

THE TAO OF
SENECA

Practical Letters from a Stoic Master



BASED ON THE WRITINGS OF SENECA

Foreword by **Tim Ferriss**

FEATURING ESSAYS BY MODERN STOIC THINKERS

VOLUME 1

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The Tao of Seneca, Volume 1

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translated by Richard Mott Gummere.

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**THESE VOLUMES ARE DEDICATED
TO ALL WHO SEEK TO BETTER
THEMSELVES AND, IN DOING SO,
BETTER THE WORLD.**

—Tim Ferriss

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

by Tim Ferriss



Few of us consider ourselves philosophers. “Philosophy” usually conjures images of dense textbooks and academic quibbling with no application to real life. It’s fun for professors, perhaps, but a waste of time for the rest of us.

I felt this way for decades. Then, in 2004, I found the work of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, better known as Seneca the Younger or simply “Seneca.” Born circa 4 BC in present day Spain and raised in Rome, Seneca was simultaneously an esteemed playwright, one of the wealthiest people in Rome, a famous statesman, and an advisor to the emperor. He had to negotiate, persuade, and strategize his way through life. Far from spouting philosophy from the safety of an ivory tower, he had to constantly deal with uncooperative, powerful human beings and faced disaster, exile, and death head on.

Seneca took risks and did big things.

His primary philosophy, Stoicism, was founded around 300 BC in Athens and can be thought of as an operating system for thriving in high-stress environments. At its core, it teaches you how to separate what you can control from what you cannot, and it trains you to focus exclusively on the former.

Seneca’s *Moral Letters to Lucilius* — a distillation of his lessons

learned—changed my life and continues to do so today. You now hold a version of those letters in your hands, complete with original illustrations, original calligraphy from compatible traditions like Zen, links to free audio, and more.

I'm giving away *The Tao of Seneca* in the hopes that it changes your life, and I promise you that it can.

Stoicism was designed for doers, and you'll be in fine company as a student.

Thomas Jefferson had Seneca on his bedside table. Michel de Montaigne had a quote from Epictetus—a handicapped slave turned famous Stoic teacher—carved into the ceiling of his house so he would see it constantly. Every year, Bill Clinton reads *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, who was at once a Stoic, emperor, and the most powerful man in the world. Other proponents include John Stuart Mill, bestselling author Tom Wolfe, and Navy vice admiral and Medal of Honor recipient James Stockdale, who credited his survival as a prisoner of war (7.5 years, much of it in a windowless 3' x 9' cement cell) to Stoicism.

But far from limited to overcoming the negative, Stoicism can also be used to maximize the positive.

For this reason, Stoicism has spread like wildfire throughout Silicon Valley and the NFL in the last five years, becoming a mental toughness training system for CEOs, founders, coaches, and players alike. Super Bowl champions like the Patriots and Seahawks have embraced Stoicism to make them better competitors.

In my own life, the results have been incredible.

Whether early-stage investments (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Uber, Alibaba, and 50+ others), books translated into 40+ languages (e.g., *Tools of Titans*), or anything else in the last 20+ years of my life, I credit nearly all of the biggest successes—and biggest disasters averted—to my study of Stoicism and, specifically, the writing of Seneca.

But keep in mind: reading alone does very little. The ideas in this book are meant to be applied and this requires *practice*.

Why do I fast for at least one three-day stretch each month?

Why do I often schedule “suffer camps” of various types, where I might endure cold or eat exclusively rice and beans for 3–10 days?

Why might I wear the same type of black t-shirt for a week straight, along with one pair of jeans, all the while remaining unshaven and asking myself, “Is this the condition that I feared?”

All of the above examples are how I use just one letter—**Letter 18, On Festivals and Fasting** ([pg 90](#)). Here’s the gist in a few excerpts:

Set aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare, with coarse and rough dress, saying to yourself the while: “Is this the condition that I feared?” It is precisely in times of immunity from care that the soul should toughen itself beforehand for occasions of greater stress, and it is while Fortune is kind that it should fortify itself against her violence. In days of peace the soldier performs maneuvers, throws up earthworks with no enemy in sight, and wearies himself by gratuitous toil, in order that he may be equal to unavoidable toil. If you would not have a man flinch when the crisis comes, train him before it comes.

...

Let the pallet be a real one, and the coarse cloak; let the bread be hard and grimy. Endure all this for three or four days at a time, sometimes for more, so that it may be a test of yourself instead of a mere hobby. Then, I assure you, my dear Lucilius, you will leap for joy when filled with a pennyworth of food, and you will understand that a man’s

peace of mind does not depend upon Fortune; for, even when angry she grants enough for our needs.

• • •

For though water, barley-meal, and crusts of barley-bread, are not a cheerful diet, yet it is the highest kind of pleasure to be able to derive pleasure from this sort of food, and to have reduced one's needs to that modicum which no unfairness of Fortune can snatch away.

These types of practices make you less emotionally reactive, more aware in the present tense, and more resilient. Perhaps counterintuitively, given the English connotations of “stoic,” this dramatically increases your ability to feel joy over the small things.

As you navigate life, this type of mental toughness training also makes tough decisions easier, whether quitting a job, starting a company, asking someone out, ending a relationship, or anything else.

So, where to start?

There are many great minds in the Stoic pantheon, including Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Cato. For me, though, Seneca stands out as easy to read, memorable, and surprisingly practical. He covers specifics ranging from handling slander and backstabbing, to fasting, exercise, wealth, and death. His letters read like a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure book for handling the obstacles life deals you.

I suggest you approach this book the way I approached it: make Seneca part of your daily routine.

Set aside 10–15 minutes a day and read one letter. Whether over coffee in the morning, right before bed, or somewhere in between, digest one letter. Do this for two weeks and it will change you.

Feel free to bounce around and skip liberally. This is *your* book, meant to be customized. Three of my favorites might help you

get started: **Letter 13 On Groundless Fears** ([pg 66](#)), **Letter 18 On Festivals and Fasting** ([pg 90](#)), and **Letter 20 On Practicing What You Preach** ([pg 100](#)), which is also hilarious.

If you have never been exposed to Seneca before, I'm excited for you . . . and envious of you. What a journey you have ahead.

As he might say, "Vale." Seneca used this to close many of letters, and it is often translated as "Farewell" for simplicity. It's perhaps better translated several other ways, and my favorite is two words:

Stay strong.

May this book serve you as a friend, teacher, and companion on the path.

I hope you enjoy the ride as much as I have,

Tim

San Francisco, California

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Instagram/Facebook: [TimFerriss](#)

I am deeply indebted to [DailyStoic.com](#), who generously provided most of the contemporary interviews in this book. Additional modern essays are credited to their respective authors. My sincere thanks to all who were kind enough to contribute to this project.

SUGGESTED SHORT READING



If you ever feel overwhelmed by longer reads in this book, below are a few 5–10-minute options that punch above their weight.

Each of these blog posts explores how to apply practical philosophies in the real world, and the first is the most important to me personally:

Fear-Setting: The Most Valuable Exercise I Do Every Month

(tim.blog/fear-setting)

Stoicism 101: A Practical Guide for Entrepreneurs

(tim.blog/stoicism101)

On The Shortness of Life: An Introduction to Seneca

(tim.blog/shortness)

How to Use Philosophy as a Personal Operating System:

From Seneca to Musashi

(tim.blog/philosophy)

Discovering Kindness In The Storm

(tim.blog/kindness)

Stoicism for Modern Stresses: 5 Lessons from Cato

(tim.blog/less-stress)

無 静
我 觀



Japanese: *Sei Kan Mu Ga*

English: Taken together, *seikan* means watchful waiting.

Muga means selflessness or self-renunciation.

This suggests sitting quietly as is done in Zen practice.

(Read vertically from top right to bottom left.

Each character is one word above.)

Calligrapher: Noriko Lake

LETTER 1

On Saving Time



Greetings from Seneca to his friend Lucilius.

Continue to act thus, my dear Lucilius—set yourself free for your own sake; gather and save your time, which till lately has been forced from you, or filched away, or has merely slipped from your hands. Make yourself believe the truth of my words—that certain moments are torn from us, that some are gently removed, and that others glide beyond our reach. The most disgraceful kind of loss, however, is that due to carelessness. Furthermore, if you will pay close heed to the problem, you will find that the largest portion of our life passes while we are doing ill, a goodly share while we are doing nothing, and the whole while we are doing that which is not to the purpose.

What man can you show me who places any value on his time, who reckons the worth of each day, who understands that he is dying daily? For we are mistaken when we look forward to death; the major portion of death has already passed. Whatever years be behind us are in death's hands.

Therefore, Lucilius, do as you write me that you are doing: hold every hour in your grasp. Lay hold of today's task, and you will not need to depend so much upon tomorrow's. While we are postponing, life speeds by.

Nothing, Lucilius, is ours, except time. We were entrusted by nature with the ownership of this single thing, so fleeting and slippery that anyone who will can oust us from possession. What fools these mortals be! They allow the cheapest and most useless things, which can easily be replaced, to be charged in the reckoning, after they have acquired them; but they never regard themselves as in debt when they have received some of that precious commodity—time! And yet time is the one loan which even a grateful recipient cannot repay.

You may desire to know how I, who preach to you so freely, am practicing. I confess frankly: my expense account balances, as you would expect from one who is free-handed but careful. I cannot boast that I waste nothing, but I can at least tell you what I am wasting, and the cause and manner of the loss; I can give you the reasons why I am a poor man. My situation, however, is the same as that of many who are reduced to slender means through no fault of their own: every one forgives them, but no one comes to their rescue.

What is the state of things, then? It is this: I do not regard a man as poor, if the little which remains is enough for him. I advise you, however, to keep what is really yours; and you cannot begin too early. For, as our ancestors believed, it is too late to spare when you reach the dregs of the cask.^[1] Of that which remains at the bottom, the amount is slight, and the quality is vile. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 369.

LETTER 2

On Discursiveness in Reading



Judging by what you write me, and by what I hear, I am forming a good opinion regarding your future. You do not run hither and thither and distract yourself by changing your abode; for such restlessness is the sign of a disordered spirit. The primary indication, to my thinking, of a well-ordered mind is a man's ability to remain in one place and linger in his own company.

Be careful, however, lest this reading of many authors and books of every sort may tend to make you discursive and unsteady. You must linger among a limited number of master thinkers, and digest their works, if you would derive ideas which shall win firm hold in your mind. Everywhere means nowhere. When a person spends all his time in foreign travel, he ends by having many acquaintances, but no friends. And the same thing must hold true of men who seek intimate acquaintance with no single author, but visit them all in a hasty and hurried manner.

Food does no good and is not assimilated into the body if it leaves the stomach as soon as it is eaten; nothing hinders a cure so much as frequent change of medicine; no wound will heal when one salve is tried after another; a plant which is often moved can never grow strong. There is nothing so efficacious that it can be helpful while it is being shifted about. And in reading of many books is distraction.

Accordingly, since you cannot read all the books which you may possess, it is enough to possess only as many books as you can read.

“But,” you reply, “I wish to dip first into one book and then into another.” I tell you that it is the sign of an overnice appetite to toy with many dishes; for when they are manifold and varied, they cloy but do not nourish. So you should always read standard authors; and when you crave a change, fall back upon those whom you read before. Each day acquire something that will fortify you against poverty, against death, indeed against other misfortunes as well; and after you have run over many thoughts, select one to be thoroughly digested that day.

This is my own custom; from the many things which I have read, I claim some one part for myself.

The thought for today is one which I discovered in Epicurus;^[1] for I am wont to cross over even into the enemy’s camp—not as a deserter, but as a scout.

He says: “Contented poverty is an honourable estate.” Indeed, if it be contented, it is not poverty at all. It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor. What does it matter how much a man has laid up in his safe, or in his warehouse, how large are his flocks and how fat his dividends, if he covets his neighbour’s property, and reckons, not his past gains, but his hopes of gains to come? Do you ask what is the proper limit to wealth? It is, first, to have what is necessary, and, second, to have what is enough. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Frag. 475 Usener

LETTER 3

On True and False Friendship



You have sent a letter to me through the hand of a “friend” of yours, as you call him. And in your very next sentence you warn me not to discuss with him all the matters that concern you, saying that even you yourself are not accustomed to do this; in other words, you have in the same letter affirmed and denied that he is your friend.

Now if you used this word of ours^[1] in the popular sense, and called him “friend” in the same way in which we speak of all candidates for election as “honourable gentlemen,” and as we greet all men whom we meet casually, if their names slip us for the moment, with the salutation “my dear sir”—so be it. But if you consider any man a friend whom you do not trust as you trust yourself, you are mightily mistaken and you do not sufficiently understand what true friendship means. Indeed, I would have you discuss everything with a friend; but first of all discuss the man himself. When friendship is settled, you must trust; before friendship is formed, you must pass judgment. Those persons indeed put last first and confound their duties, who, violating the rules of Theophrastus,^[2] judge a man after they have made him their friend, instead of making him their friend after they have judged him. Ponder for a long time whether you shall admit a given person to your friendship; but when you have decided to

admit him, welcome him with all your heart and soul. Speak as boldly with him as with yourself.

As to yourself, although you should live in such a way that you trust your own self with nothing which you could not entrust even to your enemy, yet, since certain matters occur which convention keeps secret, you should share with a friend at least all your worries and reflections. Regard him as loyal, and you will make him loyal. Some, for example, fearing to be deceived, have taught men to deceive; by their suspicions they have given their friend the right to do wrong. Why need I keep back any words in the presence of my friend? Why should I not regard myself as alone when in his company?

There is a class of men who communicate, to anyone whom they meet, matters which should be revealed to friends alone, and unload upon the chance listener whatever irks them. Others, again, fear to confide in their closest intimates; and if it were possible, they would not trust even themselves, burying their secrets deep in their hearts. But we should do neither. It is equally faulty to trust everyone and to trust no one. Yet the former fault is, I should say, the more ingenuous, the latter the more safe.

In like manner you should rebuke these two kinds of men—both those who always lack repose, and those who are always in repose. For love of bustle is not industry—it is only the restlessness of a hunted mind. And true repose does not consist in condemning all motion as merely vexation; that kind of repose is slackness and inertia.

Therefore, you should note the following saying, taken from my reading in Pomponius:^[3] “Some men shrink into dark corners, to such a degree that they see darkly by day.” No, men should combine these tendencies, and he who reposes should act and he

who acts should take repose. Discuss the problem with Nature; she will tell you that she has created both day and night. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., a word which has a special significance to the Stoics; see Ep. xviii, note.
2. Frag. 74 Wimmer.
3. See Index.



LETTER 4

On the Terrors of Death



Keep on as you have begun, and make all possible haste, so that you may have longer enjoyment of an improved mind, one that is at peace with itself. Doubtless you will derive enjoyment during the time when you are improving your mind and setting it at peace with itself; but quite different is the pleasure which comes from contemplation when one's mind is so cleansed from every stain that it shines.

You remember, of course, what joy you felt when you laid aside the garments of boyhood and donned the man's toga, and were escorted to the forum; nevertheless, you may look for a still greater joy when you have laid aside the mind of boyhood and when wisdom has enrolled you among men. For it is not boyhood that still stays with us, but something worse—boyishness. And this condition is all the more serious because we possess the authority of old age, together with the follies of boyhood, yea, even the follies of infancy. Boys fear trifles, children fear shadows, we fear both.

All you need to do is to advance; you will thus understand that some things are less to be dreaded, precisely because they inspire us with great fear. No evil is great which is the last evil of

all. Death arrives; it would be a thing to dread, if it could remain with you. But death must either not come at all, or else must come and pass away.

“It is difficult, however,” you say, “to bring the mind to a point where it can scorn life.” But do you not see what trifling reasons impel men to scorn life? One hangs himself before the door of his mistress; another hurls himself from the house-top that he may no longer be compelled to bear the taunts of a bad-tempered master; a third, to be saved from arrest after running away, drives a sword into his vitals. Do you not suppose that virtue will be as efficacious as excessive fear? No man can have a peaceful life who thinks too much about lengthening it, or believes that living through many consulships is a great blessing.

Rehearse this thought every day, that you may be able to depart from life contentedly; for many men clutch and cling to life, even as those who are carried down a rushing stream clutch and cling to briars and sharp rocks.

Most men ebb and flow in wretchedness between the fear of death and the hardships of life; they are unwilling to live, and yet they do not know how to die.

For this reason, make life as a whole agreeable to yourself by banishing all worry about it. No good thing renders its possessor happy, unless his mind is reconciled to the possibility of loss; nothing, however, is lost with less discomfort than that which, when lost, cannot be missed. Therefore, encourage and toughen your spirit against the mishaps that afflict even the most powerful.

For example, the fate of Pompey was settled by a boy and a eunuch, that of Crassus by a cruel and insolent Parthian. Gaius Caesar ordered Lepidus to bare his neck for the axe of the tribune Dexter; and he himself offered his own throat to Chaerea.^[1] No man has ever been so far advanced by Fortune that she did not threaten him as greatly as she had previously indulged him. Do

not trust her seeming calm; in a moment the sea is moved to its depths. The very day the ships have made a brave show in the games, they are engulfed.

Reflect that a highwayman or an enemy may cut your throat; and, though he is not your master, every slave wields the power of life and death over you. Therefore I declare to you: he is lord of your life that scorns his own. Think of those who have perished through plots in their own home, slain either openly or by guile; you will that just as many have been killed by angry slaves as by angry kings. What matter, therefore, how powerful he be whom you fear, when every one possesses the power which inspires your fear?

“But,” you will say, “if you should chance to fall into the hands of the enemy, the conqueror will command that you be led away,”—yes, whither you are already being led.^[2] Why do you voluntarily deceive yourself and require to be told now for the first time what fate it is that you have long been labouring under? Take my word for it: since the day you were born you are being led thither. We must ponder this thought, and thoughts of the like nature, if we desire to be calm as we await that last hour, the fear of which makes all previous hours uneasy.

But I must end my letter. Let me share with you the saying which pleased me today. It, too, is culled from another man’s Garden:^[3] “Poverty brought into conformity with the law of nature, is great wealth.” Do you know what limits that law of nature ordains for us? Merely to avert hunger, thirst, and cold. In order to banish hunger and thirst, it is not necessary for you to pay court at the doors of the purse-proud, or to submit to the stern frown, or to the kindness that humiliates; nor is it necessary for you to scour the seas, or go campaigning; nature’s needs are easily provided and ready to hand.

It is the superfluous things for which men sweat—the superfluous things that wear our togas threadbare, that force us to grow old in camp, that dash us upon foreign shores. That which is enough is ready to our hands. He who has made a fair compact with poverty is rich. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. A reference to the murder of Caligula, on the Palatine, A.D. 41.
2. i.e., to death.
3. The Garden of Epicurus. Frag. 477 and 200 Usener.

LETTER 5

On the Philosopher's Mean



I commend you and rejoice in the fact that you are persistent in your studies, and that, putting all else aside, you make it each day your endeavour to become a better man. I do not merely exhort you to keep at it; I actually beg you to do so. I warn you, however, not to act after the fashion of those who desire to be conspicuous rather than to improve, by doing things which will rouse comment as regards your dress or general way of living.

Repellent attire, unkempt hair, slovenly beard, open scorn of silver dishes, a couch on the bare earth, and any other perverted forms of self-display, are to be avoided. The mere name of philosophy, however quietly pursued, is an object of sufficient scorn; and what would happen if we should begin to separate ourselves from the customs of our fellow-men? Inwardly, we ought to be different in all respects, but our exterior should conform to society.

Do not wear too fine, nor yet too frowzy, a toga. One needs no silver plate, encrusted and embossed in solid gold; but we should not believe the lack of silver and gold to be proof of the simple life. Let us try to maintain a higher standard of life than that of the multitude, but not a contrary standard; otherwise, we shall frighten away and repel the very persons whom we are trying to improve. We also bring it about that they are unwilling

to imitate us in anything, because they are afraid lest they might be compelled to imitate us in everything.

The first thing which philosophy undertakes to give is fellow-feeling with all men; in other words, sympathy and sociability. We part company with our promise if we are unlike other men. We must see to it that the means by which we wish to draw admiration be not absurd and odious. Our motto,^[1] as you know, is “Live according to Nature”; but it is quite contrary to nature to torture the body, to hate unlaboured elegance, to be dirty on purpose, to eat food that is not only plain, but disgusting and forbidding.

Just as it is a sign of luxury to seek out dainties, so it is madness to avoid that which is customary and can be purchased at no great price. Philosophy calls for plain living, but not for penance; and we may perfectly well be plain and neat at the same time. This is the mean of which I approve; our life should observe a happy medium between the ways of a sage and the ways of the world at large; all men should admire it, but they should understand it also.

“Well then, shall we act like other men? Shall there be no distinction between ourselves and the world?” Yes, a very great one; let men find that we are unlike the common herd, if they look closely. If they visit us at home, they should admire us, rather than our household appointments. He is a great man who uses earthenware dishes as if they were silver; but he is equally great who uses silver as if it were earthenware. It is the sign of an unstable mind not to be able to endure riches.

But I wish to share with you today’s profit also. I find in the writings of our^[2] Hecato that the limiting of desires helps also to cure fears: “Cease to hope,” he says, “and you will cease to fear.” “But how,” you will reply, “can things so different go side by side?” In this way, my dear Lucilius: though they do seem at variance, yet they are really united. Just as the same chain fastens the prisoner

and the soldier who guards him, so hope and fear, dissimilar as they are, keep step together; fear follows hope.

I am not surprised that they proceed in this way; each alike belongs to a mind that is in suspense, a mind that is fretted by looking forward to the future. But the chief cause of both these ills is that we do not adapt ourselves to the present, but send our thoughts a long way ahead. And so foresight, the noblest blessing of the human race, becomes perverted.

Beasts avoid the dangers which they see, and when they have escaped them are free from care; but we men torment ourselves over that which is to come as well as over that which is past. Many of our blessings bring bane to us; for memory recalls the tortures of fear, while foresight anticipates them. The present alone can make no man wretched. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., of the Stoic school.
2. Frag. 25 Fowler.

LETTER 6

On Sharing Knowledge



I feel, my dear Lucilius, that I am being not only reformed, but transformed. I do not yet, however, assure myself, or indulge the hope, that there are no elements left in me which need to be changed. Of course there are many that should be made more compact, or made thinner, or be brought into greater prominence. And indeed this very fact is proof that my spirit is altered into something better—that it can see its own faults, of which it was previously ignorant. In certain cases sick men are congratulated because they themselves have perceived that they are sick.

I therefore wish to impart to you this sudden change in myself; I should then begin to place a surer trust in our friendship—the true friendship which hope and fear and self-interest cannot sever, the friendship in which and for the sake of which men meet death.

I can show you many who have lacked, not a friend, but a friendship; this, however, cannot possibly happen when souls are drawn together by identical inclinations into an alliance of honourable desires. And why can it not happen? Because in such cases men know that they have all things in common, especially their troubles. You cannot conceive what distinct progress I notice that each day brings to me.

And when you say: “Give me also a share in these gifts which you have found so helpful,” I reply that I am anxious to heap all

these privileges upon you, and that I am glad to learn in order that I may teach. Nothing will ever please me, no matter how excellent or beneficial, if I must retain the knowledge of it to myself. And if wisdom were given me under the express condition that it must be kept hidden and not uttered, I should refuse it. No good thing is pleasant to possess, without friends to share it.

I shall therefore send to you the actual books; and in order that you may not waste time in searching here and there for profitable topics, I shall mark certain passages, so that you can turn at once to those which I approve and admire. Of course, however, the living voice and the intimacy of a common life will help you more than the written word. You must go to the scene of action, first, because men put more faith in their eyes than in their ears,^[1] and second, because the way is long if one follows precepts, but short and helpful, if one follows patterns.

Cleanthes could not have been the express image of Zeno, if he had merely heard his lectures; he shared in his life, saw into his hidden purposes, and watched him to see whether he lived according to his own rules. Plato, Aristotle, and the whole throng of sages who were destined to go each his different way, derived more benefit from the character than from the words of Socrates. It was not the class-room of Epicurus, but living together under the same roof, that made great men of Metrodorus, Hermarchus, and Polyænus. Therefore I summon you, not merely that you may derive benefit, but that you may confer benefit; for we can assist each other greatly.

Meanwhile, I owe you my little daily contribution; you shall be told what pleased me today in the writings of Hecato;^[2] it is these words: "What progress, you ask, have I made? I have begun to be a friend to myself." That was indeed a great benefit; such a person

can never be alone. You may be sure that such a man is a friend to all mankind. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Herodotus, i. 8 ὅτα τυγχάνει ἀνθρώποισι ἔοντα ἀπιστότερα ὀφθαλμῶν.
2. Frag. 26 Fowler.

LETTER 7

On Crowds



Do you ask me what you should regard as especially to be avoided? I say, crowds; for as yet you cannot trust yourself to them with safety. I shall admit my own weakness, at any rate; for I never bring back home the same character that I took abroad with me. Something of that which I have forced to be calm within me is disturbed; some of the foes that I have routed return again. Just as the sick man, who has been weak for a long time, is in such a condition that he cannot be taken out of the house without suffering a relapse, so we ourselves are affected when our souls are recovering from a lingering disease.

To consort with the crowd is harmful; there is no person who does not make some vice attractive to us, or stamp it upon us, or taint us unconsciously therewith. Certainly, the greater the mob with which we mingle, the greater the danger.

But nothing is so damaging to good character as the habit of lounging at the games; for then it is that vice steals subtly upon one through the avenue of pleasure.

What do you think I mean? I mean that I come home more greedy, more ambitious, more voluptuous, and even more cruel and inhuman, because I have been among human beings. By chance I attended a mid-day exhibition, expecting some fun, wit, and relaxation—an exhibition at which men's eyes have respite

from the slaughter of their fellow-men. But it was quite the reverse. The previous combats were the essence of compassion; but now all the trifling is put aside and it is pure murder.^[1] The men have no defensive armour. They are exposed to blows at all points, and no one ever strikes in vain.

Many persons prefer this programme to the usual pairs and to the bouts “by request.” Of course they do; there is no helmet or shield to deflect the weapon. What is the need of defensive armour, or of skill? All these mean delaying death. In the morning they throw men to the lions and the bears; at noon, they throw them to the spectators. The spectators demand that the slayer shall face the man who is to slay him in his turn; and they always reserve the latest conqueror for another butchering. The outcome of every fight is death, and the means are fire and sword. This sort of thing goes on while the arena is empty.

You may retort: “But he was a highway robber; he killed a man!” And what of it? Granted that, as a murderer, he deserved this punishment, what crime have you committed, poor fellow, that you should deserve to sit and see this show? In the morning they cried “Kill him! Lash him! Burn him! Why does he meet the sword in so cowardly a way? Why does he strike so feebly? Why doesn’t he die game? Whip him to meet his wounds! Let them receive blow for blow, with chests bare and exposed to the stroke!” And when the games stop for the intermission, they announce: “A little throatcutting in the meantime, so that there may still be something going on!”

Come now; do you^[2] not understand even this truth, that a bad example reacts on the agent? Thank the immortal gods that you are teaching cruelty to a person who cannot learn to be cruel.

The young character, which cannot hold fast to righteousness, must be rescued from the mob; it is too easy to side with the majority. Even Socrates, Cato, and Laelius might have been

shaken in their moral strength by a crowd that was unlike them; so true it is that none of us, no matter how much he cultivates his abilities, can withstand the shock of faults that approach, as it were, with so great a retinue.

Much harm is done by a single case of indulgence or greed; the familiar friend, if he be luxurious, weakens and softens us imperceptibly; the neighbour, if he be rich, rouses our covetousness; the companion, if he be slanderous, rubs off some of his rust upon us, even though we be spotless and sincere. What then do you think the effect will be on character, when the world at large assaults it! You must either imitate or loathe the world.

But both courses are to be avoided; you should not copy the bad simply because they are many, nor should you hate the many because they are unlike you. Withdraw into yourself, as far as you can. Associate with those who will make a better man of you. Welcome those whom you yourself can improve. The process is mutual; for men learn while they teach.

There is no reason why pride in advertising your abilities should lure you into publicity, so that you should desire to recite or harangue before the general public. Of course I should be willing for you to do so if you had a stock-in-trade that suited such a mob; as it is, there is not a man of them who can understand you. One or two individuals will perhaps come in your way, but even these will have to be moulded and trained by you so that they will understand you. You may say: "For what purpose did I learn all these things?" But you need not fear that you have wasted your efforts; it was for yourself that you learned them.

In order, however, that I may not today have learned exclusively for myself, I shall share with you three excellent sayings, of the same general purport, which have come to my attention. This letter will give you one of them as payment of my debt; the other two you may accept as a contribution in advance. Democritus^[3]

says: “One man means as much to me as a multitude, and a multitude only as much as one man.”

The following also was nobly spoken by someone or other, for it is doubtful who the author was; they asked him what was the object of all this study applied to an art that would reach but very few. He replied: “I am content with few, content with one, content with none at all.” The third saying—and a noteworthy one, too—is by Epicurus,^[4] written to one of the partners of his studies: “I write this not for the many, but for you; each of us is enough of an audience for the other.”

Lay these words to heart, Lucilius, that you may scorn the pleasure which comes from the applause of the majority. Many men praise you; but have you any reason for being pleased with yourself, if you are a person whom the many can understand? Your good qualities should face inwards. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. During the luncheon interval condemned criminals were often driven into the arena and compelled to fight, for the amusement of those spectators who remained throughout the day.
2. The remark is addressed to the brutalized spectators.
3. Frag. 302^a Diels².
4. Frag. 208 Usener.

LETTER 8

On the Philosopher's Seclusion



“Do you bid me,” you say, “shun the throng, and withdraw from men, and be content with my own conscience? Where are the counsels of your school, which order a man to die in the midst of active work?” As to the course^[1] which I seem to you to be urging on you now and then, my object in shutting myself up and locking the door is to be able to help a greater number. I never spend a day in idleness; I appropriate even a part of the night for study. I do not allow time for sleep but yield to it when I must, and when my eyes are wearied with waking and ready to fall shut, I keep them at their task.

I have withdrawn not only from men, but from affairs, especially from my own affairs; I am working for later generations, writing down some ideas that may be of assistance to them. There are certain wholesome counsels, which may be compared to prescriptions of useful drugs; these I am putting into writing; for I have found them helpful in ministering to my own sores, which, if not wholly cured, have at any rate ceased to spread.

I point other men to the right path, which I have found late in life, when wearied with wandering. I cry out to them: “Avoid whatever pleases the throng: avoid the gifts of Chance! Halt before every good which Chance brings to you, in a spirit of doubt and fear; for it is the dumb animals and fish that are deceived by

tempting hopes. Do you call these things the ‘gifts’ of Fortune? They are snares. And any man among you who wishes to live a life of safety will avoid, to the utmost of his power, these limed twigs of her favour, by which we mortals, most wretched in this respect also, are deceived; for we think that we hold them in our grasp, but they hold us in theirs.

Such a career leads us into precipitous ways, and life on such heights ends in a fall. Moreover, we cannot even stand up against prosperity when she begins to drive us to leeward; nor can we go down, either, ‘with the ship at least on her course,’ or once for all;^[2] Fortune does not capsize us—she plunges our bows under^[3] and dashes us on the rocks.

“Hold fast, then, to this sound and wholesome rule of life—that you indulge the body only so far as is needful for good health. The body should be treated more rigorously, that it may not be disobedient to the mind. Eat merely to relieve your hunger; drink merely to quench your thirst; dress merely to keep out the cold; house yourself merely as a protection against personal discomfort. It matters little whether the house be built of turf, or of variously coloured imported marble; understand that a man is sheltered just as well by a thatch as by a roof of gold. Despise everything that useless toil creates as an ornament and an object of beauty. And reflect that nothing except the soul is worthy of wonder; for to the soul, if it be great, naught is great.”^[4]

When I commune in such terms with myself and with future generations, do you not think that I am doing more good than when I appear as counsel in court, or stamp my seal upon a will, or lend my assistance in the senate, by word or action, to a candidate? Believe me, those who seem to be busied with nothing are busied with the greater tasks; they are dealing at the same time with things mortal and things immortal.

But I must stop, and pay my customary contribution, to balance this letter. The payment shall not be made from my own property; for I am still conning Epicurus.^[5] I read today, in his works, the following sentence: “If you would enjoy real freedom, you must be the slave of Philosophy.” The man who submits and surrenders himself to her is not kept waiting; he is emancipated^[6] on the spot. For the very service of Philosophy is freedom.

It is likely that you will ask me why I quote so many of Epicurus’s noble words instead of words taken from our own school. But is there any reason why you should regard them as sayings of Epicurus and not common property? How many poets give forth ideas that have been uttered, or may be uttered, by philosophers! I need not touch upon the tragedians and our writers of national drama;^[7] for these last are also somewhat serious, and stand half-way between comedy and tragedy. What a quantity of sagacious verses lie buried in the mime! How many of Publilius’s lines are worthy of being spoken by buskin-clad actors, as well as by wearers of the slipper!^[8]

I shall quote one verse of his, which concerns philosophy, and particularly that phase of it which we were discussing a moment ago, wherein he says that the gifts of Chance are not to be regarded as part of our possessions:

*Still alien is whatever you have gained
By coveting.*^[9]

I recall that you yourself expressed this idea much more happily and concisely:

What Chance has made yours is not really yours.^[10]

And a third, spoken by you still more happily, shall not be omitted:

The good that could be given, can be removed.^[11]

I shall not charge this up to the expense account, because I have given it to you from your own stock. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. As contrasted with the general Stoic doctrine of taking part in the world's work.
2. See Ep. lxxxv. 33 for the famous saying of the Rhodian pilot.
3. *cernulat*, equivalent to Greek ἀναχαρτίζω, of a horse which throws a rider over its head.
4. Cf. the Stoic precept *nil admirandum*.
5. Frag. 199 Usener.
6. Literally "spun around" by the master and dismissed to freedom. Cf. Persius, v. 75f.
7. *Fabulae togatae* were plays which dealt with Roman subject matter, as contrasted with adaptations from the Greek, called *palliatae*. The term, in the widest sense includes both comedy and tragedy.
8. i.e., comedians or mimes.
9. *Syri Sententiae*, p. 309 Ribbeck².
10. *Com. Rom. Frag.* p. 394 Ribbeck².
11. *ibidem*.

LETTER 9

On Philosophy and Friendship



You desire to know whether Epicurus is right when, in one of his letters,^[1] he rebukes those who hold that the wise man is self-sufficient and for that reason does not stand in need of friendships. This is the objection raised by Epicurus against Stilbo and those who believe^[2] that the Supreme Good is a soul which is insensible to feeling.

We are bound to meet with a double meaning if we try to express the Greek term “lack of feeling” summarily, in a single word, rendering it by the Latin word *impatientia*. For it may be understood in the meaning the opposite to that which we wish it to have. What we mean to express is, a soul which rejects any sensation of evil; but people will interpret the idea as that of a soul which can endure no evil. Consider, therefore, whether it is not better to say “a soul that cannot be harmed,” or “a soul entirely beyond the realm of suffering.”

There is this difference between ourselves and the other school:^[3] our ideal wise man feels his troubles, but overcomes them; their wise man does not even feel them. But we and they alike hold this idea—that the wise man is self-sufficient. Nevertheless, he desires friends, neighbours, and associates, no matter how much he is sufficient unto himself.

And mark how self-sufficient he is; for on occasion he can be content with a part of himself. If he lose a hand through disease or war, or if some accident puts out one or both of his eyes, he will be satisfied with what is left, taking as much pleasure in his impaired and maimed body as he took when it was sound. But while he does not pine for these parts if they are missing, he prefers not to lose them.

In this sense the wise man is self-sufficient, that he can do without friends, not that he desires to do without them. When I say “can,” I mean this: he endures the loss of a friend with equanimity.

But he need never lack friends, for it lies in his own control how soon he shall make good a loss. Just as Phidias, if he lose a statue, can straightway carve another, even so our master in the art of making friendships can fill the place of a friend he has lost.

If you ask how one can make oneself a friend quickly, I will tell you, provided we are agreed that I may pay my debt^[4] at once and square the account, so far as this letter is concerned. Hecato,^[5] says: “I can show you a philtre, compounded without drugs, herbs, or any witch’s incantation: ‘If you would be loved, love.’” Now there is great pleasure, not only in maintaining old and established friendships, but also in beginning and acquiring new ones.

There is the same difference between winning a new friend and having already won him, as there is between the farmer who sows and the farmer who reaps. The philosopher Attalus used to say: “It is more pleasant to make than to keep a friend, as it is more pleasant to the artist to paint than to have finished painting.” When one is busy and absorbed in one’s work, the very absorption affords great delight; but when one has withdrawn one’s hand from the completed masterpiece, the pleasure is not so keen. Henceforth it is the fruits of his art that he enjoys; it was the art itself that he enjoyed while he was painting. In the case

of our children, their young manhood yields the more abundant fruits, but their infancy was sweeter.

Let us now return to the question. The wise man, I say, self-sufficient though he be, nevertheless desires friends if only for the purpose of practicing friendship, in order that his noble qualities may not lie dormant. Not, however, for the purpose mentioned by Epicurus^[6] in the letter quoted above: "That there may be someone to sit by him when he is ill, to help him when he is in prison or in want;" but that he may have someone by whose sick-bed he himself may sit, someone a prisoner in hostile hands whom he himself may set free. He who regards himself only, and enters upon friendships for this reason, reckons wrongly. The end will be like the beginning: he has made friends with one who might assist him out of bondage; at the first rattle of the chain such a friend will desert him.

These are the so-called "fair-weather" friendships; one who is chosen for the sake of utility will be satisfactory only so long as he is useful. Hence prosperous men are blockaded by troops of friends; but those who have failed stand amid vast loneliness their friends fleeing from the very crisis which is to test their worth. Hence, also, we notice those many shameful cases of persons who, through fear, desert or betray. The beginning and the end cannot but harmonize. He who begins to be your friend because it pays will also cease because it pays. A man will be attracted by some reward offered in exchange for his friendship, if he be attracted by aught in friendship other than friendship itself.

For what purpose, then, do I make a man my friend? In order to have someone for whom I may die, whom I may follow into exile, against whose death I may stake my own life, and pay the pledge, too. The friendship which you portray is a bargain and not a friendship; it regards convenience only, and looks to the results.

Beyond question the feeling of a lover has in it something akin to friendship; one might call it friendship run mad. But, though this is true, does anyone love for the sake of gain, or promotion, or renown? Pure^[7] love, careless of all other things, kindles the soul with desire for the beautiful object, not without the hope of a return of the affection. What then? Can a cause which is more honourable produce a passion that is base?

You may retort: "We are now discussing the question whether friendship is to be cultivated for its own sake." On the contrary, nothing more urgently requires demonstration; for if friendship is to be sought for its own sake, he may seek it who is self-sufficient. "How, then," you ask, "does he seek it?" Precisely as he seeks an object of great beauty, not attracted to it by desire for gain, nor yet frightened by the instability of Fortune. One who seeks friendship for favourable occasions, strips it of all its nobility.

"The wise man is self-sufficient." This phrase, my dear Lucilius, is incorrectly explained by many; for they withdraw the wise man from the world, and force him to dwell within his own skin. But we must mark with care what this sentence signifies and how far it applies; the wise man is sufficient unto himself for a happy existence, but not for mere existence. For he needs many helps towards mere existence; but for a happy existence he needs only a sound and upright soul, one that despises Fortune.

I should like also to state to you one of the distinctions of Chrysippus,^[8] who declares that the wise man is in want of nothing, and yet needs many things.^[9] "On the other hand," he says, "nothing is needed by the fool, for he does not understand how to use anything, but he is in want of everything." The wise man needs hands, eyes, and many things that are necessary for his daily use; but he is in want of nothing. For want implies a necessity, and nothing is necessary to the wise man.

Therefore, although he is self-sufficient, yet he has need of friends. He craves as many friends as possible, not, however, that he may live happily; for he will live happily even without friends. The Supreme Good calls for no practical aids from outside; it is developed at home, and arises entirely within itself. If the good seeks any portion of itself from without, it begins to be subject to the play of Fortune.

People may say: "But what sort of existence will the wise man have, if he be left friendless when thrown into prison, or when stranded in some foreign nation, or when delayed on a long voyage, or when out upon a lonely shore?" His life will be like that of Jupiter, who, amid the dissolution of the world, when the gods are confounded together and Nature rests for a space from her work, can retire into himself and give himself over to his own thoughts.^[10] In some such way as this the sage will act; he will retreat into himself, and live with himself.

As long as he is allowed to order his affairs according to his judgment, he is self-sufficient—and marries a wife; he is self-sufficient—and brings up children; he is self-sufficient—and yet could not live if he had to live without the society of man. Natural promptings, and not his own selfish needs, draw him into Friendships. For just as other things have for us an inherent attractiveness, so has friendship. As we hate solitude and crave society, as nature draws men to each other, so in this matter also there is an attraction which makes us desirous of friendship.

Nevertheless, though the sage may love his friends dearly, often comparing them with himself, and putting them ahead of himself, yet all the good will be limited to his own being, and he will speak the words which were spoken by the very Stilbo^[11] whom Epicurus criticizes in his letter. For Stilbo, after his country was captured and his children and his wife lost, as he emerged from the general desolation alone and yet happy, spoke as follows to

Demetrius, called Sacker of Cities because of the destruction he brought upon them, in answer to the question whether he had lost anything: “I have all my goods with me!”

There is a brave and stout-hearted man for you! The enemy conquered, but Stilbo conquered his conqueror. “I have lost nothing!” Aye, he forced Demetrius to wonder whether he himself had conquered after all. “My goods are all with me!” In other words, he deemed nothing that might be taken from him to be a good.

We marvel at certain animals because they can pass through fire and suffer no bodily harm; but how much more marvellous is a man who has marched forth unhurt and unscathed through fire and sword and devastation! Do you understand now how much easier it is to conquer a whole tribe than to conquer one *man*? This saying of Stilbo makes common ground with Stoicism; the Stoic also can carry his goods unimpaired through cities that have been burned to ashes; for he is self-sufficient. Such are the bounds which he sets to his own happiness.

But you must not think that our school alone can utter noble words; Epicurus himself, the reviler of Stilbo, spoke similar language;^[12] put it down to my credit, though I have already wiped out my debt for the present day.^[13] He says: “Whoever does not regard what he has as most ample wealth, is unhappy, though he be master of the whole world.” Or, if the following seems to you a more suitable phrase—for we must try to render the meaning and not the mere words: “A man may rule the world and still be unhappy, if he does not feel that he is supremely happy.”

In order, however, that you may know that these sentiments are universal,^[14] suggested, of course, by Nature, you will find in one of the comic poets this verse;

Unblest is he who thinks himself unblest.^[15]

or what does your condition matter, if it is bad in your own eyes?

You may say; “What then? If yonder man, rich by base means, and yonder man, lord of many but slave of more, shall call themselves happy, will their own opinion make them happy?” It matters not what one says, but what one feels; also, not how one feels on one particular day, but how one feels at all times. There is no reason, however, why you should fear that this great privilege will fall into unworthy hands; only the wise man is pleased with his own. Folly is ever troubled with weariness of itself. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Frag. 174 Usener.
2. i.e., the Cynics.
3. i.e., the Cynics.
4. i.e., the *diurna mercedula*; see Ep. vi, 7.
5. Frag. 27 Fowler.
6. Frag. 175 Usener.
7. “Pure love,” i.e., love in its essence, unalloyed with other emotions.
8. Cf. his *Frag. moral.* 674 von Arnim.
9. The distinction is based upon the meaning of *egere*, “to be in want of” something indispensable, and *opus esse*, “to have need of” something which one can do without.
10. This refers to the Stoic conflagration: after certain cycles their world was destroyed by fire. Cf. E. V. Arnold, *Roman Stoicism*, pp. 192 f.; cf. also Chrysippus, *Frag. phys.* 1065 von Arnim.
11. *Gnomologici Vaticani* 515^a Sternberg.
12. Frag. 474 Usener.
13. Cf. above § 6.
14. i.e., not confined to the Stoics, etc.
15. Author unknown; perhaps, as Buecheler thinks, adapted from the Greek.

LETTER 10

On Living to Oneself



Yes, I do not change my opinion: avoid the many, avoid the few, avoid even the individual. I know of no one with whom I should be willing to have you shared. And see what an opinion of you I have; for I dare to trust you with your own self. Crates, they say, the disciple of the very Stilbo whom I mentioned in a former letter, noticed a young man walking by himself, and asked him what he was doing all alone. “I am communing with myself,” replied the youth. “Pray be careful, then,” said Crates, “and take good heed; you are communing with a bad man!”

When persons are in mourning, or fearful about something, we are accustomed to watch them that we may prevent them from making a wrong use of their loneliness. No thoughtless person ought to be left alone; in such cases he only plans folly, and heaps up future dangers for himself or for others; he brings into play his base desires; the mind displays what fear or shame used to repress; it whets his boldness, stirs his passions, and goads his anger. And finally, the only benefit that solitude confers—the habit of trusting no man, and of fearing no witnesses—is lost to the fool; for he betrays himself.

Mark therefore what my hopes are for you—nay, rather, what I am promising myself, inasmuch as hope is merely the title of an

uncertain blessing: I do not know any person with whom I should prefer you to associate rather than yourself.

I remember in what a great-souled way you hurled forth certain phrases, and how full of strength they were! I immediately congratulated myself and said: "These words did not come from the edge of the lips; these utterances have a solid foundation. This man is not one of the many; he has regard for his real welfare."

Speak, and live, in this way; see to it that nothing keeps you down. As for your former prayers, you may dispense the gods from answering them; offer new prayers; pray for a sound mind and for good health, first of soul and then of body. And of course you should offer those prayers frequently. Call boldly upon God; you will not be asking him for that which belongs to another.

But I must, as is my custom, send a little gift along with this letter. It is a true saying which I have found in Athenodorus:^[1] "Know that thou art freed from all desires when thou hast reached such a point that thou prayest to God for nothing except what thou canst pray for openly." But how foolish men are now! They whisper the basest of prayers to heaven; but if anyone listens, they are silent at once. That which they are unwilling for men to know, they communicate to God. Do you not think, then, that some such wholesome advice as this could be given you: "Live among men as if God beheld you; speak with God as if men were listening"? Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Frag. de superstitione 36 H., according to Rossbach.

LETTER 11

On the Blush of Modesty



Your friend and I have had a conversation. He is a man of ability; his very first words showed what spirit and understanding he possesses, and what progress he has already made. He gave me a foretaste, and he will not fail to answer thereto. For he spoke not from forethought, but was suddenly caught off his guard. When he tried to collect himself, he could scarcely banish that hue of modesty, which is a good sign in a young man; the blush that spread over his face seemed so to rise from the depths. And I feel sure that his habit of blushing will stay with him after he has strengthened his character, stripped off all his faults, and become wise. For by no wisdom can natural weaknesses of the body be removed. That which is implanted and inborn can be toned down by training, but not overcome.

The steadiest speaker, when before the public, often breaks into a perspiration, as if he had wearied or over-heated himself; some tremble in the knees when they rise to speak; I know of some whose teeth chatter, whose tongues falter, whose lips quiver. Training and experience can never shake off this habit; nature exerts her own power and through such a weakness makes her presence known even to the strongest.

I know that the blush, too, is a habit of this sort, spreading suddenly over the faces of the most dignified men. It is, indeed

more prevalent in youth, because of the warmer blood and the sensitive countenance; nevertheless, both seasoned men and aged men are affected by it. Some are most dangerous when they redden, as if they were letting all their sense of shame escape.

Sulla, when the blood mantled his cheeks, was in his fiercest mood. Pompey had the most sensitive cast of countenance; he always blushed in the presence of a gathering, and especially at a public assembly. Fabianus also, I remember, reddened when he appeared as a witness before the senate; and his embarrassment became him to a remarkable degree.

Such a habit is not due to mental weakness, but to the novelty of a situation; an inexperienced person is not necessarily confused, but is usually affected, because he slips into this habit by natural tendency of the body. Just as certain men are full-blooded, so others are of a quick and mobile blood, that rushes to the face at once.

As I remarked, Wisdom can never remove this habit; for if she could rub out all our faults, she would be mistress of the universe. Whatever is assigned to us by the terms of our birth and the blend in our constitutions, will stick with us, no matter how hard or how long the soul may have tried to master itself. And we cannot forbid these feelings any more than we can summon them.

Actors in the theatre, who imitate the emotions, who portray fear and nervousness, who depict sorrow, imitate bashfulness by hanging their heads, lowering their voices, and keeping their eyes fixed and rooted upon the ground. They cannot, however, muster a blush; for the blush cannot be prevented or acquired. Wisdom will not assure us of a remedy, or give us help against it; it comes or goes unbidden, and is a law unto itself.

But my letter calls for its closing sentence. Hear and take to heart this useful and wholesome motto:^[1] “Cherish some man of high character, and keep him ever before your eyes, living as

if he were watching you, and ordering all your actions as if he beheld them.”

Such, my dear Lucilius, is the counsel of Epicurus;^[2] he has quite properly given us a guardian and an attendant. We can get rid of most sins, if we have a witness who stands near us when we are likely to go wrong. The soul should have someone whom it can respect—one by whose authority it may make even its inner shrine more hallowed.^[3] Happy is the man who can make others better, not merely when he is in their company, but even when he is in their thoughts! And happy also is he who can so revere a man as to calm and regulate himself by calling him to mind! One who can so revere another, will soon be himself worthy of reverence.

Choose therefore a Cato; or, if Cato seems too severe a model, choose some Laelius, a gentler spirit. Choose a master whose life, conversation, and soul-expressing face have satisfied you; picture him always to yourself as your protector or your pattern. For we must indeed have someone according to whom we may regulate our characters; you can never straighten that which is crooked unless you use a ruler. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Epicurus, Frag. 210 Usener.
2. Frag. 210 Usener.
3. The figure is taken from the ἅγιον, the Holy of Holies in a temple. Cf. Vergil, *Aeneid*, vi. 10 secreta *Sibyllas*.

How To Be A Stoic: An Interview With Author Elif Batuman

There's been quite a surge of stories on Stoicism lately—appearing everywhere from influential blogs to prestigious outlets like *Sports Illustrated*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Atlantic*. One of the pieces that caught our attention was “[How to Be a Stoic](#)” in *The New Yorker*. It's by Elif Batuman (Twitter: [@BananaKarenina](#)), a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and author of the acclaimed [The Idiot](#) and [The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them](#). Her stories have appeared in *Best American Travel Writing* and *Best American Essays* anthologies.

Her piece is a wonderful exploration of Epictetus and so the Daily Stoic team reached out to learn more about Elif and her relation to Stoicism. How does she use it on a day-to-day basis? What are the common misconceptions about the philosophy? How did she first discover it? What are some characters in literature that embody Stoicism? Was there anything off-putting about a philosophy that appears to have a ‘male-bent’?

We are grateful to Elif for agreeing to do this interview and her generous answers which you can read below. Enjoy!

History tends to show that Stoicism is often popular during times of difficulty or uncertainty. Was that true in your case? I was curious if you could give our readers a bit of a background

regarding your story of discovering Epictetus and how it has helped you?

Yes, I had just started a new job in a new country (Turkey), where there was a certain amount of political tension. I was also in the middle of a problematic long-distance relationship, and living in a remote area. I had gotten really behind on work in the previous months (my first book, *The Possessed*, had just come out, so I was doing travel and publicity for that, and then also I had had some personal issues), and had deliberately sought out this kind of isolated living situation so I could catch up, but then I ended up feeling really lost and alone. I was also doing some reporting, I was working on a story for the *New Yorker* about soccer fan groups in Istanbul, which involved hanging out with a milieu I wasn't really used to, often late at night—it was a stressful time.

