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“THERE, BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD,...”



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John Bradford, the Sixteenth Century English Reformer, was a humble man. He was the Chaplain to King Edward VI. Yet, it is said that, whenever he saw a criminal led to his execution, Bradford would exclaim,

There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford!

He was acutely aware of his fallibility. When he looked at a criminal, Bradford knew that he could have easily committed the same crime, if the conditions had been different.

We may be Stoics, may quietly feel proud of the virtues we practice, and pity or be critical of thieves, rioters, and vandals. But, are we really any better? Aren't we the products of what we inherited and who we are surrounded by? What is there to be proud of or feel superior about?

As Sharon Lebell cautions us in her article in this issue:

When our view of others and ourselves hardens, complacency expands, empathy dissipates, and we can't bear other points of view.

So let's not be too quick to judge others no matter how certain we feel that we are right.

Committing to practicing moral introspection grows our character and clears our thinking so that we can play our part in making a just and joyful world.

When we look inward, we begin to see that what we are no different from those we are critical of. So

what should we as Stoics do when we face vicious behaviour? Marcus Aurelius shows the way:

Not to be like that is the best revenge. - Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 6.6

When we witness behaviour that is at odds with our principles, the first thing we should probably do is look within and understand why the person does what he does. This is more likely to lead to a solution than immediately attacking the other person. The second thing we can do is to make sure that we don't behave like the offender.

What prevents us from doing this? Our sense of outrage. It springs from valuing externals. Meredith Kunz has this to say in her article:

By focusing on our choices and character, we may begin to feel untouchable by fortune, finding a sense of inner calm rooted in practicing the Stoic virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance.

Jonas Salzggeber points out that everything passes. Knowing this we can continue to keep our cool during difficult times:

In challenging times, let's count our blessings. While some things don't seem to go our way, many things certainly do – always did and always will.

None of this means that we are indifferent to injustice and that we don't need to act. All it means is that we shouldn't act in haste or with a sense of injury. We act because it is the right thing to do, not because we are offended by someone's actions.