Learning the *Hard Way*

HOW CANCER CHANGED MY LIFE,
BUT NOT HOW YOU THINK



FRANK GRANDE JR.

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INTRODUCTION

The Three Haymakers

And a 2000 Year-Old Lifeline

You have power over your mind, not outside events. Realize this, and you will find strength.

MARCUS AURELIUS

You can't control what happens to you, only how you respond. That idea, rooted in Stoic philosophy, became the foundation for how I faced one of the darkest moments of my life: a stage four colon cancer diagnosis in 2019.

Today, I am a husband, father, son, uncle, and former Wall Street guy who has learned the hard way that none of us are guaranteed another ordinary day. I wrote this book because I spent too many years learning lessons after the damage was already done. I wanted to leave my sons, my nieces, and anyone facing their own storm, a playbook I wish I had earlier. My degree in life comes from the School of Hard

Knocks. I'm someone who has been hit hard by life, made plenty of mistakes, and kept trying to become a better man.

That's something that I'm continually working on, becoming a little better every day. My wife jokingly (and lovingly) calls me her stoic philosopher. Even after all that I have read and studied, I still don't think of myself as a philosopher. When I hear that word, I picture professors, academics, or people sitting around debating the meaning of life. I planned on going to work, building a life, taking care of my family and the people I love, and squeezing in a little meaning around the edges. I was raised in a religious household. I went to church every Sunday as a child. In my mind, religion and philosophy were similar. As the saying goes, "Same corporation, different divisions." Philosophy, to me, was something for professors and movie stars, not for hospital rooms and scan results. The hospital room was for "Thoughts and prayers." Then one afternoon, my world was flipped upside down. A doctor sat across from me, took a breath, and said the words "stage 4 colon cancer," and my life split into a before and an after.

This was not the first life-altering event that I experienced. It was the third.

The First Haymaker

The first life-altering event was when my older brother died of pancreatic cancer.

He was young when he died, just 34 years old. A brutal, aggressive cancer. A cancer that I thought old people get after

years of drinking and smoking. Not someone in their early thirties who was young and vibrant. By the time they found it, it was too late as is the nature of most pancreatic cancer diagnoses.

I was 29 when he passed. We were exactly 5 years and 2 days apart. Because our birthdays were so close, we always celebrated together with big elaborate parties. We would even have our own cakes when we were younger. My parents would make sure that we each kept our individual identity while celebrating together. It was a family celebration. Things changed after he passed away. My birthday has never been the same joyous occasion. I still celebrate it but now it's just different.

"My birthday has never been the same joyous occasion."

He left behind a two-year-old daughter, a grieving wife, and parents who were never the same. That was my first confrontation with tragedy. Cancer wasn't just a word. It was something that shattered my family.

I've always been an emotional guy. A big presence, 6'1", over 200 pounds, loud voice, classic New York Italian temperament. I've been told I wear my emotions on my sleeve. I still do. You never have to guess how I feel, you'll know.

I was angry. I saw what cancer did to my family, and I didn't handle it well. I blamed God, I blamed myself, and I

blamed anything else I could. I carried that pain around without realizing how deeply it was affecting me.

When it came to his funeral arrangements, I had to be the strong one. My parents were a wreck and never the same again. My sister-in-law was grieving too but in a different way. She had a 2-year-old little girl to take care of. That meant that I had to sit with the funeral director. I got the funeral plot. I ordered the headstone. I had to do virtually everything. I had to do this for my older brother. The one who was superman in my younger eyes.

I didn't have the ability or time to properly grieve.

In the years that followed, I was the one who stepped up in the role of Dad for my niece. My sister-in-law took care of everything that she could. My parents, especially my mom, did also. But when it was time for 'Dad stuff', I tried to be there as much as I could. Eventually, I attended less and less of these events. The problem was I now had two small children of my own. My time was spread thinly.

The family dynamics got complicated. We have a good relationship now, but my sister-in-law went through her own issues. Understandably so. Tensions were high between my parents and my sister-in-law. I used the term "walking on eggshells" when it came to how everyone interacted with her. You had to step lightly, or she could fly off the handle. During that time, people left me in the dark because they were afraid of how I would interact with her. Looking back at it now, I understand why.

