This Is the Lecture That the Naval Academy Didn't Want Me to Give

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RYAN HOLIDAY DELIVERED THREE LECTURES AT THE NAVAL ACADEMY—BUT NOT A FOURTH. (COURTESY OF RYAN HOLIDAY)

By Ryan Holiday

I was supposed to give a talk at the U.S. Naval Academy in Maryland on April 14. I found out about 20 minutes before I was due to go onstage that it wasn't going to happen. The lecture was about wisdom and how to cultivate it. It was a staunch defense of reading widely, perhaps especially, books you don't agree with. The Naval Academy's leadership

had learned I was going to challenge the terribly sad fact that this wonderful institution had banned 381 books from the academy's Nimitz Library, on the orders of Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

They asked me to delete this part of the speech. I declined. My lecture was canceled.

Look, I understand the impossible position that the good folks at the Naval Academy are in. Any Naval Academy employee who defied the edict would have risked their job security or pension. But I'm a private citizen. Nobody suggested that there would be serious consequences for me, but there was a heaviness to the demand nonetheless, an expectation that I could not come back if I didn't play ball.

My intention is not to embarrass anyone or cause trouble. In fact, if anyone was afraid of controversy, they would have been disappointed, which is sort of the point. We have gotten to a place where even a basic defense of intellectual freedom is now considered "too political" for a government institution. Still, I could not in good conscience deliver a lecture about wisdom and not address the fact of the removal of books from a library a few hundred yards away. It would have undermined the messages of my three previous lectures at the Naval Academy on the subjects of courage, discipline, and doing the right thing.

Although the Naval Academy stopped me from going onstage, when I got home from Annapolis, I recorded it in full. You can watch it here:

And, if you prefer, here is an edited transcript of the video:

I want to take you back to the summer of 1943. A young man from Illinois named James Stockdale is about to be sworn into the Naval Academy.

As World War II rages across the globe, he swears his oath to the Constitution and to the country. And his father, who had dreamed for many years that his son would one day enter the Naval Academy, gives him a parting word of advice.

He says: “I want you to try to be the best man in that hall.”

What did he mean by this? Class rank?

Ultimately, James Stockdale ranked about 130th in his class at the Naval Academy—which, although impressive, is by no means the best. But perhaps his father meant *best* in some other way. Perhaps his advice was something similar to a piece of guidance that a Stoic philosopher gave another impressive soldier, Pompey the Great, as he set out to battle pirates in the Mediterranean.

Pompey stopped in to visit the Stoic philosopher Posidonius, to ask him if he had any advice for him before he departed. And Posidonius said, quoting *The Odyssey*: "You must be best and always superior to others."

Now, again: Was Posidonius referring to winning all of the battles? Was he referring to the greatest conquests, or the greatest feats of intellectual achievement, or piling up the most money? I don't think so. I think he was referring to the idea of virtue, the Stoic virtues of courage, discipline, justice, and wisdom. *Be the most virtuous man; be superior to others.*

It reminds me of another story about two Spartan wrestlers. After a long, hard battle, one wins. And as the other reaches up his hand to shake that of the victor, he says, "The better man won."

The wrestler who won corrects him and says, "No, the better wrestler."

This is a story about sportsmanship, but also the idea that winning is not everything. Rank is not everything. Achievements are not everything. But who you are, the standards you hold yourself to, the character that you possess: This is everything.

These were different times. Stockdale entered the Naval Academy in '43 as part of the class of '47. Women were not allowed in the Naval Academy at this time. It is, in fact, not until 1980 that Elizabeth Rowe and Janie Mines become the two of the first female graduates of the Naval Academy. These two powerful, inspiring women are a reminder that—as the Stoics in fact talked about, long before diversity, equity, and inclusion—there is nothing gendered about virtue or greatness. Courage, discipline, justice, and wisdom are demanded of each of us as individuals, and that is what we ought to aspire to, whoever we are, whatever we do. It is the compass that guides us. It is our true north.

And there is a reason that wisdom is considered the mother of the virtues: Because it tells us when to apply courage. It tells us what is

right and what is wrong. It tells us what the right amount of things are, what to resist, and what to accept. Wisdom is probably the most ineffable of the virtues. It is hard to define. It's being smart, and it's knowledge and facts, and it's insight. It's intelligence and intuition. It's experience and education and philosophy and practical understanding and awareness and wit, perspective and perception. It's even prudence, as the ancients sometimes called wisdom. It's all these things and more. And while we might quibble over the exact definition of wisdom, I think we can all agree that it's not something you're born with. It's not something that someone can give you. Wisdom is something you have to *earn*.

