

## THE 4 TRUTHS TO LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE

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How many people worry? Anybody worry? [Congregants laugh] Okay. How many people have ever been anxious, worried, and stressed on a regular basis? Anybody feel ...?

You know, studies show that 42 to 45% of Americans self-report that they feel anxiety, worry and stress on a daily basis. How many people worry so much that if you don't have anything to worry about, you get worried? [Congregants laugh]

You know, the Stoic philosopher Seneca said this. He said, *"We suffer more in our imagination than in reality. Most of our fear comes from stories that our minds invent, not from life itself."*

Penn State University did some studies, and they showed that 85 to 91% of the things we worry about never happen. Anybody ever had a scenario, and you kept visualizing all the worst-case stuff -- all the negativity, how bad things would go? And it turned out to not go anywhere near what you were thinking?

This morning, we're going to look at three insights -- we'll look at the fourth next week -- three insights from Stoic philosophy. And, of course, we know three of the main writers of Stoicism: Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. And they share wonderful ideas, wonderful truths, wonderful spiritual principles to help understand ourselves, to understand life, to understand others in a greater way so we can use them to our advantage and to live our best life; be our best self. They do a lot of them in terms of warnings: Don't do this or these will be the consequences and it'll hold you back from living your best life.

And so let us begin with the first one, which I already shared with you. And it says **WE SUFFER MORE IN OUR IMAGINATION THAN IN REALITY.** Most of our fears come from stories our minds invent, not from life, itself. Whether we realize it or not, we all make stuff up every day of our lives. Every day of our lives, we jump to conclusions without having all the evidence.

What story pops into your mind if I describe some of these scenarios? You are told your boss wants to speak with you immediately. [Congregants laugh] Your teenager uncharacteristically is hours late and you've not heard a word from them. A friend wants to meet to discuss some important news. You are giving a presentation and, while you are speaking, someone gets up and walks out.

What do you assume? Where does your imagination go in a lot of these everyday scenarios? Is it to worry? Is it to fear? Is it to make stuff up?

One of the greatest gifts that we have been given is the gift of imagination. And our imaginations are amazing! They can see incredible positive possibilities. We can use our imagination to envision goals and dreams and desires and all sorts of amazing and wonderful things. Einstein said, *"Imagination is more powerful than knowledge."* Knowledge represents all that we know. And as much as all that we know is a lot, it's still limited. But imagination represents all the things it could be. It represents all the different possibilities, which is unlimited.

And so, the thing about imagination -- it is powerful, it is amazing. The question is: How well are we using it? Are we using it in the most effective, helpful way to attract the good that we want, to live the best life that we want? Or are we using it in ways that cause us suffering?

Let's do a little exercise -- a little visualization thing. Let's close our eyes for a minute. Okay, I want you to imagine that you are on a concrete terrace that is 10 feet by 5 feet on the top of a 30-story building with no railing. And you're standing in the center of this concrete terrace. And you're up so high you can't even hear the traffic below. You're up so high all you can hear is the air conditioning and feeling the wind blow a bit; the breeze blow.

And so, you're standing there. Now look down at your feet and notice what shoes you're wearing. So right in the center there. And now lift up your head. Look straight ahead. Now walk directly to the edge until you get your toes right to the edge. Okay? And you're looking straight still. Your toes are on the edge. And now just look straight down. And now look up again and either walk or crawl back to the center of the terrace. [Congregants laugh]

Let's do it again. So, you're back there. But this time you have wings. So, you're in the center of the terrace. And now you're going to walk forward until you get your toes to the edge of the terrace. And I want you to bend your knees, and I want you to jump off. And remember, you've got wings!

So how are you flying? See yourself, but feel yourself. How does that feel: that whole experience? How is it feeling? So do a couple of loop-de-loops -- whatever you feel like doing -- and now fly back to the center of the terrace.

So how many people were a little bit nervous? Or you felt a little thing in your gut in the first one? Anybody? And how many felt excited or confident and joyful or free in the second one? So, with our imagination, we both felt experiences of feeling scared and we felt a feeling of feeling exhilaration.

