



By Joe Byerly

One of my favorite books from the past couple of years is [How to Think Like a Roman Emperor](#). My copy is marked up, tabbed out, and I've referenced it a lot. It helped me through my reintegration after my recent deployment to Afghanistan. Recently, I reached out to the author, Donald Robertson, to learn more about Marcus Aurelius and if you scroll all the way to the bottom, he offers up some great book recommendations at the end!

**Joe: Donald, you wrote this amazing book that is a biography, history, and psychology book all in one and it centers on Stoicism and the writings and life of Marcus Aurelius. Why do you think Marcus Aurelius is relevant to military leaders serving today?**

Donald: Marcus Aurelius provides a great example of leadership that we can learn from and apply his lessons today. Let me tell you a little about him. He had to lead the Roman Empire through a lot of hardship. He had to deal with a plague that was much worse than the COVID-19 that we are dealing with today. He also had military invasions to contend with. The barbarians or Germanic tribes to the North didn't have much sympathy during the

pandemic and saw a great opportunity to invade. Even though the big cities like Rome were affected, the military camps took the brunt of it. And it was actually the Legionaries that brought the plague back with them to their garrisons throughout the Empire as they returned from the Parthian War.

What's interesting is that Marcus didn't step into a military role until his mid 40s. Originally, the campaigning was going to be done by his co-emperor Lucius Verus, but he didn't do a great job during the Parthian War, so Marcus must have reluctantly thought he had to step up and take command of the Legions in the northern frontier after the barbarians launched their invasion. We are told he "donned the military cape and boots," rode out from Rome, and took command of 140,000 troops stationed along the front lines.

And I think that when those under his command first met him, they were thinking, "Who is this guy?" They must have been like, "Who is this nerd?" Again, Marcus was in his mid 40s without any military training that we know of and he was also sickly. In spite of these first impressions, he won them over. They became intensely loyal to him. I think we can attribute this to the virtues that Marcus exemplified through his actions on and off the battlefield.

I also think that Stoicism can appeal to leaders in the military. There's actually [a long tradition of Socratic and Stoic philosophers serving in the Greek and Roman militaries](#). Even in more modern times, there's James Stockdale who was an American POW in Vietnam. I think he's also a great role model for those serving in uniform today. He credits Epictetus with providing him with a foundation that helped him survive torture. Stockdale wrote several books to include [Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot](#) that I recommend to people. More recently, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis said that he carried a copy of the Meditations around with him throughout his career.

There's another appeal that Stoicism has to those in the military. There's a virtue ethic and an emphasis on self-reliance and a code of honor, which are all important aspects of

Stoicism.

There's one more thing, I think some groups of men have a hard time admitting they need to go to counseling. I used to be a counselor in a high school and the 15-year-old tough guys didn't want to talk about counseling, but they would be happy to talk about Stoicism.

Stoicism contains many of the same ideas as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and can be quite useful to people. And I think it appeals to members of the military because learning about Stoicism doesn't have the same stigmas associated with it as going to counseling.

**Joe: One of the lessons you highlight in the book is that Marcus was able to overcome his lack of military experience and remain composed because he used a Reserve Clause. Could you describe what that is?**

Donald: Okay, you're going to have to let me nerd out for a bit and talk about CBT before I return to Stoicism. Albert Ellis, a New York therapist and one of the pioneers for rational emotive behavior therapy (which evolved into CBT), believed that fundamentally, most emotional disorders were caused by rigid and unrealistic demands we place on ourselves and the world or other people. And when we impose rigid demands on things that are outside of our direct control it's a recipe for anger, frustration, and emotional distress.

For example, if you think that other people *have* to respect you because if they don't, life will be awful and unbearable, you are setting yourself up for social anxiety and depression. Instead, you should say I'd *prefer* to have other people respect me and if they don't, it's not the end of the world. Ellis went on to say that you can desire things without demanding them.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the reserve clause in Stoicism. The Stoics attached a caveat onto all intentions. For example, instead of only saying I will go to Athens or I will pass this exam, they would add "god willing" or "fate permitting" or "if nothing prevents me" onto that statement. The Stoics did this because it acknowledges the fact that there is always a

possibility that they might not succeed and prepares them to accept that with equanimity. This allowed Marcus to quickly deal with setbacks, and make sound decisions moving forward.

