



YLD Perspectives

by Scott Young

Marcus Aurelius for the Young Lawyer

In 161 C.E., the Roman Emperor Antoninus died,

leaving the empire to his adopted son, Marcus Aurelius. However, Antoninus desired that his other adopted son, Lucius Verus, be appointed co-emperor. In accordance with his step-father's wish, Marcus Aurelius refused to become emperor unless Lucius was appointed co-emperor. With this humility and eye for justice, Marcus Aurelius ruled over the Roman Empire for nearly 20 years. Rome reached its apex under Marcus Aurelius and began to decline soon after his death. A philosopher at heart, Marcus Aurelius left a wealth of wisdom that has been treasured for centuries. His *Meditations* provide insight into how to rule an empire, and for those of us who are less politically motivated, how to build a healthy and satisfying law practice. Below are 10 pieces of advice Marcus Aurelius left for young lawyers.¹

10. "Why should the instructed, the intelligent, and skillful soul be disturbed by the rude and illiterate?" (Book V, #32)

An attorney is defined by his or her professionalism. No matter the stage of your legal career, you should constantly be reminding yourself to act professionally. This means being courteous to opposing counsel even when it kills you, ridding your briefs of pejorative and inflammatory language, and treating staff well. This sound advice also applies to dealing with clients. As counsel, you are captain of a ship in rough water that needs a steady hand. If you set a tone that is professional, polite, and competent, clients will continue to use you and will refer others to you.

9. "If anyone can convince me, or show me that my sentiments, or conduct, has been wrong: I will joyfully alter them. 'Tis truth I am searching for, which never hurts any man. But men are often hurt, by remaining in error and ignorance." (Book VI, #21)

There is a reason they call it a law *practice*. None of us is perfect, and as we begin our careers, we especially need to be willing to search for better methods and adapt accordingly. Humility is an attribute of successful young lawyers.

Marcus' advice is particularly apt as you set goals for your

professional development. As a young attorney, you only have power to control your own actions, and your goals should reflect this desire. For example, your business development goals should revolve around actions you can take, such as maintaining relationships with law school classmates, participating in local and national bar associations, and developing professional skills. Your business development goals should not focus on results over which you have no control, such as whether a client will call you to handle a case or transaction.

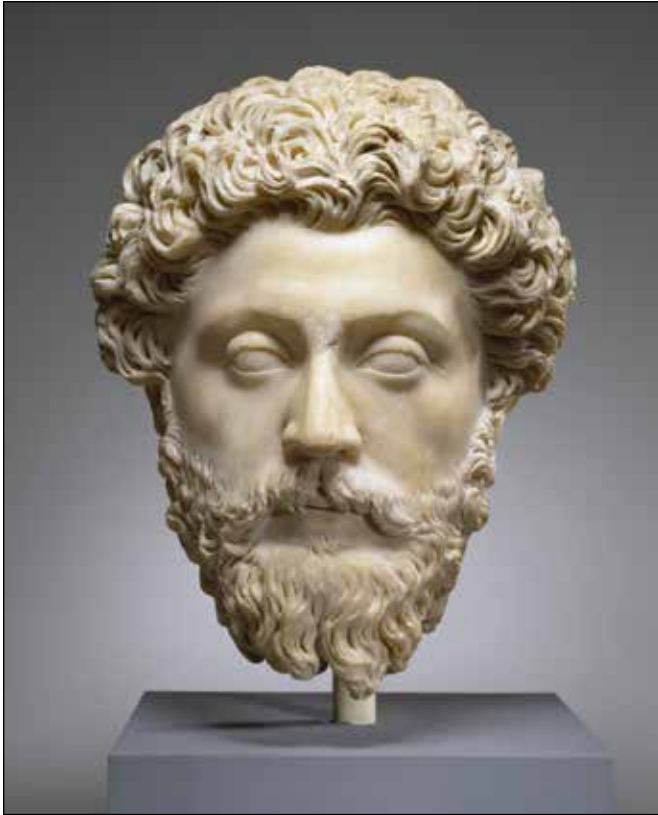
8. "Look attentively on each particular thing you are doing." (Book X, #29)

Precision builds the confidence of clients and partners. Develop a resolution strategy as soon as possible and revisit it frequently. Always make decisions while considering the overall view of the litigation or transaction.