You mentioned that you first discovered Epictetus back in 2011 and you wrote about him more than five years later. Did you read any of the other Stoics in between? I can only assume he made a strong impression on you and was wondering how often did his ideas come to mind over the years in your daily life? Was it something that was a constant presence or it was more in specific situations?

That piece I wrote was just about Epictetus, and I only had 750 words, so it's a bit schematic. My actual route to the Stoics was more circuitous. I'm sure I had been introduced to Stoic ideas in the past, but the first time they really registered with me was in Istanbul in 2010 or 2011 when I read Sarah Bakewell's wonderful *How to Live: Or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*. It's kind of a self-help book in the form of biographical essays about Montaigne. For me, all the most helpful advice came from the Stoics. (Montaigne as you probably know was really influenced by Stoicism, especially Seneca, though also

Epictetus, and also the Epicureans.) I wanted to know more about the Stoics, so I bought *A Guide to the Good Life: The Art of Stoic Joy*, by William B. Irvine, which was a terrific introduction to the basic ideas and how they could be applied to daily life. After that I read Seneca's *Dialogues and Essays*, Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, and Epictetus's *Enchiridion*.

I liked Marcus Aurelius and Seneca, too, but Epictetus was definitely my favorite—I think he's the funniest. With Marcus Aurelius you have this world-weary emperor who is kind of a mystic; Seneca writes in this flowery Latin, he's a famous tragedian and a speechwriter for Nero, so he has that whole thing going; but Epictetus is born a slave, and then he becomes a teacher, and *all* he cares about is teaching. I was teaching undergraduates at the time, and I felt like Epictetus had been working on this same eternal puzzle that I was, of how to get young people to do what's difficult, to make them think that things are worthwhile, to rally their spirits, and it felt like finding this great friend and ally.

After I read the *Enchiridion*, I got the *Discourses and Selected Writings*, the Penguin Classics one edited by Robert Dobbin, which was marvelous, even better than the *Enchiridion* I had downloaded for free online somewhere. Next I tried reading Musonius Rufus, Epictetus's teacher—he was great, too, but I thought the ideas were more forcefully expressed in Epictetus. Then I read Tad Brennan's *The Stoic Life*, where he summarizes a lot of Chrysippus's ideas, but you know, Chrysippus really isn't for me, the whole thing about how everyone who isn't 100% wise is 100% "vicious" seems kind of theoretical and alienating to me. I prefer what I take to be Epictetus's view, viz. that we're all struggling constantly, none of us will be perfect, but we can always get better, and that improvement is not just not worthless, it's actually the most meaningful thing there is.

At least online (and of course, historically) Stoicism seems to have a predominant number of males. Many of them hear about it from action movies like *Gladiator* or the military or now, with its popularity in sports, it might get passed to them in the locker room. I'm curious about two things. One, as a woman, was there anything off putting about that male-bent? Two, since the actual philosophy itself is universal and can help anyone, what can be done to recreate your experience and exposure to philosophy?

Well, I never saw *Gladiator* and have never served in the military or spent much time in a men's locker room, so I can't really speak to the "male bent" that Stoicism might have in those venues. As a reader in the privacy of my home, I didn't find there was anything off-puttingly male about Stoic philosophy. I guess Epictetus talks about beards in a way I can't really identify with, but I don't think that's a major cornerstone of his belief. And Musonius Rufus wrote in a really moving way about how he thought women and men should have the same education in philosophy, that women are just as capable as men of applying and benefiting from philosophical ideas. And Seneca does write those letters to women, including his mother, so clearly he thinks Stoicism can help women.

I think there's a common misconception about Stoicism, that it's about forcing yourself to somehow not feel emotions; that's probably an idea that would appeal more to men than to women (since, from childhood, boys are encouraged to be macho, while girls are encouraged to be in touch with their emotions). But the thing I love about Epictetus is that it's really all *about* handling emotions. He's like, "You're definitely going to feel this incredibly powerful thing, but guess what, it's not a law that dictates what you think or how you act—you're perfectly free, and in fact duty-bound, to consult your reason and say, 'OK, feeling, duly noted,

but you are just a feeling and not the truth.” I think that’s maybe an *especially* useful message for women, because of how little girls are educated, or at least how they were when I was little. I think for a lot of women (as well as men), there’s a tendency to think: “Oh my God, I already felt this, so the bad thing already happened.” And Epictetus is all about realizing, “Bro, nothing bad has happened yet, everyone has feelings, now just take a moment and evaluate what the truth is.”

In your *New Yorker* piece, you mention Epictetus’s line about ignoring small slights — “For such a small price, I buy tranquility,” and how useful it has been. Are there other exercises or quotes that you’d point to as practical and helpful?

Oh man, I use so many of them every day. Definitely, the one about the bathhouse: “If you are heading out to bathe, picture to yourself the typical scene at the bathhouse—people splashing, pushing, yelling and pinching your clothes. You will complete the act with more composure if you say at the outset, ‘I want a bath, but at the same time I want to keep my will aligned with nature.’” I actually thought that at a hamam in Istanbul once and it really helped! I use it all the time on the subway and also at the airport.

Another great trick is when he’s like, “You know how if someone else tells you that something bad happened to them, you’re like, ‘Oh, too bad, that’s life,’ but if something bad happens to you, you’re like, ‘I am the unhappiest of mortals?’” Oh I found the quote: “When somebody’s wife or child dies, to a man we all routinely say, ‘Well, that’s part of life.’ But if one of our own family is involved, then right away it’s ‘Poor, poor me!’ We would do better to remember how we react when a similar loss afflicts others.”

I haven’t had to use that one with a big loss, but for little things it really works. Last week I was having bureaucratic trouble with my health insurance. I imagined I was listening to a friend tell

me about making such calls, and thought about how I would be like, “Oh, too bad, insurance can be a pain”—I definitely wouldn’t have been like, “Oh my God, you unfortunate person, your whole week must have been ruined, *what* did you do wrong that this happened to you, how could you have avoided it?”—which is kind of how I felt about it myself, when I didn’t stop to think about it.

You are both a fantastic writer and a scholar—writing for the *New Yorker*, *n+1*, *Harper’s Magazine* among others and you hold a doctoral degree from Stanford in comparative literature. I’d love to know if there are any fictional characters that you think embody Stoicism that you can point us to? Or any other works of fiction that you think readers would love? (Also I want to ask if you’ve read *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar?)

I actually find Stoicism to be very present in the works of Charlotte Brontë’s novels *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. (She calls it “stoicism” or “Christian stoicism” or “Christian composure.”) Both those novels are about a young woman who really has no social value in the Victorian social marketplace—poor, orphaned, no social connections, not beautiful—Brontë is really cold and brutal about this. Those girls don’t have a single thing you need to make a good marriage, which at that time is the only thing standing between an unconnected young woman and a whole humiliating, possibly long, life as a drudge and a dependent. There are these amazing passages in both books, towards the end, where the character realizes (or thinks she realizes) that love isn’t going to work out for her, that the guy who she thought liked her is going to maybe choose someone a little younger, richer, or more beautiful—so she resigns herself to being a teacher, to doing her duty, to a life without romance—and you really feel both the difficulty and the freedom of that resignation. It’s really brutal and moving.

Dostoevsky has some pretty stoical characters, too, like Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Of course he's also a Christian. In general if you're talking about the 19th-century European novel (my grad school beat...), Stoicism is going to be in there through some version of Christianity. But I mean the affinity between Stoicism and Christian thought is one of the ways Stoicism has survived since antiquity.

Epictetus does also make a cameo in J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*.

I know you have a new book out, this time “a novel about not just discovering but inventing oneself.” Can you tell us a bit more about it? I also wanted to say that the cover is absolutely beautiful.

Thank you! I love the cover. It's a semi-autobiographical novel called *The Idiot*. The main character, Selin, is 18, the book takes place in her first year of college, and she's a perfect example of someone who doesn't know about Stoicism, who takes emotions for truth and finds signs everywhere, in all her almost physical, visceral, emotional reactions—and then every now and then she stops and is like “Are you fucking *kidding* me? This is life?” I'm hoping to write more books about Selin in the future, and, if I live long enough, I would love to do one where she discovers Epictetus.

LETTER 12

On Old Age



Wherever I turn, I see evidences of my advancing years. I visited lately my country-place, and protested against the money which was spent on the tumble-down building. My bailiff maintained that the flaws were not due to his own carelessness; “he was doing everything possible, but the house was old.” And this was the house which grew under my own hands! What has the future in store for me, if stones of my own age are already crumbling?

I was angry, and I embraced the first opportunity to vent my spleen in the bailiff’s presence. “It is clear,” I cried, “that these plane-trees are neglected; they have no leaves. Their branches are so gnarled and shrivelled; the boles are so rough and unkempt! This would not happen, if someone loosened the earth at their feet, and watered them.” The bailiff swore by my protecting deity that “he was doing everything possible, and never relaxed his efforts, but those trees were old.” Between you and me, I had planted those trees myself, I had seen them in their first leaf.

Then I turned to the door and asked: “Who is that broken-down dotard? You have done well to place him at the entrance; for he is outward bound.^[1] Where did you get him? What pleasure did it give you to take up for burial some other man’s dead?”^[2] But the slave said: “Don’t you know me, sir? I am Felicio; you used to bring me little images.^[3] My father was Philositus the steward, and

I am your pet slave.” “The man is clean crazy,” I remarked. “Has my pet slave become a little boy again? But it is quite possible; his teeth are just dropping out.”^[4]

I owe it to my country-place that my old age became apparent whithersoever I turned. Let us cherish and love old age; for it is full of pleasure if one knows how to use it. Fruits are most welcome when almost over; youth is most charming at its close; the last drink delights the toper, the glass which souses him and puts the finishing touch on his drunkenness.

Each pleasure reserves to the end the greatest delights which it contains. Life is most delightful when it is on the downward slope, but has not yet reached the abrupt decline. And I myself believe that the period which stands, so to speak, on the edge of the roof, possesses pleasures of its own. Or else the very fact of our not wanting pleasures has taken the place of the pleasures themselves. How comforting it is to have tired out one’s appetites, and to have done with them!

“But,” you say, “it is a nuisance to be looking death in the face!” Death, however, should be looked in the face by young and old alike. We are not summoned according to our rating on the censor’s list.^[5] Moreover, no one is so old that it would be improper for him to hope for another day of existence. And one day, mind you, is a stage on life’s journey.

Our span of life is divided into parts; it consists of large circles enclosing smaller. One circle embraces and bounds the rest; it reaches from birth to the last day of existence. The next circle limits the period of our young manhood. The third confines all of childhood in its circumference. Again, there is, in a class by itself, the year; it contains within itself all the divisions of time by the multiplication of which we get the total of life. The month is bounded by a narrower ring. The smallest circle of all is the

day; but even a day has its beginning and its ending, its sunrise and its sunset.

Hence Heraclitus, whose obscure style gave him his surname,^[6] remarked: “One day is equal to every day.” Different persons have interpreted the saying in different ways. Some hold that days are equal in number of hours, and this is true; for if by “day” we mean twenty-four hours’ time, all days must be equal, inasmuch as the night acquires what the day loses. But others maintain that one day is equal to all days through resemblance, because the very longest space of time possesses no element which cannot be found in a single day—namely, light and darkness—and even to eternity day makes these alternations^[7] more numerous, not different when it is shorter and different again when it is longer.

Hence, every day ought to be regulated as if it closed the series, as if it rounded out and completed our existence.

Pacuvius, who by long occupancy made Syria his own,^[8] used to hold a regular burial sacrifice in his own honour, with wine and the usual funeral feasting, and then would have himself carried from the dining room to his chamber, while eunuchs applauded and sang in Greek to a musical accompaniment: “He has lived his life, he has lived his life!”

Thus Pacuvius had himself carried out to burial every day. Let us, however, do from a good motive what he used to do from a debased motive; let us go to our sleep with joy and gladness; let us say:

*I have lived; the course which Fortune set for me
Is finished.*^[9]

And if God is pleased to add another day, we should welcome it with glad hearts. That man is happiest, and is secure in his own possession of himself, who can await the morrow without

apprehension. When a man has said: “I have lived!”, every morning he arises he receives a bonus.

But now I ought to close my letter. “What?” you say; “shall it come to me without any little offering? “Be not afraid; it brings something—nay, more than something, a great deal. For what is more noble than the following saying^[10] of which I make this letter the bearer: “It is wrong to live under constraint; but no man is constrained to live under constraint.” Of course not. On all sides lie many short and simple paths to freedom; and let us thank God that no man can be kept in life. We may spurn the very constraints that hold us

“Epicurus,” you reply, “uttered these words; what are you doing with another’s property?” Any truth, I maintain, is my own property. And I shall continue to heap quotations from Epicurus upon you, so that all persons who swear by the words of another, and put a value upon the speaker and not upon the thing spoken, may understand that the best ideas are common property. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. A jesting allusion to the Roman funeral; the corpse’s feet pointing towards the door.
2. His former owner should have kept him and buried him.
3. Small figures, generally of terra-cotta, were frequently given to children as presents at the Saturnalia. Cf. Macrobius, i. 11. 49 *sigila . . . pro se atque suis piaculum*.
4. i.e., the old slave resembles a child in that he is losing his teeth (but for the second time).
5. i.e., *seniores*, as contrasted with *iuniores*.
6. ὁ σκοτεινός, “the Obscure,” Frag. 106 Diels².
7. i.e., of light and darkness.
8. *Usus* was the mere enjoyment of a piece of property; *dominium* was the exclusive right to its control. Possession for one, or two, years conferred ownership. See Leage, *Roman Private Law*, pp. 133, 152, and 164. Although Pacuvius was governor so long that the province seemed to belong to him, yet he knew he might die any day.
9. Vergil, *Aeneid*, iv. 653.
10. Epicurus, Sprüche, 9 Wokte.

LETTER 13

On Groundless Fears



[If interested, a free audiobook version of this letter can be found at this web address: tim.blog/13]

I know that you have plenty of spirit; for even before you began to equip yourself with maxims which were wholesome and potent to overcome obstacles, you were taking pride in your contest with Fortune; and this is all the more true, now that you have grappled with Fortune and tested your powers. For our powers can never inspire in us implicit faith in ourselves except when many difficulties have confronted us on this side and on that, and have occasionally even come to close quarters with us. It is only in this way that the true spirit can be tested—the spirit that will never consent to come under the jurisdiction of things external to ourselves.

This is the touchstone of such a spirit; no prizefighter can go with high spirits into the strife if he has never been beaten black and blue; the only contestant who can confidently enter the lists is the man who has seen his own blood, who has felt his teeth rattle beneath his opponent's fist, who has been tripped and felt the full force of his adversary's charge, who has been downed in body but not in spirit, one who, as often as he falls, rises again with greater defiance than ever.

So then, to keep up my figure, Fortune has often in the past got the upper hand of you, and yet you have not surrendered, but have leaped up and stood your ground still more eagerly. For manliness gains much strength by being challenged; nevertheless, if you approve, allow me to offer some additional safeguards by which you may fortify yourself.

There are more things, Lucilius, likely to frighten us than there are to crush us; we suffer more often in imagination than in reality. I am not speaking with you in the Stoic strain but in my milder style. For it is our Stoic fashion to speak of all those things, which provoke cries and groans, as unimportant and beneath notice; but you and I must drop such great-sounding words, although, heaven knows, they are true enough. What I advise you to do is, not to be unhappy before the crisis comes; since it may be that the dangers before which you paled as if they were threatening you, will never come upon you; they certainly have not yet come.

Accordingly, some things torment us more than they ought; some torment us before they ought; and some torment us when they ought not to torment us at all. We are in the habit of exaggerating, or imagining, or anticipating, sorrow.

The first of these three faults^[1] may be postponed for the present, because the subject is under discussion and the case is still in court, so to speak. That which I should call trifling, you will maintain to be most serious; for of course I know that some men laugh while being flogged, and that others wince at a box on the ear. We shall consider later whether these evils derive their power from their own strength, or from our own weakness.

Do me the favour, when men surround you and try to talk you into believing that you are unhappy, to consider not what you hear but what you yourself feel, and to take counsel with your feelings and question yourself independently, because you know your own affairs better than anyone else does. Ask: "Is there any reason

why these persons should condole with me? Why should they be worried or even fear some infection from me, as if troubles could be transmitted? Is there any evil involved, or is it a matter merely of ill report, rather than an evil?" Put the question voluntarily to yourself: "Am I tormented without sufficient reason, am I morose, and do I convert what is not an evil into what is an evil?"

You may retort with the question: "How am I to know whether my sufferings are real or imaginary?" Here is the rule for such matters: we are tormented either by things present, or by things to come, or by both. As to things present, the decision is easy. Suppose that your person enjoys freedom and health, and that you do not suffer from any external injury. As to what may happen to it in the future, we shall see later on. Today there is nothing wrong with it.

"But," you say, "something will happen to it." First of all, consider whether your proofs of future trouble are sure. For it is more often the case that we are troubled by our apprehensions, and that we are mocked by that mocker, rumour, which is wont to settle wars, but much more often settles individuals. Yes, my dear Lucilius; we agree too quickly with what people say. We do not put to the test those things which cause our fear; we do not examine into them; we blench and retreat just like soldiers who are forced to abandon their camp because of a dust-cloud raised by stampeding cattle, or are thrown into a panic by the spreading of some unauthenticated rumour.

And somehow or other it is the idle report that disturbs us most. For truth has its own definite boundaries, but that which arises from uncertainty is delivered over to guesswork and the irresponsible license of a frightened mind. That is why no fear is so ruinous and so uncontrollable as panic fear. For other fears are groundless, but this fear is witless.

Let us, then, look carefully into the matter. It is likely that some troubles will befall us; but it is not a present fact. How often has the unexpected happened! How often has the expected never come to pass! And even though it is ordained to be, what does it avail to run out to meet your suffering? You will suffer soon enough, when it arrives; so look forward meanwhile to better things.

What shall you gain by doing this? Time. There will be many happenings meanwhile which will serve to postpone, or end, or pass on to another person, the trials which are near or even in your very presence. A fire has opened the way to flight. Men have been let down softly by a catastrophe. Sometimes the sword has been checked even at the victim's throat. Men have survived their own executioners. Even bad fortune is fickle. Perhaps it will come, perhaps not; in the meantime it is not. So look forward to better things.

The mind at times fashions for itself false shapes of evil when there are no signs that point to any evil; it twists into the worst construction some word of doubtful meaning; or it fancies some personal grudge to be more serious than it really is, considering not how angry the enemy is, but to what lengths he may go if he is angry. But life is not worth living, and there is no limit to our sorrows, if we indulge our fears to the greatest possible extent; in this matter, let prudence help you, and condemn with a resolute spirit even when it is in plain sight. If you cannot do this, counter one weakness with another, and temper your fear with hope. There is nothing so certain among these objects of fear that it is not more certain still that things we dread sink into nothing and that things we hope for mock us.

Accordingly, weigh carefully your hopes as well as your fears, and whenever all the elements are in doubt, decide in your own favour; believe what you prefer. And if fear wins a majority of the

votes, incline in the other direction anyhow, and cease to harass your soul, reflecting continually that most mortals, even when no troubles are actually at hand or are certainly to be expected in the future, become excited and disquieted. No one calls a halt on himself, when he begins to be urged ahead; nor does he regulate his alarm according to the truth. No one says; “The author of the story is a fool, and he who has believed it is a fool, as well as he who fabricated it.” We let ourselves drift with every breeze; we are frightened at uncertainties, just as if they were certain. We observe no moderation. The slightest thing turns the scales and throws us forthwith into a panic.

But I am ashamed either to admonish you sternly or to try to beguile you with such mild remedies.^[2] Let another say. “Perhaps the worst will not happen.” You yourself must say. “Well, what if it does happen? Let us see who wins! Perhaps it happens for my best interests; it may be that such a death will shed credit upon my life.” Socrates was ennobled by the hemlock draught. Wrench from Cato’s hand his sword, the vindicator of liberty, and you deprive him of the greatest share of his glory.

I am exhorting you far too long, since you need reminding rather than exhortation. The path on which I am leading you is not different from that on which your nature leads you; you were born to such conduct as I describe. Hence there is all the more reason why you should increase and beautify the good that is in you.

But now, to close my letter, I have only to stamp the usual seal upon it, in other words, to commit thereto some noble message to be delivered to you: “The fool, with all his other faults, has this also, he is always getting ready to live.”^[3] Reflect, my esteemed Lucilius, what this saying means, and you will see how revolting is the fickleness of men who lay down every day new foundations

of life, and begin to build up fresh hopes even at the brink of the grave.

Look within your own mind for individual instances; you will think of old men who are preparing themselves at that very hour for a political career, or for travel, or for business. And what is baser than getting ready to live when you are already old? I should not name the author of this motto, except that it is somewhat unknown to fame and is not one of those popular sayings of Epicurus which I have allowed myself to praise and to appropriate. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Seneca dismisses the topic of “exaggerated ills,” because judgements will differ concerning present troubles; the Stoics, for example, would not admit that torture was an evil at all. He then passes on to the topic of “imaginary ills,” §§ 6-7, and afterwards to “anticipated ills,” §§ 8-11. From § 12 on, he deals with both imaginary and anticipated ills.
2. Cf. Solon’s *καὶ με κωτίλλοντα λείως τραχὺν ἐκφανεῖ νόον*.
3. Epicurus, Frag. 494 Usener.

LETTER 14

*On the Reasons for Withdrawing
From the World*



I confess that we all have an inborn affection for our body; I confess that we are entrusted with its guardianship. I do not maintain that the body is not to be indulged at all; but I maintain that we must not be slaves to it. He will have many masters who makes his body his master, who is over-fearful in its behalf, who judges everything according to the body.

We should conduct ourselves not as if we ought to live for the body, but as if we could not live without it. Our too great love for it makes us restless with fears, burdens us with cares, and exposes us to insults. Virtue is held too cheap by the man who counts his body too dear. We should cherish the body with the greatest care; but we should also be prepared, when reason, self-respect, and duty demand the sacrifice, to deliver it even to the flames.

Let us, however, in so far as we can, avoid discomforts as well as dangers, and withdraw to safe ground, by thinking continually how we may repel all objects of fear. If I am not mistaken, there are three main classes of these: we fear want, we fear sickness, and we fear the troubles which result from the violence of the stronger.

And of all these, that which shakes us most is the dread which hangs over us from our neighbour's ascendancy; for it is accompanied by great outcry and uproar. But the natural evils

which I have mentioned—want and sickness, steal upon us silently with no shock of terror to the eye or to the ear. The other kind of evil comes, so to speak, in the form of a huge parade. Surrounding it is a retinue of swords and fire and chains and a mob of beasts to be let loose upon the disembowelled entrails of men.

Picture to yourself under this head the prison, the cross, the rack, the hook, and the stake which they drive straight through a man until it protrudes from his throat. Think of human limbs torn apart by chariots driven in opposite directions, of the terrible shirt smeared and interwoven with inflammable materials, and of all the other contrivances devised by cruelty, in addition to those which I have mentioned!^[1]

It is not surprising, then, if our greatest terror is of such a fate; for it comes in many shapes and its paraphernalia are terrifying. For just as the torturer accomplishes more in proportion to the number of instruments which he displays—indeed, the spectacle overcomes those who would have patiently withstood the suffering—similarly, of all the agencies which coerce and master our minds, the most effective are those which can make a display. Those other troubles are of course not less serious; I mean hunger, thirst, ulcers of the stomach, and fever that parches our very bowels. They are, however, secret; they have no bluster and no heralding; but these, like huge arrays of war, prevail by virtue of their display and their equipment.

Let us, therefore, see to it that we abstain from giving offence. It is sometimes the people that we ought to fear; or sometimes a body of influential oligarchs in the Senate, if the method of governing the State is such that most of the business is done by that body; and sometimes individuals equipped with power by the people and against the people. It is burdensome to keep the friendship of all such persons; it is enough not to make enemies of them. So the wise man will never provoke the anger of those

in power; nay, he will even turn his course, precisely as he would turn from a storm if he were steering a ship.

When you travelled to Sicily, you crossed the Straits. The reckless pilot scorned the blustering South Wind—the wind which roughens the Sicilian Sea and forces it into choppy currents; he sought not the shore on the left,^[2] but the strand hard by the place where Charybdis throws the seas into confusion. Your more careful pilot, however, questions those who know the locality as to the tides and the meaning of the clouds; he holds his course far from that region notorious for its swirling waters. Our wise man does the same he shuns a strong man who may be injurious to him, making a point of not seeming to avoid him, because an important part of one's safety lies in not seeking safety openly; for what one avoids, one condemns,

We should therefore look about us, and see how we may protect ourselves from the mob. And first of all, we should have no cravings like theirs; for rivalry results in strife. Again, let us possess nothing that can be snatched from us to the great profit of a plotting foe. Let there be as little booty as possible on your person. No one sets out to shed the blood of his fellow-men for the sake of bloodshed—at any rate very few. More murderers speculate on their profits than give vent to hatred. If you are empty-handed, the highwayman passes you by: even along an infested road, the poor may travel in peace.^[3]

Next, we must follow the old adage and avoid three things with special care: hatred, jealousy, and scorn. And wisdom alone can show you how this may be done. It is hard to observe a mean; we must be chary of letting the fear of jealousy lead us into becoming objects of scorn, lest, when we choose not to stamp others down, we let them think that they can stamp us down. The power to inspire fear has caused many men to be in fear.^[4] Let us withdraw

ourselves in every way; for it is as harmful to be scorned as to be admired.

One must therefore take refuge in philosophy; this pursuit, not only in the eyes of good men, but also in the eyes of those who are even moderately bad, is a sort of protecting emblem.^[5] For speechmaking at the bar, or any other pursuit that claims the people's attention, wins enemies for a man; but philosophy is peaceful and minds her own business. Men cannot scorn her; she is honoured by every profession, even the vilest among them. Evil can never grow so strong, and nobility of character can never be so plotted against, that the name of philosophy shall cease to be worshipful and sacred.

Philosophy itself, however should be practiced with calmness and moderation.

"Very well, then," you retort, "do you regard the philosophy of Marcus Cato as moderate? Cato's voice strove to check a civil war. Cato parted the swords of maddened chieftains. When some fell foul of Pompey and others fell foul of Caesar, Cato defied both parties at once!"

Nevertheless, one may well question whether, in those days, a wise man ought to have taken any part in public affairs, and ask: "What do you mean, Marcus Cato? It is not now a question of freedom; long since has freedom gone to rack and ruin. The question is, whether it is Caesar or Pompey who controls the State. Why, Cato, should you take sides in that dispute? It is no business of yours; a tyrant is being selected. What does it concern you who conquers? The better man may win; but the winner is bound to be the worse man."^[6] I have referred to Cato's final rôle. But even in previous years the wise man was not permitted to intervene in such plundering of the state; for what could Cato do but raise his voice and utter unavailing words? At one time he was "bustled" by the mob and spat upon and forcibly removed from the forum

and marked for exile; at another, he was taken straight to prison from the senate-chamber.

However, we shall consider later^[7] whether the wise man ought to give his attention to politics; meanwhile, I beg you to consider those Stoics who, shut out from public life, have withdrawn into privacy for the purpose of improving men's existence and framing laws for the human race without incurring the displeasure of those in power. The wise man will not upset the customs of the people, nor will he invite the attention of the populace by any novel ways of living.

“What then? Can one who follows out this Plan be safe in any case?” I cannot guarantee you this any more than I can guarantee good health in the case of a man who observes moderation; although, as a matter of fact, good health results from such moderation. Sometimes a vessel perishes in harbour; but what do you think happens on the open sea? And how much more beset with danger that man would be, who even in his leisure is not secure, if he were busily working at many things! Innocent persons sometimes perish; who would deny that? But the guilty perish more frequently. A soldier's skill is not at fault if he receives the death-blow through his armour.

And finally, the wise man regards the reason for all his actions, but not the results. The beginning is in our own power; fortune decides the issue, but I do not allow her to pass sentence upon myself. You may say: “But she can inflict a measure of suffering and of trouble.” The highwayman does not pass sentence when he slays.

Now you are stretching forth your hand for the daily gift. Golden indeed will be the gift with which I shall load you; and, inasmuch as we have mentioned gold, let me tell you how its use and enjoyment may bring you greater pleasure. “He who needs riches least, enjoys riches most.”^[8] “Author's name, please!” you

say. Now, to show you how generous I am, it is my intent to praise the dicta of other schools. The phrase belongs to Epicurus, or Metrodorus, or some one of that particular thinking-shop.

But what difference does it make who spoke the words? They were uttered for the world. He who craves riches feels fear on their account. No man, however, enjoys a blessing that brings anxiety; he is always trying to add a little more. While he puzzles over increasing his wealth, he forgets how to use it. He collects his accounts, he wears out the pavement in the forum, he turns over his ledger^[9]—in short, he ceases to be master and becomes a steward. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Tacitus, *Annals*, xv. 44, describing the tortures practiced upon the Christians.
2. Scylla was a rock on the Italian side of the Straits. Charybdis was a whirlpool on the Sicilian side. Servius on Vergil, *Aeneid*, iii, 420 defines the *dextrum* as the shore “to the right of those coming from the Ionian sea.”
3. Cf. Juvenal, x. 22 *cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator*.
4. Cf. the proverb *necesse est multos timeat quem multi timent*, which is found in Seneca, *de Ira*, ii. 11. 4 and often elsewhere.
5. Literally, “is as good as a (priest’s) fillet.”
6. Cf. Tac. *Hist.* i. 50 *inter duos quorum bello solum id scires, deteriore fore vicisset*.
7. See, for example, Letter xxii.
8. Epicurus, *Ep.* iii. p. 63. 19 Usener.
9. Named *kalendarium* because interest was reckoned according to the Kalends of each month.

LETTER 15

On Brawn and Brains



The old Romans had a custom which survived even into my lifetime. They would add to the opening words of a letter: "If you are well, it is well; I also am well." Persons like ourselves would do well to say. "If you are studying philosophy, it is well." For this is just what "being well" means. Without philosophy the mind is sickly, and the body, too, though it may be very powerful, is strong only as that of a madman or a lunatic is strong.

This, then, is the sort of health you should primarily cultivate; the other kind of health comes second, and will involve little effort, if you wish to be well physically. It is indeed foolish, my dear Lucilius, and very unsuitable for a cultivated man, to work hard over developing the muscles and broadening the shoulders and strengthening the lungs. For although your heavy feeding produce good results and your sinews grow solid, you can never be a match, either in strength or in weight, for a first-class bull. Besides, by overloading the body with food you strangle the soul and render it less active. Accordingly, limit the flesh as much as possible, and allow free play to the spirit.

Many inconveniences beset those who devote themselves to such pursuits. In the first place, they have their exercises, at which they must work and waste their life-force and render it less fit to bear a strain or the severer studies. Second, their keen edge

is dulled by heavy eating. Besides, they must take orders from slaves of the vilest stamp—men who alternate between the oil-flask^[1] and the flagon, whose day passes satisfactorily if they have got up a good perspiration and quaffed, to make good what they have lost in sweat, huge draughts of liquor which will sink deeper because of their fasting. Drinking and sweating—it's the life of a dyspeptic!^[2]

Now there are short and simple exercises which tire the body rapidly, and so save our time; and time is something of which we ought to keep strict account. These exercises are running, brandishing weights, and jumping—high-jumping or broad-jumping, or the kind which I may call, “the Priest’s dance,”^[3] or, in slighting terms, “the clothes-cleaner’s jump.”^[4] Select for practice any one of these, and you will find it plain and easy.

But whatever you do, come back soon from body to mind. The mind must be exercised both day and night, for it is nourished by moderate labour, and this form of exercise need not be hampered by cold or hot weather, or even by old age. Cultivate that good which improves with the years.

Of course I do not command you to be always bending over your books and your writing materials; the mind must have a change—but a change of such a kind that it is not unnerved, but merely unbent. Riding in a litter shakes up the body, and does not interfere with study: one may read, dictate, converse, or listen to another; nor does walking prevent any of these things.

You need not scorn voice-culture; but I forbid you to practice raising and lowering your voice by scales and specific intonations. What if you should next propose to take lessons in walking! If you consult the sort of person whom starvation has taught new tricks, you will have someone to regulate your steps, watch every mouthful as you eat, and go to such lengths as you yourself, by enduring him and believing in him, have encouraged his effrontery to go.

“What, then?” you will ask; “is my voice to begin at the outset with shouting and straining the lungs to the utmost?” No; the natural thing is that it be aroused to such a pitch by easy stages, just as persons who are wrangling begin with ordinary conversational tones and then pass to shouting at the top of their lungs. No speaker cries “Help me, citizens!” at the outset of his speech.

Therefore, whenever your spirit’s impulse prompts you, raise a hubbub, now in louder now in milder tones, according as your voice, as well as your spirit, shall suggest to you, when you are moved to such a performance. Then let your voice, when you rein it in and call it back to earth, come down gently, not collapse; it should trail off in tones half way between high and low, and should not abruptly drop from its raving in the uncouth manner of countrymen. For our purpose is, not to give the voice exercise, but to make it give us exercise.

You see, I have relieved you of no slight bother; and I shall throw in a little complementary present—it is Greek, too. Here is the proverb; it is an excellent one: “The fool’s life is empty of gratitude and full of fears; its course lies wholly toward the future.” “Who uttered these words?” you say. The same writer whom I mentioned before.^[5] And what sort of life do you think is meant by the fool’s life? That of Baba and Isio?^[6] No; he means our own, for we are plunged by our blind desires into ventures which will harm us, but certainly will never satisfy us; for if we could be satisfied with anything, we should have been satisfied long ago; nor do we reflect how pleasant it is to demand nothing, how noble it is to be contented and not to be dependent upon Fortune.

Therefore continually remind yourself, Lucilius, how many ambitions you have attained. When you see many ahead of you, think how many are behind! If you would thank the gods, and be grateful for your past life, you should contemplate how many men

you have outstripped. But what have you to do with the others? You have outstripped yourself.

Fix a limit which you will not even desire to pass, should you have the power. At last, then, away with all these treacherous goods! They look better to those who hope for them than to those who have attained them. If there were anything substantial in them, they would sooner or later satisfy you; as it is, they merely rouse the drinkers' thirst. Away with fripperies which only serve for show! As to what the future's uncertain lot has in store, why should I demand of Fortune that she give rather than demand of myself that I should not crave? And why should I crave? Shall I heap up my winnings, and forget that man's lot is unsubstantial? For what end should I toil? Lo, today is the last; if not, it is near the last. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., the prize-ring; the contestants were rubbed with oil before the fight began.
2. *Cardiacus* meant, according to Pliny, *N. H.* xxiii. 1. 24, a sort of dyspepsia accompanied by fever and perspiration. Compare the man in Juvenal v. 32, who will not send a spoonful of wine to a friend ill of this complaint.
3. Named from the *Salii*, or leaping priests of Mars.
4. The fuller, or washerman, cleansed the clothes by leaping and stamping upon them in the tub.
5. Epicurus, *Frag.* 491 Usener.
6. Court fools of the period.



LETTER 16

On Philosophy, the Guide of Life



It is clear to you, I am sure, Lucilius, that no man can live a happy life, or even a supportable life, without the study of wisdom; you know also that a happy life is reached when our wisdom is brought to completion, but that life is at least endurable even when our wisdom is only begun. This idea, however, clear though it is, must be strengthened and implanted more deeply by daily reflection; it is more important for you to keep the resolutions you have already made than to go on and make noble ones. You must persevere, must develop new strength by continuous study, until that which is only a good inclination becomes a good settled purpose.

Hence you no longer need to come to me with much talk and protestations; I know that you have made great progress. I understand the feelings which prompt your words; they are not feigned or specious words. Nevertheless I shall tell you what I think—that at present I have hopes for you, but not yet perfect trust. And I wish that you would adopt the same attitude towards yourself; there is no reason why you should put confidence in yourself too quickly and readily. Examine yourself; scrutinize and observe

yourself in divers ways; but mark, before all else, whether it is in philosophy or merely in life itself^[1] that you have made progress.

Philosophy is no trick to catch the public; it is not devised for show. It is a matter, not of words, but of facts. It is not pursued in order that the day may yield some amusement before it is spent, or that our leisure may be relieved of a tedium that irks us. It moulds and constructs the soul; it orders our life, guides our conduct, shows us what we should do and what we should leave undone; it sits at the helm and directs our course as we waver amid uncertainties. Without it, no one can live fearlessly or in peace of mind. Countless things that happen every hour call for advice; and such advice is to be sought in philosophy.

Perhaps someone will say: “How can philosophy help me, if Fate exists? Of what avail is philosophy, if God rules the universe? Of what avail is it, if Chance governs everything? For not only is it impossible to change things that are determined, but it is also impossible to plan beforehand against what is undetermined; either God has forestalled my plans, and decided what I am to do, or else Fortune gives no free play to my plans.”

Whether the truth, Lucilius, lies in one or in all of these views, we must be philosophers; whether Fate binds us down by an inexorable law, or whether God as arbiter of the universe has arranged everything, or whether Chance drives and tosses human affairs without method, philosophy ought to be our defence. She will encourage us to obey God cheerfully, but Fortune defiantly; she will teach us to follow God and endure Chance.

But it is not my purpose now to be led into a discussion as to what is within our own control—if foreknowledge is supreme, or if a chain of fated events drags us along in its clutches, or if the sudden and the unexpected play the tyrant over us; I return now to my warning and my exhortation, that you should not allow the impulse of your spirit to weaken and grow cold. Hold fast to

it and establish it firmly, in order that what is now impulse may become a habit of the mind.

If I know you well, you have already been trying to find out, from the very beginning of my letter, what little contribution it brings to you. Sift the letter, and you will find it. You need not wonder at any genius of mine; for as yet I am lavish only with other men's property. But why did I say "other men"? Whatever is well said by anyone is mine. This also is a saying of Epicurus:^[2] "If you live according to nature, you will never be poor; if you live according to opinion, you will never be rich."

Nature's wants are slight; the demands of opinion are boundless. Suppose that the property of many millionaires is heaped up in your possession. Assume that fortune carries you far beyond the limits of a private income, decks you with gold, clothes you in purple, and brings you to such a degree of luxury and wealth that you can bury the earth under your marble floors; that you may not only possess, but tread upon, riches. Add statues, paintings, and whatever any art has devised for the luxury; you will only learn from such things to crave still greater.

Natural desires are limited; but those which spring from false opinion can have no stopping-point. The false has no limits. When you are travelling on a road, there must be an end; but when astray, your wanderings are limitless. Recall your steps, therefore, from idle things, and when you would know whether that which you seek is based upon a natural or upon a misleading desire, consider whether it can stop at any definite point. If you find, after having travelled far, that there is a more distant goal always in view, you may be sure that this condition is contrary to nature. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., have merely advanced in years.
2. Frag. 201 Usener.

LETTER 17

On Philosophy and Riches



Cast away everything of that sort, if you are wise; nay, rather that you may be wise; strive toward a sound mind at top speed and with your whole strength. If any bond holds you back, untie it, or sever it. “But,” you say, “my estate delays me; I wish to make such disposition of it that it may suffice for me when I have nothing to do, lest either poverty be a burden to me, or I myself a burden to others.”

You do not seem, when you say this, to know the strength and power of that good which you are considering. You do indeed grasp the all important thing, the great benefit which philosophy confers, but you do not yet discern accurately its various functions, nor do you yet know how great is the help we receive from philosophy in everything, everywhere—how, (to use Cicero’s language,^[1]) it not only succours us in the greatest matters but also descends to the smallest. Take my advice; call wisdom into consultation; she will advise you not to sit for ever at your ledger.

Doubtless, your object, what you wish to attain by such postponement of your studies, is that poverty may not have to be feared by you. But what if it is something to be desired? Riches have shut off many a man from the attainment of wisdom; poverty is unburdened and free from care. When the trumpet sounds,

the poor man knows that he is not being attacked; when there is a cry of “Fire,”^[2] he only seeks a way of escape, and does not ask what he can save; if the poor man must go to sea, the harbour does not resound, nor do the wharves bustle with the retinue of one individual. No throng of slaves surrounds the poor man—slaves for whose mouths the master must covet the fertile crops of regions beyond the sea.

It is easy to fill a few stomachs, when they are well trained and crave nothing else but to be filled. Hunger costs but little; squeamishness costs much. Poverty is contented with fulfilling pressing needs.

Why, then, should you reject Philosophy as a comrade?

Even the rich man copies her ways when he is in his senses. If you wish to have leisure for your mind, either be a poor man, or resemble a poor man. Study cannot be helpful unless you take pains to live simply; and living simply is voluntary poverty. Away, then, with all excuses like: “I have not yet enough; when I have gained the desired amount, then I shall devote myself wholly to philosophy.” And yet this ideal, which you are putting off and placing second to other interests, should be secured first of all; you should begin with it. You retort: “I wish to acquire something to live on.” Yes, but learn while you are acquiring it; for if anything forbids you to live nobly, nothing forbids you to die nobly.

There is no reason why poverty should call us away from philosophy—no, nor even actual want. For when hastening after wisdom, we must endure even hunger. Men have endured hunger when their towns were besieged, and what other reward for their endurance did they obtain than that they did not fall under the conqueror’s power? How much greater is the promise of the prize of everlasting liberty, and the assurance that we need fear neither God nor man! Even though we starve, we must reach that goal.

Armies have endured all manner of want, have lived on roots, and have resisted hunger by means of food too revolting to mention. All this they have suffered to gain a kingdom, and—what is more marvellous—to gain a kingdom that will be another’s. Will any man hesitate to endure poverty, in order that he may free his mind from madness?

Therefore one should not seek to lay up riches first; one may attain to philosophy, however, even without money for the journey.

It is indeed so. After you have come to possess all other things, shall you then wish to possess wisdom also? Is philosophy to be the last requisite in life—a sort of supplement? Nay, your plan should be this: be a philosopher now, whether you have anything or not—for if you have anything, how do you know that you have not too much already?—but if you have nothing, seek understanding first, before anything else.

“But,” you say, “I shall lack the necessities of life.” In the first place, you cannot lack them; because nature demands but little, and the wise man suits his needs to nature. But if the utmost pinch of need arrives, he will quickly take leave of life and cease being a trouble to himself. If, however, his means of existence are meagre and scanty, he will make the best of them, without being anxious or worried about anything more than the bare necessities; he will do justice to his belly and his shoulders; with free and happy spirit he will laugh at the bustling of rich men, and the flurried ways of those who are hastening after wealth, and say: “Why of your own accord postpone your real life to the distant future? Shall you wait for some interest to fall due, or for some income on your merchandise, or for a place in the will of some wealthy old man, when you can be rich here and now. Wisdom offers wealth in ready money, and pays it over to those in whose eyes she has made wealth superfluous.” These remarks refer to other

men; you are nearer the rich class. Change the age in which you live, and you have too much. But in every age, what is enough remains the same.

I might close my letter at this point, if I had not got you into bad habits. One cannot greet Parthian royalty without bringing a gift; and in your case I cannot say farewell without paying a price. But what of it? I shall borrow from Epicurus:^[3] “The acquisition of riches has been for many men, not an end, but a change, of troubles.”

I do not wonder. For the fault is not in the wealth, but in the mind itself. That which had made poverty a burden to us, has made riches also a burden. Just as it matters little whether you lay a sick man on a wooden or on a golden bed, for whithersoever he be moved he will carry his malady with him; so one need not care whether the diseased mind is bestowed upon riches or upon poverty. His malady goes with the man. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Perhaps from the *Hortensius*; see Müller, Frag. 98, p. 326.
2. Literally, “Water!”
3. Frag. 479 Usener.

LETTER 18

On Festivals and Fasting



[If interested, a free audiobook version of this letter can be found at this web address: tim.blog/18]

It is the month of December, and yet the city is at this very moment in a sweat. License is given to the general merrymaking. Everything resounds with mighty preparations—as if the Saturnalia differed at all from the usual business day! So true it is that the difference is nil, that I regard as correct the remark of the man who said: “Once December was a month; now it is a year.”^[1]

If I had you with me, I should be glad to consult you and find out what you think should be done—whether we ought to make no change in our daily routine, or whether, in order not to be out of sympathy with the ways of the public, we should dine in gayer fashion and doff the toga.^[2] As it is now, we Romans have changed our dress for the sake of pleasure and holiday-making, though in former times that was only customary when the State was disturbed and had fallen on evil days.

I am sure that, if I know you aright, playing the part of an umpire you would have wished that we should be neither like the liberty-capped^[3] throng in all ways, nor in all ways unlike them; unless, perhaps, this is just the season when we ought to lay down the law to the soul, and bid it be alone in refraining from pleasures

just when the whole mob has let itself go in pleasures; for this is the surest proof which a man can get of his own constancy, if he neither seeks the things which are seductive and allure him to luxury, nor is led into them.

It shows much more courage to remain dry and sober when the mob is drunk and vomiting; but it shows greater self-control to refuse to withdraw oneself and to do what the crowd does, but in a different way—thus neither making oneself conspicuous nor becoming one of the crowd. For one may keep holiday without extravagance.

I am so firmly determined, however, to test the constancy of your mind that, drawing from the teachings of great men, I shall give you also a lesson: Set aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare, with coarse and rough dress, saying to yourself the while: “Is this the condition that I feared?”

It is precisely in times of immunity from care that the soul should toughen itself beforehand for occasions of greater stress, and it is while Fortune is kind that it should fortify itself against her violence. In days of peace the soldier performs manoeuvres, throws up earthworks with no enemy in sight, and wearies himself by gratuitous toil, in order that he may be equal to unavoidable toil. If you would not have a man flinch when the crisis comes, train him before it comes. Such is the course which those men^[4] have followed who, in their imitation of poverty, have every month come almost to want, that they might never recoil from what they had so often rehearsed.

You need not suppose that I mean meals like Timon’s, or “paupers’ huts,”^[5] or any other device which luxurious millionaires use to beguile the tedium of their lives. Let the pallet be a real one, and the coarse cloak; let the bread be hard and grimy. Endure all this for three or four days at a time, sometimes for more, so that

it may be a test of yourself instead of a mere hobby. Then, I assure you, my dear Lucilius, you will leap for joy when filled with a pennyworth of food, and you will understand that a man's peace of mind does not depend upon Fortune; for, even when angry she grants enough for our needs.

There is no reason, however, why you should think that you are doing anything great; for you will merely be doing what many thousands of slaves and many thousands of poor men are doing every day. But you may credit yourself with this item—that you will not be doing it under compulsion, and that it will be as easy for you to endure it permanently as to make the experiment from time to time. Let us practice our strokes on the “dummy”;^[6] let us become intimate with poverty, so that Fortune may not catch us off our guard. We shall be rich with all the more comfort, if we once learn how far poverty is from being a burden.

Even Epicurus, the teacher of pleasure, used to observe stated intervals, during which he satisfied his hunger in niggardly fashion; he wished to see whether he thereby fell short of full and complete happiness, and, if so, by what amount he fell short, and whether this amount was worth purchasing at the price of great effort. At any rate, he makes such a statement in the well known letter written to Polyænus in the archonship of Charinus.^[7] Indeed, he boasts that he himself lived on less than a penny, but that Metrodorus, whose progress was not yet so great, needed a whole penny.

Do you think that there can be fullness on such fare? Yes, and there is pleasure also—not that shifty and fleeting Pleasure which needs a fillip now and then, but a pleasure that is steadfast and sure. For though water, barley-meal, and crusts of barley-bread, are not a cheerful diet, yet it is the highest kind of Pleasure to be able to derive pleasure from this sort of food, and to have reduced

one's needs to that modicum which no unfairness of Fortune can snatch away.

Even prison fare is more generous; and those who have been set apart for capital punishment are not so meanly fed by the man who is to execute them. Therefore, what a noble soul must one have, to descend of one's own free will to a diet which even those who have been sentenced to death have not to fear! This is indeed forestalling the spearthrusts of Fortune.

So begin, my dear Lucilius, to follow the custom of these men, and set apart certain days on which you shall withdraw from your business and make yourself at home with the scantiest fare. Establish business relations with poverty.

*Dare, O my friend, to scorn the sight of wealth,
And mould thyself to kinship with thy God.*^[8]

For he alone is in kinship with God who has scorned wealth. Of course I do not forbid you to possess it, but I would have you reach the point at which you possess it dauntlessly; this can be accomplished only by persuading yourself that you can live happily without it as well as with it, and by regarding riches always as likely to elude you.

But now I must begin to fold up my letter. "Settle your debts first," you cry. Here is a draft on Epicurus; he will pay down the sum: "Ungoverned anger begets madness."^[9] You cannot help knowing the truth of these words, since you have had not only slaves, but also enemies.

But indeed this emotion blazes out against all sorts of persons; it springs from love as much as from hate, and shows itself not less in serious matters than in jest and sport. And it makes no difference how important the provocation may be, but into what kind of soul it penetrates. Similarly with fire; it does not matter how great is the flame, but what it falls upon. For solid timbers have repelled a very

great fire; conversely, dry and easily inflammable stuff nourishes the slightest spark into a conflagration. So it is with anger, my dear Lucilius; the outcome of a mighty anger is madness, and hence anger should be avoided, not merely that we may escape excess, but that we may have a healthy mind. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., the whole year is a Saturnalia.
2. For a dinner dress.
3. The *pilleus* was worn by newly freed slaves and by the Roman populace on festal occasions.
4. The Epicurians. Cf. § 9 and Epicurus, Frag. 158. Usener.
5. Cf. Ep. c. 6 and Martial, iii. 48.
6. The post which gladiators used when preparing themselves for combats in the arena.
7. Usually identified with Chaerimus, 307-8 B.C. But Wilhelm, *Öster Jahreshfte*, V.136, has shown that there is probably no confusion of names. A Charinus was archon at Athens in 290-89; see Johnson, *Class. Phil.* ix. p. 256.
8. Vergil, *Aeneid*, viii. 364 f.
9. Frag. 484 Usener.

LETTER 19

On Worldliness and Retirement



I leap for joy whenever I receive letters from you. For they fill me with hope; they are now not mere assurances concerning you, but guarantees. And I beg and pray you to proceed in this course; for what better request could I make of a friend than one which is to be made for his own sake? If possible, withdraw yourself from all the business of which you speak; and if you cannot do this, tear yourself away. We have dissipated enough of our time already—let us in old age begin to pack up our baggage.

Surely there is nothing in this that men can begrudge us. We have spent our lives on the high seas; let us die in harbour. Not that I would advise you to try to win fame by your retirement; one's retirement should neither be paraded nor concealed. Not concealed, I say, for I shall not go so far in urging you as to expect you to condemn all men as mad and then seek out for yourself a hiding-place and oblivion; rather make this your business, that your retirement be not conspicuous, though it should be obvious.

In the second place, while those whose choice is unhampered from the start will deliberate on that other question, whether they wish to pass their lives in obscurity, in your case there is not a free choice. Your ability and energy have thrust you into the work of the world; so have the charm of your writings and the friendships you have made with famous and notable men.

Renown has already taken you by storm. You may sink yourself into the depths of obscurity and utterly hide yourself; yet your earlier acts will reveal you.

You cannot keep lurking in the dark; much of the old gleam will follow you wherever you fly.

Peace you can claim for yourself without being disliked by anyone, without any sense of loss, and without any pangs of spirit. For what will you leave behind you that you can imagine yourself reluctant to leave? Your clients? But none of these men courts you for yourself; they merely court something from you. People used to hunt friends, but now they hunt pelf; if a lonely old man changes his will, the morning-caller transfers himself to another door. Great things cannot be bought for small sums; so reckon up whether it is preferable to leave your own true self, or merely some of your belongings.

