

# Commonplace book

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction



We all want to be better people, shout at the kids less often, get some perspective at work and call our friends and family more. We have a picture of a better version of ourselves but we're still fallible, lazy, tired and busy. Best intentions fall away and we forget our better selves. To make our jobs a little easier we can listen to Marcus Aurelius who tells us that without a goal we can't live consistently (cf. 2.21). Thinking about the sort of qualities we want to show is a great first step but we need a little more help. To get us through the tough spots we're going to get help from philosophers, sportsmen, fictional characters, artists and people smarter than us.





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## CHAPTER 2

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# Focus

Steer clear of lifers, the toxic and charlatans.  
You become who you know

Ryan Holiday

---

Never wrestle with pigs, you both get dirty  
and the pig likes it

cf.  
2.15

George Bernard Shaw

---

You can do anything.  
but you can't do everything.

David Allen

---

Reaching your true potential involves choice.  
How exactly you choose to excel is up to you

Brian Colbert

---

No random actions, none not based on under-  
lying principles

Marcus Aurelius

---

If you're not doing what you love, you're wasting your time

Billy Joel

---

You're better off not giving the small things more time than they deserve

marcus Aurelius

---

Don't spend time with people you  
don't like

---

Prue Leith

You are whatever the company you  
keep is

---

Lord Chesterfield

Let your mind dwell on examples  
of honor

---

Cicero

Slow down and remember this;  
Most things make no difference.  
Being busy is a form of laziness.  
Lazy thinking and indiscriminate  
action.

Tim Ferris

See: efficacy hacks and a not to do list.

---

If you seek tranquility, do less  
or (more accurately) do what's es-  
sential because most of what we  
say and do is not essential  
Ask yourself at every moment "is  
this necessary?"

---

Marcus Aurelius

If you wish to improve, be content  
to appear clueless or stupid in ex-  
traneous matters

---

Epictetus

Hard work is simply the refuge of  
people who have nothing better to  
do

Oscar Wilde

---

Never try to teach a pig to sing.  
It wastes time and annoys the pig.

cf. 2.2

Robert Heinlein

---

Parkinson's Law:

A task will swell in (perceived) importance and complexity in relation to the time allocated for its completion.

---

And so I'll treat them as the law that binds us requires.

With kindness and with justice.

And the inconsequential things?

I'll do my best to treat them as they deserve.

---

Marcus Aurelius



Treat what you don't have as non-existent

Look at what you have, the things you value most and think how much you'd crave them if you didn't have them

cf. 4.17

Marcus Aurelius

---

The cucumber is bitter?

Throw it out.

There are brambles in the path?

Then go around them

cf. 2.8

Marcus Aurelius

---

Four habits to watch for.

Ask yourself:

- is this thought necessary?
  - is it destructive to those around me?
  - is it really what you think?
  - is it just self indulgent?
-

If you don't have a consistent goal in life, how can you live it in a consistent way?

---

Marcus Aurelius

Get used to your circumstances, complain about them as little as possible. Grasp whatever advantages they have to offer

---

Seneca

They should try to subordinate things to themselves not themselves to things

---

cf. 4.17

Horace

The things you used to own. Now  
they own you

Jack, *Fight Club*

---

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## CHAPTER 3

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# Action

Action may not always bring happiness, but  
without action there is none

Benjamin Disraeli

---

Fac aut tace

Do or be silent

---

Code wins

---

Demonstrate don't explicate

Robert Greene

---

Action expresses priority

Mahatma Ghandi

---

Quality is not an act. It is a habit.

Aristotle

---

How you do anything is how you  
do everything

Ryan Holiday

---

If I cannot do great things I can do  
small things in a great way

Martin Luther King Jr.

---

Each of us lives only now in this brief instant.  
The rest has been lived already or is impossible  
to see

Marcus Aurelius

---

## Stick to what's in front of you; Idea, action, utterance

Marcus Aurelius

---

Do what nature demands. Get a move on if you have it in you and don't worry whether anyone will give you any credit for it. And don't go expecting Plato's "Republic" either, just be satisfied with even the smallest progress

Marcus Aurelius

---

It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit

Harry S Truman

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## CHAPTER 4

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# Leadership

When you are not practicing remember that someone else is and when you meet him he will win.

Bill Bradley

---

Wise men make more opportunities  
than they find

Francis Bacon

---

Don't judge each day by the harvest  
you reap but by the seeds you  
sow.

