

DAILY STOIC

In his wonderful book, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, the Pulitzer Prize winning scholar Stephen Greenblatt spends a lot of time analyzing a pivotal moment early in the life of Saint Augustine, when he was at a Roman bath with his father. One of the observations Greenblatt makes is about the steamy, quiet, relaxing atmosphere of the baths, with its alternating hot and cold, the scrubbing and soaking and resting and massaging. The kind of baths that Saint Augustine visited in the 4th century, Greenblatt writes, “was everywhere the same and has continued virtually unchanged to the present.”

The bath he visited when he was simply Augustine of Hippo was essentially identical to the baths [Marcus Aurelius experienced](#), that [Seneca wrote about](#), that Cato was famously shoved at (and forgave his accidental assailant), that you might visit on a vacation to Istanbul, or really, not all that different from the locker room at one of those private athletic clubs in most major cities. You can actually still visit some of [Rome’s ancient thermal baths](#).

Isn’t that interesting? For all the things that have changed and for all the technological advancements that happened between Cato’s time and St. Augustine’s time (about 400 years) and between St. Augustine’s time and ours (almost 1600 years), this experience fundamentally hasn’t really changed. We’re still just human beings who occasionally need to get scrubbed down or sweat out the dirt and stress of life.

Over and over again, Marcus reminded himself about how similar his life was to the past and how little the future would deviate from the same patterns and cycles. That most of the “change” we see happening around us is window dressing or a distraction. He made this point to remind himself to focus on the timelessness of human nature and to humble himself in comparison to the distant past and the endless future.

We can do the same, today, by stopping and thinking about that old 19th century French epigram about *how the more things change, the more they stay the same*. We can take care to notice how different words we still use today evolve from ancient usage, or how eerily similar certain practices or experiences remain after all this time. We can pick up a classic book and think about how generations before us held that same text in their hands and what they thought about it.

It will humble us. It will give us perspective.