

Mimetic Leadership: Learning Through Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius, the king who had it all, yet decided to be mindful and led a life aligned with virtues and morality—the greatest of the Roman Emperors, and perhaps the wisest of them all.

Step 1: Why Marcus Aurelius is My Role Model

I could have picked anyone, even my amazing late grandmother; she was my hero. Whenever I sit there in the sun, on a wintry afternoon, I feel I am becoming her, well, almost. She was the kindest, yet strictest person I have ever known—someone who would go about her day with courage and love.

However, learning about Marcus Aurelius brought to mind many of his ideals, many of which I have adopted over the past several years. The ones that stand out are in this illustration of his life. He was a Stoic to the core. His morning ritual of affirming that no matter what or who he encounters during the day, he will stay true to his values remains significant even today. There is so much power in that (Aurelius, 2002). This has been profoundly impactful, as it gives me the power to choose how I want to present myself in the world. It helps me navigate through my day with presence and compassion.

Journaling his thoughts and his observations was another key aspect of his personality (Robertson, 2019). Being grateful and focusing on the present moment, and regularly reflecting on the good, fosters a sense of contentment. He reminds us that focusing on what one can control helps us let go of worrying about things beyond our control and instead center ourselves on our thoughts, actions, and attitude.

He also encourages us to accept the nature of the universe and trust that life unfolds as it should (Aurelius, 2002). His ability to simplify his desires and his encouragement to seek harmony with others stand out. He teaches us to understand human nature and strive to work with others in a spirit of empathy and patience.

The phrase “*the obstacle is the way*” is so meaningful and relevant (Holiday, 2014). Over time, we realize this truth and connect the dots, seeing how disappointment—or “this point meant”—is only a bump, a bend in the journey, not an end. What a powerful reminder. Most of all, Marcus Aurelius shows us that understanding the impermanence of life and appreciating everything holds the key to unlocking goodness and helping us escape the misery that so often traps our minds (McMahon, 2018).

Step 2: Committing to Imitation

Over the next two weeks, I will commit to practicing some of these traits in my own life, in the spirit of mimetic leadership (Ben-Shahar, 2024). Like Marcus Aurelius, I will begin each day with a short affirmation: reminding myself that no matter what I encounter, I can remain true to my values.

I practice journaling almost daily and aim to reflect on gratitude, as well as how I respond to the day’s challenges. I will continue to focus on what I can control—my thoughts, words, and actions—rather than being consumed by what I can’t control (Aurelius, 2002).

Embracing simplicity and minimizing distractions can be a challenging yet meaningful ritual. Whether that means taking a mindful breath break or stepping away from digital smog, it is a huge step forward. I will meet others with patience and empathy, remembering that we are all human and all doing our best.

Step 3: Creating Reminders

I have this illustration as a wallpaper on my phone to remind me of his wisdom and reflect on and apply it to my day-to-day. I also keep a journal nearby to jot my thoughts and reflect on them. I remind myself that every obstacle is also a growth path. I like to believe that a disappointment has a point to make, “this-point-meant,” that this is only a bump, a bend, and not an end in the journey.

For the next two weeks, I commit to practicing these qualities in specific, practical ways:

1. **Morning affirmation:** Each day, I will begin with a short Stoic reminder, such as: “Today, I will meet people with patience. I will act with integrity regardless of circumstances.” This echoes Marcus’s morning ritual (Aurelius, 2002).
2. **Evening journaling:** Like Marcus, I will close each day by journaling about what I am grateful for, what went well, and how I lived in accordance with my values (Robertson, 2019).
3. **Focus on what I can control:** When I catch myself worrying about things outside my influence, I will pause, breathe, and redirect attention to my actions and mindset (Aurelius, 2002).
4. **Practicing simplicity:** Each day, I will choose one moment to simplify consciously—a meal eaten in silence, an intentional break from digital smog, or a mindful walk with my dog.
5. **Empathy in conversations:** I will remind myself to listen first, to pause before reacting, and to assume good intent.

These are not grand gestures. They are small, repeatable habits—what happiness research has shown to be the building blocks of lasting change (Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts, & Wardle, 2010). Installing them over two weeks will be an experiment in embodying Marcus’s way of life, in the hope that they may become part of my own.

Reflection

Learning about him has been an incredible, in-depth exploration of his mindset; yet, embodying his ideals is the way to make a meaningful difference. As I reflect on this, I also realize that Marcus Aurelius may have been the greatest of Roman emperors, but his wisdom endures because it speaks to the small empires we all rule—our thoughts, our choices, and the way we live each day.

References

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