



Waking up to impermanence



“There is no actual tomorrow.”

“There is no actual tomorrow.” My daughter said this to me as we talked about the way people experience time. It’s true: We’re always living in the right now, today. And we always seem to imagine that tomorrow will be just the same as today.

In this way, the impermanence of our lives never really sinks in as we live day to day, minute to minute. In my experience, though I worry about the future, I never stray too far from thinking that my current life is “the way it is”—and especially that my current problems are forever-problems.

That’s the permanent now.

Things seem as if they will never change. Maybe it’s a coping mechanism our brains developed to handle the consciousness of time and the largeness of the universe—we can’t really grasp it until we stop and contemplate what it means.

Things remain the same - until they don’t

It reminds me of a scientific hypothesis I learned about in college, “punctuated equilibrium.” Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge developed this theory of evolution as it stretched over broad swaths of time. In general, he explained, many things stay roughly

the same—until they don’t. That’s when the “punctuation” happens (a natural disaster, for example) that causes enormous flux and rapid evolution of species.

We are shocked by change

There are two sides to this stasis that we believe we’re living in. First, we are shocked when things actually do change. Second, we have trouble understanding whether things won’t stay the same, whether they are good now, or terrible.

A wake-up call

The bird’s eye view of Stoic philosophy seeks to shake us from this sense of self-satisfaction and to acknowledge that not only do things around us change over time—so do we. We remind ourselves: “This too shall pass.” (This phrase was first found in ancient Persia, and it has appeared in many cultures, including in the Latin “sic transit gloria mundi” and “omnia mutantur.” Impermanence has been explored in many wisdom traditions.)

Many Stoic writers shared this wake-up call. I invite you to consider these quotes from Marcus Aurelius. He felt particularly keenly the gap between our permanent now—and the mindful attention we should bring to our

everyday lives—and the impermanence of all things in the long run:

Everything in flux. And you too will alter in the whirl and perish, and the world as well. - Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 9:19

Look at everything that exists, and observe that it is already in dissolution and change, and as it were putrefaction or dispersion... 10.18

On fame. Look at their minds, the nature of their thought and what they seek or avoid. And see how, just as drifting sands constantly overlay the previous sand, so in our lives what we once did is very quickly covered over by subsequent layers. - 7:34

Everything’s destiny is to change, to be transformed, to perish. So that new things can be born. 12:21

No tomorrow, only constant flux

There is no “tomorrow,”—but there is constant flux. That means that, as humans, the “now” is what we must cherish while also keeping in the back of our minds that it will always change.

In other words, we have to hold in our thoughts the knowledge that what we have at this moment we will no longer have in the future; and what we are today, we will no longer be.

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