

SAMPLE CHAPTER + TEACHER NOTES

Talks on a Park Bench

by María Ferrer Tarazona

Chapter 3.6 — The luck nobody mentions

PHILOSOPHER	CORE IDEA	THEMES	SUGGESTED USE
Boethius (c. 477–524) and the Stoics	Fortune shapes outcomes; effort is the part that is yours	Luck, privilege, inequality, effort and merit	Ages 15–18 · Ethics, Philosophy, Citizenship · one 45–50 min lesson

Four teenagers — Marc, Nora, Diego and Vera — meet on a park bench and talk about real problems: exams, friendship, grief, social media. In each chapter a philosophical idea arrives after the problem, not before. The extract below is the opening scene and the "philosophical turn" of one chapter, reproduced word for word.

EXTRACT: THE SCENE

Something was said to Nora that same afternoon at the pool, and it shows on her face before she even opens her mouth.

"Carla's quitting," she says, with no preamble. "The swimmer on my team, the one I told you about who competes in my same event."

"Why?" Vera asks. "I thought she was doing really well."

"She was doing better than well. She actually has more natural talent than me, and everyone on the team knew it. But her parents can't afford the club fees anymore, or the travel to competitions, or the gear. She's applied for scholarships two years running and hasn't gotten one. So she's quitting. Just like that."

An uncomfortable silence falls over the bench.

"That's messed up," Diego says, bluntly. "Sorry for the word, but there's no other way to put it."

"The worst part is I've been turning this over all afternoon," Nora goes on. "I've gotten where I've gotten by training hard, yes, but also because my parents have been able to pay every fee, every trip, every competition swimsuit, without blinking. I'd never thought about it that way until today."

"The same thing happens to me with the violin, now that I think about it," Marc says, thoughtful. "I started because my parents could afford private lessons for me starting at age six. Without that, I wouldn't even know I'm good at it."

"I'm not saying you two haven't worked hard," Vera clarifies. "I know you've both put in a huge amount of work. But Carla worked just as hard, or harder, and it got her nowhere, because she was missing the other part."

Diego, who's been listening to all this with real attention, says something that's been on his mind for a while, chewing it over.

"It's just that this whole 'if you try hard you get everything' line always forgets to mention this part. It never tells the story of someone who tried just as hard and didn't make it, because they didn't have the scholarship, or the parents with money, or the right timing."

“So what’s the point of even trying, then?” Vera asks, not as a challenge, but as a genuine question.

Nobody has an immediate answer to that. The silence stretches a moment, until Marc, carefully, tries something.

“Maybe it still helps, even if it doesn’t guarantee anything,” he says. “I don’t know how to explain it better. But not trying doesn’t guarantee you anything either, and on top of it takes away even the chance that it might go well.”

“That sounds like a cheap consolation,” Nora says, though without any bitterness, more thinking out loud.

“Maybe,” Marc admits. “But I also think about Carla. If she hadn’t put in the effort all these years, she wouldn’t even have had the chance to apply for the scholarship. She ended up not getting it, yes, but not for lack of trying.”

Diego nods.

“That doesn’t fix how unfair all of this is. But maybe it does change what the effort is actually for. It’s not a guarantee of the outcome. It’s, at most, the only part of the equation that really is in your hands.”



THE PHILOSOPHICAL TURN

The Stoics, despite insisting so forcefully that virtue — well-directed effort, character, the way one acts — was the only truly good thing, never denied the existence of fortune, an external factor that escapes anyone’s control completely and that, in a decisive way, influences the visible outcomes of a life. The Greeks called it Tyche; the Romans, Fortuna. Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus knew perfectly well that two people could put in exactly the same effort, with the same talent and the same dedication, and get completely different results, simply because one had been born into more favorable circumstances than the other.

This idea was developed, centuries later, into a memorable image by the Roman philosopher Boethius, already at the twilight of the Roman Empire, profoundly influenced by Stoic thought: the wheel of fortune, which turns without rest, lifting some and dropping others, with no criterion of merit or justice behind it. Boethius, who wrote about this while imprisoned and awaiting an unjust execution, didn’t say it from the comfort of theory, but from the direct experience of having seen fortune take everything from him in an instant, deserved or not.

The Stoic conclusion in the face of this isn’t fatalism, nor giving up trying. It is, rather, an essential humility: to keep acting with all possible diligence in what genuinely depends on oneself, knowing honestly that the final outcome never depends solely on that, and that those who don’t reach where they wanted haven’t always failed in effort. Many times, quite simply, the wheel didn’t turn in their favor.