A few years later, I was coaching Little League baseball. I was always involved in my sons' sports - baseball, football,

wrestling, even basketball (though to be honest, I had no business on a basketball court). But I loved it. I was good with the kids. I was the coach who made it fun, the one who joked around and teased them. Even now, as the kids turned to grown men, they will come up to me and say, "Hey Coach," and we'll laugh about those old days. It was one of the great joys of my life, having the privilege to coach my sons and their friends and teammates.

It was like I was two different people. I was able to find joy and happiness while suppressing unhealthy anger and depression inside of me. The problem was that it was only a matter of time until the facade broke. Life can be funny that way. You can go through your daily routine keeping your unresolved feelings in check while trying to convince yourself that "I'm fine." Then life hits you square in the mouth with another life-altering event.

That's exactly what happened to me. My second life-altering event was when I was laid off at my job after 15 years.

The Second Haymaker

It was several years after my brother's death when I was called into human resources. It can take years to come to grips with a loved one passing away. I was still dealing with it when I got the news. Or more precisely, not dealing with it.

I spent 20 years on Wall Street. Fifteen of those years were with the same firm. When the 2008 financial crisis hit, our trading desk shrank from over 100 people to just 10. I surv-

ived the early rounds of layoffs, but in 2009, I was let go. Even though I knew it was coming, I was still angry.

It was during the baseball season after I was laid off that I lost my spark. I had never dealt with my emotions properly. The fuse was already lit and was burning slowly. I was short-tempered. I flew off the handle too quickly. And for the first and only time in all my years of coaching, a parent told me he didn't want me coaching his son the following season. That hurt. I told myself I was just trying to bring a "toughness mentality" to the team, but the truth is, that was just an excuse. I was a wreck, and I didn't even know it.

What I had learned to do and became really good at, was suppress those feelings. Bury them deep. The problem with that? That's not who I am.

As with when my brother died, I didn't handle my layoff well. And just like before, I thought I did. My wife had started her cosmetic company less than a year prior. I had just received my year-end bonus along with a severance package. There was money in the bank to get us by for a while. On paper, we were okay. The problem was, I was 40 years old and the job I had spent 15 years doing was disappearing across the entire industry, not just at my firm.

I went on job interviews where I was told I was overqualified. One interviewer even said I was a threat to his job. Needless to say, I didn't get a job offer from him. The job search was brutal. I had been a market maker, which meant facilitating the trading of stocks between buyers and sellers. But algorithms had taken over. What once required hundreds of traders to process thousands of trades now needed just one

guy to supervise a computer program. In hindsight, this was my first interaction with an early version of Artificial Intelligence even though the term wouldn't become mainstream until years later.

I remember being exhausted every day from sending out résumés to anyone and everyone. Making calls to contacts. Reaching out to friends of friends. And I remember the arguments with my wife. She'd ask if I had contacted someone or followed up on a lead, and I took it as criticism-as if she thought I wasn't doing enough. But she was just trying to help in the only way she knew how. Still, I internalized her words and spiraled. I told myself I was a failure, a burden. I started to suppress my anger again, just like I had done after my brother passed. I was short-tempered, snapped at my family, and all around just miserable.

During the nine months of that grind, I started helping with her company. There was no formal job offer. I just pitched where I could. I ran to the post office to ship packages, set up her Amazon seller account, and even helped acquire trademarks. I picked up everything she didn't have time for so she could focus on marketing, her true strength. Over time, I became her CFO. But those suppressed feelings didn't go away. I still felt rejected. My self-worth was low. And on top of all that, I worked for my wife. That created additional tension in our marriage, but that's a story for later.

The business grew rapidly. My wife traveled a lot for trade shows and sales meetings. I held down the fort at home with my sons and with the business. I was an integral part of growing the business even if she didn't always see it that way. If

something needed to be done, I was the one who figured it out and got it done. We grew from three employees to well over 50. Sales grew exponentially. I would tell people that my job was to make sure my wife had enough money and products to do whatever she needed to do.

On the surface, everything seemed perfect. Underneath the surface, the tension in my marriage was starting to boil over. It seems that every other week we would fight about me staying in the business or my perception of her inability to give me any credit. But the tension never left. Working with your spouse is tough. Especially when you've never really dealt with the anger and insecurity you've been carrying for years. I thought I had, but I hadn't. Not really. I had never learned how to deal with my anger and the questioning of my self-worth. I was repeating the same mistakes.

That brings me to the third life-altering event: my cancer diagnosis.

