

# Marcus Aurelius on How to Turn Around a Rotten Day

When you wake up in the morning, notice how quickly your mind checks into its physical and psychological ailments. Back pain? Still there. Afternoon meeting to worry about? Still there. Troublesome financial situation? Still there.

Did you expect it to be different? If you look for them, there will always be difficulties to drag through your day.

Today, like most days, it will probably be too hot or too cold. Traffic will be terrible. Troubling events will happen in the world. Your colleagues and even family members may not see things your way, and you may experience some interpersonal conflicts.

Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic philosopher. He would say, *Nothing has to go right today for you to act with honor and character.*

To do the impossible and think only positive thoughts is not the answer. Quite the contrary, Aurelius advises in his [\*Meditations\*](#), “When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly.”

Making the mindset adjustment that Aurelius advises, you are not battling with reality.

Of the disagreeable people encountered in any day, Aurelius continues, “They are like this because they can’t tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own—not of the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine.”

Everyone you will meet today, despite their poor behavior, does not differ from you. There is no need, Aurelius advises,

for anger, hate, or conflict. Things may not go well, and things don't have to go well for you have to a good day.

Others, like you, sometimes make a poor choice and, like you, have the power to make a better choice: "We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are obstructions."

Notice how reluctant your mind is to believe "we were born to work together." Your fellow commuters seem to be in your way, and some of your colleagues seem to be obstacles.

No wonder the day has barely begun and you are exhausted already.

*How laughable your mindset is, Aurelius might say. You expected the world to provide no obstructions while your mind was filled with obstructions.*

### **Focus on Your Character**

"What fresh hell is this" [famously quipped, Dorothy Parker](#) when the doorbell would ring in her apartment. Perhaps you greet the new day with similar trepidation.

Although it seemed otherwise to Dorothy Parker, Aurelius taught that we, not other people, are the problem. How much time do we waste focusing on what others are doing? Aurelius offers sound advice:

"Don't waste the rest of your time here worrying about other people—unless it affects the common good. It will keep you from doing anything useful. You'll be too preoccupied with what so-and-so is doing, and why, and what they're saying, and what they're thinking, and what they're up to, and all the other things that throw you off and keep you from focusing on your own mind."

To underscore his point, he added, "Yes, keep on degrading

yourself, soul. But soon your chance at dignity will be gone. Everyone gets one life. Yours is almost used up, and instead of treating yourself with respect, you have entrusted your own happiness to the souls of others.”

When our thoughts are not hijacked by today’s disruptions, we free up our mental energy to concentrate on our own efforts:

“Concentrate every minute...on doing what’s in front of you with precise and genuine seriousness, tenderly, willingly, with justice. And on freeing yourself from all other distractions. Yes, you can—if you do everything as if it were the last thing you were doing in your life, and stop being aimless, stop letting your emotions override what your mind tells you, stop being hypocritical, self-centered, irritable.”

Not convinced? Do you still think others are the problem and you need to *get away*? Aurelius has a bucket of ice water for your mistaken belief and a better path for self-renewal:

“People try to get away from it all—to the country, to the beach, to the mountains. You always wish that you could too. Which is idiotic: you can get away from it anytime you like.

By going within.

Nowhere you can go is more peaceful—more free of interruptions—than your own soul. Especially if you have other things to rely on. An instant’s recollection and there it is: complete tranquility. And by tranquility I mean a kind of harmony.

So keep getting away from it all—like that. Renew yourself. But keep it brief and basic. A quick visit should be enough to ward off all and send you back ready to face what awaits you.”

Marcus Aurelius wrote *Meditations* as guidance for himself never expecting it would become a lasting treasure for humanity. A Byzantine poet once advised his readers to study what he called *The Book of Marcus*: “If you desire to master pain, unroll this book and read with care.”

If you want to read more, the translation of [Meditations](#) by University of Virginia classics professor Gregory Hays is magnificent. Read and reread. Begin to observe, each morning as you get out of bed, you will have an opportunity to learn a truth: Nothing has to go right for you today, and yet, as the Stoic philosopher Epictetus prescribed, you can “act your part with honor.”

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