

Welcome to The Garden of Epicurus

Seeking wisdom,
solace and purpose in an
angry, chaotic world

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With stress levels and angry debate escalating all around us, where can we find a place for engaging conversation, sensual aesthetics and the keys to a more peaceful mindset?

Turns out the philosophical insights taught by ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus at his personal home and garden are influencing important trends here in the 21st century.

Whether they are conscious of it or not, millions of millennials, along with many Baby Boomers and GenXers, are making influential lifestyle choices based on the teachings of Epicurus. The key influencer: The desire for a simplified, more sustainable and enjoyable life.

WHO WAS EPICURUS?

In 306 B.C.E., Epicurus founded The Garden, a combination of philosophical community, informal

Millennials are making lifestyle choices based on the teachings of ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus.

Wikipedia

school and social meeting place.

His Garden academy was a reaction to stress levels rising among citizens of ancient Athens due to decades of constant warfare and uncertainty as to their future, a situation not unlike many feel today.

Epicurus' Garden was based on the Agora, an open-air marketplace in the city where citizens would meet to enjoy local foods and crafts and engage in stimulating conversations about issues of the day. Epicurus felt strongly that given the rising fears and stress levels, people needed to focus less on debates about politics and more on engaged philosophical conversations about personal values and what makes for a virtuous, enjoyable life.

The Garden was not an organized academic environment with grades, official degrees or competitive career tracks. Epicurus did not see any distinction between a vibrant learning environment and the enjoyment of sensual pleasures derived from being in an aesthetic environment enjoying the simple pleasures of food, wine, conversation, music, art and nature.

Specifically, Epicurus was the first philosopher in the Western tradition to diagnose the disease of greed and fear, and propose a cure.

Garden sessions included a surprisingly varied group for its time: men and women, free citizens and slaves, and even a few reformed prostitutes. They were all welcome at this quiet retreat away from the congested and agitated interactions of the city.

A PHILOSOPHY WORTH REVISITING

Epicurus believed that the purpose of life was pleasure, particularly the sensuous pleasures of fresh

food from the garden and local farms, moderate amounts of wine, music, art and the aesthetics of nature.

He made an interesting distinction between two types of pleasure: moving pleasures and static pleasures.



Moving pleasures involve the satisfying of a desire — for example, eating a meal when hungry. Static pleasures free us from the pain of need or want.

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Simply stated, moving pleasures involve the satisfying of a desire — for example, eating a meal when hungry. Static pleasures, on the other hand, involve the state of having had a desire fulfilled. That might include feeling satisfied after a meal.

Static pleasures, Epicurus said, are better than moving pleasures because they free us from the pain of need or want. Psychologically, he is pointing out that when we focus more on what we have and less on what we want, lives are more pleasurable. It's contentment over desire.

Contrast this with our contemporary culture: There's a constant barrage from advertisers and marketers manipulating our desire. They're trying to convince us our happiness and health are dependent on stuff they're selling.

Epicurus made it clear that by promoting the importance of pleasure, not everything that is pleasurable should be pursued, and not everything that is painful should be avoided. The emphasis needs to be on longer-lasting pleasures, not instant gratification. Sometimes this requires sacrificing an immediate pleasure in order to help others.

MODERATION OVER RAMPANT CONSUMERISM

While Epicurus clearly advocated enjoying the sensual pleasures of food, drink, intimacy and nature, he wrote: "Luxurious food and drinks in no way protect you from harm. Wealth beyond what is natural, is no more use than an overflowing container. Real value

is not generated by theaters, spas, perfumes or ointments, but by philosophy.”

The philosophy he taught was nothing like the formal, technically complicated academic philosophy known today. The word “philosophy” is derived from the two words, “love of” and “wisdom.” The love of wisdom taught at The Garden was grounded in the philosophy that “less” really is “more.”

Epicurus reminds us, “A free life cannot acquire many possessions, because this is not easy to do without servility to mobs or monarchs.”

And “Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not.”

CONVERSATION OVER DEBATE

Our English word, “conversation,” has an interesting etymology. It means “to turn together.”

A meaningful conversation requires a spirit of moving together to arrive at a new perception or bigger picture that none of the individual participants had experienced before. Contrast this with debate based on defending an entrenched position. Epicurus saw the hurt and destruction caused by constant debate and argument. While life issues discussed at The Garden were deeply important, Epicurus created a friendly social environment where participants could enjoy the pleasures of open-minded philosophical conversation without the added weight of seeking individual credit or award.

COLLABORATION OVER COMPETITION

There was no competition within the walls of The Garden. No grades, no tests, no tenure, no diplomas.

Those attending The Garden were allowed to keep private possessions. This was not a commune. But the pleasurable environment and insights into life received in The Garden were meant to be shared in a communal way, not for personal gain. Epicurus exuded generosity. He deplored selfishness and consistently promoted the good of the larger community.

