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What Would Seneca Do?

The Stoic Art of Confronting the Worst-Case Scenario

> Pessimism, when you get used to it, is just as agreeable as optimism.
>
> – Arnold Bennett, *Things That Have Interested Me*

IT IS AN ORDINARY spring morning on the Central Line of the London Underground, which is to say that there are the usual 'minor delays' to the service, and a major sense of despair emanating from the closely packed commuters. The only extraordinary thing is that I am a few moments from undergoing, entirely voluntarily, what I expect to be one of the most terrifying experiences of my life. As we approach Chancery Lane station – but before the automated voice on the public-address system announces this fact – I plan to break the silence and proclaim, loudly, the words 'Chancery Lane'. As the train continues to Holborn, Tottenham Court Road, Oxford Circus and beyond, it is my intention to keep this up, announcing the name of each station as we go.

I am aware that this is not the most frightening exploit imaginable. Readers with experience of having been taken hostage by

pirates, or buried alive – or even just having endured a particularly turbulent aeroplane journey, for that matter – could be forgiven for finding this all rather self-dramatising. Yet the fact remains that my palms are sweating and my heartbeat is accelerating. I've never handled embarrassment well, and now I'm berating myself for ever having thought that deliberately courting it might be a clever idea.

I am conducting this ritual of deliberate self-humiliation on the instructions of a modern-day psychologist, Albert Ellis, who died in 2007. But he designed it to provide a vivid demonstration of an ancient philosophy, that of the Stoics, who were among the first to suggest that the path to happiness might depend on negativity. Ellis recommended the 'subway-station exercise', originally prescribed to his therapy patients in New York, as a way of demonstrating how irrationally we approach even mildly unpleasant experiences – and how we might find unforeseen benefits lurking within them, if only we could bring ourselves to look.

Stoicism, which was born in Greece and matured in Rome, should not be confused with 'stoicism' as the word is commonly used today – a weary, uncomplaining resignation that better describes the attitude of my fellow passengers on the Underground. Real Stoicism is far more tough-minded, and involves developing a kind of muscular calm in the face of trying circumstances. This is also the purpose of Ellis's excruciating exercise, which is intended to bring me face to face with all my unspoken beliefs about embarrassment, self-consciousness, and what other people might think about me. It will force me to experience the unpleasantness that I am fearing, and thereby to realise something about the situation that is psychologically intriguing: that my beliefs about how staggeringly awful it's going to be, when they're brought out into the open and examined, just don't seem to match the facts.

Unless you are an unusually unembarrassable person, you can

probably empathise with the apprehension I am feeling – yet when you think about it, there's something bizarre about having any negative feelings whatsoever in this situation. After all, I know nobody in the carriage personally, so I have nothing to lose from them thinking that I'm crazy. Moreover, I know from past experience on the Underground that when other people start talking out loud to themselves, I ignore them, as does everyone else; this is almost certainly the worst that's going to happen to me. And those other people speaking out loud are often talking gibberish, whereas I am going to be announcing the names of the stations. You could almost argue that I'm performing a public service. Certainly, it will be much less irritating than all the leaking iPod headphones in my vicinity.

And so why – as the train begins to slow, almost indetectibly at first, for the approach to Chancery Lane – do I feel as if I want to vomit?

Behind many of the most popular approaches to happiness is the simple philosophy of *focusing on things going right.* In the world of self-help, the most overt expression of this outlook is the technique known as 'positive visualisation': if you mentally picture things turning out well, the reasoning goes, they are far more likely to do so. The fashionable New Age concept of the 'law of attraction' takes things a step further, suggesting that visualisation may be the *only* thing you need in order to attain riches, great relationships, and good health. 'There is a deep tendency in human nature to become precisely what you visualise yourself as being,' said Norman Vincent Peale, the author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, in a speech he gave to executives of the investment bank Merrill Lynch in the mid-1980s. 'If you see

yourself as tense and nervous and frustrated . . . that, assuredly, is what you will be. If you see yourself as inferior in any way, and you hold that image in your conscious mind, it will presently, by the process of intellectual osmosis, sink into the unconscious, and you will be what you visualise. If, on the contrary, you see yourself as organised, controlled, studious, a thinker, a worker, believing in your talent and ability and yourself, that is what you will become.' Merrill Lynch collapsed in the financial meltdown of 2008 and had to be rescued by Bank of America; readers are invited to draw their own conclusions.

Even most people who scoff at Peale's homilies, however, might find it hard to argue with the underlying outlook: that being optimistic about the future, when you can manage it, is generally for the best. And focusing on how you hope things will turn out, rather than how you hope they won't, seems like a sensible way of motivating yourself and of maximising your chances of success. Walking into a job interview, you're surely better off to err on the side of assuming you can triumph. As you prepare to ask someone on a date, it's surely advisable to operate on the basis that she or he might actually say yes. Indeed, a tendency to look on the bright side may be so intertwined with human survival that evolution has skewed us that way. In her 2011 book *The Optimism Bias*, the neuroscientist Tali Sharot compiles growing evidence that a well-functioning mind may be built so as to perceive the odds of things going well as greater than they really are. Healthy and happy people, research suggests, generally have a *less* accurate, overly optimistic grasp of their true ability to influence events than do those who are suffering from depression.

