

On the Shortness of Life

Seneca the Younger (4 BC - 65 AD)

Summary and Notes

It is not that we have a short space of time, but that we waste much of it. Life is long enough, and it has been given in sufficiently generous measure to allow the accomplishment of the very greatest things if the whole of it is well invested. But when it is squandered in luxury and carelessness, when it is devoted to no good end, forced at last by the ultimate necessity we perceive that it has passed away before we were aware that it was passing. So it is - the life we receive is not short, but we make it so, not do we have a lack of it, but are wasteful of it.

Why do we complain of nature? She has shown herself kindly (if indifferent); life, if you know how to use it, is long. But one man is possessed by an avarice that is insatiable, another by a toilsome devotion to tasks that are useless; one man is besotted with wine, another is paralyzed in sloth; one man is exhausted by an ambition that always hangs upon the decisions of others, another, driven on by the greed of the trader, is led over all lands and all seas by the hope of gain; some are tormented by a passion for war and are always either bent upon inflicting danger upon others or concerned about their own; some there are who are worn out by voluntary servitude in a thankless attendance upon the great; many are kept busy either in the pursuit of other men's fortune or in complaining of their own; many, following no fixed aim, shifting and inconstant and dissatisfied, are plunged by their fickleness into plans that are ever new; some have no fixed principle by which to direct their course, but Fate takes them unawares while they loll and yawn - so surely does it happen that I cannot doubt the truth of the utterance which the greatest of poets delivered with all the seeming of an oracle: the part of life we really live is small. For all the rest of existence is not life, but merely time.

Finally, everybody agrees that no one pursuit can be successfully followed by a man who is busied with many things - eloquence cannot, nor the liberal studies - since the mind, when its interests are divided, takes in nothing very deeply, but rejects everything that is, as it were, crammed into it. There is nothing the busy man is less busied with than living; there is nothing that is harder to learn.

Everyone hurries his life on and suffers a yearning for the future and a weariness of the present. But he who bestows all of his time on his own needs, who plans out every day as if it were his last, neither longs for nor fears the morrow.

And so there is no reason for you to think that any man has lived long because he has gray hair and wrinkles; he has not lived long - he has existed long.

Yet no one will bring back the years, no one will bestow you once more upon yourself. Life will follow the path it started upon, and will neither reverse nor check its course; it will make no noise, it will not remind you of its swiftness. Silent it will glide on; it will not prolong itself at the command of a king, or at the applause of the populace. Just as it was started on its first day, so it will run; nowhere will it turn aside, nowhere will it delay. And what will be the result? You have been engrossed, life hastens by; meanwhile death will be at hand, for which, willy nilly, you must find leisure.

The fairest day in hapless mortals' life, Is first to flee.

Life is divided into three periods - what which has been, that which is, that which will be. Of these the present time is short, the future is doubtful, the past is certain. For the last is the one over which Fortune has no control, is the one which cannot be back under any man's power. But men who are engrossed lose this; for they have no time to look back upon the past, and even if they should have, it is not pleasant to recall something they must view with regret....And yet this is the part of our time that is sacred and set apart, put beyond the reach of all human mishaps, and removed from the dominion of Fortune, the part that is disquieted by no want, by no fear, by no attacks or disease; this can neither be troubled nor snatched away - it is an everlasting and unanxious possession....The mind that is untroubled and tranquil has the power to roam into all parts of its life; but the minds of the engrossed, just as if weighted by a yoke, cannot turn and look behind. And so their life vanishes into an abyss; and it does no good, no matter how much water you pour into a vessel, if there is no bottom to receive and hold it, so with time - it makes no difference how much is given; if there is nothing for it to settle upon, it passes out through the chinks and holes of the mind.

Present time is very brief, so brief, indeed, that to some there seems to be none; for it is always in motion, it ever flows and hurries on; it ceases to be before it has come, and can no more brook delay than the firmament or stars, whose ever unresting movement never lets them abide in the same track. The engrossed, therefore, are concerned with present time alone, and it is so brief that it cannot be grasped, and even this is filched away from them, distracted as they are among many things.

Of all men they alone are at leisure, who take time for philosophy, they alone really live; for they are not content to be good guardians of their own lifetime study. They annex every age to their own; all the years that have gone before them are addition to their store. Unless we are most ungrateful, all those men, glorious fashioners of holy thoughts, were born for us; for us they have prepared a way of life. By other men's labors we are led in the sight of things most beautiful that have been wrested from the darkness and brought into the light; from no age are

we shut out, we have access to all ages, and if it is our wish, by greatness of mind, to pass beyond the narrow limits of human weakness, there is a great stretch of time through which we may roam....Since nature allows us to enter into fellowship with every age, why should we not turn from this paltry and fleeting span of time and surrender ourselves with all our souls to the past, which is boundless, which is eternal, which we share with our betters?

But the works which philosophy as consecrated cannot be harmed; no age will destroy them, no age reduce them; the following and each succeeding age will but increase the reverence for them, since envy works upon what is close at hand, and things that are far off we are more free to admire. The life of the philosopher, therefore, has wide range, and he is not confined by the same bounds that shut others in. He alone is freed from the limitations of the human race; all ages serve him as if a god. Has some time passed by? This he embraces by recollection. Is time present? This he uses. Is it still to come? This he anticipates. He makes his life long by combining all times into one.

But those that forget the past, neglect the present, and fear for the future have a life that is very brief and troubled; when they have reached the end of it, the poor wretches perceive too late that for such a long while they have been busied in doing nothing.

...for, whenever their engrossments fail them, they are restless because they are left with nothing to do, and they do not know how to dispose of their leisure or to drag out the time. And so they strive for something else to occupy them, and all the intervening time is irksome; exactly as they do when a gladiatorial exhibition has been announced, or when they are waiting for the appointed time of some other show or amusement, they want to skip over the days that lie between. All postponement of something they hope for seems long to them. Yet the time which they enjoy is short and swift, and it is made much shorter by their own fault; for they flee from one pleasure to another and cannot remain fixed in one desire.....They lose the day in expectation of the night, and the night in fear of the dawn.

The very displeasure of such men are uneasy and disquieted by alarms of various sorts, and at the very moment of rejoicing the anxious thought comes over them: "How long will these things last?" This feeling has led kings to weep over the power they possessed, and they have not so much delights in the greatness of their fortune, as they have viewed with terror the end to which it must some time come....By great toil they attain what they wish, and with anxiety hold what they have attained; meanwhile they take no account of time that will never more return. New engrossments take the place of the old, hope leads to new hope, ambition to new ambition. They do not seek an end to their wretchedness, but change the cause.

The condition of all who are engrossed is wretched, but most wretched is the condition of those who labour at engrossments that are not even their own, who regulate their sleep by that of another, their walk by the pace of another....If these wish to know how short their life is, let them reflect how small a part of it is their own.

All things are bought at the price of life.