Would that you had had the privilege of growing old amid the limited circumstances of your origin, and that fortune had not raised you to such heights! You were removed far from the sight of wholesome living by your swift rise to prosperity, by your province, by your position as procurator,^[1] and by all that such things promise; you will next acquire more important duties and after them still more. And what will be the result?

Why wait until there is nothing left for you to crave? That time will never come. We hold that there is a succession of causes, from which fate is woven; similarly, you may be sure, there is a succession in our desires; for one begins where its predecessor ends. You have been thrust into an existence which will never of itself put an end to your wretchedness and your slavery. Withdraw your chafed neck from the yoke; it is better that it should be cut off once for all, than galled for ever.

If you retreat to privacy, everything will be on a smaller scale, but you will be satisfied abundantly; in your present condition,

however, there is no satisfaction in the plenty which is heaped upon you on all sides. Would you rather be poor and sated, or rich and hungry? Prosperity is not only greedy, but it also lies exposed to the greed of others. And as long as nothing satisfies you, you yourself cannot satisfy others.

“But,” you say, “how can I take my leave?” Any way you please. Reflect how many hazards you have ventured for the sake of money, and how much toil you have undertaken for a title! You must dare something to gain leisure, also—or else grow old amid the worries of procuratorships^[2] abroad and subsequently of civil duties at home, living in turmoil and in ever fresh floods of responsibilities, which no man has ever succeeded in avoiding by unobtrusiveness or by seclusion of life. For what bearing on the case has your personal desire for a secluded life? Your position in the world desires the opposite! What if, even now, you allow that position to grow greater? But all that is added to your successes will be added to your fears.

At this point I should like to quote a saying of Maecenas, who spoke the truth when he stood on the very summit:^[3] “There’s thunder even on the loftiest peaks.” If you ask me in what book these words are found, they occur in the volume entitled *Prometheus*.^[4] He simply meant to say that these lofty peaks have their tops surrounded with thunder-storms. But is any power worth so high a price that a man like you would ever, in order to obtain it, adopt a style so debauched as that?^[5] Maecenas was indeed a man of parts, who would have left a great pattern for Roman oratory to follow, had his good fortune not made him effeminate—nay, had it not emasculated him! An end like his awaits you also, unless you forthwith shorten sail and—as Maecenas was not willing to do until it was too late—hug the shore!

This saying of Maecenas’s might have squared my account with you; but I feel sure, knowing you, that you will get out an

injunction against me, and that you will be unwilling to accept payment of my debt in such crude and debased currency. However that may be, I shall draw on the account of Epicurus.^[6] He says: “You must reflect carefully beforehand with whom you are to eat and drink, rather than what you are to eat and drink. For a dinner of meats without the company of a friend is like the life of a lion or a wolf.”

This privilege will not be yours unless you withdraw from the world; otherwise, you will have as guests only those whom your slave-secretary^[7] sorts out from the throng of callers. It is, however, a mistake to select your friend in the reception-hall or to test him at the dinner-table. The most serious misfortune for a busy man who is overwhelmed by his possessions is, that he believes men to be his friends when he himself is not a friend to them, and that he deems his favours to be effective in winning friends, although, in the case of certain men, the more they owe, the more they hate. A trifling debt makes a man your debtor; a large one makes him an enemy.

“What,” you say, “do not kindnesses establish friendships?” They do, if one has had the privilege of choosing those who are to receive them, and if they are placed judiciously, instead of being scattered broadcast.

Therefore, while you are beginning to call your mind your own, meantime apply this maxim of the wise: consider that it is more important who receives a thing, than what it is he receives. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. See the introduction, p. ix.
2. The procurator did the work of a quaestor in an imperial province. Positions at Rome to which Lucilius might succeed were such as *praefectus annonae*, in charge of the grain supply, or *praefectus urbi*, Director of Public Safety, and others.
3. And therefore could speak with authority on this point.

4. Perhaps a tragedy, although Seneca uses the word *liber* to describe it. Maecenas wrote a *Symposium*, a work *De cultu suo*, *Octavia*, some stray verse, and perhaps some history. See Seneca, Epp. xcii. and ci.
5. Seneca whimsically pretends to assume that eccentric literary style and high political position go hand in hand. See also the following sentence.
6. Epicurus, Frag. 542 Usener.
7. A slave kept by every prominent Roman to identify the master's friends and dependants.

LETTER 20

On Practicing What You Preach



[If interested, a free audiobook version of this letter can be found at this web address: tim.blog/20]

If you are in good health and if you think yourself worthy of becoming at last your own master, I am glad. For the credit will be mine, if I can drag you from the floods in which you are being buffeted without hope of emerging. This, however, my dear Lucilius, I ask and beg of you, on your part, that you let wisdom sink into your soul, and test your progress, not by mere speech or writings, but by stoutness of heart and decrease of desire. Prove your words by your deeds.

Far different is the purpose of those who are speech-making and trying to win the approbation of a throng of hearers, far different that of those who allure the ears of young men and idlers by many-sided or fluent argumentation; philosophy teaches us to act, not to speak; it exacts of every man that he should live according to his own standards, that his life should not be out of harmony with his words, and that, further, his inner life should be of one hue and not out of harmony with all his activities. This, I say, is the highest duty and the highest proof of wisdom—that deed and word should be in accord, that a man should be equal to himself under all conditions, and always the same.

“But,” you reply, “who can maintain this standard?” Very few, to be sure; but there are some. It is indeed a hard undertaking, and I do not say that the philosopher can always keep the same pace. But he can always travel the same path.

Observe yourself, then, and see whether your dress and your house are inconsistent, whether you treat yourself lavishly and your family meanly, whether you eat frugal dinners and yet build luxurious houses. You should lay hold, once for all, upon a single norm to live by, and should regulate your whole life according to this norm. Some men restrict themselves at home, but strut with swelling port before the public; such discordance is a fault, and it indicates a wavering mind which cannot yet keep its balance.

And I can tell you, further, whence arise this unsteadiness and disagreement of action and purpose; it is because no man resolves upon what he wishes, and, even if he has done so, he does not persist in it, but jumps the track; not only does he change, but he returns and slips back to the conduct which he has abandoned and abjured.

Therefore, to omit the ancient definitions of wisdom and to include the whole manner of human life, I can be satisfied with the following: “What is wisdom? Always desiring the same things, and always refusing the same things.”^[1] You may be excused from adding the little proviso—that what you wish, should be right; since no man can always be satisfied with the same thing, unless it is right.

For this reason men do not know what they wish, except at the actual moment of wishing; no man ever decided once and for all to desire or to refuse. Judgment varies from day to day, and changes to the opposite, making many a man pass his life in a kind of game. Press on, therefore, as you have begun; perhaps you will be led to perfection, or to a point which you alone understand is still short of perfection.

“But what,” you say, “will become of my crowded household without a household income?” If you stop supporting that crowd, it will support itself; or perhaps you will learn by the bounty of poverty what you cannot learn by your own bounty. Poverty will keep for you your true and tried friends; you will be rid of the men who were not seeking you for yourself, but for something which you have. Is it not true, however, that you should love poverty, if only for this single reason—that it will show you those by whom you are loved? O when will that time come, when no one shall tell lies to compliment you!

Accordingly, let your thoughts, your efforts, your desires, help to make you content with your own self and with the goods that spring from yourself; and commit all your other prayers to God’s keeping! What happiness could come closer home to you? Bring yourself down to humble conditions, from which you cannot be ejected and in order that you may do so with greater alacrity, the contribution contained in this letter shall refer to that subject; I shall bestow it upon you forthwith.

Although you may look askance, Epicurus^[2] will once again be glad to settle my indebtedness: “Believe me, your words will be more imposing if you sleep on a cot and wear rags. For in that case you will not be merely saying them; you will be demonstrating their truth.” I, at any rate, listen in a different spirit to the utterances of our friend Demetrius, after I have seen him reclining without even a cloak to cover him, and, more than this, without rugs to lie upon. He is not only a teacher of the truth, but a witness to the truth.

“May not a man, however, despise wealth when it lies in his very pocket?” Of course; he also is great-souled, who sees riches heaped up round him and, after wondering long and deeply because they have come into his possession, smiles, and hears rather than feels

that they are his. It means much not to be spoiled by intimacy with riches; and he is truly great who is poor amidst riches.

“Yes, but I do not know,” you say, “how the man you speak of will endure poverty, if he falls into it suddenly.” Nor do I, Epicurus, know whether the poor man you speak of will despise riches, should he suddenly fall into them; accordingly, in the case of both, it is the mind that must be appraised, and we must investigate whether your man is pleased with his poverty, and whether my man is displeased with his riches. Otherwise, the cot-bed and the rags are slight proof of his good intentions, if it has not been made clear that the person concerned endures these trials not from necessity but from preference.

It is the mark, however, of a noble spirit not to precipitate oneself into such things^[3] on the ground that they are better, but to practice for them on the ground that they are thus easy to endure. And they are easy to endure, Lucilius; when, however, you come to them after long rehearsal, they are even pleasant; for they contain a sense of freedom from care—and without this nothing is pleasant.

I hold it essential, therefore, to do as I have told you in a letter that great men have often done: to reserve a few days in which we may prepare ourselves for real poverty by means of fancied poverty. There is all the more reason for doing this, because we have been steeped in luxury and regard all duties as hard and onerous. Rather let the soul be roused from its sleep and be prodded, and let it be reminded that nature has prescribed very little for us. No man is born rich. Every man, when he first sees light, is commanded to be content with milk and rags. Such is our beginning, and yet kingdoms are all too small for us!^[4] Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Seneca applies to wisdom the definition of friendship, Salust, *Catiline*, 20. 4 *idem velle atque idem nolle, ea demum firma amicitia est.*
2. Frag. 206 Usener.

3. i.e., the life of voluntary poverty.
4. Adapted from the epigram on Alexander the Great, “*hic est quem non capit orbis.*” See Plutarch, *Alexander*, § 6 ὃ παῖ ζῆται σεαυτῷ βασιλείαν ἴσην. Μακεδονία γάρ σε οὐ χωρεῖ, and Seneca, Ep. cxix. 8.

LETTER 21

*On the Renown Which
My Writings Will Bring You*



Do you conclude that you are having difficulties with those men about whom you wrote to me? Your greatest difficulty is with yourself; for you are your own stumbling-block. You do not know what you want. You are better at approving the right course than at following it out. You see where the true happiness lies, but you have not the courage to attain it. Let me tell you what it is that hinders you, inasmuch as you do not of yourself discern it.

You think that this condition, which you are to abandon, is one of importance, and after resolving upon that ideal state of calm into which you hope to pass, you are held back by the lustre of your present life, from which it is your intention to depart, just as if you were about to fall into a state of filth and darkness. This is a mistake, Lucilius; to go from your present life into the other is a promotion. There is the same difference between these two lives as there is between mere brightness and real light; the latter has a definite source within itself, the other borrows its radiance; the one is called forth by an illumination coming from the outside, and anyone who stands between the source and the object immediately turns the latter into a dense shadow; but the other has a glow that comes from within.

It is your own studies that will make you shine and will render you eminent, Allow me to mention the case of Epicurus.

He was writing^[1] to Idomeneus and trying to recall him from a showy existence to sure and steadfast renown. Idomeneus was at that time a minister of state who exercised a rigorous authority and had important affairs in hand. “If,” said Epicurus, “you are attracted by fame, my letters will make you more renowned than all the things which you cherish and which make you cherished.”

Did Epicurus speak falsely? Who would have known of Idomeneus, had not the philosopher thus engraved his name in those letters of his? All the grandees and satraps, even the king himself, who was petitioned for the title which Idomeneus sought, are sunk in deep oblivion. Cicero’s letters keep the name of Atticus from perishing. It would have profited Atticus nothing to have an Agrippa for a son-in-law, a Tiberius for the husband of his grand-daughter, and a Drusus Caesar for a great-grandson; amid these mighty names his name would never be spoken, had not Cicero bound him to himself.^[2]

The deep flood of time will roll over us; some few great men will raise their heads above it, and, though destined at the last to depart into the same realms of silence, will battle against oblivion and maintain their ground for long.

That which Epicurus could promise his friend, this I promise you, Lucilius. I shall find favour among later generations; I can take with me names that will endure as long as mine. Our poet Vergil promised an eternal name to two heroes, and is keeping his promise:^[3]

*Blest heroes twain! If power my song possess,
The record of your names shall never be
Erased from out the book of Time, while yet
Aeneas’ tribe shall keep the Capitol,*

*That rock immovable, and Roman sire
Shall empire hold.*

Whenever men have been thrust forward by fortune, whenever they have become part and parcel of another's influence, they have found abundant favour, their houses have been thronged, only so long as they themselves have kept their position; when they themselves have left it, they have slipped at once from the memory of men. But in the case of innate ability, the respect in which it is held increases, and not only does honour accrue to the man himself, but whatever has attached itself to his memory is passed on from one to another.^[4]

In order that Idomeneus may not be introduced free of charge into my letter, he shall make up the indebtedness from his own account. It was to him that Epicurus addressed the well-known saying^[5] urging him to make Pythocles rich, but not rich in the vulgar and equivocal way. "If you wish," said he, "to make Pythocles rich, do not add to his store of money, but subtract from his desires."

This idea is too clear to need explanation, and too clever to need reinforcement. There is, however, one point on which I would warn you—not to consider that this statement applies only to riches; its value will be the same, no matter how you apply it. "If you wish to make Pythocles honourable, do not add to his honours, but subtract from his desires"; "if you wish Pythocles to have pleasure for ever, do not add to his pleasures, but subtract from his desires"; "if you wish to make Pythocles an old man, filling his life to the full, do not add to his years, but subtract from his desires."

There is no reason why you should hold that these words belong to Epicurus alone; they are public property. I think we ought to do in philosophy as they are wont to do in the Senate: when someone has made a motion, of which I approve to a certain

extent, I ask him to make his motion in two parts, and I vote for the part which I approve. So I am all the more glad to repeat the distinguished words of Epicurus, in order that I may prove to those who have recourse to him through a bad motive, thinking that they will have in him a screen for their own vices, that they must live honourably, no matter what school they follow.

Go to his Garden and read the motto carved there:

“Stranger, here you will do well to tarry; here our highest good is pleasure.”

The care-taker of that abode, a kindly host, will be ready for you; he will welcome you with barley-meal and serve you water also in abundance, with these words: “Have you not been well entertained?” “This garden,” he says, “does not whet your appetite; it quenches it. Nor does it make you more thirsty with every drink; it slakes the thirst by a natural cure, a cure that demands no fee. This is the ‘pleasure’ in which I have grown old.”

In speaking with you, however, I refer to those desires which refuse alleviation, which must be bribed to cease. For in regard to the exceptional desires, which may be postponed, which may be chastened and checked, I have this one thought to share with you: a pleasure of that sort is according to our nature, but it is not according to our needs; one owes nothing to it; whatever is expended upon it is a free gift. The belly will not listen to advice; it makes demands, it importunes. And yet it is not a troublesome creditor; you can send it away at small cost, provided only that you give it what you owe, not merely all you are able to give. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Epicurus, Frag. 132 Usener.
2. i.e., Cicero’s letters did more to preserve the name of Atticus than such a connexion with the imperial house would have done.
3. *Aeneid*, ix. 446 ff.
4. As in the case of Epicurus and Idomeneus, Cicero and Atticus, Vergil and Euryalus and Nisus, and Seneca and Lucilius!
5. Frag. 135 Usener.

LETTER 22

On the Futility of Half-Way Measures



You understand by this time that you must withdraw yourself from those showy and depraved pursuits; but you still wish to know how this may be accomplished. There are certain things which can be pointed out only by someone who is present. The physician cannot prescribe by letter the proper time for eating or bathing; he must feel the pulse. There is an old adage about gladiators—that they plan their fight in the ring; as they intently watch, something in the adversary's glance, some movement of his hand, even some slight bending of his body, gives a warning.

We can formulate general rules and commit them to writing, as to what is usually done, or ought to be done; such advice may be given, not only to our absent friends, but also to succeeding generations. In regard, however, to that second^[1] question—when or how your plan is to be carried out—no one will advise at long range; we must take counsel in the presence of the actual situation.

You must be not only present in the body, but watchful in mind, if you would avail yourself of the fleeting opportunity. Accordingly, look about you for the opportunity; if you see it, grasp it, and with all your energy and with all your strength devote yourself to this task—to rid yourself of those business duties.

Now listen carefully to the opinion which I shall offer; it is my opinion that you should withdraw either from that kind

of existence, or else from existence altogether. But I likewise maintain that you should take a gentle path, that you may loosen rather than cut the knot which you have bungled so badly in tying—provided that if there shall be no other way of loosening it, you may actually cut it. No man is so faint-hearted that he would rather hang in suspense for ever than drop once for all.

Meanwhile—and this is of first importance—do not hamper yourself; be content with the business into which you have lowered yourself, or, as you prefer to have people think, have tumbled. There is no reason why you should be struggling on to something further; if you do, you will lose all grounds of excuse, and men will see that it was not a tumble. The usual explanation which men offer is wrong: “I was compelled to do it. Suppose it was against my will; I had to do it.” But no one is compelled to pursue prosperity at top speed; it means something to call a halt—even if one does not offer resistance—instead of pressing eagerly after favouring fortune.

Shall you then be put out with me, if I not only come to advise you, but also call in others to advise you—wiser heads than my own, men before whom I am wont to lay any problem upon which I am pondering? Read the letter of Epicurus^[2] which appears on this matter; it is addressed to Idomeneus. The writer asks him to hasten as fast as he can, and beat a retreat before some stronger influence comes between and takes from him the liberty to withdraw.

But he also adds that one should attempt nothing except at the time when it can be attempted suitably and seasonably. Then, when the long-sought occasion comes, let him be up and doing. Epicurus forbids^[3] us to doze when we are meditating escape; he bids us hope for a safe release from even the hardest trials, provided that we are not in too great a hurry before the time, nor too dilatory when the time arrives.

Now, I suppose, you are looking for a Stoic motto also. There is really no reason why anyone should slander that school to you on the ground of its rashness; as a matter of fact, its caution is greater than its courage. You are perhaps expecting the sect to utter such words as these: "It is base to flinch under a burden. Wrestle with the duties which you have once undertaken. No man is brave and earnest if he avoids danger, if his spirit does not grow with the very difficulty of his task."

Words like these will indeed be spoken to you, if only your perseverance shall have an object that is worth while, if only you will not have to do or to suffer anything unworthy of a good man; besides, a good man will not waste himself upon mean and discreditable work or be busy merely for the sake of being busy. Neither will he, as you imagine, become so involved in ambitious schemes that he will have continually to endure their ebb and flow. Nay, when he sees the dangers, uncertainties, and hazards in which he was formerly tossed about, he will withdraw—not turning his back to the foe, but falling back little by little to a safe position.

From business, however, my dear Lucilius, it is easy to escape, if only you will despise the rewards of business. We are held back and kept from escaping by thoughts like these: "What then? Shall I leave behind me these great prospects? Shall I depart at the very time of harvest? Shall I have no slaves at my side? no retinue for my litter? no crowd in my reception room?"

Hence men leave such advantages as these with reluctance; they love the reward of their hardships, but curse the hardships themselves.

Men complain about their ambitions as they complain about their mistresses; in other words, if you penetrate their real feelings, you will find, not hatred, but bickering. Search the minds of those who cry down what they have desired, who talk about

escaping from things which they are unable to do without; you will comprehend that they are lingering of their own free will in a situation which they declare they find it hard and wretched to endure.

It is so, my dear Lucilius; there are a few men whom slavery holds fast, but there are many more who hold fast to slavery.

If, however, you intend to be rid of this slavery; if freedom is genuinely pleasing in your eyes; and if you seek counsel for this one purpose—that you may have the good fortune to accomplish this purpose without perpetual annoyance—how can the whole company of Stoic thinkers fail to approve your course? Zeno, Chrysippus, and all their kind will give you advice that is temperate, honourable, and suitable.

But if you keep turning round and looking about, in order to see how much you may carry away with you, and how much money you may keep to equip yourself for the life of leisure, you will never find a way out. No man can swim ashore and take his baggage with him. Rise to a higher life, with the favour of the gods; but let it not be favour of such a kind as the gods give to men when with kind and genial faces they bestow magnificent ills, justified in so doing by the one fact that the things which irritate and torture have been bestowed in answer to prayer.

I was just putting the seal upon this letter; but it must be broken again, in order that it may go to you with its customary contribution, bearing with it some noble word. And lo, here is one that occurs to my mind; I do not know whether its truth or its nobility of utterance is the greater. “Spoken by whom?” you ask. By Epicurus;^[4] for I am still appropriating other men’s belongings.

The words are: “Everyone goes out of life just as if he had but lately entered it.” Take anyone off his guard, young, old, or middle-aged; you will find that all are equally afraid of death, and equally ignorant of life. No one has anything finished, because we have

kept putting off into the future all our undertakings.^[5] No thought in the quotation given above pleases me more than that it taunts old men with being infants.

“No one,” he says, “leaves this world in a different manner from one who has just been born.” That is not true; for we are worse when we die than when we were born; but it is our fault, and not that of Nature. Nature should scold us, saying: “What does this mean? I brought you into the world without desires or fears, free from superstition, treachery and the other curses. Go forth as you were when you entered!”

A man has caught the message of wisdom, if he can die as free from care as he was at birth; but as it is we are all a-flutter at the approach of the dreaded end. Our courage fails us, our cheeks blanch; our tears fall, though they are unavailing. But what is baser than to fret at the very threshold of peace?

The reason, however is, that we are stripped of all our goods, we have jettisoned our cargo of life and are in distress; for no part of it has been packed in the hold; it has all been heaved overboard and has drifted away. Men do not care how nobly they live, but only how long, although it is within the reach of every man to live nobly, but within no man’s power to live long. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The first question, “Shall I withdraw from the world?” has been answered, apparently by Lucilius himself. The second was, “How can I accomplish this?” Seneca pretends to answer it, although he feels that this should be done in personal conference rather than by writing.
2. See the preceding letter of Seneca.
3. Frag. 133 Usener.
4. Frag. 495 Usener.
5. i.e., the old man is like the infant in this, also—that he can look back upon nothing which he has finished, because he has always put off finishing things.



Japanese: *Michi*. In Japanese, this character can also be read *do* (long vowel), as found in *bushido*, *aikido* and *judo* (i.e. “The way of...”). It can be read in Chinese as *tao* or *dao*, as found in the *Tao Te Ching*.

English: Way or path.

Calligrapher: Noriko Lake

LETTER 23

*On the True Joy Which
Comes from Philosophy*



Do you suppose that I shall write you how kindly the winter season has dealt with us—a short season and a mild one—or what a nasty spring we are having—cold weather out of season—and all the other trivialities which people write when they are at a loss for topics of conversation? No; I shall communicate something which may help both you and myself. And what shall this “something” be, if not an exhortation to soundness of mind? Do you ask what is the foundation of a sound mind? It is, not to find joy in useless things. I said that it was the foundation; it is really the pinnacle.

We have reached the heights if we know what it is that we find joy in and if we have not placed our happiness in the control of externals. The man who is goaded ahead by hope of anything, though it be within reach, though it be easy of access, and though his ambitions have never played him false, is troubled and unsure of himself.

Above all, my dear Lucilius, make this your business: learn how to feel joy.

Do you think that I am now robbing you of many pleasures when I try to do away with the gifts of chance, when I counsel the avoidance of hope, the sweetest thing that gladdens our hearts? Quite the contrary; I do not wish you ever to be deprived of

gladness. I would have it born in your house; and it is born there, if only it be inside of you. Other objects of cheer do not fill a man's bosom; they merely smooth his brow and are inconstant—unless perhaps you believe that he who laughs has joy. The very soul must be happy and confident, lifted above every circumstance.

Real joy, believe me, is a stern matter. Can one, do you think, despise death with a care-free countenance, or with a “blithe and gay” expression, as our young dandies are accustomed to say? Or can one thus open his door to poverty, or hold the curb on his pleasures, or contemplate the endurance of pain? He who ponders these things^[1] in his heart is indeed full of joy; but it is not a cheerful joy. It is just this joy, however, of which I would have you become the owner; for it will never fail you when once you have found its source.

The yield of poor mines is on the surface; those are really rich whose veins lurk deep, and they will make more bountiful returns to him who delves unceasingly. So too those baubles which delight the common crowd afford but a thin pleasure, laid on as a coating, and even joy that is only plated lacks a real basis. But the joy of which I speak, that to which I am endeavouring to lead you, is something solid, disclosing itself the more fully as you penetrate into it.

Therefore I pray you, my dearest Lucilius, do the one thing that can render you really happy: cast aside and trample under foot all the things that glitter outwardly and are held out to you^[2] by another or as obtainable from another; look toward the true good, and rejoice only in that which comes from your own store. And what do I mean by “from your own store”? I mean from your very self, that which is the best part of you. The frail body, also, even though we can accomplish nothing without it, is to be regarded as necessary rather than as important; it involves us in vain pleasures, short-lived, and soon to be regretted, which, unless

they are reined in by extreme self-control, will be transformed into the opposite. This is what I mean: pleasure, unless it has been kept within bounds, tends to rush headlong into the abyss of sorrow.

But it is hard to keep within bounds in that which you believe to be good. The real good may be coveted with safety.

Do you ask me what this real good is, and whence it derives? I will tell you: it comes from a good conscience, from honourable purposes, from right actions, from contempt of the gifts of chance, from an even and calm way of living which treads but one path. For men who leap from one purpose to another, or do not even leap but are carried over by a sort of hazard—how can such wavering and unstable persons possess any good that is fixed and lasting?

There are only a few who control themselves and their affairs by a guiding purpose; the rest do not proceed; they are merely swept along, like objects afloat in a river. And of these objects, some are held back by sluggish waters and are transported gently; others are torn along by a more violent current; some, which are nearest the bank, are left there as the current slackens; and others are carried out to sea by the onrush of the stream. Therefore, we should decide what we wish, and abide by the decision.

Now is the time for me to pay my debt. I can give you a saying of your friend Epicurus^[3] and thus clear this letter of its obligation. “It is bothersome always to be beginning life.” Or another, which will perhaps express the meaning better: “They live ill who are always beginning to live.”

You are right in asking why; the saying certainly stands in need of a commentary. It is because the life of such persons is always incomplete. But a man cannot stand prepared for the approach of death if he has just begun to live. We must make it our aim already

to have lived long enough. No one deems that he has done so, if he is just on the point of planning his life.

You need not think that there are few of this kind; practically everyone is of such a stamp. Some men, indeed, only begin to live when it is time for them to leave off living. And if this seems surprising to you, I shall add that which will surprise you still more: Some men have left off living before they have begun. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Death, poverty, temptation, and suffering.
2. By the various sects which professed to teach how happiness is to be obtained.
3. Frag. 493 Usener.

LETTER 24

On Despising Death^[1]



You write me that you are anxious about the result of a lawsuit, with which an angry opponent is threatening you; and you expect me to advise you to picture to yourself a happier issue, and to rest in the allurements of hope. Why, indeed, is it necessary to summon trouble—which must be endured soon enough when it has once arrived, or to anticipate trouble and ruin the present through fear of the future? It is indeed foolish to be unhappy now because you may be unhappy at some future time.

But I shall conduct you to peace of mind by another route: if you would put off all worry, assume that what you fear may happen will certainly happen in any event; whatever the trouble may be, measure it in your own mind, and estimate the amount of your fear. You will thus understand that what you fear is either insignificant or short-lived.

And you need not spend a long time in gathering illustrations which will strengthen you; every epoch has produced them. Let your thoughts travel into any era of Roman or foreign history, and there will throng before you notable examples of high achievement or of high endeavour.

If you lose this case, can anything more severe happen to you than being sent into exile or led to prison? Is there a worse fate that any man may fear than being burned or being killed?

Name such penalties one by one, and mention the men who have scorned them; one does not need to hunt for them—it is simply a matter of selection.

Sentence of conviction was borne by Rutilius as if the injustice of the decision were the only thing which annoyed him. Exile was endured by Metellus with courage, by Rutilius even with gladness; for the former consented to come back only because his country called him; the latter refused to return when Sulla summoned him—and nobody in those days said “No” to Sulla! Socrates in prison discoursed, and declined to flee when certain persons gave him the opportunity; he remained there, in order to free mankind from the fear of two most grievous things, death and imprisonment.

Mucius put his hand into the fire. It is painful to be burned; but how much more painful to inflict such suffering upon oneself! Here was a man of no learning, not primed to face death and pain by any words of wisdom, and equipped only with the courage of a soldier, who punished himself for his fruitless daring; he stood and watched his own right hand falling away piecemeal on the enemy’s brazier,^[2] nor did he withdraw the dissolving limb, with its uncovered bones, until his foe removed the fire. He might have accomplished something more successful in that camp, but never anything more brave. See how much keener a brave man is to lay hold of danger than a cruel man is to inflict it: Porsenna was more ready to pardon Mucius for wishing to slay him than Mucius to pardon himself for failing to slay Porsenna!

“Oh,” say you, “those stories have been droned to death in all the schools; pretty soon, when you reach the topic ‘On Despising Death,’ you will be telling me about Cato.” But why should I not tell you about Cato, how he read Plato’s^[3] book on that last glorious night, with a sword laid at his pillow? He had provided these two requisites for his last moments—the first, that he might have the

will to die, and the second, that he might have the means. So he put his affairs in order—as well as one could put in order that which was ruined and near its end—and thought that he ought to see to it that no one should have the power to slay or the good fortune to save^[4] Cato.

Drawing the sword—which he had kept unstained from all bloodshed against the final day, he cried: “Fortune, you have accomplished nothing by resisting all my endeavours. I have fought, till now, for my country’s freedom, and not for my own, I did not strive so doggedly to be free, but only to live among the free. Now, since the affairs of mankind are beyond hope, let Cato be withdrawn to safety.”

So saying, he inflicted a mortal wound upon his body. After the physicians had bound it up, Cato had less blood and less strength, but no less courage; angered now not only at Caesar but also at himself, he rallied his unarmed hands against his wound, and expelled, rather than dismissed, that noble soul which had been so defiant of all worldly power.

I am not now heaping up these illustrations for the purpose of exercising my wit, but for the purpose of encouraging you to face that which is thought to be most terrible. And I shall encourage you all the more easily by showing that not only resolute men have despised that moment when the soul breathes its last, but that certain persons, who were craven in other respects, have equalled in this regard the courage of the bravest. Take, for example, Scipio, the father-in-law of Gnaeus Pompeius: he was driven back upon the African coast by a head-wind and saw his ship in the power of the enemy. He therefore pierced his body with a sword; and when they asked where the commander was, he replied: “All is well with the commander.”

These words brought him up to the level of his ancestors and suffered not the glory which fate gave to the Scipios in Africa^[5] to

lose its continuity. It was a great deed to conquer Carthage, but a greater deed to conquer death. “All is well with the commander!” Ought a general to die otherwise, especially one of Cato’s generals?

I shall not refer you to history, or collect examples of those men who throughout the ages have despised death; for they are very many. Consider these times of ours, whose enervation and over-refinement call forth our complaints; they nevertheless will include men of every rank, of every lot in life, and of every age, who have cut short their misfortunes by death.

Believe me, Lucilius; death is so little to be feared that through its good offices nothing is to be feared.

Therefore, when your enemy threatens, listen unconcernedly. Although your conscience makes you confident, yet, since many things have weight which are outside your case,^[6] both hope for that which is utterly just, and prepare yourself against that which is utterly unjust. Remember, however, before all else, to strip things of all that disturbs and confuses, and to see what each is at bottom; you will then comprehend that they contain nothing fearful except the actual fear.

That you see happening to boys happens also to ourselves, who are only slightly bigger boys: when those whom they love, with whom they daily associate, with whom they play, appear with masks on, the boys are frightened out of their wits. We should strip the mask, not only from men, but from things, and restore to each object its own aspect.

“Why dost thou^[7] hold up before my eyes swords, fires, and a throng of executioners raging about thee? Take away all that vain show, behind which thou lurkest and scarest fools! Ah! thou art naught but Death, whom only yesterday a manservant of mine and a maid-servant did despise! Why dost thou again unfold and spread before me, with all that great display, the whip and the rack? Why are those engines of torture made ready, one for

each several member of the body, and all the other innumerable machines for tearing a man apart piecemeal? Away with all such stuff, which makes us numb with terror! And thou, silence the groans the cries, and the bitter shrieks ground out of the victim as he is torn on the rack! Forsooth thou art naught but Pain, scorned by yonder gout-ridden wretch, endured by yonder dyspeptic in the midst of his dainties, borne bravely by the girl in travail. Slight thou art, if I can bear thee; short thou art if I cannot bear thee!”

Ponder these words which you have often heard and often uttered. Moreover, prove by the result whether that which you have heard and uttered is true. For there is a very disgraceful charge often brought against our school—that we deal with the words, and not with the deeds, of philosophy.

What, have you only at this moment learned that death is hanging over your head, at this moment exile, at this moment grief? You were born to these perils. Let us think of everything that can happen as something which will happen.

I know that you have really done what I advise you to do; I now warn you not to drown your soul in these petty anxieties of yours; if you do, the soul will be dulled and will have too little vigour left when the time comes for it to arise. Remove the mind from this case of yours to the case of men in general. Say to yourself that our petty bodies are mortal and frail; pain can reach them from other sources than from wrong or the might of the stronger. Our pleasures themselves become torments; banquets bring indigestion, carousals paralysis of the muscles and palsy, sensual habits affect the feet, the hands, and every joint of the body.

I may become a poor man; I shall then be one among many. I may be exiled; I shall then regard myself as born in the place to which I shall be sent. They may put me in chains. What then? Am I free from bonds now? Behold this clogging burden of a body, to which nature has fettered me! “I shall die,” you say; you mean to

say “I shall cease to run the risk of sickness; I shall cease to run the risk of imprisonment; I shall cease to run the risk of death.”

I am not so foolish as to go through at this juncture the arguments which Epicurus harps upon, and say that the terrors of the world below are idle—that Ixion does not whirl round on his wheel, that Sisyphus does not shoulder his stone uphill, that a man’s entrails cannot be restored and devoured every day;^[8] no one is so childish as to fear Cerberus, or the shadows, or the spectral garb of those who are held together by naught but their unfleshed bones. Death either annihilates us or strips us bare. If we are then released, there remains the better part, after the burden has been withdrawn; if we are annihilated, nothing remains; good and bad are alike removed.

Allow me at this point to quote a verse of yours, first suggesting that, when you wrote it, you meant it for yourself no less than for others. It is ignoble to say one thing and mean another; and how much more ignoble to write one thing and mean another! I remember one day you were handling the well-known commonplace—that we do not suddenly fall on death, but advance towards it by slight degrees; we die every day.

For every day a little of our life is taken from us; even when we are growing, our life is on the wane. We lose our childhood, then our boyhood, and then our youth. Counting even yesterday, all past time is lost time; the very day which we are now spending is shared between ourselves and death. It is not the last drop that empties the water-clock, but all that which previously has flowed out; similarly, the final hour when we cease to exist does not of itself bring death; it merely of itself completes the death-process. We reach death at that moment, but we have been a long time on the way.

In describing this situation, you said in your customary, style (for you are always impressive, but never more pungent than when you are putting the truth in appropriate words):

*Not single is the death which comes; the death
Which takes us off is but the last of all.*

I prefer that you should read your own words rather than my letter; for then it will be clear to you that this death, of which we are afraid, is the last but not the only death.

I see what you are looking for; you are asking what I have packed into my letter, what inspiriting saying from some master-mind, what useful precept. So I shall send you something dealing with this very subject which has been under discussion. Epicurus^[9] upbraids those who crave, as much as those who shrink from, death: “It is absurd,” he says, “to run towards death because you are tired of life, when it is your manner of life that has made you run towards death.”

And in another passage:^[10] “What is so absurd as to seek death, when it is through fear of death that you have robbed your life of peace?” And you may add a third statement, of the same stamp:^[11] “Men are so thoughtless, nay, so mad, that some, through fear of death, force themselves to die.”

Whichever of these ideas you ponder, you will strengthen your mind for the endurance alike of death and of life. For we need to be warned and strengthened in both directions—not to love or to hate life overmuch; even when reason advises us to make an end of it, the impulse is not to be adopted without reflection or at headlong speed.

The grave and wise man should not beat a hasty retreat from life; he should make a becoming exit. And above all, he should avoid the weakness which has taken possession of so many—the lust for death. For just as there is an unreflecting tendency of

the mind towards other things, so, my dear Lucilius, there is an unreflecting tendency towards death; this often seizes upon the noblest and most spirited men, as well as upon the craven and the abject. The former despise life; the latter find it irksome.

Others also are moved by a satiety of doing and seeing the same things, and not so much by a hatred of life as because they are cloyed with it. We slip into this condition, while philosophy itself pushes us on, and we say; “How long must I endure the same things? Shall I continue to wake and sleep, be hungry and be cloyed, shiver and perspire? There is an end to nothing; all things are connected in a sort of circle; they flee and they are pursued. Night is close at the heels of day, day at the heels of night; summer ends in autumn, winter rushes after autumn, and winter softens into spring; all nature in this way passes, only to return. I do nothing new; I see nothing new; sooner or later one sickens of this, also.” There are many who think that living is not painful, but superfluous. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Seneca's theme is suggested by the fear which possesses Lucilius as to the issue of a lawsuit. This fear is taken as typical of all fears, and Seneca devotes most of his letter to the greatest fear of all—fear of death.
2. The *foculus* in this version of the story was evidently a movable fire, a brazier.
3. The *Phaedo* on the immortality of the soul.
4. i.e., to save and bring back to Rome as prisoner.
5. Scipio Africanus defeated Hannibal at Zama in 202 B.C. Scipio Aemilianus, also surnamed Africanus, was by adoption the grandson of Hannibal's conqueror. He captured Carthage in the Third Punic War, 146 B.C. The Scipio mentioned by Seneca died in 46 B.C.
6. He refers to the lawsuit, as again in § 16.
7. An apostrophe to Death and Pain.
8. As mythology describes the treatment of Tityus or of Prometheus.
9. Frag. 496 Usener.
10. Frag. 498 Usener.
11. Frag. 497 Usener.

On Reformation

With regard to these two friends of ours, we must proceed along different lines; the faults of the one are to be corrected, the other's are to be crushed out. I shall take every liberty; for I do not love this one^[1] if I am unwilling to hurt his feelings. "What," you say, "do you expect to keep a forty-year-old ward under your tutelage? Consider his age, how hardened it now is, and past handling!

Such a man cannot be re-shaped; only young minds are moulded." I do not know whether I shall make progress; but I should prefer to lack success rather than to lack faith. You need not despair of curing sick men even when the disease is chronic, if only you hold out against excess and force them to do and submit to many things against their will. As regards our other friend I am not sufficiently confident, either, except for the fact that he still has sense of shame enough to blush for his sins. This modesty should be fostered; so long as it endures in his soul, there is some room for hope. But as for this veteran of yours, I think we should deal more carefully with him, that he may not become desperate about himself.

There is no better time to approach him than now, when he has an interval of rest and seems like one who has corrected his faults. Others have been cheated by this interval of virtue on his part, but he does not cheat me. I feel sure that these faults will return,

as it were, with compound interest, for just now, I am certain, they are in abeyance but not absent. I shall devote some time to the matter, and try to see whether or not something can be done.

But do you yourself, as indeed you are doing, show me that you are stout-hearted; lighten your baggage for the march. None of our possessions is essential. Let us return to the law of nature; for then riches are laid up for us. The things which we actually need are free for all, or else cheap; nature craves only bread and water. No one is poor according to this standard; when a man has limited his desires within these bounds, he can challenge the happiness of Jove himself, as Epicurus says. I must insert in this letter one or two more of his sayings:^[2]

“Do everything as if Epicurus were watching you.” There is no real doubt that it is good for one to have appointed a guardian over oneself, and to have someone whom you may look up to, someone whom you may regard as a witness of your thoughts. It is, indeed, nobler by far to live as you would live under the eyes of some good man, always at your side; but nevertheless I am content if you only act, in whatever you do, as you would act if anyone at all were looking on; because solitude prompts us to all kinds of evil.

And when you have progressed so far that you have also respect for yourself, you may send away your attendant; but until then, set as a guard over yourself the authority of some man, whether your choice be the great Cato or Scipio, or Laelius—or any man in whose presence even abandoned wretches would check their bad impulses. Meantime, you are engaged in making of yourself the sort of person in whose company you would not dare to sin. When this aim has been accomplished and you begin to hold yourself in some esteem, I shall gradually allow you to do what Epicurus, in another passage, suggests:^[3] “The time when you

should most of all withdraw into yourself is when you are forced to be in a crowd.”

You ought to make yourself of a different stamp from the multitude. Therefore, while it is not yet safe to withdraw into solitude,^[4] seek out certain individuals; for everyone is better off in the company of somebody or other—no matter who—than in his own company alone. “The time when you should most of all withdraw into yourself is when you are forced to be in a crowd.” Yes, provided that you are a good, tranquil, and self-restrained man; otherwise, you had better withdraw into a crowd in order to get away from your self. Alone, you are too close to a rascal. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The second friend, whose faults are to be crushed out. He proves to be some forty years old; the other is a youth.
2. Frag. 211 Usener.
3. Frag. 209 Usener.
4. Because “solitude prompts to evil,” § 5.

LETTER 26

On Old Age and Death



I was just lately telling you that I was within sight of old age.^[1] I am now afraid that I have left old age behind me. For some other word would now apply to my years, or at any rate to my body; since old age means a time of life that is weary rather than crushed. You may rate me in the worn-out class—of those who are nearing the end.

Nevertheless, I offer thanks to myself, with you as witness; for I feel that age has done no damage to my mind, though I feel its effects on my constitution. Only my vices, and the outward aids to these vices, have reached senility; my mind is strong and rejoices that it has but slight connexion with the body. It has laid aside the greater part of its load. It is alert; it takes issue with me on the subject of old age; it declares that old age is its time of bloom.

Let me take it at its word, and let it make the most of the advantages it possesses. The mind bids me do some thinking and consider how much of this peace of spirit and moderation of character I owe to wisdom and how much to my time of life; it bids me distinguish carefully what I cannot do and what I do not want to do. . . .^[2] For why should one complain or regard it as a disadvantage, if powers which ought to come to an end have failed?

“But,” you say, “it is the greatest possible disadvantage to be worn out and to die off, or rather, if I may speak literally, to melt away! For we are not suddenly smitten and laid low; we are worn away, and every day reduces our powers to a certain extent.”

But is there any better end to it all than to glide off to one’s proper haven, when nature slips the cable? Not that there is anything painful in a shock and a sudden departure from existence; it is merely because this other way of departure is easy—a gradual withdrawal. I, at any rate, as if the test were at hand and the day were come which is to pronounce its decision concerning all the years of my life, watch over myself and commune thus with myself:

“The showing which we have made up to the present time, in word or deed, counts for nothing. All this is but a trifling and deceitful pledge of our spirit, and is wrapped in much charlatanism. I shall leave it to Death to determine what progress I have made. Therefore with no faint heart I am making ready for the day when, putting aside all stage artifice and actor’s rouge, I am to pass judgment upon myself—whether I am merely declaiming brave sentiments, or whether I really feel them; whether all the bold threats I have uttered against fortune are a pretence and a farce.

Put aside the opinion of the world; it is always wavering and always takes both sides. Put aside the studies which you have pursued throughout your life; Death will deliver the final judgment in your case. This is what I mean: your debates and learned talks, your maxims gathered from the teachings of the wise, your cultured conversation—all these afford no proof of the real strength of your soul. Even the most timid man can deliver a bold speech. What you have done in the past will be manifest only at the time when you draw your last breath. I accept the terms; I do not shrink from the decision.”

This is what I say to myself, but I would have you think that I have said it to you also. You are younger; but what does that matter? There is no fixed count of our years. You do not know where death awaits you; so be ready for it everywhere.

I was just intending to stop, and my hand was making ready for the closing sentence; but the rites are still to be performed and the travelling money for the letter disbursed. And just assume that I am not telling where I intend to borrow the necessary sum; you know upon whose coffers I depend. Wait for me but a moment, and I will pay you from my own account;^[3] meanwhile, Epicurus will oblige me with these words:^[4] “Think on death,” or rather, if you prefer the phrase, on “migration to heaven.”

The meaning is clear—that it is a wonderful thing to learn thoroughly how to die. You may deem it superfluous to learn a text that can be used only once; but that is just the reason why we ought to think on a thing. When we can never prove whether we really know a thing, we must always be learning it.

“Think on death.” In saying this, he bids us think on freedom. He who has learned to die has unlearned slavery; he is above any external power, or, at any rate, he is beyond it. What terrors have prisons and bonds and bars for him? His way out is clear. There is only one chain which binds us to life, and that is the love of life. The chain may not be cast off, but it may be rubbed away, so that, when necessity shall demand, nothing may retard or hinder us from being ready to do at once that which at some time we are bound to do. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. See the twelfth letter. Seneca was by this time at least sixty-five years old, and probably older.
2. This passage is hopelessly corrupt. The course of the argument requires something like this: For it is just as much to my advantage not to be able to do what I do not want to do, as it is to be able to do whatever gives me pleasure.

3. i.e., the money will be brought from home—the saying will be one of Seneca's own.
4. Epicurus, Frag. 205 Usener.

LETTER 27

On the Good Which Abides



“What,” say you, “are you giving me advice? Indeed, have you already advised yourself, already corrected your own faults? Is this the reason why you have leisure to reform other men?” No, I am not so shameless as to undertake to cure my fellow-men when I am ill myself. I am, however, discussing with you troubles which concern us both, and sharing the remedy with you, just as if we were lying ill in the same hospital. Listen to me, therefore, as you would if I were talking to myself. I am admitting you to my inmost thoughts, and am having it out with myself, merely making use of you as my pretext.

I keep crying out to myself: “Count your years, and you will be ashamed to desire and pursue the same things you desired in your boyhood days. Of this one thing make sure against your dying day—let your faults die before you die. Away with those disordered pleasures, which must be dearly paid for; it is not only those which are to come that harm me, but also those which have come and gone. Just as crimes, even if they have not been detected when they were committed, do not allow anxiety to end with them; so with guilty pleasures, regret remains even after the pleasures are over. They are not substantial, they are not trustworthy; even if they do not harm us, they are fleeting.

Cast about rather for some good which will abide. But there can be no such good except as the soul discovers it for itself within itself. Virtue alone affords everlasting and peace-giving joy; even if some obstacle arise, it is but like an intervening cloud, which floats beneath the sun but never prevails against it.”

When will it be your lot to attain this joy? Thus far, you have indeed not been sluggish, but you must quicken your pace. Much toil remains; to confront it, you must yourself lavish all your waking hours, and all your efforts, if you wish the result to be accomplished. This matter cannot be delegated to someone else.

The other kind of literary activity^[1] admits of outside assistance. Within our own time there was a certain rich man named Calvisius Sabinus; he had the bank-account and the brains of a freedman.^[2] I never saw a man whose good fortune was a greater offence against propriety. His memory was so faulty that he would sometimes forget the name of Ulysses, or Achilles, or Priam—names which we know as well as we know those of our own attendants. No major-domo in his dotage, who cannot give men their right names, but is compelled to invent names for them—no such man, I say, calls off the names^[3] of his master’s tribesmen so atrociously as Sabinus used to call off the Trojan and Achaean heroes. But none the less did he desire to appear learned.

So he devised this short cut to learning: he paid fabulous prices for slaves—one to know Homer by heart and another to know Hesiod; he also delegated a special slave to each of the nine lyric poets. You need not wonder that he paid high prices for these slaves; if he did not find them ready to hand he had them made to order. After collecting this retinue, he began to make life miserable for his guests; he would keep these fellows at the foot of his couch, and ask them from time to time for verses which he might repeat, and then frequently break down in the middle of a word.

Satellius Quadratus, a feeder, and consequently a fawner, upon addle-pated millionaires, and also (for this quality goes with the other two) a flouter of them, suggested to Sabinus that he should have philologists to gather up the bits.^[4] Sabinus remarked that each slave cost him one hundred thousand sesterces; Satellius replied: “You might have bought as many book-cases for a smaller sum.” But Sabinus held to the opinion that what any member of his household knew, he himself knew also.

This same Satellius began to advise Sabinus to take wrestling lessons—sickly, pale, and thin as he was, Sabinus answered: “How can I? I can scarcely stay alive now.” “Don’t say that, I implore you,” replied the other, “consider how many perfectly healthy slaves you have!” No man is able to borrow or buy a sound mind; in fact, as it seems to me, even though sound minds were for sale, they would not find buyers. Depraved minds, however, are bought and sold every day.

But let me pay off my debt and say farewell: “Real wealth is poverty adjusted to the law of Nature.”^[5] Epicurus has this saying in various ways and contexts; but it can never be repeated too often, since it can never be learned too well. For some persons the remedy should be merely prescribed; in the case of others, it should be forced down their throats. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., ordinary studies, or literature, as contrasted with philosophy.
2. Compare with the following the vulgarities of Trimalchio in the Satire of Petronius, and the bad taste of Nasidienus in Horace (*Sat.* ii. 8).
3. At the *salutatio*, or morning call. The position of *nomenclator*, “caller-of-names,” was originally devoted more strictly to political purposes. Here it is primarily social.
4. i.e., all the ideas that dropped out of the head of Sabinus. The slave who picked up the crumbs was called *analecta*.
5. Epicurus, Frag. 477 Usener.

On Travel as a Cure for Discontent

Do you suppose that you alone have had this experience? Are you surprised, as if it were a novelty, that after such long travel and so many changes of scene you have not been able to shake off the gloom and heaviness of your mind? You need a change of soul rather than a change of climate.^[1] Though you may cross vast spaces of sea, and though, as our Vergil^[2] remarks,

Lands and cities are left astern,

your faults will follow you whithersoever you travel.

Socrates made the same remark to one who complained; he said: “Why do you wonder that globe-trotting does not help you, seeing that you always take yourself with you? The reason which set you wandering is ever at your heels.” What pleasure is there in seeing new lands? Or in surveying cities and spots of interest? All your bustle is useless. Do you ask why such flight does not help you? It is because you flee along with yourself. You must lay aside the burdens of the mind; until you do this, no place will satisfy you.

Reflect that your present behaviour is like that of the prophetess whom Vergil describes:^[3] she is excited and goaded into fury, and contains within herself much inspiration that is not her own:

*The priestess raves, if haply she may shake
The great god from her heart.*

You wander hither and yon, to rid yourself of the burden that rests upon you, though it becomes more troublesome by reason of your very restlessness, just as in a ship the cargo when stationary makes no trouble, but when it shifts to this side or that, it causes the vessel to heel more quickly in the direction where it has settled. Anything you do tells against you, and you hurt yourself by your very unrest; for you are shaking up a sick man.

That trouble once removed, all change of scene will become pleasant; though you may be driven to the uttermost ends of the earth, in whatever corner of a savage land you may find yourself, that place, however forbidding, will be to you a hospitable abode. The person you are matters more than the place to which you go; for that reason we should not make the mind a bondsman to any one place. Live in this belief: “I am not born for any one corner of the universe; this whole world is my country.”

If you saw this fact clearly, you would not be surprised at getting no benefit from the fresh scenes to which you roam each time through weariness of the old scenes. For the first would have pleased you in each case, had you believed it wholly yours.^[4] As it is, however, you are not journeying; you are drifting and being driven, only exchanging one place for another, although that which you seek—to live well—is found everywhere.^[5]

Can there be any spot so full of confusion as the Forum? Yet you can live quietly even there, if necessary. Of course, if one were allowed to make one’s own arrangements, I should flee far from the very sight and neighbourhood of the Forum. For just as pestilential places assail even the strongest constitution, so there are some places which are also unwholesome for a healthy mind which is not yet quite sound, though recovering from its ailment.

