

The story of the Stoic archer

MEREDITH KUNZ



Meredith Kunz is a Silicon Valley based writer. You can read her blogs at thestoicmom.com and her tweets at [@meredithkunz](https://twitter.com/meredithkunz).

“Hitting the target is not in the archer’s power.”

The role of stories

Great wisdom traditions tell great stories. Stories help us learn and remember difficult or elusive ideas. Stories humanize complex concepts. And stories about people are relatable – especially if we can put ourselves in the shoes of the story’s character(s).

I live immersed in stories, and in fact, I make my living telling them. I’m a writer and editor, and I have worked as a journalist. I love finding and sharing stories that are memorable, especially those that carry a broader message.

The story of the archer

I’ve been thinking about Stoic stories lately. For me, one of Stoicism’s most memorable stories is that of the archer, which was shared by Stoic philosopher Antipater. He described the trained archer pulling back the bow and shooting the arrow, trying his best to hit a target, but knowing that his happiness does not depend on whether the arrow reaches the right spot or not. What is important is aiming and shooting the arrow with as much care, attention, and preparation as possible (this was referenced

by the Greek writer Stobaeus).

Hitting the target, in fact, is not in the archer’s power. After all, a sudden wind may blow, whisking the arrow away into the sky as the archer helplessly watches. Or another person may move the target just after the arrow has been released. Or a person may run into the arrow’s path and snatch it up. Any of these things could stop the archer’s arrow from reaching its target, without the archer being able to prevent it.

The archer’s attempt to shoot accurately is analogous with our efforts, as Stoics, to live good lives. We can do all within our control, and yet many factors are outside our power or dependent on luck. That doesn’t mean we should give up on striving.

Cicero talked about this, too, noting that the archer aims to shoot straight, and should do all one can towards this goal. To hit the target is “to be selected but not sought,” just like reaching the “supreme good” in life as a whole, as we go about the act of living.

The effort vs. the result

Some have criticized Stoic philosophy for

advocating caring about the effort and preparation while not caring about the results, as John Sellars has pointed out in writing about the archer analogy. My sense is that this is less a troubling contradiction than a healthy and measured approach to the realities of life – a way to keep trying to do the right thing, but not fall on our swords if we fail.

Doing what is in our power

I’ve recently shared this story of the archer with my daughter as she intensely studied for her final exams of the semester. She looked up from her books with concern knitting her brow. What if I don’t do well?, she asked me. What if despite all my studying I can’t answer a question? Well, I reminded her, you are the archer. You’re doing all you can to prepare and stay focused. And that’s all you can do. You will get results with the knowledge that you worked to get ready and to aim for the best, and that some aspects of your score are outside your power.

Fates willing, you’ll hit that target. And if not, you’ll move on to the next one, keeping your focus and motivation intact.