

NOTES FROM: *Peace of Mind*, by Seneca

SUMMARY: No one who's *never* had to overcome any tremendously difficult challenges in their life is qualified to teach you about how to achieve peace of mind.

There's not a single person on *earth* who can be said to have had an "easy life" (we *all* encounter difficulties, suffer losses, get sick, and eventually have to face our own mortality), but Lucius Annaeus Seneca is uniquely qualified to teach us about how to claim tranquility of mind *because he's been through it all*.

Seneca is one of the most influential Roman Stoic philosophers, and although he became tremendously wealthy during his lifetime, he was exiled from the Empire *twice* (once to Egypt as a young man, and then later to Corsica), came up against many of the same kinds of challenges we *all* face in our lives, and was eventually ordered to commit suicide by the psychopathic dictator, Emperor Nero, whom Seneca tutored from a very young age.

Seneca had to learn early on that *the world just isn't fair*: good intentions don't *always* lead to good outcomes, people who *claim* to love you will turn their backs on you when it's convenient for them to do so, great achievements often go unrecognized, *and then we die at the end*.

Luckily for us, it was also around the time of his exile to Corsica that he started writing, and for thousands of years, people of all ages, abilities, and temperaments have come to Seneca's works for wise, soothing, sage advice about how to take the *worst* the world has to throw at them and *still* rise to their feet again afterward.

Peace of Mind (De Tranquillitate Animi) is a dialogue written during the years 49 to 62 A.D. concerning the state of mind of Seneca's friend Serenus and how to cure him of his various mental afflictions - anxiety, fear, worry, pessimism, apathy, unhealthy desires, and despair.

Seneca is the ideal teacher because he has *overcome* all these incredible ordeals throughout his life and never allowed himself to be laid low permanently by pessimism or fear.

He even believed that people *should* have to face obstacles such as the ones he had to face, or else they would never know what they were truly capable of. Moreover, he also said that we "*suffer more often in imagination than in reality*," meaning that problems of the mind can be *solved* with the mind.

There's a lot more to say about Seneca's personal history, and he's also open to various criticisms, as most of us are, but it's true that he lived the *full truth* of his philosophy and was willing to follow it all the way to the end of the path, whither it may lead.

In fact, even though he was one of the wealthiest individuals to have ever *lived*, he voluntarily used to sleep on the hard floor, eat the worst, least edible types of food, wear raggedy old clothes, and go without all the luxuries traditionally afforded to people of his noble position. *He always remained willing to relinquish it all*, and would *never* have tried to hold onto his material wealth if it meant sacrificing his peace of mind.

When Emperor Nero, one of the worst Roman Emperors of all, ordered Seneca to commit suicide after a failed assassination plot, Seneca did so calmly, with poise, and all the while displaying a strength of character that has served as a model for the Good Life for thousands of years.

As I've said, Seneca leaves himself and the rest of the Stoics open to various criticisms, but not so many or so severe as to devalue the worth of his advice or the desirability of keeping *Peace of Mind* close by at all times.

In the passages below, Seneca discusses how we can begin to realize *the true value of time* and get better at investing ours; how we can *bear losses bravely* and leave ourselves less exposed to the vicissitudes of fate; why *freedom/discipline* are inextricably *linked*, and how there's room for *both* in a life well lived; and also how to *laugh at misfortune* and *find the good in life*, even when those all around us can't stop focusing on the negative.

Inside the mind is where it all begins. That's where the majority of our work can and must be done.

We don't see the world as it is, *but as we are*. So it makes sense to clean and maintain the "viewing window" through which we experience life, see opportunities, and observe reality. When we learn how to calm the mind, we realize that we're capable of controlling a lot more that happens in our lives as well. *Seneca's beautiful little book can help us do this.*

Over the last two thousand years, he's been a close friend to *millions*, and by reading *Peace of Mind* and experimenting with his philosophy, he can be ours too.

Serenus: "No one that will give me no compensation worth such a loss shall ever rob me of a day."

Serenus: "Let my mind be contained within itself and improve itself: let it take no part with other men's affairs, and do nothing which depends on the approval of others: let me enjoy a tranquility undisturbed by either public or private troubles."

