

Issue 6: On the Shortness of Life –  
Lucius Annacus Seneca (c. 5 BC – AD  
65)

In his writings called On the Shortness of Life, Seneca discusses the principles by which he believes a person can live a long life. The book is full of tidbits, some obvious, others not so obvious, but helpful all the same.

Seneca was banished to Corsica on a charge of adultery with Caligula's sister. He was a teacher to emperor Nero, who later ordered that he commit suicide because of a suspicion that Seneca was involved in a plot to assassinate him. In his writings, Seneca claimed freedom for himself even while in exile, as he still had his studies to invigor his mind.

Seneca stated simply that the past cannot be controlled, that the future may not arise, and that the present should be the focus of one's thoughts and actions. He also stressed that time is our most valuable commodity, and if one is not cautious and particular, others who are not deserving will easily and without apology demand our time. He stressed the importance of good friendship. We should avoid "those who are gloomy and always lamenting, and who grasp at every pretext for complaint".

To make the most of our time, he stressed, we need to schedule in leisure time – which is different from what he called "idle preoccupation" - whether it is every day or one day a month, for example. If what you are doing involves a serious commitment, you are not at leisure. You should always be greater than your task, so that goals may be reached and so that stress is not a result of an undertaking. Amusingly, he even

recommended that one reach a state of intoxication once in a while to drink away the cares of the day.

Those who are distracted, he wrote, are the ones who complain that life is short. Distractions take many forms – work, excess, wealth, gluttony – and focusing on these distractions comes at a high cost. Seneca believed that we have everything we need in nature – that it is not necessary to eat shellfish or wild animals. "It is the mind that creates our wealth...and in the harshest desert places it finds sufficient to nourish the body and revels in the enjoyment of its own goods." Even a modest hut should be considered adequate for shelter. He devotes much of his writings to criticism of those who focus on the acquisition of wealth – their wastefulness and needless abundance. If ones gets to a point where everything can be taken away without it bothering them, they are wealthiest of all. "Whatever is best for a human being lies outside human control", he stated.

As if predating modern psychological thought, Seneca purported that those who lack inside themselves will forever be insatiable. Studies, and sharing of knowledge with others are the only things that are truly important and will "withdraw all of your melancholy".

Part of his writings come in the form of a letter to his mother, whom he tries to comfort as she grieves for him in exile. He commends her on how she has handled the grief of losing her husband, not giving in to grief, but mastering it. Inner strength would not permit her to grieve unnecessarily.

He claimed that we should learn to soften our anger. "Think your way through difficulties," he recommended,

"harsh conditions can be softened, restricted ones can be widened, and heavy ones can weigh less on those who know how to bear them." "He will live badly who does not know how to die well."

He even offered practical advice such as "we must go for walks out of doors, so the mind can be strengthened and invigorated by a clear sky and of fresh air".

All in all, Seneca's writings are a good reminder of where we must focus our time and energy. A worthwhile read for an afternoon of leisure.