The Third Haymaker

In 2019, just before the pandemic hit, we started the process to sell cosmetics business to a private equity firm. The sale process took several months to complete. I knew I wouldn't stay on after the deal closed. I had helped build that company from the ground up for over a decade, and now I had to figure out what was next. I was 50 years old, financially stable, and seriously considered law school. I had done legal work for the company and discovered I enjoyed it, and I was good at it.

Then I got the diagnosis: stage four colon cancer.

Suddenly, law school didn't seem so important. I didn't know if I had five or fifty years left to live.

My first reaction was fear, the kind that sits on your chest and makes it hard to breathe. My second reaction was anger, at my body, at fate. I thought, "not this again", "what am I going to tell my wife, my kids, my mom?" "How could I put my mom through that again?" Underneath those emotions was confusion and a strange kind of emptiness. The only framework for what was happening to me was my brother and his death. I was mad at GOD. How could you do this to me, my family, my mom? I turned my back on religion. I didn't have a philosophy. I had instincts, habits, and whatever strength I could scrape together on a given day. For a while, that was all I had.

I was angry again. And this time, it was worse. Not only was I diagnosed with cancer, but we were also now in the middle of a global pandemic. To top it all off, due to complications from the treatment, I needed a colostomy bag. That was my lowest point. The depression and anxiety were crushing. I remember kneeling in front of the toilet to empty the bag, using emptied picnic-style mustard and ketchup bottles to rinse it out. I was afraid that I was dying, and I didn't want to spend what time I had left being miserable and bitter.

Before my diagnosis, I had the same worries that most people have: the kids, money, reputation, minor aches and pains, getting into better shape. After, the list got very short, very fast. Confucius is credited with saying, "A healthy man wants a thousand things, a sick man wants one." I was now living on that exact quote. I remember the way the room

seemed to shrink as the doctors talked. I remember staring at his mouth moving while my mind raced ahead to every horrible possibility. I remember thinking, "This can't be happening," and "People who get cancer die."

It wasn't until after the diagnosis, in the long stretches between appointments and treatments, the time when I wanted to forget what I was there for. It was during those times that I stumbled onto something different. Something from the modern-day source of wisdom: TikTok.

I started seeing clips from people like Joe Rogan, David Goggins, and Jordan Peterson. The algorithm took over and filled my feed with motivational content. I found myself listening to podcasts featuring Ryan Holiday, Mel Robbins, and Chris Williamson. That led me to something deeper: Stoicism. I came across a simple idea: we don't control what happens, only how we respond. I didn't dive into it because I wanted to be "philosophical." I went looking because I was scared, angry, and tired of feeling like my mind was just along for the ride. I needed to break my cycle of anger.

"I came across a simple idea: we don't control what happens, only how we respond."

I had heard the term before. I had seen stoic heroes in movies or at least I was told they were "stoic". But now I wanted to understand the philosophy of Stoicism. I started reading the classics: Meditations by Marcus Aurelius, The Handbook by Epictetus, writings from Seneca and interpretations and recounts of Zeno. I even read Carl Jung's The Undiscovered Self to better understand the human psyche.

The ancient Stoics said our first task is to separate what is up to us from what is not. Illness, other people's opinions, random events, and even the final outcome of our efforts are not up to us. Our judgments, our decisions, our actions, and the kind of person we choose to be in the middle of all that chaos, that's up to us. Reading those ideas for the first time, with stage 4 stamped on my chart, was like someone handing me a small, solid handle in a room where everything else was spinning.

The Stoic philosophy resonated with me. It cut through the noise.

One quote attributed to Epictetus stood out. "It is not things themselves that disturb us, but our opinions about them." Marcus Aurelius echoed this in Meditations. "If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

Those words hit hard. I realized I had the power to reinterpret everything that had happened to me. I couldn't undo the cancer. I couldn't go back and erase my brother's death, or the layoff, or the resentment. But I could choose how I res-

ponded to them. I could decide what story I told myself about those events.

Faced with cancer, I could not control that there was something growing in my body, or the stage they labeled it, or the statistics someone could pull from Google or Chat GPT. I could control whether I showed up to each appointment. I could control whether I listened or shut down, whether I treated the people around me with kindness or resentment, whether I spent what might be my last months in panic or in some kind of hard-won peace. Little by little, these old ideas began to give shape to how I wanted to live, even if I might have been dying.

