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*The Stoic philosopher is one who lives a life
guided by reason, contemplation, and aretē.*

“Aging Well”

by Beatrix Murrell

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Many of the great Stoic thinkers, like Seneca, were quite down-to-earth and talked in a universal language that holds meaning for most of us today. These philosophers spoke to and wrote for their friends, for the citizenry of the Greco-Roman world, and maybe they just might speak to us!

As for aging in this life, that's one item we all have in common. As for aging *well,* that's not so common. This is an area where the words of Seneca might seem quite applicable. Let us proceed with his good, practical wisdom.

"Often an old man will have nothing but the calendar to prove that he has lived a long time." [Moses Hadas (translator), THE STOIC PHILOSOPHY OF SENECA, W.W. Norton & Co., 1958, p. 84.]

So many of us complain that life is so short, but for Seneca it's only short "when it is squandered through luxury and indifference, and spent for no good end..." For him it's all a matter of how we use our life, how we engage in life. "The life we receive is not short but we make it so; we are not ill provided but use what we have wastefully." [Ibid, p. 48.]

Rather "it takes a great man...to allow none of his time to be frittered away; such a man's life is very long because he devotes every available minute of it to himself. None of it lies idle and unexploited, none of it is at the disposal of another." [Ibid, p. 55.]

I don't think Seneca is advocating a narcissistic selfishness in this above statement. In this case he is talking about a person who is sufficient unto himself, a person who knows his likes and dislikes, a person who can carry out pursuits effectively, and a person who can plan ahead.

For Seneca "the man who puts all of his time to his own uses, who plans every day as if it were his last, is neither impatient for the morrow nor afraid of it." [Ibid, p. 56.] Conversely, those "busy over nothing" can never restore their years--and no one can gain lost time back.

Seneca is especially discussing how we employ our leisure. Naturally, as a Stoic, he considers that the best way to engage in this time we have to ourselves is to "take time for philosophy." In a sense he is referring to our grasp of great human works down through history, and how we may take such unto ourselves and make it part of our own life's continuum!

"Only men who make Zeno and Pythagoras and Democritus and the other high priests of liberal studies their daily familiars, who cultivate Aristotle and Theophrastus, can properly be said to be engaged in the duties of life." [Ibid, p. 66.]

As for these ancient philosophers, as for all the great modern thinkers in many fields, whose disciplines we select to study today, "It is not their lifetime alone of which they are careful stewards: they annex every age to their own and exploit all the years that have gone before." [Ibid, p. 65.]

Interestingly, Seneca draws an analogy regarding these studious pursuits. "It is a common saying that a man's parents are not of his own choosing but allotted to him by chance. But we can choose our genealogy. Here are families with noble endowments: choose whichever you wish to belong to." [Ibid, p. 67.]

The more we connect to great and noble thinking, the more noble we become, and the more noble our efforts as life unfolds.

Moving even more precisely, towards a deeper personal level, Seneca believes that in order to age well we need also to develop a stability of mind. By this he means the "well-being of soul," which he calls *tranquility.*

Seneca puts the question: how can the mind "maintain a consistent and advantageous course, be kind to itself and take pleasure in its attributes...[and] abide in its serenity, without excitement or depression?" [Ibid, p. 80.]

For Seneca it's easy to observe the general populace, full of people "who are afflicted with fickleness and ennui and continual shifting of aim." These are people who blow with the wind and oft are blown away by the wind, so to speak. They are not able to settle. They don't know their own mind. And many abhor innovation. Seneca realizes that this common malady "has countless symptoms but its effect is uniform--dissatisfaction with self." [Ibid, p.80.]

This ancient malady is also extremely modern, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi--the exponent of "Flow" psychology-- points out: "In normal everyday existence, we are the prey of thoughts and worries

intruding unwanted in consciousness... Consequently the ordinary state of mind involves unexpected and frequent entropy interfering with the smooth run of psychic energy." [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, FLOW: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE, Harper Perennial, 1991, p. 58.]

This common condition reflects the vacillation of minds that seemingly can find no outlet. Seneca describes such minds in that they are "naturally restless, and obviously without internal resources." These are people who are never at rest, always in need of entertainment--and when this is "withdrawn, their mind cannot endure home, loneliness, walls, and cannot abide itself left to itself." [Hadas, STOIC PHILOSOPHY OF SENECA, p. 81.]

So, is there a remedy?

Yes, but the responsibility for aging well rests squarely upon the individual. Seneca provides a general outline for a balanced life: though a man may seemingly lead a life of "insulated" leisure, it still is his duty "to be of service to individuals and to mankind by his intelligence, his voice, his counsel." [Ibid, p. 83.]

