

# THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

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## Being Content

by Erik Wiegardt

### *Introduction*

*I wrote this more than three years ago. I know it's hard to remember that life existed way back then, back before the current American presidential election, but it did. That was back when Americans were often laughed at by the more cynical citizens of older countries for being hopelessly idealistic and naïve. I suppose that in some circles they still are. But when Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton became the best leaders that America could offer, suddenly the snickers became exclamations of high anxiety. Yes, life was simpler back then—just as it was before 9/11, and before the Vietnam War, and before Kennedy was assassinated, and before indoor plumbing, and so on.*

*Speaking of indoor plumbing, the toilet in particular would be hard for some of us to give up. I had to call a plumber today to address a clog somewhere in the system. He came out and worked on it a couple of hours ago, but it still isn't fixed, and it's times like these when you realize that the toilet is one of the truly great inventions of all time. I'm really glad we no longer have to wade through streets flowing with raw sewage. Maybe I've gotten too soft. Apparently tribal people didn't need indoor toilets. I guess it didn't occur to them how much more convenient it would be to do their business inside the tent instead of outside in the bushes.*

*This brief essay was written at a time when I was thinking about how tribal people of the past were so often destroyed by those whose only claim to superiority was based on technology, not virtue. Unlike people living in nature civilized individuals and cultures were more frequently discontent with their tools and methods, so they invented things, all kinds of things to make work easier and killing even easier. But those individuals and cultures who were content to just accept what Nature gave them, failed to invent much or advance. Primitive weapons of war left primitive peoples at the mercy of the merciless. Both American continents were civilized in this way.*

*It made me wonder if contentment was a good thing; that is, when you're about to become the victim of slavery or genocide is contentment the right feeling for such an occasion? Of course these ignorant tribal people didn't know that in order for the rich and powerful to become even more rich and more powerful it was necessary for them and their tribesmen to be killed or enslaved or worked to death. Those people living in nature didn't know that even the humble city clerk would be ready and willing to kill them so that he or she could pan for gold or have a bit of dirt to farm. They didn't know that in so-called civilized countries it has always been thus. They had never heard of Machiavelli, and so they were unprepared.*

*Stoics believe that if we are content with the way things happen as ordained by Fate, we will never be upset or disappointed. Hmm. Yes, but we may be killed for our contentment, not just individually killed but also members of our families and indeed our entire culture as a people. Should we be forever and on all occasions content with whatever happens? Does a Stoic have enough faith in Fate, our providential God, to be happy regardless of who gets killed or elected President of the United States? Can a Stoic remain calmly equanimous with either Trump or Clinton as their president?*

*That's like asking if Stoics of ancient Rome were able to be happy when Nero was emperor. Of course they were. Don't forget, Epictetus was the crippled slave of one of Nero's former slaves. But, let's be realistic, contentment can be a double-edged sword.*

EW, 27 September 16

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### Contentment: The Old Ways

May 2013. I have a sampler framed and hanging on the wall a few feet away. I can see it from where I'm sitting now. You know what a sampler is, right? . . . a piece of cloth embroidered with flowers or little animals or wise sayings. Making samplers used to be part of a young girl's education many years ago. Not any more. So anyway, the sampler I have says, "Contentment is not the fulfillment of what you want, but the realization of how much you already have."

Hmm. Well, yes. I like that. After all, I'm the one that bought the sampler and hung it on the wall. I must have liked it at the time I bought it, but I've been thinking about contentment lately and wondering if there's another side to this story. I mean, what's the difference between contentment and stagnation? If we had known more contentment in human history wouldn't we all still be Hunter-gatherers, or at most agrarian types?

Where have all the Hunter-gatherers gone? The Amish are here and apparently content with their self-imposed eternal Agrarian Age, preferring buttons to zippers, which they consider too technical. When I get frustrated with my computer I'm inclined to agree with them. There are about 273,000 Amish here in North America, and they always have the most beautiful farms wherever they settle. The Hunters and gatherers—who were also content with the way things used to be—are mostly gone now. We've killed them off to get their land or their gold, or both. I guess there are a few hundred left in the Amazon region. Why didn't they want to make progress the way the rest of us have? Was it because they were content with the old ways?

For the Hunter-gatherer the "old ways" were living not just in agreement *with* Nature but actually 100% in it. Nature was both mother and father, nurturer and teacher; and, despite what the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) said, living in a state of nature does *not* condemn one to a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." That's only the opinion of one, so-called civilized man, and one that freely admitted he lived entirely apart from nature due to an overwhelming fear of it. Hobbes was *afraid* of nature.

Philosophers today may consider Hobbes to be a second-rate intellectual, but Hunter-gatherers would consider him to be a complete fool. Listen to what Chief Luther Standing Bear (1868-1939), Oglala Sioux, said on the subject of living in harmony with nature:

Only to the white man was nature a “wilderness” and only to him was the land “infested” with “wild animals and savage” people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families that we loved was it “wild” for us (*Land of the Spotted Eagle* [1933]).

Nothing the Great Mystery placed in the land of the Indian pleased the white man, and nothing escaped his transforming hand...But because for the Lakota there was no wilderness, because nature was not dangerous but hospitable, not forbidding but friendly, Lakota philosophy was healthy—free from fear and dogmatism. And here I find the great distinction between the faith of the Indian and the white man. Indian faith sought the harmony of man with his surroundings; the other sought the dominance of surroundings...For one man the world was full of beauty; for the other it was a place of sin and ugliness to be endured until he went to another world, there to become a creature of wings, half-man and half-bird...But the old Lakota was wise. He knew that man's heart, away from nature, becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans, too. So he kept his children close to nature's softening influence (*The Wisdom of Native Americans*, MJF Books, 1999, pp. 39-40) .

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