In the darkest nights, when sleep wouldn't come and fear filled the room, four old words gave me something to hold on to: wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. The Stoics called these the cardinal virtues, the qualities that make a life solid, no matter what storms hit. I hadn't grown up with those words on my wall. I discovered them halfway through the fire. Wisdom helped me ask, "What are the actual facts here, and what story am I adding on top?" Courage helped me put one foot in front of the other and walk into treatment rooms I desperately wanted to avoid. Justice reminded me that my family, friends, and doctors were in this with me, and that how I treated them mattered as much as what happened to me. Temperance helped me pause before acting on my impulses, especially when I wanted to lash out or shut down. It helped me move toward a steadier middle ground in how I ate, talked, worked, and worried.

This is not a book written by someone who studied philosophy first and then went looking for a test. I'm not a therapist, a philosopher, or a mindset coach. I'm a husband, a father, and a former Wall Street guy who got punched in the mouth by life more than once. The tools in this book are not clinical techniques. They're things I picked up from the Stoics and tried out on myself in waiting rooms, hospital beds, and long nights staring at the ceiling. If they sound a little like what modern therapists do, that's because good ideas tend to bridge centuries. But this is not a therapy manual. It's a field report from one patient, trying to live a little wiser and kinder than before. It's written by someone who was tested not once, not twice but three times. Someone who failed and didn't want to fail again. Someone who was in the midst of failing again and then went looking, desperately, for something that could help him meet this new test. It is a field report from a person who heard "stage 4," walked through the fire of treatment, and by grace and medicine, came out the other side cancer free, but not unchanged. You will not find a perfect Stoic hero in these pages. You will find a human being who was afraid, who made mistakes, who lost his composure at times, and who kept coming back, again and again, to a simple code: see clearly, act bravely, treat people right, and master yourself as best you can.

In the chapters that follow, I'll tell the story of what happened to me, but more importantly, I'll share how discovering these ideas after my diagnosis changed the way I faced it and how they continue to shape my life now that the scans are clear and the world expects everything to be "normal"

again. We'll look at wisdom in the diagnosis and other hard decisions that arise, courage in the face of fear and pain, justice in how illness and other obstacles affect family, work, and legacy, and temperance in reshaping what "enough" really means.

If I hadn't gotten cancer, I probably wouldn't have discovered Stoicism. I probably would've remained temperamental and reactive, quick to anger, quick to speak, and slow to listen. That emotional volatility had caused strain in my marriage, in my family, and in myself.

Today, my relationships are stronger than ever. I still wear my emotions on my sleeve but now they're mostly joy, gratitude, and presence. I'm known as the guy who's always trying to be positive. And when I do get upset, I try to catch myself. I pause. I ask questions instead of assuming the worst. I've learned not to fill in the silence with my own negative interpretations. When my wife asks me to take out the garbage, she's not calling me lazy, she's just asking me to take out the garbage.

I'm genuinely happier now than I've ever been.

What surprised me most was learning that the ancient Stoics wrestled with the same struggles we do. Epictetus was born into slavery. Marcus Aurelius was the emperor of Rome, yet he still had trouble getting out of bed. They both dealt with difficult people. They both felt overwhelmed, just like the rest of us. Just like me.

And that's what makes this all so human.

The great philosopher, Rocky Balboa, once said "The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and

nasty place and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done!"

Life has thrown me a few haymakers. Job loss, cancer and even death. Stoicism helped me to keep moving forward.

My hope is not that you walk the same path I did. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. My hope is that whether you are facing, illness, loss, pressure, uncertainty or you'll see that you don't need to have it all figured out before the storm hits. You can learn, you can grow, you can find a framework even in the middle of the chaos. You can keep moving forward. You may not control what has happened to you. But you control how you meet it, starting now, with who you choose to be today.

It took cancer to force me to confront the ways I need to change. It took cancer to make me a better husband, a better father and a better man.



CHAPTER

1

What Is a Stoic Life?

The happiness of your life depends upon the quality of your thoughts.

MARCUS AURELIUS

What does it mean to live a "Stoic Life"? Is it the hero in the latest superhero movie? Is it the robot in *The Terminator?* Or do you have to dress up in a toga sitting around contemplating the meaning of life?

