

Subject: A Stoic way to examine what happened-and what comes next

Accept what happened without surrendering your responsibility: make your own next action just, truthful, and useful to the common good.

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Dear friend,

I have been thinking about how to introduce you to Marcus Aurelius without offering the kind of reassurance that would diminish what happened. The death of your patient is not something a slogan can resolve, and Stoicism does not ask you to pretend that it is emotionally insignificant. Its value here is more exact: it offers a disciplined way to separate the event itself from the judgments that may now be multiplying around it.

Marcus repeatedly distinguishes what happens from the conclusions we add-"harmful," "shameful," "unbearable," or proof that one is no longer fit to act. The event demands careful examination. The additional verdicts may or may not be true. Holding those apart is not evasion; it is the beginning of accurate judgment. His practical instruction is to remain with the first apprehension of a thing before allowing fear, wounded pride, or self-condemnation to take over.

That distinction also clarifies responsibility. Stoicism does not say, "Nothing was in your control." It says to distinguish the circumstances from your conduct within them. Marcus's summary is direct: accept what happens as part of the order of things, while making your own actions just. For you, that could mean reviewing the operation with complete honesty: What was known at each moment? What decision was made? What could reasonably have been done differently? What must be learned or corrected? The aim is truth, not a ritual punishment designed to preserve the illusion that enough suffering could undo the death.

His standard for a life is not reputation or uninterrupted success, but justice, truth, temperance, and courage. Death itself is part of nature; it is not, in his account, automatically a disgrace. That does not remove grief or the duty to learn. It prevents mortality from becoming a verdict on your moral worth. Your next decisions still belong to you, and the present moment is the only part of life in which those decisions can be made.

A useful first practice would be a brief written review. Ask: What is the event, stripped of interpretation? What is actually within my control now? What action is necessary, rational, just, and beneficial to patients and colleagues? At the end, ask whether you are correcting an error or merely trying to punish myself. Marcus treats changing one's mind in the light of truth as strength, not weakness.

You do not have to become calm before acting well. Tranquility, for him, is an orderly disposition-not the absence of sorrow. Return to that order whenever your thoughts scatter. The work is not to become untouched by this death, but to ensure that grief and uncertainty do not distort the next just action.

With care,

Your friend