Premeditatio Malorum

"Forseeing Bad Things" and other Stoic Practices

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

November 22, 2026

Before Thanksgiving became an American holiday, the means of giving thanks were spontaneous community feasts and festivals to celebrate a particularly bountiful harvest and good fortune. Such feasts have probably been part of human life since our beginnings but have been especially so since the advent of agricultural societies. A bountiful harvest was a lot more appreciated in the past that it is today. Nowadays we're more grateful for low prices at the grocery store and a functioning global supply chain, but in the not so long ago past a poor harvest could lead to hunger and even starvation during a harsh winter.

The Pilgrims who settled the Plymouth Colony in 1620 learned this terrible lesson during their first New England winter, which was particularly brutal. Arriving too late in the season to build shelters, they lived aboard their cramped, damp, freezing, anchored ship where many succumbed to starvation, scurvy, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. Between January and February of 1621, two to three of them died each day, with only a handful healthy enough to care for the sick. By the time it was over, less than half the original 102 settlers were still alive.

In March, they met and signed a mutual protection treaty with the Wampanoag people who taught them how to grow corn using fish as fertilizer, to forage for shellfish, tap maple trees, and the like. By Autum, they had enough food stored to survive the coming winter and decided to celebrate with a joyous harvest festival that included games, musket firing, and feasting.

After that, days of thanksgiving became regular in New England colonies, which evolved into an American tradition that became a formal holiday under President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, amidst the Civil War, a particularly dark time in our history.

And that's why I've brought this little bit of history up, to point out the gratitude leading to giving thanks, and to Thanksgiving, wasn't the result of overwhelming happiness, but of defiance to extreme suffering, brutality, and death. It is more a sign of relief after something terrible—like a storm, a plague, a war—has finally passed and we are over it. The pain, the loss, the destruction is still there but so is relief in the knowledge that the worst of it has ended, that we've gotten through it, that we can hope and begin moving forward again. That's why the surviving Pilgrims had the audacity to celebrate and feast only a few weeks after losing more of their companions than were still alive. It's why President Lincoln established an official day of gratitude amidst what remains the deadliest war in American history. In fact, Lincoln issued the proclamation on October 3, 1863, a few months after

Gettysburg and Vicksburg, when the war was still at its bloodiest. The time, like that of the Pilgrims, demonstrates and attitude that no matter how much we have lost; no matter how hard life is right now; no matter how uncertain our future, in the darkest of times we must find reasons to be grateful, reasons to continue, reasons for hope, reasons for happiness, reasons that make life worth living. Without these reasons, why, in such dire circumstances, would any of us want to continue?

It's an unusual juxtaposition to consider, that gratitude is the natural human response to some of our worst difficulties rather than to periods of joy and happiness. But there's ample historical evidence that this is so. In addition to those I've named, the origins of Thanksgiving in the deadly winter of 1660 and 61, and in the brutalist period of the Civil War, the example I'm most familiar with is the emergence of Stoicism after the Peloponnesian war, which lasted throughout most of the 5th century BCE, leaving Athens, once humanity's greatest civilization, in ruins, its people dispersed, and now ruled by a foreign power.

Prior to this, Greek philosophy had mostly focused on understanding physics, the nature of reality, how things work. But with the city in ruins, its people dispersed, and little hope of rebuilding or regaining what they'd lost, wondering about how clouds form, why the earth shakes, or the basic stuff that makes up everything, was of little importance. External reality was the problem, the source of their misery, not something they wanted to dwell on.

Socrates, its most famous philosopher, who lived during the war and died after it was over, was the first to challenge the Early-philosopher's focus on the nature of external reality by turning it inward. As philosopher A.C. Grayling says, Socrates considered their "quest to know reality … a waste of energy when the far more important question of 'how one should live' goes unanswered."[1] Instead, he became famous for trying to understand what it means to have and to live a "good life" and for saying things like, "the unconsidered life is not worth living." As the 19th and 20th century scholar, Francis Macdonald Cornford wrote, "Pre-Socratic philosophy begins ... with the discovery of nature; Socratic philosophy begins with the discovery of man's soul."[2]

Socrates became the inspiration for three major Greek philosophies that emerged in response to the terrible aftermath of the war, all of which worked to turn the attention of the depressed and broken Athenians inward as the new region for finding happiness, or what they called *eudaimonia* (meaning "good spirit), *ataraxia* (meaning "peace of mind"), and *apatheia* (meaning "without care" or "free of disturbance"). First came Cynicism, the complete rejection of external pleasures, especially the trappings of civilization. Its adherents attempted to live like wild animals—outdoors, naked, foraging for raw food. Then came its opposite, *Epicureanism*, also known as *Hedonism*, which pursued happiness

by seeking pleasure—not mere physical pleasure but the pleasures of friendship, wisdom, and values. Finally, Stoicism emerged, which is making a comeback today, perhaps because ours, too, is a period of great social and world disruption, so we are turning inward to find stability and understanding.

