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Carthage began to expand its position on the Iberian peninsula late in the third century B.C. When Hannibal attacked the Iberian city of Saguntum in 219, the Romans responded by invading the peninsula. Although they forced the Carthaginians out, the peninsula’s inhabitants were not entirely subdued until two centuries later. The country was rugged. The Romans lacked an overall strategy. And the native Iberian, Celtiberian, and Lusitanian tribes were fiercely refractory. The Celtiberian city of Numantia defied a Roman siege for eight months until, reduced at last to cannibalism, many of its inhabitants chose suicide over submission. By 19 B.C., however, the peninsula in its entirety had become Hispania—Roman Spain.

Roman occupation brought Roman culture, particularly the cultivation of rhetoric as the capstone of higher education. Both Seneca and Quintilian, this volume’s representatives of the period, were trained as rhetoricians, though their rhetorical pursuits eventually developed in a philosophical direction. Roman philosophers in general were more practically oriented than their Greek counterparts, and Seneca and Quintilian illustrate the trend. Although Seneca occasionally theorizes
in the speculative Greek manner, his philosophy more often takes a vital, practical turn. Both of these tendencies are found in his *Epistulae morales*, excerpted here. Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, also excerpted, seconds this decidedly practical approach to philosophy, including Quintilian’s distinctively Roman view of the orator as philosopher.
The Roman province of Baetica had its capital at Cordoba, where Lucius Annaeus Seneca (often called Seneca the Younger) was born into a distinguished family around 4 B.C. Externally, Seneca’s life was a dizzying series of ups and downs. His father, Seneca the rhetorician, took him to Rome as a boy to be educated in rhetoric and philosophy, but illness curtailed the young man’s studies, forcing his removal to Egypt. Returning to Rome in A.D. 31, he rose to prominence in the Senate but aroused the jealousy of the emperor Caligula, who was dissuaded from killing him by the argument that ill health would soon do him in. In 41, the first year of Claudius’ reign, Seneca was accused of adultery with the emperor’s niece and exiled to the island of Corsica. Recalled to Rome in 49, he became tutor to the future emperor Nero. When Claudius was poisoned in 54, Nero acceded to the throne, Seneca to the power behind it. Together with the army officer Burrus, Seneca was responsible for the successful government of Nero’s first five years, marked by the absence of capital punishment and bloody contests, by reduced taxes, and by the provision for civil suits against masters by slaves. By 62, however, Seneca’s influence was gone. He retired to his estates, bequeathing his enormous fortune to Nero, and devoted himself to philosophy. In 65, having been charged with participation in the conspiracy of Piso, he obeyed Nero’s order to commit suicide.¹
Although Seneca wrote tragedy, satire, and poetry, he is represented here as a philosopher, the greatest figure of the late Stoa. His philosophical writings include dialogues, moral essays, a treatise on nature, and letters. The following selections are taken from the *Epistulae morales* (Moral Letters), written during Seneca’s final retirement. Nominaly addressed to his old friend Lucilius, procurator of Sicily, the 124 letters were probably meant for publication from the start. They have been recognized as essays in all but name since at least the time of Francis Bacon. In them Seneca emphasizes the harshness of life (Letter 107) and proposes philosophy as a means of self-defense (Letter 18). Appropriating the Stoic distinctions between matter and reason, body and soul, he locates freedom in the ascendancy of soul over body. To achieve this ascendancy, he recommends following nature (Letters 41, 107), thereby ridding the soul progressively of its diseases and passions. Anyone who manages to complete this process is a Stoic sage, able to “take things philosophically” come what may. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this ideal has been criticized as inhuman. Readers who care to reflect on the justice of the charge may consult Seneca’s observations on death (Letter 63). Similarly, those curious about his humanity may want to weigh his remarks on slavery (Letter 47).