I disagree with those who strike out into the midst of the billows and, welcoming a stormy existence, wrestle daily in hardship of soul with life's problems. The wise man will endure all that, but will not choose it; he will prefer to be at peace rather than at war. It helps little to have cast out your own faults if you must quarrel with those of others.

Says one: "There were thirty tyrants surrounding Socrates, and yet they could not break his spirit"; but what does it matter how many masters a man has? "Slavery" has no plural; and he who has scorned it is free—no matter amid how large a mob of overlords he stands.

It is time to stop, but not before I have paid duty. "The knowledge of sin is the beginning of salvation." This saying of Epicurus^[6] seems to me to be a noble one. For he who does not know that he has sinned does not desire correction; you must discover yourself in the wrong before you can reform yourself.

Some boast of their faults. Do you think that the man has any thought of mending his ways who counts over his vices as if they were virtues? Therefore, as far as possible, prove yourself guilty, hunt up charges against yourself; play the part, first of accuser, then of judge, last of intercessor. At times be harsh with yourself.
[7] Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Horace, *Ep.* i. 11, 27 *caelum non animum mutant qui trans mare currunt*.
2. *Aeneid*, iii. 72.
3. *Aeneid*, vi. 78 f.
4. i.e., had you been able to say *patria mea totus mundus est*.
5. Cf. Horace, *Ep.* i. 11, 28—*navibus atque Quadrigis petimus bene vivere; quod petis, hic est*.
6. *Frag.* 522 Usener.
7. i.e., refuse your own intercession.

LETTER 29

On the Critical Condition of Marcellinus



You have been inquiring about our friend Marcellinus and you desire to know how he is getting along. He seldom comes to see me, for no other reason than that he is afraid to hear the truth, and at present he is removed from my danger of hearing it; for one must not talk to a man unless he is willing to listen. That is why it is often doubted whether Diogenes and the other Cynics, who employed an indiscriminating freedom of speech and offered advice to any who came in their way, ought to have pursued such a plan.

For what if one should chide the deaf or those who are speechless from birth or by illness? But you answer: "Why should I spare words? They cost nothing. I cannot know whether I shall help the man to whom I give advice; but I know well that I shall help someone if I advise many. I must scatter this advice by the handful.^[1] It is impossible that one who tries often should not sometime succeed."

This very thing, my dear Lucilius, is, I believe, exactly what a great-souled man ought not to do; his influence is weakened; it has too little effect upon those whom it might have set right if it had not grown so stale. The archer ought not to hit the mark only sometimes; he ought to miss it only sometimes. That which takes effect by chance is not an art. Now wisdom is an art; it

should have a definite aim, choosing only those who will make progress, but withdrawing from those whom it has come to regard as hopeless—yet not abandoning them too soon, and just when the case is becoming hopeless trying drastic remedies.

As to our friend Marcellinus, I have not yet lost hope. He can still be saved, but the helping hand must be offered soon. There is indeed danger that he may pull his helper down; for there is in him a native character of great vigour, though it is already inclining to wickedness. Nevertheless I shall brave this danger and be bold enough to show him his faults.

He will act in his usual way; he will have recourse to his wit—the wit that can call forth smiles even from mourners. He will turn the jest, first against himself, and then against me. He will forestall every word which I am about to utter. He will quiz our philosophic systems; he will accuse philosophers of accepting doles, keeping mistresses, and indulging their appetites. He will point out to me one philosopher who has been caught in adultery, another who haunts the cafes, and another who appears at court.

He will bring to my notice Aristo, the philosopher of Marcus Lepidus, who used to hold discussions in his carriage; for that was the time which he had taken for editing his researches, so that Scaurus said of him when asked to what school he belonged: “At any rate, he isn’t one of the Walking Philosophers.” Julius Graecinus, too, a man of distinction, when asked for an opinion on the same point, replied: “I cannot tell you; for I don’t know what he does when dismounted,” as if the query referred to a chariot-gladiaior.^[2]

It is mountebanks of that sort, for whom it would be more creditable to have left philosophy alone than to traffic in her, whom Marcellinus will throw in my teeth. But I have decided to put up with taunts; he may stir my laughter, but I perchance shall stir him to tears; or, if he persist in his jokes, I shall rejoice, so to

speak, in the midst of sorrow, because he is blessed with such a merry sort of lunacy. But that kind of merriment does not last long. Observe such men, and you will note that within a short space of time they laugh to excess and rage to excess.

It is my plan to approach him and to show him how much greater was his worth when many thought it less. Even though I shall not root out his faults, I shall put a check upon them; they will not cease, but they will stop for a time; and perhaps they will even cease, if they get the habit of stopping. This is a thing not to be despised, since to men who are seriously stricken the blessing of relief is a substitute for health.

So while I prepare myself to deal with Marcellinus, do you in the meantime, who are able, and who understand whence and whither you have made your way, and who for that reason have an inkling of the distance yet to go, regulate your character, rouse your courage, and stand firm in the face of things which have terrified you. Do not count the number of those who inspire fear in you. Would you not regard as foolish one who was afraid of a multitude in a place where only one at a time could pass? Just so, there are not many who have access to you to slay you, though there are many who threaten you with death. Nature has so ordered it that, as only one has given you life, so only one will take it away.

If you had any shame, you would have let me off from paying the last instalment. Still, I shall not be niggardly either, but shall discharge my debts to the last penny and force upon you what I still owe: “I have never wished to cater to the crowd; for what I know, they do not approve, and what they approve, I do not know.”^[3]

“Who said this?” you ask, as if you were ignorant whom I am pressing into service; it is Epicurus. But this same watchword rings in your ears from every sect—Peripatetic, Academic, Stoic,

Cynic. For who that is pleased by virtue can please the crowd? It takes trickery to win popular approval; and you must needs make yourself like unto them; they will withhold their approval if they do not recognise you as one of themselves. However, what you think of yourself is much more to the point than what others think of you. The favour of ignoble men can be won only by ignoble means.

What benefit, then, will that vaunted philosophy confer, whose praises we sing, and which, we are told, is to be preferred to every art and every possession? Assuredly, it will make you prefer to please yourself rather than the populace, it will make you weigh, and not merely count, men's judgments, it will make you live without fear of gods or men, it will make you either overcome evils or end them. Otherwise, if I see you applauded by popular acclamation, if your entrance upon the scene is greeted by a roar of cheering and clapping, marks of distinction meet only for actors—if the whole state, even the women and children, sing your praises, how can I help pitying you? For I know what pathway leads to such popularity. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The usual expression is *plena manu spargere*, "with full hand," cf. Ep. cxx. 10. In the famous saying of Corinna to Pindar: "Sow with the hand and not with the sack," the idea is "sparingly," and not, as here, "bountifully."
2. The *essedarius* fought from a car. When his adversary forced him out of the car, he was compelled to continue the fight on foot, like an unhorsed knight.
3. Epicurus, Frag. 187 Usener.



LETTER 30

On Conquering the Conqueror



I have beheld Aufidius Bassus, that noble man, shattered in health and wrestling with his years. But they already bear upon him so heavily that he cannot be raised up; old age has settled down upon him with great—yes, with its entire, weight. You know that his body was always delicate and sapless. For a long time he has kept it in hand, or, to speak more correctly, has kept it together; of a sudden it has collapsed.

Just as in a ship that springs a leak, you can always stop the first or the second fissure, but when many holes begin to open and let in water, the gaping hull cannot be saved; similarly, in an old man's body, there is a certain limit up to which you can sustain and prop its weakness. But when it comes to resemble a decrepit building, when every joint begins to spread and while one is being repaired another falls apart—then it is time for a man to look about him and consider how he may get out.^[1]

But the mind of our friend Bassus is active. Philosophy bestows this boon upon us; it makes us joyful in the very sight of death, strong and brave no matter in what state the body may be, cheerful and never failing though the body fail us. A great pilot can sail even when his canvas is rent; if his ship be dismantled, he can yet put

in trim what remains of her hull and hold her to her course. This is what our friend Bassus is doing; and he contemplates his own end with the courage and countenance which you would regard as undue indifference in a man who so contemplated another's.

This is a great accomplishment, Lucilius, and one which needs long practice to learn—to depart calmly when the inevitable hour arrives. Other kinds of death contain an ingredient of hope: a disease comes to an end; a fire is quenched; falling houses have set down in safety those whom they seemed certain to crush; the sea has cast ashore unharmed those whom it had engulfed, by the same force through which it drew them down; the soldier has drawn back his sword from the very neck of his doomed foe. But those whom old age is leading away to death have nothing to hope for; old age alone grants no reprieve. No ending, to be sure, is more painless; but there is none more lingering.

Our friend Bassus seemed to me to be attending his own funeral, and laying out his own body for burial, and living almost as if he had survived his own death, and bearing with wise resignation his grief at his own departure. For he talks freely about death, trying hard to persuade us that if this process contains any element of discomfort or of fear, it is the fault of the dying person, and not of death itself; also, that there is no more inconvenience at the actual moment than there is after it is over.

“And it is just as insane,” he adds, “for a man to fear what will not happen to him, as to fear what he will not feel if it does happen.” Or does anyone imagine it to be possible that the agency by which feeling is removed can be itself felt? “Therefore,” says Bassus, “death stands so far beyond all evil that it is beyond all fear of evils.”

I know that all this has often been said and should be often repeated; but neither when I read them were such precepts so effective with me, nor when I heard them from the lips of those who were at a safe distance from the fear of the things which they

declared were not to be feared. But this old man had the greatest weight with me when he discussed death and death was near.

For I must tell you what I myself think: I hold that one is braver at the very moment of death than when one is approaching death. For death, when it stands near us, gives even to inexperienced men the courage not to seek to avoid the inevitable. So the gladiator, who throughout the fight has been no matter how faint-hearted, offers his throat to his opponent and directs the wavering blade to the vital spot.^[2] But an end that is near at hand, and is bound to come, calls for tenacious courage of soul; this is a rarer thing, and none but the wise man can manifest it.

Accordingly, I listened to Bassus with the deepest pleasure; he was casting his vote concerning death and pointing out what sort of a thing it is when it is observed, so to speak, nearer at hand. I suppose that a man would have your confidence in a larger degree, and would have more weight with you, if he had come back to life and should declare from experience that there is no evil in death; and so, regarding the approach of death, those will tell you best what disquiet it brings who have stood in its path, who have seen it coming and have welcomed it.

Bassus may be included among these men; and he had no wish to deceive us. He says that it is as foolish to fear death as to fear old age; for death follows old age precisely as old age follows youth. He who does not wish to die cannot have wished to live. For life is granted to us with the reservation that we shall die; to this end our path leads. Therefore, how foolish it is to fear it, since men simply await that which is sure, but fear only that which is uncertain!

Death has its fixed rule—equitable and unavoidable. Who can complain when he is governed by terms which include everyone? The chief part of equity, however, is equality.

But it is superfluous at the present time to plead Nature's cause; for she wishes our laws to be identical with her own; she but

resolves that which she has compounded, and compounds again that which she has resolved.

Moreover, if it falls to the lot of any man to be set gently adrift by old age—not suddenly torn from life, but withdrawn bit by bit, oh, verily he should thank the gods, one and all, because, after he has had his fill, he is removed to a rest which is ordained for mankind, a rest that is welcome to the weary. You may observe certain men who crave death even more earnestly than others are wont to beg for life. And I do not know which men give us greater courage—those who call for death, or those who meet it cheerfully and tranquilly—for the first attitude is sometimes inspired by madness and sudden anger, the second is the calm which results from fixed judgment. Before now men have gone to meet death in a fit of rage; but when death comes to meet him, no one welcomes it cheerfully, except the man who has long since composed himself for death.

I admit, therefore, that I have visited this dear friend of mine more frequently on many pretexts, but with the purpose of learning whether I should find him always the same, and whether his mental strength was perhaps waning in company with his bodily powers. But it was on the increase, just as the joy of the charioteer is wont to show itself more clearly when he is on the seventh round^[3] of the course, and nears the prize.

Indeed, he often said, in accord with the counsels of Epicurus:^[4] “I hope, first of all, that there is no pain at the moment when a man breathes his last; but if there is, one will find an element of comfort in its very shortness. For no great pain lasts long. And at all events, a man will find relief at the very time when soul and body are being torn asunder, even though the process be accompanied by excruciating pain, in the thought that after this pain is over he can feel no more pain. I am sure, however, that an old man’s soul is on his very lips, and that only a little

force is necessary to disengage it from the body. A fire which has seized upon a substance that sustains it needs water to quench it, or, sometimes, the destruction of the building itself; but the fire which lacks sustaining fuel dies away of its own accord.”

I am glad to hear such words, my dear Lucilius, not as new to me, but as leading me into the presence of an actual fact. And what then? Have I not seen many men break the thread of life? I have indeed seen such men; but those have more weight with me who approach death without any loathing for life, letting death in, so to speak, and not pulling it towards them.

Bassus kept saying: “It is due to our own fault that we feel this torture, because we shrink from dying only when we believe that our end is near at hand.” But who is not near death? It is ready for us in all places and at all times. “Let us consider,” he went on to say, “when some agency of death seems imminent, how much nearer are other varieties of dying which are not feared by us.”

A man is threatened with death by an enemy, but this form of death is anticipated by an attack of indigestion. And if we are willing to examine critically the various causes of our fear, we shall find that some exist, and others only seem to be. We do not fear death; we fear the thought of death. For death itself is always the same distance from us; wherefore, if it is to be feared at all, it is to be feared always. For what season of our life is exempt from death?

But what I really ought to fear is that you will hate this long letter worse than death itself; so I shall stop. Do you, however, always think on death in order that you may never fear it. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., *exeat e vita*, “depart from life.”
2. The defeated gladiator is supposed to be on his back, his opponent standing over him and about to deliver the final blow. As the blade wavers at the throat, searching for the jugular vein, the victim directs the point.
3. i.e., when on the home stretch.
4. Frag. 503 Usener.

LETTER 31

On Siren Songs



Now I recognize my Lucilius! He is beginning to reveal the character of which he gave promise. Follow up the impulse which prompted you to make for all that is best, treading under your feet that which is approved by the crowd. I would not have you greater or better than you planned; for in your case the mere foundations have covered a large extent of ground; only finish all that you have laid out, and take in hand the plans which you have had in mind.

In short, you will be a wise man, if you stop up your ears; nor is it enough to close them with wax; you need a denser stopple than that which they say Ulysses used for his comrades. The song which he feared was alluring, but came not from every side; the song, however, which you have to fear, echoes round you not from a single headland, but from every quarter of the world. Sail, therefore, not past one region which you mistrust because of its treacherous delights, but past every city. Be deaf to those who love you most of all; they pray for bad things with good intentions. And, if you would be happy, entreat the gods that none of their fond desires for you may be brought to pass.

What they wish to have heaped upon you are not really good things; there is only one good, the cause and the support of a happy life—trust in oneself. But this cannot be attained, unless one has learned to despise toil and to reckon it among the things

which are neither good nor bad. For it is not possible that a single thing should be bad at one time and good at another, at times light and to be endured, and at times a cause of dread.

Work is not a good.^[1] Then what is a good? I say, the scorning of work. That is why I should rebuke men who toil to no purpose. But when, on the other hand, a man is struggling towards honourable things, in proportion as he applies himself more and more, and allows himself less and less to be beaten or to halt,^[2] I shall recommend his conduct and shout my encouragement, saying: "By so much you are better! Rise, draw a fresh breath, and surmount that hill, if possible, at a single spurt!"

Work is the sustenance of noble minds. There is, then, no reason why, in accordance with that old vow of your parents, you should pick and choose what fortune you wish should fall to your lot, or what you should pray for; besides, it is base for a man who has already travelled the whole round of highest honours to be still importuning the gods. What need is there of vows? Make yourself happy through your own efforts; you can do this, if once you comprehend that whatever is blended with virtue is good, and that whatever is joined to vice is bad. Just as nothing gleams if it has no light blended with it, and nothing is black unless it contains darkness or draws to itself something of dimness, and as nothing is hot without the aid of fire, and nothing cold without air; so it is the association of virtue and vice that makes things honourable or base.

What then is good? The knowledge of things. What is evil? The lack of knowledge of things. Your wise man, who is also a craftsman, will reject or choose in each case as it suits the occasion; but he does not fear that which he rejects, nor does he admire that which he chooses, if only he has a stout and unconquerable soul. I forbid you to be cast down or depressed. It is not enough if you do not shrink from work; ask for it.

“But,” you say, “is not trifling and superfluous work, and work that has been inspired by ignoble causes, a bad sort of work?” No; no more than that which is expended upon noble endeavours, since the very quality that endures toil and rouses itself to hard and uphill effort, is of the spirit, which says: “Why do you grow slack? It is not the part of a man to fear sweat.”

And besides this, in order that virtue may be perfect, there should be an even temperament and a scheme of life that is consistent with itself throughout; and this result cannot be attained without knowledge of things, and without the art^[3] which enables us to understand things human and things divine. That is the greatest good. If you seize this good, you begin to be the associate of the gods, and not their suppliant.

“But how,” you ask, “does one attain that goal?” You do not need to cross the Pennine or Graian^[4] hills, or traverse the Candavian^[5] waste, or face the Syrtes,^[6] or Scylla, or Charybdis, although you have travelled through all these places for the bribe of a petty governorship; the journey for which nature has equipped you is safe and pleasant. She has given you such gifts that you may, if you do not prove false to them, rise level with God.

Your money, however, will not place you on a level with God; for God has no property. Your bordered robe^[7] will not do this; for God is not clad in raiment; nor will your reputation, nor a display of self, nor a knowledge of your name wide-spread throughout the world; for no one has knowledge of God; many even hold him in low esteem, and do not suffer for so doing. The throng of slaves which carries your litter along the city streets and in foreign places will not help you; for this God of whom I speak, though the highest and most powerful of beings, carries all things on his own shoulders. Neither can beauty or strength make you blessed, for none of these qualities can withstand old age.

What we have to seek for, then, is that which does not each day pass more and more under the control of some power which cannot be withstood.^[8] And what is this? It is the soul—but the soul that is upright, good, and great. What else could you call such a soul than a god dwelling as a guest in a human body? A soul like this may descend into a Roman knight just as well as into a freedman's son or a slave. For what is a Roman knight, or a freedman's son, or a slave? They are mere titles, born of ambition or of wrong. One may leap to heaven from the very slums. Only rise

And mould thyself to kinship with thy God.^[9]

This moulding will not be done in gold or silver; an image that is to be in the likeness of God cannot be fashioned of such materials; remember that the gods, when they were kind unto men,^[10] were moulded in clay. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The argument is that work is not, in itself, a good; if it were, it would not be praiseworthy at one time and to be deprecated at another. It belongs, therefore, to the class of things which the Stoics call ἀδιάφορα, *indifferentia, res mediae*; cf. Cicero, *de Fin.* iii. 16.
2. Literally, "come to the end of his furrow."
3. i.e., philosophy.
4. The Great St. Bernard and Little St. Bernard routes over the Alps.
5. A mountain in Illyria, over which the Via Egnatia ran.
6. Dangerous quick-sands along the north coast of Africa.
7. The *toga praetexta*, badge of the official position of Lucilius.
8. For example, Time or Chance.
9. Vergil, *Aeneid*, viii. 364 f.
10. In the Golden Age, described in Ep. xc., when men were nearest to nature and "fresh from the gods."

LETTER 32

On Progress



I have been asking about you, and inquiring of everyone who comes from your part of the country, what you are doing, and where you are spending your time, and with whom. You cannot deceive me; for I am with you. Live just as if I were sure to get news of your doings, nay, as if I were sure to behold them. And if you wonder what particularly pleases me that I hear concerning you, it is that I hear nothing, that most of those whom I ask do not know what you are doing.

This is sound practice—to refrain from associating with men of different stamp and different aims. And I am indeed confident that you cannot be warped, that you will stick to your purpose, even though the crowd may surround and seek to distract you. What, then, is on my mind? I am not afraid lest they work a change in you; but I am afraid lest they may hinder your progress. And much harm is done even by one who holds you back, especially since life is so short; and we make it still shorter by our unsteadiness, by making ever fresh beginnings at life, now one and immediately another. We break up life into little bits, and fritter it away.

Hasten ahead, then, dearest Lucilius, and reflect how greatly you would quicken your speed if an enemy were at your back, or if you suspected the cavalry were approaching and pressing hard upon your steps as you fled. It is true; the enemy is indeed pressing

upon you; you should therefore increase your speed and escape away and reach a safe position, remembering continually what a noble thing it is to round out your life before death comes, and then await in peace the remaining portion of your time, claiming^[1] nothing for yourself, since you are in possession of the happy life; for such a life is not made happier for being longer.

O when shall you see the time when you shall know that time means nothing to you, when you shall be peaceful and calm, careless of the morrow, because you are enjoying your life to the full?

Would you know what makes men greedy for the future? It is because no one has yet found himself. Your parents, to be sure, asked other blessings for you; but I myself pray rather that you may despise all those things which your parents wished for you in abundance. Their prayers plunder many another person, simply that you may be enriched. Whatever they make over to you must be removed from someone else.

I pray that you may get such control over yourself that your mind, now shaken by wandering thoughts, may at last come to rest and be steadfast, that it may be content with itself and, having attained an understanding of what things are truly good—and they are in our possession as soon as we have this knowledge—that it may have no need of added years. He has at length passed beyond all necessities—he has won his honourable discharge and is free—who still lives after his life has been completed. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The text seems to be corrupt. Hense thinks that *expectare* is to be supplied with *nihil sibi*—"To expect nothing for oneself"; but the use of the verb in two meanings would be harsh. The thought seems to be "asking for no added years"; and one suspects that the loss of a word like *adrogantem* before *nihil*.

LETTER 33

On the Futility of Learning Maxims



You wish me to close these letters also, as I closed my former letters, with certain utterances taken from the chiefs of our school. But they did not interest themselves in choice extracts; the whole texture of their work is full of strength. There is unevenness, you know, when some objects rise conspicuous above others. A single tree is not remarkable if the whole forest rises to the same height.

Poetry is crammed with utterances of this sort, and so is history. For this reason I would not have you think that these utterances belong to Epicurus. they are common property and are emphatically our own.^[1] They are, however, more noteworthy in Epicurus, because they appear at infrequent intervals and when you do not expect them, and because it is surprising that brave words should be spoken at any time by a man who made a practice of being effeminate. For that is what most persons maintain. In my own opinion, however, Epicurus is really a brave man, even though he did wear long sleeves.^[2] Fortitude, energy, and readiness for battle are to be found among the Persians,^[3] just as much as among men who have girded themselves up high.

Therefore, you need not call upon me for extracts and quotations; such thoughts as one may extract here and there in the works of other philosophers run through the whole body of our writings. Hence we have no “show-window goods,” nor do we

deceive the purchaser in such a way that, if he enters our shop, he will find nothing except that which is displayed in the window. We allow the purchasers themselves to get their samples from anywhere they please.

Suppose we should desire to sort out each separate motto from the general stock; to whom shall we credit them? To Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Panaetius, or Posidonius? We Stoics are not subjects of a despot: each of us lays claim to his own freedom. With them,^[4] on the other hand, whatever Hermarchus says or Metrodorus, is ascribed to one source. In that brotherhood, everything that any man utters is spoken under the leadership and commanding authority^[5] of one alone. We cannot, I maintain, no matter how we try, pick out anything from so great a multitude of things equally good.

Only the poor man counts his flock.^[6]

Wherever you direct your gaze, you will meet with something that might stand out from the rest, if the context in which you read it were not equally notable.

For this reason, give over hoping that you can skim, by means of epitomes, the wisdom of distinguished men. Look into their wisdom as a whole; study it as a whole. They are working out a plan and weaving together, line upon line, a masterpiece, from which nothing can be taken away without injury to the whole. Examine the separate parts, if you like, provided you examine them as parts of the man himself. She is not a beautiful woman whose ankle or arm is praised, but she whose general appearance makes you forget to admire her single attributes.

If you insist, however, I shall not be niggardly with you, but lavish; for there is a huge multitude of these passages; they are scattered about in profusion—they do not need to be gathered together, but merely to be picked up. They do not drip forth

occasionally; they flow continuously. They are unbroken and are closely connected. Doubtless they would be of much benefit to those who are still novices and worshipping outside the shrine; for single maxims sink in more easily when they are marked off and bounded like a line of verse.

That is why we give to children a proverb, or that which the Greeks call *Chria*,^[7] to be learned by heart; that sort of thing can be comprehended by the young mind, which cannot as yet hold more. For a man, however, whose progress is definite, to chase after choice extracts and to prop his weakness by the best known and the briefest sayings and to depend upon his memory, is disgraceful; it is time for him to lean on himself. He should make such maxims and not memorize them. For it is disgraceful even for an old man, or one who has sighted old age, to have a notebook knowledge. "This is what Zeno said." But what have you yourself said? "This is the opinion of Cleanthes." But what is your own opinion? How long shall you march under another man's orders? Take command, and utter some word which posterity will remember. Put forth something from your own stock.

For this reason I hold that there is nothing of eminence in all such men as these, who never create anything themselves, but always lurk in the shadow of others, playing the rôle of interpreters, never daring to put once into practice what they have been so long in learning. They have exercised their memories on other men's material. But it is one thing to remember, another to know. Remembering is merely safeguarding something entrusted to the memory; knowing, however, means making everything your own; it means not depending upon the copy and not all the time glancing back at the master.

"Thus said Zeno, thus said Cleanthes, indeed!" Let there be a difference between yourself and your book! How long shall you be a learner? From now on be a teacher as well! "But why," one

asks,^[8] “should I have to continue hearing lectures on what I can read?” “The living voice,” one replies, “is a great help.” Perhaps, but not the voice which merely makes itself the mouthpiece of another’s words, and only performs the duty of a reporter.

Consider this fact also. Those who have never attained their mental independence begin, in the first place, by following the leader in cases where everyone has deserted the leader; then, in the second place, they follow him in matters where the truth is still being investigated. However, the truth will never be discovered if we rest contented with discoveries already made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing but is not even investigating.

What then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use the old road, but if I find one that makes a shorter cut and is smoother to travel, I shall open the new road. Men who have made these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all; it has not yet been monopolized. And there is plenty of it left even for posterity to discover. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Stoic as well as Epicurean.
2. Contrasted with *alte cinctos*. The sleeveless and “girt-up” tunic is the sign of energy; cf. Horace, *Sat.* i. 5. 5, and Suetonius, *Caligula*, 52: the effeminate Caligula would “appear in public with a long-sleeved tunic and bracelets.”
3. Who wore sleeves.
4. i.e., the Epicureans.
5. For the phrase *ductu et auspiciis* see Plautus, *Amph.* i. 1. 41 *ut gesserit rem publicam ductu imperio auspicio suo*; and Horace, *Od.* i. 7. 27 *Teucro duce et auspice Teucro*. The original significance of the phrase refers to the right of the commander-in-chief to take the auspices.
6. Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, xiii. 824.
7. Either “maxims” or “outlines,” “themes.” For a discussion of them see Quintilian, *Inst. Orat.* i. 9. 3 ff.
8. The objector is the assumed auditor. The answer to the objection gives the usual view as to the power of the living voice; to this Seneca assents, provided that the voice has a message of its own.

LETTER 34

On a Promising Pupil



I grow in spirit and leap for joy and shake off my years and my blood runs warm again, whenever I understand, from your actions and your letters, how far you have outdone yourself; for as to the ordinary man, you left him in the rear long ago. If the farmer is pleased when his tree develops so that it bears fruit, if the shepherd takes pleasure in the increase of his flocks, if every man regards his pupil as though he discerned in him his own early manhood—what, then, do you think are the feelings of those who have trained a mind and moulded a young idea, when they see it suddenly grown to maturity?

I claim you for myself; you are my handiwork. When I saw your abilities, I laid my hand upon you,^[1] I exhorted you, I applied the goad and did not permit you to march lazily, but roused you continually. And now I do the same; but by this time I am cheering on one who is in the race and so in turn cheers me on.

“What else do you want of me, then?” you ask; “the will is still mine.” Well, the will in this case is almost everything, and not merely the half, as in the proverb “A task once begun is half done.” It is more than half, for the matter of which we speak is determined by the soul.^[2] Hence it is that the larger part of goodness is the will to become good. You know what I mean by a good

man? One who is complete, finished—whom no constraint or need can render bad.

I see such a person in you, if only you go steadily on and bend to your task, and see to it that all your actions and words harmonize and correspond with each other and are stamped in the same mould. If a man's acts are out of harmony, his soul is crooked. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. A reference to the act (*iniectio*) by which a Roman took possession of a thing belonging to him, e.g., a runaway slave—without a decision of the court
2. i.e., the proverb may apply to tasks which a man performs with his hands, but it is an understatement when applied to the tasks of the soul.

LETTER 35

On the Friendship of Kindred Minds



When I urge you so strongly to your studies, it is my own interest which I am consulting; I want your friendship, and it cannot fall to my lot unless you proceed, as you have begun, with the task of developing yourself. For now, although you love me, you are not yet my friend. “But,” you reply, “are these words of different meaning?” Nay, more, they are totally unlike in meaning.^[1] A friend loves you, of course; but one who loves you is not in every case your friend. Friendship, accordingly, is always helpful, but love sometimes even does harm. Try to perfect yourself, if for no other reason, in order that you may learn how to love.

Hasten, therefore, in order that, while thus perfecting yourself for my benefit, you may not have learned perfection for the benefit of another. To be sure, I am already deriving some profit by imagining that we two shall be of one mind, and that whatever portion of my strength has yielded to age will return to me from your strength, although there is not so very much difference in our ages.

But yet I wish to rejoice in the accomplished fact. We feel a joy over those whom we love, even when separated from them, but such a joy is light and fleeting; the sight of a man, and his presence, and communion with him, afford something of living pleasure; this is true, at any rate, if one not only sees the man

one desires, but the sort of man one desires. Give yourself to me, therefore, as a gift of great price, and, that you may strive the more, reflect that you yourself are mortal, and that I am old.

Hasten to find me, but hasten to find yourself first. Make progress, and, before all else, endeavour to be consistent with yourself. And when you would find out whether you have accomplished anything, consider whether you desire the same things today that you desired yesterday. A shifting of the will indicates that the mind is at sea, heading in various directions, according to the course of the wind. But that which is settled and solid does not wander from its place. This is the blessed lot of the completely wise man, and also, to a certain extent, of him who is progressing and has made some headway. Now what is the difference between these two classes of men? The one is in motion, to be sure, but does not change its position; it merely tosses up and down where it is; the other is not in motion at all. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The question of Lucilius represents the popular view, which regards love as including friendship. But according to Seneca it is only the perfect love, from which all selfishness has been removed, that becomes identical with friendship.

LETTER 36

On the Value of Retirement



Encourage your friend to despise stout-heartedly those who upbraid him because he has sought the shade of retirement and has abdicated his career of honours, and, though he might have attained more, has preferred tranquillity to them all. Let him prove daily to these detractors how wisely he has looked out for his own interests. Those whom men envy will continue to march past him; some will be pushed out of the ranks, and others will fall. Prosperity is a turbulent thing; it torments itself. It stirs the brain in more ways than one, goading men on to various aims—some to power, and others to high living. Some it puffs up; others it slackens and wholly enervates.

“But,” the retort comes, “so-and-so carries his prosperity well.” Yes; just as he carries his liquor. So you need not let this class of men persuade you that one who is besieged by the crowd is happy; they run to him as crowds rush for a pool of water, rendering it muddy while they drain it. But you say: “Men call our friend a trifler and a sluggard.” There are men, you know, whose speech is awry, who use the contrary^[1] terms. They called him happy; what of it? Was he happy?

Even the fact that to certain persons he seems a man of a very rough and gloomy cast of mind, does not trouble me. Aristo^[2] used to say that he preferred a youth of stern disposition to one

who was a jolly fellow and agreeable to the crowd. "For," he added, "wine which, when new, seemed harsh and sour, becomes good wine; but that which tasted well at the vintage cannot stand age." So let them call him stern and a foe to his own advancement, it is just this sternness that will go well when it is aged, provided only that he continues to cherish virtue and to absorb thoroughly the studies which make for culture—not those with which it is sufficient for a man to sprinkle himself, but those in which the mind should be steeped.

Now is the time to learn. "What? Is there any time when a man should not learn?" By no means; but just as it is creditable for every age to study, so it is not creditable for every age to be instructed. An old man learning his A B C is a disgraceful and absurd object; the young man must store up, the old man must use. You will therefore be doing a thing most helpful to yourself if you make this friend of yours as good a man as possible; those kindnesses, they tell us, are to be both sought for and bestowed, which benefit the giver no less than the receiver; and they are unquestionably the best kind.

Finally, he has no longer any freedom in the matter; he has pledged his word. And it is less disgraceful to compound with a creditor than to compound with a promising future. To pay his debt of money, the business man must have a prosperous voyage, the farmer must have fruitful fields and kindly weather; but the debt which your friend owes can be completely paid by mere goodwill.

Fortune has no jurisdiction over character. Let him so regulate his character that in perfect peace he may bring to perfection that spirit within him which feels neither loss nor gain, but remains in the same attitude, no matter how things fall out. A spirit like this, if it is heaped with worldly goods, rises superior to its wealth; if,

on the other hand, chance has stripped him of a part of his wealth, or even all, it is not impaired.

If your friend had been born in Parthia, he would have begun, when a child, to bend the bow; if in Germany, he would forthwith have been brandishing his slender spear; if he had been born in the days of our forefathers, he would have learned to ride a horse and smite his enemy hand to hand. These are the occupations which the system of each race recommends to the individual—yes, prescribes for him.

To what, then, shall this friend^[3] of yours devote his attention? I say, let him learn that which is helpful against all weapons, against every kind of foe—contempt of death; because no one doubts that death has in it something that inspires terror, so that it shocks even our souls, which nature has so moulded that they love their own existence; for otherwise^[4] there would be no need to prepare ourselves, and to whet our courage, to face that towards which we should move with a sort of voluntary instinct, precisely as all men tend to preserve their existence.

No man learns a thing in order that, if necessity arises, he may lie down with composure upon a bed of roses; but he steels his courage to this end, that he may not surrender his plighted faith to torture, and that, if need be, he may some day stay out his watch in the trenches, even though wounded, without even leaning on his spear; because sleep is likely to creep over men who support themselves by any prop whatsoever.

In death there is nothing harmful; for there must exist something to which it is harmful.^[5]

And yet, if you are possessed by so great a craving for a longer life, reflect that none of the objects which vanish from our gaze and are re-absorbed into the world of things, from which they have come forth and are soon to come forth again, is annihilated; they merely end their course and do not perish. And death, which

we fear and shrink from, merely interrupts life, but does not steal it away; the time will return when we shall be restored to the light of day; and many men would object to this, were they not brought back in forgetfulness of the past.

But I mean to show you later,^[6] with more care, that everything which seems to perish merely changes. Since you are destined to return, you ought to depart with a tranquil mind. Mark how the round of the universe repeats its course; you will see that no star in our firmament is extinguished, but that they all set and rise in alternation. Summer has gone, but another year will bring it again; winter lies low, but will be restored by its own proper months; night has overwhelmed the sun, but day will soon rout the night again. The wandering stars retrace their former courses; a part of the sky is rising unceasingly, and a part is sinking.

One word more, and then I shall stop; infants, and boys, and those who have gone mad, have no fear of death, and it is most shameful if reason cannot afford us that peace of mind to which they have been brought by their folly. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., they are no more correct now, when they called him a trifler, than they were before, when they called him happy.
2. Aristo of Chios, Frag. 388 von Armin.
3. As a Roman, living in an age when philosophy was recommended and prescribed.
4. i.e., if death inspired no terror.
5. And since after death we do not exist, death cannot be harmful to us. Seneca has in mind the argument of Epicurus (Diogenes Laertius, x. 124-5): "Therefore the most dread-inspiring of all evils, death, is nothing to us; for when we exist; death is not present in us, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore it does not concern either the living or the dead; for to the living it has no existence, and the dead do not themselves exist." Lucretius uses this argument, concluding it with (iii. 830): *Nil igitur mors est ad nos neque pertinet hilum*.
6. For example, in Ep. lxxvii.

LETTER 37

On Allegiance to Virtue



You have promised to be a good man; you have enlisted under oath; that is the strongest chain which will hold you to a sound understanding. Any man will be but mocking you, if he declares that this is an effeminate and easy kind of soldiering. I will not have you deceived. The word of this most honourable compact are the same as the words of that most disgraceful one, to wit:^[1] “Through burning, imprisonment, or death by the sword.”

From the men who hire out their strength for the arena, who eat and drink what they must pay for with their blood, security is taken that they will endure such trials even though they be unwilling; from you, that you will endure them willingly and with alacrity. The gladiator may lower his weapon and test the pity of the people;^[2] but you will neither lower your weapon nor beg for life. You must die erect and unyielding. Moreover, what profit is it to gain a few days or a few years? There is no discharge for us from the moment we are born.

“Then how can I free myself?” you ask. You cannot escape necessities, but you can overcome them

By force a way is made.^[3]

And this way will be afforded you by philosophy. Betake yourself therefore to philosophy if you would be safe, untroubled, happy,

in fine, if you wish to be—and that is most important—free. There is no other way to attain this end.

Folly^[4] is low, abject, mean, slavish, and exposed to many of the cruellest passions. These passions, which are heavy taskmasters, sometimes ruling by turns, and sometimes together, can be banished from you by wisdom, which is the only real freedom. There is but one path leading thither, and it is a straight path; you will not go astray. Proceed with steady step, and if you would have all things under your control, put yourself under the control of reason; if reason becomes your ruler, you will become ruler over many. You will learn from her what you should undertake, and how it should be done; you will not blunder into things.

You can show me no man who knows how he began to crave that which he craves. He has not been led to that pass by forethought; he has been driven to it by impulse. Fortune attacks us as often as we attack Fortune. It is disgraceful, instead of proceeding ahead, to be carried along, and then suddenly, amid the whirlpool of events, to ask in a dazed way: “How did I get into this condition?” Farewell.

Footnotes

1. He refers to the famous oath which the gladiator took when he hired himself to the fighting-master; *uri, vinciri, verberari, ferroque necari patior*; cf. Petronius, *Sat.* 117. The oath is abbreviated in the text, probably by Seneca himself, who paraphrases it in Ep. lxxi. 23.
2. Awaiting the signal of “thumbs up” or “thumbs down.” Cf. Juvenal, iii. 36 *verso pollice, vulgus Quem iubet occidunt populariter*.
3. Vergil, *Aeneid*, ii. 494.
4. In the language of Stoicism, ἀμαθία, *stultitia*, “folly,” is the antithesis of σοφία, *sapientia*, “wisdom.”

On Quiet Conversation

YOU are right when you urge that we increase our mutual traffic in letters. But the greatest benefit is to be derived from conversation, because it creeps by degrees into the soul. Lectures prepared beforehand and spouted in the presence of a throng have in them more noise but less intimacy. Philosophy is good advice; and no one can give advice at the top of his lungs. Of course we must sometimes also make use of these harangues, if I may so call them, when a doubting member needs to be spurred on; but when the aim is to make a man learn and not merely to make him wish to learn, we must have recourse to the low-toned words of conversation. They enter more easily, and stick in the memory; for we do not need many words, but, rather, effective words.

Words should be scattered like seed; no matter how small the seed may be, if it has once found favourable ground, it unfolds its strength and from an insignificant thing spreads to its greatest growth. Reason grows in the same way; it is not large to the outward view, but increases as it does its work. Few words are spoken; but if the mind has truly caught them, they come into their strength and spring up. Yes, precepts and seeds have the same quality; they produce much, and yet they are slight things. Only, as I said, let a favourable mind receive and assimilate them.

Then of itself the mind also will produce bounteously in its turn,
giving back more than it has received. Farewell.

“Good”: An Essay by Jocko Willink

Source: [Tools of Titans](#) by Tim Ferriss

Background from Tim: Jocko Willink (FB/TW: [@jockowillink](#); [jockopodcast.com](#)) is one of the scariest human beings imaginable. He is a lean 230 pounds. He is a Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt who used to tap out 20 Navy SEALs per workout. He is a legend in the special operations world, and his eyes look through you more than at you. His [interview with me](#) was the first interview he ever did, and it took the Internet by storm.

Jocko spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy and commanded SEAL Team Three’s Task Unit Bruiser, the most highly decorated special operations unit from the Iraq war. Upon returning to the United States, Jocko served as the officer-in-charge of training for all West Coast SEAL Teams, designing and implementing some of the most challenging and realistic combat training in the world. After retiring from the Navy, he co-founded Echelon Front, a leadership and management consulting company, and co-authored the #1 *New York Times* bestseller [Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win](#).

He now discusses war, leadership, business and life in his top-rated podcast, [Jocko Podcast](#). He is an avid surfer, a husband, and the father of four “highly motivated” children.

ENTER JOCKO

How do I deal with setbacks, failures, delays, defeat, or other disasters? I actually have a fairly simple way of dealing with these situations. There is one word to deal with all those situations, and that is: “good.”

This is something that one of my direct subordinates, one of the guys who worked for me, a guy who became one of my best friends, pointed out. He would call me up or pull me aside with some major problem or some issue that was going on, and he’d say, “Boss, we got this, that, or the other thing going wrong,” and I would look at him and I’d say, “Good.”

And finally, one day, he was telling me about some situation that was going off the rails, and as soon as he got done explaining it to me, he said, “I already know what you’re going to say.”

And I asked, “What am I going to say?”

He said, “You’re going to say: ‘Good.’”

He continued, “That’s what you always say. When something is wrong or going bad, you just look at me and say, ‘Good.’”

And I said, “Well, I mean it. Because that is how I operate.” So I explained to him that when things are going bad, there’s going to be some good that will come from it.

- Oh, mission got cancelled? Good. We can focus on another one.
- Didn’t get the new high-speed gear we wanted? Good. We can keep it simple.
- Didn’t get promoted? Good. More time to get better.
- Didn’t get funded? Good. We own more of the company.
- Didn’t get the job you wanted? Good. Go out, gain more experience, and build a better résumé.

- Got injured? Good. Needed a break from training.
- Got tapped out? Good. It's better to tap out in training than to tap out on the street.
- Got beat? Good. We learned.
- Unexpected problems? Good. We have the opportunity to figure out a solution.

That's it. When things are going bad, don't get all bummed out, don't get startled, don't get frustrated. No. Just look at the issue and say: "Good."

Now. I don't mean to say something clichéd. I'm not trying to sound like Mr. Smiley Positive Guy. That guy ignores the hard truth. That guy thinks a positive attitude will solve problems. It won't. But neither will dwelling on the problem. No. Accept reality, but focus on the solution. Take that issue, take that setback, take that problem, and turn it into something good. Go forward. And, if you are part of a team, that attitude will spread throughout.

Finally, to close this up: If you can say the word "good," guess what? It means you're still alive. It means you're still breathing.

And if you're still breathing, that means you've still got some fight left in you. So get up, dust off, reload, recalibrate, re-engage, and go out on the attack.

And that, right there, is about as good as it gets.

On Noble Aspirations

I shall indeed arrange for you, in careful order and narrow compass, the notes which you request. But consider whether you may not get more help from the customary method^[1] than from that which is now commonly called a “breviary,” though in the good old days, when real Latin was spoken, it was called a “summary.”^[2] The former is more necessary to one who is learning a subject, the latter to one who knows it. For the one teaches, the other stirs the memory. But I shall give you abundant opportunity for both.^[3] A man like you should not ask me for this authority or that; he who furnishes a voucher for his statements argues himself unknown.

I shall therefore write exactly what you wish, but I shall do it in my own way; until then, you have many authors whose works will presumably keep your ideas sufficiently in order. Pick up the list of the philosophers; that very act will compel you to wake up, when you see how many men have been working for your benefit. You will desire eagerly to be one of them yourself, for this is the most excellent quality that the noble soul has within itself, that it can be roused to honourable things.

No man of exalted gifts is pleased with that which is low and mean; the vision of great achievement summons him and uplifts him.

Just as the flame springs straight into the air and cannot be cabined or kept down any more than it can repose in quiet, so our soul is always in motion, and the more ardent it is, the greater its motion and activity. But happy is the man who has given it this impulse toward better things! He will place himself beyond the jurisdiction of chance; he will wisely control prosperity; he will lessen adversity, and will despise what others hold in admiration.

It is the quality of a great soul to scorn great things and to prefer that which is ordinary rather than that which is too great. For the one condition is useful and life-giving; but the other does harm just because it is excessive. Similarly, too rich a soil makes the grain fall flat, branches break down under too heavy a load, excessive productiveness does not bring fruit to ripeness. This is the case with the soul also; for it is ruined by uncontrolled prosperity, which is used not only to the detriment of others, but also to the detriment of itself.

What enemy was ever so insolent to any opponent as are their pleasures to certain men? The only excuse that we can allow for the incontinence and mad lust of these men is the fact that they suffer the evils which they have inflicted upon others. And they are rightly harassed by this madness, because desire must have unbounded space for its excursions, if it transgresses nature's mean. For this has its bounds, but waywardness and the acts that spring from wilful lust are without boundaries.

Utility measures our needs; but by what standard can you check the superfluous? It is for this reason that men sink themselves in pleasures, and they cannot do without them when once they have become accustomed to them, and for this reason they are most wretched, because they have reached such a pass that what was once superfluous to them has become indispensable. And so they are the slaves of their pleasures instead of enjoying them; they even love their own ills,^[4]—and that is the worst ill of all!

Then it is that the height of unhappiness is reached, when men are not only attracted, but even pleased, by shameful things, and when there is no longer any room for a cure, now that those things which once were vices have become habits. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The regular method of studying philosophy was, as we infer from this letter, a course of reading in the philosophers. Seneca deprecates the use of the "cram" which is only a memory-help, as a substitute for reading, on the ground that by its use one does not, in the first place, learn the subject, and, in the second place and chiefly, that one loses the inspiration to be derived by direct contact with great thinkers. The request of Lucilius for a cram thus suggests the main topic of the letter, which is taken up in the second paragraph.
2. i.e., the word *breviarium*, "abridgment," "abstract," has displaced the better word *summarium*, "outline of chief points."
3. i.e., to do the reading and to review it by means of the summary. The reading will enable Lucilius to identify for himself the authors of the several passages or doctrines.
4. i.e., their pleasures. These ills, by being cultivated, become vices.

LETTER 40

*On the Proper Style for a
Philosopher's Discourse*



I thank you for writing to me so often; for you are revealing your real self to me in the only way you can. I never receive a letter from you without being in your company forthwith. If the pictures of our absent friends are pleasing to us, though they only refresh the memory and lighten our longing by a solace that is unreal and unsubstantial, how much more pleasant is a letter, which brings us real traces, real evidences, of an absent friend! For that which is sweetest when we meet face to face is afforded by the impress of a friend's hand upon his letter—recognition.

You write me that you heard a lecture by the philosopher Serapio,^[1] when he landed at your present place of residence. “He is wont,” you say, “to wrench up his words with a mighty rush, and he does not let them flow forth one by one, but makes them crowd and dash upon each other.”^[2] For the words come in such quantity that a single voice is inadequate to utter them.” I do not approve of this in a philosopher; his speech, like his life, should be composed; and nothing that rushes headlong and is hurried is well ordered. That is why, in Homer, the rapid style, which sweeps down without a break like a snow-squall, is assigned to the younger speaker; from the old man eloquence flows gently, sweeter than honey.^[3]

Therefore, mark my words; that forceful manner of speech, rapid and copious, is more suited to a mountebank than to a man who is discussing and teaching an important and serious subject. But I object just as strongly that he should drip out his words as that he should go at top speed; he should neither keep the ear on the stretch, nor deafen it. For that poverty-stricken and thin-spun style also makes the audience less attentive because they are weary of its stammering slowness; nevertheless, the word which has been long awaited sinks in more easily than the word which flits past us on the wing. Finally, people speak of “handing down” precepts to their pupils; but one is not “handing down” that which eludes the grasp.

Besides, speech that deals with the truth should be unadorned and plain. This popular style has nothing to do with the truth; its aim is to impress the common herd, to ravish heedless ears by its speed; it does not offer itself for discussion, but snatches itself away from discussion. But how can that speech govern others which cannot itself be governed? May I not also remark that all speech which is employed for the purpose of healing our minds, ought to sink into us? Remedies do not avail unless they remain in the system.

Besides, this sort of speech contains a great deal of sheer emptiness; it has more sound than power. My terrors should be quieted, my irritations soothed, my illusions shaken off, my indulgences checked, my greed rebuked. And which of these cures can be brought about in a hurry? What physician can heal his patient on a flying visit? May I add that such a jargon of confused and ill-chosen words cannot afford pleasure, either?

No; but just as you are well satisfied, in the majority of cases, to have seen through tricks which you did not think could possibly be done,^[4] so in the case of these word-gymnasts to have heard them once is amply sufficient. For what can a man desire to learn

or to imitate in them? What is he to think of their souls, when their speech is sent into the charge in utter disorder, and cannot be kept in hand?

Just as, when you run down hill, you cannot stop at the point where you had decided to stop, but your steps are carried along by the momentum of your body and are borne beyond the place where you wished to halt; so this speed of speech has no control over itself, nor is it seemly for philosophy; since philosophy should carefully place her words, not fling them out, and should proceed step by step.

“What then?” you say; “should not philosophy sometimes take a loftier tone?” Of course she should; but dignity of character should be preserved, and this is stripped away by such violent and excessive force. Let philosophy possess great forces, but kept well under control; let her stream flow unceasingly, but never become a torrent. And I should hardly allow even to an orator a rapidity of speech like this, which cannot be called back, which goes lawlessly ahead; for how could it be followed by jurors, who are often inexperienced and untrained? Even when the orator is carried away by his desire to show off his powers, or by uncontrollable emotion, even then he should not quicken his pace and heap up words to an extent greater than the ear can endure.

You will be acting rightly, therefore, if you do not regard those men who seek how much they may say, rather than how they shall say it, and if for yourself you choose, provided a choice must be made, to speak as Publius Vinicius the stammerer does. When Asellius was asked how Vinicius spoke, he replied: “Gradually”! (It was a remark of Geminus Varius, by the way: “I don’t see how you can call that man ‘eloquent’; why, he can’t get out three words together.”) Why, then, should you not choose to speak as Vinicius does?

Though of course some wag may cross your path, like the person who said, when Vinicius was dragging out his words one by one, as if he were dictating and not speaking. "Say, haven't you anything to say?" And yet that were the better choice, for the rapidity of Quintus Haterius, the most famous orator of his age, is, in my opinion, to be avoided by a man of sense. Haterius never hesitated, never paused; he made only one start, and only one stop.

However, I suppose that certain styles of speech are more or less suitable to nations also; in a Greek you can put up with the unrestrained style, but we Romans, even when writing, have become accustomed to separate our words.^[5] And our compatriot Cicero, with whom Roman oratory sprang into prominence, was also a slow pacer.^[6] The Roman language is more inclined to take stock of itself, to weigh, and to offer something worth weighing.

Fabianus, a man noteworthy because of his life, his knowledge, and, less important than either of these, his eloquence also, used to discuss a subject with dispatch rather than with haste; hence you might call it ease rather than speed. I approve this quality in the wise man; but I do not demand it; only let his speech proceed unhampered, though I prefer that it should be deliberately uttered rather than spouted.

However, I have this further reason for frightening you away from the latter malady, namely, that you could only be successful in practicing this style by losing your sense of modesty; you would have to rub all shame from your countenance,^[7] and refuse to hear yourself speak. For that heedless flow will carry with it many expressions which you would wish to criticize.