THE MOST VIRTUOUS RELATIONSHIP

Epicurus maintained that friendship is the most valuable relationship because it creates so much pleasure in our lives. Equally as important, friends provide the best security for one another, particularly in times of great societal stress and conflict.

Epicurus strongly opposed marriage. To us, this seems excessive. To put this into perspective, ancient Greece marriages were almost always arranged purely for financial gain to the parents. Girls often were forced to marry by the time they were 15. (Even today, more than 50 percent of marriages break apart; the number of never-married Americans has doubled over the past 50 years. And there are studies showing the marriages that bring the most happiness are those where the partners, in addition to being lovers and parents, are truly good friends.)

DEALING WITH FEAR

This is the most important key to the philosophy of The Garden. How can any of us, as individuals, members of a family, citizens of a society, or observers of the world stage lead enjoyable, engaged, charitable, benevolent lives if our minds are fearful?

As previously stated, The Garden was created as a direct response to decades of constant warfare, political infighting and economic uncertainty of 4th century Athens. One of the main attractions of The Garden was the cultivation of what the ancient Greeks called *ataraxia*.

Ataraxia referred to a conscious, peaceful state of mind cultivated through certain disciplines, including deep gratitude to nature, one’s best teachers and one’s ancestors. In ataraxia, one is conscious of conflicts out in the world, but not fixated on them. Epicurus taught participants to face the “here and now” and reduce time fearing the future.

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A view of the Acropolis from the ancient agora, Athens, Greece.

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versation; and spending part of each day in solitary contemplation. This quieting down of the mind in the face of uncertainty is an essential practice if we are not to be overwhelmed with fear.

Epicurus was not an atheist. But he felt strongly that the greatest threat to a peaceful, virtuous mind were religions that taught disciples to fear the gods.

He wrote, “It is vain to ask of the gods what man is capable of supplying for himself.”

His views on religion and fear were quite distinct from the mainstream thinking of his ancient Greek contemporaries. They believed the gods to be forces watching over human activities and actively interfering with human lives. Epicurus taught that the gods are divine because they are beyond meddling in the affairs of humans. The gods functioned mainly as ethical ideals, not wrathful forces to be feared, he said.

If we need proof that Epicurus “walked the walk” of his own philosophy and cultivated a more tranquil, less fearful mind, we can look at the letter he wrote to one of his students on his deathbed. Despite experiencing horrific pain from multiple kidney stones and total bladder blockage, he wrote, “On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from my condition are so great that nothing could increase them; but I set above them all the gladness of mind at the memory of our past conversations.”

After Epicurus’ death, his philosophy and The Garden continued to flourish as a philosophical movement for close to 800 years. It then went into severe decline with the rise of Christianity, which forcibly banned all teachings promoting sensual pleasure and lack of respect for religious authority. For the dura-

tion of the Dark Ages, there was virtually not a trace of Epicurus’ teaching.

EPICURUS REDISCOVERED

The story of how The Garden of Epicurus was retrieved from obscurity after the church banned all references to his life or philosophy is recounted in a fascinating Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Swerve: How The World Became Modern*, by Stephen Greenblatt.

The Swerve relates the story of the greatest book hunter of the Renaissance. His most significant find, located in the dark catacombs of a German monastery, was a copy of Lucretius’ *On the Nature of Things*, which had been lost to history for more than a thousand years.

The main inspiration for Lucretius’ secular, humanist philosophy was Epicurus, to whom he refers throughout his work.

These insights helped recalibrate the thinking of Renaissance artists and philosophers who were throwing off the authoritarian religious orthodoxy of the Dark Ages and seeking new levels of aesthetic creativity and an expanded vision of man’s place in the world.

Beyond the Renaissance, Epicurus became admired by many of our founding fathers. Thomas Jefferson owned at least five Latin editions of *On the Nature of Things*, as well as translations into other languages. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were avowed Deists, a religious philosophy that adopted many aspects of Epicurus’ philosophy, particularly a sense of God as the creative force of nature and an ethical ideal, not a vengeful force to be feared. (There are dozens of books and



Millennials are choosing to borrow rather than own cars, fancy clothing, bikes and handbags.

From left: zipcar.com; renttherunway.com; citibike; bagborroworsteal.com

articles confirming this, including the writings of Jefferson and Franklin themselves.)

An important note: In modern usage, the word “Epicurean” has come to refer to highly refined luxurious food and lifestyle. This is a manipulation of the original philosophy, first by the royal class of the 18th and 19th centuries and by modern-day elitists. Today, thanks to recent books and dozens of articles online, we can rediscover the emphasis on enjoying simple, enduring pleasures at the heart of The Garden philosophy.

THE GARDEN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Millions of millennials, whether they are conscious of it or not, have been developing important and influential trends reflecting The Garden philosophy of simple pleasures, collaboration and “less is more.”