It is a powerful thing, the gift of imagination! The question we all need to ask ourselves is: How well am I using it? How effectively am I using it as an amazing spiritual tool God has given us to create and attract the life that we desire?

You know, sometimes we are using our imaginations in a negative way, and don't even realize it. And keep ourselves in a trap and a pattern of negativity and limitation. Let me give an example. Anybody ever heard of the book or read the book, "Trusting You Are Loved" by Lou and Francine Epstein?

So, he's on a business trip and his wife always packs his suitcase. And she puts this special orthopedic pillow in his suitcase because he absolutely needs it. He can't have a good night's rest without it. So, he's on this trip; he goes to bed. And then within an hour or two, he's feeling uncomfortable, and he realizes that's not his special pillow. And she forgets to put the pillow in.

And so he starts imagining, thinking, "How careless!" She must have just carelessly threw some other pillow in, and how he must not be a priority to her. She must have not been thinking of him at all. And he kept ratcheting it up: *"She is so thoughtless. She doesn't care about me. Why do I put up with this? I have had enough. I'm going to leave her."*

And so, here it is. With his imagination alone, he goes from a pillow missing to divorce. [Congregants laugh] And sometimes we run these scenarios of negativity. And one of the things he said ... His book is called "Trusting You Are Loved." So, he realizes he is loved by her. And he realizes his mind is running wild in terms of negativity.

But he says often in life, when we get triggered and think, *"They don't love me,"* we start looking for evidence. And that's where the imagination comes. *"Oh, she didn't do that the other day. She forgot this."* And we start building a case of negativity with our imagination.

How many people have ever let your imagination run wild to negativity, kind of like that story? I mean, it is absolutely amazing. I mean, why on earth would we question the love of someone who has clearly proven that they love us? And it is because we sometimes live in a level of fear. We live in a level of feeling not worthy. And when it comes up, we start letting our imaginations run wild, and it causes us suffering. It causes us pain.

And not only does it do that in us, but it has an impact on our relationship and relationships. In an article in "Psychology Today," it said something that I found surprising, but then it makes a lot of sense. It says that anxiety is an epidemic in our world today. Studies show that anxiety now constitutes the most prevalent mental health problem worldwide.

We live in a world that constantly has threats of terrorism, of war, of violence, of corruption, of injustice, and financial crisis. And we also live out from our own space of a mindset of poverty or a victim mindset. And living all these things creates a level of anxiety that we're not safe throughout our days. Consistently with our days, that has become more and more a mindset for us. And it is causing suffering. And our imaginations are a part of what is causing and sustaining some of this mindset of anxiety.

So how do we use our imaginations more positively to move us in the direction of the best life and the kind of life that we want to lead?

Marcus Aurelius said, *"We have power over our minds, not outside events. Realize this and you will find strength."*

You know, imagination is something that we have this incredible gift to use it from some powerful, positive things to create, to attract. I mean, if we are all creators -- and we are! We're born in the image and likeness of the Creator, and we are all creators. And we are always creating.

And so, if that is true -- that we are creators and we're always creating -- how are you liking what you've created so far? And what's going on right now? And what would you like to create, perhaps, that's different than what you're experiencing right now?

You know, imagination is a creative energy. And so that, when we put our energy out, that we are literally creating what our lives are. We are creating our success. We are creating our happiness. We're creating our health, our careers. And so, we have the power to take our imagination and shape any of the areas of our lives into what it is that we want to do ... and to do it consciously and to do it intentionally.

Book of Proverbs 29:18 says, *"Where there is no vision, the people perish."* And I say where there is a vision, people prosper. Where there is a vision, people progress. Because it's a creative power. And it's what we put out there. And it's a part of our spiritual work to put out positivity; to put out our dreams; to put out greater things than what are happening in our lives and our world right now. To bring out more love; to bring out more joy. And our imaginations is one of the greatest tools that we have been given to create this.