The freshness of Seneca’s philosophical writing still strikes readers nearly two thousand years later. There is certainly more than one reason for this, but the primary one is probably its straightforward practicality. Although Seneca occasionally indulges in “less deserving,” more theoretical topics, theory is kept on a short leash and is strictly subservient to practical ends. Philosophy, as he understands it, is the enlightened pursuit of happiness; it consists not so much in words as in actions. Seneca offers vivid examples of these philosophical actions in Letter 18.
It is the month of December, and yet the whole city is in a sweat! Fes-
tivity at state expense is given unrestricted license. Everywhere there
echoes the noise of preparations on a massive scale. It all suggests that
the Saturnalia\(^1\) holidays are different from the ordinary working day,
when the difference is really nonexistent—so much so in fact that the
man who said that December used to be a month but is now a year was,
in my opinion, not far wide of the mark!

If I had you with me I should enjoy consulting you and finding out
what course you think we should follow: should we make no alteration
in our daily habits, or should we take off our togas—time was when a
change from formal wear would come about only during periods of
grave political upheaval, whereas with us it happens for holidays’ and
pleasure’s sake!—and have dinner parties with a note of gaiety about
them, to avoid giving the impression that we disagree with the ways of
those around us? If I know you as well as I think I do and you had to
give a decision in the matter, you would say that we should be neither
altogether like nor altogether unlike the festive-hatted crowd. But per-
haps this is the very season when we should be keeping the soul under

strict control, making it unique in abstaining from pleasure just when the crowd are all on pleasure bent. If the soul succeeds in avoiding either heading or being carried away in the direction of the temptations that lead people into extravagant living, no surer proof of its strength of purpose can be vouchsafed it. Remaining dry and sober takes a good deal more strength of will when everyone about one is puking drunk; it takes a more developed sense of fitness, on the other hand, not to make of oneself a person apart, to be neither indistinguishable from those about one nor conspicuous by one’s difference, to do the same things but not in quite the same manner. For a holiday can be celebrated without extravagant festivity.

Still, my determination to put your moral strength of purpose to the test is such that I propose to give even you the following direction found in great men’s teaching: set aside now and then a number of days during which you will be content with the plainest of food, and very little of it, and with rough, coarse clothing, and will ask yourself, “Is this what one used to dread?” It is in times of security that the spirit should be preparing itself to deal with difficult times; while fortune is bestowing favors on it then is the time for it to be strengthened against her rebuffs. In the midst of peace the soldier carries out maneuvers, throws up earthworks against a nonexistent enemy and tires himself out with unnecessary toil in order to be equal to it when it is necessary. If you want a man to keep his head when the crisis comes you must give him some training before it comes. This was the aim of the men who once every month pretended they were poor, bringing themselves face to face with want, to prevent their ever being terrified by a situation which they had frequently rehearsed.

You must not at this point imagine that I mean meals like Timon’s or “the poor man’s room” or anything else to which the extravagance of wealth resort to amuse away its tedium. That pallet must be a real one, and the same applies to your smock, and your bread must be hard and grimy. Endure all this for three or four days at a time, sometimes more, so that it is a genuine trial and not an amusement. At the end of it, believe me, Lucilius, you will revel in being sated for a penny, and will come to see that security from care is not dependent on fortune—for even when she is angry she will always let us have what is enough for our needs.
There is no reason, mind you, why you should suppose yourself to be performing a considerable feat in doing this—you will only be doing something done by thousands upon thousands of slaves and paupers. But take credit on one account, that you will be doing it of your own free choice—and finding it no more difficult to endure on a permanent basis than to try out once in a while. We should be practicing with a dummy target, getting to be at home with poverty so that fortune cannot catch us unprepared. We shall be easier in our minds when rich if we have come to realize how far from burdensome it is to be poor. The great hedonist teacher Epicurus used to observe certain periods during which he would be niggardly in satisfying his hunger, with the object of seeing to what extent, if at all, one thereby fell short of attaining full and complete pleasure, and whether it was worth going to much trouble to make the deficit good. At least so he says in the letter he wrote to Polyaenus in the year Charinus was in office. He boasts in it indeed that he is managing to feed himself for less than a halfpenny whereas Metrodorus, not yet having made such good progress, needs a whole halfpenny! Do you think such fare can do no more than fill a person up? It can fill him with pleasure as well, and not the kind of insubstantial, fleeting pleasure that needs constant renewal but a pleasure which is sure and lasting. Barley porridge, or a crust of barley bread, and water do not make a very cheerful diet, but nothing gives one keener pleasure than the ability to derive pleasure even from that—and the feeling of having arrived at something which one cannot be deprived of by any unjust stroke of fortune. Prison rations are more generous: the man in the condemned cell is not so scantily fed as that by the executioner; to reduce oneself, then, of one’s own free choice to a diet that no man has any real call to be apprehensive about even if he is sentenced to death, that is an act of real spiritual greatness. To do this is truly to forestall the blows of fortune. So, my dear Lucilius, start following these men’s practice and appoint certain days on which to give up everything and make yourself at home with next to nothing. Start cultivating a relationship with poverty.