And, I repeat, you could not attain it and at the same time preserve your sense of shame. Moreover, you would need to practice every day, and transfer your attention from subject matter to words. But words, even if they came to you readily and flowed

without any exertion on your part, yet would have to be kept under control. For just as a less ostentatious gait becomes a philosopher, so does a restrained style of speech, far removed from boldness. Therefore, the ultimate kernel of my remarks is this: I bid you be slow of speech. Farewell

Footnotes

1. This person cannot be identified.
2. The explanation of Professor Summers seems sound, that the metaphor is taken from a mountain-torrent. Compare the description of Cratinus' style in Aristophanes, *Ach.* 526, or that of Pindar in Horace, *Od.* iv. 2. 5 ff.
3. *Iliad*, iii. 222 (Odysseus), and i. 249 (Nestor).
4. Seneca's phrase, *quae fieri posse non crederes*, has been interpreted as a definition of παράδοξα. It is more probable, however, that he is comparing with the juggler's tricks the verbal performances of certain lecturers, whose jargon one marvels at but does not care to hear again.
5. The Greek texts were still written without separation of the words, in contrast with the Roman.
6. *Gradarius* may be contrasted with *tolutarius*, "trotter." The word might also mean one who walks with dignified step, as in a religious procession.
7. Cf. Martial, xi. 27. *7 aut cum perfricuit frontem posuitque pudorem*. After a violent rubbing, the face would not show blushes.

LETTER 41

On the God Within Us



You are doing an excellent thing, one which will be wholesome for you, if, as you write me, you are persisting in your effort to attain sound understanding; it is foolish to pray for this when you can acquire it from yourself. We do not need to uplift our hands towards heaven, or to beg the keeper of a temple to let us approach his idol's ear, as if in this way our prayers were more likely to be heard. God is near you, he is with you, he is within you.

This is what I mean, Lucilius: a holy spirit indwells within us, one who marks our good and bad deeds, and is our guardian. As we treat this spirit, so are we treated by it. Indeed, no man can be good without the help of God. Can one rise superior to fortune unless God helps him to rise? He it is that gives noble and upright counsel. In each good man

A god doth dwell, but what god know we not.^[1]

If ever you have come upon a grove that is full of ancient trees which have grown to an unusual height, shutting out a view of the sky by a veil of pleached and intertwining branches, then the loftiness of the forest, the seclusion of the spot, and your marvel at the thick unbroken shade in the midst of the open spaces, will prove to you the presence of deity. Or if a cave, made by the deep crumbling of the rocks, holds up a mountain on its arch, a place

not built with hands but hollowed out into such spaciousness by natural causes, your soul will be deeply moved by a certain intimation of the existence of God. We worship the sources of mighty rivers; we erect altars at places where great streams burst suddenly from hidden sources; we adore springs of hot water as divine, and consecrate certain pools because of their dark waters or their immeasurable depth.

If you see a man who is unterrified in the midst of dangers, untouched by desires, happy in adversity, peaceful amid the storm, who looks down upon men from a higher plane, and views the gods on a footing of equality, will not a feeling of reverence for him steal over you, will you not say: "This quality is too great and too lofty to be regarded as resembling this petty body in which it dwells? A divine power has descended upon that man."

When a soul rises superior to other souls, when it is under control, when it passes through every experience as if it were of small account, when it smiles at our fears and at our prayers, it is stirred by a force from heaven. A thing like this cannot stand upright unless it be propped by the divine. Therefore, a greater part of it abides in that place from whence it came down to earth. Just as the rays of the sun do indeed touch the earth, but still abide at the source from which they are sent; even so the great and hallowed soul, which has come down in order that we may have a nearer knowledge of divinity, does indeed associate with us, but still cleaves to its origin; on that source it depends, thither it turns its gaze and strives to go, and it concerns itself with our doings only as a being superior to ourselves.

What, then, is such a soul? One which is resplendent with no external good, but only with its own. For what is more foolish than to praise in a man the qualities which come from without? And what is more insane than to marvel at characteristics which may at the next instant be passed on to someone else? A golden

bit does not make a better horse. The lion with gilded mane, in process of being trained and forced by weariness to endure the decoration, is sent into the arena in quite a different way from the wild lion whose spirit is unbroken; the latter, indeed, bold in his attack, as nature wished him to be, impressive because of his wild appearance—and it is his glory that none can look upon him without fear—is favoured^[2] in preference to the other lion, that languid and gilded brute.

No man ought to glory except in that which is his own. We praise a vine if it makes the shoots teem with increase, if by its weight it bends to the ground the very poles which hold its fruit; would any man prefer to this vine one from which golden grapes and golden leaves hang down? In a vine the virtue peculiarly its own is fertility; in man also we should praise that which is his own. Suppose that he has a retinue of comely slaves and a beautiful house, that his farm is large and large his income; none of these things is in the man himself; they are all on the outside.

Praise the quality in him which cannot be given or snatched away, that which is the peculiar property of the man. Do you ask what this is? It is soul, and reason brought to perfection in the soul. For man is a reasoning animal. Therefore, man's highest good is attained, if he has fulfilled the good for which nature designed him at birth.

And what is it which this reason demands of him? The easiest thing in the world—to live in accordance with his own nature. But this is turned into a hard task by the general madness of mankind; we push one another into vice. And how can a man be recalled to salvation, when he has none to restrain him, and all mankind to urge him on? Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Vergil, *Aeneid*, viii. 352, *Hoc nemus, hunc, inquit, frondoso vertice collem, Quis deus incertum est, habitat deus*, and cf. Quintilian, i. 10. 88, where he is speaking of Ennius, whom "*sicut sacros vetustate lucos adoremus, in*

quibus grandia et antiqua robora iam non tantum habent speciem quantem religionem.”

2. The spectators of the fight, which is to take place between the two lions, applaud the wild lion and bet on him.

LETTER 42

On Values



[If interested, a free audiobook version of this letter can be found at this web address: tim.blog/42]

Has that friend of yours already made you believe that he is a good man? And yet it is impossible in so short a time for one either to become good or be known as such.^[1] Do you know what kind of man I now mean when I speak of “a good man”? I mean one of the second grade, like your friend. For one of the first class perhaps springs into existence, like the phoenix, only once in five hundred years. And it is not surprising, either, that greatness develops only at long intervals; Fortune often brings into being commonplace powers, which are born to please the mob; but she holds up for our approval that which is extraordinary by the very fact that she makes it rare.

This man, however, of whom you spoke, is still far from the state which he professes to have reached. And if he knew what it meant to be “a good man,” he would not yet believe himself such; perhaps he would even despair of his ability to become good. “But,” you say, “he thinks ill of evil men.” Well, so do evil men themselves; and there is no worse penalty for vice than the fact that it is dissatisfied with itself and all its fellows.

“But he hates those who make an ungoverned use of great power suddenly acquired.” I retort that he will do the same thing as soon as he acquires the same powers. In the case of many men, their vices, being powerless, escape notice; although, as soon as the persons in question have become satisfied with their own strength, the vices will be no less daring than those which prosperity has already disclosed.

These men simply lack the means whereby they may unfold their wickedness. Similarly, one can handle even a poisonous snake while it is stiff with cold; the poison is not lacking; it is merely numbed into inaction. In the case of many men, their cruelty, ambition, and indulgence only lack the favour of Fortune to make them dare crimes that would match the worst. That their wishes are the same you will in a moment discover, in this way: give them the power equal to their wishes.

Do you remember how, when you declared that a certain person was under your influence, I pronounced him fickle and a bird of passage, and said that you held him not by the foot but merely by a wing? Was I mistaken? You grasped him only by a feather; he left it in your hands and escaped. You know what an exhibition he afterwards made of himself before you, how many of the things he attempted were to recoil upon his own head. He did not see that in endangering others he was tottering to his own downfall. He did not reflect how burdensome were the objects which he was bent upon attaining, even if they were not superfluous.

Therefore, with regard to the objects which we pursue, and for which we strive with great effort, we should note this truth; either there is nothing desirable in them, or the undesirable is preponderant. Some objects are superfluous; others are not worth the price we pay for them. But we do not see this clearly, and we regard things as free gifts when they really cost us very dear.

Our stupidity may be clearly proved by the fact that we hold that “buying” refers only to the objects for which we pay cash, and we regard as free gifts the things for which we spend our very selves. These we should refuse to buy, if we were compelled to give in payment for them our houses or some attractive and profitable estate; but we are eager to attain them at the cost of anxiety, of danger, and of lost honour, personal freedom, and time; so true it is that each man regards nothing as cheaper than himself.

Let us therefore act, in all our plans and conduct, just as we are accustomed to act whenever we approach a huckster who has certain wares for sale; let us see how much we must pay for that which we crave. Very often the things that cost nothing cost us the most heavily; I can show you many objects the quest and acquisition of which have wrested freedom from our hands. We should belong to ourselves, if only these things did not belong to us.

I would therefore have you reflect thus, not only when it is a question of gain, but also when it is a question of loss. “This object is bound to perish.” Yes, it was a mere extra; you will live without it just as easily as you have lived before. If you have possessed it for a long time, you lose it after you have had your fill of it; if you have not possessed it long, then you lose it before you have become wedded to it. “You will have less money.” Yes, and less trouble.

“Less influence.” Yes, and less envy. Look about you and note the things that drive us mad, which we lose with a flood of tears; you will perceive that it is not the loss that troubles us with reference to these things, but a notion of loss. No one feels that they have been lost, but his mind tells him that it has been so. He that owns himself has lost nothing. But how few men are blessed with ownership of self! Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Seneca doubtless has in mind the famous passage of Simonides, ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀληθῶς γενέσθαι χαλεπὸν, discussed by Plato, *Protagoras*, 339 A.

LETTER 43

On the Relativity of Fame



Do you ask how the news reached me, and who informed me, that you were entertaining this idea, of which you had said nothing to a single soul? It was that most knowing of persons—gossip. “What,” you say, “am I such a great personage that I can stir up gossip?” Now there is no reason why you should measure yourself according to this part of the world;^[1] have regard only to the place where you are dwelling.

Any point which rises above adjacent points is great, at the spot where it rises. For greatness is not absolute; comparison increases it or lessens it. A ship which looms large in the river seems tiny when on the ocean. A rudder which is large for one vessel, is small for another.

So you in your province^[2] are really of importance, though you scorn yourself. Men are asking what you do, how you dine, and how you sleep, and they find out, too; hence there is all the more reason for your living circumspectly. Do not, however, deem yourself truly happy until you find that you can live before men’s eyes, until your walls protect but do not hide you; although we are apt to believe that these walls surround us, not to enable us to live more safely, but that we may sin more secretly.

I shall mention a fact by which you may weigh the worth of a man’s character: you will scarcely find anyone who can live with

his door wide open. It is our conscience, not our pride, that has put doorkeepers at our doors; we live in such a fashion that being suddenly disclosed to view is equivalent to being caught in the act. What profits it, however, to hide ourselves away, and to avoid the eyes and ears of men?

A good conscience welcomes the crowd, but a bad conscience, even in solitude, is disturbed and troubled. If your deeds are honourable, let everybody know them; if base, what matters it that no one knows them, as long as you yourself know them? How wretched you are if you despise such a witness! Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., Rome.
2. Lucilius was at this time the imperial procurator in Sicily.

LETTER 44

On Philosophy and Pedigrees



You are again insisting to me that you are a nobody, and saying that nature in the first place, and fortune in the second, have treated you too scurvily, and this in spite of the fact that you have it in your power to separate yourself from the crowd and rise to the highest human happiness! If there is any good in philosophy, it is this—that it never looks into pedigrees. All men, if traced back to their original source, spring from the gods.

You are a Roman knight, and your persistent work promoted you to this class; yet surely there are many to whom the fourteen rows are barred;^[1] the senate-chamber is not open to all; the army, too, is scrupulous in choosing those whom it admits to toil and danger. But a noble mind is free to all men; according to this test, we may all gain distinction. Philosophy neither rejects nor selects anyone; its light shines for all.

Socrates was no aristocrat. Cleanthes worked at a well and served as a hired man watering a garden. Philosophy did not find Plato already a nobleman; it made him one. Why then should you despair of becoming able to rank with men like these? They are all your ancestors, if you conduct yourself in a manner worthy of them; and you will do so if you convince yourself at the outset that no man outdoes you in real nobility.

We have all had the same number of forefathers; there is no man whose first beginning does not transcend memory. Plato says: "Every king springs from a race of slaves, and every slave has had kings among his ancestors."^[2] The flight of time, with its vicissitudes, has jumbled all such things together, and Fortune has turned them upside down.

Then who is well-born? He who is by nature well fitted for virtue. That is the one point to be considered; otherwise, if you hark back to antiquity, every one traces back to a date before which there is nothing. From the earliest beginnings of the universe to the present time, we have been led forward out of origins that were alternately illustrious and ignoble. A hall full of smoke-begrimed busts does not make the nobleman. No past life has been lived to lend us glory, and that which has existed before us is not ours; the soul alone renders us noble, and it may rise superior to Fortune out of any earlier condition, no matter what that condition has been.^[3]

Suppose, then, that you were not that Roman knight, but a freedman, you might nevertheless by your own efforts come to be the only free man amid a throng of gentlemen. "How?" you ask. Simply by distinguishing between good and bad things without patterning your opinion from the populace. You should look, not to the source from which these things come, but to the goal towards which they tend. If there is anything that can make life happy, it is good on its own merits; for it cannot degenerate into evil.

Where, then, lies the mistake, since all men crave the happy life? It is that they regard the means for producing happiness as happiness itself, and, while seeking happiness, they are really fleeing from it. For although the sum and substance of the happy life is unalloyed freedom from care, and though the secret of such freedom is unshaken confidence, yet men gather together

that which causes worry, and, while travelling life's treacherous road, not only have burdens to bear, but even draw burdens to themselves; hence they recede farther and farther from the achievement of that which they seek, and the more effort they expend, the more they hinder themselves and are set back. This is what happens when you hurry through a maze; the faster you go, the worse you are entangled. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Alluding to seats reserved for the knights at the theatre.
2. Plato, *Theaetetus*, p. 174 E.
3. Compare with the whole argument Menander, Frag. 533 Kock, ending:
 ὃς ἂν εὖ γεγωνῶς ἢ τῇ φύσει πρὸς τάγαθά, κἂν Αἰθίοψ ἢ, μήτερ, ἐστὶν
 εὐγενής.

On Sophistical Argumentation

You complain that in your part of the world there is a scant supply of books. But it is quality, rather than quantity, that matters; a limited list of reading benefits; a varied assortment serves only for delight. He who would arrive at the appointed end must follow a single road and not wander through many ways. What you suggest is not travelling; it is mere tramping.

“But,” you say, “I should rather have you give me advice than books.” Still, I am ready to send you all the books I have, to ransack the whole storehouse. If it were possible, I should join you there myself; and were it not for the hope that you will soon complete your term of office, I should have imposed upon myself this old man’s journey; no Scylla or Charybdis or their storied straits could have frightened me away. I should not only have crossed over, but should have been willing to swim over those waters, provided that I could greet you and judge in your presence how much you had grown in spirit.

Your desire, however, that I should dispatch to you my own writings does not make me think myself learned, any more than a request for my picture would flatter my beauty. I know that it is due to your charity rather than to your judgment. And even if it is the result of judgment, it was charity that forced the judgment upon you.

But whatever the quality of my works may be, read them as if I were still seeking, and were not aware of, the truth, and were seeking it obstinately, too. For I have sold myself to no man; I bear the name of no master. I give much credit to the judgment of great men; but I claim something also for my own. For these men, too, have left to us, not positive discoveries, but problems whose solution is still to be sought. They might perhaps have discovered the essentials, had they not sought the superfluous also.

They lost much time in quibbling about words and in sophistical argumentation; all that sort of thing exercises the wit to no purpose. We tie knots and bind up words in double meanings, and then try to untie them.

Have we leisure enough for this? Do we already know how to live, or die? We should rather proceed with our whole souls towards the point where it is our duty to take heed lest things, as well as words, deceive us.

Why, pray, do you discriminate between similar words, when nobody is ever deceived by them except during the discussion? It is things that lead us astray: it is between things that you must discriminate. We embrace evil instead of good; we pray for something opposite to that which we have prayed for in the past. Our prayers clash with our prayers, our plans with our plans.

How closely flattery resembles friendship! It not only apes friendship, but outdoes it, passing it in the race; with wide-open and indulgent ears it is welcomed and sinks to the depths of the heart, and it is pleasing precisely wherein it does harm. Show me how I may be able to see through this resemblance! An enemy comes to me full of compliments, in the guise of a friend. Vices creep into our hearts under the name of virtues, rashness lurks beneath the appellation of bravery, moderation is called sluggishness, and the coward is regarded as prudent; there is great

danger if we go astray in these matters. So stamp them with special labels.

Then, too, the man who is asked whether he has horns on his head^[1] is not such a fool as to feel for them on his forehead, nor again so silly or dense that you can persuade him by means of argumentation, no matter how subtle, that he does not know the facts. Such quibbles are just as harmlessly deceptive as the juggler's cup and dice, in which it is the very trickery that pleases me. But show me how the trick is done, and I have lost my interest therein. And I hold the same opinion about these tricky word-plays; for by what other name can one call such sophistries? Not to know them does no harm, and mastering them does no good.

At any rate, if you wish to sift doubtful meanings of this kind, teach us that the happy man is not he whom the crowd deems happy, namely, he into whose coffers mighty sums have flowed, but he whose possessions are all in his soul, who is upright and exalted, who spurns inconstancy, who sees no man with whom he wishes to change places, who rates men only at their value as men, who takes Nature for his teacher, conforming to her laws and living as she commands, whom no violence can deprive of his possessions, who turns evil into good, is unerring in judgment, unshaken, unafraid, who may be moved by force but never moved to distraction, whom Fortune when she hurls at him with all her might the deadliest missile in her armoury, may graze, though rarely, but never wound. For Fortune's other missiles, with which she vanquishes mankind in general, rebound from such a one, like hail which rattles on the roof with no harm to the dweller therein, and then melts away.

Why do you bore me with that which you yourself call the "liar fallacy,"^[2] about which so many books have been written? Come now, suppose that my whole life is a lie; prove that to be

wrong and, if you are sharp enough, bring that back to the truth. At present it holds things to be essential of which the greater part is superfluous. And even that which is not superfluous is of no significance in respect to its power of making one fortunate and blest. For if a thing be necessary, it does not follow that it is a good. Else we degrade the meaning of “good,” if we apply that name to bread and barley-porridge and other commodities without which we cannot live.

The good must in every case be necessary; but that which is necessary is not in every case a good, since certain very paltry things are indeed necessary. No one is to such an extent ignorant of the noble meaning of the word “good,” as to debase it to the level of these humdrum utilities.

What, then? Shall you not rather transfer your efforts to making it clear to all men that the search for the superfluous means a great outlay of time, and that many have gone through life merely accumulating the instruments of life? Consider individuals, survey men in general; there is none whose life does not look forward to the morrow.

“What harm is there in this,” you ask? Infinite harm; for such persons do not live, but are preparing to live. They postpone everything. Even if we paid strict attention, life would soon get ahead of us; but as we are now, life finds us lingering and passes us by as if it belonged to another, and though it ends on the final day, it perishes every day.

But I must not exceed the bounds of a letter, which ought not to fill the reader’s left hand.^[3] So I shall postpone to another day our case against the hair-splitters, those over-subtle fellows who make argumentation supreme instead of subordinate. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Gellius, xviii. 2. *9 quod non perdidisti, habes; cornua non perdidisti; habes igitur cornua*; cf. also Seneca, Ep. xlviii.

2. e.g. Gellius, xviii. 2. 10 *cum mentior et mentiri me dico, mentior an verum dico?*
3. A book was unrolled with the right hand; the reader gathered up the part already perused with the left hand. Nearly all books at this time were papyrus rolls, as were letters of any great length.

LETTER 46

On a New Book by Lucilius



I received the book of yours which you promised me. I opened it hastily with the idea of glancing over it at leisure; for I meant only to taste the volume. But by its own charm the book coaxed me into traversing it more at length. You may understand from this fact how eloquent it was; for it seemed to be written in the smooth style,^[1] and yet did not resemble your handiwork or mine, but at first sight might have been ascribed to Titus Livius or to Epicurus. Moreover, I was so impressed and carried along by its charm that I finished it without any postponement. The sunlight called to me, hunger warned, and clouds were lowering; but I absorbed the book from beginning to end.

I was not merely pleased; I rejoiced. So full of wit and spirit it was! I should have added “force,” had the book contained moments of repose, or had it risen to energy only at intervals. But I found that there was no burst of force, but an even flow, a style that was vigorous and chaste. Nevertheless I noticed from time to time your sweetness, and here and there that mildness of yours. Your style is lofty and noble; I want you to keep to this manner and this direction. Your subject also contributed something; for this reason you should choose productive topics, which will lay hold of the mind and arouse it.

I shall discuss the book more fully after a second perusal; meantime, my judgment is somewhat unsettled, just as if I had heard it read aloud, and had not read it myself. You must allow me to examine it also. You need not be afraid; you shall hear the truth. Lucky fellow, to offer a man no opportunity to tell you lies at such long range! Unless perhaps, even now, when excuses for lying are taken away, custom serves as an excuse for our telling each other lies! Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Possibly *levis* in the sense of *light*, referring to size.



LETTER 47

On Master and Slave



I am glad to learn, through those who come from you, that you live on friendly terms with your slaves. This befits a sensible and well-educated man like yourself. “They are slaves,” people declare.^[1] Nay, rather they are men. “Slaves!” No, comrades. “Slaves!” No, they are unpretentious friends. “Slaves!” No, they are our fellow-slaves, if one reflects that Fortune has equal rights over slaves and free men alike.

That is why I smile at those who think it degrading for a man to dine with his slave. But why should they think it degrading? It is only because purse-proud etiquette surrounds a householder at his dinner with a mob of standing slaves. The master eats more than he can hold, and with monstrous greed loads his belly until it is stretched and at length ceases to do the work of a belly; so that he is at greater pains to discharge all the food than he was to stuff it down.

All this time the poor slaves may not move their lips, even to speak. The slightest murmur is repressed by the rod; even a chance sound—a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup—is visited with the lash. There is a grievous penalty for the slightest breach of silence. All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb.

The result of it all is that these slaves, who may not talk in their master's presence, talk about their master. But the slaves of former days, who were permitted to converse not only in their master's presence, but actually with him, whose mouths were not stitched up tight, were ready to bare their necks for their master, to bring upon their own heads any danger that threatened him; they spoke at the feast, but kept silence during torture.

Finally, the saying, in allusion to this same high-handed treatment, becomes current: "As many enemies as you have slaves." They are not enemies when we acquire them; we make them enemies.

I shall pass over other cruel and inhuman conduct towards them; for we maltreat them, not as if they were men, but as if they were beasts of burden. When we recline at a banquet, one slave mops up the disgorged food, another crouches beneath the table and gathers up the left-overs of the tipsy guests.

Another carves the priceless game birds; with unerring strokes and skilled hand he cuts choice morsels along the breast or the rump. Hapless fellow, to live only for the purpose of cutting fat capons correctly—unless, indeed, the other man is still more unhappy than he, who teaches this art for pleasure's sake, rather than he who learns it because he must.

Another, who serves the wine, must dress like a woman and wrestle with his advancing years; he cannot get away from his boyhood; he is dragged back to it; and though he has already acquired a soldier's figure, he is kept beardless by having his hair smoothed away or plucked out by the roots, and he must remain awake throughout the night, dividing his time between his master's drunkenness and his lust; in the chamber he must be a man, at the feast a boy.^[2]

Another, whose duty it is to put a valuation on the guests, must stick to his task, poor fellow, and watch to see whose flattery and

whose immodesty, whether of appetite or of language, is to get them an invitation for tomorrow. Think also of the poor purveyors of food, who note their masters' tastes with delicate skill, who know what special flavours will sharpen their appetite, what will please their eyes, what new combinations will rouse their cloyed stomachs, what food will excite their loathing through sheer satiety, and what will stir them to hunger on that particular day. With slaves like these the master cannot bear to dine; he would think it beneath his dignity to associate with his slave at the same table! Heaven forbid!

But how many masters is he creating in these very men!

I have seen standing in the line, before the door of Callistus, the former master,^[3] of Callistus; I have seen the master himself shut out while others were welcomed—the master who once fastened the “For Sale” ticket on Callistus and put him in the market along with the good-for-nothing slaves. But he has been paid off by that slave who was shuffled into the first lot of those on whom the crier practices his lungs; the slave, too, in his turn has cut his name from the list and in his turn has adjudged him unfit to enter his house. The master sold Callistus, but how much has Callistus made his master pay for!

Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies. It is just as possible for you to see in him a free-born man as for him to see in you a slave. As a result of the massacres in Marius's^[4] day, many a man of distinguished birth, who was taking the first steps toward senatorial rank by service in the army, was humbled by fortune, one becoming a shepherd, another a caretaker of a country cottage. Despise, then, if you dare, those to whose estate you may at any time descend, even when you are despising them.

I do not wish to involve myself in too large a question, and to discuss the treatment of slaves, towards whom we Romans are excessively haughty, cruel, and insulting. But this is the kernel of my advice: Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters. And as often as you reflect how much power you have over a slave, remember that your master has just as much power over you.

“But I have no master,” you say. You are still young; perhaps you will have one. Do you not know at what age Hecuba entered captivity, or Croesus, or the mother of Darius, or Plato, or Diogenes?^[5]

Associate with your slave on kindly, even on affable, terms; let him talk with you, plan with you, live with you. I know that at this point all the exquisites will cry out against me in a body; they will say: “There is nothing more debasing, more disgraceful, than this.” But these are the very persons whom I sometimes surprise kissing the hands of other men’s slaves.

Do you not see even this, how our ancestors removed from masters everything invidious, and from slaves everything insulting? They called the master “father of the household,” and the slaves “members of the household,” a custom which still holds in the mime. They established a holiday on which masters and slaves should eat together—not as the only day for this custom, but as obligatory on that day in any case. They allowed the slaves to attain honours in the household and to pronounce judgment;^[6] they held that a household was a miniature commonwealth.

“Do you mean to say,” comes the retort, “that I must seat all my slaves at my own table?” No, not any more than that you should invite all free men to it. You are mistaken if you think that I would bar from my table certain slaves whose duties are more humble, as, for example, yonder muleteer or yonder herdsman; I propose to value them according to their character, and not according

to their duties. Each man acquires his character for himself, but accident assigns his duties. Invite some to your table because they deserve the honor, and others that they may come to deserve it. For if there is any slavish quality in them as the result of their low associations, it will be shaken off by intercourse with men of gentler breeding.

You need not, my dear Lucilius, hunt for friends only in the forum or in the Senate-house; if you are careful and attentive, you will find them at home also. Good material often stands idle for want of an artist; make the experiment, and you will find it so. As he is a fool who, when purchasing a horse, does not consider the animal's points, but merely his saddle and bridle; so he is doubly a fool who values a man from his clothes or from his rank, which indeed is only a robe that clothes us.

"He is a slave." His soul, however, may be that of a freeman. "He is a slave." But shall that stand in his way? Show me a man who is not a slave; one is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, and all men are slaves to fear. I will name you an ex-consul who is slave to an old hag, a millionaire who is slave to a serving-maid; I will show you youths of the noblest birth in serfdom to pantomime players! No servitude is more disgraceful than that which is self-imposed.

You should therefore not be deterred by these finicky persons from showing yourself to your slaves as an affable person and not proudly superior to them; they ought to respect you rather than fear you.

Some may maintain that I am now offering the liberty-cap to slaves in general and toppling down lords from their high estate, because I bid slaves respect their masters instead of fearing them. They say: "This is what he plainly means: slaves are to pay respect as if they were clients or early-morning callers!" Anyone who holds this opinion forgets that what is enough for a god cannot

be too little for a master. Respect means love, and love and fear cannot be mingled.

So I hold that you are entirely right in not wishing to be feared by your slaves, and in lashing them merely with the tongue; only dumb animals need the thong.

That which annoys us does not necessarily injure us; but we are driven into wild rage by our luxurious lives, so that whatever does not answer our whims arouses our anger.

We don the temper of kings. For they, too, forgetful alike of their own strength and of other men's weakness, grow white-hot with rage, as if they had received an injury, when they are entirely protected from danger of such injury by their exalted station. They are not unaware that this is true, but by finding fault they seize upon opportunities to do harm; they insist that they have received injuries, in order that they may inflict them.

I do not wish to delay you longer; for you need no exhortation. This, among other things, is a mark of good character: it forms its own judgments and abides by them; but badness is fickle and frequently changing, not for the better, but for something different. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Much of the following is quoted by Macrobius, *Sat.* i. 11. 7 ff., in the passage beginning *vis tu cogitare eos, quos ius tuum vocas, isdem seminibus ortos eodem frui caelo, etc.*
2. *Glabri, delicati, or exoleti* were favourite slaves, kept artificially youthful by Romans of the more dissolute class. Cf. Catullus, lxi. 142, and Seneca, *De Brevitate Vitae*, 12. 5 (a passage closely resembling the description given above by Seneca), where the master prides himself upon the elegant appearance and graceful gestures of these favourites.
3. The master of Callistus, before he became the favourite of Caligula, is unknown.
4. There is some doubt whether we should not read *Variana*, as Lipsius suggests. This method of qualifying for senator suits the Empire better than the Republic. *Variana* would refer to the defeat of Varus in Germany, A.D. 9.

5. Plato was about forty years old when he visited Sicily, whence he was afterwards deported by Dionysius the Elder. He was sold into slavery at Aegina and ransomed by a man from Cyrene. Diogenes, while travelling from Athens to Aegina, is said to have been captured by pirates and sold in Crete, where he was purchased by a certain Corinthian and given his freedom.
6. i.e., as the praetor himself was normally accustomed to do.

On Quibbling as Unworthy of the Philosopher

In answer to the letter which you wrote me while travelling—a letter as long as the journey itself—I shall reply later. I ought to go into retirement, and consider what sort of advice I should give you. For you yourself, who consult me, also reflected for a long time whether to do so; how much more, then, should I myself reflect, since more deliberation is necessary in settling than in propounding a problem! And this is particularly true when one thing is advantageous to you and another to me. Am I speaking again in the guise of an Epicurean?^[1]

But the fact is, the same thing is advantageous to me which is advantageous to you; for I am not your friend unless whatever is at issue concerning you is my concern also. Friendship produces between us a partnership in all our interests. There is no such thing as good or bad fortune for the individual; we live in common. And no one can live happily who has regard to himself alone and transforms everything into a question of his own utility; you must live for your neighbour, if you would live for yourself.

This fellowship, maintained with scrupulous care, which makes us mingle as men with our fellow-men and holds that the human race have certain rights in common, is also of great help in cherishing the more intimate fellowship which is based on friendship, concerning which I began to speak above. For he

that has much in common with a fellow-man will have all things in common with a friend.

And on this point, my excellent Lucilius, I should like to have those subtle dialecticians of yours advise me how I ought to help a friend, or how a fellow man, rather than tell me in how many ways the word “friend” is used, and how many meanings the word “man” possesses. Lo, Wisdom and Folly are taking opposite sides. Which shall I join? Which party would you have me follow? On that side, “man” is the equivalent of “friend”; on the other side, “friend” is not the equivalent of “man.” The one wants a friend for his own advantage; the other wants to make himself an advantage to his friend.^[2] What *you* have to offer me is nothing but distortion of words and splitting of syllables.

It is clear that unless I can devise some very tricky premisses and by false deductions tack on to them a fallacy which springs from the truth, I shall not be able to distinguish between what is desirable and what is to be avoided! I am ashamed! Old men as we are, dealing with a problem so serious, we make play of it!

“‘Mouse’ is a syllable.^[3] Now a mouse eats its cheese; therefore, a syllable eats cheese.” Suppose now that I cannot solve this problem; see what peril hangs over my head as a result of such ignorance! What a scrape I shall be in! Without doubt I must beware, or some day I shall be catching syllables in a mousetrap, or, if I grow careless, a book may devour my cheese! Unless, perhaps, the following syllogism is shrewder still: “‘Mouse’ is a syllable. Now a syllable does not eat cheese. Therefore a mouse does not eat cheese.”

What childish nonsense! Do we knit our brows over this sort of problem? Do we let our beards grow long for this reason? Is this the matter which we teach with sour and pale faces?

Would you really know what philosophy offers to humanity? Philosophy offers counsel. Death calls away one man, and poverty

chafes another; a third is worried either by his neighbour's wealth or by his own. So-and-so is afraid of bad luck; another desires to get away from his own good fortune. Some are ill-treated by men, others by the gods.

Why, then, do you frame for me such games as these? It is no occasion for jest; you are retained as counsel for unhappy mankind. You have promised to help those in peril by sea, those in captivity, the sick and the needy, and those whose heads are under the poised axe. Whither are you straying? What are you doing?

This friend, in whose company you are jesting, is in fear. Help him, and take the noose from about his neck. Men are stretching out imploring hands to you on all sides; lives ruined and in danger of ruin are begging for some assistance; men's hopes, men's resources, depend upon you. They ask that you deliver them from all their restlessness, that you reveal to them, scattered and wandering as they are, the clear light of truth.

Tell them what nature has made necessary, and what superfluous; tell them how simple are the laws that she has laid down, how pleasant and unimpeded life is for those who follow these laws, but how bitter and perplexed it is for those who have put their trust in opinion rather than in nature.

I should deem your games of logic to be of some avail in relieving men's burdens, if you could first show me what part of these burdens they will relieve. What among these games of yours banishes lust? Or controls it? Would that I could say that they were merely of no profit! They are positively harmful. I can make it perfectly clear to you whenever you wish, that a noble spirit when involved in such subtleties is impaired and weakened.

I am ashamed to say what weapons they supply to men who are destined to go to war with fortune, and how poorly they equip them! Is this the path to the greatest good? Is philosophy to proceed by such claptrap^[4] and by quibbles which would be

a disgrace and a reproach even for expounders^[5] of the law? For what else is it that you men are doing, when you deliberately ensnare the person to whom you are putting questions, than making it appear that the man has lost his case on a technical error?^[6] But just as the judge can reinstate those who have lost a suit in this way, so philosophy has reinstated these victims of quibbling to their former condition.

Why do you men abandon your mighty promises, and, after having assured me in high-sounding language that you will permit the glitter of gold to dazzle my eyesight no more than the gleam of the sword, and that I shall, with mighty steadfastness, spurn both that which all men crave and that which all men fear, why do you descend to the ABC's of scholastic pedants? What is your answer?

Is this the path to heaven?^[7]

For that is exactly what philosophy promises to me, that I shall be made equal to God. For this I have been summoned, for this purpose have I come. Philosophy, keep your promise!

Therefore, my dear Lucilius, withdraw yourself as far as possible from these exceptions and objections of so-called philosophers. Frankness, and simplicity beseech true goodness. Even if there were many years left to you, you would have had to spend them frugally in order to have enough for the necessary things; but as it is, when your time is so scant, what madness it is to learn superfluous things! Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The Epicureans, who reduced all goods to "utilities," could not regard a friend's advantage as identical to one's own advantage. And yet they laid great stress upon friendship as one of the chief sources of pleasure. For an attempt to reconcile these two positions see Cicero, *De Finibus*, i. 65 ff. Seneca has inadvertently used a phrase that implies a difference between a friend's interest and one's own. This leads him to reassert the Stoic view of friendship, which adopted as its motto κοινὰ τὰ πάντων φίλων.

2. The sides are given in the reverse order in the two clauses: to the Stoic the terms “friend” and “man” are co-extensive; he is the friend of everybody, and his motive in friendship is to be of service; the Epicurean, however, narrows the definition of “friend” and regards him merely as an instrument to his own happiness.
3. In this paragraph Seneca exposes the folly of trying to prove a truth by means of logical tricks, and offers a caricature of those which were current among the philosophers whom he derides.
4. Literally, “or if or if not,” words constantly employed by the logicians in legal instruments. For the latter cf. Cicero, *Pro Caecina*, 23. 65 *tum illud, quod dicitur, “sive nive” irridet, tum aucupia verborum et litterarum tendiculas in invidiam vocant.*
5. Literally, “to those who sit studying the praetor’s edicts.” The *album* is the bulletin-board, on which the edicts of the praetor were posted, giving the formulae and stipulations for legal processes of various kinds.
6. In certain actions the praetor appointed a judge and established a formula, indicating the plaintiff’s claim and the judge’s duty. If the statement was false, or the claim excessive, the plaintiff lost his case; under certain conditions (see last sentence of Seneca § 11) the defendant could claim annulment of the formula and have the case tried again. Such cases were not lost on their merits, and for that reason the lawyer who purposely took such an advantage was doing a contemptible thing.
7. Vergil, *Aeneid*, ix. 641.

LETTER 49

On the Shortness of Life



*[If interested, a free audiobook version of this letter
can be found at this web address: tim.blog/49]*

A man is indeed lazy and careless, my dear Lucilius, if he is reminded of a friend only by seeing some landscape which stirs the memory; and yet there are times when the old familiar haunts stir up a sense of loss that has been stored away in the soul, not bringing back dead memories, but rousing them from their dormant state, just as the sight of a lost friend's favourite slave, or his cloak, or his house, renews the mourner's grief, even though it has been softened by time.

Now, lo and behold, Campania, and especially Naples and your beloved Pompeii,^[1] struck me, when I viewed them, with a wonderfully fresh sense of longing for you. You stand in full view before my eyes. I am on the point of parting from you. I see you choking down your tears and resisting without success the emotions that well up at the very moment when you try to check them. I seem to have lost you but a moment ago. For what is not "but a moment ago" when one begins to use the memory?

It was but a moment ago that I sat, as a lad, in the school of the philosopher Sotion,^[2] but a moment ago that I began to plead in the courts, but a moment ago that I lost the desire to plead, but a

moment ago that I lost the ability. Infinitely swift is the flight of time, as those see more clearly who are looking backwards. For when we are intent on the present, we do not notice it, so gentle is the passage of time's headlong flight.

Do you ask the reason for this? All past time is in the same place; it all presents the same aspect to us, it lies together. Everything slips into the same abyss. Besides, an event which in its entirety is of brief compass cannot contain long intervals. The time which we spend in living is but a point, nay, even less than a point. But this point of time, infinitesimal as it is, nature has mocked by making it seem outwardly of longer duration; she has taken one portion thereof and made it infancy, another childhood, another youth, another the gradual slope, so to speak, from youth to old age, and old age itself is still another. How many steps for how short a climb!

It was but a moment ago that I saw you off on your journey; and yet this "moment ago" makes up a goodly share of our existence, which is so brief, we should reflect, that it will soon come to an end altogether. In other years time did not seem to me to go so swiftly; now, it seems fast beyond belief, perhaps, because I feel that the finish-line is moving closer to me, or it may be that I have begun to take heed and reckon up my losses.

For this reason I am all the more angry that some men claim the major portion of this time for superfluous things—time which, no matter how carefully it is guarded, cannot suffice even for necessary things. Cicero^[3] declared that if the number of his days were doubled, he should not have time to read the lyric poets.^[4] And you may rate the dialecticians in the same class; but they are foolish in a more melancholy way. The lyric poets are avowedly frivolous; but the dialecticians believe that they are themselves engaged upon serious business.

I do not deny that one must cast a glance at dialectic; but it ought to be a mere glance, a sort of greeting from the threshold, merely that one may not be deceived, or judge these pursuits to contain any hidden matters of great worth.

Why do you torment yourself and lose weight over some problem which it is more clever to have scorned than to solve? When a soldier is undisturbed and travelling at his ease, he can hunt for trifles along his way; but when the enemy is closing in on the rear, and a command is given to quicken the pace, necessity makes him throw away everything which he picked up in moments of peace and leisure.

I have no time to investigate disputed inflections of words, or to try my cunning upon them.

*Behold the gathering clans, the fast-shut gates,
And weapons whetted ready for the war.*^[5]

I need a stout heart to hear without flinching this din of battle which sounds round about.

And all would rightly think me mad if, when graybeards and women were heaping up rocks for the fortifications, when the armour-clad youths inside the gates were awaiting, or even demanding, the order for a sally, when the spears of the foemen were quivering in our gates and the very ground was rocking with mines and subterranean passages—I say, they would rightly think me mad if I were to sit idle, putting such petty posers as this: “What you have not lost, you have. But you have not lost any horns. Therefore, you have horns,”^[6] or other tricks constructed after the model of this piece of sheer silliness.

And yet I may well seem in your eyes no less mad, if I spend my energies on that sort of thing; for even now I am in a state of siege. And yet, in the former case it would be merely a peril from the outside that threatened me, and a wall that sundered

me from the foe; as it is now, death-dealing perils are in my very presence. I have no time for such nonsense; a mighty undertaking is on my hands. What am I to do? Death is on my trail, and life is fleeting away; teach me something with which to face these troubles. Bring it to pass that I shall cease trying to escape from death, and that life may cease to escape from me. Give me courage to meet hardships; make me calm in the face of the unavoidable. Relax the straitened limits of the time which is allotted me. Show me that the good in life does not depend upon life's length, but upon the use we make of it; also, that it is possible, or rather usual, for a man who has lived long to have lived too little. Say to me when I lie down to sleep: "You may not wake again!" And when I have waked: "You may not go to sleep again!" Say to me when I go forth from my house: "You may not return!" And when I return: "You may never go forth again!"

You are mistaken if you think that only on an ocean voyage there is a very slight space^[7] between life and death. No, the distance between is just as narrow everywhere. It is not everywhere that death shows himself so near at hand; yet everywhere he is as near at hand.

Rid me of these shadowy terrors; then you will more easily deliver to me the instruction for which I have prepared myself. At our birth nature made us teachable, and gave us reason, not perfect, but capable of being perfected.

Discuss for me justice, duty, thrift, and that twofold purity, both the purity which abstains from another's person, and that which takes care of one's own self. If you will only refuse to lead me along by-paths, I shall more easily reach the goal at which I am aiming. For, as the tragic poet^[8] says:

The language of truth is simple.

We should not, therefore, make that language intricate; since there is nothing less fitting for a soul of great endeavour than such crafty cleverness. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Probably the birthplace of Lucilius.
2. The Pythagorean. For his views on vegetarianism, and their influence on Seneca, see Ep. cviii. 17 ff.
3. Source unknown; perhaps, as Hense thinks, from the *Hortensius*.
4. An intentional equivocation on the part of Cicero, who intimates that he will “lose no time” in reading them.
5. Vergil, *Aeneid*, viii. 385 f.
6. An example of syllogistic nonsense, quoted also by Gellius, xviii. 2. 9. See also Ep. xlv. 8.
7. i.e., the timbers of the ship. Compare the same figure in Ep. xxx. 2.
8. Euripides, *Phoenissae*, 469 ἀπλοῦς ὁ μῦθος τῆς ἀληθείας ἔφω.

LETTER 50

On Our Blindness and Its Cure



I received your letter many months after you had posted it; accordingly, I thought it useless to ask the carrier what you were busied with. He must have a particularly good memory if he can remember that! But I hope by this time you are living in such a way that I can be sure what it is you are busied with, no matter where you may be. For what else are you busied with except improving yourself every day, laying aside some error, and coming to understand that the faults which you attribute to circumstances are in yourself? We are indeed apt to ascribe certain faults to the place or to the time; but those faults will follow us, no matter how we change our place.

You know Harpaste, my wife's female clown; she has remained in my house, a burden incurred from a legacy. I particularly disapprove of these freaks; whenever I wish to enjoy the quips of a clown, I am not compelled to hunt far; I can laugh at myself. Now this clown suddenly became blind. The story sounds incredible, but I assure you that it is true: she does not know that she is blind. She keeps asking her attendant to change her quarters; she says that her apartments are too dark.

You can see clearly that that which makes us smile in the case of Harpaste happens to all the rest of us; nobody understands that he is himself greedy, or that he is covetous. Yet the blind ask

for a guide, while we wander without one, saying: "I am not self-seeking; but one cannot live at Rome in any other way. I am not extravagant, but mere living in the city demands a great outlay. It is not my fault that I have a choleric disposition, or that I have not settled down to any definite scheme of life; it is due to my youth."

Why do we deceive ourselves? The evil that afflicts us is not external, it is within us, situated in our very vitals; for that reason we attain soundness with all the more difficulty, because we do not know that we are diseased.

Suppose that we have begun the cure; when shall we throw off all these diseases, with all their virulence? At present, we do not even consult the physician, whose work would be easier if he were called in when the complaint was in its early stages. The tender and the inexperienced minds would follow his advice if he pointed out the right way.

No man finds it difficult to return to nature, except the man who has deserted nature. We blush to receive instruction in sound sense; but, by Heaven, if we think it base to seek a teacher of this art, we should also abandon any hope that so great a good could be instilled into us by mere chance.

No, we must work. To tell the truth, even the work is not great, if only, as I said, we begin to mould and reconstruct our souls before they are hardened by sin. But I do not despair even of a hardened sinner.

There is nothing that will not surrender to persistent treatment, to concentrated and careful attention; however much the timber may be bent, you can make it straight again. Heat unbends curved beams, and wood that grew naturally in another shape is fashioned artificially according to our needs. How much more easily does the soul permit itself to be shaped, pliable as it is and more yielding than any liquid! For what else is the soul than air

in a certain state? And you see that air is more adaptable than any other matter, in proportion as it is rarer than any other.

There is nothing, Lucilius, to hinder you from entertaining good hopes about us, just because we are even now in the grip of evil, or because we have long been possessed thereby. There is no man to whom a good mind comes before an evil one. It is the evil mind that gets first hold on all of us. Learning virtue means unlearning vice.

We should therefore proceed to the task of freeing ourselves from faults with all the more courage because, when once committed to us, the good is an everlasting possession; virtue is not unlearned. For opposites find difficulty in clinging where they do not belong, therefore they can be driven out and hustled away; but qualities that come to a place which is rightfully theirs abide faithfully. Virtue is according to nature; vice is opposed to it and hostile.

But although virtues, when admitted, cannot depart and are easy to guard, yet the first steps in the approach to them are toilsome, because it is characteristic of a weak and diseased mind to fear that which is unfamiliar. The mind must, therefore, be forced to make a beginning; from then on, the medicine is not bitter; for just as soon as it is curing us it begins to give pleasure. One enjoys other cures only after health is restored, but a draught of philosophy is at the same moment wholesome and pleasant. Farewell.

LETTER 51

On Baiae and Morals



Every man does the best he can, my dear Lucilius! You over there have Etna,^[1] that lofty and most celebrated mountain of Sicily; (although I cannot make out why Messala—or was it Valgius? for I have been reading in both—has called it “unique,” inasmuch as many regions belch forth fire, not merely the lofty ones where the phenomenon is more frequent—presumably because fire rises to the greatest possible height—but low-lying places also.) As for myself, I do the best I can; I have had to be satisfied with Baiae,^[2] and I left it the day after I reached it; for Baiae is a place to be avoided, because, though it has certain natural advantages, luxury has claimed it for her own exclusive resort.

“What then,” you say, “should any place be singled out as an object of aversion?” Not at all. But just as, to the wise and upright man, one style of clothing is more suitable than another, without his having an aversion for any particular colour, but because he thinks that some colours do not befit one who has adopted the simple life; so there are places also, which the wise man or he who is on the way toward wisdom will avoid as foreign to good morals.

Therefore, if he is contemplating withdrawal from the world, he will not select Canopus^[3] (although Canopus does not keep any man from living simply), nor Baiae either; for both places have begun to be resorts of vice. At Canopus luxury pampers itself to

the utmost degree; at Baiae it is even more lax, as if the place itself demanded a certain amount of licence.

We ought to select abodes which are wholesome not only for the body but also for the character. Just as I do not care to live in a place of torture, neither do I care to live in a cafe. To witness persons wandering drunk along the beach, the riotous revelling of sailing parties, the lakes a-din with choral^[4] song, and all the other ways in which luxury, when it is, so to speak, released from the restraints of law not merely sins, but blazons its sins abroad—why must I witness all this?

We ought to see to it that we flee to the greatest possible distance from provocations to vice. We should toughen our minds, and remove them far from the allurements of pleasure. A single winter relaxed Hannibal's fibre; his pampering in Campania took the vigour out of that hero who had triumphed over Alpine snows. He conquered with his weapons, but was conquered by his vices.

We too have a war to wage, a type of warfare in which there is allowed no rest or furlough. To be conquered, in the first place, are pleasures, which, as you see, have carried off even the sternest characters. If a man has once understood how great is the task which he has entered upon, he will see that there must be no dainty or effeminate conduct. What have I to do with those hot baths or with the sweating-room where they shut in the dry steam which is to drain your strength? Perspiration should flow only after toil.

Suppose we do what Hannibal did—check the course of events, give up the war, and give over our bodies to be coddled. Every one would rightly blame us for our untimely sloth, a thing fraught with peril even for the victor, to say nothing of one who is only on the way to victory. And we have even less right to do this than those followers of the Carthaginian flag; for our danger is greater

than theirs if we slacken, and our toil is greater than theirs even if we press ahead.

Fortune is fighting against me, and I shall not carry out her commands. I refuse to submit to the yoke; nay rather, I shake off the yoke that is upon me—an act which demands even greater courage. The soul is not to be pampered; surrendering to pleasure means also surrendering to pain, surrendering to toil, surrendering to poverty. Both ambition and anger will wish to have the same rights over me as pleasure, and I shall be torn asunder, or rather pulled to pieces, amid all these conflicting passions.

I have set freedom before my eyes; and I am striving for that reward. And what is freedom, you ask? It means not being a slave to any circumstance, to any constraint, to any chance; it means compelling Fortune to enter the lists on equal terms. And on the day when I know that I have the upper hand, her power will be naught. When I have death in my own control, shall I take orders from her?

Therefore, a man occupied with such reflections should choose an austere and pure dwelling-place. The spirit is weakened by surroundings that are too pleasant, and without a doubt one's place of residence can contribute towards impairing its vigour. Animals whose hoofs are hardened on rough ground can travel any road; but when they are fattened on soft marshy meadows their hoofs are soon worn out. The bravest soldier comes from rock-ribbed regions; but the town-bred and the home-bred are sluggish in action. The hand which turns from the plough to the sword never objects to toil; but your sleek and well-dressed dandy quails at the first cloud of dust.

Being trained in a rugged country strengthens the character and fits it for great undertakings. It was more honourable in Scipio to spend his exile at Liternum,^[5] than at Baiae; his downfall did

not need a setting so effeminate. Those also into whose hands the rising fortunes of Rome first transferred the wealth of the state, Gaius Marius, Gnaeus Pompey, and Caesar, did indeed build villas near Baiae; but they set them on the very tops of the mountains. This seemed more soldier-like, to look down from a lofty height upon lands spread far and wide below. Note the situation, position, and type of building which they chose; you will see that they were not country-places—they were camps.

Do you suppose that Cato would ever have dwelt in a pleasure-palace, that he might count the lewd women as they sailed past, the many kinds of barges painted in all sorts of colours, the roses which were wafted about the lake, or that he might listen to the nocturnal brawls of serenaders? Would he not have preferred to remain in the shelter of a trench thrown up by his own hands to serve for a single night? Would not anyone who is a man have his slumbers broken by a war-trumpet rather than by a chorus of serenaders?