A Stoic life, in plain terms, is a life built around controlling what you can, accepting what you can't, and trying to be a decent human being in the middle of it all. There's a term for the first step. It's called The Dichotomy of Control. It

doesn't mean you never feel anything, or that you walk around like the Terminator. It looks more like the nurse who has had a brutal shift, goes home exhausted, and still chooses not to take it out on her kids. It's the business owner whose big deal falls through, but instead of blaming everyone and everything, sits down, looks at what was in his control, and adjusts his approach. It's the parent stuck in traffic who wants to explode but takes a breath and decides not to make the car ride worse for everyone. A Stoic life is not about being a superhero or an emotionless robot; it's about training yourself, in small, ordinary moments, to respond instead of reacting, to keep your character intact when circumstances don't cooperate.

The Dichotomy of Control.

The dichotomy of control is the core Stoic idea that some things are up to us and some things are not, and that peace depends on knowing the difference and acting accordingly. When I finally understood the dichotomy of control, it felt less like a philosophical concept and more like someone quietly sliding a map to mental clarity across the table to me. At its heart, it's brutally simple: there are things you control, and things you don't. Most of our suffering and anxiety comes from mixing the two up. You don't control the diagnosis, the economy, what other people say, or whether life plays fair. You do control what you tell yourself about those things, what you choose to do next, and the kind of person you decide to be in the middle of it all.

For most of my life, I lived as if it were the other way around, trying to muscle the world into behaving the way I thought it should while giving my own reactions (or overreactions) a free pass. The Stoics flip that script. They say: put your energy where you actually have the leverage, your judgments, your actions, your character, and stop trying to bully reality into giving you the guarantees it never promised. It doesn't make the hard things go away, but it changes your perspective: you move from being a victim of circumstances to being responsible for how you respond to it.

Changing your perspective is not as hard as one might think. I was well into my stoic journey and experience when, about a year ago, my son came to me worrying about his future. He was ending his first year of law school when he had a crisis of faith. Apparently, this is a thing that happens to a lot of first year law students. There is a saying among lawyers about law school. Year one is extremely hard, in year two you're extremely busy and in year three you're extremely bored.

He was behind in finding an internship for the summer. All the organizations that he wanted to intern with had put a freeze on the programs because of a shift in the political environment.

His stress levels were increasing dramatically because not only was he having a hard time finding an internship, but he also had finals within the next couple of weeks. Now, he had to change course on what he thought was going to be his future law discipline. He started questioning if he even wanted to finish law school. He said to me, "What happens if I wake

up in 20 years and I'm miserable? What if I find that I hate being a lawyer?"

He blamed his professors, the school, the job process for internships, his parents, and even the President of the United States.

After listening to him for about a half hour, one of the things that I asked him to do was to make a list. I wanted him to write down everything that was bothering him. I told him that I don't care if the list has five things or fifty things on it. I didn't care if the items were big or small. His list consisted of over twenty items with one of them being the results of the presidential election.

Once he had completed the list, I told him to cross out everything that he could not change and circle the items that he had control over. By the time that he had finished this part of the exercise, his list consisted of three things.

1. Apply for internships with law firms and follow up with potential employers.
2. Make a study plan and prepare thoroughly for my final exams.
3. Create next year's class schedule.

Now he had a roadmap to move forward. He had action items to work on. His focus shifted to things that he could do something about and away from the things that he couldn't. He stopped wasting his mental energy. Suddenly, he realized that his world was not coming to an end. That his childhood dream of being an attorney was not over. Something that he wanted since middle school. By doing this exercise, it showed

him that his mind went to the extremes and not in a good way. He lost control over his thoughts. In Stoic terms, that was his obstacle from within, not the frozen internships or the election, but the story his own mind was telling about them. So that he could recognize when this happens again, and it will, I had him add a fourth item to his list.

1. Don't let my mind go negative. Notice when I assume the worst, check the facts, and choose my next steps.

In that moment, he wasn't just crossing items off a list; he was seeing his own mind clearly, maybe for the first time. He realized that nothing "out there" had actually changed, same school, same internship market, same finals, same president, but the story he'd been telling himself had turned a temporary setback into a doomed future. He had lost control of his thoughts, and they went straight to the worst-case scenario. By adding that fourth item, "Don't let my mind go negative", he had an eye-opening experience. He realized that the real problem wasn't just the missing internship. It was the way he was talking to himself about it.

I am happy to say that he's still in school and on track to graduate. He secured several internships and externships in fields that he wanted. He now has a roadmap for this career that he's excited about. He still has trouble with item number four, but we all do from time to time. When negative thoughts start to show themselves, he now has a tool that he can use to get back on track.