Dear guest, be bold enough to pay no heed
To riches, and so make yourself, like him,
Worthy of a god.
For no one is worthy of a god unless he has paid no heed to riches. I am not, mind you, against your possessing them, but I want to ensure that you possess them without tremors; and this you will only achieve in one way, by convincing yourself that you can live a happy life even without them, and by always regarding them as being on the point of vanishing.

But it’s time I started folding up this letter. “Not till you’ve settled your account,” you say. Well, I’ll refer you to Epicurus for payment. “Anger carried to excess begets madness.” How true this is you’re bound to know, having had both slaves and enemies. It is a passion, though, which flares up against all types of people. It is born of love as well as hate, and is as liable to arise in the course of sport or jesting as in affairs of a serious kind. The factor that counts is not the importance of the cause from which it springs but the kind of personality it lands in, in the same way as with fire what matters is not the fierceness of the flame but where it catches—solid objects may resist the fiercest flame while, conversely, dry and inflammable matter will nurse a mere spark into a conflagration. It is true, my dear Lucilius. The outcome of violent anger is a mental raving, and therefore anger is to be avoided not for the sake of moderation but for the sake of sanity.

Letter XLI

You are doing the finest possible thing and acting in your best interests if, as you say in your letter, you are persevering in your efforts to acquire a sound understanding. This is something it is foolish to pray for when you can win it from your own self. There is no need to raise our hands to heaven; there is no need to implore the temple warden to allow us close to the ear of some graven image, as though this increased the chances of our being heard. God is near you, is with you, is inside you. Yes, Lucilius, there resides within us a divine spirit, which guards us and watches us in the evil and the good we do. As we treat him, so will he treat us. No man, indeed, is good without God—is any one capable of rising above fortune unless he has help from God? He it is that prompts us to noble and exalted endeavors. In each and every good man

A god (what god we are uncertain) dwells.
If you have ever come on a dense wood of ancient trees that have risen to an exceptional height, shutting out all sight of the sky with one thick screen of branches upon another, the loftiness of the forest, the seclusion of the spot, your sense of wonderment at finding so deep and unbroken a gloom out of doors, will persuade you of the presence of a deity. Any cave in which the rocks have been eroded deep into the mountain resting on it, its hollowing out into a cavern of impressive extent not produced by the labors of men but the result of processes of nature, will strike into your soul some kind of inkling of the divine. We venerate the sources of important streams; places where a mighty river bursts suddenly from hiding are provided with altars; hot springs are objects of worship; the darkness or unfathomable depth of pools has made their waters sacred. And if you come across a man who is never alarmed by dangers, never affected by cravings, happy in adversity, calm in the midst of storm, viewing mankind from a higher level and the gods from their own, is it not likely that a feeling will find its way into you of veneration for him? Is it not likely that you will say to yourself, “Here is a thing which is too great, too sublime for anyone to regard it as being in the same sort of category as that puny body it inhabits.” Into that body there has descended a divine power. The soul that is elevated and well regulated, that passes through any experience as if it counted for comparatively little, that smiles at all the things we fear or pray for, is impelled by a force that comes from heaven. A thing of that soul’s height cannot stand without the prop of a deity. Hence the greater part of it is situated where it descends from; in the same way as the sun’s rays touch the earth but are really situated at the point from which they emanate, a soul possessed of greatness and holiness, which has been sent down into this world in order that we may gain a nearer knowledge of the divine, associates with us, certainly, but never loses contact with its source. On that source it depends; that is the direction in which its eyes turn, and the direction it strives to climb in; the manner in which it takes part in our affairs is that of a superior being.