But I have been haranguing against Baiae long enough; although I never could harangue often enough against vice. Vice, Lucilius, is what I wish you to proceed against, without limit and without end. For it has neither limit nor end. If any vice rend your heart, cast it away from you; and if you cannot be rid of it in any other way, pluck out your heart also. Above all, drive pleasures from your sight. Hate them beyond all other things, for they are like the bandits whom the Egyptians call “lovers,”^[6] who embrace us only to garrotte us. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Etna was of especial interest to Lucilius. Besides being a Governor in Sicily, he may have written the poem *Aetna*. For Seneca's own curiosity regarding the mountain compare *Ep. lxxix. 5 ff.*
2. Not far from Naples, and across the bay from Puteoli. It was a fashionable and dissolute watering place.
3. Situated at the mouth of the westernmost branch of the Nile, and proverbial in Latin literature for the laxity of its morals.

4. There is considerable doubt whether *symphonia* was vocal or instrumental music. The passage probably refers either to glee-singers (as in Venice today) or to bands of flute-players playing part-music. Cicero (*Verr.* iii. 44. 105) mentions them as providing entertainment at banquets.
5. See Letter lxxxvi.
6. The Egyptians used the word φηλητής in the sense of “knave” or “foot-pad.” The word is found in the *Hecate* of Callimachus. Hesychius defines it as equal to κλώψ “thief.” It was pronounced in the same way as φιλητής “lover,” and in late Greek was spelt in the same way.



Japanese: *Mu*.

English: *Mu* is best understood in context. For instance, it is found in the Zen expression *mushin no shin* (無心の心), meaning “the mind without mind” or the state of “no-mindedness.” This refers to a mind not fixed or occupied by thought or emotion and thus open to everything. This concept—a prerequisite for what the West would consider “flow” in sports, for instance—is widely used within Japanese martial and aesthetic arts.

Calligrapher: Noriko Lake

On Choosing Our Teachers

What is this force, Lucilius, that drags us in one direction when we are aiming in another, urging us on to the exact place from which we long to withdraw? What is it that wrestles with our spirit, and does not allow us to desire anything once for all? We veer from plan to plan. None of our wishes is free, none is unqualified, none is lasting.

“But it is the fool,” you say, “who is inconsistent; nothing suits him for long.” But how or when can we tear ourselves away from this folly? No man by himself has sufficient strength to rise above it; he needs a helping hand, and some one to extricate him.

Epicurus^[1] remarks that certain men have worked their way to the truth without any one’s assistance, carving out their own passage. And he gives special praise to these, for their impulse has come from within, and they have forged to the front by themselves. Again, he says, there are others who need outside help, who will not proceed unless someone leads the way, but who will follow faithfully. Of these, he says, Metrodorus was one; this type of man is also excellent, but belongs to the second grade. We ourselves are not of that first class, either; we shall be well treated if we are admitted into the second. Nor need you despise a man who can gain salvation only with the assistance of another; the will to be saved means a great deal, too.

You will find still another class of man—and a class not to be despised—who can be forced and driven into righteousness, who do not need a guide as much as they require someone to encourage and, as it were, to force them along. This is the third variety. If you ask me for a man of this pattern also, Epicurus tells us that Hermarchus was such. And of the two last-named classes, he is more ready to congratulate the one,^[2] but he feels more respect for the other; for although both reached the same goal, it is a greater credit to have brought about the same result with the more difficult material upon which to work.

Suppose that two buildings have been erected, unlike as to their foundations, but equal in height and in grandeur. One is built on faultless ground, and the process of erection goes right ahead. In the other case, the foundations have exhausted the building materials, for they have been sunk into soft and shifting ground and much labour has been wasted in reaching the solid rock. As one looks at both of them, one sees clearly what progress the former has made but the larger and more difficult part of the latter is hidden.

So with men's dispositions; some are pliable and easy to manage, but others have to be laboriously wrought out by hand, so to speak, and are wholly employed in the making of their own foundations. I should accordingly deem more fortunate the man who has never had any trouble with himself; but the other, I feel, has deserved better of himself, who has won a victory over the meanness of his own nature, and has not gently led himself, but has wrestled his way, to wisdom.

You may be sure that this refractory nature, which demands much toil, has been implanted in us. There are obstacles in our path; so let us fight, and call to our assistance some helpers. "Whom," you say, "shall I call upon? Shall it be this man or that?"^[3] There is another choice also open to you; you may go

to the ancients; for they have the time to help you. We can get assistance not only from the living, but from those of the past.

Let us choose, however, from among the living, not men who pour forth their words with the greatest glibness, turning out commonplaces and holding, as it were, their own little private exhibitions,^[4]—not these, I say, but men who teach us by their lives, men who tell us what we ought to do and then prove it by practice, who show us what we should avoid, and then are never caught doing that which they have ordered us to avoid.

Choose as a guide one whom you will admire more when you see him act than when you hear him speak.

Of course I would not prevent you from listening also to those philosophers who are wont to hold public meetings and discussions, provided they appear before the people for the express purpose of improving themselves and others, and do not practice their profession for the sake of self-seeking. For what is baser than philosophy courting applause? Does the sick man praise the surgeon while he is operating?

In silence and with reverent awe submit to the cure.^[5] Even though you cry applause, I shall listen to your cries as if you were groaning when your sores were touched. Do you wish to bear witness that you are attentive, that you are stirred by the grandeur of the subject? You may do this at the proper time; I shall of course allow you to pass judgment and cast a vote as to the better course. Pythagoras made his pupils keep silence for five years; do you think that they had the right on that account to break out immediately into applause?

How mad is he who leaves the lecture-room in a happy frame of mind simply because of applause from the ignorant! Why do you take pleasure in being praised by men whom you yourself cannot praise? Fabianus used to give popular talks, but his audience listened with self-control. Occasionally a loud shout of

praise would burst forth, but it was prompted by the greatness of his subject, and not by the sound of oratory that slipped forth pleasantly and softly.

There should be a difference between the applause of the theatre and the applause of the school; and there is a certain decency even in bestowing praise. If you mark them carefully, all acts are always significant, and you can gauge character by even the most trifling signs. The lecherous man is revealed by his gait, by a movement of the hand, sometimes by a single answer, by his touching his head with a finger,^[6] by the shifting of his eye. The scamp is shown up by his laugh; the madman by his face and general appearance. These qualities become known by certain marks; but you can tell the character of every man when you see how he gives and receives praise.

The philosopher's audience, from this corner and that, stretch forth admiring hands, and sometimes the adoring crowd almost hang over the lecturer's head. But, if you really understand, that is not praise; it is merely applause. These outcries should be left for the arts which aim to please the crowd; let philosophy be worshipped in silence.

Young men, indeed, must sometimes have free play to follow their impulses, but it should only be at times when they act from impulse, and when they cannot force themselves to be silent. Such praise as that gives a certain kind of encouragement to the hearers themselves, and acts as a spur to the youthful mind. But let them be roused to the matter, and not to the style; otherwise, eloquence does them harm, making them enamoured of itself, and not of the subject.

I shall postpone this topic for the present; it demands a long and special investigation, to show how the public should be addressed, what indulgences should be allowed to a speaker on a public occasion, and what should be allowed to the crowd itself in the

presence of the speaker. There can be no doubt that philosophy has suffered a loss, now that she has exposed her charms for sale. But she can still be viewed in her sanctuary, if her exhibitor is a priest and not a pedlar. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Frag. 192 Usener.
2. i.e., that of Metrodorus, who had the happier nature.
3. i.e., a representative of this school or that. Seneca's reply is, in effect, "Upon no present school; go to the ancients."
4. *Circulatores* were travelling showmen who performed sword-swallowing and snake-charming feats, or cheap stump speakers who displayed their eloquence at the street-corners in the hope of a few pence. The word is also found in the sense of "pedlar".
5. This and what follows, to § 11, are the words with which a true philosopher is supposed to address his hearers.
6. The scratching of the head with one finger was for some reason regarded as a mark of effeminacy or vice; cf. the charge brought against Pompey, Plutarch, *Moralia*, 89 E and Ammianus, 17. 11 *quod genuino quodam more caput digito uno scalpebat . . . ut dissolutum*. Compare also Juvenal, ix. 133 *scalpere caput digito*.

On the Faults of the Spirit

You can persuade me into almost anything now, for I was recently persuaded to travel by water. We cast off when the sea was lazily smooth; the sky, to be sure, was heavy with nasty clouds, such as usually break into rain or squalls. Still, I thought that the few miles between Puteoli and your dear Parthenope^[1] might be run off in quick time, despite the uncertain and lowering sky. So, in order to get away more quickly, I made straight out to sea for Nesis,^[2] with the purpose of cutting across all the inlets.

But when we were so far out that it made little difference to me whether I returned or kept on, the calm weather, which had enticed me, came to naught. The storm had not yet begun, but the ground-swell was on, and the waves kept steadily coming faster. I began to ask the pilot to put me ashore somewhere; he replied that the coast was rough and a bad place to land, and that in a storm he feared a lee shore more than anything else.

But I was suffering too grievously to think of the danger, since a sluggish seasickness which brought no relief was racking me, the sort that upsets the liver without clearing it. Therefore I laid down the law to my pilot, forcing him to make for the shore, willy-nilly. When we drew near, I did not wait for things to be done in accordance with Vergil's orders, until

Prow faced seawards^[3]

or

Anchor plunged from bow;^[4]

I remembered my profession^[5] as a veteran devotee of cold water, and, clad as I was in my cloak, let myself down into the sea, just as a cold-water bather should.

What do you think my feelings were, scrambling over the rocks, searching out the path, or making one for myself? I understood that sailors have good reason to fear the land. It is hard to believe what I endured when I could not endure myself; you may be sure that the reason why Ulysses was shipwrecked on every possible occasion was not so much because the sea-god was angry with him from his birth; he was simply subject to seasickness. And in the future I also, if I must go anywhere by sea, shall only reach my destination in the twentieth year.^[6]

When I finally calmed my stomach (for you know that one does not escape seasickness by escaping from the sea) and refreshed my body with a rubdown, I began to reflect how completely we forget or ignore our failings, even those that affect the body, which are continually reminding us of their existence—not to mention those which are more serious in proportion as they are more hidden.

A slight ague deceives us; but when it has increased and a genuine fever has begun to burn, it forces even a hardy man, who can endure much suffering, to admit that he is ill. There is pain in the foot, and a tingling sensation in the joints; but we still hide the complaint and announce that we have sprained a joint, or else are tired from over-exercise. Then the ailment, uncertain at first, must be given a name; and when it begins to swell the ankles also, and has made both our feet “right” feet,^[7] we are bound to confess that we have the gout.

The opposite holds true of diseases of the soul; the worse one is, the less one perceives it. You need not be surprised, my beloved

Lucilius. For he whose sleep is light pursues visions during slumber, and sometimes, though asleep, is conscious that he is asleep; but sound slumber annihilates our very dreams and sinks the spirit down so deep that it has no perception of self.

Why will no man confess his faults? Because he is still in their grasp; only he who is awake can recount his dream, and similarly a confession of sin is a proof of sound mind.

Let us, therefore, rouse ourselves, that we may be able to correct our mistakes. Philosophy, however, is the only power that can stir us, the only power that can shake off our deep slumber. Devote yourself wholly to philosophy. You are worthy of her; she is worthy of you; greet one another with a loving embrace. Say farewell to all other interests with courage and frankness. Do not study philosophy merely during your spare time.^[8]

If you were ill, you would stop caring for your personal concerns, and forget your business duties; you would not think highly enough of any client to take active charge of his case during a slight abatement of your sufferings. You would try your hardest to be rid of the illness as soon as possible. What, then? Shall you not do the same thing now? Throw aside all hindrances and give up your time to getting a sound mind; for no man can attain it if he is engrossed in other matters. Philosophy wields her own authority; she appoints her own time and does not allow it to be appointed for her. She is not a thing to be followed at odd times, but a subject for daily practice; she is mistress, and she commands our attendance.

Alexander, when a certain state promised him a part of its territory and half its entire property, replied: "I invaded Asia with the intention, not of accepting what you might give, but of allowing you to keep what I might leave." Philosophy likewise keeps saying to all occupations: "I do not intend to accept the time which

you have left over, but I shall allow you to keep what I myself shall leave.”

Turn to her, therefore, with all your soul, sit at her feet, cherish her; a great distance will then begin to separate you from other men. You will be far ahead of all mortals, and even the gods will not be far ahead of you. Do you ask what will be the difference between yourself and the gods? They will live longer. But, by my faith, it is the sign of a great artist to have confined a full likeness to the limits of a miniature. The wise man’s life spreads out to him over as large a surface as does all eternity to a god. There is one point in which the sage has an advantage over the god; for a god is freed from terrors by the bounty of nature, the wise man by his own bounty.

What a wonderful privilege, to have the weaknesses of a man and the serenity of a god! The power of philosophy to blunt the blows of chance is beyond belief. No missile can settle in her body; she is well-protected and impenetrable. She spoils the force of some missiles and wards them off with the loose folds of her gown, as if they had no power to harm; others she dashes aside, and hurls them back with such force that they recoil upon the sender. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. The poetical name for Naples; perhaps it was once a town near by which gave a sort of romantic second title to the larger city. Professor Summers thinks that this poetical name, together with *tua*, indicates a reference to a passage from the verse of Lucilius. Perhaps, however, *tua* means nothing more than “the place which you love so well,” being in the neighbourhood of Pompeii, the birthplace of Lucilius.
2. An islet near the mouth of the bay wherein Baiae was situated. Puteoli was on the opposite side of the bay from Baiae.
3. *Aeneid*, vi. 3. This was the usual method of mooring a ship in ancient times.
4. *Aeneid*, iii. 277.
5. Compare *Ep.* lxxxiii. 5.
6. Ulysses took ten years on his journey, because of sea-sickness; Seneca will need twice as many.
7. That is, they are so swollen that left and right look alike.

8. Literally “on sufferance,” whenever other matters permit. Cf. Pliny, *Ep.* vii. 30 *precario studeo*—“subject to interruption from others.”

On Asthma and Death



My ill-health had allowed me a long furlough, when suddenly it resumed the attack. “What kind of ill-health?” you say. And you surely have a right to ask; for it is true that no kind is unknown to me. But I have been consigned, so to speak, to one special ailment. I do not know why I should call it by its Greek name;^[1] for it is well enough described as “shortness of breath.” Its attack is of very brief duration, like that of a squall at sea; it usually ends within an hour. Who indeed could breathe his last for long?

I have passed through all the ills and dangers of the flesh; but nothing seems to me more troublesome than this. And naturally so; for anything else may be called illness; but this is a sort of continued “last gasp.”^[2] Hence physicians call it “practicing how to die.” For some day the breath will succeed in doing what it has so often essayed.

Do you think I am writing this letter in a merry spirit, just because I have escaped? It would be absurd to take delight in such supposed restoration to health, as it would be for a defendant to imagine that he had won his case when he had succeeded in postponing his trial. Yet in the midst of my difficult breathing I never ceased to rest secure in cheerful and brave thoughts.

“What?” I say to myself; “does death so often test me? Let it do so; I myself have for a long time tested death.” “When?” you ask.

Before I was born. Death is non-existence, and I know already what that means. What was before me will happen again after me. If there is any suffering in this state, there must have been such suffering also in the past, before we entered the light of day. As a matter of fact, however, we felt no discomfort then.

And I ask you, would you not say that one was the greatest of fools who believed that a lamp was worse off when it was extinguished than before it was lighted? We mortals also are lighted and extinguished; the period of suffering comes in between, but on either side there is a deep peace. For, unless I am very much mistaken, my dear Lucilius, we go astray in thinking that death only follows, when in reality it has both preceded us and will in turn follow us. Whatever condition existed before our birth, is death. For what does it matter whether you do not begin at all, or whether you leave off, inasmuch as the result of both these states is non-existence?

I have never ceased to encourage myself with cheering counsels of this kind, silently, of course, since I had not the power to speak; then little by little this shortness of breath, already reduced to a sort of panting, came on at greater intervals, and then slowed down and finally stopped. Even by this time, although the gasping has ceased, the breath does not come and go normally; I still feel a sort of hesitation and delay in breathing. Let it be as it pleases, provided there be no sigh from the soul.^[3]

Accept this assurance from me—I shall never be frightened when the last hour comes; I am already prepared and do not plan a whole day ahead. But do you praise^[4] and imitate the man whom it does not irk to die, though he takes pleasure in living. For what virtue is there in going away when you are thrust out? And yet there is virtue even in this: I am indeed thrust out, but it is as if I were going away willingly. For that reason the wise man can never be thrust out, because that would mean removal from

a place which he was unwilling to leave; and the wise man does nothing unwillingly. He escapes necessity, because he wills to do what necessity is about to force upon him. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., asthma. Seneca thinks that the Latin name is good enough.
2. Celcus (iv. 8) gives this disease as the second of those which deal with the respiratory organs; *cum vehementior est, ut spirare aeger sine sono et anhelatione non possit*.
3. i.e., that the sigh be physical—an asthmatic gasp—and not caused by anguish of the soul.
4. The argument is: I am ready to die, but do not praise me on that account; reserve your praise for him who is not loth to die, though (unlike me) he finds it a pleasure to live (because he is in good health). Yes, for there is no more virtue in accepting death when one hates life, than there is in leaving a place when one is ejected.

LETTER 55

On Vatia's Villa



I have just returned from a ride in my litter; and I am as weary as if I had walked the distance, instead of being seated. Even to be carried for any length of time is hard work, perhaps all the more so because it is an unnatural exercise; for Nature gave us legs with which to do our own walking, and eyes with which to do our own seeing. Our luxuries have condemned us to weakness; we have ceased to be able to do that which we have long declined to do.

Nevertheless, I found it necessary to give my body a shaking up, in order that the bile which had gathered in my throat, if that was my trouble, might be shaken out, or, if the very breath within me had become, for some reason, too thick, that the jolting, which I have felt was a good thing for me, might make it thinner. So I insisted on being carried longer than usual, along an attractive beach, which bends between Cumae and Servilius Vatia's country-house,^[1] shut in by the sea on one side and the lake on the other, just like a narrow path. It was packed firm under foot, because of a recent storm; since, as you know, the waves, when they beat upon the beach hard and fast, level it out; but a continuous period of fair weather loosens it, when the sand, which is kept firm by the water, loses its moisture.

As my habit is, I began to look about for something there that might be of service to me, when my eyes fell upon the villa which

had once belonged to Vatia. So this was the place where that famous praetorian millionaire passed his old age! He was famed for nothing else than his life of leisure, and he was regarded as lucky only for that reason. For whenever men were ruined by their friendship with Asinius Gallus^[2] whenever others were ruined by their hatred of Sejanus, and later^[3] by their intimacy with him—for it was no more dangerous to have offended him than to have loved him—people used to cry out: “O Vatia, you alone know how to live!”

But what he knew was how to hide, not how to live; and it makes a great deal of difference whether your life be one of leisure or one of idleness. So I never drove past his country-place during Vatia’s lifetime without saying to myself: “Here lies Vatia!”

But, my dear Lucilius, philosophy is a thing of holiness, something to be worshipped, so much so that the very counterfeit pleases. For the mass of mankind consider that a person is at leisure who has withdrawn from society, is free from care, self-sufficient, and lives for himself; but these privileges can be the reward only of the wise man. Does he who is a victim of anxiety know how to live for himself? What? Does he even know (and that is of first importance) how to live at all?

For the man who has fled from affairs and from men, who has been banished to seclusion by the unhappiness which his own desires have brought upon him, who cannot see his neighbour more happy than himself, who through fear has taken to concealment, like a frightened and sluggish animal.—this person is not living for himself he is living for his belly, his sleep, and his lust—and that is the most shameful thing in the world. He who lives for no one does not necessarily live for himself. Nevertheless, there is so much in steadfastness and adherence to one’s purpose that even sluggishness, if stubbornly maintained, assumes an air of authority^[4] with us.

I could not describe the villa accurately; for I am familiar only with the front of the house, and with the parts which are in public view and can be seen by the mere passer-by. There are two grottoes, which cost a great deal of labour, as big as the most spacious hall, made by hand. One of these does not admit the rays of the sun, while the other keeps them until the sun sets. There is also a stream running through a grove of plane-trees, which draws for its supply both on the sea and on Lake Acheron; it intersects the grove just like a race-way^[5] and is large enough to support fish, although its waters are continually being drawn off. When the sea is calm, however, they do not use the stream, only touching the well-stocked waters when the storms give the fishermen a forced holiday.

But the most convenient thing about the villa is the fact that Baiae is next door, it is free from all the inconveniences of that resort, and yet enjoys its pleasures. I myself understand these attractions, and I believe that it is a villa suited to every season of the year. It fronts the west wind, which it intercepts in such a way that Baiae is denied it. So it seems that Vatia was no fool when he selected this place as the best in which to spend his leisure when it was already unfruitful and decrepit.

The place where one lives, however, can contribute little towards tranquillity; it is the mind which must make everything agreeable to itself. I have seen men despondent in a gay and lovely villa, and I have seen them to all appearance full of business in the midst of a solitude. For this reason you should not refuse to believe that your life is well-placed merely because you are not now in Campania. But why are you not there? Just let your thoughts travel, even to this place.

You may hold converse with your friends when they are absent, and indeed as often as you wish and for as long as you wish. For we enjoy this, the greatest of pleasures, all the more when we are

absent from one another. For the presence of friends makes us fastidious; and because we can at any time talk or sit together, when once we have parted we give not a thought to those whom we have just beheld.

And we ought to bear the absence of friends cheerfully, just because everyone is bound to be often absent from his friends even when they are present. Include among such cases, in the first place, the nights spent apart, then the different engagements which each of two friends has, then the private studies of each and their excursions into the country, and you will see that foreign travel does not rob us of much.

A friend should be retained in the spirit; such a friend can never be absent. He can see every day whomsoever he desires to see.

I would therefore have you share your studies with me, your meals, and your walks. We should be living within too narrow limits if anything were barred to our thoughts. I see you, my dear Lucilius, and at this very moment I hear you; I am with you to such an extent that I hesitate whether I should not begin to write you notes instead of letters. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Cumae was on the coast about six miles north of Cape Misenum. Lake Acheron (see § 6) was a salt-water pool between those two points, separated from the sea by a sandbar; it lay near Lake Avernus and probably derived its name from that fact. The Vatia mentioned here is unknown; he must not be confused with Isauricus.
2. Son of Asinius Pollio; his frankness got him into trouble and he died of starvation in a dungeon in A.D. 33. Tacitus, *Ann.* i. 32. 2, quotes Augustus, discussing his own successor, as saying of Gallus *avidus et minor*. Sejanus was overthrown and executed in A.D. 31.
3. i.e., after his fall.
4. i.e., imposes on us.
5. Literally, "like a Euripus," referring to the narrow strait which divides Euboea from Boeotia at Chalcis. Its current is swift.

LETTER 56

On Quiet and Study



Beshrew me if I think anything more requisite than silence for a man who secludes himself in order to study! Imagine what a variety of noises reverberates about my ears! I have lodgings right over a bathing establishment. So picture to yourself the assortment of sounds, which are strong enough to make me hate my very powers of hearing! When your strenuous gentleman, for example, is exercising himself by flourishing leaden weights; when he is working hard, or else pretends to be working hard, I can hear him grunt; and whenever he releases his imprisoned breath, I can hear him panting in wheezy and high-pitched tones. Or perhaps I notice some lazy fellow, content with a cheap rubdown, and hear the crack of the pummelling hand on his shoulder, varying in sound according as the hand is laid on flat or hollow. Then, perhaps, a professional^[1] comes along, shouting out the score; that is the finishing touch.

Add to this the arresting of an occasional roisterer or pickpocket, the racket of the man who always likes to hear his own voice in the bathroom,^[2] or the enthusiast who plunges into the swimming-tank with unconscionable noise and splashing. Besides all those whose voices, if nothing else, are good, imagine the hair-plucker with his penetrating, shrill voice—for purposes of advertisement—continually giving it vent and never holding

his tongue except when he is plucking the armpits and making his victim yell instead. Then the cakeseller with his varied cries, the sausageman, the confectioner, and all the vendors of food hawking their wares, each with his own distinctive intonation.

So you say: "What iron nerves or deadened ears, you must have, if your mind can hold out amid so many noises, so various and so discordant, when our friend Chrysippus^[3] is brought to his death by the continual good-morrows that greet him!" But I assure you that this racket means no more to me than the sound of waves or falling water; although you will remind me that a certain tribe once moved their city merely because they could not endure the din of a Nile cataract.^[4]

Words seem to distract me more than noises; for words demand attention, but noises merely fill the ears and beat upon them. Among the sounds that din round me without distracting, I include passing carriages, a machinist in the same block, a saw-sharpener near by, or some fellow who is demonstrating with little pipes and flutes at the Trickling Fountain,^[5] shouting rather than singing.

Furthermore, an intermittent noise upsets me more than a steady one. But by this time I have toughened my nerves against all that sort of thing, so that I can endure even a boatswain marking the time in high-pitched tones for his crew. For I force my mind to concentrate, and keep it from straying to things outside itself; all outdoors may be bedlam, provided that there is no disturbance within, provided that fear is not wrangling with desire in my breast, provided that meanness and lavishness are not at odds, one harassing the other. For of what benefit is a quiet neighbourhood, if our emotions are in an uproar?

'Twas night, and all the world was lulled to rest.^[6]

This is not true; for no real rest can be found when reason has not done the lulling. Night brings our troubles to the light, rather than banishes them; it merely changes the form of our worries. For even when we seek slumber, our sleepless moments are as harassing as the daytime. Real tranquillity is the state reached by an unperverted mind when it is relaxed.

Think of the unfortunate man who courts sleep by surrendering his spacious mansion to silence, who, that his ear may be disturbed by no sound, bids the whole retinue of his slaves be quiet and that whoever approaches him shall walk on tiptoe; he tosses from this side to that and seeks a fitful slumber amid his frettings!

He complains that he has heard sounds, when he has not heard them at all. The reason, you ask? His soul's in an uproar; it must be soothed, and its rebellious murmuring checked. You need not suppose that the soul is at peace when the body is still. Sometimes quiet means disquiet.

We must therefore rouse ourselves to action and busy ourselves with interests that are good, as often as we are in the grasp of an uncontrollable sluggishness.

Great generals, when they see that their men are mutinous, check them by some sort of labour or keep them busy with small forays. The much occupied man has no time for wantonness, and it is an obvious commonplace that the evils of leisure can be shaken off by hard work. Although people may often have thought that I sought seclusion because I was disgusted with politics and regretted my hapless and thankless position,^[7] yet, in the retreat to which apprehension and weariness have driven me, my ambition sometimes develops afresh. For it is not because my ambition was rooted out that it has abated, but because it was wearied or perhaps even put out of temper by the failure of its plans.

And so with luxury, also, which sometimes seems to have departed, and then when we have made a profession of frugality,

begins to fret us and, amid our economies, seeks the pleasures which we have merely left but not condemned. Indeed, the more stealthily it comes, the greater is its force. For all unconcealed vices are less serious; a disease also is farther on the road to being cured when it breaks forth from concealment and manifests its power. So with greed, ambition, and the other evils of the mind—you may be sure that they do most harm when they are hidden behind a pretence of soundness.

Men think that we are in retirement, and yet we are not. For if we have sincerely retired, and have sounded the signal for retreat, and have scorned outward attractions, then, as I remarked above,^[8] no outward thing will distract us; no music of men or of birds^[9] can interrupt good thoughts, when they have once become steadfast and sure.

The mind which starts at words or at chance sounds is unstable and has not yet withdrawn into itself; it contains within itself an element of anxiety and rooted fear, and this makes one a prey to care, as our Vergil says:

*I, whom of yore no dart could cause to flee,
Nor Greeks, with crowded lines of infantry.
Now shake at every sound, and fear the air,
Both for my child and for the load I bear.*^[10]

This man in his first state is wise; he blenches neither at the brandished spear, nor at the clashing armour of the serried foe, nor at the din of the stricken city. This man in his second state lacks knowledge fearing for his own concerns, he pales at every sound; any cry is taken for the battle-shout and overthrows him; the slightest disturbance renders him breathless with fear. It is the load that makes him afraid.^[11]

Select anyone you please from among your favourites of Fortune, trailing their many responsibilities, carrying their many

burdens, and you will behold a picture of Vergil's hero, "fearing both for his child and for the load he bears."

You may therefore be sure that you are at peace with yourself, when no noise readies you, when no word shakes you out of yourself, whether it be of flattery or of threat, or merely an empty sound buzzing about you with unmeaning din.

"What then?" you say, "is it not sometimes a simpler matter just to avoid the uproar?" I admit this. Accordingly, I shall change from my present quarters. I merely wished to test myself and to give myself practice. Why need I be tormented any longer, when Ulysses found so simple a cure for his comrades^[12] even against the songs of the Sirens? Farewell.

Footnotes

1. *Pilicrepus* probably means "ball-counter,"—one who keeps a record of the strokes. Compare our "billiard-marker."
2. This was especially true of poets, cf. Horace, *Sat.* i. 4. 76 *suave locus voci resonat conclusus*, and Martial, iii. 44.
3. It is nowhere else related of the famous Stoic philosopher Chrysippus that he objected to the salutations of his friends; and, besides, the morning salutation was a Roman, not a Greek, custom. Lipsius, therefore, was probably right when he proposed to read here, for Chrysippus, Crispus, one of Seneca's friends; cf. *Epigr.* 6.
4. The same story is told in *Naturalis Quaestiones*, iv. 2. 5.
5. A cone-shaped fountain, resembling a turning-post (*meta*) in the circus, from which the water spouted through many jets; hence the "sweating" (*sudans*). Its remains may still be seen now not far from the Colosseum on the Velia.
6. A fragment from the *Argonautica* of Varro Atacinus.
7. See Introduction, page viii.
8. § 4 of this letter.
9. An allusion to the Sirens and Ulysses, cf. § 15 below.
10. Aeneas is escaping from Troy, *Aeneid*, ii. 726 ff.
11. Aeneas carries Anchises; the rich man carries his burden of wealth.
12. Not merely by stopping their ears with wax, but also by bidding them row past the Sirens as quickly as possible. *Odyssey*, xii. 182.

LETTER 57

On the Trials of Travel



When it was time for me to return to Naples from Baiae, I easily persuaded myself that a storm was raging, that I might avoid another trip by sea; and yet the road was so deep in mud, all the way, that I may be thought none the less to have made a voyage. On that day I had to endure the full fate of an athlete; the anointing^[1] with which we began was followed by the sand-sprinkle in the Naples tunnel.^[2]

No place could be longer than that prison; nothing could be dimmer than those torches, which enabled us, not to see amid the darkness, but to see the darkness. But, even supposing that there was light in the place, the dust, which is an oppressive and disagreeable thing even in the open air, would destroy the light; how much worse the dust is there, where it rolls back upon itself, and, being shut in without ventilation, blows back in the faces of those who set it going! So we endured two inconveniences at the same time, and they were diametrically different: we struggled both with mud and with dust on the same road and on the same day.

The gloom, however, furnished me with some food for thought; I felt a certain mental thrill, and a transformation unaccompanied by fear, due to the novelty and the unpleasantness of an unusual occurrence. Of course I am not speaking to you of myself at this

point, because I am far from being a perfect person, or even a man of middling qualities; I refer to one over whom fortune has lost her control. Even such a man's mind will be smitten with a thrill and he will change colour.

For there are certain emotions, my dear Lucilius, which no courage can avoid; nature reminds courage how perishable a thing it is. And so he will contract his brow when the prospect is forbidding, will shudder at sudden apparitions, and will become dizzy when he stands at the edge of a high precipice and looks down. This is not fear; it is a natural feeling which reason cannot rout.

That is why certain brave men, most willing to shed their own blood, cannot bear to see the blood of others. Some persons collapse and faint at the sight of a freshly inflicted wound; others are affected similarly on handling or viewing an old wound which is festering. And others meet the sword-stroke more readily than they see it dealt.

Accordingly, as I said, I experienced a certain transformation, though it could not be called confusion. Then at the first glimpse of restored daylight my good spirits returned without forethought or command. And I began to muse and think how foolish we are to fear certain objects to a greater or less degree, since all of them end in the same way. For what difference does it make whether a watchtower or a mountain crashes down upon us? No difference at all, you will find. Nevertheless, there will be some men who fear the latter mishap to a greater degree, though both accidents are equally deadly; so true it is that fear looks not to the effect, but to the cause of the effect.

Do you suppose that I am now referring to the Stoics,^[3] who hold that the soul of a man crushed by a great weight cannot abide, and is scattered forthwith, because it has not had a free

opportunity to depart? That is not what I am doing; those who think thus are, in my opinion, wrong.

Just as fire cannot be crushed out, since it will escape round the edges of the body which overwhelms it; just as the air cannot be damaged by lashes and blows, or even cut into, but flows back about the object to which it gives place; similarly the soul, which consists of the subtlest particles, cannot be arrested or destroyed inside the body, but, by virtue of its delicate substance, it will rather escape through the very object by which it is being crushed. Just as lightning, no matter how widely it strikes and flashes, makes its return through a narrow opening,^[4] so the soul, which is still subtler than fire, has a way of escape through any part of the body.

We therefore come to this question—whether the soul can be immortal. But be sure of this: if the soul survives the body after the body is crushed, the soul can in no wise be crushed out, precisely because it does not perish; for the rule of immortality never admits of exceptions, and nothing can harm that which is everlasting. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. i.e., an “anointing” with mud.
2. A characteristic figure. After anointing, the wrestler was sprinkled with sand, so that the opponent’s hand might not slip. The Naples tunnel furnished a shortcut to those who, like Seneca in this letter, did not wish to take the time to travel by the shore route along the promontory of Pausilipum.
3. Cf. Hicks, *Stoic and Epicurean*, p. 61, on the doctrine of interpenetration, explaining the diffusion of the soul throughout the body; and Rohde, *Psyche*, ii. 319, on the popular superstition that one who dies in a whirlwind has his soul snatched away by the wind-spirits. The doctrine referred to by Seneca is not, however, a purely Stoic doctrine.
4. For this belief compare Xenophon, *Mem.* iv. 3. 14, “No one sees the bolt either on its way down or on its way back.” Seneca himself was much interested in lightning cf. *N. Q.* ii. 40. 2.



LETTER 58

On Being



Tim Ferriss here. Pardon the interruption, but what follows is a very strange letter. Seneca is usually concrete, relatable, and very tactical. For most people, Letter 58, titled “On Being,” is none of these things.

Still, it’s here because we want you to have the complete experience. Just be forewarned that Seneca goes a bit off the reservation. I found it jarring and wished I’d had a warning, hence this short note. You might think of Letter 58 as Seneca on mushrooms. If not your thing, feel free to skip to Letter 59. I usually do.

And there’s another abstract letter coming up in Letter 65, titled “On The First Cause.” Please feel free to skip that letter—or any letter, for that matter—that doesn’t strike your fancy.

With all that said, enjoy.

How scant of words our language is, nay, how poverty-stricken, I have not fully understood until today. We happened to be speaking of Plato, and a thousand subjects came up for discussion, which needed names and yet possessed none; and there were certain others which once possessed, but have since lost, their words because we were too nice about their use. But who can endure to be nice in the midst of poverty?^[1]

There is an insect, called by the Greeks *oestrus*,^[2] which drives cattle wild and scatters them all over their pasturing grounds; it used to be called *asilus* in our language, as you may believe on the authority of Vergil:

*Near Silarus groves, and eke Alburnus' shades
Of green-clad oak-trees flits an insect, named
Asilus by the Romans; in the Greek
The word is rendered oestrus. With a rough
And strident sound it buzzes and drives wild
The terror-stricken herds throughout the woods.*^[3]

By which I infer that the word has gone out of use. And, not to keep you waiting too long, there were certain uncompounded words current, like *cernere ferro inter se*, as will be proved again by Vergil:

*Great heroes, born in various lands, had come
To settle matters mutually with the sword.*^[4]

This “settling matters” we now express by *decernere*. The plain word has become obsolete.

The ancients used to say *iusso*, instead of *iussero*, in conditional clauses. You need not take my word, but you may turn again to Vergil:

*The other soldiers shall conduct the fight
With me, where I shall bid.*^[5]

It is not in my purpose to show, by this array of examples, how much time I have wasted on the study of language; I merely wish you to understand how many words, that were current in the works of Ennius and Accius, have become mouldy with age; while even in the case of Vergil, whose works are explored daily, some of his words have been filched away from us.

You will say, I suppose: “What is the purpose and meaning of this preamble?” I shall not keep you in the dark; I desire, if possible, to say the word *essentia* to you and obtain a favourable hearing. If I cannot do this, I shall risk it even though it put you out of humour. I have Cicero,^[6] as authority for the use of this word, and I regard him as a powerful authority. If you desire testimony of a later date, I shall cite Fabianus,^[7] careful of speech, cultivated, and so polished in style that he will suit even our nice tastes. For what can we do, my dear Lucilius? How otherwise can we find a word for that which the Greeks call οὐσία, something that is indispensable, something that is the natural substratum of everything? I beg you accordingly to allow me to use this word *essentia*. I shall nevertheless take pains to exercise the privilege, which you have granted me, with as sparing a hand as possible; perhaps I shall be content with the mere right.

Yet what good will your indulgence do me, if, lo and behold, I can in no wise express in Latin^[8] the meaning of the word which gave me the opportunity to rail at the poverty of our language? And you will condemn our narrow Roman limits even more, when you find out that there is a word of one syllable which I cannot translate. “What is this?” you ask. It is the word ὄν. You think me lacking in facility; you believe that the word is ready to hand, that it might be translated by *quod est*. I notice, however, a great difference; you are forcing me to render a noun by a verb.

But if I must do so, I shall render it by *quod est*. There are six ways^[9] in which Plato expresses this idea, according to a friend of ours, a man of great learning, who mentioned the fact today. And I shall explain all of them to you, if I may first point out that there is something called *genus* and something called *species*.

For the present, however, we are seeking the primary idea of *genus*, on which the others, the different *species*, depend, which is the source of all classification, the term under which universal

ideas are embraced. And the idea of *genus* will be reached if we begin to reckon back from particulars; for in this way we shall be conducted back to the primary notion.

Now “man” is a *species*, as Aristotle^[10] says; so is “horse,” or “dog.” We must therefore discover some common bond for all these terms, one which embraces them and holds them subordinate to itself. And what is this? It is “animal.” And so there begins to be a *genus* “animal,” including all these terms, “man,” “horse,” and “dog.”

But there are certain things which have life (*anima*) and yet are not “animals.” For it is agreed that plants and trees possess life, and that is why we speak of them as living and dying. Therefore the term “living things” will occupy a still higher place, because both animals and plants are included in this category. Certain objects, however, lack life—such as rocks. There will therefore be another term to take precedence over “living things,” and that is “substance.” I shall classify “substance” by saying that all substances are either animate or inanimate.

But there is still something superior to “substance”; for we speak of certain things as possessing substance, and certain things as lacking substance. What, then, will be the term from which these things are derived? It is that to which we lately gave an inappropriate name, “that which exists.” For by using this term they will be divided into *species*, so that we can say: that which exists either possesses, or lacks, substance.

This, therefore, is what *genus* is—the primary, original, and (to play upon the word) “general.” Of course there are the other *genera*: but they are “special” *genera*: “man” being, for example, a *genus*. For “man” comprises species: by nations—Greek, Roman, Parthian; by colours—white, black, yellow. The term comprises individuals also: Cato, Cicero, Lucretius. So “man” falls into the category *genus*, in so far as it includes many kinds; but in so far

as it is subordinate to another term, it falls into the category *species*. But the *genus* “that which exists” is general, and has no term superior to it. It is the first term in the classification of things, and all things are included under it.

The Stoics would set ahead of this still another *genus*, even more primary; concerning which I shall immediately speak, after proving that the *genus* which has been discussed above, has rightly been placed first, being, as it is, capable of including everything.

I therefore distribute “that which exists” into these two species—things with, and things without, substance. There is no third class. And how do I distribute “substance”? By saying that it is either animate or inanimate. And how do I distribute the “animate”? By saying: “Certain things have mind, while others have only life.” Or the idea may be expressed as follows: “Certain things have the power of movement, of progress, of change of position, while others are rooted in the ground; they are fed and they grow only through their roots.” Again, into what species do I divide “animals”? They are either perishable or imperishable.

Certain of the Stoics regard the primary *genus*^[11] as the “something.” I shall add the reasons they give for their belief; they say: “in the order of nature some things exist, and other things do not exist. And even the things that do not exist are really part of the order of nature. What these are will readily occur to the mind, for example centaurs, giants, and all other figments of unsound reasoning, which have begun to have a definite shape, although they have no bodily consistency.”

But I now return to the subject which I promised to discuss for you, namely, how it is that Plato^[12] divides all existing things in six different ways. The first class of “that which exists” cannot be grasped by the sight or by the touch, or by any of the senses; but it can be grasped by the thought. Any generic conception, such as the generic idea “man,” does not come within the range of the

eyes; but “man” in particular does; as, for example, Cicero, Cato. The term “animal” is not seen; it is grasped by thought alone. A particular animal, however, is seen, for example, a horse, a dog.

The second class of “things which exist,” according to Plato, is that which is prominent and stands out above everything else; this, he says, exists in a pre-eminent degree.^[13] The word “poet” is used indiscriminately, for this term is applied to all writers of verse; but among the Greeks it has come to be the distinguishing mark of a single individual. You know that Homer is meant when you hear men say “the poet.” What, then, is this pre-eminent Being? God, surely, one who is greater and more powerful than anyone else.

The third class is made up of those things which exist in the proper sense of the term;^[14] they are countless in number, but are situated beyond our sight. “What are these?” you ask. They are Plato’s own furniture, so to speak; he calls them “ideas,” and from them all visible things are created, and according to their pattern all things are fashioned. They are immortal, unchangeable, inviolable.

And this “idea,” or rather, Plato’s conception of it,^[15] is as follows: “The ‘idea’ is the everlasting pattern of those things which are created by nature.” I shall explain this definition, in order to set the subject before you in a clearer light: Suppose that I wish to make a likeness of you; I possess in your own person the pattern of this picture, wherefrom my mind receives a certain outline, which it is to embody in its own handiwork. That outward appearance, then, which gives me instruction and guidance, this pattern for me to imitate, is the “idea.” Such patterns, therefore, nature possesses in infinite number—of men, fish, trees, according to whose model everything that nature has to create is worked out.

In the fourth place we shall put “form.”^[16] And if you would know what “form” means, you must pay close attention, calling

Plato, and not me, to account for the difficulty of the subject. However, we cannot make fine distinctions without encountering difficulties. A moment ago I made use of the artist as an illustration. When the artist desired to reproduce Vergil in colours he would gaze upon Vergil himself. The "idea" was Vergil's outward appearance, and this was the pattern of the intended work. That which the artist draws from this "idea" and has embodied in his own work, is the "form."

Do you ask me where the difference lies? The former is the pattern; while the latter is the shape taken from the pattern and embodied in the work. Our artist follows the one, but the other he creates. A statue has a certain external appearance; this external appearance of the statue is the "form." And the pattern^[17] itself has a certain external appearance, by gazing upon which the sculptor has fashioned his statue; this is the "idea." If you desire a further distinction, I will say that the "form" is in the artist's work, the "idea" outside his work, and not only outside it, but prior to it.

The fifth class is made up of the things which exist in the usual sense of the term. These things are the first that have to do with us; here we have all such things as men, cattle, and things. In the sixth class goes all that which has a fictitious existence, like void, or time.

Whatever is concrete to the sight or touch, Plato does not include among the things which he believes to be existent in the strict sense of the term.^[18] These things are the first that have to do with us: here we have all such things as men, cattle, and things. For they are in a state of flux, constantly diminishing or increasing. None of us is the same man in old age that he was in youth; nor the same on the morrow as on the day preceding. Our bodies are burned along like flowing waters; every visible object accompanies time in its flight; of the things which we see, nothing is fixed. Even I myself as I comment on this change, am changed myself.

This is just what Heraclitus^[19] says: “We go down twice into the same river, and yet into a different river.” For the stream still keeps the same name, but the water has already flowed past. Of course this is much more evident in rivers than in human beings. Still, we mortals are also carried past in no less speedy a course; and this prompts me to marvel at our madness in cleaving with great affection to such a fleeting thing as the body, and in fearing lest some day we may die, when every instant means the death of our previous condition.^[20] Will you not stop fearing lest that may happen once which really happens every day?

So much for man—a substance that flows away and falls, exposed to every influence; but the universe, too, immortal and enduring as it is, changes and never remains the same. For though it has within itself all that it has had, it has it in a different way from that in which it has had it; it keeps changing its arrangement.

“Very well,” say you, “what good shall I get from all this fine reasoning?” None, if you wish me to answer your question. Nevertheless, just as an engraver rests his eyes when they have long been under a strain and are weary, and calls them from their work, and “feasts” them, as the saying is; so we at times should slacken our minds and refresh them with some sort of entertainment. But let even your entertainment be work; and even from these various forms of entertainment you will select, if you have been watchful, something that may prove wholesome.

That is my habit, Lucilius: I try to extract and render useful some element from every field of thought, no matter how far removed it may be from philosophy. Now what could be less likely to reform character than the subjects which we have been discussing? And how can I be made a better man by the “ideas” of Plato? What can I draw from them that will put a check on my appetites? Perhaps the very thought, that all these things which

minister to our senses, which arouse and excite us, are by Plato denied a place among the things that really exist.

Such things are therefore imaginary, and though they for the moment present a certain external appearance, yet they are in no case permanent or substantial; none the less, we crave them as if they were always to exist, or as if we were always to possess them.

We are weak, watery beings standing in the midst of unrealities; therefore let us turn our minds to the things that are everlasting. Let us look up to the ideal outlines of all things, that flit about on high, and to the God who moves among them and plans how he may defend from death that which he could not make imperishable because its substance forbade, and so by reason may overcome the defects of the body.

For all things abide, not because they are everlasting, but because they are protected by the care of him who governs all things; but that which was imperishable would need no guardian. The Master Builder keeps them safe, overcoming the weakness of their fabric by his own power. Let us despise everything that is so little an object of value that it makes us doubt whether it exists at all.

Let us at the same time reflect, seeing that Providence rescues from its perils the world itself, which is no less mortal than we ourselves, that to some extent our petty bodies can be made to tarry longer upon earth by our own providence, if only we acquire the ability to control and check those pleasures whereby the greater portion of mankind perishes.

Plato himself, by taking pains, advanced to old age. To be sure, he was the fortunate possessor of a strong and sound body (his very name was given him because of his broad chest^[21]); but his strength was much impaired by sea voyages and desperate adventures. Nevertheless, by frugal living, by setting a limit upon all that

rouses the appetites, and by painstaking attention to himself, he reached that advanced age in spite of many hindrances.

You know, I am sure, that Plato had the good fortune, thanks to his careful living, to die on his birthday, after exactly completing his eighty-first year. For this reason wise men of the East, who happened to be in Athens at that time, sacrificed to him after his death, believing that his length of days was too full for a mortal man, since he had rounded out the perfect number of nine times nine. I do not doubt that he would have been quite willing to forgo a few days from this total, as well as the sacrifice.

Frugal living can bring one to old age; and to my mind old age is not to be refused any more than is to be craved. There is a pleasure in being in one's own company as long as possible, when a man has made himself worth enjoying. The question, therefore, on which we have to record our judgment is, whether one should shrink from extreme old age and should hasten the end artificially, instead of waiting for it to come. A man who sluggishly awaits his fate is almost a coward, just as he is immoderately given to wine who drains the jar dry and sucks up even the dregs.

But we shall ask this question also: "Is the extremity of life the dregs, or is it the clearest and purest part of all, provided only that the mind is unimpaired, and the senses, still sound, give their support to the spirit, and the body is not worn out and dead before its time?" For it makes a great deal of difference whether a man is lengthening his life or his death.

But if the body is useless for service, why should one not free the struggling soul? Perhaps one ought to do this a little before the debt is due, lest, when it falls due, he may be unable to perform the act. And since the danger of living in wretchedness is greater than the danger of dying soon, he is a fool who refuses to stake a little time and win a hazard of great gain.^[22]

Few have lasted through extreme old age to death without impairment, and many have lain inert, making no use of themselves. How much more cruel, then, do you suppose it really is to have lost a portion of your life, than to have lost your right to end that life?

Do not hear me with reluctance, as if my statement applied directly to you, but weigh what I have to say. It is this, that I shall not abandon old age, if old age preserves me intact for myself, and intact as regards the better part of myself; but if old age begins to shatter my mind, and to pull its various faculties to pieces, if it leaves me, not life, but only the breath of life, I shall rush out of a house that is crumbling and tottering.

I shall not avoid illness by seeking death, as long as the illness is curable and does not impede my soul. I shall not lay violent hands upon myself just because I am in pain; for death under such circumstances is defeat. But if I find out that the pain must always be endured, I shall depart, not because of the pain but because it will be a hindrance to me as regards all my reasons for living. He who dies just because he is in pain is a weakling, a coward; but he who lives merely to brave out this pain, is a fool.

But I am running on too long; and, besides, there is matter here to fill a day. And how can a man end his life, if he cannot end a letter? So farewell. This last word^[23] you will read with greater pleasure than all my deadly talk about death. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. This theme was emphasized by Lucretius, i. 136 and 832, and iii. 260. Munro thinks, however, that "Lucretius had too much instead of too little technical language for a poet." Seneca knew Lucretius; cf. Epp. lviii. 12, xc. 11, etc.
2. The gad-fly.
3. *Georgics*, iii. 146 ff.
4. *Aeneid*, xii. 708 f.
5. *Aeneid*, xi. 467.

6. Cicero usually says *natura*. The word, according to Quintilian, was first used by a certain Sergius Flavius. It is also found in Apulcius, Macrobius, and Sidonius.
7. See Ep. c. Papirius Fabianus, who lived in the times of Tiberius and Caligula, was a pupil of the Sextius of Ep. lix., and was (Pliny, *N. H.* xxxvi. 15. 24) *naturae rerum peritissimus*. He is praised by the elder Seneca (*Cont. 2. Praef.*) who, however, says of him *deerat robur—splendor aderat*.
8. i.e., I must not use other imported words to explain *essentia*, which is not a native Latin word, but invented as a literal translation of οὐσία.
9. Cf. § 16.
10. *Categories* 2 b 11 and often.
11. i.e., the *genus* beyond “that which exists.”
12. Cf. § 8. Plato’s usual division was threefold—αἰσθητά, μαθηματικά, εἶδη (*sensibilia, mathematica, ideae*)—a division which is often quoted by Aristotle.
13. Εἶναι κατ’ ἐξοχήν. After illustrating the poet κατ’ ἐξοχήν, Homer, he passes to τὸ ὄν κατ’ ἐξοχήν, God.
14. Ὅντως τὰ ὄντα. “Each idea is a single, independent, separate, self-existing, perfect, and eternal essence”; Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, ii. 169. See Zeller’s *Plato* (p. 237) for a list of Greek words used by Plato to indicate the reality of these ideas.
15. Cf., for example, *Parmenides* 132 D. What follows is not a direct quotation, and the same thought is found elsewhere.
16. Εἶδος.
17. i.e., the “original.”
18. i.e., κυρίως ὄντα. See above, § 16f
19. Frag. 49^a Diels² ποταμοῖς τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἐμβαίνομέν τε καὶ οὐκ ἐμβαίνομεν, εἰμέν τε καὶ οὐκ εἶμεν.
20. This idea Seneca has already developed in Ep. xxiv. 20.
21. Diogenes Laertius, iii. 1, who records also other explanations of the name Plato, which replaced the given name Aristocles.
22. Cf. Plato, *Phaedo*, 114 D καὶ ἄξιον κινδυνεῦσαι, οἰομένω οὕτως ἔχειν· καλὸς γὰρ ὁ κίνδυνος, the “chance” being immortality.
23. Since *vale* means “keep well” no less than “good bye.”