Robert Louis Stephenson

---

As I grow older I pay less attention  
to what people say, I just watch  
what they do.

---

Andrew Carnegie

People do not change, they are  
merely revealed

---

Anne Enright

Kindness gives birth to kindness

---

Seneca

Pay less attention to the words  
people use and greater attention  
to the tone of their voice, the look  
in their eyes and their body lan-  
guage

cf. 4.24

Robert Green

---

There is no use talking about the  
problem unless you talk about the  
solution

Betty Williams

---

Under promise;  
over deliver

Tom Peters

---

You can't build a reputation on  
what you're going to do

Henry Ford

---

Be careful not to baost of any suc-  
cess

Robert Greene

---

Be quiet, work hard, stay healthy

---

use strict;  
good servant,  
bad master.

---

Simon Cozens

Be the chief but never the lord

---

Lao Tzu

One man practicing sportsmanship  
is better than 100 teaching it

---

cf. 4.10

Knute Roche

Races are won here not there. Where it is  
hardest to speed up not easiest

---

Ryan Holiday

Life is defined by how much you do, how often you took the difficult path and were rewarded for it

Ryan Holiday

(not by how much you own)

---

Super-human effort is not worth a damn unless it produces results

Shackleton

---

Recognise effort  
Reward results

BAML

---

Close captures no crowns

Ryan Holiday

---



Learning to listen is the most valuable thing you can do

cf. 4.4

Robert Love

---

The ability to measure people and know who you're dealing with is the most important skill of all

cf. 4.5

Robert Greene

---

Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire

Confucious

---

Practice really hearing what people say.

Do your best to get inside their minds

cf. 4.21

Marcus Aurelius

---

Learn to ask of all actions, "why  
are they doing that?"  
Starting with your own.

cf. 7.5

Marcus Aurelius

---

If it's in your control why do it? If  
it's in someone else's then who are  
you blaming?  
Blame no one  
Set people straight if you can. If  
not just repair the damage

cf. 11.7

Marcus Aurelius

---

If they've done something wrong,  
correct them gently and show  
them how to improve.

If you can't do that the blame lies  
with you or no one

cf. 3.12

Marcus Aurelius

---

To undertake nothing:

- without purpose or at random
- for any other reason than the  
common good

cf. 2.11

Marcus Aurelius

---

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## CHAPTER 5

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# Patience

Ask yourself this question:  
Am I in charge of this situation or is this situation in charge of me?

Anthony De Mello

---

Do not make war unless victory  
may be gained;  
If there is a prospect of victory  
move;  
If there is no prospect of victory  
do not move.

Sun Tzu

---

Impatience: perhaps the single  
greatest pitfall

Robert Greene

---

How much more damage grief  
and anger do than the things that  
caused them

---

Marcus Aurelius

There are always more of them be-  
fore they are counted

---

cf. 7.19

Ulysses S Grant

The senses don't deceive judge-  
ment deceives

---

Goethe





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## CHAPTER 6

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# Learning

If I read a book and get one good idea from that \$20, then I've gotten one of the greatest deals of all time

Tom Peters

---

To forgive and forget means to have thrown away a dearly bought experience

Arthur Schopenhaur

---

The greatest danger you face is your mind growing soft and your eyes growing dull

Robert Greene

---

You think you are doing fine you  
are not compelled to adapt until it  
is too late

Robert Greene

---

The art lies in concealing the art

Horace

---

If people knew how hard I worked, it would  
not seem so masterful

Michelangelo

---

Never nitpick a heuristic

Nassim Taleb

---



---

## CHAPTER 7

---

# Resilience

When we are tired we are attacked by ideas  
we conquered long ago.

Friedrich Nietzsche

---

All the meat and all that it wants.

Case, Neuromancer

---

It's just fat and muscle

---

To think is easy  
To act is hard  
But the hardest thing of all is to  
act in accordance with your think-  
ing

---

John Von Goethe

Hanlon's Razor:  
Never attribute to malice that  
which can be adequately explained  
by incompetence

Robert J. Hanlon

---

or weakness or fear

Promise yourself to be so strong that nothing  
can disturb your peace of mind

Christian D'Larson

---

You control the effort not the results

Ryan Holiday

---



We control our own actions and are responsible for them.