What, then, is this soul? Something which has a luster that is due to no quality other than its own. Could anything be more stupid than to praise a person for something that is not his? Or more crazy than admiring things which in a single moment can be transferred to another? It is not a golden bit that makes one horse superior to others. Sending a lion into the arena with his mane gilded, tired by the handling he has been
given in the process of being forced to submit to this embellishment, is a very different thing from sending in a wild one with his spirit unbroken. Bold in attack, as nature meant him to be, in all his unkempt beauty, a beast whose glory it is that none can look on him without fear, he stands higher in people’s eyes than the other, docile, gold-leaf coated creature.

No one should feel pride in anything that is not his own. We praise a vine if it loads its branches with fruit and bends its very props to the ground with the weight it carries: would any one prefer the famous vine that had gold grapes and leaves hanging on it? Fruitfulness is the vine’s peculiar virtue. So, too, in a man praise is due only to what is his very own. Suppose he has a beautiful home and a handsome collection of servants, a lot of land under cultivation and a lot of money out at interest; not one of these things can be said to be in him—they are just things around him. Praise in him what can neither be given nor snatched away, what is peculiarly a man’s.

You ask what that is? It is his spirit, and the perfection of his reason in that spirit. For man is a rational animal. Man’s ideal state is realized when he has fulfilled the purpose for which he was born. And what is it that reason demands of him? Something very easy—that he live in accord ance with his own nature. Yet this is turned into something difficult by the madness that is universal among men; we push one another into vices. And how can people be called back to spiritual well-being when no one is trying to hold them back and the crowd is urging them on?

Letter XLVII

I’m glad to hear, from these people who’ve been visiting you, that you live on friendly terms with your slaves. It is just what one expects of an enlightened, cultivated person like yourself. “They’re slaves,” people say. No. They’re human beings. “They’re slaves.” But they share the same roof as ourselves. “They’re slaves.” No, they’re friends, humble friends. “They’re slaves.” Strictly speaking they’re our fellow-slaves, if you once reflect that fortune has as much power over us as over them.

This is why I laugh at those people who think it degrading for a man to eat with his slave. Why do they think it degrading? Only because the
most arrogant of conventions has decreed that the master of the house be surrounded at his dinner by a crowd of slaves, who have to stand around while he eats more than he can hold, loading an already distended belly in his monstrous greed until it proves incapable any longer of performing the function of a belly, at which point he expends more effort in vomiting everything up than he did in forcing it down. And all this time the poor slaves are forbidden to move their lips to speak, let alone to eat. The slightest murmur is checked with a stick; not even accidental sounds like a cough, or a sneeze, or a hiccup are let off a beating. All night long they go on standing about, dumb and hungry, paying grievously for any interruption.

The result is that slaves who cannot talk before his face talk about him behind his back. The slaves of former days, however, whose mouths were not sealed up like this, who were able to make conversation not only in the presence of their master but actually with him, were ready to bare their necks to the executioner for him, to divert on to themselves any danger that threatened him; they talked at dinner but under torture they kept their mouths shut. It is just this high-handed treatment which is responsible for the frequently heard saying, “You’ve as many enemies as you’ve slaves.” They are not our enemies when we acquire them; we make them so.

For the moment I pass over other instances of our harsh and inhuman behavior, the way we abuse them as if they were beasts of burden instead of human beings, the way for example, from the time we take our places on the dinner couches, one of them mops up the spittle and another stationed at the foot of the couch collects up the “leavings” of the drunken diners. Another carves the costly game birds, slicing off choice pieces from the breast and rump with the unerring strokes of a trained hand—unhappy man, to exist for the one and only purpose of carving a fat bird in the proper style—although the person who learns the technique from sheer necessity is not quite so much to be pitied as the person who gives demonstrations of it for pleasure’s sake. Another, the one who serves the wine, is got up like a girl and engaged in a struggle with his years; he cannot get away from his boyhood, but is dragged back to it all the time; although he already has the figure of a soldier, he is kept free of hair by having it rubbed away or pulled out by the roots. His sleepless night is divided between his master’s drunkenness and sexual
pleasures, boy at the table, man in the bedroom. Another, who has the privilege of rating each guest’s character, has to go on standing where he is, poor fellow, and watch to see whose powers of flattery and absence of restraint in appetite or speech are to secure them an invitation for the following day. Add to these the caterers with their highly developed knowledge of their master’s palate, the men who know the flavors that will sharpen his appetite, know what will appeal to his eyes, what novelties can tempt his stomach when it is becoming queasy, what dishes he will push aside with the eventual coming of sheet satiety, what he will have a craving for on that particular day.

