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This is why I am an Epicurean

By **Robert Hanrott**, author of the [Epicurus Blog](#).

Reducing fear

I was attracted to Epicureanism in the first place by what Epicurus said about fear. Many years ago a girlfriend told me, “*You will never be content until you have reduced your level of fear. It is obvious in everything you do*”. My wife calls it “eternal vigilance” At best it is an underlying and pervasive anxiety, at worst it leads to instant panics and irrationality. It is a burden.

So much of what I have done in my life has been driven by fear: fear of failure, fear of seeing the family reduced in the world, fear of being out of work, fear of letting down those who depend on me, fear of lack of money, fear of being disliked. So many fears!

I think most people are driven by fear to some degree or other. It is a normal human emotion, and it has some benefits. Without fear our ancestors would have been eaten by saber-toothed tigers. Without fear, the human race would not have achieved the levels of comfort, wealth, health, and control over its environment that it has achieved. Fear has been responsible for many good things as well as many evils.

Jesus told us not to fear, but Epicurus says it so simply, without the interpolations of priests. Some Christian sects build huge revenues out of a mixture of hope and fear: hope of the afterlife, and fear of everlasting damnation, brimstone and fire if you fail to adhere to their teachings. They use fear as a mechanism of social and political control. At present politicians, supported by the right-wing Christians, frighten us with the so-called “War on Terror”. A half-attentive population believes it all and votes for these people out of fear.

So the idea of personal “lack of fear” is attractive. Of course, you cannot eliminate all fear, nor should you. But Epicurus taught that the greatest objective in life is peace of mind — peace of mind comes when you have nothing to fear. He told us not to fear death — death itself does not hurt. And he told us that there is indeed eternal life, but not in the sense that Catholics believe. To Epicurus eternal life means that your atoms are recycled forever in a myriad of forms, from which there is nothing to fear, for nature is impartial.

Try not to fret about things you cannot control.

I suppose there is nothing exclusively Epicurean about this stricture. I am sure many philosophies, maybe several religions, teach the same thing. But I heard it first from Epicurus. Of course, it is one thing to quote the saying and quite another to live by it. You can't have peace of mind if you are constantly busying yourself about things you cannot control. But we all do it, and maybe never stop doing it in one way or another. When one is retired and one has more time to think about the world, the more one gets concerned about misery and misgovernment and other age-old problems that will never be fixed. The irony is that the more retired you are the less power you have to change anything at all. It's a good principle, though, and helpful.

Mental pleasure is better than bodily pleasure. Keep your mind alive.

It is inconvenient, often painful, to have things go wrong with your body, and therefore I assiduously look after it, but mainly for practical reasons. As I have become older I've become more concerned with matters of the mind. What a voyage of discovery it is trying to discover what the brain is capable of! Is there a limit to the number of melodies the brain can remember? Is there a limit to the number of tunes that can pop into the head, to be written down? Equipped with a rhyming dictionary and a thesaurus, where is the limit to the power of the brain to adopt unexpected rhyming couplets that take the story forward while still scanning, making sense and even sometimes being funny? Drawings of hippos are not great art, but the real trick is a trick of the brain — can it come up with an apposite, hopefully amusing concept or message that can be illustrated with a drawing of a hippo? How is one's lateral thinking? Can one find connections between current and historical events and make from them a good story or a political case?

These things give me more pleasure than a good dinner or even an exotic holiday, much as I enjoy both.

Live simply and prudently, with self-control and moderation. Seek simple pleasures, those that satisfy natural and necessary desires, chief of which are food, drink, clothing, shelter, friendship and love.

I think Jesus says something very similar, and I'm sure the Eastern philosophies do. But it was Epicurus who made me think about it. Have I lived this way? I would like to think I have. It is really common sense, but it is difficult to do in a consumerist age, where possessions are deemed equivalent to happiness.

My only problem with this has been friendship. The reality has been that, like many men, I have been dependent on the women in my life for friends. Then, when divorce, for instance, comes along you realize whose friends they really were all along. It is disillusioning, and it can result in a withdrawal from intimacy (in the old, respectable sense of the word), for fear of rejection and the superficiality of some of the friendships one observes.

The quality of pleasure is more important than the quantity.

This is a very useful thing to tell us. We all chase around doing a host of things, hoping thereby to be happy. Actually, a few events, trips, or get-togethers of high quality are more satisfying than the constant activity and filling in of time on unsatisfying and second-rate happenings that simply leaves you tired and wishing you'd stayed at home.

Avoid upsetting and offending people

Common sense? Well yes, but not so common. Some people don't care as long as they get what they want. Others, myself included, try their utmost to avoid offense and to please everyone (but be fierce in self-defense where necessary.) You can be more "successful" in life by pressing ahead in the face of objections and doing

what you think is right regardless of the opinions of others (in your own or in the general interest). On the other hand, one lives a calmer life antagonizing as few people as possible.

“Let us live while we are alive”

Ah, there you have it! No one thanks you for living a life of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. This is an idea popularized by the monastic movement and, later, by the puritans, neither of whom were as “pure’ as they tried to insist.

One is a long time dead. We have a brief time to enjoy the good things the earth has given us, and why not, as long as we harm no one else in the process. Only Epicurus says this, as far as I am aware. The church asks for acknowledgment of guilt, repentance, absolution, redemption, and after all that we still don’t know that we’ll go to heaven. Epicurus wants to stress the joy of living – - some churches want to stress the guilt one should feel for a host of actions or even thoughts. The congregations may sing jolly songs, but are wracked with guilt.

Epicurus absolves us from all the hang-ups and insists that we enjoy life. The implication is that this should be done with a laugh, a smile and a sense of humour.