

THE BIG IDEAS

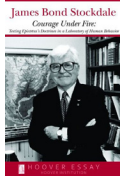
The World of Epictetus
Dropping in.

Play the Part Well
What part have you been given?

Philosopher Lecture Room
More like a hospital than a spa.

Emotions
It's time to control them.

Your Soul
You are the captain, my friend.



Courage Under Fire

Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior

BY JAMES BOND STOCKDALE · HOOVER INSTITUTION © 1993 · 21 PAGES

"I came to the philosophic life as a thirty-eight-year-old naval pilot in grad school at Stanford University. I had been in the navy for twenty years and scarcely ever out of the cockpit. In 1962, I began my second year of studying international relations so I could become a strategic planner in the Pentagon. But my heart wasn't in it. . . .

Phil Rhinelander opened my eyes. In that study it all happened for me—my inspiration, my dedication to the philosophic life. From then on, I was out of international relations—I already had enough credits for the master's—and into philosophy. We went from Job to Socrates to Aristotle to Descartes. And then on to Kant, Hume, Dostoyevsky, Camus. All the while, Rhinelander was psyching me out, trying to figure out what I was seeking. He thought my interest in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* was quite interesting. On my last session, he reached high in his wall of books and brought down a copy of *The Enchiridion*. He said, 'I think you'll be interested in this.'"

~ James Stockdale from *Courage Under Fire*

The Enchiridion means "ready at hand." It's a handbook capturing the wisdom of the ancient Stoic philosopher, Epictetus.

That handbook would become a guide for [James Stockdale](#) as he spent seven and a half years as the highest ranking prisoner of war during the Vietnam War. He spent four of those years in solitary confinement and two years in leg irons. He was tortured fifteen times.

He endured all of that with Stoicism in mind.

This is a tiny little booklet—the 21 page transcript of a speech delivered at the Great Hall, King's College on Monday, November 15, 1993 that captures how Stockdale applied the Stoic ideals to his life.

If you appreciate the wisdom of Stoicism and/or the modern-day application of ancient wisdom, you will find this book deeply moving and inspiring. (Get it [here](#).)

Most of my copy is underlined. Let's take a quick look at a handful of my favorite Big Ideas.

ENTERING THE WORLD OF EPICTETUS

"On September 9, 1965, I flew at 500 knots right into a flak trap, at tree-top level, in a little A-4 airplane—the cockpit walls not even three feet apart—which I couldn't steer after it was on fire, its control system shot out. After ejection I had about thirty seconds to make my last statement in freedom before I landed in the main street of a little village right ahead. And so help me, I whispered to myself: 'Five years down there, at least. I'm leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus.'"

"So what Epictetus was telling his students was that there can be no such thing as being the 'victim' of another. You can only be a 'victim of yourself.' It's all in how you discipline your mind."

~ James Stockdale

"But during the time interval between pulling the ejection handle and coming to rest on the street, I had become a man with a mission."

~ James Stockdale

It's hard to imagine any of that—getting shot down while flying a combat mission. Knowing that you will be beaten and tortured and imprisoned for at least 5 years. And then, in the remaining seconds of your freedom, to bring to mind the wisdom of Epictetus.

Here are the next lines in Stockdale's speech, describing his thought process: **"Ready at hand' from *The Enchiridion* as I ejected from that airplane was the understanding that a Stoic always kept separate files in his mind for (A) those things that are 'up to him' and (B) those things that are 'not up to him.' Another way of saying it is (A) those things that are 'within' his power' and (B) those things that are 'beyond his power.'"**

Imagine that.

Stockdale is floating down into impending doom, reminding himself that NOTHING outside of his mind can determine how he will respond.