These are the people with whom a master cannot tolerate the thought of taking his dinner, assuming that to sit down at the same table with one of his slaves would seriously impair his dignity. “The very idea!” he says. Yet have a look at the number of masters he has from the ranks of these very slaves.5 Take Callistus’ one-time master. I saw him once actually standing waiting at Callistus’ door and refused admission while others were going inside, the very master who had attached a price-ticket to the man and put him up for sale along with other rejects from his household staff. There’s a slave who has paid his master back—one who was pushed into the first lot, too, the batch on which the auctioneer is merely trying out his voice! Now it was the slave’s turn to strike his master off his list, to decide that he’s not the sort of person he wants in his house. Callistus’ master sold him, yes, and look how much it cost him!

How about reflecting that the person you call your slave traces his origin back to the same stock as yourself, has the same good sky above him, breathes as you do, lives as you do, dies as you do? It is as easy for you to see in him a free-born man as for him to see a slave in you. Remember the Varus disaster: many a man of the most distinguished ancestry, who was doing his military service as the first step on the road to a seat in the Senate, was brought low by fortune, condemned by her to look after a steading, for example, or a flock of sheep. Now think contemptuously of these people’s lot in life, in whose very place, for all your contempt, you could suddenly find yourself.

I don’t want to involve myself in an endless topic of debate by discussing the treatment of slaves, towards whom we Romans are exceptionally arrogant, harsh and insulting. But the essence of the advice I’d like to give is this: treat your inferiors in the way in which you would
like to be treated by your own superiors. And whenever it strikes you how much power you have over your slave, let it also strike you that your own master has just as much power over you. “I haven’t got a master,” you say. You’re young yet; there’s always the chance that you’ll have one. Have you forgotten the age at which Hecuba became a slave, or Croesus, or the mother of Darius, or Plato, or Diogenes? Be kind and courteous in your dealings with a slave; bring him into your discussions and conversations and your company generally. And if at this point all those people who have been spoilt by luxury raise an outcry protesting, as they will, “There couldn’t be anything more degrading, anything more disgraceful,” let me just say that these are the very persons I will catch on occasion kissing the hand of someone else’s slave.

Don’t you notice, too, how our ancestors took away all odium from the master’s position and all that seemed insulting or degrading in the lot of the slave by calling the master “father of the household” and speaking of the slaves as “members of the household” (something which survives to this day in the mime)? They instituted, too, a holiday on which master and slave were to eat together, not as the only day this could happen, of course, but as one on which it was always to happen. And in the household they allowed the slaves to hold official positions and to exercise some jurisdiction in it; in fact they regarded the household as a miniature republic.

“Do you mean to say,” comes the retort, “that I’m to have each and every one of my slaves sitting at the table with me?” Not at all, any more than you’re to invite to it everybody who isn’t a slave. You’re quite mistaken, though, if you imagine that I’d bar from the table certain slaves on the grounds of the relatively menial or dirty nature of their work—that muleteer, for example, or that cowhand. I propose to value them according to their character, not their jobs. Each man has a character of his own choosing; it is chance or fate that decides his choice of job. Have some of them dine with you because they deserve it, others in order to make them so deserving. For if there’s anything typical of the slave about them as a result of the low company they’re used to living in, it will be rubbed off through association with men of better breeding.

You needn’t, my dear Lucilius, look for friends only in the City or the Senate; if you keep your eyes open, you’ll find them in your own home. Good material often lies idle for want of someone to make use of
it; just give it a trial. A man who examines the saddle and bridle and not
the animal itself when he is out to buy a horse is a fool; similarly, only
an absolute fool values a man according to his clothes, or according to
his social position, which after all is only something that we wear like
clothing.