How many people have a vision for your life? How many have a vision for every area of your life? I mean, there's no reason why we don't have a vision for what our career and our finances look like. A vision, you know, for our relationship, for our family. A vision for our health and fitness. Or even a vision for what our spiritual life looks like. That is how powerful this imagination is. And to use it intentionally to shop and to create the kind of life we want to have is an important thing.

And I think it's really powerful to use the power of our imagination to correct and improve some bad habits that we might have. So, let's say you smoke cigarettes. You could use your imagination to see yourself, you know, tearing it up or throwing it away. Or being offered one and saying no. It's an important thing! We don't think that it applies in all areas, but it absolutely can be applied in all areas.

Anybody ever get a little upset in traffic? Like, if somebody cuts you off, you might give them the horn or flip them the bird or swear or yell? Here's what you could do the next time. If you have that problem, you visualize yourself driving down the highway and someone cuts you off. And then instead of the other responses, this was your response: You smile. You say, *"God bless you."* And you wave at them with all five fingers. [Congregants laugh]

You can use your imagination to shape and create any and every area of your life. You've got an important meeting coming up this week. Visualize how that meeting could go. At a minimum, see yourself at peace. See yourself grounded and centered. And think of the qualities you'd like to exude during that meeting. It's an important, powerful tool we have been given. And it is a shame that we're using it to allow ourselves to suffer instead of succeed. And so, this is an important thing.

Our imagination can be our worst enemy and it can be our best friend. It could cause suffering or it could create success. The choice is ours. So how are you going to use your imagination to bring forth your living your best life?

Okay, the second one is **WHAT YOU AVOID CONTROLS YOU**. Running from discomfort only strengthens it and gives it power over you. Face it once and you break the chain forever.

So let me ask you: What in your life are you avoiding right now? What conversation do you need to have that you're avoiding? What decision do you need to make that you're avoiding? What action are you avoiding taking? What are you avoiding starting? What are you avoiding letting go or ending?

You know, we like avoiding a lot of things. Difficult conversations must be at the top of the list, but sometimes we avoid grief. Sometimes we avoid forgiveness. Sometimes we avoid vulnerability. Sometimes we avoid the silence, because then we have to actually feel what we're feeling and face what we are feeling inside.

Every avoidance -- while it might seem liberating and free for a moment -- eventually becomes a prison. Eventually comes something that limits us and represses/suppresses us. When we avoid, we are literally robbing ourselves of growth, of expansion, of healing, of awakening, of peace and transformation.

Most people think, again, freedom comes from avoiding discomfort. But growth is uncomfortable. Healing is uncomfortable. Forgiveness is uncomfortable. Transformation is uncomfortable. And so, we need to face the things in our lives that are challenging, because they're there to help us grow. They're there to help us transform. They're there to help us live more fully and freely.

Les Brown, the motivational speaker, said, *"When my life was shaking at its foundations, I went to God to find out why, only to find that it was God that was shaking me."* And sometimes -- I don't know about you -- but sometimes I need a good little shakeup. Sometimes we need a little bit of challenge and a little bit of adversity to wake us up. And so it's not to run from the very thing; it is actually the thing that we need, the thing that will help us.

I want you to think of a hero, a role model; someone you idolize or have been a big help for you; someone you look up to. And I will guarantee you that they overcame something. That they achieved something great, something that was not easy. And it's because we see it in them, and it's calling the greatness in us to come forth. It's reminding us we've got that in there. We get excited to see them, because we know we could be expressing that in a greater way, as well.

I found this stoic writing. I don't know who wrote it, but I just want to share it, because it's powerful. It's good. *"Our biggest problem is believing that we shouldn't have any problems. We imagine that life should be smooth, that peace means the absence of chaos. But a sea without waves is not a sea at all. Problems are not interruptions to our life. They are our life, rising and falling just as the tide must. When you stop resisting the storm, you realize it was never against you. It was you moving through another moment of the dance."*

And this message is simple: Don't avoid life; face life. Because that's the thing that will grow us, develop us, and expand us, and take us to another level of living.

