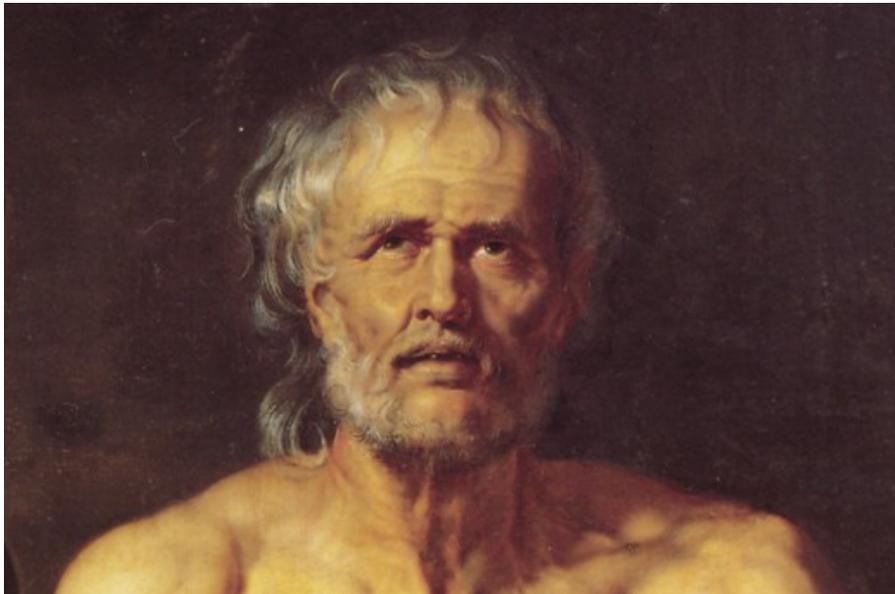


Letters of Note

Nothing is ours, except time, Wednesday, 11 September 2013



Towards the end of his 69 years, Roman [Stoic](#) philosopher [Lucius Annaeus Seneca](#) wrote numerous insightful letters to his friend, [Lucilius Junior](#), in which he offered often invaluable advice relating to a wide range of issues. In 65 AD, the year of Seneca's death, 124 of these missives were published under the title [Epistulae morales ad Lucilium](#) (Moral Epistles to Lucilius). The first of these fantastic letters, on the subject of saving time, can be read below.

English translation follows.

(Source: [Seneca, Volume IV, Epistles 1-65](#); Image: *Portrait of Seneca* by Peter Paul Rubens, via [Great Thoughts Treasury](#).)

Seneca Lucilio suo salutem

Ita fac, mi Lucili: vindica te tibi, et tempus quod adhuc aut auferebatur aut subripiiebatur aut excidebat collige et serva. Persuade tibi hoc sic esse ut scribo: quaedam tempora eripiuntur nobis, quaedam subducuntur, quaedam effluunt. Turpissima tamen est iactura quae per negligentiam fit. Et si volueris attendere, magna pars vitae elabatur male agentibus, maxima nihil agentibus, tota vita aliud agentibus. Quem mihi dabis qui aliquod pretium tempori ponat, qui diem aestimet, qui intellegat se cotidie mori? In hoc enim fallimur, quod mortem prospicimus: magna pars eius iam praeterit; quidquid aetatis retro est mors tenet.

Fac ergo, mi Lucili, quod facere te scribis, omnes horas complectere; sic fiet ut minus ex crastino pendeas, si hodierno manum inieceris. Dum differtur vita transcurrit. Omnia, Lucili, aliena sunt, tempus tantum nostrum est; in huius rei unius fugacis ac lubricae possessionem natura nos misit, ex qua expellit quicumque vult. Et tanta stultitia mortalium est ut quae minima et vilissima sunt, certe reparabilia, imputari sibi cum impetravere patiantur, nemo se iudicet quicquam debere qui tempus accepit, cum interim hoc unum est quod ne gratus

quidem potest reddere. Interrogabis fortasse quid ego faciam qui tibi ista praecipio. Fatebor ingenue: quod apud luxuriosum sed diligentem evenit, ratio mihi constat impensae. Non possum dicere nihil perdere, sed quid perdam et quare et quemadmodum dicam; causas paupertatis meae reddam. Sed evenit mihi quod plerisque non suo vitio ad inopiam redactis: omnes ignoscunt, nemo succurrit. Quid ergo est? non puto pauperem cui quantulumcumque superest sat est; tu tamen malo serves tua, et bono tempore incipies. Nam ut visum est maioribus nostris, 'sera parsimonia in fundo est'; non enim tantum minimum in imo sed pessimum remanet. Vale.

Greetings from Seneca to Lucilius

Continue to act thus, my dear Lucilius—set yourself free for your own sake; gather and save your time, which til 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 lie 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 practising. 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 cannot begin too early. For, as our ancestors believed, it is too late to spare when you reach the dregs of the cask. Of that which remains at the bottom, the amount is slight, and the quality is vile. Farewell.