Yet there are problems with this outlook, aside from just feeling disappointed when things don't turn out well. These are particularly acute in the case of positive visualisation. Over the last few

years, the German-born psychologist Gabriele Oettingen and her colleagues have constructed a series of experiments designed to unearth the truth about 'positive fantasies about the future'. The results are striking: spending time and energy thinking about how well things could go, it has emerged, actually reduces most people's motivation to achieve them. Experimental subjects who were encouraged to think about how they were going to have a particularly high-achieving week at work, for example, ended up achieving less than those who were invited to reflect on the coming week, but given no further guidelines on how to do so.

In one ingenious experiment, Oettingen had some of the participants rendered mildly dehydrated. They were then taken through an exercise that involved visualising drinking a refreshing, icy glass of water, while others took part in a different exercise. The dehydrated water-visualisers – contrary to the self-help doctrine of motivation through visualisation – experienced a significant *reduction* in their energy levels, as measured by blood pressure. Far from becoming more motivated to hydrate themselves, their bodies relaxed, as if their thirst were already quenched. In experiment after experiment, people responded to positive visualisation by relaxing. They seemed, subconsciously, to have confused visualising success with having already achieved it.

It doesn't necessarily follow, of course, that it would be a better idea to switch to *negative* visualisation instead, and to start focusing on all the ways in which things could go wrong. Yet that is precisely one of the conclusions that emerges from Stoicism, a school of philosophy that originated in Athens, a few years after the death of Aristotle, and that came to dominate Western thinking about happiness for nearly five centuries.

The first Stoic, so far as we know, was Zeno of Citium, born in what is now Larnaca, on the southern shores of Cyprus,

sometime around 334 BC. 'He had his head naturally bent on one side,' writes the third-century Greek historian Diogenes Laertius, in his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, which is the primary source of evidence for the early Stoics. 'He was thin, very tall, of a dark complexion, [with] flabby, weak legs . . . and he was very fond, as it is said, of figs, both fresh and dried in the sun.' According to legend, Zeno was a merchant who came to Athens aged around thirty, possibly after the traumatising experience of being shipwrecked. There, he began to study under the Cynic philosopher Crates; Laertius relates one of Zeno's early experiences at the hands of Crates, which may help explain Stoicism's focus on irrational beliefs as the source of emotional distress. According to the story, Crates gave Zeno a bowl of 'lentil porridge' and demanded that he carry it through the streets of Athens, but then Crates smashed the bowl with his stick, causing the contents to splatter all over Zeno's body. 'The porridge ran all down his legs,' Laertius tells us, whereupon Zeno ran away in embarrassment. 'Why do you run away [when] you have done no harm?', Crates called after him teasingly, mocking Zeno's belief that he had grounds for feeling ashamed. When Zeno began to teach philosophy himself, he did so under the *stoa poikile*, the 'painted porch' on the north side of the ancient agora of Athens – hence the label 'Stoic'. The school's influence subsequently spread to Rome, and it is these later Roman Stoics – above all Epictetus, Seneca the Younger, and Marcus Aurelius – whose works have survived.

From their earliest days, Stoic teachings emphasised the fundamental importance of reason. Nature had bestowed uniquely upon humans, the Stoics argued, the capacity to reason, and therefore a 'virtuous' life – meaning a life proper and fitting to a human – entailed living in accordance with reason. The

Roman Stoics added a psychological twist: living virtuously in accordance with reason, they argued, would lead to inner tranquility – 'a state of mind', writes the scholar of Stoicism William Irvine, 'marked by the absence of negative emotions, such as grief, anger, and anxiety, and the presence of positive emotions, such as joy.' And here lies the essential difference between Stoicism and the modern-day 'cult of optimism'. For the Stoics, the ideal state of mind was tranquility, not the excitable cheer that positive thinkers usually seem to mean when they use the word 'happiness'. And tranquility was to be achieved not by strenuously chasing after enjoyable experiences, but by cultivating a kind of calm indifference towards one's circumstances. One way to do this, the Stoics argued, was by turning towards negative emotions and experiences; not shunning them, but examining them closely instead.

If this focus on negativity seems perverse, it may help to consider the life circumstances of the Stoics themselves. Epictetus was born into slavery in what is now Turkey; though later freed, he died crippled as a result of his masters' brutal treatment. Seneca, by contrast, was the son of a nobleman, and enjoyed a stellar career as a personal tutor to the Roman Emperor. But that ended abruptly when his employer – who, unfortunately, was the deranged Nero – suspected Seneca of plotting against him, and ordered him to commit suicide. There seems to have been little evidence for Nero's suspicions, but by that point he had already murdered his mother and step-brother, and gained a reputation for burning Christians in his gardens after dark to provide a source of light, so he can hardly be accused of acting out of character. Seneca, the story goes, tried to do as he was told, by cutting open his veins to bleed himself to death. But he failed to die, and so asked to be fed poison; this, too, failed to kill him. It was only when he took a suffocatingly

steamy bath that he finally expired. Perhaps it is unsurprising that a philosophy emerging from such circumstances as Epictetus's – or in a context where a fate such as Seneca's awaited even those of noble birth, if their luck ran out – would not incline towards positive thinking. Where was the merit in trying to convince yourself that things would turn out for the best, when there was so much evidence that they might not?

