

On Accepting Fate

By Seneca (4BC – AD65)

(Letter CVII)

W H E R E's that moral insight of yours? Where's that acuteness of perception? Or magnanimity? Does something as trivial as that upset you? Your slaves have seen your absorption in business as their chance to run away. So be it, you have been let down by friends - for by all means let them keep the name we mistakenly bestowed on them and be called such just to heighten their disgrace; but the fact is that your affairs have been freed for good and all of a number of people on whom all your trouble was being wasted and who considered you insufferable to anyone but yourself. There's nothing unusual or surprising about it all. To be put out by this sort of thing is as ridiculous as grumbling about being spattered in the street or getting dirty where it's muddy. One has to accept life on the same terms as the public baths, or crowds, or travel'. Things will get thrown at you and things will hit you. Life's no soft affair. It's a long road you've started on: you can't but expect to have slips and knocks and falls, and get tired, and openly wish - a lie - for death. At one place you will part from a companion, at another bury one, and be afraid of one at another. These are the kind of things you'll come up against all along this rugged journey. Wanting to die? Let the personality be made ready to face everything; let it be made to realize that it has come to terrain on which thunder and lightning play, terrain on which

Grief and vengeful Care have set their couch,
And pallid Sickness dwells, and drear Old Age.
Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI:274-5

This is the company in which you must live out your days. Escape them you cannot, scorn them you can. And scorn them you will if by constant reflection you have anticipated future happenings. Everyone faces up more bravely to a thing for which he has long prepared himself, sufferings, even, being withstood if they have been trained for in advance. Those who are unprepared, on the other hand, are panic-stricken by the most insignificant happenings. We must see to it that nothing takes us by surprise. And since it is invariably unfamiliarity that makes a thing more formidable than it really is, this habit of continual reflection will ensure that no form of adversity finds you a complete beginner.

'I've been deserted by my slaves!' Others have been plundered, incriminated, set upon, betrayed, beaten up, attacked with poison or with calumny - mention anything you like, it has happened to plenty of people. A vast variety of missiles are launched with us as their target. Some are planted in our flesh already, some are hurtling towards us at this very moment, others merely grazing us in passing on their way to other targets. Let's not be taken aback by any of the things we're born to, things no one need complain at for the simple reason that they're the same for everybody. Yes, the same for everybody; for even if a man does escape something, it was a thing which he might have suffered. The fairness of a law does not consist in its effect being actually felt by all alike, but in its having been laid down for all alike. Let's get this sense of justice firmly into our heads

and pay up. Without grumbling the taxes arising from our mortal state. Winter brings in the cold, and we have to shiver; summer brings back the heat and we have to swelter. Bad weather tries the health and we have to be ill. Somewhere or other we are going to have encounters with wild beasts, and with man, too, - more dangerous than all those beasts. Floods will rob us of one thing, fire of another. These are conditions of our existence which we cannot change. What we can do is adopt a noble spirit, such a spirit as befits a good man, so that we may bear up bravely under all that fortune sends us and bring our wills into tune with nature's; reversals, after all, are the means by which nature regulates this visible realm of hers: clear skies follow cloudy; after the calm comes the storm; the winds take turns to blow; day succeeds night; while part of the heavens is in the ascendant, another is sinking. It is by means of opposites that eternity endures.

This is the law to which our minds are needing to be reconciled. This is the law they should be following and obeying. They should assume that whatever happens was bound to happen and refrain from railing at nature. One can do nothing better than endure what cannot be cured and attend uncomplainingly the God at whose instance all things come about. It is a poor soldier that follows his commander grumbling. So let us receive our orders readily and cheerfully, and not desert the ranks along the march - the march of this glorious fabric of creation in which everything we shall suffer is a strand. And let us address Jupiter, whose guiding hand directs this mighty work, in the way our own Cleanthes did, in some most expressive lines which I may perhaps be pardoned for translating in view of the example set here by that master of expressiveness, Cicero. If you like them, so much the better; if not, you will at least know that I was following Cicero's example.

Lead me, Master of the soaring vault
Of Heaven, lead me, Father, where you will.
I stand here prompt and eager to obey.
And ev'n suppose I were unwilling, still
I should attend you and know suffering,
Dishonourably and grumbling, when I might
Have done so and been good as well. For Fate
The willing leads, the unwilling drags along.

Let us speak and live like that. Let fate find us ready and eager. Here is your noble spirit - the one which has put itself in the hands of fate; on the other side we have the puny degenerate spirit which struggles, and which sees nothing right in the way the universe is ordered, and would rather reform the gods than reform itself