**Joe: In the *Meditations* and your book, the theme of mentorship comes up quite a bit. Was that an important concept for Marcus and the Stoics?**

Donald: I'd like to answer this question by starting out with a little bit of trivia. The word mentor comes from Homer's *Odyssey*. The Goddess Athena is the goddess of military strategy, wisdom, and philosophy. She would act as a mentor to heroes, coming down and providing advice to characters such as Odysseus. In the *Odyssey*, she disguises herself as a man named Mentor who counsels and advises Odysseus. And that's where we get the word.

In Stoicism, it seemed like many of the students of the philosophy had mentors who helped them through life. Marcus had a few that he mentions in *Meditations*. At the beginning of *Meditations*, Marcus says that his mentor Junius Rusticus told him that he needed to train and discipline his character. Rusticus also introduced him to the teachings of Epictetus.

When Marcus went to the northern frontier, he left Rusticus in charge of Rome as Urban Prefect (equivalent to a mayor). I'd like to think that during this time Marcus wrote him letters, seeking out his advice. But, during this period Rusticus dies and we think this is when Marcus starts writing the *Meditations*. The earliest manuscript we have, which was called "To Himself." I think when Rusticus died, Marcus continued writing letters but he wrote them to himself because he realized he needed to become his own therapist or coach. It wouldn't surprise me if many of the passages in the book are from previous conversations he had with Rusticus. We don't know that for sure, but it seems plausible.

There was another man who Marcus learned from. Galen of Pergoman was the court physician in Rome. Galen wrote a book called *On the Diagnosis and Cure of Soul's Passions*. In the book, Galen draws from one of *Aesop's Fables*. The fable says that we are born with

two sacks hanging around our neck - one in the front, the other in the back. The one in front is very large (you can't miss it) and it contains everyone else's flaws. The second sack is much smaller and hangs down our back, and we can't see that one because it's outside our field of view. It contains all *our* flaws. Aesop's point is that it is easy to see what's wrong with other people, but we have a blind spot for our own flaws. So, Galen says for that reason it is important to find someone we trust who can be honest and speak frankly to us about our flaws. And I think that is what Marcus was doing with Junius Rusticus.

**Joe: Okay, so besides going out and purchasing a copy of [How to Think Like a Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius](#), what translations or books would you recommend to readers who want to learn more about the *Meditations* or Stoicism?**

Donald: A lot of people struggle with reading *Meditations* because they download free versions off the Internet. These translations were written in the Victorian era, so they're harder for modern readers to understand. Therefore, I recommend readers check out Robin Hard's *Meditations with Selected Correspondence (Oxford World Classics)* and Gregory Hays' [Meditations: A New Translation](#) translations.

Additionally:

- [Epictetus: Discourses, Fragments, Handbook \(Oxford World Classics\)](#) by Robin Hard
- [That One Should Disdain Hardships: Teachings of a Roman Stoic](#) by Musonius Rufus (If you like Epictetus, you will like him. He was his teacher).
- [Lives of Eminent Philosophers](#) by Diogenes Laertius. Books 6 and 7 are relevant within this collection.
- [Memorabilia](#) by Xenophon. It's a collection of Socratic dialogues.
- [Apology of Socrates](#) by Plato. It's a literary masterpiece. It will only take a few hours to

read. It's the story of Socrates' trial and execution. You can see the precursor to many of the Stoic beliefs.

- Finally, I don't suggest reading the whole of Plato's [Republic](#), because it's quite long and boring. Read Book One. It contains ideas that preempt the Stoics. I read it when I was 15 and bits of it have stayed with me ever since.

**For more from Donald, check out his [website](#) and follow him on [Twitter](#)! And, don't forget to sign-up for my [monthly reading list email](#) where you can learn about the books you won't find on military reading lists! Each month, we pick names from the list and send them copies of the books we highlight. So, don't miss out!**

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