“He’s a slave.” But he may have the spirit of a free man. “He’s a
slave.” But is that really to count against him? Show me a man who isn’t
a slave; one is a slave to sex, another to money, another to ambition; all
are slaves to hope or fear. I could show you a man who has been a Con-
sul who is a slave to his “little old woman,” a millionaire who is the
slave of a little girl in domestic service. I could show you some highly
aristocratic young men who are utter slaves to stage artistes. And there’s
no state of slavery more disgraceful than one which is self-imposed. So
you needn’t allow yourself to be deterred by the snobbish people I’ve
been talking about from showing good humor towards your slaves
instead of adopting an attitude of arrogant superiority towards them.
Have them respect you rather than fear you.

Here, just because I’ve said they “should respect a master rather than
fear him,” someone will tell us that I’m now inviting slaves to proclaim
their freedom and bringing about their employers’ overthrow. “Are
slaves to pay their ‘respects’ like dependent followers or early morning
callers? That’s what he means, I suppose.” Anyone saying this forgets
that what is enough for a god, in the shape of worship, cannot be too
little for a master. To be really respected is to be loved; and love and
fear will not mix. That’s why I think you’re absolutely right in not wish-
ing to be feared by your slaves, and in confining your lashings to verbal
ones; as instruments of correction, beatings are for animals only. Be-
sides, what annoys us does not necessarily do us any harm; but we mas-
ters are apt to be robbed of our senses by mere passing fancies, to the
point where our anger is called out by anything which fails to answer to
our will. We assume the mental attitudes of tyrants. For they too forget
their own strength and the helplessness of others and grow white-hot
with fury as if they had received an injury, when all the time they are
quite immune from any such danger through the sheer exaltedness of
their position. Nor indeed are they unaware of this; but it does not
stop them seizing an opportunity of finding fault with an inferior and
maltreating him for it; they receive an injury by way of excuse to do one
themselves.
But I won’t keep you any longer; you don’t need exhortation. It is a mark of a good way of life that, among other things, it satisfies and abides; bad behavior, constantly changing, not for the better, simply into different forms, has none of this stability.

Letter LXIII

I am very sorry to hear of your friend Flaccus’ death. Still, I would not have you grieve unduly over it. I can scarcely venture to demand that you should not grieve at all—and yet I am convinced that it is better that way. But who will ever be granted that strength of character, unless he be a man already lifted far out of fortune’s reach? Even he will feel a twinge of pain when a thing like this happens—but only a twinge. As for us, we can be pardoned for having given way to tears so long as they have not run down in excessive quantities and we have checked them for ourselves. When one has lost a friend one’s eyes should be neither dry nor streaming. Tears, yes, there should be, but not lamentation. Can you find the rule I am laying down a harsh one when the greatest of Greek poets has restricted to a single day, no more, a person’s right to cry—in the passage where he tells us that even Niobe remembered to eat? Would you like to know what lies behind extravagant weeping and wailing? In our tears we are trying to find means of proving that we feel the loss. We are not being governed by our grief but parading it. No one ever goes into mourning for the benefit merely of himself. Oh, the miserable folly of it all—that there should be an element of ostentation in grief!

“Come now,” you will be asking, “are you saying that I should forget a person who has been a friend?” Well, you are not proposing to keep him very long in your memory if his memory is to last just as long as your grief. At any moment something or other will happen that will turn that long face of yours into a smiling one. I do not see very much time going by before the sense of loss is mitigated and even the keenest sorrowings settle down. Your face will cease to be its present picture of sadness as soon as you take your eyes off yourself. At the moment you are keeping a watch on your grief—but even as you do it is fading away, and the keener it is the quicker it is in stopping.
Let us see to it that the recollection of those we have lost becomes a pleasure to us. Nobody really cares to cast his mind back to something which he is never going to think of without pain. Inevitable as it is that the names of persons who were dear to us and are now lost should cause us a gnawing sort of pain when we think of them, that pain is not without a pleasure of its own. As my teacher Attalus used to say, “In the pleasure we find in the memory of departed friends there is a resemblance to the way in which certain bitter fruits are agreeable or the very acidity of an exceedingly old wine has its attraction. But after a certain interval all that pained us is obliterated and the enjoyment comes to us unalloyed.” If we are to believe him, “Thinking of friends who are alive and well is like feasting on cakes and honey. Recalling those who are gone is pleasant but not without a touch of sourness. Who would deny, though, that even acid things like this with a harshness in their taste do stimulate the palate?” Personally I do not agree with him there. Thinking of departed friends is to me something sweet and mellow. For when I had them with me it was with the feeling that I was going to lose them, and now that I have lost them I keep the feeling that I have them with me still.

