

translated by J. M. Pfundstein

Seneca to his friend Lucilius: greetings.

Where's your sense? Where's your cleverness in understanding things? Where's your character? Can so trivial a thing really touch you?

Your servants thought your preoccupation gave them a chance to run away. If your friends (let's go ahead and call them by the name which our mistake gave them, so that we won't call them something uglier) were deceiving you ... They failed to back you up in all your endeavors and they undermined your work and thought you were an annoyance to everybody.

None of this stuff is unheard of; none of it is unexpected. It's as ridiculous to be offended by these things as it is to complain because you got splashed in a bathhouse, or jostled in a crowd, or smeared in the mud. The conditions of life are the same as those of a bathhouse, a crowd, a road. Some things will be tossed at you; some things will happen to hit you. Living isn't a nice business.

You've set out on a long journey. And it's expected that you'll slip, and bump into something, and fall, and get tired, and shout, "I wish I were dead!"— in other words, you'll lie. You'll pick up a companion in one place, bury him in another, and you'll be afraid in still another. These sufferings are the milestones on this broken road.

Does your soul want to die? Let it be ready for anything; let it know it's come where the lightning falls. Let it know it's come where

Grief and the avenging Cares have put their beds,
and the pale Diseases dwell, and grim Old Age
—Vergil, Aeneid 6.274f

With neighbors like these you must live out your life. You can't escape them; you can despise them. And you will despise them if you think about and anticipate what's to come. Everyone approaches something more bravely if he's settled his mind to it for a long time, and even hard things can be endured if they are expected. On the other hand, someone who's unprepared is terrified by practically nothing. We have to make it so that nothing is a surprise for us. And, because things have more impact due to novelty, constant forethought will see to it that you are a novice at no form of suffering.

"My servants left me." Another man got robbed; another man was charged with a crime; another man was killed; another betrayed; another beaten; another attacked with poison or slander. Whatever you may come up with, it happens to many...

And many different spears and arrows are aimed, one after another, straight at us. Some of them have sunk deep in us; some of them merely threaten and some are coming even now with as much force as possible; some of them, aimed at someone else,

strike us instead.

We should be surprised by none of this; we are born to it. No one should complain about it, since it's the same for everybody. So I say things are fair: for someone could have suffered even that which he escaped. It's a fair law not if everyone has benefited from it, but if it has been levelled equally at everyone. Let fairness rule the mind and let's pay without complaint the tax every living thing owes to death.

Winter brings cold weather: we'll freeze. Summer brings back hot weather: we'll broil. Hostile weather attacks our health: we'll get sick. We might run into wild beasts somewhere, or men more deadly than any beast. We may lose this thing to water, this thing to fire. We can't change the way of things. But we can do this: take up a great spirit, worthy of a good man, and with it bravely take our chances and consent to Nature.

Nature, moreover, moderates her kingdom, which you see, with changes. Clear skies follow clouds. The seas grow restless after they were quiet; the different winds blow in turn; day follows night; as part of the sky rises, another part sets: the eternity of the world exists in contrary things.

Our mind should fit itself to this law, follow it, obey it. Whatever happens, we should think that it ought to have happened and we shouldn't want to quarrel with Nature. It's best to endure what you can't cure and accompany without complaint the god from whom, as creator, all things come forth. It's a bad soldier who follows his commander groaning. So let's take our orders, lively and quick, and let's not abandon the course of this most beautiful creation, interwoven with everything we suffer.

And let's address Jupiter, by whose direction all this matter is guided, as Cleanthes the Stoic addressed him in eloquent verses. (I've translated them into our language, following the example of Cicero, that very learned man. If you like the verses, you'll make good use of them. If you don't like them, you'll know I was just imitating Cicero!)

Father and ruler of the high heavens,
lead me wherever you want; I won't lag behind
I'm willing. But make me unwilling: groaning I'll still go
and as an evil man endure what was granted to the good.
The Fates lead the willing; they drag the unwilling.

We should live this way; we should speak this way. Fate shouldn't find us unprepared, but ready. On the one hand, there is a great spirit who has handed himself over to Fate. But, on the other hand, there is a puny and weak man, who opposes and thinks badly about the order of the universe, and prefers to correct the gods rather than himself.

Goodbye.