

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 (§??). Thinking about the sort of qualities we want to show is a great first step to focus the mind and make sure we know where we're going¹ but we need a little more help. Thinking about the sort of person we want to be and looking closely at the qualities they embody we can come up with a consistent goal, a set of high or even unattainable targets.

Even with our goal, we'll still fail. Badly. But to get us through the tough spots We're going to get help from philosophers, deities, sportsmen, fictional characters, artists and people who are far smarter than us.

The hope here is that we can turn to this set of *Pointers* at times when we're losing our way, forgetting what's important to us and the promises we've made about the sort of person we want to become.

The set of qualities we're looking to develop here are inspired in part by the Modern Virtues page from the School of Life², the majority of content is helpful quotes and aphorisms picked up from books and the internet. If you find one good idea in these pages it will be directly attributable to them (§??).

Good luck and, as Seneca would say, live well.

¹Arthur Scopenhauer, [?]

²<http://bit.ly/1XoP0tE>

Chapter 1

Action

The *Pointers* here are not things to be mulled over and analysed in great depth, they're included to give us the little nudges and course corrections for our actions.

Without action of some kind our plans for improvement simply won't get very far. We need to look at the mammoth task in front of us and take that scary first step (and then the next). Taking action isn't always easy and choosing the right move (§??) at the right time (§??) can be stupefyingly hard. The hope is though that we won't be paralysed and we will make a positive impact on the people and projects which are important to us.

We won't be successful all the time (there are sometimes periods weeks in which I'm not very successful on many fronts for much of the time) but by persevering (§?? and ??) we can chip away at the habits (and even relationships (§??)) that are slowing us down or even undoing good progress we've already made.

We need to remember what's important to us. Remember how much time we have and how we choose to spend it¹. Marcus often looks at how little life he's been allotted (and how much he thinks he has left). Although, as Seneca reminds us, it's not that we are allocated a short time, it's just that we are wasteful of the time we do have. It's a good reminder for people like us to just get on with things and not get too wrapped up in ourselves too much. We also need to keep in mind that people will see how we spend our time and the choices we made. We need to be honest with ourselves about what is important to us and what's not. No matter what we say they will believe what they see (and don't see).

¹<http://bit.ly/1OMUOuU>

Chapter 2

Focus

As hard as it can be to take action, it's even harder to maintain the level of focus we need to on the right things. To help us find the right things we should think about what impact our efforts can produce (§??) and what price we'll have to pay. The sun will still hide behind the clouds on our day at the beach, the white van will still drive too close no matter how much we hope otherwise. Better to work on things we can control.

When we do identify the right things, we still squander our time and energy. We're too polite, putting ourselves and our priorities to one side to avoid offending people (§??), we make great gains on Twitter and Facebook while we let our Amazing Book Idea gather dust (§??), we spend hours mindlessly scrolling around crappy sensationalist journalism when we could be reading an immersive novel (§??) or working on our beloved hobby (§??).

Epictetus reminds us that we need to gut things from our lives which take us away from the tricky but important business of improvement. We can be sure that nothing truly terrible will happen if we stop using social media. We can be confident that life will carry on if we leave "the mind numbing spirit crushing game shows¹" to someone else. There are so many ways to spend our time, we need to be careful not to waste it and that can require significant effort. Asking ourselves whether what we're doing right now is truly important to us (§??) is an incredibly useful habit to develop.

Maybe we should call someone who's important to us and focus solely on that for starters.

Let's take 15 minutes. The advice and guidance on the

¹Renton, Trainspotting

next few pages will still be here when we get back.

Chapter 3

Patience

We know how important action is, but acting rashly, without care and attention can do serious harm to ourselves and can undo the progress we've made towards our aims. On this journey knowing where we're headed is more important than getting there quickly, especially when you consider that we may not even arrive. So we should consider that the manner in which we make the journey is at least as important as the destination.

To some patience can look like a lack of engagement or a lack of commitment but there's often more harm done through an emotional (over) reaction (§??) and we're only going to waste time and do everything badly if we act or speak angrily (§??).

We know that we are expected to play the game with limited (or even inaccurate) information but we should take time to think over what we do know before committing to a course of action. We also need to be open to changing our plans as more facts are revealed (§??).

Acting in good faith after a consideration of the facts and taking counsel where we can will mean that even when the landscape changes and the actions we took weren't right in retrospect we can still stand by them in the light of what we knew at the time (§??). But dive in and we can blunder from one poorly understood situation to the next and end up in an even weaker position than we started in. It's a lot of effort to be patient enough to maintain a level of control so that we can act correctly, we don't fly into a rage, we don't make snap judgements and we don't let ourselves be carried away by the crowd.

