

LIFE AS WAR

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You're just like them



Gold bust of Marcus Aurelius, 161-180 CE, photo by Allan Gluck

by Mariana Alessandri

# You're just like them

In 175 CE, Avidius Cassius proclaimed himself emperor of Rome. It might not have been a problem except that the current emperor, Marcus Aurelius, was still alive. The Senate immediately declared Cassius a public enemy and confiscated his belongings. This was treason, clearly, but why did he do it? Rumour had it that Aurelius was dead, so perhaps Cassius felt compelled to step in. Aurelius's wife, Faustina, is also said to have urged Cassius to take the throne. If they married, her fourteen-year-old son Commodus would retain his position as next emperor. Aurelius had to choose: kill Cassius or hear him out? Before Cassius became a usurper, he had been a loyal friend to Aurelius. Crude, yes – a heartless killer by all accounts – but a trusted general. Aurelius's *Meditations* documents his ongoing efforts to practice Stoicism in the face of treason, but also amidst everyday conflicts to which non-emperors might more easily relate.

Aurelius's notebook is filled with the advice of ancient philosophers. From Socrates, Aurelius took the idea

that No one does wrong willingly. From the slave-turned-Stoic Epictetus, he favoured the following paraphrased tenets: *You can't control other people; There is no good except virtue; It's not events that hurt us but our judgments about those events; and You can only be harmed if you allow it.* To this list of well-known Stoic doctrines, Aurelius added a few of his own, which we can test next time we face a conflict.

In an often-quoted line, Aurelius advised himself: "When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly." My experience matches Aurelius's: people can be pretty disappointing. But he says we can bypass disappointment if we come to expect it. "That sort of person is bound to do that. You might as well resent a fig tree for secreting juice." Aurelius repeated Epictetus's fig metaphor again and again: "Remember you shouldn't be surprised that a fig tree produces figs." "To expect a bad person not to harm others is like expecting fig trees

not to secrete juice, babies not to cry, horses not to neigh – the inevitable not to happen." He attributed anger and disappointment to the gap between our expectations and people's performance. It would be wise, therefore, to adjust our expectations after observing each other for a while.

The hard part is doing so without bitterness, but at least Aurelius made a compelling case: we are just as disappointing as everyone else. "You've made enough mistakes yourself," he wrote. "You're just like them." For the Stoics, self-scrutiny is as prized as preoccupation with others' behaviour is despised. Therefore, "when faced with people's bad behaviour, turn around and ask when you have acted like that." Epictetus had described a Stoic making progress as "on guard against himself as an enemy lying in wait". Aurelius agreed. "Ask of all actions," he wrote, "Why are they doing that?" Starting with your own. "Instead of the customary response to offense – "I would never do that" – we can recall a time when we did something ugly. Self-scrutiny is

a tool that can open us to “sympathy rather than outrage or anger”. Finding common ground with those who trespass against us is worth a try. It beats feeling holier than every thou.

But when the situation is serious, when self-scrutiny and sympathy fall short, Aurelius suggested correction. If someone has body odour or bad breath, to use his example, it’s not necessary to suffer in silence. “People exist for one another,” he wrote. “You can instruct or endure them.” If you choose instruction, however, he recommended a soft touch. “If they’ve made a mistake,” Aurelius advised, “correct them gently and show them where they went wrong. If you can’t do that, the blame lies with you. Or no one.” It would do him no good to blame Cassius for being Cassius, just as it won’t help to fault our particular fig tree for secreting juice. But treating the offender with respect might work. “What can even the most vicious person do,” he wondered, “if you keep treating him with kindness and gently set him straight – if you get the chance – correcting him cheerfully at the exact moment that he’s trying to do you harm.” If all else fails, he wrote, “leave other people’s mistakes where they lie.”

Aurelius could not leave Cassius’s mistake where it lay, and sometimes nor should we. “What injures the hive injures the bee,” and a good emperor, like a good parent, partner, or sibling, values the hive above the ego. “Don’t waste the rest of your time here worrying about other people,” Aurelius wrote, “unless it affects the common good.” In this case, something had to

be done to reunify the Roman empire. In our case, it might be a family we’re trying to keep from collapsing, or a work relationship, or even a friendship. We must protect the hive.

“Remember,” he wrote, digging down into the well of his Stoicism, “This life is a chance at dignity.” For the Stoics, a dignified life is filled with virtue and free of vice. We can ask, like Aurelius, “Does what’s happened keep you from acting with justice, generosity, self-control, sanity, prudence, honesty, humility, straightforwardness, and all the other qualities that allow a person’s nature to fulfil itself?” Again and again in the *Meditations*, he reminded himself that, no matter the circumstances, “My task is to be good.”

So, how did Aurelius handle Cassius, and is there anything worth imitating? As a follower of Socrates, he should have assumed that Cassius was acting on misinformation. We can start here instead of with suspicion or accusations. But if our Cassius is anything like Aurelius’s, who refused to stand down even after learning that the emperor lived, we can pivot. Treason is worse than body odour, Aurelius reasoned, and Cassius had surely injured the hive, so he decided to intervene. We can too, heeding the advice “don’t treat inhumanity as it treats human beings”. He would set Cassius straight, but not like Cassius would have done.

Before setting out to correct his wayward friend, Aurelius addressed the Romans. We don’t have his speech, but he might have conveyed the following meditation: “Someone despises me. That’s their problem. Mine: to be

patient and cheerful with everyone, including them. Ready to show them their mistake. Not spitefully, or to show off my own self-control, but in an honest, upright way.” It might have surprised the Romans that Aurelius would preach mercy, clemency, compassion, and understanding. His refusal to add violence to violence might have struck his audience as weak and especially illogical during wartime. Likewise, we might get puzzled looks. Or perhaps the Romans were used to his Stoicism. They might have guessed that he would find Cassius, forgive him, and bring him back into the fold. Our loved ones might similarly come to expect clemency from us.

Before Aurelius got the chance to convert his confidante-turned-traitor to Stoicism, he received a special delivery: Cassius’s head. Three months were all Cassius got as emperor of Rome before he was killed by a centurion, against explicit orders. Aurelius refused to look at his old friend’s severed head and he had it buried out of respect. Cassius died, and so would Aurelius five years later, but his advice for how to handle conflict like a Stoic survived. Two thousand years later, we can adjust our expectations with the understanding that we’re not perfect, either. We can gently correct one another when we need to protect the hive. And we can tell ourselves that this life is a chance at dignity.

Or we can jump recklessly into conflict, just as Aurelius’s son did. When Commodus became emperor, he had the descendants of Cassius burned alive. ■