So, my dear Lucilius, behave in keeping with your usual fair-mindedness and stop misinterpreting the kindness of fortune. She has given as well as taken away. Let us therefore go all out to make the most of friends, since no one can tell how long we shall have the opportunity. Let us just think how often we leave them behind when we are setting out on some long journey or other, or how often we fail to see them when we are staying in the same area, and we shall realize that we have lost all too much time while they are still alive. Can you stand people who treat their friends with complete neglect and then mourn them to distraction, never caring about anyone unless they have lost him? And the reason they lament them so extravagantly then is that they are afraid people may wonder whether they did care; they are looking for belated means of demonstrating their devotion. If we have other friends, we are hardly kind or appreciative of them if they count for so very little when it comes to consoling us for the one we have buried. If we have no other friends, we have done ourselves a greater injury than fortune has done us: she has deprived us of a single friend but we have deprived ourselves of every friend we have failed to make. A person, moreover, who has
not been able to care about more than one friend cannot have cared even about that one too much. Supposing someone lost his one and only shirt in a robbery, would you not think him an utter idiot if he chose to bewail his loss rather than look about him for some means of keeping out the cold and find something to put over his shoulders? You have buried someone you loved. Now look for someone to love. It is better to make good the loss of a friend than to cry over him.

What I am about to go on to say is, I know, a commonplace, but I am not going to omit it merely because every one has said it. Even a person who has not deliberately put an end to his grief finds an end to it in the passing of time. And merely growing weary of sorrowing is quite shameful as a means of curing sorrow in the case of an enlightened man. I should prefer to see you abandoning grief than it abandoning you. Much as you may wish to, you will not be able to keep it up for very long, so give it up as early as possible. For women our forefathers fixed the period of mourning at a year with the intention, not that women should continue mourning as long as that, but that they should not go on any longer: for men no period is prescribed at all because none would be decent. Yet out of all the pathetic females you know of who were only dragged away from the graveside, or even torn from the body itself, with the greatest of difficulty, can you show me one whose tears lasted for a whole month? Nothing makes itself unpopular quite so quickly as a person’s grief. When it is fresh it attracts people to its side, finds someone to offer it consolation; but if it is perpetuated it becomes an object of ridicule—deservedly, too, for it is either feigned or foolish.

And all this comes to you from me, the very man who wept for Annaeus Serenus, that dearest of friends to me, so unrestrainedly that I must needs be included—though this is the last thing I should want—among examples of men who have been defeated by grief! Nevertheless I condemn today the way I behaved then. I realize now that my sorrowing in the way I did was mainly due to the fact that I had never considered the possibility of his dying before me. That he was younger than I was, a good deal younger too, was all that ever occurred to me—as if fate paid any regard to seniority! So let us bear it constantly in mind that those we are fond of are just as liable to death as we are ourselves. What I should have said before was, “My friend Serenus is younger than I am,
but what difference does that make? He should die later than me, but it is quite possible he will die before me.” It was just because I did not do so that fortune caught me unprepared with that sudden blow. Now I bear it in mind not only that all things are liable to death but that that liability is governed by no set rules. Whatever can happen at any time can happen today. Let us reflect then, my dearest Lucilius, that we ourselves shall not be long in reaching the place we mourn his having reached. Perhaps, too, if only there is truth in the story told by sages and some welcoming abode awaits us, he whom we suppose to be dead and gone has merely been sent on ahead.

