



DAILY STOIC

STOICISM 101: ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY FOR YOUR ACTUAL LIFE

Stoic Lessons from A Life Well-Lived (January 9, 2025)

He lived for a century, the longest-living president in American history. That in itself, doesn't tell us anything. Seneca's line was that it's not how long you live but how well you live that matters. He was pointing out that many people live to be old but have little to show for it. Jimmy Carter, it must be said, has a lot to show for his ten decades on this planet. The reviews of his presidency might be mixed (although that is unfair—this was a man whose term was without wars, without corruption, which first addressed climate change, mandated seat belt in cars, return of the Panama Canal to its rightful owners, a historic peace deal for the Middle East). As he summed up his own time in office, "We told the truth, we obeyed the law, and we kept the peace."

But his time as an ex-president is unquestioned. After he left office, Carter founded The Carter Center to promote global health, democracy, and human rights, earning him a Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. In particular, Carter was relentless in his efforts to eradicate Guinea worm disease. At a press conference in 2015, Carter famously said, "I'd like for the last Guinea worm to die before I do." When he started working on the problem, the disease afflicted more than 3.6 million people a year in 21 countries. As of the latest report at the end of 2022, there are just 13 cases in 4 countries. Beyond wiping out diseases, he's acted as an international mediator in North Korea, Haiti, and other nations. He was an active volunteer, focusing particularly on housing for the poor—still personally building houses into his 90s. He wrote numerous books on a variety of subjects, from policy to his personal life and even poetry. He enjoyed a 77-year marriage to his beloved Rosalynn, "the foundation for my entire enjoyment of life," Carter once said. Together, they had four children and 22 grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

In short, it was a life of service and a life of virtue. Not virtue in the pious, judgmental sense, but in the Stoic sense—active in public life, active in the world, equal parts compassionate and muscular, he was a man deserving to command because he commanded himself first.

We've written about Carter quite a bit over the years—he comes up repeatedly in [Right Thing](#), [Right Now](#) and [The Daily Dad](#), as well as one of the best stories in [Discipline is Destiny](#)—and with his recent passing, we wanted to reflect on five simple lessons from the great Jimmy Carter on how to live a good and honorable life:

- **[Always do your best.](#)** In an interview with Admiral Hyman Rickover, the father of the nuclear Navy, after Carter proudly said he was ranked 59th in a class of 840 at the Naval Academy, instead of being impressed, Rickover asked, “But did you always do your best?” Carter answered honestly that he did not always do his best. After a long pause, Rickover asked, “Why not?” and then walked out of the room. Carter would never forget this question. This question became the lodestar of Carter’s life.
- **[Hang in there.](#)** In the 1930s and 40s, the black midshipman accepted to the Naval Academy all left before graduating because of appalling racism. Wesley Brown was on the brink of leaving when Carter, who was two years ahead, caught him walking down the hallway, threw his arm around him and said, “Hang in there.” Because Carter grew up in a small rural segregated town in Georgia, he was expected to be racist, and so, one classmate recalled, “he was treated as if he was a traitor.” Carter, who ran cross country with Brown, took it in stride. Brown would hang in there and become the first African American graduate of the Naval Academy in 1949—the school’s athletic center is now named after him.
- **[Make time every day for study and reflection.](#)** Even when he became President, Carter was disciplined about creating space for self-awareness and preparation. Just days into his term, he asked his aides to delay meetings so he could dedicate an hour to reading, prayer, and thought—a habit rooted in his boyhood practice of rising early. “I need more time alone early each morning,” he wrote to his team, ensuring he approached each day with clarity and focus.
- **[Don’t be all about business.](#)** As he was setting up his administration in the White House, Carter told the ambitious staff, “We are going to be here a long time, and all of you will be more valuable to me and the country with rest and a stable home life.” By prioritizing temperance and moderation, Carter showed that true success isn’t

just about professional accomplishments but also about nurturing lasting relationships and well-being. Fame is temporary, but family is forever.

- [You have only one life to live. Make the most of it.](#) As president, Carter prayed for guidance to live with purpose, striving to make the most of each day. Like Marcus Aurelius or Cato, Jimmy Carter reminds us that life's challenges and fleeting nature demand not despair but a commitment to transforming our time into something significant. "Let me live my life so that it will be meaningful," he said.

From his mentor Admiral Rickover, Carter picked up this idea not just of doing your best, but doing what was *right*. "It is impossible for me to delay something that I see needs to be done," Carter once said. It was this attitude that likely cost him a second term (in fact, it was said that the surest way to get on Carter's bad side was to claim something would be bad for his reelection prospects).

It is, of course, sad to hear of Carter's passing. On the other hand, no one can say that he was taken from us too soon. Certainly, he left nothing undone—guinea worm, though still technically around, is close to becoming the second human disease to ever be eradicated after smallpox. This man got more time on the planet than any other America president, but much more impressively, he *did more* with his time. We can say, unequivocally, that this man lived.