

## *Excerpts from the Meditations by Marcus Aurelius Antoninus for Classroom Discussion*

The Antonine emperor Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180 A.D.) was educated by many famous teachers, including the orator Fronto. From the age of twelve, he showed an interest in philosophy, and eventually it became a key feature of his life. He was much influenced by a school of philosophy called Stoicism, but his writings draw from Platonism and Epicureanism as well. His philosophical musings on human life and the ways of the gods were recorded in Greek in a personal notebook, and they have come down to us as the *Meditations*. His legacy as a philosopher-ruler survives today.

Some possible questions to consider when discussing these excerpts: What do the quotations indicate about Roman life and culture? What do they say about the importance of history and art? About leadership? Are any of the concepts expressed relevant to your life or the modern world? What qualities does Marcus Aurelius admire in a person in the first quotation? In the second, what does he seem to be saying about the importance of earthly activities?

### *Book Three, 5*

In your actions let there be a willing promptitude, yet a regard for the common interest; due deliberation, yet no irresolution; and in your sentiments no pretentious over-refinement. Avoid talkativeness, avoid officiousness. The god within you should preside over a being who is virile and mature, a statesman, a Roman, and a ruler; one who has held his ground, like a soldier waiting for the signal to retire from life's battlefield and ready to welcome his relief; a man whose credit need neither be sworn to by himself nor avouched by others. Therein is the secret of cheerfulness, of depending on no help from without and needing to crave from no man the boon of tranquility. We have to stand upright ourselves, not be set up.

### *Book Four, 33*

Expressions that were once current have gone out of use nowadays. Names, too, that were formerly household words are virtually archaisms today; Camillus, Caeso, Volesus, Dentatus; or a little later, Scipio and Cato; Augustus too, and even Hadrian and Antoninus. All things fade into the storied past, and in a little while are shrouded in oblivion. Even to men whose lives were a blaze of glory this comes to pass; as for the rest, the breath is hardly out of them before, in Homer's words, they are "lost to sight alike and hearsay." What, after all, is immortal fame? An empty, hollow thing. To what, then, must we aspire? This, and this alone: the just thought, the unselfish act, the tongue that utters no falsehood, the temper that greets each passing event as something predestined, expected, and emanating from the One source and origin.