

F-Words: Fate, fortune, faith, failure and fear



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

That's a lot of F's. With each one packing a whole file folder full of fine fodder for freethought. Alright, I'm done playing with F's – for now. As I dive a little deeper into the minds of Stoic philosophers in ancient Rome, I'm more drawn to their F's, beginning with fate and fortune.

We speak of something or someone being “fortunate,” but do we know what we're saying? Fortuna was the goddess of chance, luck and fate. According to Webster's: “She might bring good or bad luck: she could be represented as veiled and blind, as in modern depictions of Lady Justice, except that Fortuna does not hold a balance. Fortuna came to represent life's capriciousness.” In a letter to his mother, Roman philosopher Lucius Seneca wrote this fascinating line: “[Fortune] falls heavily on those to whom she is unexpected; the one who is always expecting her easily withstands her.” The capricious goddess is one to resist. “Never have I trusted Fortune.” He was never attached to anything she gave – Fortuna could take it all back at any

time.

In terms of faith, Stoics often refer to God (Zeus/Jupiter), the gods, or Nature. The Stoic conception of divinity could be summarized as: “the animating rational principle in Nature” (Sellars, “Lessons in Stoicism”). This was not a personal god but a physical principle “identified with fate” without superstitious views. In his “Discourses,” Epictetus, the former slave who became an influential teacher, instructed his students: “There is one road to peace and happiness ... regarding nothing as your own, handing over everything to fortune and the deity.” Epictetus certainly believed in a “god” yet he put an interesting twist on what that meant: “God is helpful. Whatever is good is also helpful. It is reasonable to suppose, then, that the divine nature and the nature of the good will correspond.” He adds: “So what is the divine nature? ... It is mind, intelligence and correct reason.” This is why he can claim, along with fellow Stoics like Seneca and Marcus Aurelius: “You are a particle of God himself; there is a bit of God within you.” Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and other mystics have taught the same notion. Even seculars could agree Nature is within.

So, faith is tied to fortune and fate, but what about failure and fear?

One of our greatest fears is losing control over things including our lives.

The Stoics remind us we can't lose what we never really had, that most of what happens in life is completely beyond our control, so we needn't be anxious about external things (let fate, fortune and the gods handle those). We tend to be fearful of death, though for the most part that's out of our hands. They suggest the best way to face our fears is to practice what may be the greatest F-word: Freedom.

“What is it then,” Epictetus asks, “that renders a person free and independent?” He responds: “In the conduct of life, there must be a science to living well.” He goes on to address the failure of our phobias: “When you're thus practiced and prepared to discriminate between what belongs to you and what doesn't [that one is important and the other irrelevant], then is there anyone, any more, you need to be frightened of? No, because what would you fear them for?” A person needs to “[Distinguish] between what you own and what you don't, between what is in your power and what is not” A wise reality-check.

Roman historian Tacitus commented on principles of Stoic ethics: “Although things happen according to fate, this depends not on the movement of the planets but on the principles and logic of natural causality. This school concedes to us the freedom to choose our own

lives.” Which brings us to another fearful distraction: the Future. We are free to choose not to fear losing anything, including our lives, and to choose not to be frightened of the future which is, of course, something else beyond our control.

A Jewish woman I know has a podcast entitled, “All the F-Words.” She and her co-host hold discussions of everything from Feminism, Fanaticism and Fundamentalism to Family, Freedom and Friendship. These two women “take a deep dive on a wide range of issues that happen to start with the letter F.” A clever approach to ideas. It makes me wonder about our most offensive four-letter F-word? Notice the way our lips form an aggressive, angry expression when it's used. Maybe it reveals a fundamental fear of sexuality? One flippant word demeans intimacy, an expression of pleasure weaponized to show displeasure and disrespect.

However we formulate our F's, they can lead to unfortunate floundering or ineffable fulfillment.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are “Friendly Freethinker,” “Broken Bridges” and “A Freethinker's Gospel.” Learn more at chighland.com.