One of the stoics' primary focuses was on finding happiness, but not through either austerity or indulgence, as with Cynicism and Hedonism, respectively. They considered pain and pleasure with indifference, meaning they do not matter when it comes to true happiness and contentment in our lives. What makes us happy, rather, is living according to the virtues and values we most cherish, regardless of how doing so might impact our lives. If being virtuous brings us pleasure—such as wealth and prestige—so be it. But that is not the point of being virtuous. And if virtue causes us to suffer and be treated with disdain, so be it. Building our character by living according to our most cherished values, no matter the consequences, is, for the stoics, the means by which we achieve true happiness.

And such happiness—*eudemonia, ataraxia, apatheia*—is the entire point of Stoicism. Its founder, Zeno of Citium, Cypress, believed unhappiness comes from wanting what we don't have and happiness from appreciating what we do have. In order to achieve happiness then, the stoics came up with the practice of *Premeditatio Malorum*, which means "foreseeing bad things." They regularly and intentionally imagined what it would be like to lose the things, and positions, and people they most loved. This practice wasn't about toughening themselves up, becoming emotionally detached and callous, or preparing themselves for the worst, but for the purpose of being happy and content with what they already had, rather than discontented and unhappy because they didn't have all that they wanted.

Contemporary Stoic philosopher William Irvine, calls this practice "Negative Visualization." In his book, *A Guide to the Good Life*, Irvine discusses several reasons for such practice. Imagining bad things, like a break-in, for example, can lead us to take preventative measures, like installing an alarm system to thwart burglars. It can also prepare us to better cope emotionally when bad things do happen. Irvine quotes Seneca who said that "Misfortune weighs most heavily … on those who 'expect nothing but good fortune.'"[3] But the most important reason for Negative Visualization, he says, is because "We humans are unhappy in large part because we are insatiable; after working hard to get what we want, we routinely lose interest in the object of our desire. Rather than feeling satisfied, we feel a bit bored, and in response to this boredom, we go on to form new, even grander desires."[4] In short, we should practice *Premeditatio Malorum* because we are never satisfied and, thus, never truly happy.

By regularly imagining what it might be like to lose the things we already have and love, causes us to feel more satisfied with our lives, rather than lament what we don't have. This,

according to Stoic thought, leads to our happiness, rather than the unhappiness resulting from our discontentment with the way things are.

To be clear, doing so does not erase the pain of loss and grief and disappointment we sometimes experience. Such feelings are often real and true and justified, as they were for the Pilgrims and those caught up in the brutality of civil war. But, at the same time, there is also much in our lives we can be grateful for. *Premeditatio Malorum, "*foreseeing bad things," "Negative Visualization," or whatever we call it, is a means of directing our attention to such things, even amidst the worst of times; and, even in good times, to remind us of the subtler, less apparent truth, that there always remains much to be grateful for.

I think this week especially—Thanksgiving week—this is a valuable insight that few of us have ever considered. It's not about putting on a happy face, even when we're not feeling it. It's not about denial or forgetting the challenges we have faced or are facing. It's not about faking gratitude, it's about intentionally finding real reasons to be grateful, in addition to the loss, and want, and need in our lives and in the world. Those who survived the voyage of the Mayflower, those living through the violence of the Civil War, and the Stoics, in their effort to cope with the loss of their entire society, all knew this relationship between suffering and gratitude, akin to the masks of Tragedy and Comedy that have appeared together in Greek dramas since the 6th century BCE.

Today, Stoicism is often associated with being cold and emotionless in the face of difficulties. That's not it at all. Stoic practices are about helping us cope in healthy ways with the difficulties we face. Stoics, like anyone, feel anger, and pain, and grief, and passion, and so forth. But they try not to let such feelings rule their responses and cause their resulting actions to only make matters worse.