As Seneca would say, "No one is wise by chance." It is the result of toil and struggle, trial and error, and so many things. Wisdom is work, and it's really the work of our lives.

It was certainly the work of Stockdale's life.

He graduates from the Naval Academy, then spends almost 20 years in the Navy and rises to the rank of commander. Then he's sent to Stanford to get a master's degree. Now, it might seem strange that the Navy would send a fighter pilot in his late 30s to a first-rate college to get an advanced degree in the humanities, but Stockdale knew exactly why he was there.

And in fact, he was a bit frustrated his first year or so at Stanford.

One of the things that struck him was that he'd taken all these classes, he'd spent all this time studying, but the one thing that he hadn't gotten was wisdom. He said, "I was lacking an inspiration or a pole star to guide me." He had just been processing relatively tedious material.

And then, as he walked through the halls of Stanford, one day, a man approaches him, at first confusing him for a fellow professor, because

Stockdale was so much older than the other students. This man is named Philip Rhinelander.

Rhinelander had himself served in the Navy during World War II, and he asked Stockdale what he's doing and what he's looking for. They strike up a friendship. The hero's journey often involves seeking out a mentor. Marcus Aurelius said that a mastery of reading and writing requires a master. For him, the master was his philosophy teacher, Junius Rusticus, who he thanks at the beginning of *Meditations*. Specifically, Marcus thanks Rusticus for loaning him a book from his own library. That book is by the great Stoic philosopher Epictetus.

Navy midshipmen stand during the national anthem during the Army-Navy football game in Landover, Maryland, last December. (Patrick Smith via Getty Images)

Just as reading and writing require a mentor, so does life. And Rhinelander becomes that for Stockdale, who comes to spend countless hours in Professor Rhinelander's office getting reading recommendations and life advice, discussing big ideas, and ultimately

taking Rhinelander's course in philosophy. But before all that, Rhinelander lent Stockdale a book—an introduction to the very same Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius was introduced to all those years before: Epictetus. It changed Stockdale's life.

Michelle Howard, a graduate of the Naval Academy and our first female four-star admiral, would say, "You can either figure it out on your own and stumble. . . or you can talk to someone who has the same shared experiences." We can learn by trial and error, or we can learn from the experiences of others.

Because as the Stoics say: *It is impossible to learn that which you think you already know*. Ego gets in the way. Our ambition gets in the way. Our entitlements get in the way. Our conceit gets in the way. There's a famous statue of Nero, who was also given a great teacher in Seneca, one of the wisest minds in the ancient world. And he, too, had the opportunity for years and years of on-the-job study. But he resents Seneca's leadership, and as you can see in the statue by Eduardo Barrón González, his body language resembles that of the petulant teenager, the person whose ego tells them that they already know everything they need to know. It is the sulking, close-minded, deliberate ignorance of a petty narcissist. All the things that Nero was and all the things that ultimately proved to be his undoing.

Look, learning is not always fun. Mentors are not always nice. The course they set out for us is not always easy. But as Epictetus said, and as Stockdale would have read, the philosopher's lecture is a hospital. It's painful, he says. You shouldn't walk out of it feeling good, but you should still be in pain because you weren't well when you entered the work, the rework, the changes, the remedies. Where we end up, that is what matters and that is what's important.

I think of the World War II hero, General George S. Patton, who sincerely believed he was the reincarnated spirit of countless warriors from the past. He wrote in a famous poem: *Through a glass, and darkly / The age long strife I see / Where I fought in many guises, / Many names, but always me*. And there is a story about him touring the site where the awful and violent Battle of the Wilderness in 1864 was fought during the Civil War, 20 years before Patton's birth. And as he discussed the battle with his tour guide, he began to argue, saying that the tour guide's version of events was incorrect, that it happened this way and the troops had traveled that way. Patton believed he had been there as a boy.

I think the explanation here is that, as a young boy, Patton was almost debilitatingly dyslexic. He did not write or read until he was 11 years old. His parents actually kept him out of school. They were worried that he would never do these things, and wondered if he was disabled in some form. But instead of giving up on their son, what they did was they read to him a lot. They read him *The Odyssey*, and every classic they could get their hands on. His father also used his professional connections to bring in Civil War veterans and politicians and any well-known person that he could contact, so that Patton could ask them every question he possibly could.