Here's a passage from [The Enchiridion](#) that captures this perspective: *"Of things some are in our power, and others are not... examine it by the rules which you possess, and by this first and chiefly, whether it relates to the things which are in our power or to the things which are not in our power: and if it relates to anything which is not in our power, be ready to say, that it does not concern you."*

Reminds me of [Viktor Frankl](#) who endured the horrors of a World War II concentration camp. He told us nearly the same exact thing in [Man's Search for Meaning](#): *"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."*

Let's bring this back to you. Are you experiencing challenging times? Can you see that some things are within your control and some are not?

We must discipline ourselves to focus on that which is within our control. Our thoughts. Our behaviors. How we *choose* to respond.

Remember: Everything may be taken from us but no one and no thing can ever take away our power to choose how we will respond.

P.S. I want to make a note on another point in that initial descent into the world of Epictetus. Stockdale rightly estimated that he had at least 5 years of imprisonment ahead of him.

In his classic business book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes a conversation with Stockdale about his coping strategy while in prison.

Stockdale told him: *"I never lost faith in the end of the story, I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."*

Collins asked him who didn't make it out of Vietnam to which Stockdale replied: *"Oh, that's easy, the optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."*

Stockdale continued: *"This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."*

Collins described that as the "Stockdale Paradox."

In short, we must simultaneously confront the (potentially brutal) facts of reality with an unbending resolve to prevail in the end. Naive optimism won't do the trick.

That's a really Big Idea.

*“So make sure in your heart of hearts, in your inner self, that you treat your station in life with *indifference,* not with contempt, only with *indifference.*”*

~ James Stockdale

PLAY WELL THE GIVEN PART

“Epictetus turned out to be right. After a very crude operation, I was on crutches within a couple of months, and the crooked leg, healing itself, was strong enough to hold me up without the crutches in about a year. All told, it was only a temporary setback from things that were important to me, and being cast in the role as the sovereign head of an American expatriate colony that was destined to remain anonymous, out of communication with Washington, for years on end was very important to me. I was forty-two years old—still on crutches, dragging a leg, at considerably less than my normal body weight, with hair down near my shoulders, my body unbathed since I had been catapulted from the *Oriskany*, a beard that had not seen a razor since I arrived—when I took command (clandestinely, of course, the North Vietnamese would never acknowledge our rank) of about fifty Americans. That expatriate colony would grow to over four hundred—all officers, all college graduates, all pilots or backseat electronic wizards. I was determined to ‘play well the given part.’”

The Stoics believed we are all given a role in life and that our responsibility is not to choose the role but to play the role well.

Here’s how [Epictetus](#) put it: “Remember that thou art an actor in a play of such a kind as the teacher (author) may choose; if short, of a short one; if long, of a long one: if he wishes you to act the part of a poor man, see that you act the part naturally; if the part of a lame man, of a magistrate, of a private person, (do the same). For this is your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part, belongs to another.”

As the senior officer in prison, Stockdale was the commanding officer—responsible for his men, leading them through their years in prison.

Stockdale did not *choose* this role but he was absolutely (!) committed to playing his part well. Period.

Back to you.

What role have you been chosen to play?

That of a mother? A father? A teacher? A student? A manager? An athlete? An artist? An entrepreneur?

With Stockdale’s inspiration, let’s spend a little less time trying to create a new role for ourselves and see if we can play the currently assigned roles as well as we possibly can.

P.S. As we do that, let’s remember this wisdom from [Marcus Aurelius](#): “Let your one delight and refreshment be to pass from one service to the community to another, with God ever in mind.”

THE LECTURE ROOM OF A PHILOSOPHER

“Epictetus once gave a lecture to his faculty complaining about the common tendency of new teachers to slight the stark realism of Stoicism’s challenges in favor of giving the students an uplifting, rosy picture of how they could meet the harsh requirements of the good life painlessly. Epictetus said: ‘Men, the lecture-room of the philosopher is a hospital; students ought not to walk out of it in pleasure, but in pain.’ If Epictetus’s lecture room was a hospital, my prison was a laboratory—a laboratory of human behavior. I chose to test his postulates against the demanding real-life challenges of my laboratory. And as you can tell, I think he passed with flying colors.”