And then the last one is **BECOME UNSTOPPABLE**. You become unstoppable the moment you stop seeking approval.

Cute little story. So there's a story about a father and a son, and they're traveling with a donkey. Both of them were riding the donkey when people started criticizing and telling them they're overworking the donkey. So, then the father started walking, and only the son rode on the donkey. And people started criticizing the son for not honoring his father, who was older, and giving him a break to ride. And then the son walked while the father rode, and people criticized, saying that the father was being very selfish. He should let the son ride. And then they both walked beside the donkey and then people started mocking them saying, *"Hey, they're wasting a perfectly good donkey."*

And the father said to the son; he said, *"If we live by everyone's opinions, it'll be hard for us to get anywhere."*

In the book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul says, *"Am I now seeking human approval or God's approval?"* And it's a good question for all of us. Who is directing your life and decisions, actions and choices? Is it your family? Your friends? Is it fear? Is it public opinion? Is it divine wisdom? Is it our inner guidance?

You know, seeking approval is actually a really easy thing to fall into. And the reason is: we are hardwired for belonging. We absolutely need belonging. And so, to connect with people and be with them socially, we sometimes act in a different way so that people will like us. It's something that's kind of hardwired in us. That we will edit and adapt ourselves to be liked; to feel we belong; to feel connected.

You know, and sometimes we don't want to get rejected. All of these other things that allow us the opportunity to feel loved, to feel a sense of belonging and closeness. And sometimes we get conditioned into pleasing and improving. When we see, as children, that you get treated nicely, if you do act this way, we keep acting that way.

And sometimes that's good. But sometimes it's not so good. That we're actually living and torturing ourselves into whatever we need to do so we'll be liked and loved. So, it takes work as adults to live more authentically when we've been hardwired and conditioned to be more pleasing towards others.

But the benefits are that we get to connect with the truth of who we are. The benefits are that we actually have real, authentic relationships. The benefits are that we are willing to take a risk and step out and do greater things than we thought we would do.

Epictetus said this. He says, *"If you want to improve, be content to be thought foolish and stupid."* I think he could have said that better. [Congregants laugh] But what he's saying is that, you know, if you want a better life, you've got to stand true to yourself, no matter what other people think.

And we need to ask ourselves: Is this good with my soul? That whatever decision we make, whatever process we have, we've got to get to that place and say: Is this good with my soul? Is this what the deeper part of myself is saying is wisest and best thing to do?

Three men went hiking through a forest. When they came to this raging, violent river, they needed to get to the other side. And the first man prayed, God, *"Please give me the strength to cross the river."* And poof! He had big muscular arms and legs. And it took him two hours. He almost drowned twice, but he made it over.

And then the second guy saw what first guy went through, and he said, *"God, please give me the strength and the tools to get over the river."* And so, poof! He had the big arms and legs. He had the strength again, and God gave him a rowboat. And he was able to cross in about an hour, and he almost capsized only once.

And seeing this, the third man prayed, *"God, please give me the strength, the tools, and the intelligence to cross the river."* And poof, he turned into a woman. [Congregants laugh and applaud] You don't have to clap that loud!

And she looked at the map, noticed there was a bridge just 100 yards away, and went over and crossed it. [Congregants laugh]

So did you know that Jesus and Seneca lived at the same time? And that Jesus was a stoic philosopher, as well? It's really predicated on the idea that we should control and do the best in the things that we can control and do the best in. And we should address it all in a mindset of inner peace. To use wisdom, courage, justice, and temperament.

And so, I found it powerful that Jesus aligned with these wonderful principles and teachings. And what it is saying is for us to not suffer. Don't you allow your imagination to cause you suffering. Use your imagination to help you have success. Lift up your eyes with your imagination to see greater things. And

don't avoid the difficult parts in life. Face it because it's for you, not against you. And finally, don't seek others' approval. Seek and ask your soul: What is the right and best thing for me? And take advantage of the wonderful gift it has for us.

And those are the first three lessons of four from the Stoic philosophy.

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