With a little help we can be sure we're up to it.

Chapter 4

Learning

We don't know enough. We'll likely never master our respective professions, hobbies and past-times, we'll never understand how others behave and what motivates them to any meaningful level but that shouldn't stop us from trying. Quite the opposite in fact. Maintaining an open mind¹ is a key trait for us to make sure we're in a position where we can grow and make progress towards our aims. Getting stuck into patterns of behaviour and allowing our comfort zones to shrink is a sure way to stop progress dead in its tracks.

There's an endless amount of knowledge our open minds can consume but learning in an undirected manner won't help us (§?? and ??). Deciding which topics (and even which authors) to consume is important enough to be given some serious thought. We can't just let anyone in so following recommendations from those few we trust (§??) becomes a key strategy for learning.

Spending some time reviewing what we would like to learn should involve not just a look at our careers and the skills needed for the Next Big Project but a broader look at things we've enjoyed doing in the past and what topics we can look at in that area. If it happens that the topics you've enjoyed are the ones you use every day in your career then you're very lucky and if not? In that case we need to have a more detailed look (§??).

No matter what we choose, one way we can certainly learn more is to simply read more² so that we make use of otherwise wasted time.

¹<http://mindsetonline.com/whatisit/themindsets/index.html>

²<http://ryanholiday.net/how-to-read-more-a-lot-more/>

Chapter 5

Resilience

We can't have full control and so things won't always turn out as we'd hoped. Having the courage to pursue our goal in the face of unexpected changes of plan (§??), times of poor judgement (§??), and even after outright failures (§??) will mean that we'll still make slow progress towards our aim of a better self.

The challenges won't just come from us and our lapses in judgement or the Fates¹ changing their mind, others will see our improvement and resent us or even try to derail us (§??). Our successes can make them uncomfortable when they feel lazy, cruel or arrogant. When that happens we need to remember that we were there not so long ago ourselves (§??) but we need to keep focussed on what's truly important and what we're trying to achieve. Our route is hard enough without allowing other people to throw us off course (§??).

Picking ourselves up and dusting ourselves off needs to become second nature. We may be lucky enough to have support from others at times but we know we can't rely on that, we can only rely on what we control and that is nothing more than our response to what has happened.

To reach our goals we don't need to be the best (§??), and in our case it doesn't really make sense to "be the best" as we'll always be able to improve in some way, but we do need to keep at it and no matter what happens acting as though we were already the better person we want to be (§??).

No matter what's happened, no matter what they've said, no matter what they've done; it's up to us how we react, it's up to us what happens next.

¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parcae>

Chapter 6

Humility

We can't bear listening to empty claims and boasting, it's infuriating especially when people seem to be eating up the inflated claims. At times we fall foul of this behaviour ourselves, acting as though there's nothing we can learn from those around us, acting as though we have it all figured out, acting as though we know it all. No matter how masterful we are in a given area, we can be sure that there are those more accomplished than us and those who are less accomplished. In either case we should be ready to listen to them as they can both provide different and valuable view points to change our direction and improve our processes (§??).

We're not immune to needing help, we need to recognise that there are those who have skills that we sorely lack and that asking for help is not a cause for embarrassment it's a chance for us to learn something new, patch our deficiencies and maybe build a new relationship. If we allow ego to stop us from admitting to ourselves that we need help we're doing ourselves a major disservice, we need to put that to one side and let the experts show us the way. Sometimes we'll be out of our depth and alone, in which case we know we need to do what's required to the best of our ability.

We're not immune to luck either, it's incredibly important to remember that the current situation is not just down to how awesome we are, that there's an element of fate involved too. We know that it's only truly our behaviour which is under our control and to act as though that's not the case is incredibly short sighted.

If we can keep this in mind we'll be open to new ideas, we'll be more self aware and we'll chip away at our weaknesses.

Chapter 7

Confidence

It's a fine line between arrogance and confidence. We need to be sure about what we're about to do but we need to remember that we're only human and we will make errors in judgement, just as we have before (§??). Of course, we can't let our past (§?? and ??) define our self image and we can't let our past define how we behave now. Once we've learnt from those events, we need to understand that we can't change what happened but we can have an impact on what happens next.