If we act wrongly we have done serious harm to ourselves

---

Marcus Aurelius

Does what happened stop you from acting with justice, generosity, self control, sanity, prudence, honesty and stright forwardness?

---

Marcus Aurelius

The world loves to blacken the radiant and  
drag the sublime through the dust

Schiller

---

Haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate

cf.  
11.3

Taylor Swift

---

You don't need their approval

Danielle La Porte

---

Ta eph'hemin  
Ta ouk eph'hemin

Stoic phrase

what is up to us, what is not up to us.

---

Tranquility comes when you stop  
caring what they say

Marcus Aurelius

---



Nothing either good nor bad but  
thinking makes it so

Shakespeare

---

Real difficulties can be overcome  
It's only the imaginary ones that  
are unconquerable

Theodore N Vail

---

Problems are rarely as bad as we  
think they are, or rather, they are  
precisely as bad as we think they  
are

cf. 7.47

Ryan Holiday

---

External things are not the problem. It's your assessment of them which you can erase right now

---

Marcus Aurelius

See things for what they are,  
do what we can,  
endure what we must

---

Ryan Holiday

Not to give into adversity.  
Not to trust prosperity.

And always take note of For-  
tune's habit of behaving exactly  
as she pleases

---

Seneca

You can't stop the waves but you  
can learn how to surf

Jon Kabat Zin

---



All of our unhappiness comes from our inability to be alone

Jean de la Brugere

---

A bore is someone who deprives you of solitude without providing you with company

Gian Vincenzo Gravina

---

Strive to keep yourself free from unnecessary entanglements and alliances

Robert Greene

---

## Happiness depends on ourselves

Aristotle

---

Nothing can bring you peace but  
yourself.

Nothing can bring you peace but  
the triumph of principles

Ralph Waldo Emerson

---

Everyone gets one life. Your's is  
almost up and instead of treating  
yourself with respect you have en-  
trusted your happiness to others.

Marcus Aurelius

---

He who conquers others is strong,  
he who conquers himself is  
mighty

Lao Tzu

---

Success depends on previous preparation, and  
without such preparation there can be no suc-  
cess

Confucius

---

Optimism is cowardice

Oswald Spengler

---

Hope is a poor hedge

Erik R. Sirri

2007, but likely earlier

---

## Preparation not luck

---

So keep at it until it's fully digested.

A strong stomach digests whatever it eats.

A blazing fire takes whatever you throw on it and makes light and flame.

Courage doesn't always roar.  
Sometimes courage is the quiet  
voice at the end of the day whis-  
pering "I will try again tomorrow"

cf. 7.35

Mary Anne Radmach

---

Disgraceful for the soul to give up  
while the body is still going strong

Marcus Aurelius

---



# Fall seven times, stand eight

cf. 7.35

Japanese Proverb

---

Choose not to be harmed and you  
won't feel harmed  
Don't feel harmed and you haven't  
been

---

Marcus Aurelius

It can ruin your life only if it ruins  
your character. Otherwise it can-  
not harm you. Inside or out

---

Marcus Aurelius

Trust yourself more and others less

---

Robert Greene



Love all  
Trust a few  
Do wrong to none

William Shakespeare

---

I was once s fortunate man, then fortune deserted me.

But true good fortune is what you make for yourself.

Good fortune:

- good character
- good intentions
- good actions

Ambition: tying your well being to  
what other people say and do

Self-indulgence: tying it to the  
things that happen to you

Sanity: tying it to your own ac-  
tions

cf. 7.13

Marcus Aurelius

---

Straight not straightened

Marcus Aurelius

---

What is outside my mind means  
nothing to it

Marcus Aurelius

---

The mind without passions is like a fortress. No place is more secure

Marcus Aurelius

---

Objective judgment now, at this very moment.

Unselfish action now, at this very moment.

Willing acceptance of all external events now, at this very moment.

That's all you need

Marcus Aurelius

---

It is we who generate the judgments inscribing them on ourselves

---

Marcus Aurelius

When you judge another you do not define them, you define yourself.

---

Wayne Dyer

Care about what other people think and you will always be their prisoner

---

cf. 7.13

Lao Tzu

It is reason and wisdom which take  
away cares  
not places afording views over the  
sea

cf. 7.25

Horace

---

---

## CHAPTER 8

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# Humility

No chorus of lamentation, No hysterics

Marcus Aurelius

---



If you're not humble life will visit  
humility upon you

---

Mike Tyson

He who does not empty a guide  
cannot gain advantage from the  
ground

---

Sun Tzu

Take the help

---

Danielle La Porte

Learn as if you were going to live  
but live as if you were going to die  
tomorrow.

