



Dr. Ron Pies

By Mary Kantor

Since moving to the east coast, I have taken a child's delight in the offerings of American history that abound in this part of the country. Now living steps away from Paul Revere's ride, I can say that my grade school memorization of the poem, "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere", by New England poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, was not for naught! On a recent drive in Lexington, these revolutionary days were brought to mind by the Battle Green, the Minuteman National Historic Park, Redcoat Lane and Revere St. And as I also noted Apollo Circle, Augustus Road, and Laconia Street, I was harkened back to a yet more ancient time, an era my childhood history lessons had not linked to Lexington, Massachusetts. But to Lexington I came to meet another New England poet and writer whose recent work lingers in these ancient days of the Roman Empire.

Ronald Pies, M.D. is a long-time resident of Lexington with his wife Nancy. His new book, *Everything Has Two Handles: The Stoic's Guide to the Art of Living*, leads a reader through the ideas of Stoicism, and in particular, the thinking of the later Stoic philosopher, the great Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius (121-180 C.E.). Dr. Pies is Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Tufts University School of Medicine, as well as Professor of Psychiatry and Lecturer on Bioethics and Humanities at SUNY Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, N.Y. He is also Editor-in-Chief of the *Psychiatric Times*, and the author of several psychiatric textbooks, including a guide to psychotherapy for the general public. His recent book is also for the general public, and according to Dr. Pies, is "aimed at the intelligent general reader who is interested in how to live 'the good life.'"

Stoicism, a Greek school of philosophy, was founded by Zeno in Cyprus around 300 B.C.E. This system of philosophy received its name from the *stoa poikile*, 'painted porch or portico', the area of the 'stoa' or colonnade, at Athens where teaching was done and discourses given. Stoicism passed from the Middle East to the West and was introduced to the Roman world where it reached its height in the time of Marcus Aurelius. This

## Psychiatrist, Philosopher, Poet . . . and Lexington Neighbor

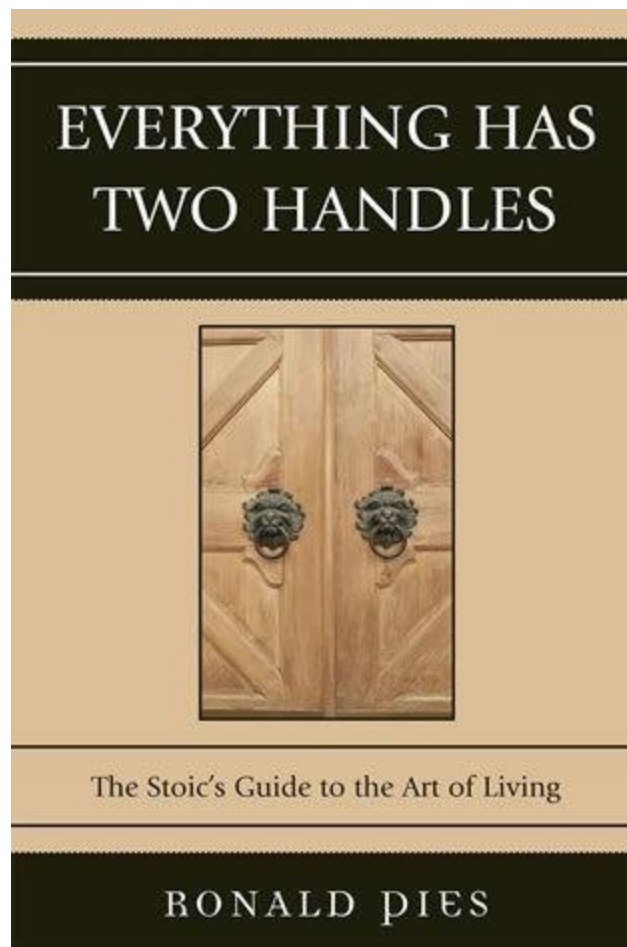
philosophy, more akin to how we today use the word 'religion', was framed by a striving to live according to Nature, the divine, universal Reason, eternal laws. Living according to Reason was a way to attain happiness, the chief end and highest good of the human person. This divine or Reason, sometimes referred to as God, was seen as existing in all of creation, yet not separate from this creation. Reason allowed one to know that some things are in one's power and others are not. Death, bodily health, wealth was not in one's power but one's response, judgment, or power to accept what is morally right was within one's own power. Stoicism advocated the calm acceptance of all of life's occurrences, as these events of life are the unavoidable result of divine will or of the natural order. This understanding led to our current definition of a stoic person as "one who is seemingly impassive, indifferent to pleasure or pain, unmoved by joy or grief."

On a chilly autumn afternoon (a day too chilly to uphold the ancient tradition of meeting on a porch), I had a conversation with Dr. Pies about Stoicism, his book and 'the good life'.

My own curiosity began in wondering how a physician and psychiatrist happened to write about an ancient philosophical system. Pies' mother, to whom his book is dedicated, exposed him to the Stoics long before he had done any reading of them. His mother was trained as a psychiatric social worker in a school of psychotherapy known as Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT). This cognitive-behavioral therapy, founded by Dr. Albert Ellis, was built on founding principles that are essentially Stoic principles. According to Pies: "The basic ideas of Stoicism are identical to the ideas underlying Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy: Our thoughts determine our feelings. And you can change the way you feel by changing the way you think." Through his mother, Pies and his siblings were exposed to these principles when they were quite young. These early threads brought him back to the Stoics more directly years later.