Unchecked, our negative self talk and fear of failure can be paralysing but if we structure our tasks and goals in the right way we can control it. If we aim for things which are under our control we can be more sure of success. In areas where we have some control (or none at all) we need to consider what would constitute a successful outcome and what behaviours might influence that. We're not looking to win the Thursday night poker game, we're looking to make fewer errors than last week. We're not looking to get a raise at work, we're looking to consistently be valuable to our boss. We're not looking to win The Nobel Prize in Literature, we're looking to hone our craft and produce a vast portfolio of work.

Incidentally, if we manage to consistently do those things we stand a much better chance of hitting the original external targets but that's none of our concern because we're focussed on what we can control not what we don't. We don't have control of how things will turn out measured by external metrics and that can be a big hit on our confidence, but if we change our success criteria focussing on internal metrics we can always win or learn.

Being bold enough to act in the face of that uncertainty. That's what we're aiming for.

Chapter 8

Gratitude

Just looking at the massively improbable set of circumstances needed to get us here in one piece we should be able to grab handfuls of gratitude from the air. We don't though, we take things for granted after a while. We forget quickly that we're lucky enough to be literate and high enough up Maslow's hierarchy of needs¹ to have time to focus on our better selves having ticked off the basics a long time ago.

It's not just the things we have already that we take for granted, it's someone taking extra effort on our behalf or extending an unexpected generosity to us. We become so cynical that we expect others to be on the make or we sniffily say that they're "just doing their job".

If we can't rely on ourselves to be grateful, we need a little help to remind us and correct our course.

The stoics offered a routine to make sure we appreciated the things we have and the people around us. They suggested that we occasionally take the time to imagine our life without our loved ones and our most treasured possessions (§??). By regularly putting ourselves through the loss of a limb or a loved one, we'll feel truly grateful when they are with you (or still connected to the rest of your body).

We know that we should behave as though this is our final day (§?? and ??) so simply waking up provides us with a great source of gratitude for the day ahead (there are many who won't of course). No matter what else happens (§??) not only will we be ready for it but we'll be thankful for the chances brought us for improving ourselves by focussing on the aims we have.

¹<http://bit.ly/1BYf2Nd>

Chapter 9

Generosity

Materially speaking, we know that it is better to help many than to live in luxury ¹, we don't need a top of the range car more than the homeless man needs the next meal. Professionally we can be equally tight fisted, grabbing at praise from our superiors and doing our peers down so we are first in line for the bonus and promotion. We don't need to do either of those things of course. Allowing others to take the credit for work we've played a part in or setting others up for success can feel like career suicide but it's character traits like this that, with time, mean we'll be seen as the person who brings up strong talent and the person needed on the project to make sure it's a roaring success.

Even when we behave like this, we know other people are selfish, they will upset us and they'll unravel our plans. It doesn't mean they're out to get us (§?? and ??) even though it may feel like that from time to time.

As hard as it is, if we want to make progress towards our aims, we need to give other people (and ourselves) a break. It's part of our duty to lead by example. We know that focussing on things that happened in the past is fruitless, it won't change the situation and only adds to our own stresses. There are few things more pointless than behaviour like this. We don't have to forget the events, that might mean we'd be surprised next time around but turning them over and over?

There's no need to harbour grudges (§??), we don't have that time to waste, but we do need to remember the times we've spoken sharply or hurtfully and we've been forgiven and pass that favour on (§?? and ??).

¹Musonius Rufus, [?]

Chapter 10

Leadership

It doesn't matter whether we're leading an expedition, a household or just ourselves our behaviour is always influencing those around us and our actions speak volumes about the sort of people we are.

We're holding ourselves to an incredibly high set of standards; we need to recognise the efforts of others and be generous in our interpretation of their actions (§??), show gratitude when things go well, have an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, be open to correction (from anyone) in the light of better information, let others know they're important to us by putting everything else to one side and focussing entirely on them when they need us. Consistently measuring ourselves against these standards will be hard and humbling for us. We will slip up from time to time. What matters is how we deal with those bumps in the road, will we let our heads drop or will we use the situation to our benefit? (§??) With sustained practice the gaps between the failures will lengthen and we'll set a better example as a result.

When things go wrong we need to move with a level of determination and confidence demonstrating that we have thought about our options and made a conscious choice about the next steps (§??). That's when we can be the most helpful, that's when we can calm things and that's when we're needed most.

Acting as though we have already achieved the qualities we aspire to, acting as though we are already the better versions of ourselves that we imagined at the start of the journey means we can have an incredibly positive impact on those around us.

Of course, it doesn't matter whether anyone follows. Only that we try to lead.