---

via Ryan Holiday

After the game the king and the  
pawn go back into the same box

---

Italian Proverb

You could leave this life right now.  
Let that determine how you act.

---

Marcus Aurelius

Certainly, if a man of understand-  
ing still has himself, he has lost  
nothing.

---

Michel De Montaigne

Foolish is the man who delights in  
his good fortune, supposing it will  
never leave him.

cf. 7.20

Euripides

---

To accept it without arrogance,  
to let it go with indifference

Marcus Aurelius

---

If the stars were to appear but one  
night every thousand years how  
man would marvel

Ralph Waldo Emerson

---

Your opinion is either dependent  
on the facts or it's not;  
When they change you should shift  
along with them

cf. 7.21

Ryan Holiday

The facts were always there, of course, just unclear or hidden.  
Think clearly about what you're looking at. cf 9.10

---

Remember that to change your  
mind and accept correction are  
mere acts too

Marcus Aurelius

and so, under our control

---

It is the folly of many to mistake  
the echo of a London coffee shop  
for the voice of a kingdom

---

Jonathan Swift

Everywhere, at each moment, you have the option:

- to accept this event with humility
- to treat each person as he should be treated
- to approach this thought with care, so that nothing irrational creeps in

That you've made enough mistakes yourself. You just like them.

cf. 11.7

Marcus Aurelius

---

So make your exit with grace  
the same grace shown too you

Marcus Aurelius

---

Be willing to be a beginner every  
single morning

cf. 2.13

Meister Eckhart

---





---

## CHAPTER 9

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# Confidence

Let go and move with the chaos that presents itself to you. From within it you will find endless oppourtunities that elude other people

Robert Greene

---

Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.

cf. 7.21

Anais Nin

---

So often self confidence is dependent on the basic but elusive premise  
"I'm fine as I am"

via the School of Life

on confidence

---

## Don't water your weeds

Harvey Mackay

---

Any kind of resistance or obstacle that crosses  
your path should be seen as yet another  
chance to improve your work

Robert Green

---

You can adopt the attitude that  
there's nothing you can do, or you  
can see the challenge as a call to  
action

cf. 2.22

Catherine Pulsifer

---

You've already made it this far, might as well  
take one more step

Ryan Holiday

---

But to get back up when you fail, to celebrate behaving like a human (however imperfectly) and fully embrace the pursuit you've embarked on.

Marcus Aurelius

---

You will fail eventually.  
Whatever.

cf. 7.9

Danielle La Parte

---

A mistake is not something to be determined after the fact but in the light of information up to that point

Nassim Taleb

---

A failed attempt is just that and nothing more,  
its not the end and its not fatal. Keep at it.

---



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## CHAPTER 10

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# Gratitude





---

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## CHAPTER 11

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# Generosity

Tell yourself this the people I deal with today will be:

- meddling
- ungrateful
- arrogant
- dishonest
- jealous
- surly

cf. 11.7

Marcus Aurelius

People are going to be like that from time to time and so long as you remember that you've been like that too you can see the behaviour for what it is.

---

Resentment is like taking poison and waiting  
for the other person to die

cf.  
7.11

Malachi McCourt

---

Someone hates me? Their problem.

Mine: to be patient and cheerful  
with everyone (including them)

Marcus Aurelius

---

Because... hate will get you every  
time

Every time.

Ryan Holiday

---

If talking to oneself did not look so mad no day would go by without my growling to myself "you silly shit!"

Yet, I do not intend that to be the definition of me

cf. 9.4

Michel De Montaigne

---

Always give with remembering and receive without forgetting

cf. 4.6

Brian Tracy

---

Forgiveness means a long memory of all the times when we wouldn't have gotten through life with someone cutting us some slack. It is recognising that living with others is not possible without excusing errors

via School of Life

See the modern virtues

---

You've given and they've received it. And yet, like an idiot, you keep holding out for more. To be credited with a good deed? To be repaid in kind? why?

cf.  
3.12

Marcus Aurelius

---

## Forgiveness means giving up hope of a better past

cf. 3.9

Lily Tomlin

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