Serenus: "Many men would have arrived at wisdom had they not believed themselves to have arrived there already, had they not purposely deceived themselves as to some parts of their character, and passed by others with their eyes shut: for you have no grounds for supposing that other people's flattery is more ruinous to us than our own. Who dares to tell himself the truth? Who is there, by however large a troop of caressing courtiers he may be surrounded, who in spite of them is not his own greatest flatterer?"

"Men who cannot succeed themselves wish everyone else to be ruined."

Lucretius: "Thus every mortal from himself doth flee."

"Are you not ashamed of yourself, you who gaze upon riches with astonished admiration? Look upon the universe: you will see the gods quite bare of property, and possessing nothing though they give everything. Do you think that this man who has stripped himself of all fortuitous accessories is a pauper, or one like to the immortal gods?"

"Diogenes's only slave ran away from him, and when he was pointed out to Diogenes, he did not think him worth fetching back. 'It is a shame,' he said, 'that Manes should be able to live without Diogenes, and that Diogenes should not be able to live without Manes.' He seems to me to have said, 'Fortune, mind your own business: Diogenes has nothing left that belongs to you.'"

"How far happier is he who is indebted to no man for anything except for what he can deprive himself of with the greatest ease!"

"We ought at any rate to diminish the extent of our property, in order to be less exposed to the assaults of fortune: those men whose bodies can be within the shelter of their armor, are more fitted for war than those whose huge size everywhere extends beyond it, and exposes them to wounds."

"He will not complain of Fortune, but will say, 'I thank you for what I have had possession of: I have managed your property so as largely to increase it, but since you order me, I give it back to you and return it willingly and thankfully.'"

"He who fears death will never act as becomes a living man."

"In the same way every one of those who walk out to swell the crowd in the streets, is led round the city by worthless and empty reasons; the dawn drives him forth, although he has nothing to do, and after he has pushed his way into many men's doors, and saluted their nomenclatures one after the other, and been turned away from many others, he finds that the most difficult person of all to find at home is himself."

"Nothing befalls the wise man which he did not expect."

“We ought therefore to bring ourselves into such a state of mind that all the vices of the vulgar may not appear hateful to us, but merely ridiculous, and we should imitate Democritus rather than Heraclitus. The latter of these, whenever he appeared in public, used to weep, the former to laugh: the one thought all human doings to be follies, the other thought them to be miseries. We must take a higher view of all things, and bear with them more easily: it better becomes a man to scoff at life than to lament over it. Add to this that he who laughs at the human race deserves better of it than he who mourns for it, for the former leaves it some good hopes of improvement, while the latter stupidly weeps over what he has given up all hopes of mending. He who after surveying the universe cannot control his laughter shows, too, a greater mind than he who cannot restrain his tears, because his mind is only affected in the slightest possible degree, and he does not think that any part of all this apparatus is either important, serious, or unhappy.”

“Yet it is better to accept public morals and human vices calmly without bursting into either laughter or tears; for to be hurt by the sufferings of others is to be forever miserable, while to enjoy the sufferings of others is an inhuman pleasure, just as it is a useless piece of humanity to weep and pull a long face because someone is burying his son. In one’s own misfortunes, also, one ought so to conduct oneself as to bestow upon them just as much sorrow as reason, not as much as custom requires: for many shed tears in order to show them, and whenever no one is looking at them their eyes are dry, but they think it disgraceful not to weep when everyone does so. So deeply has this evil of being guided by the opinion of others taken root in us, that even grief, the simplest of all emotions, begins to be counterfeited.”

“Nevertheless we ought to mix up these two things, and to pass our lives alternately in solitude and among throngs of people; for the former will make us long for the society of mankind, the latter for that of ourselves, and the one will counteract the other: solitude will cure us when we are sick of crowds, and crowds will cure us when we are sick of solitude.”

“Yet moderation is wholesome both in freedom and in wine.”

“I have now, my beloved Serenus, given you an account of what things can preserve peace of mind, what things can restore it to us, what can arrest the vices which secretly undermine it: yet be assured, that none of these is strong enough to enable us to retain so fleeting a blessing, unless we watch over our vacillating mind with intense and unremitting care.”