What does it mean to "have power over your mind"?

For a long time, I would've done exactly like my son did and answered this question the wrong way. I thought having power over my mind meant I could "tough it out", shove feelings down, argue, or white-knuckle my way through whatever life threw at me. When you approach life this way, you can become bitter and angry. You are in a constant battle and to survive you had to be "strong". I thought strength meant not breaking no matter what the circumstance was. Stoicism later taught me something very different: having power over your mind means you pay attention to what you're telling yourself, you must be careful of how you "fill in the blanks" that are in every story. Ask yourself, are those blanks positive or all doom and gloom? Are they even true? You can change your perspective by asking, what do you know, and what are you assuming? What evidence supports the story you're telling yourself? Once you notice these stories and sentences running in the background, you learn that those thoughts shape how you feel and how you act. Eventually, you learn to control how you "fill in the blanks".

"I thought strength meant not breaking no matter what the circumstance was."

We all have that "inner voice."

I didn't have that language for it when I was younger. I just knew there was a constant commentary running in my head, judging, predicting, criticizing, worrying. Later, I heard a speech from Alan Watts, the British-American writer and "philosophical entertainer," that gave me a completely different way to see that voice.

He asked a simple question: if there's a voice in your head that's always talking...who is listening?

He pointed out that if you watch your thoughts carefully, you'll notice something strange. Thoughts appear in your mind, but you don't decide in advance what they will be. You don't know what your next thought will be until it shows up. So how can you be fully in control of those thoughts? Thoughts are happening to you, just like sounds happen to you. Just as you hear sounds, you "hear" your thoughts.

Which one are you?

According to Watts, you are the awareness that hears the thoughts. The thoughts come and go, but the awareness remains. You are not your thoughts. You are the awareness behind them. I love that perspective. It gave me a little bit of distance from that nonstop voice in my head. It helped me see that my mind can talk nonsense, and I don't always have to take it at face value.

The Stoics called Watts' awareness The Obstacle from Within. They believed that what truly blocks you isn't the diagnosis, the layoff, or the difficult person in front of you, it's the way your own mind grabs onto those events and turns them into fear, rage, or despair. In their language, the real obstacle is the judgment you slap on top of reality and the story

you build from it. Once you see that you're the awareness watching those judgments, not the judgments themselves, you can start treating your inner reactions as the main battlefield. The scan result is hard; the panic spiral afterward is optional. The comment from your boss stings; the all-night replay is your choice. When I catch myself replaying it, I can practice bringing my attention back to what needs doing now. For the Stoics, that inner obstacle isn't something to ignore or bulldoze through, it's the place where you practice wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance, one thought at a time.

"The comment from your boss stings; the all-night replay is your choice."

But it also raised another question:

If I'm not my thoughts, what did Marcus Aurelius mean when he said I have power over my mind?

At first glance, Watts and Marcus sound like they're contradicting each other. One says, "You are not your thoughts." The other says, "You have power over your mind." But as I've lived with both ideas, through grief, job loss, and cancer, I've come to believe they're talking about two sides of the same coin.

Watts is reminding us: don't confuse the noise in your head with your deepest self. Marcus is reminding us: don't surrender that noise to autopilot like my son did. You may

not choose your first thought, but you have more power than you think over what you do with it next.

That inner voice has a few names in modern psychology: self-talk, inner dialogue, inner monologue. I later learned the term "automatic thoughts for thoughts that arise without deliberate effort." I'm not a therapist, so I'm not going to write this book as if I am. But I later learned that a lot of what I stumbled into (watching my thoughts, challenging them, changing them) lines up with what they do in something called cognitive behavioral therapy. It's no accident that many psychologists openly acknowledge that CBT is rooted in Stoic ideas. To me, that just confirmed what I was discovering the hard way: the way you talk to yourself matters.

I believe that voice is, at least partly, our internal representation of what we think society thinks of us or will think of us. It's the echo of parents, teachers, bosses, friends, enemies, social media, culture, all mixed together with our own fears and hopes. It comments on everything: your body, your work, your parenting, your marriage, your faith, your failures, even your successes.

You can't turn that voice off.

But you can learn to relate to it differently, to see it as the obstacle from within rather than the voice of truth.

Honestly, that's what this chapter and this whole book are about.