He grew up surrounded by history. History—these myths, these legends, these great moments, great battles, great personalities—became almost real to him. He had lived with them in a way that his fellow schoolchildren never could have even imagined.

This is what books ultimately became to Patton, who became a lifelong reader and was seen reading in all of his campaigns. It was said that by the time World War II broke out, he had read nearly every book about war ever published. He read books about everything he could get his hands on. And the reason he did this is that through history we annex, as Seneca said, all the errors and wisdom of the past into our own lives. It's what I do every time I pick up a book. It's what Stockdale was doing when he was introduced to Epictetus.

Reading is a superpower. Because when we are reading, we are not just conversing with the dead who created that book, but all the dead people who have read it since your predecessors—your ancestors who picked it up in a library, whose parents read it to them, who were recommended it by a friend whose lives were changed by the ideas in those books.

The great General James Mattis, who spent 40 years in the Marine Corps and became secretary of defense, would say "reading is an honor and a gift from a warrior or historian who—a decade or a thousand decades ago—set aside time to write. He distilled a lifetime of campaigning in order to have a 'conversation' with you."

Who would decline such a supernatural experience?

Unfortunately, this is precisely what so many of us do to follow breaking news, to gossip, to veg out in front of the television, to distract ourselves with social media.

Stockdale claimed that he didn't have time to be "a bookworm" while he was a fighter pilot, but that he still spent several hours buried in books each week. "On my bedside table," he explained, "no matter what carrier I was aboard, were my Epictetus books: *Enchiridion*, *Discourses*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia of Socrates*, and *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. (Epictetus expected his students to be familiar with Homer's plots.)"

My own copy of *Meditations* is pretty worse for wear after 20-odd years. Its cover is falling off, nearly every page is marked or folded. But that's the point. I am not just reading it, but rereading it and rereading it, and each time I pick it up, I take something new out of it. As Heraclitus said: "You can't step in the same river twice." Although the book doesn't change, you change, the world changes, and thus you take something new out of it each time. And I am communing not just with Marcus Aurelius, who is dead. I am communing with a younger version of myself

who captured a bit of myself in these pages, in these memorabilia that I left behind. And I can see who I used to be.

I can disagree with myself. I can talk with my younger, more ignorant self. When I say that we have to read, I don't just mean we read the popular books or we read the acceptable books. We have to read critically. We have to read dangerously.

Understanding and being familiar with something is not the same as liking or endorsing or embracing it.

Seneca said that we have to read like a spy in the enemy's camp. And this is what he was doing. Seneca wasn't afraid of a rival's school of philosophy. In the fall of 1961, Stockdale enrolled in a class he had eagerly been trying to get into, which was a class on comparative Marxist thought. He said that what struck him about the class is that they didn't read criticisms of Marx or summaries of Marxism. They read only the Marxists themselves.

Stockdale was reading like a spy in the enemy's camp. He would write a letter home to his father that one of the things he learned from his parents is that you can't beat something you don't understand, that you will be better equipped to beat something you understand than something you don't understand. Something you have closed your mind to.

Today we should consider what Stockdale would think about the news that almost 400 books have been removed from the Naval Academy library. I suspected at first that it was an April Fools' joke. The idea that the best and brightest stars in the country are seen as too fragile, too

easily manipulated, too susceptible to be exposed to works that people don't like or disagree with.

This transgresses the very ethos, the very purpose of higher education, which is to challenge, which is to open doors, which is to allow you to understand things. And understanding and being familiar with something is not the same as liking or endorsing or embracing it. Because when people tell you you shouldn't be allowed to read something, you shouldn't be able to engage with an idea, it is precisely those ideas that intellectually curious people ought to go toward.

Read dangerously. Read curiously. Plunge into unfamiliar territory. Get behind enemy lines, and seek to understand anything and everything, particularly the points of view of the people you disagree with. Steelman rather than strawman. Investigate rather than persecute. This is what Seneca was saying: We must read like a spy in the enemy's camp.

But also, I think it's essential to point out here that the books that have been removed from the library at the Naval Academy are not Marxist texts or *Mein Kampf*. They are, in many cases, art, literature, works of legitimate, if not controversial, scholarship. They are criticisms of America and American history. Maya Angelou is not the enemy. If Stockdale can read the enemy and try to understand, we certainly can make room for some of our greatest poets and writers.

And you never know when this information is going to be of use to you in the future, when this understanding, when this curiosity will benefit you.