Yet it is a curious truth that the Stoics' approach to happiness through negativity begins with exactly the kind of insight that Norman Vincent Peale might endorse: that when it comes to feeling upbeat or despondent, it's our *beliefs* that really matter. Most of us, the Stoics point out, go through life under the delusion that it is certain people, situations, or events that make us sad, anxious, or angry. When you're irritated by a colleague at the next desk who won't stop talking, you naturally assume that the colleague is the source of the irritation; when you hear that a beloved relative is ill and feel pained for them, it makes sense to think of the illness as the source of the pain. Look closely at your experience, though, say the Stoics, and you will eventually be forced to conclude that neither of these external events is 'negative' in itself. Indeed, nothing outside your own mind can properly be described as negative or positive at all. What actually causes suffering are the beliefs you hold about those things. The colleague is not irritating per se, but because of your belief that getting your work finished without interruption is an important goal. Even a relative's illness is bad only in view of your belief that it's a good thing for your relatives not to be ill. (Millions of people, after all, get ill every day; we have no beliefs whatsoever about most of them, and consequently don't feel distressed.) 'Things do not touch the soul,' is how Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic philosopher–emperor, expresses the notion, adding: 'Our perturbations come only from the opinion

which is within.' We think of distress as a one-step procedure: something in the outside world causes distress in your interior world. In fact, it's a two-step procedure: between the outside event and the inside emotion is a belief. If you didn't judge a relative's illness to be bad, would you be distressed by it? Obviously not. 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so,' Shakespeare has Hamlet say, very Stoically indeed.

The suggestion here is not that negative emotions don't really exist, or that they don't matter, or that they can easily be brushed aside through sheer force of will. The Stoics aren't making any such claims; they are merely specifying the mechanism through which all distress arises. And they do mean all. Even losing your home or your job or a loved one, from this perspective, is not a negative event in itself; in itself, it's merely an event. To which you might respond: But what if it really *is* bad? Lacking a home and an income, you might perish from starvation or exposure. Surely that would be bad? But the same relentless logic applies. What makes the prospect of starvation or exposure distressing in the first place? The beliefs that you hold about the disadvantages of death. This view of how emotions work, as the leading Stoic scholar A. A. Long points out, is the underlying insight behind contemporary cognitive behavioural therapy, too. 'It's all there [in the work of the Stoics],' he told me. 'Particularly this idea that judgments are in our power, that our emotions are determined by our judgments, and that we can always step back and ask: "Is it other people that bother me? Or the judgment I make about other people?"' It was a method of thinking he regularly employed himself, Long explained, to deal with everyday distresses, such as road rage. Were other drivers really behaving 'badly'? Or was it more accurate to say that the cause of his anger was his belief that they ought to behave differently?

The distinction is crucial. The idea that it is ultimately our beliefs that cause our distress, as we've seen, is a perspective shared by Stoics and positive thinkers alike. Beyond this, though, the two traditions diverge utterly – and the divergence becomes most baldly apparent when it comes to beliefs about the future. The evangelists of optimism argue that you should cultivate as many positive expectations about the future as you can. But this is not the good idea that it may at first appear to be. For a start, as Gabriele Oettingen's experiments demonstrate, focusing on the outcome you desire may actually sabotage your efforts to achieve it. More generally, a Stoic would point out, it just isn't a particularly good technique for feeling happier. Ceaseless optimism about the future only makes for a greater shock when things go wrong; by fighting to maintain only positive beliefs about the future, the positive thinker ends up being *less* prepared, and *more* acutely distressed, when things eventually happen that he can't persuade himself to believe are good. (And such things will happen.) This is a problem underlying all approaches to happiness that set too great a store by optimism. Trying to see things in an exclusively positive light is an attitude that requires constant, effortful replenishment. Should your efforts falter or prove insufficient when confronted by some unexpected shock, you'll sink back down into – possibly deeper – gloom.

Applying their stringent rationality to the situation, the Stoics propose a more elegant, sustainable and calming way to deal with the possibility of things going wrong: rather than struggling to avoid all thought of these worst-case scenarios, they counsel actively dwelling on them, staring them in the face. Which brings us to an important milestone on the negative path to happiness – a psychological tactic that William Irvine argues is 'the single most valuable technique in the Stoics' toolkit'. He calls it 'negative

visualisation'. The Stoics themselves, rather more pungently, called it 'the premeditation of evils'.

The first benefit of dwelling on how bad things might get is a straightforward one. Psychologists have long agreed that one of the greatest enemies of human happiness is 'hedonic adaptation' – the predictable and frustrating way in which any new source of pleasure we obtain, whether it's as minor as a new piece of electronic gadgetry or as major as a marriage, swiftly gets relegated to the backdrop of our lives. We grow accustomed to it, and so it ceases to deliver so much joy. It follows, then, that regularly reminding yourself that you might lose any of the things you currently enjoy – indeed, that you will definitely lose them all, in the end, when death catches up with you – would reverse the adaptation effect. Thinking about the possibility of losing something you value shifts it from the backdrop of your life back to centre stage, where it can deliver pleasure once more. 'Whenever you grow attached to something,' writes Epictetus, 'do not act as though it were one of those things that cannot be taken away, but as though it were something like a jar or a crystal goblet . . . if you kiss your child, your brother, your friend . . remind yourself that you love a mortal, something not your own; it has been given to you for the present, not inseparably nor forever, but like a fig, or a bunch of grapes, at a fixed season of the year.' Each time you kiss your child goodnight, he contends, you should specifically consider the possibility that she might die tomorrow. This is jarring advice that might strike any parent as horrifying, but Epictetus is adamant: the practice will make you love her all the more, while simultaneously reducing the shock should that awful eventuality ever come to pass.

