



Sharon Lebell

My mama told me...but I didn't listen

Mama warned me about roaming around dodgy neighborhoods, but I didn't heed her advice. Old enough to prefer seeking most of my knowledge from physical books and other print sources, I decided to enlarge my world by poking around the internet to read some discussions in assorted self-described Stoic forums around the world.

Good and bad everywhere

Within any "community," one finds good and bad. The good part—and it was substantial—was encountering earnest exchanges among scholars and people studying, contemplating, and trying to honestly understand and apply Stoic principles to their own daily lives for personal betterment and for the improvement of our world. I also met trolls, which was disappointing but not surprising, as I had advance warning they'd be lurking.

Is this truly Stoic?

Somewhere between the serious-minded students of Stoicism and the bloviators I encountered a number of polemical exchanges about what kinds of actions are truly Stoic (and what kinds are not), who is actually a Stoic (and who isn't), who claims to be a Stoic but *entre nous* falls short of the moniker, and lots of talk about what defines an authentic Stoic, classical or contemporary. There's nothing wrong with seeking insight into how Stoic thought translates into people's words

and deeds. But, I still felt icky after reading these conversations, some of which were nothing so much as philosophical grandstanding.

**It comes down to this:
I'd rather be around a simple decent person ... than with someone who can recite chapter and verse from the Loeb Library editions of Stoics.**

It comes down to this: I'd rather be around a simple decent person who for their own reasons is committed to culturing their character in the direction of virtue than with someone who can recite chapter and verse from the Loeb Library editions of Stoics. In other words, I'd rather be a person who does Stoicism "wrong," or even misunderstands it, but happens to be a surpassingly decent person.

Perception and reality

I think we need to remember that Stoicism doesn't have a boss. There are no membership cards, no hierarchy, no final arbiters of who is doing it right or wrong. There's no qualifying exam.

Also, we need to exercise caution when we elevate teachers of wisdom traditions, be they ancient or current, as heroes, lest they become idols. This is a prescription for disillusionment. Stoic ideas came from human beings. People who teach contemporary Stoicism are human beings. Human beings are flawed. They excel at some things and are lousy at others.

I learned this the hard way (what other way is there to learn it?). Years ago I worked at a couple of large well-known book publishers who specialized in books by thought leaders across many different wisdom traditions, religious, philosophical, and otherwise. You would recognize these authors' names. They were brilliant. Some of them earned my reverence at first. However, when you work up close with celebrities, gurus, esteemed leaders in influential fields, or those who have a talent for expressing perennial ideas in a fetching way, you start to see that their outsized publicly conferred authority and status don't jibe with their essential humanity.

You know this already from your own life and meetings with teachers or leaders who proved to have feet of clay. Still, this isn't bad news. It's simply a reminder that our lives and the quality of our character are on us.

Let your virtue speak

Every day, every moment, really, we get a chance to ask ourselves, as if for the first time, "Who do I want to be? What do I want my life to stand for? What do I want to give?" And then we let our virtue speak for ourselves.

Sharon Lebell is the author of [The Art of Living: The Classic Manual on Virtue, Happiness, and Effectiveness](#), the first modern interpretation of Epictetus' teachings. She Tweets@SharonLebell.