On Pleasure and Joy



I received great pleasure from your letter; kindly allow me to use these words in their everyday meaning, without insisting upon their Stoic import. For we Stoics hold that pleasure is a vice. Very likely it is a vice; but we are accustomed to use the word when we wish to indicate a happy state of mind.

I am aware that if we test words by our formula,^[1] even pleasure is a thing of ill repute, and joy can be attained only by the wise. For “joy” is an elation of spirit, of a spirit which trusts in the goodness and truth of its own possessions. The common usage, however, is that we derive great “joy” from a friend’s position as consul, or from his marriage, or from the birth of his child; but these events, so far from being matters of joy, are more often the beginnings of sorrow to come. No, it is a characteristic of real joy that it never ceases, and never changes into its opposite.^[2]

Accordingly, when our Vergil speaks of

The evil joys of the mind,^[3]

his words are eloquent, but not strictly appropriate. For no “joy” can be evil. He has given the name “joy” to pleasures, and has thus expressed his meaning. For he has conveyed the idea that men take delight in their own evil.

Nevertheless, I was not wrong in saying that I received great “pleasure” from your letter; for although an ignorant^[4] man may derive “joy” if the cause be an honourable one, yet, since his emotion is wayward, and is likely soon to take another direction, I call it “pleasure”; for it is inspired by an opinion concerning a spurious good; it exceeds control and is carried to excess.

But, to return to the subject, let me tell you what delighted me in your letter. You have your words under control. You are not carried away by your language, or borne beyond the limits which you have determined upon.

Many writers are tempted by the charm of some alluring phrase to some topic other than that which they had set themselves to discuss. But this has not been so in your case; all your words are compact, and suited to the subject, You say all that you wish, and you mean still more than you say. This is a proof of the importance of your subject matter, showing that your mind, as well as your words, contains nothing superfluous or bombastic.

I do, however,^[5] find some metaphors, not, indeed, daring ones, but the kind which have stood the test of use. I find similes also; of course, if anyone forbids us to use them, maintaining that poets alone have that privilege, he has not, apparently, read any of our ancient prose writers, who had not yet learned to affect a style that should win applause. For those writers, whose eloquence was simple and directed only towards proving their case, are full of comparisons; and I think that these are necessary, not for the same reason which makes them necessary for the poets, but in order that they may serve as props to our feebleness, to bring both speaker and listener face to face with the subject under discussion.

For example, I am at this very moment reading Sextius;^[6] he is a keen man, and a philosopher who, though he writes in Greek, has the Roman standard of ethics. One of his similes appealed especially to me, that of an army marching in hollow square,^[7]

in a place where the enemy might be expected to appear from any quarter, ready for battle. "This," said he, "is just what the wise man ought to do; he should have all his fighting qualities deployed on every side, so that wherever the attack threatens, there his supports may be ready to hand and may obey the captain's command without confusion." This is what we notice in armies which serve under great leaders; we see how all the troops simultaneously understand their general's orders, since they are so arranged that a signal given by one man passes down the ranks of cavalry and infantry at the same moment.

This, he declares, is still more necessary for men like ourselves; for soldiers have often feared an enemy without reason, and the march which they thought most dangerous has in fact been most secure; but folly brings no repose, fear haunts it both in the van and in the rear of the column, and both flanks are in a panic. Folly is pursued, and confronted, by peril. It blanches at everything; it is unprepared; it is frightened even by auxiliary troops.^[8] But the wise man is fortified against all inroads; he is alert; he will not retreat before the attack of poverty, or of sorrow, or of disgrace, or of pain. He will walk undaunted both against them and among them.

We human beings are fettered and weakened by many vices; we have wallowed in them for a long time and it is hard for us to be cleansed. We are not merely defiled; we are dyed by them. But, to refrain from passing from one figure^[9] to another, I will raise this question, which I often consider in my own heart: why is it that folly holds us with such an insistent grasp? It is, primarily, because we do not combat it strongly enough, because we do not struggle towards salvation with all our might; secondly, because we do not put sufficient trust in the discoveries of the wise, and do not drink in their words with open hearts; we approach this great problem in too trifling a spirit.

But how can a man learn, in the struggle against his vices, an amount that is enough, if the time which he gives to learning is only the amount left over from his vices? None of us goes deep below the surface. We skim the top only, and we regard the smattering of time spent in the search for wisdom as enough and to spare for a busy man.

What hinders us most of all is that we are too readily satisfied with ourselves; if we meet with someone who calls us good men, or sensible men, or holy men, we see ourselves in his description, not content with praise in moderation, we accept everything that shameless flattery heaps upon us, as if it were our due. We agree with those who declare us to be the best and wisest of men, although we know that they are given to much lying. And we are so self-complacent that we desire praise for certain actions when we are especially addicted to the very opposite. Yonder person hears himself called “most gentle” when he is inflicting tortures, or “most generous” when he is engaged in looting, or “most temperate” when he is in the midst of drunkenness and lust. Thus it follows that we are unwilling to be reformed, just because we believe ourselves to be the best of men.

Alexander was roaming as far as India, ravaging tribes that were but little known, even to their neighbours. During the blockade of a certain city, while he was reconnoitring the walls and hunting for the weakest spot in the fortifications, he was wounded by an arrow. Nevertheless, he long continued the siege, intent on finishing what he had begun. The pain of his wound, however, as the surface became dry and as the flow of blood was checked, increased; his leg gradually became numb as he sat his horse; and finally, when he was forced to withdraw, he exclaimed: “All men swear that I am the son of Jupiter, but this wound cries out that I am mortal.”^[10]

Let us also act in the same way. Each man, according to his lot in life, is stultified by flattery. We should say to him who flatters us: "You call me a man of sense, but I understand how many of the things which I crave are useless, and how many of the things which I desire will do me harm. I have not even the knowledge, which satiety teaches to animals, of what should be the measure of my food or my drink. I do not yet know how much I can hold."

I shall now show you how you may know that you are not wise. The wise man is joyful, happy and calm, unshaken, he lives on a plane with the gods. Now go, question yourself; if you are never downcast, if your mind is not harassed by my apprehension, through anticipation of what is to come, if day and night your soul keeps on its even and unswerving course, upright and content with itself, then you have attained to the greatest good that mortals can possess. If, however, you seek pleasures of all kinds in all directions, you must know that you are as far short of wisdom as you are short of joy. Joy is the goal which you desire to reach, but you are wandering from the path, if you expect to reach your goal while you are in the midst of riches and official titles—in other words, if you seek joy in the midst of cares, these objects for which you strive so eagerly, as if they would give you happiness and pleasure, are merely causes of grief.

All men of this stamp, I maintain, are pressing on in pursuit of joy, but they do not know where they may obtain a joy that is both great and enduring. One person seeks it in feasting and self-indulgence; another, in canvassing for honours and in being surrounded by a throng of clients; another, in his mistress; another, in idle display of culture and in literature that has no power to heal; all these men are led astray by delights which are deceptive and short-lived—like drunkenness for example, which pays for a single hour of hilarious madness by a sickness of many days, or

like applause and the popularity of enthusiastic approval which are gained, and atoned for, at the cost of great mental disquietude.

Reflect, therefore, on this, that the effect of wisdom is a joy that is unbroken and continuous.^[11] The mind of the wise man is like the ultra-lunar firmament;^[12] eternal calm pervades that region. You have, then, a reason for wishing to be wise, if the wise man is never deprived of joy. This joy springs only from the knowledge that you possess the virtues. None but the brave, the just, the self-restrained, can rejoice.

And when you query: “What do you mean? Do not the foolish and the wicked also rejoice?” I reply, no more than lions who have caught their prey. When men have wearied themselves with wine and lust, when night fails them before their debauch is done, when the pleasures which they have heaped upon a body that is too small to hold them begin to fester, at such times they utter in their wretchedness those lines of Vergil:^[13]

*Thou knowest how, amid false-glittering joys,
We spent that last of nights.*

Pleasure-lovers spend every night amid false-glittering joys, and just as if it were their last. But the joy which comes to the gods, and to those who imitate the gods, is not broken off, nor does it cease; but it would surely cease were it borrowed from without. Just because it is not in the power of another to bestow, neither is it subject to another’s whims. That which Fortune has not given, she cannot take away. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. A figure taken from the praetor’s edict, which was posted publicly on a white tablet, *album*.
2. i.e., grief.
3. *Aeneid*, vi. 278.
4. The wise man, on the other hand, has his emotions under control, and is less likely to be swayed by “an opinion concerning a spurious good.”
5. i.e., in spite of the fact that your style is compact.

6. Q. Sextius was a Stoic with Pythagorean leanings, who lived in the days of Julius Caesar. He is also mentioned in Epp. lxiv. and lxxiii. A book of moral *Sententiae*, taken over by the church, is assigned to him, perhaps wrongly.
7. *Agmen quadratum* was an army in a square formation, with baggage in the middle, ready for battle—as contrasted with *agmen iustum* (close ranks), and *acies triplex* (a stationary formation, almost rectangular). *Agmen quadratum* is first found in the Spanish campaigns of the second century B.C.
8. i.e., by the troops of the second line, who in training and quality were inferior to the troops of the legion.
9. i.e., from that of the “fetter” to that of the “dust and dye.” In § 6 Seneca has praised Lucilius for his judicious employment of metaphors.
10. Several similar stories are related about Alexander, e.g. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 180 E, where he says to his flatterers, pointing to a wound just received: “See, this is blood, not ichor!”
11. Seneca returns to the definition of *gaudium* given in § 2: “True joy never ceases and never changes into its opposite.” It is not subject to ups and downs.
12. Cf. Seneca, *De Ira*, iii. 6. 1. The upper firmament, near the stars, is free from clouds and storms. It is calm, though the lightning plays below.
13. *Aeneid*, vi. 513 f. The night is that which preceded the sack of Troy.

LETTER 60

On Harmful Prayers



I file a complaint, I enter a suit, I am angry. Do you still desire what your nurse, your guardian, or your mother, have prayed for in your behalf? Do you not yet understand what evil they prayed for? Alas, how hostile to us are the wishes of our own folk! And they are all the more hostile in proportion as they are more completely fulfilled. It is no surprise to me, at my age, that nothing but evil attends us from our early youth; for we have grown up amid the curses invoked by our parents. And may the gods give ear to our cry also, uttered in our own behalf—one which asks no favours!

How long shall we go on making demands upon the gods, as if we were still unable to support ourselves? How long shall we continue to fill with grain the market-places of our great cities? How long must the people gather it in for us? How long shall many ships convey the requisites for a single meal, bringing them from no single sea? The bull is filled when he feeds over a few acres; and one forest is large enough for a herd of elephants. Man, however, draws sustenance both from the earth and from the sea.

What, then? Did nature give us bellies so insatiable, when she gave us these puny bodies, that we should outdo the hugest and most voracious animals in greed? Not at all. How small is the amount which will satisfy nature? A very little will send her away

contented. It is not the natural hunger of our bellies that costs us dear, but our solicitous cravings.

Therefore those who, as Sallust^[1] puts it, “hearken to their bellies,” should be numbered among the animals, and not among men; and certain men, indeed, should be numbered, not even among the animals, but among the dead. He really lives who is made use of by many; he really lives who makes use of himself. Those men, however, who creep into a hole and grow torpid^[2] are no better off in their homes than if they were in their tombs. Right there on the marble lintel of the house of such a man you may inscribe his name,^[3] for he has died before he is dead. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Catiline, i. 1.

2. i.e., like animals.

3. i.e., you may put an epitaph upon his dwelling as if it were a tomb.

LETTER 61

On Meeting Death Cheerfully



Let us cease to desire that which we have been desiring. I, at least, am doing this: in my old age I have ceased to desire what I desired when a boy. To this single end my days and my nights are passed; this is my task, this the object of my thoughts—to put an end to my chronic ills. I am endeavouring to live every day as if it were a complete life. I do not indeed snatch it up as if it were my last; I do regard it, however, as if it might even be my last.

The present letter is written to you with this in mind as if death were about to call me away in the very act of writing. I am ready to depart, and I shall enjoy life just because I am not over-anxious as to the future date of my departure.

Before I became old I tried to live well; now that I am old, I shall try to die well; but dying well means dying gladly. See to it that you never do anything unwillingly.

That which is bound to be a necessity if you rebel, is not a necessity if you desire it. This is what I mean: he who takes his orders gladly, escapes the bitterest part of slavery—doing what one does not want to do. The man who does something under orders is not unhappy; he is unhappy who does something against his will. Let us therefore so set our minds in order that we may desire whatever is demanded of us by circumstances, and above all that we may reflect upon our end without sadness.

We must make ready for death before we make ready for life. Life is well enough furnished, but we are too greedy with regard to its furnishings; something always seems to us lacking, and will always seem lacking. To have lived long enough depends neither upon our years nor upon our days, but upon our minds. I have lived, my dear friend Lucilius, long enough. I have had my fill;^[1] I await death. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. A reminiscence of Lucretius, iii. 938 f. *Cur non ut plenus vitae conviva recedus Aeque animoque capis securam, stulte, quietem?* Cf. also Horace, *Sat.* i. 1. 118 f. *vitae Cedat uti conviva satur.*

LETTER 62

On Good Company



We are deceived by those who would have us believe that a multitude of affairs blocks their pursuit of liberal studies; they make a pretence of their engagements, and multiply them, when their engagements are merely with themselves. As for me, Lucilius, my time is free; it is indeed free, and wherever I am, I am master of myself. For I do not surrender myself to my affairs, but loan myself to them, and I do not hunt out excuses for wasting my time. And wherever I am situated, I carry on my own meditations and ponder in my mind some wholesome thought.

When I give myself to my friends, I do not withdraw from my own company, nor do I linger with those who are associated with me through some special occasion or some case which arises from my official position. But I spend my time in the company of all the best; no matter in what lands they may have lived, or in what age, I let my thoughts fly to them.

Demetrius,^[1] for instance, the best of men, I take about with me, and, leaving the wearers of purple and fine linen, I talk with him, half-naked as he is, and hold him in high esteem. Why should I not hold him in high esteem? I have found that he lacks nothing. It is in the power of any man to despise all things, but of no man to possess all things. The shortest cut to riches is to despise riches. Our friend Demetrius, however, lives not merely

as if he has learned to despise all things, but as if he has handed them over for others to possess.^[2] Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Demetrius of Sunium, the Cynic philosopher, who taught in Rome in the reign of Caligula and was banished by Nero.
2. i.e., he has achieved the Stoic ideal of independence of all external control; he is a king and has all things to bestow upon others, but needs nothing for himself.

LETTER 63

On Grief for Lost Friends



I am grieved to hear that your friend Flaccus is dead, but I would not have you sorrow more than is fitting. That you should not mourn at all I shall hardly dare to insist; and yet I know that it is the better way. But what man will ever be so blessed with that ideal steadfastness of soul, unless he has already risen far above the reach of Fortune? Even such a man will be stung by an event like this, but it will be only a sting. We, however, may be forgiven for bursting into tears, if only our tears have not flowed to excess, and if we have checked them by our own efforts. Let not the eyes be dry when we have lost a friend, nor let them overflow. We may weep, but we must not wail.

Do you think that the law which I lay down for you is harsh, when the greatest of Greek poets has extended the privilege of weeping to one day only, in the lines where he tells us that even Niobe took thought of food?^[1] Do you wish to know the reason for lamentations and excessive weeping? It is because we seek the proofs of our bereavement in our tears, and do not give way to sorrow, but merely parade it. No man goes into mourning for his own sake. Shame on our ill-timed folly! There is an element of self-seeking even in our sorrow.

“What,” you say, “am I to forget my friend?” It is surely a short-lived memory that you vouchsafe to him, if it is to endure only as

long as your grief; presently that brow of yours will be smoothed out in laughter by some circumstance, however casual. It is to a time no more distant than this that I put off the soothing of every regret, the quieting of even the bitterest grief. As soon as you cease to observe yourself, the picture of sorrow which you have contemplated will fade away; at present you are keeping watch over your own suffering. But even while you keep watch it slips away from you, and the sharper it is, the more speedily it comes to an end.

Let us see to it that the recollection of those whom we have lost becomes a pleasant memory to us. No man reverts with pleasure to any subject which he will not be able to reflect upon without pain. So too it cannot but be that the names of those whom we have loved and lost come back to us with a sort of sting; but there is a pleasure even in this sting.

For, as my friend Attalus^[2] used to say: “The remembrance of lost friends is pleasant in the same way that certain fruits have an agreeably acid taste, or as in extremely old wines it is their very bitterness that pleases us. Indeed, after a certain lapse of time, every thought that gave pain is quenched, and the pleasure comes to us unalloyed.”

If we take the word of Attalus for it, “to think of friends who are alive and well is like enjoying a meal of cakes and honey; the recollection of friends who have passed away gives a pleasure that is not without a touch of bitterness. Yet who will deny that even these things, which are bitter and contain an element of sourness, do serve to arouse the stomach?”

For my part, I do not agree with him. To me, the thought of my dead friends is sweet and appealing. For I have had them as if I should one day lose them; I have lost them as if I have them still.

Therefore, Lucilius, act as befits your own serenity of mind, and cease to put a wrong interpretation on the gifts of Fortune. Fortune has taken away, but Fortune has given.

Let us greedily enjoy our friends, because we do not know how long this privilege will be ours. Let us think how often we shall leave them when we go upon distant journeys, and how often we shall fail to see them when we tarry together in the same place; we shall thus understand that we have lost too much of their time while they were alive.

But will you tolerate men who are most careless of their friends, and then mourn them most abjectly, and do not love anyone unless they have lost him? The reason why they lament too unrestrainedly at such times is that they are afraid lest men doubt whether they really have loved; all too late they seek for proofs of their emotions.

If we have other friends, we surely deserve ill at their hands and think ill of them, if they are of so little account that they fail to console us for the loss of one. If, on the other hand, we have no other friends, we have injured ourselves more than Fortune has injured us; since Fortune has robbed us of one friend, but we have robbed ourselves of every friend whom we have failed to make.

Again, he who has been unable to love more than one, has had none too much love even for that one.^[3] If a man who has lost his one and only tunic through robbery chooses to bewail his plight rather than look about him for some way to escape the cold, or for something with which to cover his shoulders, would you not think him an utter fool?

You have buried one whom you loved; look about for someone to love. It is better to replace your friend than to weep for him.

What I am about to add is, I know, a very hackneyed remark, but I shall not omit it simply because it is a common phrase: a man ends his grief by the mere passing of time, even if he has not ended

it of his own accord. But the most shameful cure for sorrow, in the case of a sensible man, is to grow weary of sorrowing. I should prefer you to abandon grief, rather than have grief abandon you; and you should stop grieving as soon as possible, since, even if you wish to do so, it is impossible to keep it up for a long time.

Our forefathers^[4] have enacted that, in the case of women, a year should be the limit for mourning; not that they needed to mourn for so long, but that they should mourn no longer. In the case of men, no rules are laid down, because to mourn at all is not regarded as honourable. For all that, what woman can you show me, of all the pathetic females that could scarcely be dragged away from the funeral-pile or torn from the corpse, whose tears have lasted a whole month? Nothing becomes offensive so quickly as grief; when fresh, it finds someone to console it and attracts one or another to itself; but after becoming chronic, it is ridiculed, and rightly. For it is either assumed or foolish.

He who writes these words to you is no other than I, who wept so excessively for my dear friend Annaeus Serenus^[5] that, in spite of my wishes, I must be included among the examples of men who have been overcome by grief. Today, however, I condemn this act of mine, and I understand that the reason why I lamented so greatly was chiefly that I had never imagined it possible for his death to precede mine. The only thought which occurred to my mind was that he was the younger, and much younger, too—as if the Fates kept to the order of our ages!

Therefore let us continually think as much about our own mortality as about that of all those we love. In former days I ought to have said: “My friend Serenus is younger than I; but what does that matter? He would naturally die after me, but he may precede me.” It was just because I did not do this that I was unprepared when Fortune dealt me the sudden blow. Now is the time for you to reflect, not only that all things are mortal, but also that their

mortality is subject to no fixed law. Whatever can happen at any time can happen today.

Let us therefore reflect, my beloved Lucilius, that we shall soon come to the goal which this friend, to our own sorrow, has reached. And perhaps, if only the tale told by wise men is true^[6] and there is a bourne to welcome us, then he whom we think we have lost has only been sent on ahead. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. Homer, *Iliad*, xix. 229 and xxiv. 602.
2. The teacher of Seneca, often mentioned by him.
3. The reason is, as Lipsius observed, that friendship is essentially a social virtue, and is not confined to one object. The pretended friendship for one and only one is a form of self-love, and is not unselfish love.
4. According to tradition, from the time of Numa Pompilius.
5. An intimate friend of Seneca, probably a relative, who died in the year 63 from eating poisoned mushrooms (Pliny, *N. H.* xxii. 96). Seneca dedicated to Serenus several of his philosophical essays.
6. Cf. the closing chapter of the *Agricola* of Tacitus: *si, ut sapientibus placet, non cum corpore exstinguuntur magnae animae*, etc.

LETTER 64

On the Philosopher's Task



Yesterday you were with us. You might complain if I said “yesterday” merely. This is why I have added “with us.” For, so far as I am concerned, you are always with me. Certain friends had happened in, on whose account a somewhat brighter fire was laid—not the kind that generally bursts from the kitchen chimneys of the rich and scares the watch, but the moderate blaze which means that guests have come.

Our talk ran on various themes, as is natural at a dinner; it pursued no chain of thought to the end, but jumped from one topic to another. We then had read to us a book by Quintus Sextius the Elder.^[1] He is a great man, if you have any confidence in my opinion, and a real Stoic, though he himself denies it.

Ye Gods, what strength and spirit one finds in him! This is not the case with all philosophers; there are some men of illustrious name whose writings are sapless. They lay down rules, they argue, and they quibble; they do not infuse spirit simply because they have no spirit. But when you come to read Sextius you will say: “He is alive; he is strong; he is free; he is more than a man; he fills me with a mighty confidence before I close his book.”

I shall acknowledge to you the state of mind I am in when I read his works: I want to challenge every hazard; I want to cry: “Why keep me waiting, Fortune? Enter the lists! Behold, I am ready for

you!" I assume the spirit of a man who seeks where he may make trial of himself where he may show his worth:

*And fretting 'mid the unwarlike flocks he prays
Some foam-flecked boar may cross his path, or else
A tawny lion stalking down the hills.^[2]*

I want something to overcome, something on which I may test my endurance. For this is another remarkable quality that Sextius possesses: he will show you the grandeur of the happy life and yet will not make you despair of attaining it; you will understand that it is on high, but that it is accessible to him who has the will to seek it.

And virtue herself will have the same effect upon you, of making you admire her and yet hope to attain her. In my own case, at any rate the very contemplation of wisdom takes much of my time; I gaze upon her with bewilderment, just as I sometimes gaze upon the firmament itself, which I often behold as if I saw it for the first time.

Hence I worship the discoveries of wisdom and their discoverers; to enter, as it were, into the inheritance of many predecessors is a delight. It was for me that they laid up this treasure; it was for me that they toiled. But we should play the part of a careful householder; we should increase what we have inherited. This inheritance shall pass from me to my descendants larger than before. Much still remains to do, and much will always remain, and he who shall be born a thousand ages hence will not be barred from his opportunity of adding something further.

But even if the old masters have discovered everything, one thing will be always new—the application and the scientific study and classification of the discoveries made by others. Assume that prescriptions have been handed down to us for the healing of the eyes; there is no need of my searching for others in addition; but

for all that, these prescriptions must be adapted to the particular disease and to the particular stage of the disease. Use this prescription to relieve granulation of the eyelids, that to reduce the swelling of the lids, this to prevent sudden pain or a rush of tears, that to sharpen the vision. Then compound these several prescriptions, watch for the right time of their application, and supply the proper treatment in each case.

The cures for the spirit also have been discovered by the ancients; but it is our task to learn the method and the time of treatment.

Our predecessors have worked much improvement, but have not worked out the problem. They deserve respect, however, and should be worshipped with a divine ritual. Why should I not keep statues of great men to kindle my enthusiasm, and celebrate their birthdays? Why should I not continually greet them with respect and honour? The reverence which I owe to my own teachers I owe in like measure to those teachers of the human race, the source from which the beginnings of such great blessings have flowed.

If I meet a consul or a praetor, I shall pay him all the honour which his post of honour is wont to receive: I shall dismount, uncover, and yield the road. What, then? Shall I admit into my soul with less than the highest marks of respect Marcus Cato, the Elder and the Younger, Laelius the Wise, Socrates and Plato, Zeno and Cleanthes? I worship them in very truth, and always rise to do honour to such noble names. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. See on Ep. lix. 7. As the following sentence indicates, he seems to have considered himself an eclectic in philosophy, and to have been half-Stoic, half-Pythagorean.
2. Vergil, *Aeneid*, iv. 158 f. The boy Ascanius, at Dido's hunt, longs for wilder game than the deer and the goats.

*Stoicism and the Art of Happiness:
An Interview With Donald Robertson*

Donald Robertson is a cognitive behavioral psychotherapist, trainer, and author who specializes in the treatment of anxiety and the use of CBT. He is the author of [*Stoicism and the Art of Happiness*](#), [*The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy*](#), and [several other books](#). His website is philosophy-of-cbt.com.

Before we get into it, can you briefly tell us how did your interest in Stoicism begin? I remember reading that you were exploring Buddhism but found it unsatisfactory and turned to Stoicism? Can you tell us about that?

Well, when I was in my early twenties, I studied philosophy at Aberdeen University. I also took courses in the history of Indian religions there, and was involved with the Buddhist society. I had a general interest in things like self-hypnosis, meditation, self-help, psychotherapy, and philosophy. These things felt like they were all competing for my attention, though, and I wanted to somehow integrate them. It wasn't until after I left university and began working as a counsellor and psychotherapist that I discovered Stoicism. It was one of the few philosophies I knew absolutely nothing about but it turned out to be the one I'd been looking for all along! I stumbled across Pierre Hadot's book *Plotinus or the*

Simplicity of Vision and that led me to read another three books by him that deal more with Stoicism. It seemed to offer a practical philosophy of life that was more familiar to me than Buddhism, more rational, and more down-to-earth. There's a sense of déjà vu when you first begin to study Stoicism because our culture is full of things influenced by it. The first thing it made me think of was the scene about *carpe diem* from Robin Williams' film *The Dead Poets' Society*. Of course, that phrase, seize the day, comes from the Odes of Horace, and Horace had studied and wrote about Stoicism, as well as the Epicurean philosophy. Stoicism reminded me of other tropes familiar from poetry and later authors, such as *memento mori*, *ubi sunt*, and the view from above. It seemed like a more practical and down-to-earth alternative to modern academic philosophy; like a more Western alternative to Buddhism; like a more rational and less faith-based alternative to Christianity... And of course, Stoicism was the inspiration for modern cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), one of my other major interests. However, not much had been written about the many parallels between them, so I started writing articles and giving talks on that subject, around 2004, which eventually evolved into my first book on Stoicism: *The Philosophy of CBT* (2010).

To go back to Buddhism, my father was a Freemason, and his interest in mysticism inspired me to begin studying Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, among other things, when I was a teenager. I was initially drawn to them all to some extent but slowly became frustrated by the obscurity of some Eastern writings. The *Dao De Jing*, for example, says that running a state is like frying small fish. I had no idea what that might mean! Likewise, our history of religions class were told how the Dalai Lama had explained the Buddhist doctrine that we have no self, and yet somehow something that's not a self is reincarnated, as like one stone hitting another stone and causing a chain reaction.

None of us could make head nor tail of that explanation, though. Stoicism seemed less cryptic to me and many of the ideas and phrases resonated with other things I'd learned from Western philosophy and literature.

Also, I believe that observing our relationship with our thoughts in general, with mindfulness, is far more important than periods of seated meditation. Whereas many people today believe that "mindfulness" is an ancient Buddhist invention, the truth is the English word was seldom used until the 1970s. It seemed to me that people were unwittingly Westernizing Buddhism, viewing it through the lens of our culture, and perhaps even imposing a concept of mindfulness on it that owed more to Hellenistic philosophies, particularly Stoicism.

Stoicism gave me a philosophy that was consistent with my other interests and with many of the concepts and practices I later came to employ in CBT. Buddhism is a very mixed bag, and very diverse. There's more than one Buddhism, if you like. However, in general, I felt Buddhist ethics were too focused on the individual attaining subjective peace of mind, nirvana, and not enough about the quality of our actions. Buddhist virtue is often presented as merely a means to the end of attaining nirvana, whereas for Stoics virtue is the end itself. To put it crudely, Buddhism, even of the Mahayana variety, seemed a good philosophy for monks but not for heroes. The Stoics warn us that it's hypocrisy to accept values ourselves that we wouldn't find admirable in other people and it seems to me that it's not very admirable to treat virtues like justice as merely a means to some personal end. Stoicism, on the other hand, values practical wisdom and virtue and seemed to offer a philosophy of life that's more actively engaged with real life, and other people.

You are a psychotherapist and have written a fascinating book on the connections between cognitive behavioral therapy and Stoicism. Can you briefly explain what CBT is and how its origins are rooted in Stoicism?

Well, it may surprise many people to learn that a form of cognitive psychotherapy has actually been around since the start of the 20th century. For decades, the founder of what was called “rational psychotherapy,” a famous Swiss psychiatrist called Paul Dubois who was influenced by Seneca, represented the main rival to Freud and psychoanalysis. His approach became completely eclipsed by psychoanalysis, though. Then behavior therapy became popular in the late 1950s, scientific research on psychotherapy started to take off, and that led to a resurgence of interest in the use of reason in psychotherapy.

Albert Ellis was the pioneer of the new wave of cognitive therapy in the 1950s and 1960s. Ellis read Marcus Aurelius as a youth. He later abandoned his training in psychoanalytic therapy to develop what he called “Rational Therapy,” or later “Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy” (REBT), which he said was inspired by Stoicism. Indeed, in addition to Ellis’ many references to the Stoics, REBT has many concepts and techniques, which appear to be derived from the Stoic literature.

Then Aaron Beck developed “cognitive therapy” in the 1960s and 1970s, and he also cited the Stoics as the philosophical inspiration for his approach, but said very little more about them. By the 1990s, the more broadly defined cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which drew on Ellis, Beck, behavior therapy, and other authors working along similar lines, had become the dominant model of modern evidence-based psychotherapy.

The central doctrine of Ellis, and later Beck, was the cognitive theory of emotion. This holds that our emotions are a combination of different factors, the main one being our thoughts or beliefs

(cognitions). For example, Beck said that when we feel fear it's because at some level we believe we're about to be harmed. That's virtually identical to the Stoic theory of fear, recorded over two thousand years earlier.

This was an important innovation in modern psychotherapy because people tend to dismiss their problematic emotions as irrational and involuntary. People say "that's just how I feel", that it's not true or false. However, if we focus instead on the beliefs underlying feelings such as fear, well, those are obviously true or false. "I'm frightened people will think I'm an idiot"; well, what if it turns out they actually don't? So we can help people to articulate those beliefs better, and bring them into awareness. Then we can help them question how helpful they are, to evaluate how rational they are in terms of the evidence, and to carry out experiments in daily life to test out whether they're true or false in practice.

For instance, people with panic attacks very often (but not always) believe the sensations of pain and tightness in their chest, etc., are symptoms of an impending heart attack. Therapists nowadays will construct tests to prove to them that they're mistaken: it's just harmless anxiety, muscle tension, and nothing to do with having a heart attack. We now know that panic attack sufferers typically misinterpret their own bodily sensations in a threatening manner. When the belief is removed, the anxiety tends to diminish, and the same basically goes for feelings such as anger or sadness as well. Ellis oriented most of his clients to the fundamental concepts of cognitive therapy in their initial assessment sessions by teaching them the famous quote from Epictetus: "It's not things that upset us, but our judgements about things." I think he actually gave them that Stoic saying in writing to take home and read, as part of what we now call the "socialization" phase of treatment.

I'd be curious to hear from your work experience, what are the Stoic exercises and techniques you've found resonate the most with patients? Which ones do you see have the biggest positive impact?

That's a more complicated question than it might seem at first... For me the most important aspect of Stoicism isn't the armamentarium of techniques but the central doctrines of their ethical philosophy. However, therapists have to be value-neutral, so we can't really teach an ethical doctrine to clients, although I've met many clients who had already read the Stoics and thought that way. Stoic Ethics and the philosophy as a whole have been very important to my work as a therapist.

Albert Ellis argued that it's fundamentally having rigidly absolutistic demands about life that make us neurotic, such as "People must respect me!" That's quite similar in some ways to the Stoic doctrine that emotional disturbance is caused by the belief that external things are intrinsically good or bad, such as "People disrespecting me is bad." The Stoics teach us to think: "I'd prefer it if people respect me, but if they don't that's not worth getting upset about." That's what we call "Stoic indifference", and it's the centerpiece of their philosophy, but it's more a value judgement than a technique. It actually requires adopting a set of moral values that are radically different from those adopted by the majority of people around us. The Stoics refer to this as undergoing "conversion" to a very different world view and set of values.

On the other hand, when it comes to using Stoic techniques in CBT, well, we already have modern versions of many Stoic techniques, which we usually have to follow closely in evidence-based practice as part of standard protocols. So the Stoic versions can inform what we do, but mainly as therapists we're focusing on the

modern equivalents of things like role-modelling (the Sage), or imaginal exposure to feared events (*premeditatio malorum*), etc.

If someone asked me, though, what's the most powerful technique in modern therapy, I'd say exposure therapy. It's arguably the most robustly scientifically-supported technique in the whole field of psychotherapy research. Exposure therapy is just a form of behavior therapy where we ask people to repeatedly face their fears, for longer than normal, in a controlled manner, sometimes in reality and sometimes in their imagination. The Stoics, especially Seneca, refer many times to doing something very similar, with fears of poverty, exile, death, and illness, etc. That's one of the most powerful strategies in modern therapy, right there, and it's been around in its modern form for over half a century now.

In terms of things that are more uniquely ancient, well, that would have to be the View from Above. That's what Hadot called the practice of contemplating life as if it were being viewed from an Olympian perspective, high above, or viewing the present moment from a cosmological point of view, as very small and transient. There's not really a common strategy in modern therapy that's equivalent to the View from Above, unlike most other Stoic techniques. However, people love doing it, and they find it very powerful. I've created scripted versions of that technique and used it in workshops with hundreds of participants over the years. What we lack, therefore, is strong empirical evidence from controlled trials showing its benefits.

This is a question we like to ask everyone: Do you have a favorite Stoic quote? Is there an exercise you find yourself going back to time and again?

That changes but at the moment I like a story about Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, told by Diogenes Laertius. One

day Zeno overheard an arrogant young man attacking the writings of the philosopher Antisthenes, doing a bit of a hatchet-job on them, to the amusement of a small crowd who had gathered around him. (Antisthenes was a prolific and accomplished writer, one of Socrates' most highly-regarded followers, and had died a couple of generations earlier.) Zeno interrupted the young man and asked him what he'd learned of value from Antisthenes' writings. He said he'd learned nothing worthwhile. Zeno replied that he should be ashamed, therefore, to expend so much time and energy picking holes in the writings of a philosopher without having first taken time to learn what he can from him that's actually of value.

I like that story because I feel that philosophical debate at its worst is merely nit-picking and destructive. It's all too easy, and in fact lazy, to pick holes in a philosophical theory, without first trying to learn what you can of value from it. That's similar to what philosophers sometimes call The Principle of Charity nowadays, that where we're not sure what someone means, because of ambiguity, we should consider the most rational or favorable interpretation first, and give them the benefit of the doubt rather than assuming they're stupid.

The psychological exercise I go back to most often is probably the one I call The Stoic Fork, which is the first one mentioned in Epictetus' *Handbook*, and the one he refers to most frequently in *The Discourses*. We're told to repeatedly remind ourselves of the distinction between our own actions and things that happen to us, or between what's "up to us" and what is not. That's good advice in most situations, but especially when you're feeling upset about something or stressed.

You've been active in the Stoicism community for a long time. You've published several books, you run a Facebook group, you're active on reddit. What do you think about the state of

the Stoicism community today? Where do you see it going in the future?

I think the Stoic presence online has surprised everyone by its growth. When I wrote *Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* I talked about how there was a Yahoo group with over a thousand members. Well, now our Facebook group is actually approaching twenty thousand members. The Stoics, particularly, Epictetus, warn us not to be diverted by trivial philosophical chit-chat and rhetoric. Well, there's definitely a tension between that and the way social media works. People don't seem to be able to resist the urge to post dumb jokes and snarky comments in response to serious questions about life and philosophy. That's okay in moderation, perhaps, but sometimes it seems to predominate and can stifle more meaningful discussion about Stoicism online.

Then at the opposite end of the scale we have the people who get into long-winded academic quibbles, again something the Stoics keep warning us to avoid. However, overall, I believe that the Internet is a force for good because it allows people to form communities dedicated to Stoicism whereas twenty years ago these people would perhaps have been isolated in that regard, and left to study Stoicism alone, without the support and good ideas that can come from others.

Going back to therapy, there are now over 40 million adults in the United States who are affected with anxiety. You specialize in anxiety treatment and I would be interested to know what you think more people need to know about anxiety and maybe what role Stoicism can have in helping with some of those issues people face?

Oh boy, where do I start? I guess the main thing I'd say is very general: that we know so much about anxiety now that it really does feel that we should be teaching more of it to our children.

Then on to specifics: anxiety abates naturally over time, under the right conditions. That's been known for over half a century, we call it the "habituation" of anxiety. If you take someone with a severe spider phobia and put a spider on their hand what happens to their heart rate? It goes up. It will roughly double within thirty seconds or so. However, what happens to their heart rate next? Most anxiety clients will say "Um, it gets worse?" Actually, it will very slowly start to reduce back toward its normal resting level or thereabouts. That normally takes roughly half an hour, although it can vary a lot. Most people would "escape" the situation long before then, though, by brushing the spider off and running out the door. So their anxiety will only reduce slightly and will continue to be a problem in the future. However, suppose you have someone else there encouraging you to persevere a bit longer, usually a therapist, you wait long enough for your anxiety to at least half, and you don't do anything else that might interfere with the process. Well then the next time you encounter a spider, your heart rate will still increase, but not as much, and it will reduce more quickly. And if you keep doing that repeatedly, exposing yourself to your fears for longer than normal, then pretty soon your anxiety will permanently reduce to a fairly negligible level. Everyone should know that's how anxiety, in its simplest form, works. Of course, there are more complex forms of anxiety than simple animal phobias, and so sometimes we need to do other things as well, but exposure therapy of that kind is the basis of most modern forms of anxiety treatment.

How does Stoicism help? Well, it teaches us a great many things of value in relation to anxiety. As we know, it teaches us to remember what's up to us and what isn't, which I believe is important and can be very powerful. However, it also teaches a basic strategy that Epictetus tells his students to use first if their emotions are overwhelming. He says we should take a step

back from our thoughts and remind ourselves that they're just impressions in our mind and not literally the things they claim to represent. Modern therapists call this "cognitive distancing" and there's growing evidence that it's one of the simplest and most powerful ways of responding to emotional distress. Everyone should learn how to do that too.

Do you have a daily Stoic routine? What does it look like if you do? Or is there an exercise that you'd like to incorporate in 2017 that you haven't already?

Yes. I spent years studying training methods for psychological skills, and teaching these to other therapists. So I became more interested in the general format of skills training. There's a great book on that, an overlooked classic, called *Stress Inoculation Training*, written by one of the pioneers of CBT, Donald Meichenbaum, in the 1980s. It's good to have a structure, so I incorporated some elements of his behavioral skills training framework into the Stoic Week Handbook and our Stoic Mindfulness and Resilience Training (SMRT) course.

In the evening, I try to review the events of the day in my mind three times, and to see what I can learn from how things went, how close I came to living in line with my core values, and achieving specific goals. The next morning, influenced by that, I try to plan the day ahead and to prepare in advance for the possibility of failure or setbacks. Then during the day, I try to be mindful of other Stoic concepts and practices, and particularly how my value judgements are affecting my feelings, and whether I'm slipping into placing more value on external things than upon my own character and intentions. That forms a kind of ongoing learning cycle: preparation, application, review, and repeat...

For the future, I'd like to try to focus more on Stoic empathy. This is an integral part of Stoic Ethics, and heavily indebted to

Socrates. The Stoics try to imagine other people as realistically as possible and to understand how their values, and errors, are influencing their behavior. As a kind of coping statement or maxim, Epictetus taught his students to say “It seemed right to him”, when faced with someone who is upsetting you. That doesn’t stop us challenging or opposing bad behavior but it should encourage us to try to understand other people and to see them as mistaken rather than merely wicked. I think that’s a much more helpful way to deal with conflict. There are many more strategies recommended by the Stoics for dealing with other people and I’m particularly interested in this interpersonal dimension of their teachings.

What’s next for you?

I’m organizing next year’s Stoicon 2017 conference in Toronto. So that should keep me pretty busy! I emigrated from the UK to Canada a few years ago and I’ve been living in Nova Scotia. However, I’m planning to move on soon and start a new training business, teaching different evidence-based psychological skills to the general public and corporate clients. I’m hoping to incorporate Stoicism into that too. I’m also working on some ideas for a couple of new books on philosophy, probably one going into a bit more detail about how to do various Stoic psychological exercises, written in very plain language. I have a five-year-old daughter and I find myself increasingly wanting to write things that she can read. She’s a big fan of Hercules and Diogenes, and she quite likes Socrates as well. I turn anecdotes about the Stoics and other ancient philosophers into stories for her, and adults seem to like those too. So I’m hoping to try out a new style of writing in some of my books.

Finally, is there a message for the Stoicism community at large—that you'd like to give?

Yes. I'd like to remind everyone that Stoicism is first and foremost an ethical philosophy. It's a radical theory about the nature of the good, or what's most important in life. The psychological techniques are all subordinate to that. That's not to say people can't cherry-pick concepts and techniques from Stoicism but the deeper worldview and set of values is, in my opinion, of much greater value at the end of the day.

I'd also observe that Stoicism is growing in popularity and social media is a big part of that. Technology is bringing people together like never before. But our greatest strength is also our greatest weakness. There's a temptation to get diverted by academic chit-chat about Stoicism and memes and superficial things. It requires self-discipline to remain focused and to make social media work for us, rather than against us, especially as groups grow larger and larger and risk being flooded with trivia. Stoicism offers powerful ideas about empathy and community, which can and should guide us in making our online life more harmonious and conducive to wisdom and virtue.

LETTER 65

On the First Cause



[Note from editor: For many readers, this is one of the more confusing and abstract letters. Feel free to skip and return later, if that holds true for you. The more tactical and actionable “PROFILES OF MODERN-DAY STOICS” follows immediately on [pg 311](#).]

I shared my time yesterday with ill health;^[1] it claimed for itself all the period before noon; in the afternoon, however, it yielded to me. And so I first tested my spirit by reading; then, when reading was found to be possible, I dared to make more demands upon the spirit, or perhaps I should say, to make more concessions to it. I wrote a little, and indeed with more concentration than usual, for I am struggling with a difficult subject and do not wish to be downed. In the midst of this, some friends visited me, with the purpose of employing force and of restraining me, as if I were a sick man indulging in some excess.

So conversation was substituted for writing; and from this conversation I shall communicate to you the topic which is still the subject of debate; for we have appointed you referee.^[2] You have more of a task on your hands than you suppose, for the argument is threefold.

Our Stoic philosophers, as you know, declare that there are two things in the universe which are the source of everything—namely,

cause and matter.^[3] Matter lies sluggish, a substance ready for any use, but sure to remain unemployed if no one sets it in motion. Cause, however, by which we mean reason, moulds matter and turns it in whatever direction it will, producing thereby various concrete results. Accordingly, there must be, in the case of each thing, that from which it is made, and, next, an agent by which it is made. The former is its material, the latter its cause.

All art is but imitation of nature; therefore, let me apply these statements of general principles to the things which have to be made by man. A statue, for example, has afforded matter which was to undergo treatment at the hands of the artist, and has had an artist who was to give form to the matter. Hence, in the case of the statue, the material was bronze, the cause was the workman. And so it goes with all things—they consist of that which is made and of the maker.

The Stoics believe in one cause only—the maker; but Aristotle thinks that the word “cause” can be used in three ways: “The first cause,” he says, “is the actual matter, without which nothing can be created. The second is the workman. The third is the form, which is impressed upon every work—a statue, for example.” This last is what Aristotle calls the *idos*.^[4] “There is, too,” says he, “a fourth—the purpose of the work as a whole.”

Now I shall show you what this last means. Bronze is the “first cause” of the statue, for it could never have been made unless there had been something from which it could be cast and moulded. The “second cause” is the artist; for without the skilled hands of a workman that bronze could not have been shaped to the outlines of the statue. The “third cause” is the form, inasmuch as our statue could never be called The Lance-Bearer or The Boy Binding his Hair^[5] had not this special shape been stamped upon it. The “fourth cause” is the purpose of the work. For if this purpose had not existed, the statue would not have been made.

Now what is this purpose? It is that which attracted the artist which he followed when he made the statue. It may have been money, if he has made it for sale; or renown, if he has worked for reputation; or religion, if he has wrought it as a gift for a temple. Therefore this also is a cause contributing towards the making of the statue; or do you think that we should avoid including, among the causes of a thing which has been made, that element without which the thing in question would not have been made?

To these four Plato adds a fifth cause—the pattern which he himself calls the “idea”; for it is this that the artist gazed upon^[6] when he created the work which he had decided to carry out. Now it makes no difference whether he has this pattern outside himself, that he may direct his glance to it, or within himself, conceived and placed there by himself. God has within himself these patterns of all things, and his mind comprehends the harmonies and the measures of the whole totality of things which are to be carried out; he is filled with these shapes which Plato calls the “ideas,”—imperishable, unchangeable, not subject to decay. And therefore, though men die, humanity itself, or the idea of man, according to which man is moulded, lasts on, and though men toil and perish, it suffers no change.

Accordingly, there are five causes, as Plato says:^[7] the material, the agent, the make-up, the model, and the end in view. Last comes the result of all these. Just as in the case of the statue—to go back to the figure with which we began—the material is the bronze, the agent is the artist, the make-up is the form which is adapted to the material, the model is the pattern imitated by the agent, the end in view is the purpose in the maker’s mind, and, finally, the result of all these is the statue itself.

The universe also, in Plato’s opinion, possesses all these elements. The agent is God; the source, matter; the form, the shape and the arrangement of the visible world. The pattern is

doubtless the model according to which God has made this great and most beautiful creation.

The purpose is his object in so doing. Do you ask what God's purpose is? It is goodness. Plato, at any rate, says: "What was God's reason for creating the world? God is good, and no good person is grudging of anything that is good. Therefore, God made it the best world possible." Hand down your opinion, then, O judge; state who seems to you to say what is truest, and not who says what is absolutely true. For to do that is as far beyond our ken as truth itself.

This throng of causes, defined by Aristotle and by Plato, embraces either too much or too little.^[8] For if they regard as "causes" of an object that is to be made everything without which the object cannot be made, they have named too few. Time must be included among the causes; for nothing can be made without time. They must also include place; for if there be no place where a thing can be made, it will not be made. And motion too; nothing is either made or destroyed without motion. There is no art without motion, no change of any kind.

Now, however, I am searching for the first, the general cause; this must be simple, inasmuch as matter, too, is simple. Do we ask what cause is? It is surely Creative Reason,^[9]—in other words, God. For those elements to which you referred are not a great series of independent causes; they all hinge on one alone, and that will be the creative cause.

Do you maintain that form is a cause? This is only what the artist stamps upon his work; it is part of a cause, but not the cause. Neither is the pattern a cause, but an indispensable tool of the cause. His pattern is as indispensable to the artist as the chisel or the file; without these, art can make no progress. But for all that, these things are neither parts of the art, nor causes of it.

“Then,” perhaps you will say, “the purpose of the artist, that which leads him to undertake to create something, is the cause.” It may be a cause; it is not, however, the efficient cause, but only an accessory cause. But there are countless accessory causes; what we are discussing is the general cause. Now the statement of Plato and Aristotle is not in accord with their usual penetration, when they maintain that the whole universe, the perfectly wrought work, is a cause. For there is a great difference between a work and the cause of a work.

Either give your opinion, or, as is easier in cases of this kind, declare that the matter is not clear and call for another hearing.^[10] But you will reply: “What pleasure do you get from wasting your time on these problems, which relieve you of none of your emotions, rout none of your desires?” So far as I am concerned, I treat and discuss them as matters which contribute greatly toward calming the spirit, and I search myself first, and then the world about me.

And not even now am I, as you think, wasting my time. For all these questions, provided that they be not chopped up and torn apart into such unprofitable refinements, elevate and lighten the soul, which is weighted down by a heavy burden and desires to be freed and to return to the elements of which it was once a part. For this body of ours is a weight upon the soul and its penance; as the load presses down the soul is crushed and is in bondage, unless philosophy has come to its assistance and has bid it take fresh courage by contemplating the universe, and has turned it from things earthly to things divine. There it has its liberty, there it can roam abroad;^[11] meantime it escapes the custody in which it is bound, and renews its life in heaven.

Just as skilled workmen, who have been engaged upon some delicate piece of work which wearies their eyes with straining, if the light which they have is niggardly or uncertain, go forth into

the open air and in some park devoted to the people's recreation delight their eyes in the generous light of day; so the soul, imprisoned as it has been in this gloomy and darkened house, seeks the open sky whenever it can, and in the contemplation of the universe finds rest.

The wise man, the seeker after wisdom, is bound closely, indeed, to his body, but he is an absentee so far as his better self is concerned, and he concentrates his thoughts upon lofty things. Bound, so to speak, to his oath of allegiance, he regards the period of life as his term of service. He is so trained that he neither loves nor hates life; he endures a mortal lot, although he knows that an ampler lot is in store for him.

Do you forbid me to contemplate the universe? Do you compel me to withdraw from the whole and restrict me to a part? May I not ask what are the beginnings of all things, who moulded the universe, who took the confused and conglomerate mass of sluggish matter, and separated it into its parts? May I not inquire who is the Master-Builder of this universe, how the mighty bulk was brought under the control of law and order, who gathered together the scattered atoms, who separated the disordered elements and assigned an outward form to elements that lay in one vast shapelessness? Or whence came all the expanse of light? And whether is it fire, or even brighter than fire?^[12]

Am I not to ask these questions? Must I be ignorant of the heights whence I have descended? Whether I am to see this world but once, or to be born many times? What is my destination afterwards? What abode awaits my soul on its release from the laws of slavery among men? Do you forbid me to have a share in heaven? In other words, do you bid me live with my head bowed down?

No, I am above such an existence; I was born to a greater destiny than to be a mere chattel of my body, and I regard this body as

nothing but a chain^[13] which manacles my freedom. Therefore, I offer it as a sort of buffer to fortune, and shall allow no wound to penetrate through to my soul. For my body is the only part of me which can suffer injury. In this dwelling, which is exposed to peril, my soul lives free.

Never shall this flesh drive me to feel fear or to assume any pretence that is unworthy of a good man. Never shall I lie in order to honour this petty body. When it seems proper, I shall sever my connexion with it. And at present, while we are bound together, our alliance shall nevertheless not be one of equality; the soul shall bring all quarrels before its own tribunal. To despise our bodies is sure freedom.

To return to our subject; this freedom will be greatly helped by the contemplation of which we were just speaking. All things are made up of matter and of God;^[14] God controls matter, which encompasses him and follows him as its guide and leader. And that which creates, in other words, God, is more powerful and precious than matter, which is acted upon by God.