The second, subtler, and arguably even more powerful benefit of the premeditation of evils is as an antidote to anxiety. Consider

how we normally seek to assuage worries about the future: we seek reassurance, looking to persuade ourselves that everything will be all right. But reassurance is a double-edged sword. In the short term, it can be wonderful, but like all forms of optimism, it requires constant maintenance: if you offer reassurance to a friend who is in the grip of anxiety, you'll often find that a few days later, he'll be back for more. Worse, reassurance can actually exacerbate anxiety: when you reassure your friend that the worst-case scenario he fears probably won't occur, you inadvertently reinforce his belief that it would be catastrophic if it did. You are tightening the coil of his anxiety, not loosening it. All too often, the Stoics point out, things will not turn out for the best.

But it is also true that, when they do go wrong, they'll almost certainly go *less* wrong than you were fearing. Losing your job won't condemn you to starvation and death; losing a boyfriend or girlfriend won't condemn you to a life of unrelenting misery. Those fears are based on irrational judgments about the future, usually because you haven't thought the matter through in sufficient detail. You heard the rumour about cutbacks at the company, and instantly jumped to a mental image of being utterly destitute; a lover behaved coldly and you leapt to imagining lifelong loneliness. The premeditation of evils is the way to replace these irrational notions with more rational judgments: spend time vividly imagining exactly how wrong things could go *in reality*, and you will usually find that your fears were exaggerated. If you lost your job, there are specific steps you could take to find a new one; if you lost your relationship, you would probably manage to find some happiness in life despite being single. Confronting the worst-case scenario saps it of much of its anxiety-inducing power. Happiness reached via positive thinking can be fleeting and brittle; negative visualisation generates a vastly more dependable calm.

Seneca pushes this way of thinking to its logical conclusion. If visualising the worst can be a source of tranquility, what about deliberately trying to experience a taste of the worst? In one of his letters, he proposes an exercise that was the direct predecessor of my adventures in embarrassment on the London Underground, though admittedly more extreme. If what you fear the most is losing your material wealth, he advises, don't try to persuade yourself that it could never happen. (That would be the Dr Robert H. Schuller approach: refusing to countenance the possibility of failure.) Instead, try acting as if you had already lost it. 'Set aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare, with coarse and rough dress,' he suggests, 'saying to yourself the while: "Is this the condition that I feared?".' You may not have much fun. But the exercise will force a collision between your wildest anxieties about how bad such an eventuality might be, on the one hand, and on the other, the reality – which may be unpleasant, but also much less catastrophic. It will help you grasp that the worst-case scenario is something with which you would be able to cope.

This all made intellectual sense to me, but I wanted to know if anyone really lived according to these principles today. I had heard rumours of a contemporary community of self-described Stoics, scattered around the globe, and my research brought me swiftly to something called the International Stoic Forum, an internet message-board with more than eight hundred members. Further investigation led to the story of a police officer in Chicago, who claimed to use the principles of Stoicism to keep calm while confronting violent gang members. At another website, a school-teacher from Florida reported back from the inaugural meeting of the International Stoic Society, held in Cyprus in 1998. Throughout all this, one name kept cropping up – as a moderator

of the International Stoic Forum, as the tutor to the Chicago cop, and as the author of numerous web postings on the benefits of living Stoically. My intention had been to track down a Seneca for the modern era. I imagined that this person might have chosen to shun society, as Seneca did in his later years; that he might live, for example, in a simple rustic dwelling in the foothills of some Mediterranean volcano, spending his days in philosophical contemplation and his evenings drinking retsina. But the person to whom my enquiries led, in the event, was none of these things. His name was Keith, and he lived a short train ride to the north-west of central London, in the town of Watford.

Despite living in Watford, Dr Keith Seddon did fulfill certain criteria of otherworldliness. This became clear as soon as I saw his house. Set back from its better-kept neighbours by a tall hedgerow, in which I eventually located a very small gate, it resembled a wizard's cottage as conceived by Tolkien, had *The Lord of the Rings* been set in the London commuter belt. It was early afternoon, and raining hard. The front room, I gathered by peering through the large bay window, was empty of people, but crammed with teetering piles of books, along with an extensive collection of panama hats. It took several rings of the doorbell before Seddon answered. But when he did, he looked the part: a long grey beard, twinkling eyes, and a leather waistcoat, the whole thing topped off by one of his panamas. 'Come in,' he said, three times in a row, then led me out of the rain, through the hallway, and into a small side room containing a gas fire, a sofa, and two high-backed armchairs. In one of them sat his wife, Jocelyn. Much of the remaining space was taken up by still more books, squeezed into insufficient bookcases. Works of classical philosophy jostled

against more esoteric titles: *The Book of Egyptian Ritual*, *An Introduction to Elvish*, and *Fountain Pens of the World*. Seddon ushered me to the sofa and went to fetch me a Diet Coke.

