

{ PHILOSOPHY *For* LIFE }

And Other Dangerous Situations

Monday, February 21, 2011

Stoicism and the idea of 'playing your role well'



[This is an interview I did with the Israeli psychologist Uri Wernik for my book, Philosophy for Life and Other Dangerous Situations, but I had to cut this chapter. Great interview though, a wise man. The picture above is from the animated film, Waltz with Bashir]

Uri Wernik, a 64-year-old clinical psychologist living and working in Jerusalem, says:

“As an old man, I’ve had the misfortune to participate in a few wars. One incident in particular sticks in his mind: It was during the Six Day War, between Israel and several Arab nations. I was an army reservist, serving as a medic in the Engineering Corps, we were fighting the Egyptian army at the Suez Canal – we were on one side, and on the other was a tower, from where Egyptian soldiers were shooting at us. Two Israeli armoured personnel carriers were moving across the terrain, both of them exposed. I was in the second vehicle. The first vehicle took a direct hit from the artillery on the tower. I saw injured people from the vehicle flying through the air. I had to run and give first aid. So I started running like an idiot, across the exposed terrain, because that was my duty. And I was discovered by the enemy, who all started shooting at me, with guns, with heavy artillery. And the bullets were getting closer and closer to me. And I was

completely sure that I was going to die. At such moments, you can get religious. In fact, I remember that I cursed God. But I accepted my fate. I said to myself, what will happen, will happen. There's nothing you can do to change it now. And at the last moment, an Israeli air force plane appeared, and dropped a bomb. No more tower. I was saved. Well, for a while after that, I was really happy and carefree. Who cares about anything, I thought, as long as you are alive. But of course, after a while you remember the other stuff.

After the war, Uri became a psychologist. He initially resisted joining any particular school of psychology, though he says “it was quite difficult, remaining independent”. Finally, he considered training in Jungian psychoanalysis, “because it seemed to have more of a sense of the importance of culture than other schools”. But as he was poised on the verge of following that path, he had what he describes as “a Jungian dream telling me why I shouldn't become a Jungian”:

I was in a market-place in Cairo. It may have been in the Hellenic period. And there was a guy in the market selling bottles, beautiful bottles of water, sold at very high prices. He was a great salesman. I was really admiring his talent. And then I came across another stall in the market-place, and there was a guy selling the same water but in very simple bottles, and they were selling for peanuts. Very cheap. And the labels on these bottles were written in Greek. And it became clear to me that my resources were more from ancient Greek philosophy than from modern therapies. Typically, people like the new and disregard the old. They like the flashy packaging, the sense of new discovery. But most psychotherapies today have already been said before. There's a sort of historical poverty, an ignorance of what has come before. Take the new hot thing at the moment – Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT as they call it. It's the latest fad. But there's no realization there that acceptance has always been part of psychology, right the way back to the Stoics, and further.

He regularly uses Stoic techniques in his therapy practice, and has a particular regard for Epictetus. He says: “He has a powerful voice, he speaks in metaphors, in simple parables. It is like Jesus in a way. And his emphasis on what you can control and what you cannot is of course useful for many people, though not for all cases.” He finds that Stoicism can be combined easily with Jewish teachings: “I was once treating an ultra-Orthodox Jew, and I introduced some ideas of Epictetus', and said they were from a Gentile. And the Orthodox Jew quoted a passage from the Eichah Rabbah to me: ‘If anyone says there is wisdom among the Gentiles, believe it’.” Uri points to the influence of Hellenistic philosophy on Jewish philosophy, on figures like Maimonides and Philo of Alexandria, and in particular he says the teachings of Ecclesiastes, on which he has written a book, have a distinctive Hellenistic and Stoic flavour.

The most frequent word in Ecclesiastes is 'given', as in, what God has given, what are the inescapable facts of the situation. And the author says we have to accept what's given. For example, in a court, there will be injustice, that's given. Accepting the world as it is, that's the given. There's the idea of accepting the verdict of God, which is quite Stoic.



Uri himself is a sceptic about the existence of God or divine providence. Indeed, he has written a book on chance as the ruling principle of the universe, and on the therapy of accepting the role of chance in our life. But he says: "Whether it's chance or the mysterious workings of God, things still happen, and you have to learn to accept them and carry on. There is still 'the given'." The idea of accepting 'the given' relates to what Uri thinks is the most powerful idea or technique in Stoicism: the idea, particularly well expressed by Epictetus, of playing one's role well. Uri says: "This idea is so strong, so powerful." In Epictetus' *Enchiridion* we read this passage:

Remember that you are an actor in a play, the character of which is determined by the playwright; if He wishes the play to be short, it is short; if long, it is long; if He wishes you to play the part of a beggar, remember to act even this adroitly; and so if your role is a cripple, an official, or a layman. For this is your business: to play admirably the role assigned you, but the selection of the role is Another's.

Uri says:

"I often tell my patients, 'you didn't choose to be in this situation. Life is a play we didn't write.' But we can choose to play well the role we have been given. For example, a lady came to see me, who was dying from cancer. She didn't choose to die from cancer. But she is not the first person to play that role. And there is a way to do it well, and a way to do it badly. Playing it badly is to have everyone pity you, and to wait for you to disappear, while you complain bitterly. Playing it well is to give people an example of how to accept your situation, to use the situation to talk to your children and husband and tell them you love them, to show people that even such a terrible situation can be turned to good account. And this is what she did.

Another person came to see me, a guy whose wife had an affair. It was a completely shattering discovery for this man. On the one hand, you have an affair, and it might seem trivial, not significant at all. But once it's discovered, it can be awful. So I told this man about Epictetus, about how difficult his life was, how he was a slave, then he was tortured, then exiled. And how he still spoke about playing your role well, whatever role you have been assigned – the slave, the exile, the beggar. I told him: 'You're in a play. You didn't write it. There are different roles – the happy husband, the betrayed husband. How do you play your role well, and how badly? If you played it badly, you would become suspicious, aggressive, you would begin to generalise about women, maybe become misogynistic. What is the good way to play it?'



5 thoughts on “Stoicism and the idea of ‘playing your role well’”

Murali

March 26, 2011 at 6:40 am

Views and thoughts expressed here are close to my heart. In fact, it ties loose ends which i have been carrying for sometime. Is there any entry level book i can read by Uri or Epictetus.

Reply

Jules Evans

March 26, 2011 at 7:17 am

Hi – best place to start is probably Epictetus' Discourses or his Handbook – you can get editions which have both in one book.

All the best

Jules

Reply

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Toronto real estate lawyer

May 24, 2014 at 5:16 pm

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