God's place in the universe corresponds to the soul's relation to man. World-matter corresponds to our mortal body; therefore let the lower serve the higher. Let us be brave in the face of hazards. Let us not fear wrongs, or wounds, or bonds, or poverty. And what is death? It is either the end, or a process of change. I have no fear of ceasing to exist; it is the same as not having begun. Nor do I shrink from changing into another state, because I shall, under no conditions, be as cramped as I am now. Farewell.

Footnotes

1. For Seneca's troubles in this regard see also Epp. liv. and civ.
2. The *arbiter* was a judge appointed to try a case according to *bona fides* (equity), as contrasted with the *iudex* proper, whose duty was defined by the magistrate.
3. See Zeller's *Stoics* (translated by Reichel), pp. 139 ff.
4. The statue figure is a frequent one in philosophy; cf. Ep. ix. 5. The "form" of Aristotle goes back to the "idea" of Plato. These four causes are the

causes of Aristotle, matter (ὕλη), form (εἶδος), force (τὸ κινουῦν), and the end (τὸ τέλος); when they all concur, we pass from possibility to fact. Aristotle gives eight categories in *Phys.* 225 b 5; and ten in *Categ.* 1 b 25—substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, situation, possession, action, passion. For a definition of εἶδος see Aristotle, *Phys* 190 b 20 γίγνεται πᾶν ἔκ τε τοῦ ὑποκειμένου καὶ τῆς μορφῆς (i.e. τοῦ εἶδους).

5. Well-known works of Polyclitus, fifth century B.C.
6. Explaining the derivation of the Greek word—ιδεῖν, “to behold.” For a discussion of Plato’s “ideas,” those “independent, separate, self-existing, perfect, and eternal essences” (*Republic* vi. and vii.) see Adam, *The Republic of Plato*, ii. 168-179. According to Adam, Plato owes his theory of ideas to Socrates, the Eleatics, and the study of geometry; but his debt is not so great as his discovery.
7. i.e., the four categories as established by Aristotle, plus the “idea” of Plato.
8. The Stoic view (see § 2 of this letter), besides making the four categories of “substance,” “form,” “variety,” and “variety of relation,” regarded material things as the only things which possessed being. The Stoics thus differ from Aristotle and Plato in holding that nothing is real except matter; besides, they relate everything to one ultimate cause, the acting force or efficient cause.
9. i.e., the λόγος σπερματικός, the creative force in nature, that is, Providence, or the will of Zeus.
10. i.e., restate the question and hear the evidence again.
11. According to the Stoics the soul, which consisted of fire or breath and was a part of the divine essence, rose at death into the ether and became one with the stars. Seneca elsewhere (*Consolatio ad Marciam*) states that the soul went through a sort of purifying process—a view which may have had some influence on Christian thought. The souls of the good, the Stoics maintained, were destined to last until the end of the world, the souls of the bad to be extinguished before that time.
12. The sequence of elements from the earth outwards and upwards was earth, water, air, and fire. The upper fire was ether. Zeno (quoted by Cicero, *Acad.* i. 11. 39) refused to acknowledge a fifth essence: *statuebat enim ignem esse ipsam naturam, quae quaeque gigneret, et mentem et sensus.*
13. The “prison of the body” is a frequent figure in Stoic as in all philosophy. See, for example, § 16 of this letter, “the soul in bondage.”
14. A restatement of the previous remark made in this letter; see note on § 11.

#1 New York Times
best-selling author of
The 4-Hour Workweek
The 4-Hour Body



TOOLS OF TITANS

THE TACTICS, ROUTINES, AND HABITS
OF BILLIONAIRES, ICONS,
AND WORLD-CLASS PERFORMERS

TIM FERRISS

PROFILES OF MODERN-DAY STOICS



The following pages profile modern-day stoics found in [*Tools of Titans: The Tactics, Routines, and Habits of Billionaires, Icons, and World-Class Performers*](#). These profiles also include some of their favorite tools and most amusing stories, anecdotes, and quirks. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Even Stoics deserve a laugh once in a while, *n'est-ce pas?*

Here's how they're spread across the volumes of *The Tao of Seneca*:

Volume 1 — Jocko Willink, Derek Sivers, Sebastian Junger

Volume 2 — Tony Robbins, Chris Sacca, Amelia Boone

Volume 3 — Arnold Schwarzenegger, Naval Ravikant

Not all of the people above would describe themselves as “Stoic,” but they exhibit the qualities Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus would have recognized as such.

All are incredible.

Enjoy,
Tim Ferriss

P.S. “TIM” or “TF” in the text refers to my words or commentary, as I interviewed the people profiled. Their full 2–3-hour interviews can all be found at tim.blog/podcast.

JOCKO WILLINK

Jocko Willink (FB/TW: [@jockowillink](#); [jockopodcast.com](#)) is one of the scariest human beings imaginable. He is a lean 230 pounds. He is a Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt who used to tap out 20 Navy SEALs per workout. He is a legend in the special operations world, and his eyes look *through* you more than at you. His interview with me was the first interview he ever did, and it took the Internet by storm.

Jocko spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy and commanded SEAL Team Three's Task Unit Bruiser, the most highly decorated special operations unit from the Iraq war. Upon returning to the United States, Jocko served as the officer-in-charge of training for all West Coast SEAL Teams, designing and implementing some of the most challenging and realistic combat training in the world. After retiring from the Navy, he co-founded Echelon Front, a leadership and management consulting company, and co-authored the #1 *New York Times* bestseller [Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win](#). He now discusses war, leadership, business, and life in his top-rated podcast, [Jocko Podcast](#). He is an avid surfer, a husband, and the father of four "highly motivated" children.

DISCIPLINE EQUALS FREEDOM

To "what would you put on a billboard?" Jocko responded: "My mantra is a very simple one, and that's 'Discipline equals freedom.'"

TF: I interpret this to mean, among other things, that you can use positive constraints to increase perceived free will and results. Freeform days might seem idyllic, but they are paralyzing due to continual paradox of choice (e.g., “What should I do now?”) and decision fatigue (e.g., “What should I have for breakfast?”). In contrast, something as simple as pre-scheduled workouts acts as scaffolding around which you can more effectively plan and execute your day. This gives you a greater sense of agency and feeling of freedom. Jocko adds, “It also means that if you want freedom in life—be that financial freedom, more free time, or even freedom from sickness and poor health—you can only achieve these things through discipline.”

“TWO IS ONE AND ONE IS NONE.”

This is a common expression among SEALs. Jocko explains: “It just means, ‘Have a backup.’” If you have two of something, you will break or lose one and end up with one remaining; if you have one, you will break or lose it and be screwed. One of my favorite Franz Kafka quotes is related: “Better to have, and not need, than to need, and not have.” Where can you eliminate “single points of failure” in your life or business? Jocko adds, “And don’t just have backup gear—have a backup plan to handle likely contingencies.”

EXPOSING YOURSELF TO DARKNESS TO SEE THE LIGHT

“I think that in order to truly experience the light and the bright, you have to see the darkness. I think if you shield yourself from the darkness, you’ll not appreciate—and fully understand—the beauty of life.”

On July 4, 2016, I texted Jocko to thank him for his service. We exchanged hellos, and I asked him how he and his family were doing. He responded: “All good here. With the exception of the

book I'm reading about the My Lai massacre. What a nightmare. Thankful for what we have. . . ."

All of the interviewees in this book have methods for achievement. Most who've been successful for decades also have methods to cultivate gratitude. Remembering his friends who made the ultimate sacrifice in war, Jocko is truly grateful for every sunrise, every smile, every laugh, every breath. He also deliberately and regularly exposes himself to the stories of those who have been subjected to horror, misfortune, and darkness. If you're open to reading a "dark" book to help put things in perspective, *If This Is a Man* and *The Truce* (often combined into one volume) by Primo Levi are two of my favorites. They were recommended to me by the illusionist David Blaine, who has Levi's concentration camp number tattooed on his arm. When I asked him, "What did you learn from the book?" he answered: "Everything."

IF YOU WANT TO BE TOUGHER, BE TOUGHER

"If you want to be tougher mentally, it is simple: Be tougher. Don't meditate on it." These words of Jocko's helped one listener—a drug addict—get sober after many failed attempts. The simple logic struck a chord: "Being tougher" was, more than anything, a *decision* to be tougher. It's possible to immediately "be tougher," starting with your next decision. Have trouble saying "no" to dessert? Be tougher. Make that your starting decision. Feeling winded? Take the stairs anyway. Ditto. It doesn't matter how small or big you start. If you want to be tougher, be tougher.

"TAKE EXTREME OWNERSHIP OF YOUR WORLD"

While Jocko was a SEAL Task Unit commander, the SEAL Commodore, who led all SEALs on the west coast, would hold meetings with all the Task Unit commanders to assess the needs and problems of the troops, then marshal resources to help them:

“[The SEAL Commodore] would go around the room, because he wants to get direct feedback from the frontline leaders. These guys are my peers. He’d ask one of the leaders, ‘What do you need?’ and the leader would say, ‘Well, the boots that we have are okay in the hot weather, but we’re getting ready to be in a cooler environment. We need new boots, and we need them this week before our next training block.’ The Commodore would reply, ‘Okay, got it.’ Then he’d ask the next person, who’d say, ‘When we’re out at the desert training facility and there’s no Internet, our guys are disconnected. We really need to get WiFi out there.’ ‘Okay, got it.’ The next guy would say, ‘We need more helicopter training support, because we don’t feel like we’re working around helicopters enough. We really need that.’ The Commodore would agree to take care of that as well. Eventually, he’d get to me.

“The Commodore would say: ‘Jocko, what do you need?’ and I would say, ‘We’re good, sir.’ The implication is obvious: If I have problems, I’m going to handle them. I’m going to take care of them, and I’m not going to complain. I took extreme ownership of my world. The way that worked was twofold. When I did need something, it was something significant, it was something real. And when I told the Commodore, ‘Hey, boss, we need this right here,’ I would get it almost instantaneously because he knew that I really, truly needed it.

“You can’t blame your boss for not giving you the support you need. Plenty of people will say, ‘It’s my boss’s fault.’ No, it’s actually your fault because you haven’t educated him, you haven’t influenced him, you haven’t explained to him in a manner he understands why you need this support that you need. That’s extreme ownership. Own it all.”

A GOOD REASON TO BE AN EARLY RISER

“I’m up and getting after it by 4:45. I like to have that psychological win over the enemy. For me, when I wake up in the morning—and I don’t know why—I’m thinking about the enemy and what they’re doing. I know I’m not on active duty anymore, but it’s still in my head: that there’s a guy in a cave somewhere, he’s rocking back and forth, and he’s got a machine gun in one hand and a grenade in the other. He’s waiting for me, and we’re going to meet. When I wake up in the morning, I’m thinking to myself: What can I do to be ready for that moment, which is coming? That propels me out of bed.”

TF: This story has compelled so many listeners to start waking early that there is a #0445club hashtag on Twitter, featuring pictures of wristwatches. It’s still going strong more than a year after the podcast.

POMEGRANATE WHITE TEA AND BEYOND

Jocko drinks no coffee and next-to-no caffeine. His one indulgence is occasional pomegranate white tea (“... which I believe hits your soul pretty well”). But . . .

“[During] my first deployment to Iraq, we did longer patrols in the vehicles, and I would have—in a series of pouches hanging in front of my seat—a flashbang grenade and then another flashbang grenade, and then a frag grenade, which is the grenade that kills people, and then another frag grenade. And then, the next three pouches were Red Bull, Red Bull, Red Bull.”

TIM: “But you’re an intense guy, which is meant as a compliment. What are you like on three Red Bulls?”

JOCKO: “More Jocko.”

TF: Jocko doesn’t want to need caffeine. On a similar note, another SEAL friend who regularly eats only one meal per day sent me the following: “I think it’s hilarious when some [special

operations] guys get grumpy if they don't have protein powder every 2 hours. I have a huge advantage if I can turn anything into fuel, including garbage, or go without food."

WHAT MAKES A GOOD COMMANDER?

"The immediate answer that comes to mind is 'humility.' Because you've got to be humble, and you've got to be coachable. . . . Later, when I was running training, we would fire a couple leaders from every SEAL Team because they couldn't lead. And 99.9% of the time, it wasn't a question of their ability to shoot a weapon, it wasn't because they weren't in good physical shape, it wasn't because they were unsafe. It was almost always a question of their ability to listen, open their mind, and see that, maybe, there's a better way to do things. That is from a lack of humility. . . .

"We put these guys through very realistic and challenging training, to say the least. If there are any guys who went through training when I was running it, right now they're chuckling because it was very realistic. In fact, it was borderline psychotic. We put so much pressure on these guys and overwhelmed them. A good leader would come back and say [something like one of the following], 'I lost it, I didn't control it. I didn't do a good job. I didn't see what was happening. I got too absorbed in this little tiny tactical situation that was right in front of me.' Either they'd make those criticisms about themselves, or they'd ask, 'What did I do wrong?' And when you told them, they'd nod their head, pull out their notebook, and take notes. That right there, that's a guy who's going to make it, who's going to get it right. The arrogant guys, who lacked humility, they couldn't take criticism from others—and couldn't even do an honest self-assessment because they thought they already knew everything. Stay humble or get humbled."

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DETACHMENT

“I was probably 20 or 21 years old. I was in my first SEAL platoon. We’re on an oil rig in California doing training. We’d come up on this level of this oil rig, and we’ve never been on an oil rig before. There’s gear and boxes and stuff everywhere on these levels, and you can see through the floors because they are steel grating—not solid material. It’s a complex environment. So, we come up, and we all get on this platform and, because of the complexity, everybody freezes.

“I’m kind of waiting. I’m a new guy, so I don’t really feel like I should be doing anything. But then I said to myself, ‘Somebody’s got to do something,’ so I just did what’s called ‘high port’ with my gun: I pointed my gun up toward the air [to indicate] ‘I’m not a shooter right now.’ I took one step back off the line, looked around, and I saw what the picture was.

“Then I said, ‘Hold left, move right.’ Everybody heard it, and they did it. And I said to myself, ‘Hmmm . . . that’s what you need to do: step back and observe.’ I realized that detaching yourself from the situation, so you can see what’s happening, is absolutely critical. Now, when I talk to executives or mid-level managers, I explain to them that I’m doing that all the time.

“It sounds horrible, but it’s almost like, sometimes, I’m not a participant in my own life. I’m an observer of that guy who’s doing it. So, if I’m having a conversation with you and we’re trying to discuss a point, I’m watching and saying [to myself], ‘Wait, am I being too emotional right now? Wait a second, look at him. What is his reaction?’ Because I’m not reading you correctly if I’m seeing you through my own emotion or ego. I can’t really see what you’re thinking if I’m emotional. But if I step out of that, now I can see the real you and assess if you are getting angry, or if your ego is getting hurt, or if you’re about to cave because you’re just fed up

with me. Whereas, if I'm raging in my own head, I might miss all of that. So being able to detach as a leader is critical."

*** Who do you think of when you hear the word "successful"?**

"The first people who come to mind are the real heroes of Task Unit Bruiser: Marc Lee, first SEAL killed in Iraq. Mike Monsoor, second SEAL killed in Iraq, posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor after he jumped on a grenade to save three of our other teammates. And finally, Ryan Job, one of my guys [who was] gravely wounded in Iraq, blinded in both eyes, but who made it back to America, was medically retired from the Navy, but who died from complications after the 22nd surgery to repair his wounds. Those guys, those men, those heroes, they lived, and fought, and died like warriors."

*** Most-gifted or recommended books?**

"I think there's only one book that I've ever given and I've only given it to a couple people. That's a book called *About Face*, by Colonel David H. Hackworth. The other book that I've read multiple times is *Blood Meridian* [by Cormac McCarthy]."

*** Favorite documentaries?**

"*Restrepo*, which I'm sure you've seen. [TF: This was co-produced and cofilmed by Sebastian Junger, the next profile.] There is also an hour-long program called 'A Chance in Hell: The Battle for Ramadi.'"

QUICK TAKES

*** You walk into a bar. What do you order from the bartender?**

"Water."

*** What does your diet generally look like?**

“It generally looks like steak.”

*** What kind of music does Jocko listen to?**

Two samples:

For workouts—Black Flag, *My War*, side B

In general—White Buffalo

BEHIND THE SCENES

- Peter Attia (page 59) introduced me to Jocko. I once witnessed Peter interview Jocko on stage. Peter said to the crowd, “Jocko can do 70 strict pull-ups . . .” and Jocko quickly interjected with, “No, I can’t do 70 pull-ups. I can do 67.”
- Jocko is a big fan of the *Hardcore History* podcast, hosted by Dan Carlin (page 285), as am I.
- When Jocko slept at my house following our interview, my then-girlfriend woke me up the next morning at 8 a.m. with “Ummm . . . I think he’s been up reading for 5 hours already. What should I do?”
- The only time I’ve seen Jocko’s eyes bug out was when I told him that I first learned to swim in my 30s. He texted me the following while I was working on this chapter: “Thanks for putting me in this book. . . . One day I will repay you, oddly enough, by tying your feet together and your hands behind your back and making you swim/survive.”

DEREK SIVERS

Derek Sivers (TW/FB: [@sivers](#), [sivers.org](#)) is one of my favorite humans, and I often call him for advice. Think of him as a philosopher-king programmer, master teacher, and merry prankster. Originally a professional musician and circus clown (he did the latter to counterbalance being introverted), Derek created CD Baby in 1998. It became the largest seller of independent music online, with \$100 million in sales for 150,000 musicians.

In 2008, Derek sold CD Baby for \$22 million, giving the proceeds to a charitable trust for music education. He is a frequent speaker at TED conferences, with more than 5 million views of his talks. In addition to publishing 33 books via his company Wood Egg, he is the author of [Anything You Want](#), a collection of short life lessons that I've read at least a dozen times. I still have an early draft with highlights and notes.

BEHIND THE SCENES

- Derek has read, reviewed, and rank-ordered 200+ books at [sivers.org/books](#). They're automatically sorted from best to worst. He is a huge fan of Charlie Munger, Warren Buffett's business partner, and introduced me to the book *Seeking Wisdom: From Darwin to Munger*, by Peter Bevelin.
- He read *Awaken the Giant Within* by Tony Robbins (page 210) when he was 18, and it changed his life.

➤ I posted the following on Facebook while writing this chapter: “I might need to do a second volume of my next book, 100% dedicated to the knowledge bombs of Derek Sivers. So much good stuff. Hard to cut.” The most upvoted comment was from Kevin O., who said, “Put a link to the podcast and have them listen. It’s less than two hours, and it will change their life. Tim, you and Derek got me from call center worker to location-independent freelancer with more negotiation power for income and benefits [than] I previously imagined. You both also taught me the value of ‘enough’ and contentment and appreciation, as well as achievement.” That made my week, and I hope this makes yours: fourhourworkweek.com/derek

“IF [MORE] INFORMATION WAS THE ANSWER, THEN WE’D ALL BE BILLIONAIRES WITH PERFECT ABS.”

TF: It’s not what you know, it’s what you do consistently. (See Tony Robbins, page 210.)

“HOW TO THRIVE IN AN UNKNOWABLE FUTURE? CHOOSE THE PLAN WITH THE MOST OPTIONS. THE BEST PLAN IS THE ONE THAT LETS YOU CHANGE YOUR PLANS.”

TF: This is one of Derek’s “Directives,” which are his one-line rules for life, distilled from hundreds of books and decades of lessons learned. Others include “Be expensive” (see Marc Andreessen, page 170), “Expect disaster” (see Tony Robbins, page 210), and “Own as little as possible” (see Jason Nemer, page 46, and Kevin Kelly, page 470).

*** Who do you think of when you hear the word “successful”?**

“The first answer to any question isn’t much fun because it’s just automatic. What’s the first painting that comes to mind? *Mona Lisa*. Name a genius. Einstein. Who’s a composer? Mozart.

“This is the subject of the book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman. There’s the instant, unconscious, automatic thinking and then there’s the slower, conscious, rational, deliberate thinking. I’m really, really into the slower thinking, breaking my automatic responses to the things in my life and slowly thinking through a more deliberate response instead. Then for the things in life where an automatic response is useful, I can create a new one consciously.

“What if you asked, ‘**When you think of the word “successful,” who’s the *third* person that comes to mind? Why are they actually more successful than the first person that came to mind?**’ In that case, the first would be Richard Branson, because he’s the stereotype. He’s like the *Mona Lisa* of success to me. Honestly, *you* might be my second answer, but we could talk about that a different time. My third and real answer, after thinking it through, is that we can’t know without knowing a person’s aims.

“What if Richard Branson set out to live a quiet life, but like a compulsive gambler, he just can’t stop creating companies? Then that changes everything, and we can’t call him successful anymore.”

TF: This is genius. Ricardo Semler, CEO and majority owner of the Brazil-based Semco Partners, practices asking “Why?” three times. This is true when questioning his own motives, or when tackling big projects. The rationale is identical to Derek’s.

FOR PEOPLE STARTING OUT — SAY “YES”

When Derek was 18, he was living in Boston, attending the Berklee College of Music.

“I’m in this band where the bass player, one day in rehearsal, says, ‘Hey man, my agent just offered me this gig—it’s like \$75 to play at a pig show in Vermont.’ He rolls his eyes, and he says, ‘I’m not gonna do it, do you want the gig?’ I’m like, ‘Fuck yeah, a paying gig?! Oh, my God! Yes!’ So, I took the gig to go up to Burlington, Vermont.

“And, I think it was a \$58 round-trip bus ticket. I get to this pig show, I strap my acoustic guitar on, and I walked around a pig show playing music. I did that for about 3 hours, and took the bus home, and the next day, the booking agent called me up, and said, ‘Hey, yeah, so you did a really good job at the pig show. . . .’

“So many opportunities, and 10 years of stage experience, came from that one piddly little pig show. . . . When you’re earlier in your career, I think the best strategy is to just say ‘yes’ to everything. Every little gig. You just never know what are the lottery tickets.”

THE STANDARD PACE IS FOR CHUMPS

“Kimo Williams is this large, black man, a musician who attended Berklee School of Music and then stayed there to teach for a while. . . . What he taught me got me to graduate in half the time it would [normally] take. He said, ‘I think you can graduate Berklee School of Music in two years instead of four. The standard pace is for chumps. The school has to organize its curricula around the lowest common denominator, so that almost no one is left out. They have to slow down, so everybody can catch up. But,’ he said, ‘you’re smarter than that.’ He said, ‘I think you could just buy the books for those, [skip the classes] and then contact the department head to take the final exam to get credit.’ ”

DON’T BE A DONKEY

TIM: “What advice would you give to your 30-year-old self?”

DEREK: “Don’t be a donkey.”

TIM: “And what does that mean?”

DEREK: “Well, I meet a lot of 30-year-olds who are trying to pursue many different directions at once, but not making progress in any, right? They get frustrated that the world wants them to pick one thing, because they want to do them all: ‘Why do I have to choose? I don’t know what to choose!’ But the problem is, if you’re thinking short-term, then [you act as though] if you don’t do them all this week, they won’t happen. The solution is to think long-term. To realize that you can do one of these things for a few years, and then do another one for a few years, and then another. You’ve probably heard the fable, I think it’s ‘Buridan’s ass,’ about a donkey who is standing halfway between a pile of hay and a bucket of water. He just keeps looking left to the hay, and right to the water, trying to decide. Hay or water, hay or water? He’s unable to decide, so he eventually falls over and dies of both hunger and thirst. A donkey can’t think of the future. If he did, he’d realize he could clearly go first to drink the water, then go eat the hay.

“So, my advice to my 30-year-old self is, don’t be a donkey. You can do everything you want to do. You just need foresight and patience.”

BUSINESS MODELS CAN BE SIMPLE: YOU DON’T NEED TO CONSTANTLY “PIVOT”

Derek tells the story of the sophisticated origins of CD Baby’s business model and pricing:

“I was living in Woodstock, New York, at the time, and there was a cute, tiny record store in town that sold consignment CDs of local musicians on the counter. So, I walked in there one day, and I said, ‘Hey, how does it work if I wanna sell my CD here?’ And she said, ‘Well, you set the selling price at whatever you want. We just keep a flat \$4 per CD sold, and then just come by every week, and we’ll pay you.’ So, I went home to my new website that

night and wrote ‘You set your selling price at what you want, we’ll just keep a flat \$4 per CD sold, and we’ll pay you every week.’ And then, I realized that it took about 45 minutes for me to set up a new album into the system, because I had to lay the album art on the scanner, Photoshop it and crop it, fix the musicians’ spelling mistakes in their own bio, and all that kinda stuff.

“I thought 45 minutes of my time, that’s worth about \$25. That shows you what I was valuing my time at in those days. So, I’ll charge a \$25 setup fee to sign up for this thing. And, then, oooh . . . in my head, \$25 and \$35 don’t feel very different when it comes to cost. \$10 is different, and \$50 is different, but \$25, \$35—that occupies the same space in the mind. So you know what? I’m gonna make it \$35, that will let me give anyone a discount any time they ask. If somebody’s on the phone and upset, I’ll say, ‘You know what? Let me give you a discount.’ So, I added in that little buffer so I could give people a discount, which they love. **So \$35 setup fee, \$4 per CD sold, and then, Tim, for the next 10 years, that was it. That was my entire business model, generated in 5 minutes by walking down to the local record store and asking what they do.**”

ONCE YOU HAVE SOME SUCCESS — IF IT’S NOT A “HELL, YES!” IT’S A “NO”

This mantra of Derek’s quickly became one of my favorite rules of thumb, and it led me to take an indefinite “startup vacation” starting in late 2015. I elaborate on this on page 385, but here’s the origin story:

“It was time to book the ticket [for a trip he’d committed to long ago], and I was thinking, ‘Ugh. I don’t really want to go to Australia right now. I’m busy with other stuff.’ . . . I was on the phone with my friend Amber Rubarth, who’s a brilliant musician, and I was lamenting about this. She’s the one who pointed out,

‘It sounds like, from where you are, your decision is not between yes and no. You need to figure out whether you’re feeling like, “Fuck yeah!” or “No.”’

“Because most of us say yes to too much stuff, and then, we let these little, mediocre things fill our lives. . . . The problem is, when that occasional, ‘Oh my God, hell yeah!’ thing comes along, you don’t have enough time to give it the attention that you should, because you’ve said yes to too much other little, halfass stuff, right? Once I started applying this, my life just opened up.”

“BUSY” = OUT OF CONTROL

“Every time people contact me, they say, ‘Look, I know you must be incredibly busy . . .’ and I always think, ‘No, I’m not.’ Because I’m in control of my time. I’m on top of it. ‘Busy,’ to me, seems to imply ‘out of control.’ Like, ‘Oh my God, I’m so busy. I don’t have any time for this shit!’ To me, that sounds like a person who’s got no control over their life.”

TF: Lack of time is lack of priorities. If I’m “busy,” it is because I’ve made choices that put me in that position, so I’ve forbidden myself to reply to “How are you?” with “Busy.” I have no right to complain. Instead, if I’m too busy, it’s a cue to reexamine my systems and rules.

*** What would you put on a billboard?**

“I really admire those places, like Vermont and São Paulo, Brazil, that ban billboards. But, I know that that wasn’t really what you were asking. So, my better answer is, I think I would make a billboard that says, **‘It Won’t Make You Happy,’** and I would place it outside any big shopping mall or car dealer. You know what would be a fun project, actually? To buy and train thousands of parrots to say, ‘It won’t make you happy!’ and then let them loose in the

shopping malls and superstores around the world. That's my life mission. Anybody in? Anybody with me? Let's do it."

TAKE 45 MINUTES INSTEAD OF 43 — IS YOUR RED FACE WORTH IT?

"I've always been very Type-A, so a friend of mine got me into cycling when I was living in L.A. I lived right on the beach in Santa Monica, where there's this great bike path in the sand that goes for, I think, 25 miles. I'd go onto the bike path, and I would [go] head down and push it—just red-faced huffing, all the way, pushing it as hard as I could. I would go all the way down to one end of the bike path and back, and then head home, and I'd set my little timer when doing this. . . .

"I noticed it was always 43 minutes. That's what it took me to go as fast as I could on that bike path. But I noticed that, over time, I was starting to feel less psyched about going out on the bike path. Because mentally, when I would think of it, it would feel like pain and hard work. . . . So, then I thought, 'You know, it's not cool for me to associate negative stuff with going on the bike ride. Why don't I just chill? For once, I'm gonna go on the same bike ride, and I'm not going to be a complete snail, but I'll go at half of my normal pace.' I got on my bike, and it was just pleasant.

"I went on the same bike ride, and I noticed that I was standing up, and I was looking around more. I looked into the ocean, and I saw there were these dolphins jumping in the ocean, and I went down to Marina del Rey, to my turnaround point, and I noticed in Marina del Rey, that there was a pelican that was flying above me. I looked up. I was like, 'Hey, a pelican!' and he shit in my mouth.

"So, the point is: I had such a nice time. It was purely pleasant. There was no red face, there was no huffing. And when I got back to my usual stopping place, I looked at my watch, and it said 45 minutes. I thought, 'How the hell could that have been 45 minutes,

as opposed to my usual 43? There's no way.' But it was right: 45 minutes. That was a profound lesson that changed the way I've approached my life ever since. . . .

"We could do the math, [but] whatever, 93-something-percent of my huffing and puffing, and all that red face and all that stress was only for an extra 2 minutes. It was basically for nothing. . . . [So,] for life, I think of all of this maximization—getting the maximum dollar out of everything, the maximum out of every second, the maximum out of every minute—you don't need to stress about any of this stuff. Honestly, that's been my approach ever since. I do things, but I stop before anything gets stressful. . . .

"You notice this internal 'Argh.' That's my cue. I treat that like physical pain. What am I doing? I need to stop doing that thing that hurts. What is that? And, it usually means that I'm just pushing too hard, or doing things that I don't really want to be doing."

ON LACK OF MORNING ROUTINES

"Not only do I not have morning rituals, but there's really nothing that I do every day, except for eating or some form of writing. Here's why: I get really, really, really into one thing at a time. For example, a year ago I discovered a new approach to programming my PostgreSQL database that made all of my code a lot easier. I spent 5 months—every waking hour—just completely immersed in this one thing.

"Then after 5 months, I finished that project. I took a week and I went hiking in Milford Sound in New Zealand. Totally offline. When I got back from that, I was so zen-nature-boy that I spent the next couple of weeks just reading books outside."

*** What's something you believe that other people think is crazy?**

“Oh, that’s easy. I’ve got a lot of unpopular opinions. I believe alcohol tastes bad, and so do olives. I’ve never tried coffee, but I don’t like the smell. I believe all audio books should be read and recorded by people from Iceland, because they’ve got the best accent. I believe it would be wonderful to move to a new country every 6 months for the rest of my life. **I believe you shouldn’t start a business unless people are asking you to.** I believe I’m below average. It’s a deliberate, cultivated belief to compensate for our tendency to think we’re above average. I believe the movie *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* is a masterpiece. I believe that music and people don’t mix; that music should be appreciated alone without seeing or knowing who the musicians are and without other people around. Just listening to music for its own sake, not listening to the people around you and not filtered through what you know about the musician’s personal life.”

TREAT LIFE AS A SERIES OF EXPERIMENTS

“My recommendation is to do little tests. Try a few months of living the life you think you want, but leave yourself an exit plan, being open to the big chance that you might not like it after actually trying it. . . . The best book about this subject is *Stumbling on Happiness* by Daniel Gilbert. His recommendation is to talk to a few people who are currently where you think you want to be and ask them for the pros and cons. Then trust their opinion since they’re right in it, not just remembering or imagining.”

**“EVEN WHEN EVERYTHING IS GOING TERRIBLY,
AND I HAVE NO REASON TO BE CONFIDENT, I JUST
DECIDE TO BE.”**

“There’s this beautiful Kurt Vonnegut quote that’s just a throwaway line in the middle of one of his books, that says, ‘We are whatever we pretend to be.’”

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL EMAIL DEREK EVER WROTE

At its largest, Derek spent roughly 4 hours on CD Baby every six months. He had systematized everything to run without him. Derek is both successful and fulfilled because he never hesitates to challenge the status quo, to test assumptions. It doesn’t have to take much, and his below email illustrates this beautifully.

Enter Derek

When you make a business, you’re making a little world where you control the laws. It doesn’t matter how things are done everywhere else. In your little world, you can make it like it should be.

When I first built CD Baby, every order had an automated email that let the customer know when the CD was actually shipped. At first, it was just the normal, “Your order has shipped today. Please let us know if it doesn’t arrive. Thank you for your business.”

After a few months, that felt really incongruent with my mission to make people smile. I knew could do better. So I took 20 minutes and wrote this goofy little thing:

Your CD has been gently taken from our CD Baby shelves with sterilized contamination-free gloves and placed onto a satin pillow.

A team of 50 employees inspected your CD and polished it to make sure it was in the best possible condition before mailing.

Our packing specialist from Japan lit a candle and a hush fell over the crowd as he put your CD into the finest gold-lined box that money can buy.

We all had a wonderful celebration afterwards and the whole party marched down the street to the post office where the entire town of Portland waved “Bon Voyage!” to your package, on its way to you, in our private CD Baby jet on this day, Friday, June 6th.

I hope you had a wonderful time shopping at CD Baby. We sure did. Your picture is on our wall as “Customer of the Year.” We’re all exhausted but can’t wait for you to come back to CDBABY.COM!!

That one silly email, sent out with every order, has been so loved that if you search Google for “private CD Baby jet” you’ll get more than 20,000 results. Each one is somebody who got the email and loved it enough to post on their website and tell all their friends.

That one goofy email created thousands of new customers.

When you’re thinking of how to make your business bigger, it’s tempting to try to think all the big thoughts, the world-changing, massive-action plans.

But please know that it’s often the tiny details that really thrill someone enough to make them tell all their friends about you.

SEBASTIAN JUNGER

Sebastian Junger (TW: [@sebastianjunger](#), [sebastianjunger.com](#)) is the #1 *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Perfect Storm*, *Fire*, *A Death in Belmont*, *War*, and *Tribe*. As an award-winning journalist, he has received both a National Magazine Award and a Peabody Award. Junger is also a documentary filmmaker whose debut film, *Restrepo*, co-directed with Tim Hetherington, was nominated for an Academy Award and won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance. *Restrepo*, which chronicles the deployment of a platoon of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley, is widely considered to have broken new ground in war reporting. Junger has since produced and directed three additional documentaries about war and its aftermath.

“HOW DO YOU BECOME A MAN IN A WORLD THAT DOESN'T REQUIRE COURAGE?”

Elaboration: “In terms of our communities and our society at home, we [thankfully] no longer have to organize young men and prepare them for group violence so that we can survive. That's been the human norm for 2 million years, either from predators or from other humans. . . . If you don't give young men a good and useful group to belong to, they will create a bad group to belong to. But one way or another, they're going to create a group, and they're going to find something, an adversary, where they can demonstrate their prowess and their unity.”

THE CALMING EFFECT OF ACTING INSTEAD OF WAITING

“The special forces guys were the opposite [of those in the non-elite divisions]. As soon as they heard they were about to experience an overwhelming attack, their cortisol levels dropped. They got super calm. The reason their cortisol levels dropped was because it was stressful for them to wait for the unknown, but as soon as they knew they were going to be attacked, they had a plan of action. They started filling sandbags. They started cleaning their rifles. They started stockpiling their ammo, getting the plasma bags ready, whatever they do before an attack. All of that busyness gave them a sense of mastery and control that actually made them feel less anxious than just waiting around on an average day in a dangerous place.”

THE UPSIDE OF DISASTER

“What’s very fortunate, beautiful, wonderful, and also, in a weird way, tragic about modern society, is that crisis has been removed. When you reintroduce a crisis like in the Blitz in London or an earthquake that I wrote about in Avezzano, Italy, early in the 20th century, [things change]. In Avezzano, something like 95% of the population was killed. I’m going from memory, but unbelievable casualty, just like a nuclear strike. . . . People had to rely on each other, so everyone—upper-class people, lower-class people, peasants, and nobility—sort of crouched around the same campfires. One of the survivors said, ‘The earthquake gave us what the law promises but does not, in fact, deliver, which is the equality of all men.’”

“That feeling of ‘us,’ it buffers many people from their psychological demons.”

—Sebastian discussing why unifying disasters and crisis, like 9/11 or the World War II Blitz bombings on London,

often results in dramatic *decreases* in suicide, violent crime, mental illness symptoms, etc.

THE POINT OF JOURNALISM IS THE TRUTH

“The point of journalism is the truth. The point of journalism is not to improve society. There are things, there are facts, there are truths that actually feel regressive, but it doesn’t matter, because the point of journalism isn’t to make everything better. It’s to give people accurate information about how things are.”

ON MOST “WRITER’S BLOCK” IN NONFICTION

“It’s not that I’m blocked. It’s that I don’t have enough research to write with power and knowledge about that topic. It always means, not that I can’t find the right words, [but rather] that I don’t have the ammunition. . . . I don’t have the goods. I have not gone into the world and brought back the goods that I’m writing about, and you never want to solve a research problem with language. You never want to . . . thread the needle and get through a thin patch in your research just because you’re such a prose artist.”

DON’T USE VERBAL CRUTCHES

“God, I really dislike laziness. . . . There are these clichés like ‘the mortar slammed into the hillside.’ I just don’t want to read that again. Say it in an original way or don’t say it. You’re wasting everybody’s time, including your own, if you rely on these sorts of linguistic tropes.”

HIS MESSAGE AT A HIGH SCHOOL COMMENCEMENT

“You guys are programmed to succeed. The hardest thing you’re ever going to do in your life is fail at something, and if you don’t start failing at things, you will not live a full life. You’ll be living a cautious life on a path that you know is pretty much guaranteed to

more or less work. That's not getting the most out of this amazing world we live in. You have to do the hardest thing that you have not been prepared for in this school or any school: You have to be prepared to fail. That's how you're going to expand yourself and grow. As you work through that process of failure and learning, you will really deepen into the human being you're capable of being."

*** What advice would you give your younger self?**

"I would say to myself, 'The public is not a threat.' When you realize that we all need each other, and that we can all learn from each other, your stage fright goes away."

*** What would your 70-year-old self advise your current self?**

"The world is this continually unfolding set of possibilities and opportunities, and the tricky thing about life is, on the one hand having the courage to enter into things that are unfamiliar, but also having the wisdom to stop exploring when you've found something worth sticking around for. That is true of a place, of a person, of a vocation. Balancing those two things—the courage of exploring and the commitment to staying—and getting the ratio right is very hard. I think my 70-year-old self would say: 'Be careful that you don't err on one side or the other, because you have an ill-conceived idea of who you are.'"

WHAT WOULD YOU DIE FOR?

At the end of our 2-plus-hour conversation, I asked Sebastian if he had any parting thoughts.

"Who would you die for? What ideas would you die for? The answer to those questions, for most of human history, would have come very readily to any person's mouth. Any Comanche would tell you instantly who they would die for and what they would

die for. In modern society, it gets more and more complicated, and when you lose the ready answer to those ancient human questions, you lose a part of yourself. You lose a part of your identity. I would ask people, ‘Who would you die for? What would you die for? And what do you owe your community?’ In our case, our community is our country. What do you owe your country, other than your taxes? Is there anything else you owe all of us? There’s no right answer or wrong answer, but it’s something that I think everyone should ask themselves.”

*** Most-gifted or recommended book?**

At Play in the Fields of the Lord by Peter Matthiessen

BEHIND THE SCENES

- I first met Sebastian at Josh Waitzkin’s (page 577) wedding, who described him via text as: “One of the leanest writers I know. So little bullshit between the muscle.”
- Sebastian is a big guy and doesn’t look like a runner, but he can move. He has clocked 4:12 for the mile, 9:04 for 2 miles, 24:05 for 5 miles, and 2:21 for a marathon.
- After our interview in my home, I had tea, and Sebastian took a few minutes to fire off emails from his laptop. I noticed him typing with one hand and asked him if he’d injured himself. He laughed sheepishly and explained there was no injury. As it turns out, Sebastian never learned to touch type. He has written all of his books and articles by hunting and pecking with one hand. Incredible.

28 BOOKS ON STOICISM



The (Hopefully) Ultimate Reading List

by Hristo Vassilev

The best part about Stoicism is that you can go to the primary texts, read them and feel like they were written yesterday, not 2000 years ago. You can pick up Seneca, Marcus Aurelius or Epictetus and find the writing fresh as ever. In them, we find the wisdom to help us overcome adversity, find serenity and live well. They contain timeless truths and wisdom for any era.

But what if you wanted to go deeper? What if you wanted to read commentary and biographies on the practitioners? How did the philosophy develop over the years? What do the critics have to say? How did Stoicism inspire cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)? Or maybe you want to find a fiction book that is inspired by Stoicism? Or just a simple introductory text for beginners? It's that curiosity that led me to ask the Stoicism community on reddit earlier this year for suggestions on the best books on Stoicism as well as looking around online for recommendations (including helpful lists on Goodreads and from Massimo Pigliucci). I want to thank Massimo as well as everyone from the reddit community who contributed to the discussion.

That research led to the below list—what I would call is (hopefully) the ultimate collection of books on—or inspired by—Stoicism with a short description to give you a taste. And one last thing, I wrote this primarily for myself as a list for books to read this year. I have read most, but not all.

I've started the list with some of my absolute favorites that I consider must reads but most of the list is not structured in a particular order.

Enjoy!

The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius

by Pierre Hadot

Pierre Hadot, one of the most prominent scholars of ancient philosophy, has written a remarkable guide to both Marcus Aurelius and his *Meditations*. Despite being academic and a translation from Hadot's French, this book is readable and offers unparalleled insights into Marcus, his influences and into Stoicism as a philosophy. Read this book!

Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault **by Pierre Hadot**

If you end up loving Pierre Hadot's book on Marcus, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* is a natural next step. While not focusing uniquely on Stoicism, this book is a key text in understanding how philosophy is more than an academic discipline isolated from real life, but something to guide us and orient us—and most of all—something to be practiced. In this book Pierre Hadot does a fantastic introduction to the concept of 'spiritual exercises' and offers examples from multiple philosophers. (After these two, if you like Hadot, I'd also recommend you check out his book *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*. Thanks to Ryan Holiday for recommending Hadot's work.)

***The Daily Stoic* by Ryan Holiday and Steve Hanselman**

The Daily Stoic offers 366 days of Stoic insights and exercises, featuring all-new translations from Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Epictetus, as well as lesser-known Stoics like Zeno, Cleanthes, and Musonius Rufus. Each page offers a quote and an accompanying meditation. It is probably the best place to start for someone who has zero familiarity with Stoicism.

***Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior* by James Stockdale**

Avid business readers are probably familiar with the ‘Stockdale paradox’ from the bestselling book *Good to Great*. As its author explained it, the paradox captures Stockdale’s resilient mindset who endured terrible difficulties and adversity as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. As the author wrote, “You must retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties. AND at the same time... You must confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.” The paradox aside, this is a fantastic short book by Stockdale himself that shows how Stoicism can provide the necessary principles and fortitude to survive such an ordeal.

***Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero* by James Romm**

James Romm’s book on Seneca is both a great biography on the man that can help those students of Stoicism who feel conflicted about Seneca—the complexities of being a wealthy philosopher who was a tutor to one of the worst tyrants in ancient history—to better understand him as well as to dive deeper into the political and social context of the time. It is also a case study of a despot gone mad and the paranoid regime that he gave rise to.

***Stoicism and the Art of Happiness* by Donald Robertson**

Donald Robertson's book was highly recommended by the Stoic community on reddit. The book has great reviews and as one reader wrote, "In my opinion, Robertson is superior to Hadot, Long, or any other writer on Stoicism because of his Psychotherapy background and his ability to reach the common man."

***Rome's Last Citizen: The Life and Legacy of Cato, Mortal Enemy of Caesar* by Robert Goodman and Jimmy Soni**

Cato is probably the closest we have to a perfect Stoic. As one of the authors, Jimmy Soni, wrote "The Stoics taught Cato that there were no shades of gray. There was no more-or-less good, no more-or-less bad. Whether you were a foot underwater or a fathom, you were still drowning. All virtues were one and the same virtue, all vices the same vice." This is an incredible book that shows what it means to fully live according to one's principles even if that means dying for them.

***A Man in Full* by Tom Wolfe**

For those looking for a work of fiction that includes the Stoics, this should be your first stop. Tom Wolfe's famous novel features Epictetus who gets discovered by mistake by Conrad Hensley, a young man who at that point in time has nobody—his wife had given up on him, his car was towed, was out of work and was in jail, where he gets sent by mistake a copy of Epictetus's book. The book was heralded as a 'masterpiece' and back in 1999 the *New York Times* wrote on the revival of Stoicism due to the book's influence.

The Philosophy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy: Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy

by Donald Robertson

Another book by Donald Robertson on the list, this time exploring the fascinating origins of CBT—one of the most effective forms of therapy out there—and how Stoicism plays an important role in its development. [Ed. An interview with Donald is included in the *Tao of Seneca* and he offers a great answer on the origins and parallels between the therapy and the philosophy.]

A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy

by William Irvine

This is probably one of the most famous modern introductory text for beginners. The book is very readable and like other books on the list provides a great introduction to the philosophy for people who are looking to begin their deeper understanding of Stoicism.

***The Obstacle is the Way* by Ryan Holiday**

While Ryan Holiday's *The Obstacle Is the Way* is not a book about Stoicism, it is a book inspired by Stoicism and its key principles for thriving under pressure. Through historical examples of great men and women it teaches us how to overcome adversity and difficulties, turn obstacles upside down and shows us how to love our fate, no matter what it might bring. The book has become a cult classic with coaches and athletes alike and has been featured in prominent outlets like *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN.

***Ego is the Enemy* by Ryan Holiday**

If Ryan's previous book is about facing external obstacles, this one turns around, challenging us and invites us to look inward and how we are too often our own worst enemy. Similar to *The Obstacle Is the Way* the book draws on examples from philosophy,

literature and history helping us curb our ego no matter where we are on our trajectory—aspiring, achieving or failing.

***The Consolations of Philosophy* by Alain de Botton
(part on Seneca)**

While this book has only one chapter that is directly about Stoicism—the one on Seneca—I highly recommend this book. It offers wise advice from multiple philosophers—from Schopenhauer to Epicurus to Montaigne. If you are looking for a book to supplement your studies on Stoicism with related ideas, this is a great starting point. You can also [watch this video on YouTube from Alain de Botton](#) and his journey to Rome and what Seneca can teach us about mastering our anger.

***Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*
by Nassim Nicholas Taleb**

I was first introduced to Stoicism and Seneca in Nassim Taleb's *The Black Swan*. It is one of my favorite books but I'd be more inclined to recommend his *Antifragile's* chapter on Seneca which provides one of the best and most succinct explanation of the philosophy and how its principles can help us both in times of prosperity and in moments of difficulty.

***Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche* by James Miller**

A *New York Times* Notable Book for 2011, James Miller's *Examined Lives* explores the lives of twelve famous philosophers—Seneca included—looking for wisdom and guidance. Similar to Alain de Botton's book on the list, the chapter on Seneca alone is worth it but any student of Stoicism can benefit from reading about Diogenes, Socrates, Montaigne and others to find helpful bits that lead us to living a little bit better each day.

***Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind* by Nancy Sherman**

Nancy Sherman, a distinguished University Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown, looks at the history of Stoicism in the military. This book can be heavy at times and if you are looking for a lighter introduction to how Stoicism can help soldiers you can look into Stockdale's book earlier on the list. For those ready for a serious intellectual challenge, Nancy Sherman's book is the next step.

***Stoicism* by John Sellars**

John Sellars is a Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at King's College London and his research interests are focused on Hellenistic and Roman philosophy, and Renaissance philosophy. His focus has been on Stoicism and its reception. The *Philosophers' Magazine* called this book "the best introduction to the subject," and another prominent Stoic scholar called it "both highly readable and yet based on solid academic study."

***Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics: An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* by R. W. Sharples**

This book focuses not only on the Stoics but also on the Epicureans as well as various sceptical traditions from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC to about AD 200. It's the book of choice who are looking to understand the broader context and the adjacent philosophies.

***The Stoics: A Guide for the Perplexed* by Andrew Holowchak**

This book was recommended on the reddit thread and serves as an introductory text for those unfamiliar with the philosophy. It has been described as "a clear and lively introduction to Stoicism, with emphasis on ethics." Its author, M. Andrew Holowchak, is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wilkes University.

***The Stoics* by F. H. Sandbach**

This book was also recommended in the reddit thread and while there is limited information online on the book, its reviews point that it's a solid work on Stoicism: "Not only one of the best but also the most comprehensive treatment of Stoicism written in this century." Times Literary Supplement

***Stoicism and Emotion* by Margaret Graver**

In this book, Margaret Graver argues that the chief demand of Stoic ethics is not that we should suppress or deny our feelings, but that to perfect our rational mind. A must-read book for anyone who wants to better understand the connection between Stoicism and emotions and to help them develop strong arguments against the popular misunderstanding that the core focus of the philosophy is suppressing one's emotions and feelings.

***The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* by Brad Inwood**

I found this book as one of the top recommendations from Massimo Pigliucci and I will let his strong endorsement speak for the book: "This unique volume offers an odyssey through the ideas of the Stoics in three particular ways: first, through the historical trajectory of the school itself and its influence; second, through the recovery of the history of Stoic thought; third, through the ongoing confrontation with Stoicism, showing how it refines philosophical traditions, challenges the imagination, and ultimately defines the kind of life one chooses to lead."

***Everything Has Two Handles: The Stoic's Guide to the Art of Living* by Ronald Pies**

Ronald Pies, M.D. is Professor of Psychiatry and Lecturer on Bioethics and Humanities at S.U.N.Y. and this book not only shows

how Stoicism can be path to happiness and tranquility but the author also draws from his own case studies as a therapist.

Philosophy for Life: And Other Dangerous Situations

by Jules Evans

A New Stoicism by Lawrence C. Becker

I discovered this book on Massimo Pigliucci's list on the best books about Stoicism. It is reserved only for the most serious scholars. As Massimo explains, "It's quite a difficult book to read in some ways; if you don't have a certain amount of background in philosophy, you're probably not going to get as much out of it as you should, although Becker himself is aware of this." Yet he clarifies that "the main sections of each chapter can be read, can be understood, by somebody with little or no background in philosophy."

The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca by Emily Wilson

Of all the Stoic philosophers Seneca is prone to generate the most controversy. As the book description asks: "How can we reconcile the bloody tragedies with the prose works advocating a life of Stoic tranquility? How are we to balance Seneca the man of principle, who counseled a life of calm and simplicity, with Seneca the man of the moment, who amassed a vast personal fortune in the service of an emperor seen by many, at the time and afterwards, as an insane tyrant?" If you are a fan of Seneca and want to study the man, make sure to read this biography as well as James Romm's.

How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life by Massimo Pigliucci

In the Stoic community, Massimo Pigliucci needs no introduction. He is behind the popular "[How to be a Stoic](#)" blog which

is “an evolving guide to practical Stoicism for the 21st century.” You also probably remember Massimo’s from his widely popular article on Stoicism in the New York Times from two years ago. Although his upcoming book is not yet out (May 2017), I’ve already preordered it knowing the high standards of Massimo’s work. His recommendations on his favorite books on Stoicism have also helped create this list as well.

***Marcus Aurelius: A Life* by Frank McLynn**

I discovered this book on Massimo’s list and he describes as “the definitive biography to date of this monumental historical figure.” Before jumping into it or Pierre Hadot’s book, I’d recommend reading the fantastic introduction to Marcus that is in Gregory Hays’s translation of *Meditations* as well as Ryan Holiday’s [one hundred lessons from Marcus Aurelius](#) and [this lecture series on YouTube](#) which provide fantastic starting points to Marcus.