My brother's questions

When my older brother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and eventually passed away, my thought process was completely different than it was later, when I was diagnosed with cancer myself.

When someone you love gets the worst possible news a doctor can deliver, your mind goes into overdrive. Some people immediately think about what they can do to fix the problem. (I asked the doctor if I could donate part of my pancreas to him. It turns out that I couldn't.) Some think about how to take care of practical things. Some focus on how to be supportive emotionally. Most of us try to do all three at once and don't feel like we're doing any of it well.

I remember one conversation I had with my brother while he was sick. I'll never forget it. He was scared, tired, and we were still trying to joke our way through it, like brothers do. But then he turned to me with a look on his face that I can't really explain. It was something between anger and sadness. He asked:

"Why me? Why not some convicted killer or rapist? Why did this happen to me and not someone bad?"

I didn't have an answer.

What answer could there be?

Then he said the one that really broke me:

"Who's going to walk my little girl down the aisle when she gets married?"

Of course, I told him I would be honored to do it. Of course, the whole family would be there for her. But that's not what he was really asking. What he was revealing was his deepest fear: not being there for his baby girl. Not seeing her grow up. Not getting to be her dad.

He knew we would all step in. He knew she'd be loved and cared for. But he also knew it would never be the same. At the time, I had no real understanding of what that felt like. I was 29. I wasn't a dad yet. I had not yet sat in a doctor's office and heard my own name followed by the word "cancer." I could imagine his fear, but I hadn't worn it.

Like most men in my family, my brother was a "fixer." Up until about a week before he died, he was still working on his house. He built an additional apartment so that after he was gone, his wife and child would always have a place to live and the rent from that apartment could help support them. He didn't have life insurance because he was young, and you don't think about that until something changes your life, like the birth of your first child. He was diagnosed before his daughter was born. So, he did the only thing that made sense to him as a carpenter by trade: he tried to fix what he could.

That little apartment was his way of answering the question, "Who's going to take care of my family after I'm gone?" He couldn't control the cancer. He couldn't control how much time he had. But he could measure, cut, nail, and build. He could leave behind something concrete. That was his version of the dichotomy of control. I just didn't know the term for it. Back then, neither of us had words like dichotomy of control or obstacle from within. He fought the

cancer the only way he knew how, by fixing what he could in the world outside. Years later, my own diagnosis would force me to fight a different battle, with the world inside my head.

I'm a "fix it" type of person too. We both got that gene. That's why my first thought was to offer a part of my body to help him. I figured you can donate a lung, kidney or part of a liver, why not the pancreas? I didn't know that it didn't work that way. I couldn't help him physically, so I tried to help him mentally. During those conversations about his worries and fears, I had no real answers for the questions that mattered most. What do you say to "Why me?" What do you say to "Who will walk my daughter down the aisle?" There are some things you cannot fix with a tool belt, a spreadsheet, or a pep talk.

I did what most people do: I reassured him that we would be there for his wife and child. I promised that his daughter would be loved. That she would know who her father was. For the big, existential questions, I had nothing. I felt helpless. I felt angry. I felt like I was failing him in the one role I was supposed to fill: a brother who could make it better.

Looking back now, after my own diagnosis, I realize something important: sometimes you can't fix things. Sometimes the most you can do is lie down in the mud with someone when they are at their lowest and just be there with them. You can't change the event, but you can share the experience.

What I wish I'd known then

I often wish I had started my Stoic journey years earlier, before my brother got sick. I wish I'd had different words to offer him. Not magic words, not "trust in God's plan" or "everything happens for a reason" clichés. Words that have helped me. Stoic words.

Words like:

"You didn't choose this, but you can still choose how you meet it."

"You can't control when you leave, but you can control how you love while you're here."

"You can't fix death, but you can live your role as a father and husband right up to the last page."

Would those ideas have taken away his fear? Of course not. Would they have made what happened okay? Never. But I believe they could have given us both a small, solid place to stand in the middle of the storm and maybe get up from the mud.

The truth is, back then, I didn't have that framework. I had a lot of anger. I had a vague belief in God. I had a fixer's instinct and a big heart. But I didn't have any idea of how to think about things I couldn't fix.

I didn't understand what Marcus meant by having power over my mind. I didn't understand that even in the face of something as brutal as pancreatic cancer, there is still a tiny, fragile, but real space between what happens and how we respond.

