



Thoughts from Linda:

The Emperor's Handbook
Marcus Aurelius
A New Translation of the Meditations

Scot Hicks and David V. Hicks
2002

This book about the meditations of a Roman Emperor from the 2nd century, translated by the two brothers, Scot and David Hicks, was published in 2002 and has received high praise, especially by business, military and governmental leaders, for its wisdom and relevance in the 21st century. Steve Forbes, for example, said the book is "a must-read for business leaders" and applied more praise, saying "this is a fantastic achievement." Admiral Stansfield Turner, Former Director of the CIA, noted: "All of us today would do well to take counsel from Marcus Aurelius. His pithy aphorisms lay out a philosophy of individual responsibility that should be of great value to us, whether in leading fulfilling lives, managing corporations or leading countries."

The Emperor's Handbook resulted from a four-year long-distance collaboration between two brothers, Scot and David Hicks, while one was in France and the other in Georgia. Both are scholars from Montana and deeply steeped in the classics. Scot received degrees in the classics, language, literature, and linguistics from Dartmouth, the University of Pennsylvania, and Oxford. He served as the Director of the American Section of the Lycee International de Saint Germain en Laye in Paris, the school established by President Eisenhower after WWII. His brother, David, worked for years as a resident of Darlington School in Rome, Georgia, and is the author of Norms & Nobility, the recipient of the American Library Association's Outstanding Book Award for education.

Marcus Aurelius lived in the 2nd century, from April 26, 121, to March 17, 180. He served as Roman consul in 140, 145, and 161 and as a Roman Emperor from 161 to 180, when he died while leading a military campaign against various Germanic tribes in modern-day Serbia. Machiavelli called him 'the last of the Five Good Emperors' of Rome, and he was the last one of the era that came to be called 'Pax Romana' (an age

of peace and stability for the Roman empire from 27B.C. to 180 A.D.) He was known as a Stoic philosopher, the most powerful man in the world at that time, and one of the most powerful in his impact—of all times.

As with so many early documents, it is a miracle that Marcus Aurelius's Meditations survived. These times were rugged and filled with war and plague.

Contextually, these years saw one of several mass migrations of tribes in central Europe, with many of them pushing into the northeastern boundaries of the Roman Empire. Marcus Aurelius wrote his thoughts or Meditations during this timeframe while leading 20,000 Roman soldiers in the first and second campaigns to quell the disruptions and preserve Roman territory in what became known as the Marcomannic Wars. In Rome, an illness named the Antonine Plague (after the family of Emperors sharing that name) ravaged the city during these years, killing many Romans. While estimates vary, it is thought that this plague, now identified as smallpox, wiped out from 5 to 10 million members of the Roman empire and, at one time, was taking the lives of 2,000 Romans per day.

These reflections were not combined into book form at the time but consisted of a set of notes that surfaced in 907 AD. Marcus wrote these notes at night, at the campsites in various settings along the Danube River after his day ended. Then, a Byzantine scholar named Arethas sent a letter to an official in modern-day Turkey describing what he called "the most useful old book of the Emperor Marcus."

The subsequent manuscripts of this set of notes were developed further in the 14th and 15th centuries and were widely recognized as a source of wisdom after the Renaissance. The chapter arrangements, still in use today, were created in the 17th century, and scholars have developed different translations and studied his works for the centuries since. The scholar Michael Grant, a renowned classical historian, has called this "one of the most acute and sophisticated pieces of ancient writing that exists and, incidentally, the best book ever written by a major ruler."

I enjoyed re-reading this book and appreciate the easy-to-digest approach that the Hicks brothers adopted in this translation from Greek. As they stated in the Introduction chapter, "We resolved to rectify this (the awkwardness of previous translations) situation, and in the process, we hoped to make the provocative wisdom of this extraordinary man available to a wider audience. It is fine for scholars to study Marcus, but it is natural for the captains of industry and armies to carry him in their

briefcases, for this was a man of action, not merely of words, and the few words he wrote to himself were meant to incite actions, not dissertations."

The authors go to good lengths to explain the distinctions between our modern meaning of the word: philosophy and the ancient meaning of this term. It was an all-encompassing term in contrast to the narrower meaning we use today. This is a most important difference to understand as one approaches this book because Marcus, like all who subscribed to one of the four primary 'schools of philosophy' at the time (Academics, Peripatetics, Epicureans, and the Stoics), used the teachings of the Stoics to help him make sense of life, try to lead a good life and thereby achieve personal happiness. His wide-ranging wisdom reflects his preference for logos, as the Stoics taught.

Throughout the twelve chapters, you will hear his voice as he reminds himself—for this was not intended for any other audience—of the ways to live a good and worthy life.

He begins in the first chapter, where he graciously acknowledges the many people who have influenced his life, including his parents, tutors, friends, other relatives, and political allies. For example, he refers to what he learned from Plutarch's nephew, Sextus, who tutored him even in his later years: "Generosity of spirit I learned from Sextus. He offered a fine example of the father who governs his family well and of a life lived in conformity with nature, of high-mindedness without pomposity, of genuine concern for friends, and of patience with fools and with those whose opinions have no basis in fact. I also admired his ability to discover and organize, in an insightful and systematic way, the rules for living a good life, as well as his ability to suppress all signs of anger or any other emotion while at the same time, displaying great human affection. He demonstrated how to praise without offering it and how to possess knowledge without showing off."

Most historians agree on this man's strong moral character and nature, generally referring to his competence and wisdom, humility, and adherence to discipline in all things. It is clear that he wrote much of this as an older man, with years of leadership experience and an enhanced understanding of human nature. The chapters are repetitive in many ways, and there are no beginning and endings, just notations captured as they emerged from his mind.

As the translators note, his thoughts emerge from an inner sense of awareness and relentless self-talk deeply rooted in his belief system. His words take on many forms, "Sometimes he records them as a dialogue with himself; sometimes he poses a

question or berates himself; sometimes he tells a joke or quotes something he has read; but always he is reminding himself of a Stoic precept that will help him act reasonably and in harmony with nature. Whether creating or copying, he is like a carpenter working a fine piece of furniture. Each piece needs not only to serve a purpose, but to do so boldly, beautifully, memorably."

Here are just a few of his aphorisms in closing.

"Fear not that life will someday end: fear instead that a life in harmony with nature may never begin."

"Jettison your cargo of opinion, and you are saved. Who prevents you from doing this?"

"Are my guiding principles healthy and robust? On this hinges everything."

"Live in harmony with everything around you, and love—without reservations or conditions—those with whom you live and work."

This is most definitely a book to be read and re-read or to be picked up and explored for a quick look into the thoughts of someone who thought deeply about life and right action, to the best of his understanding, some 1850 years ago. There is much virtue and wisdom here.