Imagine that.

A lecture room more like a hospital than a spa—with teachers ushering their students out in pain rather than relaxed pleasure.

"Look not for any greater harm than this: destroying the trustworthy, self-respecting well-behaved man within you."

~ James Stockdale

It seems the tendency to want to delude ourselves into thinking it's all sunshine and rainbows is not a new thing. Hah.

The reality is we often need to perform a sort of surgery on ourselves. As Seneca tells us, it's important to *"Be harsh with yourself at times."*

We need to re-shape our minds and bodies and behaviors. And, obviously, that's often painful. Reminds me of Jim Rohn who tells us we all need to pay the price. The question is, will we pay it in ounces or in tons?

[Rohn](#) (see Notes on [The Five Major Pieces to the Life Puzzle](#)) puts it this way: *"We all say that we want to succeed, but sooner or later our level of activity must equal our level of intent. Talking about achievement is one thing; making it happen is something altogether different."*

Some people seem to take more joy in talking about success than they do in achieving it. It is as though their ritualistic chant about someday lulls them into a false sense of security, and all the things that they should be doing and could be doing on any given day never seem to get done.

The consequences of this self-delusion have their own inevitable price. Sooner or later the day will arrive when they will look back with regret at all those things they could have done, and meant to do, but left undone. That is why we must push ourselves in the present to experience the milder pain of discipline. We will all experience one pain or the other—the pain of discipline or the pain of regret—but the difference is that the pain of discipline weighs only ounces while the pain of regret weighs tons."

Are you willing to pay the price?

TIME TO CONTROL OUR EMOTIONS

"For Epictetus, emotions were acts of will. Fear was not something that came out of the shadows of the night and enveloped you; he charged you with the total responsibility of starting it, stopping it, controlling it. This was one of Stoicism's biggest demands on a person. Stoics can be made to sound like lazy brutes when they are described merely as people indifferent to most everything but good and evil, people who make stingy use of emotions like pity and sympathy. But add this requirement of total personal responsibility for each and every one of your emotions, and you're talking about a person with his hands full. I whispered a 'chant' to myself as I was marched at gunpoint to my daily interrogation: 'control fear, control guilt, control fear, control guilt.' ... Controlling your emotions is difficult but can be empowering. Epictetus: 'For it is within you, that both your destruction and deliverance lie.'"

Controlling our emotions.

[Epictetus](#) reminds us that this falls within our control.

As Stockdale tells us, when we take that kind of responsibility we have our hands full.

As I typed that passage out, I thought of Richie Davidson, the leading researcher on the science of emotional imprints on our brains. I wanted to see how he described "emotions" and trace it back to how we can control them.

In [The Emotional Life of Your Brain](#) (see Notes) he tells us: *"The smallest, most fleeting unit of emotion is an emotional state. Typically lasting only a few seconds, it tends to be triggered by an experience... A feeling that does persist, and that remains consistent over minutes or hours or even days, is a mood, of the "he's in a bad mood" variety. And a feeling that characterizes you not for days but for years is an emotional trait."*

So, an emotional state lasts a few seconds and is typically triggered by something outside of ourselves. If we let that feeling persist, it becomes a mood. If we let that mood persist, we now have (and we have now created) a trait.

"What is the fruit of your doctrines?" Someone once asked Epictetus. 'Tranquility, fearlessness, and freedom,' he answered."

~ James Stockdale

What [Epictetus](#) and [Stockdale](#) are telling us, essentially, is that we are responsible for stepping in between the "state" and "mood."

We're not going to be able to cut off every single flash of fear (or anger or anxiety or whatever). We can, however, with discipline and practice, control what happens after that initial flare up of a state. And we must.

What's exciting is that Davidson's research unequivocally shows that when we make that a practice we literally change our minds—making a more optimal response more likely in the future.