It was immediately evident that fate had not been especially kind to the couple. Jocelyn suffered from severe early-onset rheumatoid arthritis, which had left her badly debilitated. Though she was only in her early fifties, she now had great difficulty even raising a glass to her lips, a manoeuvre that required the use of both hands and clearly caused her pain. Keith was her full-time carer, and suffered himself from myalgic encephalomyelitis, or chronic fatigue syndrome. Both had PhDs and had planned on academic careers, but then Jocelyn's illness had got in the way. Now Keith's work as a tutor of correspondence courses in Stoicism, teaching students at private American universities, was drying up, too, and money was seriously tight.

Yet the atmosphere in the overheated little room was far from despondent. Jocelyn, it emerged, didn't describe herself as a Stoic like her husband, but shared a similar cast of mind: she said her illness had proven to be a 'dark gift', and that once she'd learned to ignore the people telling her to 'fight' it or to 'think positive', she had come to understand her dependence on others as a kind of blessing. She seemed serene; Keith, meanwhile, was practically bubbly. 'Being a Stoic is really a very uncomfortable position to be in!', he declared merrily. 'People throughout history have made this big mistake about happiness, and here we are, the Stoics, standing out on the fringe – beyond the fringe, really! – and shouting from over the horizon: "You've got it all wrong! You've got it all wrong!"'

Keith traced his beginnings as a Stoic to a bizarre incident that had happened to him at around the age of twenty, while he was walking through a wooded park not far from his home outside London. He described it as a shift in perspective – the kind of

jolting insight that often gets described as a 'spiritual experience'. 'It was quite a short thing,' he recalled. 'Just a minute or two. But suddenly, for that minute or two, I was . . . ' He paused, hunting for the right words. 'I was *directly aware of how everything was connected together in space and time*,' he said at last. 'It was like travelling out into space, perceiving the universe as a whole, and seeing everything connected together in exactly the way it was meant to be. As something finished and complete.'

I took a sip of Diet Coke, and waited.

'It was like an Airfix model,' he said, with an exasperated shake of the head, which I took to mean that it hadn't really been like an Airfix model at all. 'I had the sense that it was all done *on purpose*, by some kind of agency. Not a God outside the universe, pulling the strings, you understand. But as if *the whole thing itself* were God.' He paused again. 'You know, the funny thing is, it didn't really strike me as particularly significant at the time.' Having briefly entered a mystic realm of cosmic consciousness, the twenty-year-old Seddon forgot about it, went home, and got on with his degree.

But after a while, the memory of those two minutes began to gnaw at him. He read the *Tao Te Ching*, looking for clues in Taoism. He explored Buddhism. But ultimately it was Stoicism that spoke to him. 'It just seemed so much more solid and down-to-earth,' he said. 'I thought: "There's nothing here that I can argue with!" ' His vision in the park, it turned out, mirrored the Stoics' own idiosyncratic form of religious belief. They too held that the universe was God – that there was a grand plan, and that everything was happening for a reason. The Stoic goal of acting according to reason meant acting in accordance with this universal plan. 'Constantly regard the universe as one living being, having one substance and one soul,' says Marcus Aurelius. 'Whatever

happens at all, happens as it should.' To modern secularist minds, this is certainly the part of Stoicism that is hardest to swallow. Calling the universe 'God' might be just about acceptable; that's arguably only a matter of language. But to suggest that it's all heading somewhere, in accordance with a plan, is far more problematic. Indeed, Keith explained with a sigh, he was always having to quell fractious arguments between atheist Stoics and theist Stoics on the International Stoic Forum – though as a good Stoic, naturally he didn't let it upset him all that much.

You don't necessarily need to accept the Stoic notion of a 'grand plan', however, in order to embrace its flip side, which is much more important to Stoicism in everyday life: that whether or not there is some agency bigger than ourselves, controlling the way things unfold, each one of us clearly has very little *individual* control over the universe. Keith and Jocelyn had learned this the hard way. They would have preferred to live without Jocelyn's arthritis, without Keith's constant fatigue, and with more money. But without their ever requesting it, circumstances had taught them Stoicism's central insight about control, and about the wisdom of understanding the limits of your own.

As Seneca frequently observes, we habitually act as if our control over the world were much greater than it really is. Even such personal matters as our health, our finances, and our reputations are ultimately beyond our control; we can try to influence them, of course, but frequently things won't go our way. And the behaviour of other people is even further beyond our control. For most conventional notions of happiness – which consist in making things the way you want them to be – this poses a big problem. In better times, it's easy to forget how little we control: we can usually manage to convince ourselves that we attained the promotion at work, or the new relationship, or the Nobel Prize, thanks

solely to our own brilliance and effort. But unhappy times bring home the truth of the matter. Jobs are lost; plans go wrong; people die. If your strategy for happiness depends on bending circumstances to your will, this is terrible news: the best you can do is to pray that not all that much will go wrong and try to distract yourself when it does. For the Stoics, however, tranquility entails confronting the reality of your limited control. 'Never have I trusted Fortune,' writes Seneca, 'even when she seemed to be at peace. All her generous bounties – money, office, influence – I deposited where she could ask for them back without disturbing me.' Those things lie beyond the individual's control; if you invest your happiness in them, you're setting yourself up for a rude shock. The only things we can truly control, the Stoics argue, are our *judgments* – what we believe – about our circumstances. But this isn't bad news. From the Stoic perspective, as we've already seen, our judgments are what cause our distress – and so they're all that we need to be able to control in order to substitute serenity for suffering.