I'll mention a few other primary Stoic practices that are like *Premeditatio Malorum* in that they are meant to help us better cope with life's challenges and hardships in productive and useful ways.

Self-denial, for example, is the practice of intentionally not allowing ourselves to achieve or obtain something we want. This proves to us that we can live happily and successfully with everything we want. Intentionally denying ourselves some of what we want prepares us for the times we can't get what we want, making it less disappointing because we are used to it. *Premeditatio Malorum* is about imagining what it would be like to lose what we've come to take for granted, and to make us more content in the process. But self-denial shows us we can be happy even without knowing what it would have been like to have certain things to begin with. It's about having happiness now rather than always pursuing it.

Self-denial is closely related to the Stoic practice of Discomfort. Discomfort differs, however, in that it requires us to put ourselves in difficult situations so that, again, we realize happiness isn't about living on Easy Street. We can find reasons to be happy and grateful, like the Pilgrims and those living during the Civil War did, even amidst difficult times and uncomfortable situations. Stoics famously practiced this by going out inadequately dressed in the cold and snow, taking ice-cold baths, or going hungry until they were nearly starved. But it doesn't have to be anything so extreme. Simply exercising is such a practice.

Our bodies naturally resist the discomfort of exercise because it throws our vitals temporarily out of whack. Our breathing, heartrate, and blood flow all rush to compensate for such unnatural exertion in our body's struggle to regain equilibrium. That's a rather stoic way of explaining that working-out sucks! Which is a reason a lot of us don't or struggle to do so regularly. But think of the health benefits that are gained when we do. We become healthier and stronger and may live longer more active lives because of regularly putting ourselves through such discomfort. That's how most discomfort works. It doesn't make us callous or leave us emotionally cold; it makes us stronger and more vibrant. *No pain, no gain*, is a perfect stoic motto.

There are other stoic practices, but I'll conclude with just one more that's aligned with my topic. It's known as the Dichotomy of Control, the meaning of which is summarized best by the ancient Roman stoic, Epictetus, who began his handbook on Stoicism with the simple statement, "Some things are up to us, and some things are not up to us." The secret is having the wisdom to know the difference. Most often we tend to worry about the things we have no control over, while not taking advantage of controlling what we can. The stoics realized we have this backwards and ought to focus our attention on the matters we can influence rather than stressing too much about what we can't.

The example of the Pilgrims also applies here. The past is something none of us can change, yet it is something we can get stuck dwelling upon much of our lives; regretting our mistakes, grieving our losses, maintaining old grudges, forever wishing things had been different rather than moving on. The Pilgrims' terrible trauma, grief, and regrets surely lasted longer than a few months until a bountiful harvest arrived. The pain was still there, but they made a conscious decision to move forward, acknowledging what we sometimes forget, that the past is over and there's nothing we can do about it. They decided to focus on their present good fortune and their power to prevent such a disaster from happening again.

William Irvine has modified Epictetus's dictum by calling it a "trichotomy of control." He says there are matters we have no control over, matters we have complete control over, and matters we have some, but not complete control over. There's no sense worrying about

what we can't control and no need to worry about what we can. So our effort should go into those matters we have some but not complete control over, like our future. It's not something we can guarantee will work out as we wish, but we can work to shape it the best we can. We can try to shape the future we want—a future of abundance worth celebrating ever year, a future without war as Lincoln longed for. Sometimes we will fail. Sometimes we will succeed. But, amidst all that is out of our control, and all of our failures, it is better to focus most our energies on what we can do to make things better for ourselves and others.

Perhaps that is the greatest lesson the Stoics have to offer us, especially during this season of Thanksgiving: that happiness is not something we must wait for until our circumstances improve, nor is gratitude something we owe only to good fortune. Both are cultivated through the choices we make, the values we live by, and the attention we give to what remains good in our lives, even when much is not. We cannot undo the hardships of yesterday or guarantee the fortunes of tomorrow, but we can appreciate what we have today and use what is within our power to make tomorrow better. And perhaps there is no better way to give thanks for the good in our lives than to help create more of it in the world.

[1] Grayling, A.C., *The History of Philosophy,* Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 115.

[2] Irvine, William B., *A Guide to the Good Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009, p. 19.

[3] Ibid., p. 65.

[4] Ibid., p. 66.