As quoted in *Forbes Magazine*: “Millennials think of happiness as the new success. And they don’t define happiness as ‘stuff.’ In general, they want a work-life balance, not a ‘work to pay for stuff’ balance. As a basic trend, millennials are not willing to grind it out just to buy ‘more, more and more.’”

According to the educational research site Postconsumers.com, “from Zipcars to Rent the Runway, millennials invented the culture of ‘borrowing instead of owning.’”

And MediaPost.com reports: “Perhaps more than any other generation, millennials are redefining what ownership culture means to them, and keeping up with the Joneses has much less to do with a lifelong

pursuit of accumulating material goods and more to do with the collection of meaningful experiences and shareable ideas over frivolous consumables.”

A look at social-media data reveals millennials’ preference for deeply felt experiences over the chase for bigger and better stuff.

And we can see that The Garden’s emphasis on contributing to the greater good, rather than pursuing individual status and wealth, is alive and well in 2017. Klaus Schwab, executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, said in an interview: “The younger generation has a completely different attitude. Those people have a really global attitude and global identity. To make money is not necessarily their first

objective. Their first objective is to make a contribution.”

And not just millennials are influenced by the teachings in The Garden of Epicurus. When Joni Mitchell wrote the lyric, “And we got to get ourselves back to the garden,” she was retrieving the essence of Epicurus’ philosophy for the Woodstock generation, a number of whom find today’s consumer-addicted “more is better” culture not only a disaster from an ecological viewpoint, but the wrong-way path to a more socially conscious, joyful, healthy lifestyle.

Luke Slattery points out in his book, *Reclaiming Epicurus*, “The

philosophy of The Garden addresses the most urgent moral question of the 21st century: How do we respond to the escalating crisis of environmental degradation? Epicurus posed this question long before it was a question by giving voice to the ideal of human behavior guided by natural limits.”



Wikipedia

Joni Mitchell and her Woodstock generation tried to get “back to the garden.”



Time and again, Epicurus and his followers return to the theme of limits. But rather than frame this in negative terms, the enduring strength of The Garden philosophy is its focus on happiness gained from developing a more tranquil, peaceful mind based on simple, enduring pleasures and avoiding the agitated, tangled web of politics and religious fear.

In the 21st century, we all face a new reality that requires a close look at the focus Epicurus places on “limits,” namely the exponentially expanding computer technology that’s dramatically altering our personal lives and global events. The World Wide Web is one of greatest and potentially progressive technologies ever invented, bringing the planet closer together in what Marshall McLuhan once referred to as “the global village.” It is potentially the greatest teaching tool ever conceived.

And yet, the expanding time we spend on desktop computers, digital tablets and smartphones is speeding up our brains in unhealthy ways. It’s putting us in the bull’s-eye of aggressive marketers, advertisers, hackers and malware.

The modern Epicurean solution is to recognize the importance of being both on and off the digital screen, taking time each day to slow down the mind, connect with others in a personal, more intimate way than possible through hundreds of Facebook friends, and contemplate what brings us enduring happiness, not just instant gratification.

Since I started my talk-radio career over 35 years ago, there have been some significant signs reflecting The Garden philosophy of Epicurus:

— The slow-food movement and focus on locally grown, naturally clean food have been steadily gaining momentum, thanks to food writers from Alice Waters in the 1980s to Michael Pollan today.

— Adherence to orthodox religion is declining as interest in more open-minded spiritual teachings

increases.

— Many powerful corporations are realizing that developing more collaborative and less competitive office environments is a better business model (for more on this, a good article is “How to Build a Collaborative Office Space Like Pixar and Google,” found online).

PRESERVING THE GARDEN

Over the centuries, while the Epicurean philosophy has been banned by authoritarian religions and misused by wealthy status seekers who use “Epicurean” to describe a privileged, luxurious lifestyle, The Garden encourages a vibrant, liberating philosophy for 21st century life.

The Garden of Epicurus is not only a beautiful physical space, it serves as an effective metaphor for a less anxious, more peaceful mind where philosophical insights into the good life are planted and cultivated.

Epicurus and his teaching in The Garden reach out over thousands of years to speak to the ever-increasing stresses and conflicts of our modern world. He wrote, “The greater difficulty, the more glory in surmounting it. Skillful pilots gain their reputation from storms and tempests.”

We see the growing trend of The Garden, fueled by millions of millennials seeking an effective antidote to the constant barrage of fear, greed and anxiety from the 24/7 news cycle. How do we expect nation states and political leaders to reduce the constant cycle of war and conflict if we are not able as individuals to develop more tranquil, peaceful minds?

So welcome to The Garden, where simple, sensual pleasures and collaborative, socially conscious philosophy prevail, while conspicuous consumption, aggressive competition, angry debate and fear are left at the entrance. **TJ**