Letter CVII

Where’s that moral insight of yours? Where’s that acuteness of perception? Or magnanimity? Does something as trivial as that upset you? Your slaves have seen your absorption in business as their chance to run away. So be it, you have been let down by friends—for by all means let them keep the name we mistakenly bestowed on them and be called such just to heighten their disgrace; but the fact is that your affairs have been freed for good and all of a number of people on whom all your trouble was being wasted and who considered you insufferable to anyone but yourself. There’s nothing unusual or surprising about it all. To be put out by this sort of thing is as ridiculous as grumbling about being spattered in the street or getting dirty where it’s muddy. One has to accept life on the same terms as the public baths, or crowds, or travel. Things will get thrown at you and things will hit you. Life’s no soft affair. It’s a long road you’ve started on: you can’t but expect to have slips and knocks and falls, and get tired, and openly wish—a lie—for death. At one place you will part from a companion, at another bury one, and be afraid of one at another. These are the kind of things you’ll come up against all along this rugged journey. Wanting to die? Let the personality be made ready to face everything; let it be made to realize that it has come to terrain on which thunder and lightning play, terrain on which

Grief and vengeful Care have set their couch,
And pallid Sickness dwells, and drear Old Age.
This is the company in which you must live out your days. Escape them you cannot, scorn them you can. And scorn them you will if by constant reflection you have anticipated future happenings. Everyone faces up more bravely to a thing for which he has long prepared himself, sufferings, even, being withstood if they have been trained for in advance. Those who are unprepared, on the other hand, are panic-stricken by the most insignificant happenings. We must see to it that nothing takes us by surprise. And since it is invariably unfamiliarity that makes a thing more formidable than it really is, this habit of continual reflection will ensure that no form of adversity finds you a complete beginner.

“I’ve been deserted by my slaves!” Others have been plundered, incriminated, set upon, betrayed, beaten up, attacked with poison or with calumny—mention anything you like, it has happened to plenty of people. A vast variety of missiles are launched with us as their target. Some are planted in our flesh already, some are hurtling towards us at this very moment, others merely grazing us in passing on their way to other targets. Let’s not be taken aback by any of the things we’re born to, things no one need complain at for the simple reason that they’re the same for everybody. Yes, the same for everybody; for even if a man does escape something, it was a thing which he might have suffered. The fairness of a law does not consist in its effect being actually felt by all alike, but in its having been laid down for all alike. Let’s get this sense of justice firmly into our heads and pay up without grumbling the taxes arising from our mortal state. Winter brings in the cold, and we have to shiver; summer brings back the heat and we have to swelter. Bad weather tries the health and we have to be ill. Somewhere or other we are going to have encounters with wild beasts, and with man, too—more dangerous than all those beasts. Floods will rob us of one thing, fire of another. These are conditions of our existence which we cannot change. What we can do is adopt a noble spirit, such a spirit as befits a good man, so that we may bear up bravely under all that fortune sends us and bring our wills into tune with nature’s; reversals, after all, are the means by which nature regulates this visible realm of hers: clear skies follow cloudy; after the calm comes the storm; the winds take turns to blow; day succeeds night; while part of the heavens is in the ascendant, another is sinking. It is by means of opposites that eternity endures.

This is the law to which our minds are needing to be reconciled. This is the law they should be following and obeying. They should assume
that whatever happens was bound to happen and refrain from railing at nature. One can do nothing better than endure what cannot be cured and attend uncomplainingly the God at whose instance all things come about. It is a poor soldier that follows his commander grumbling. So let us receive our orders readily and cheerfully, and not desert the ranks along the march—the march of this glorious fabric of creation in which everything we shall suffer is a strand. And let us address Jupiter, whose guiding hand directs this mighty work, in the way our own Cleanthes did, in some most expressive lines which I may perhaps be pardoned for translating in view of the example set here by that master of expressiveness, Cicero. If you like them, so much the better; if not, you will at least know that I was following Cicero’s example.

Lead me, Master of the soaring vault
Of Heaven, lead me, Father, where you will.
I stand here prompt and eager to obey.
And ev’n suppose I were unwilling, still
I should attend you and know suffering,
Dishonorably and grumbling, when I might
Have done so and been good as well. For Fate
The willing leads, the unwilling drags along.8

Let us speak and live like that. Let fate find us ready and eager. Here is your noble spirit—the one which has put itself in the hands of fate; on the other side we have the puny degenerate spirit which struggles, and which sees nothing right in the way the universe is ordered, and would rather reform the gods than reform itself.