'Suppose somebody insults you – insults you *really* obnoxiously,' Keith said, leaning forward in his armchair as he warmed to his theme. 'The Stoic, if he's a good enough Stoic, isn't going to get annoyed or angry or upset or disconcerted, because he'll see that, ultimately, nothing bad has happened. To get annoyed, he would first have to have judged that the other person had harmed him. The trouble is that you're conditioned into making that kind of judgment all your life.'

This is a relatively small example: it's easy enough to see that a verbal insult need entail no personal harm. It would be vastly harder to make the same argument about, say, the death of a friend. This is why the notion of a 'grand plan' is ultimately so crucial to a thoroughgoing embrace of Stoicism: it's only by

seeing death as part of such a plan that one could one ever hope to feel serene about it. 'Do not despise death, but be well content with it, since this too is one of those things which nature wills,' says Marcus. But this is a tall order. The best that Stoicism could do for an atheist, in this situation, would probably be to help her see that she retained *some* control over her judgments. She might be able to remind herself that it was possible to choose to be seriously but reasonably upset, instead of spiralling into utter despair.

Yet this hardly invalidates the usefulness of a Stoic approach when it comes to more minor, everyday forms of distress, which is where Seddon advised his correspondence-course students to begin. Try thinking Stoically, he told them, for the duration of a single trip to the supermarket. Is something out of stock? Are the queues too long? The Stoic isn't necessarily obliged to tolerate the situation; he might decide to switch to another store instead. But to become upset would be, in Stoic terms, an error of judgment. You cannot control the situation, so reacting with fury against that reality is irrational. Your irritation, moreover, is almost certainly out of all proportion to the actual harm – if any – that has been done to you by the inconvenience; there are no grounds for taking it personally. Maybe it's an opportunity to engage in the 'premeditation of evils': what's the absolute worst that could happen as a result of this? Almost always, asking this question will reveal your judgments about the situation to have been exaggerated, and cutting them down to size will vastly increase your chances of replacing distress or annoyance with calm.

It is essential to grasp a distinction here between acceptance and resignation: using your powers of reason to stop being disturbed by a situation doesn't mean you shouldn't try to change it. To take one very obvious example, a Stoic who finds herself

in an abusive relationship would not be expected to put up with it, and would almost certainly be best advised to take action to leave it. Her Stoicism would oblige her only to confront the truth of her situation – to see it for what it was – and then to take whatever actions were within her power, instead of railing against her circumstances as if they ought not exist. 'The cucumber is bitter? Put it down,' Marcus advises. 'There are brambles in the path? Step to one side. That is enough, without also asking: "How did these things come into the world at all?"'

Or take somebody who had been wrongly convicted and imprisoned, said Keith. 'Now, that person, as a Stoic, is going to say that having been unjustly imprisoned, in one sense, *doesn't actually matter*. What matters is how I engage with the situation. Now that I'm here, rather than anywhere else, here in this time and this place – what can I do? Maybe I need to read up on the law and appeal my case and fight for my freedom. That's certainly not resignation. But, rationally, I'm accepting the reality of the situation. And then I don't need to feel distressed by a judgment that it ought not to be happening. Because it *is* happening.' For Keith and Jocelyn, this struck close to home. 'Without Stoicism,' he said quietly, gesturing at his wife and himself, 'I really don't see how we'd have been able to keep going through this.'

Later, as I headed back out into the Watford dusk, I had the sense of having absorbed some of Keith's rigorously rational tranquility, as if by osmosis. Back in London, buying food to make dinner for the friends with whom I was staying, I did indeed find myself at the wrong end of a long supermarket queue, attended by one overworked member of staff and a row of malfunctioning self-service machines. I felt a flash of irritation, before I managed to call the Stoics to mind. The situation was what it was. I could leave if I chose to. And the worst-case scenario here – a few minutes'

delay before my friends and I could eat – was so trifling as to be laughable. My irrational judgments were the problem, not the supermarket queue. I felt disproportionately pleased with myself for recognising this. True, in the long history of Stoicism, it was a pretty minor triumph. It didn't really compare, for example, to staying tranquil while being forced to commit suicide by bleeding oneself to death, like Seneca. Still, I told myself – Stoically – you had to start somewhere.

For the Stoics, then, our judgments about the world are all that we can control, but also all that we need to control in order to be happy; tranquility results from replacing our irrational judgments with rational ones. And dwelling on the worst-case scenario, the 'premeditation of evils', is often the best way to achieve this – even to the point, Seneca suggests, of deliberately experiencing those 'evils', so as to grasp that they might not be as bad as you'd irrationally feared.

It was this last technique that was to prove especially inspiring, centuries later, to a maverick psychotherapist named Albert Ellis, who did more than anyone else to restore Stoicism to the forefront of modern psychology. In 2006, in the final months of Ellis's life, I went to visit him, in a cramped top-floor apartment above the establishment that he had named – with characteristic disregard for modesty – the Albert Ellis Institute, in uptown Manhattan. He was ninety-three and did not get out of bed for the interview; to accommodate his severe deafness, he wore a chunky pair of headphones, and demanded that I speak into a microphone.