Having studied at Stanford, Stockdale ended up back in the army, fighting in Vietnam, where he was ultimately imprisoned at the Hanoi Hilton. He was repeatedly interrogated and tortured. And he was able

to withstand, in part, the propaganda and the misinformation and the barrage of criticism and questions that were thrown at him because, as he said, he understood Marxist theory more than his interrogators did. Later, he would speak of pushing back against one of his interrogators, nicknamed Rabbit. “That’s not what Lenin said,” he’d say. “You’re a deviationist. You’re paraphrasing; you’re deviating from the party line.” It was his familiarity with the ideas that allowed him to do this.

If the history you are reading doesn’t make you uncomfortable, you are not reading history. If your deepest held beliefs aren’t regularly being challenged, I don’t know what path you are on, but it is not the path to wisdom. Things are not simple, and if they are simple to you, you are doing it wrong.

Maybe you know the Tennyson poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” or the Iron Maiden song about it. It’s about soldiers who didn’t need to ride into the valley of Death. Although their heroism was incredible, it was also pointless. If the commanding officer, who knew that the charge was almost certainly mistaken, had the courage to question what obviously resulted from a miscommunication, that heroism wouldn’t have been necessary. They could have been saved for another day.

I would argue that all change, all innovation, not only comes from questioning the status quo but is made possible *despite* the resistance against it. Look at the history of the Navy. Steamships were resisted and ironclads were resisted. Submarines were resisted, and aircraft carriers were resisted. So, too, was integration. So, too, were the reforms that allowed women to enlist, and the repeal of “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” Just because something has been true for a long time, just because it’s been repeated, just because it’s comfortable, doesn’t mean it’s right.

We have to figure out a way to respect tradition but despise convention. To preserve traditions that are worth preserving, but be

willing to embrace change and abhor complacency. Those who are being trained for leadership are being selected for their ability to think and to learn and to adapt to think for themselves. That is what they bring to this future.

You should be curious. You should investigate. You should put everything to the test. You don't need to be scared about the books you have access to. And if you are scared—what business do you have being in charge of anyone, let alone a cutting-edge fighter jet or an aircraft carrier or a weapon of any kind?

Whoever you are, wherever you are in life, it's not just about becoming a student, but about remaining a student for the rest of your days. General Mattis, who fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Gulf, said that there is assigned reading for every rank of Marine, that even generals are assigned new sets of books that they must consume. Whatever your rank, there are people who have been in your exact shoes who have written about or been written about, and that experience is there for you. You can talk to them, you can travel back in time. You can anticipate the future problems you're going to have.

To face them, you will need wisdom. You will need something to draw on, and you can only make that withdrawal if you've been making the deposits along the way.

Stockdale said that it's in hardship that the heroes and the bums get sorted out. For him, the pivotal moment came in September 1965. That was when, while piloting an A-4 Skyhawk over North Vietnam, he began to take flak and had to eject. And as he was parachuting down into what he knew would be certain imprisonment and quite possibly death, he said to himself, "I am leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus."

In this moment, he is thinking of what he had learned at Stanford. He is drawing on the wisdom that he had been studying, not just there in his

college days, but also in his bunk on the carrier. And then he was exposed to years of solitary confinement, deprivation, torture. He said it was the laboratory of human experience, and it was an ordeal that is almost incomprehensible. In these early days, as the highest-ranking in the Hanoi Hilton there, he had to put a lot of thought into what his orders should be, how he would communicate to the men he was charged with leading—which he did, tapping through the walls in furtive moments and brief encounters, through the letters he wrote home, through the messages that were passed man to man.

He was rewriting what it meant to be a prisoner of war, rewriting what it meant to resist, rewriting what it meant to stand on principle, he said. "I remember Phil Rhinelander telling me one time," Stockdale recounted, "that a man with a proper education could, should the necessity arise, refound his own civilization."

That's exactly what Stockdale had to do: create a prison civilization. "We as a group," he said, "had to develop the confidence to disregard bogus orders from home; we had to become the center of our own world where we could bring out the best in ourselves. We had to have our own laws, our own customs, maybe our own heroes."

It was exactly as his father had hoped. In the worst circumstances imaginable, Stockdale found a way to be the best man there, to be superior to others. Certainly he was superior to those who tried to break him.

And that's what wisdom is. That's what virtue is about.

Ryan Holiday owns and operates The Painted Porch Bookshop in Bastrop, Texas. He also is a devoted Stoic and joined an episode of Honestly to discuss why power corrupts, how ego can destroy you, and

the limits of loyalty. For more of his work, explore his YouTube channel here, and his website here.

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