldn't be a murder if they couldn't see a body. So I went out there and supported the new guy."

He says: "The one gift I could leave my party was modelling a new way of responding to adversity – a Stoic response. We've had models of leaders responding to perceived slights from their party, people who've let their party fall apart, or who have gone over to other parties. I tried to model a new response to adversity: when I get kicked in the teeth by my own people, I would suck it up, allow the criticism to go to me, and I would endorse the new guy."

I ask Sam if he ever used his office to introduce Stoic policies to his city. He says:

Stoicism is more about your actions and the way you live. It's not a religion that you could proselytise. I never really talked about philosophy as such. Vancouver is very much a cosmopolis, with a lot of different cultural groups living side by side, so you have to be respectful of people's different faiths and beliefs. Not that I read Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius every day. I just find great comfort in referring to them occasionally when things get rough.

But, he adds:

In some senses, my whole term was Stoic. For example, the Stoic idea of being a cosmopolitan was very useful to me. Vancouver is the most diverse multicultural city in Canada, and quite possibly in the world. It's quite remarkable how many different ethnic communities we have. So that whole cosmopolitanism is very appropriate, certainly in Vancouver's context. Part of that led me to try to give respect to all the different communities.

For example, I learnt some Cantonese in the election. Many people believe the reason I won was because of my facility in Cantonese. I was quite well supported by the Chinese-speaking citizens, the majority of whom are Cantonese. I also speak a bit of Mandarin, I learnt rudimentary words in Punjabi, I had some success in Italian, I can speak French, so the Stoic commitment to the cosmopolis is, to me, not at all out of line with being mayor of a city like Vancouver, and being a host to the world for the Olympics.

I also wanted the city to live according to nature. That was the whole idea of the EcoDensity project I set up – the idea that to make our cities environmentally sustainable in North America, we have to accept that we will need to live in high density cities, rather than sprawling suburbs. My view is that our present way of life, particularly the suburban culture, was running rampant over the environment. We're completely undisciplined in our approach to the way we live.

I'd like to have a Stoic city, a city that's respectful of nature, that's conscious of its actions. Stoicism is the discipline of being able to understand the universe you're living in, and being more respectful towards it.

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Thank you for reading,

Erik