'As the Buddha said two and a half thousand years ago,' he said, soon after we'd started talking, and jabbing a finger in my direction, 'we're all out of our fucking minds! That's just the way

we are.' To be honest, I would have felt short-changed if he hadn't used such language early in our conversation, such was his notoriety for swearing. But I knew he had more going for him than entertainment value. A couple of decades previously, America's psychologists had voted him the second most influential psychotherapist of the twentieth century, behind the founder of humanistic psychology, Carl Rogers, but – amazingly – ahead of Sigmund Freud. This was especially generous of them in view of Ellis's opinion of much of the world of conventional psychology, which was that it was 'horseshit'.

In the 1950s, when Ellis first began to promote his Stoic-flavoured view of psychology, it was deeply controversial, at odds both with self-help's focus on positive thinking and with the Freudianism that dominated the profession. On several occasions, at psychology conferences, he'd been jeered. But now, with more than fifty books to his name – one typical bestseller was entitled *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything, Yes, Anything!* – he exuded the satisfaction of intellectual victory.

A few days before, I had witnessed Ellis deliver one of his famous 'Friday night workshops', in which he hauled volunteers on stage in order to berate them, for their own benefit, in front of an audience of trainee therapists and interested members of the public. The first participant I watched had been beset by anxiety: she couldn't decide whether to give up her job and move across the country to join her long-term boyfriend. She wanted to marry him, and she didn't much like her job, but what if he wasn't the one for her? 'So maybe he turns out to be a jerk, and you get divorced!' Ellis shouted – because he was deaf, but also, I suspected, because he enjoyed shouting. 'That would be highly disagreeable! You might feel sad! But it doesn't have to be *awful.* It doesn't have to be *completely terrible.*'

This distinction – between outcomes that are completely terrible, versus those that are merely bad – might sound glib, or like a trivial quibble over vocabulary. To understand why it is neither, and why it goes to the heart of Ellis's outlook on the virtues of negative thinking, it is necessary to return to his youth, in Pittsburgh, in the first decades of the twentieth century. From an early age, thinking like a Stoic proved an urgent personal necessity for Ellis. His mother, as he remembered her, was self-absorbed and melodramatic; his father, a travelling salesman, was rarely around. At the age of five, Ellis developed severe kidney problems, condemning him to long stays in hospital throughout his childhood, during which his parents almost never visited. Alone with his thoughts, he drifted into philosophical speculations on the nature of existence and eventually read Seneca's *Letters from a Stoic*. The Stoics' focus on the importance of one's judgments about one's circumstances struck a chord; his unhappy existence, he came to see, might prove a surprisingly useful crucible in which to develop Stoic wisdom. And so, by 1932, when he was a gangly eighteen-year-old with a crippling fear of speaking to women, he knew enough philosophy and psychology to try addressing his shyness problem by means of a practical Stoic experiment. One day that summer – the summer that Amelia Earhart flew the Atlantic and that Walt Disney released the first Technicolor cartoon movie – Ellis arrived at the Bronx Botanical Garden, near his home in New York City, to put his plan into practice.

Every day for a month, Ellis had decided, he would follow an unbreakable rule. He would take up a position on a park bench, and, if a woman sat down near him, he would attempt to strike up an innocuous conversation. That was all. He ended up sharing benches, and attempting conversation, with a hundred and thirty women. 'Whereupon thirty got up and walked away,' he recalled,

years later. 'But that left me with a sample of a hundred, which was good enough for research purposes. I spoke to the whole hundred – for the first time in my life.' Only in one case did the conversation progress far enough for Ellis and his benchmate to make a plan to meet again – 'and she didn't show up'. To an uninformed observer, the experiment might have looked like an utter failure. But Ellis would probably have rejected any such verdict as 'horseshit'; for him, it had been a triumphant success.

What Ellis had grasped about his unstated beliefs concerning conversation with women – an insight he would later extend to the beliefs that lie behind all instances of worry or anxiety – is that they were absolutist. To put it another way, it wasn't just that he *wanted* to be less shy, and that he *wanted* to be able to talk to women. Rather, he had been operating under the absolutist conviction that he *needed* their approval. Later, he would coin a name for this habit of mind: 'musturbation'. We elevate those things we want, those things we would prefer to have, into things we believe we *must* have; we feel we *must* perform well in certain circumstances or that other people *must* treat us well. Because we think these things must occur, it follows that it would be an absolute catastrophe if they did not. No wonder we get so anxious: we've decided that if we failed to meet our goal it wouldn't merely be bad, but completely bad – absolutely terrible.

Ellis's encounters in the Bronx Botanical Garden had shown him that the worst-case scenario – rejection – was far from the absolute disaster he had been fearing. 'Nobody took out a stiletto and cut my balls off,' he remembered. 'Nobody vomited and ran away. Nobody called the cops.' It was actually a good thing, Stoically speaking, that none of his conversations had ended in thrilling dates; if he had achieved such a spectacular result, it

might subtly have reinforced his irrational beliefs about the awfulness of *not* achieving them. This 'shame-attacking exercise', as he later came to refer to these kinds of undertakings, was the 'premeditation of evils' rendered real and immediate. The worst thing about any event, Ellis liked to say, 'is usually your exaggerated belief in its horror'. The way to defuse that belief was to confront the reality – and in reality, getting rejected by women turned out to be merely undesirable, not horrifying or terrible. Later, as a working psychotherapist, Ellis devised other shame-attacking exercises; in one, he sent his clients onto the streets of Manhattan with instructions to approach strangers and to say to them: 'Excuse me, I just got out of the lunatic asylum – can you tell me what year it is?' It showed the clients that being thought of as crazy wouldn't kill them. In another, he instructed people to take rides on the New York City subway, calling out loud the names of the stations. When he told me about this, I replied that I thought I'd find such an exercise paralysingly embarrassing. Ellis said that was exactly why I should try it.