Davidson tells us: *"Although Emotional Style is ordinarily quite stable over time, it can be altered by serendipitous experiences as well as by conscious, intentional effort at any point in life, through the intentional cultivation of specific mental qualities or habits.*

I am not saying that it is theoretically possible to shift your place on one of the continua of Emotional Style, or that such a shift is possible only in principle. In my research, I have discovered practical, effective ways to do so... for now suffice it to say that you can modify your Emotional Style to improve your resilience, social intuition, sensitivity to your own internal emotional and physiological states, coping mechanisms, attention, and sense of well-being. The amazing fact is that through mental activity alone we can intentionally change our own brains. Mental activity, ranging from meditation to cognitive-behavior therapy, can alter brain function in specific circuits, with the result that you can develop a broader awareness of social signals, a deeper sensitivity to your own feelings and bodily sensations and a more consistently positive outlook. In short, through mental training you can alter your patterns of brain activity and the very structure of your brain in a way that will change your Emotional Style and improve your life. I believe this is the ultimate step in mind-body interaction."

You ready to step in and shape your emotions and mind?!

(Fantastic.)

P.S. Interesting historical fact (thank you [Wikipedia](#)): In 1954, Stockdale was at the US Naval Test Pilot School. While there, he tutored a young Marine pilot named John Glenn.

Here's what [Ryan Holiday](#) tells us about Glenn and his emotional control in his great book (also bringing Stoic wisdom to life) *The Obstacle Is the Way* (see Notes):

"John Glenn, the first American astronaut to orbit the earth, spent nearly a day in space still keeping his heart rate under a hundred beats per minute. That's a man not simply sitting at the controls but in control of his emotions. A man who had properly cultivated, what Tom Wolfe later called, "the Right Stuff."

But you . . . confront a client or a stranger on the street and your heart is liable to burst out of your chest; or you are called on to address a crowd and your stomach crashes through the floor.

It's time to realize that this is a luxury, an indulgence of our lesser self. In space, the difference between life and death lies in emotional regulation."

Here's to not hitting the panic button as we learn to master ourselves and our emotions!

"In short, what the Stoics say is 'Work with what you have control of and you'll have your hands full.'"

~ James Stockdale

I AM THE CAPTAIN OF MY SOUL

"Dave Hatcher knew I was back because I walked under his window, and though he could not peek out, he could listen and over the years had attuned his ear to my walking 'signature,' my limping gait. Soon enough, the rusty wire over the sink in the washroom was bent to the north—Dave Hatcher's signal for 'note in the bottle under the sink for Stockdale.' Like an old fighter pilot, I checked my six o'clock, scooped the note up fast, and concealed it in my prison pajama pants, carefully. Back in my cell, after the guard locked the door, I sat on my toilet bucket—where I could stealthily jettison the note if the peephole cover moved—and unfolded Hatcher's sheet of low-grade paper toweling on which, with rat dropping, he had printed, without comment or signature, the last verse of Ernest Henley's poem, *Invictus*:

It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul."

Stunning.

Everything about that is remarkable.

*I am the master of my fate.
I am the captain of my soul.*

Here's to living our highest ideals and using each obstacle as fuel for our growth as we master ourselves and play our parts as well as we can, my friend.

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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[The Enchiridion](#)

[Meditations](#)

[Letters from a Stoic](#)

[The Obstacle Is the Way](#)

[Man's Search for Meaning](#)

About the Author of "Courage Under Fire"

JAMES STOCKDALE



Vice Admiral James Stockdale, a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution, served in the navy from 1947 to 1979, beginning as a test pilot and instructor at Patuxent River, Maryland, and spending two years as a graduate student at Stanford University. He became a fighter pilot and was shot down on his second combat tour over North Vietnam, becoming a prisoner of war for eight years, four in solitary confinement. The highest-ranking naval officer held during the Vietnam War, he was tortured fifteen times and put in leg irons for two years.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.