I couldn't see that the voice in my head, and in my brother's head, was telling us stories about what was happening, and not all of those stories were same thing as reality.

When it was my turn in the mud

Years later, when I heard my own diagnosis of stage four colon cancer, I understood him in a way I never wanted to.

Everyone who gets that kind of news has the same thoughts. I was no different. Lying in bed in the middle of the night, room dark, my mind running wild. You know the nights I'm talking about. The ones where you stare at the ceiling and know sleep isn't coming, because that inner voice will not shut the F up.

I had similar thoughts my brother had told me about, and plenty he never said out loud:

"Why me?"

"Who's going to teach my boys how to be good men?"

"Who's going to take care of my mom when she can't care for herself?"

"Will my wife move on? Will she be okay? Will she find someone else?"

"Am I leaving them with enough?"

"Will I be remembered?"

"Is this it? Is this how the story ends?"

Dark thoughts creep in with no invitation. You don't sit there and logically decide, "Tonight at 2 a.m., I will imagine my funeral." The thoughts just appear. Remember what

Watts said: you don't choose your next thought. It shows up, and then you're stuck with it.

During the day, that voice is still there, but there are distractions like appointments, work, kids, errands, and noise. At night, when it's just you and the hum of the ceiling fan and the glow of the alarm clock, there's nowhere to hide.

You don't have to have cancer to know this feeling. It doesn't discriminate by age, race, gender or whatever category you can think of. My son had them about his future. Maybe for you it's a job you might lose, a child making bad choices, a marriage that feels like it's cracking, a bill you don't know how to pay. The content changes. The experience is the same.

"How many times have we heard, "Don't lose sleep over this"? We say it like a joke. But the truth is, we all do. We lose sleep over a thousand different worries:

"My boss is going to be furious."

"I can't believe my kid did that."

"My spouse is driving me crazy."

"I'm behind."

"I'm not enough."

The only difference between someone going through a life-threatening medical issue and someone who isn't is the flavor of the worry.

This brings me back to Confucius, "A healthy man wants a thousand things; a sick man only wants one."

When I got cancer, that quote stopped being a clever line and became my reality. My list of worries got very short, very fast. I was forced to cut out the noise. The trivial worries

ents that used to keep me up at night faded into the background. One question sat in the middle of everything: "Am I going to live?"

Cancer forced me to do something I'd never done well: separate what I could control from what I couldn't.

I couldn't control what was growing in my body.

I couldn't control what the scans would show.

I couldn't control how long I had.

But...

I could control whether I showed up to the appointments.

I could control whether I listened or shut down.

I could control whether I treated the people around me with kindness or bitterness.

I could control whether I spent whatever time I had in panic or in something closer to peace.

That's where Marcus and Watts finally met for me.

The voice, the awareness, and the choice

Sometimes the voice in your head is like background noise. Sometimes it feels like you're literally having a conversation with yourself. Where does that voice come from? Who's doing the talking? Who's doing the listening?

Watts would say: you are the one listening. You are not your thoughts.

Marcus would say: you have power over your mind, over what you entertain, what you dwell on, and what you tell

yourself about what's happening.

At first glance, it sounds like they're pulling in opposite directions. But living through cancer, as both an outsider and someone with firsthand knowledge, convinced me they're actually pointing to the same doorway.

You are not the first thought that appears at 2 a.m.

You are not the fear that hits you when the doctor calls.

You are not the anger that flares when your wife says the wrong thing at the wrong time.

You are the awareness that hears all of that.

And from that awareness, you can slowly, and imperfectly begin to choose the next thought. You can recognize what is truth and what is the noise filling in the blanks.

"I'm going to die" might show up on its own. That's the Watts side: you didn't pick it.

The Marcus side is what you do with it next.

Do you feed it? Replay it? Build a whole horror movie around it?

Or do you answer it, even quietly, with something else?

"I don't know how this ends yet."

"Right now, I'm alive, and my job is to show up today."

"I can't fix everything, but I can choose how I treat the people in this room."

That's what I mean by a Stoic life. Not a life without emotion. Not a life without pain. A life where you learn, little by little, to notice the voice in your head and to exercise the small but real power you have over what you do with it.

You may not control what happens to you.

But you have more power than you think over how you meet it.



THANK YOU FOR READING

The story continues in Chapter 2.

The Dichotomy of Control and the Four Virtues: A Demanding, Simple Code

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