7. "Upon each occurrence which affects the imagination, continually endeavor to apprehend its nature, and its effect upon our affections, and to reason well about it." (Book VIII, #13)

With each step in a project, whether it be a lawsuit or a transaction, it is important to do two things. First, you should take time to understand the role the action plays in the overall strategy. For instance, if a partner asks you to draft a motion to dismiss, you should take time to understand the strategic motivation and risks involved. The motion may have little chance of success, but stall the litigation so that your client can bring a product to market. However, it may simultaneously risk divulging a litigation strategy to your opponent. To become a savvy attorney, you need to understand the strategic value of each act you perform, no matter how insignificant it may appear. Second, you need to reevaluate the overall disposition plan. How does this action change the disposition plan? Does it raise costs? Does it change bargaining positions? The quicker you understand the strategic value of actions, the quicker you can make these determinations on your own.

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Portrait of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, marble sculpture, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Md.

6. “Seldom are any found unhappy for not observing the motions and intentions in the souls of others.” (Book II, #8)

This sound advice applies to networking. Let’s be honest, networking can be difficult and tedious. So stop thinking about others as marks and think of them as people who share the same concerns you do. Ask them about their life outside of work. Learn about their families and hobbies. Even if you don’t have anything in common with the other person, it is an opportunity for you to expand your horizons and learn about other interests. This is the networking that lasts.

5. “Let nothing be done at random, but according to the complete rules of art.” (Book IV, #2)

Whether your practice is criminal or civil, master the rules of procedure. These are essentially the rules of the game we play. If you don’t know the rules of procedure, you will become the dreaded football coach who doesn’t know when to throw the challenge flag and who doesn’t know how many timeouts he has left. Those coaches inevitably get fired.

4. “Must he not, then, be a fool, who is ... puffed up with success.” (Book V, #23)

Lawyers are like quarterbacks—they get too much credit for success and too much criticism for failure. While a skilled lawyer can certainly influence the outcome, facts drive lawsuits and transactions.

One way to keep the necessary perspective is to take breaks

and dedicate time to relationships and hobbies outside of the law. Have the courage to close your office door every now and then to surf ESPN.com or take a George Costanza under-the-desk nap.

3. “Remember, it equally becomes a man truly free, to change his course, of himself, when he thinks fit, and to follow the advice of another who suggests better measures.” (Book VIII, #16)

Finding a strong mentor is critical to realizing your potential as a lawyer. Seek out lawyers you enjoy being around, analyze what makes them successful, and implement those principles in your practice.

2. “In your speeches, whether in the senate or elsewhere, aim rather at a decent dignity, than elegance, and let your speech ever be sound and virtuous.” (Book VIII, #30)

A “decent dignity” in oral argument consists of applying the facts of the case to the controlling case law, not quoting Abraham Lincoln or Lord Byron. When a judge asks you a question, answer it. And remember, brevity is beautiful.

1. “If not becoming, don’t do it. If not true, don’t say it. Let these be your fixed principles.” (Book XII, #17)

Ultimately, integrity is the currency of this profession. Unlike Nike, your marketing campaign is not played out in television ads or billboards in Times Square, but in the way you conduct yourself each day of your career. Set a high standard of professionalism early in your career and stick to it. This will be the best business development tool you will ever use.

Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* are full of wisdom that can be applied to the practice of law. If you implement these 10 principles, you will be on your way to a successful and fulfilling legal career. ☺

Endnote

¹Quotations are from *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* (James Moore & Michael Silverthorne eds., Francis Hutcheson & James Moor trans., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2008) (1742), available at oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2133&Itemid=27.