Explaining the difference between a *terrible* outcome and a merely *undesirable* one became a governing mission of Ellis's career. He went so far as to insist that nothing at all could ever be absolutely terrible – 'because', he wrote, 'when you insist that an undesirable event is awful or terrible, you are implying, if you're honest with yourself, that it is as bad as it could be.' Yet nothing could be 100 per cent bad, he argued, because it could always conceivably be worse. Even if one were murdered, 'that is very bad, but not one hundred per cent bad,' because several of your loved ones could meet the same fate, 'and that would be worse. If you are tortured to death slowly, you could always be tortured to death slower.' He did grudgingly concede that there was one event that might legitimately be viewed as 100 per cent bad: the complete

destruction of absolutely everything on the planet. But that, he pointed out, 'hardly seems likely in the near future'.

This might seem like a bizarrely cold-hearted attitude to take towards such things as torture or murder; it seems tasteless to try to construct elaborate hypothetical scenarios merely to find something that could be worse than them. But it is precisely in the context of such extremely undesirable scenarios, Ellis insisted, that the strategy of focusing on the worst-case scenario – and distinguishing between *very bad* and *completely terrible* events – really comes into its own. It turns infinite fears into finite ones. One of his clients, he recalled, found herself unable to pursue a romantic life because of an extreme fear that she might contract AIDS from kissing, or even from shaking hands. If a friend suffered from such an anxiety, your first response might be reassurance: pointing out, in other words, how extremely unlikely it was that this scenario would ever occur. That was Ellis's first response, too. But, as we've seen, reassurance carries a sting: reassuring the woman that her fears were unlikely to come true did nothing to dislodge her belief that it would be unimaginably bad if they did. And so Ellis switched to negative visualisation instead. Suppose you did get AIDS, he said. That would be pretty bad. But absolutely horrific, or 100 per cent terrible? Obviously not: one could imagine worse scenarios. One always can. And one could imagine still finding sources of happiness in life, despite having contracted AIDS. The distinction between judging something to be 'very bad' and judging it to be 'absolutely horrific' makes all the difference in the world. It is only to the absolutely horrific that we respond with blind terror; all other fears are finite, and thus susceptible to being coped with. Grasping this at last, Ellis's client was able to stop fearing an inconceivably terrible calamity, and instead begin taking normal precautions to avoid a highly undesirable, though also highly unlikely, worst-case scenario. Moreover, she had internalised the

Stoic understanding that it was not within her control to eliminate all possibility of the fate that she feared. 'If you accept that the universe is uncontrollable,' Ellis told me, 'you're going to be a lot less anxious.'

Such Stoic insights served Ellis especially well in the months after I met him. His final days were afflicted not only by intestinal problems and pneumonia, but by a dispute with the other directors of the Institute. They fired him from the board, cancelled his Friday night workshops, and stopped paying for his accommodation, forcing him to move out. He sued, a judge ruled in his favour, and by the time of his death he was back in his apartment. True to his principles, he insisted that the contretemps had never made him upset. It was all highly undesirable, of course, but not horrific, and there was no point insisting that the entire universe fall in line with his wishes. The other members of the board, he told one reporter, were 'fucked-up, fallible human beings – just like everyone else'.

'Chancery Lane.'

I speak the words out loud, but in such a nervous croak that I'm not sure anybody hears them. Glancing up and down the carriage, I can't see any evidence of anyone having noticed. Then the middle-aged man sitting opposite me glances up from his newspaper, with an expression I can only describe as one of mild interest. I meet his eye for a moment, then look away. Nothing else happens. The train stops. Some people get off. Suddenly, it occurs to me that I have subconsciously been expecting something calamitous to happen – an explosion of ridicule, at least. Now that it hasn't, I feel disoriented.

As we approach Holborn, I say 'Holborn' – louder this time,

and less tremulously. The same man looks up. A baby two seats away stares at me, open-mouthed, but would probably have done so anyway.

It is at Tottenham Court Road that I cross some kind of psychic boundary. The adrenaline subsides, the panic dissipates, and I find myself confronting the very truth that Albert Ellis's Stoical shame-attacking experiment had been designed to beat into my brain: that none of this is anywhere near as bad as I'd been anticipating. I have been left with no option but to see that my fear of embarrassment was based on profoundly irrational ideas about how terrible it would be if people thought badly of me. The truth is that they aren't being outwardly mocking or hostile at all – mainly, no doubt, because they're much too busy thinking about themselves. At Tottenham Court Road, a few more people look my way when I speak. But I don't care anymore. I feel invincible.

Three stations further on, at Marble Arch, I get up and leave the train, beaming to myself, suffused with Stoic serenity. Nobody in the carriage seems particularly interested in that, either.