The chapter goes on with “Landing” (the “self-made” story and the role of luck), “Objections from the Bench” (the opposite excuse: “it’s all luck anyway”) and a “Toolbox” of two practical exercises. Read the full chapter in the book: **https://link.amazon/B06VMCWBd**

TEACHER NOTES

KEY CONCEPTS

Tyche / Fortuna	The Greek and Roman names for fortune: the external factor beyond anyone's control that, in a decisive way, influences the visible outcomes of a life. Two people with the same talent, effort and dedication can end up with very different results.
The wheel of fortune	Boethius's image of a wheel that turns without rest, lifting some and dropping others, with no regard for merit or justice. He wrote it in prison, awaiting execution, in The Consolation of Philosophy (early 6th century).
Effort vs. outcome	In the Stoic view, effort — well-directed action and character — is the part that depends on you; the final outcome never depends only on it. The conclusion is not fatalism or giving up, but humility.
Two opposite mistakes	"It's all effort" (the "self-made" story, which erases luck) and "it's all luck, so why try?" (which gives up the one part you control). The chapter rejects both.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading closely

1. What does Nora realise about her own swimming after hearing about Carla? What does Marc realise about the violin?
   Listen for: *fees, trips and gear paid "without blinking"; private lessons from age six — advantages they had not noticed, without denying their own hard work.*
2. Vera says Carla "worked just as hard, or harder, and it got her nowhere, because she was missing the other part." What is "the other part"?
   Listen for: *circumstances outside Carla's control: money, a scholarship, timing — what the Stoics called fortune.*

Thinking it through

3. Diego says the "if you try hard you get everything" line "never tells the story of someone who tried just as hard and didn't make it." Where do you meet that line (adverts, social media, school talks)? Whose stories does it leave out?
   Listen for: *teachers may want to name the connection with survivorship bias: we hear from those who made it, rarely from those who did not.*
4. Vera asks, "So what's the point of even trying?" Summarise how Marc and Diego answer. Is Nora right that it sounds like a "cheap consolation"?
   Listen for: *effort guarantees nothing, but it is the only part in your hands; without Carla's effort she would not even have had the chance to apply.*
5. How does the Stoic conclusion differ from fatalism ("it's all luck") and from the "self-made" story ("it's all effort")?
   Listen for: *keep acting with diligence in what depends on you, while recognising honestly that the outcome never depends only on that — neither blame nor surrender.*

Connecting to life

6. Is it fair to judge people — or ourselves — only by results? Think of grades, team selection, scholarships, job interviews. What would a fairer way of judging look like?
   Listen for: *taking the starting ground into account without erasing effort; no single right answer, so ask for concrete proposals.*

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY: THE FULL VERSION OF THE STORY

45–50 minutes · whole class, then pairs · paper

1. **Read (10 min).** Read the extract aloud in parts (narrator, Nora, Vera, Diego, Marc). Ask: What did Nora and Marc notice that they had not noticed before?
2. **The short version (5 min).** Show two short "highlight-reel" stories: (A) "Lucía trained every morning for five years and won the regional 800 m title." (B) "Omar taught himself to code and now runs his own app company." What do they make us think about Lucía and Omar?
3. **The full version (15 min).** In pairs, choose one story and invent its full version in four or five sentences. Keep the effort visible, and add what the short version leaves out: who paid for what, who gave time, where they lived, what they had access to, what happened to be in place at the right moment. Then change one circumstance and decide how the ending might change.
4. **Compare (10 min).** Share a few versions. Ask: Does the full version take away Lucía's or Omar's merit? (The Stoic answer: no — effort remains — but the judgement becomes more complete and more compassionate.)
5. **Private writing (5 min, voluntary).** Each student finishes, for themselves, the sentence: "One thing that helped me that I didn't choose is…" Nothing is shared aloud.

> **Teacher tip.** Some students may be closer to Carla's situation than to Nora's. Keep the personal reflection private, never ask students to rank their own advantages aloud, and work with invented stories rather than classmates' circumstances.

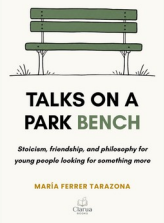
TWO MORE TIPS

Spot the starting mistake. Ask which of the two opposite mistakes — "it's all effort" and "it's all luck, so why try?" — each character comes close to at different moments. (Hint: Vera's question leans towards the second.)

Keep both truths on the board. The aim is not guilt but a more complete view: luck matters a great deal, and effort remains the one thing that depends on you.

GOING FURTHER

- Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy (early 6th century) — Book II, on fortune and her wheel.
- Block 1 of the book (the dichotomy of control, Epictetus) — what depends on us and what does not.
- In the chapter's Toolbox, two take-home exercises: "The map of your own luck" (a private list of starting advantages) and "A concrete gesture of solidarity."



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44 chapters in which four teenagers bring everyday problems to Stoic, Epicurean, Cynic, skeptic and contemporary thinkers. Includes a philosophical glossary and an annotated bibliography. A teaching guide for the whole book is also available.

Get the book: **https://link.amazon/B06VMCWBd**

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