



Rise to the work of a human being

Sharon Lebell

In Northern California, where I live, we can't go outdoors because the air is fouled with noxious smoke from nearby wildfires and the countless other fires ravaging California, Oregon, and Washington State. A few days ago, the temperature outside was 115 degrees. In my otherwise Edenic redwood forest town, no one has ever owned an air conditioner because there was no need until now. Our local townscapes and cityscapes are eerie versions of themselves. Masked people with focussed purpose carry out necessary errands and then skitter home. Yesterday, I had to put down a beloved cat, Etcetera. My life isn't special. These are only my life particulars. You have your own because where we actually live is in the quotidian with our personal constellation of people, obligations, aspirations, and exertions.

Underneath the myriad challenges we face as individuals and as a collective, life — pure and steady—abides. And, within the incomprehensibly huge and complex vessel that is life, everything is always changing. The way we each choose to live our lives, to inhabit the unique circumstances in which we find ourselves, affects the whole vast system of the universe. Our particular lives are essential parts within the whole that is life as we know it right now, especially during these transitory spiritually wanting moments.

One of my cherished Marcus quotations begins Book Five of his Meditations, "In the morning when you rise unwillingly, let this thought be present: I am rising to the work of a human being. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to do the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world?"

Marcus is right. It is an invaluable act of daily spiritual hygiene to remember that we have an important job to do: Today we

need to roll up our sleeves and get busy being the human beings we are. The world is on fire, and it's on us to fix it. There's no 1-800 number to call a specialist to come out and fix everything.

Marcus also recurrently reminds us that in order to do the things for which we exist we can't overstate the value of visiting stillness each day. Maybe stillness isn't the best word. "Settling the mind" works too. When a settled mind is our home base, ideally our default, which we win through practice, we have easier access to the answers we need, the best actions to take in the moment, an open channel to inspiration, and a vision for a way through.

For many this has been an exceptionally rough time with unsettling events compounded on top of Covid. The Stoic ideal and practice of equanimity makes our days easier and our moments more graceful, steering us away from interpersonal drama and unnecessary conflicts. This has, indeed, been a tough time. Many of us feel like we are loosing our agency, like mother nature and political forces greater than ourselves are taking over; we might feel like we are pawns in some kind of inscrutable game. But practicing equanimity reminds us of our mighty power, one that is easily overlooked or minimized during the getting-things-done part of our days. This mighty power is our power to care.

We always have the power to care: about each other, to care about doing something to upgrade the condition of the world we find ourselves in; the power to care about small domestic beautiful things that lift the heart and create a chain of goodness radiating to other people. Caring unlocks the meaning that can always be found in this moment, the meaning that can be made in this moment. The meaning that

is always right at hand. All we need to do is regularly remember the Stoic value of equanimity and to honor it by stopping and getting still. There is much value in this deliberate visit to stillness. Stillness is a tonic for meaninglessness as it reminds us to slow down and just do one thing at a time. Multi-tasking is multi-stupid. It fractures our brains. Instead we can find or attend to one beautiful or useful action or word and amplify it. We can turn and say I love you to someone, for example.

We are traversing low-level but constant trauma, and it's fatiguing. But we have each other, we have the power to care, and we have the Stoic injunction to make time for stillness to recover our equanimity, which is an ideal foundation for anything. Equanimity helps us maintain an attitude of dignity and repose even in the most trying and desperate of circumstances.

To find equanimity we intentionally engage with our inner life. This is so valuable, because a state of calm creates more calm. Our personal calm benefits everyone else. Equanimity builds on itself. The more unsettled we feel, the more reactive we become. When we can live and share from a posture of calm, we can use our equanimity as a force for peace in our community, and we can, with dignity, grace, and style, "rise to the work of a human being."



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