For those embarking on such a noble course, Seneca stresses that "our first duty will be to examine ourselves, next the career we shall undertake, and finally our associates in the work and its beneficiaries." What he is describing is that we develop an ability for strategic thinking, quietly studying and determining our course before we set sail from one point in our life to the next. [Ibid, p. 87.]

Beyond this, be realistic! Regarding any endeavor, Seneca stresses that you "put your hand to one you can finish or at least hope to finish..." [Ibid, p. 88.] And realistic goal-setting, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is psychologically positive and enjoyable---because "clear goals, stable rules, and challenges [that are] well matched to skills [present] little opportunity for the self to be threatened." [Csikszentmihalyi, FLOW, p. 63.]

Of course life is not all work and service to others. We need to well serve ourselves also. If we are to lead a successful life, one of our crucial choices will center upon friendship. "Nothing can equal the pleasures of faithful and congenial friendship." But Seneca gives warning! We need to be mindful over the choice of our friends. Rather than moving into diatribes about choosing good or bad people as friends, Seneca puts it simply: "To mingle the healthy with the sick is the beginning of disease." [Hadas, STOIC PHILOSOPHY OF SENECA, p. 89.]

Seneca's wisdom is reflected by Csikszentmihalyi when he exclaims that besides enjoyable work, "studies on Flow have demonstrated repeatedly that more than anything else, the quality of life depends on...our relations with other people." He proceeds: "We are biologically programmed to find other human beings the most important objects in the world." And as Seneca stressed, and Csikszentmihalyi states, we need to be discerning about our choice of friends..."because they can make life either very interesting and fulfilling or utterly miserable...how we manage relationships with them makes an enormous difference to our happiness." [Csikszentmihalyi, FLOW, p. 164.]

It pays to be thrifty, too! Of course there's the woes of materialism and ostentation, but Seneca focuses especially on spiritual thrift. "We must learn to strengthen self-restraint, curb luxury, temper

ambition, moderate anger, view poverty calmly, cultivate frugality...keep restive aspirations...and make it our business to get our riches from ourselves rather than from Fortune." [Hadas, STOIC PHILOSOPHY OF SENECA, p. 91.]

Not forgetting that a balanced life is a better life, Seneca alerts us that we must also engage in solitude as well as service. "It is important to withdraw into one's self." We need respite for ourselves, time to relax and enjoy life. So go ahead and pursue the joys of the intellect or the athletic life. Pursue, too, simplicity: "We ought to take outdoor walks, to refresh and raise our spirits by deep breathing in the open air. Sometimes energy will be refreshed by a carriage drive, a journey, a change of scene, good company, and a more generous wine." [Ibid, p. 105.]

But Csikszentmihalyi realizes that solitude is a major concern for modern people. Talking about ways to grow, about ways of creating higher forms of order in our lives in order to forestall entropy, he points out that we need to take time for quiet learning and improving our skills. And, especially, when "physical vigor fails with age...it means that one [should] be ready to turn one's energies from the mastery of the external world to a deep exploration of inner reality." But--"it is difficult to accomplish any of them unless one has earlier acquired the habit of using solitude to good advantage." We need to "tame" solitude, and Seneca's excellent suggestions above provide a fine foundation. [Csikszentmihalyi, FLOW, p. 172.]

Nonetheless, Seneca is no Pollyanna. He realizes the adversities that all of us must face in this life. It's seemingly our condition in this world. Still we have the ability to cope and adapt, if we so choose--even with this! "Man must...complain of it as little as possible, and grasp whatever goodlies within his reach." Again, "apply good sense to your problems; the hard can be softened, the narrow widened, and the heavy made lighter by the skillful bearer." And for what is seemingly impossible, leave it alone! [Hadas, STOIC PHILOSOPHY OF SENECA, pp. 93-94.]

For Csikszentmihalyi, Seneca's above advice is about "taming chaos." As he puts it, "sooner or later everyone will have to confront events that contradict his goals: disappointments, severe illness, financial reversal, and eventually the inevitability of one's death." Thus, "It is for this reason that courage, resilience, perseverance, mature defense, or transformation coping--the dissipative structures of the mind--are so essential. Without them we would be constantly suffering through the random bombardment of stray psychological meteorites." [Csikszentmihalyi, FLOW, p. 202.]

And, finally, any life well spent must look bravely at the issue of death. If we fear too much and dwell on death, it will bring us down. "A man afraid of death will never play the part of a live man." Rather than dwell on death, depression, and discouragement, Seneca wisely advises that we "take the lighter view of these things...it is more civilized to laugh at life than to lament over it." [Hadas, STOIC PHILOSOPHY OF SENECA, p. 102.]

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