Pies notes a Stoic strain that "runs throughout not

only philosophy but medicine and psychology.... The ethics of psychology and psychiatry are important to me and a lot of what we call ethics actually taps into a very deep psychology of understanding how people are structured. So that's the tie-in for me. I see a lot in psychology and psychiatry that relates to ancient spiritual teachings and tradition." Pies' own religious background is in Judaism, a tradition he claims for himself "in the ethical, philosophical and cultural sense." He has studied and written on the Judaic ethical tradition (see his book: *The Ethics of the Sages: An Interfaith Commentary on Pirke Avot*) and sees many similarities across the teachings of the Talmud and of Hindu and Buddhist teachings and ethical treatises. "I started to make a concerted effort to tie them all together... I like to bring them together into a kind of synthesis," he says. This synthesis is evident in



*Everything Has Two Handles*, which he conceives as an overlapping of spirituality, psychology and philosophy. He traces and upholds Stoic ideas through many examples from Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Christianity, literature and modern psychotherapy.

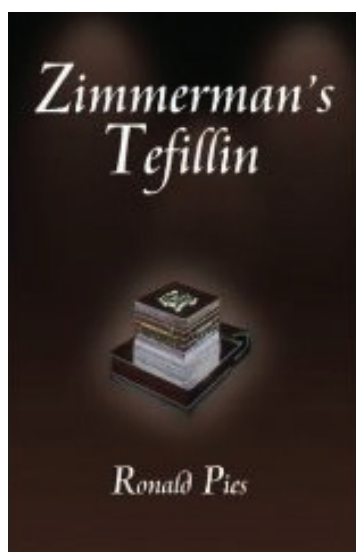
In his book's introduction, Pies states: "The Stoic aims to understand 'the way things are,' and to live accordingly...When we understand and accept the way things are, we find ourselves at peace, and are free to pursue our higher pleasures. When we refuse to accept the way things are, we make ourselves (and often others) unhappy." Beginning with Marcus Aurelius' statement –"Things do not touch the soul"– Pies leads the reader through this guide to living in a way that allows for peace, happiness, pleasure, and avoids letting things touch the soul. This understanding and accepting of the way things are does not lead to a passive life, and Pies again relies on Aurelius to set forth a path: "Leave the past to itself, entrust the future to providence, and content yourself with bringing holiness and justice to the present." This wisdom is not just for the individual but calls for a recognition of what Pies names "the common bond of being." He again draws on Aurelius: "All things are woven together and the common bond is sacred." This thoughtful, well-researched and accessible small volume is a tool to guide and improve one's life. Pies

deftly weaves key elements of the Stoic philosophy throughout his book, providing his own voice and voices of other spiritual traditions as commentary. And while Pies admits that “the Stoics were not renowned for their rollicking sense of humor,” he throws in a joke or two himself, as “keeping your sense of humor is one of the keys to health and happiness!” Pies wants a reader to know that “if they, the reader, were able to assimilate and act on the teachings of the Stoics, that he or she would probably be able to live a very happy and productive life...I really do think that the Stoics can provide a kind of user’s guide to living the good life.”



Along with his work in psychiatry and philosophy, Pies is also a published poet, a combination in part explained by his college double major of neurobiology and behavior, and English. He has published works in numerous literary journals and anthologies, and has written on the therapeutic uses of poetry and the nature of poetic language. Acknowledging this therapeutic use of poetry with patients, Dr. Pies writes: “Psychiatrists ought to consider poetry a kind of ancient well, from which they may draw wisdom not found in many textbooks.” On this intermingling of poetry and psychiatry, he continues: “[T]here is a sense in which psychiatrists – as physicians – are uniquely suited to the reading and writing of poetry. This affinity, in my view, has to do with the essential nature of poetry and the practice of medicine: Both strive to bring order out of disorder. Both strive to mend, heal and transform the damaged world around us.... Psychiatrists and poets also have in common a peculiar mode of attending to things – especially to the nuances of human thought, words and behavior.” And poetry is not just therapeutic for the patient. Dr. Pies notes: “In my own work with seriously disturbed patients, I have sometimes found it ‘therapeutic’ to put the chaos of the patient’s illness into the structure and solidity of verse...” Some of this ‘verse’, these ‘nuances of human thought, words and behavior can be found in his published collection of poems *Creeping Thyme*.

Below is an excerpt from “The Alzheimer Sonnets”, a poem written in four movements:



The doctors say some pinkish sludge  
is what does you in. Gobs of amyloid  
and twisted strands that just won't budge  
from the brain. Pretty soon, a void  
of neurons hangs like some old  
moth-eaten sweater, where once  
a solid weave of bold  
thought reigned. Yet the soul hunts  
for clues among the mind's gray runes,  
and now and then finds some Rosetta  
Stone of memory – an old Sinatra tune  
that brings back spirit, if not the letter.  
Love, these cells that wink out one by one  
are not the song of all that we've become.

*Excerpted from “The Alzheimer Sonnets”, a poem written in four movements:*

Pies notes that one of the chief functions of the psychiatrist is “the practice of hearing beneath the patient’s words, down to the soul’s music.” *Creeping Thyme* is a compelling and poignant collection of just such ‘soul’s music’.

*Dr. Pies is also the author of a collection of short stories (Zimmerman's Tefillin), and two novellas (Welcome to Eutopia, Mr. Bok; Ben Maimon's Mind). His books can be found through Amazon.com.*

*Author Mary T. Kantor recently graduated with a doctorate in Religion and Society from Harvard University.*