

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 149: How To Live In the Moment

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Tim Ferriss: Greeting ladies and germs, this is Tim Ferriss, and welcome to another episode of the Time Ferriss show. This is a shorter episode, instead of a long format interview with an expert of some type. And we're going focus on Seneca, my favorite stoic thinker and author, Seneca the Younger. His writing that I'm going to highlight and excerpt is roughly 2,000 years old, yet it is timeless. And we are going to listen to *On the Shortness of Life*. This is an essay that I revisit at least once a quarter, along with all of us his other letters that you can listen to if you would like, through TheTaoOfSeneca@audible.com/timsbooks.

In this particular letter I will highlight my favorite portion, which begins with, “Why do you torment yourself and lose weight over some problem...” and on it goes.

This is a fantastic reminder to mind the critical few to ignore the trivial many, and much much more. I hope you enjoy it.

Seneca the Younger: Letter 49: *On the Shortness of Life*. A man is indeed lazy and careless, my dear Lucilius, if he is reminded of a friend only by seeing some landscape, which stirs the memory. And yet there are times when the old familiar haunts stir up a sense of loss that has been stored away in the soul, not bringing back dead memories, but rousing them from their dormant state. Just as the sight of a lost friend’s favorite slave, or his cloak, or his house, renews the mourner’s grief, even though it has been softened by time.

Now low and behold Campania, and especially Naples and your beloved Pompeii, struck me when I viewed them with a wonderfully fresh sense of longing for you. You stand in full view before my eyes. I am on the point of parting from you. I see you choking down your tears and resisting without success the emotions that well up at the very moment when you try to check them. I seem to have lost you, but a moment ago, for what is not, but a moment to go when one begins to lose the memory.

It was but a moment ago that I sat as a lad in the school of the philosopher Cilium, but a moment ago that I began to plead in the courts, but a moment ago that I lost the desire to plead, but a

moment ago that I lost the ability. Infinitely swift is the flight of time. As those see more clearly who are looking backwards.

For when we are intent on the present, we do not notice it. So gentle is the passage of times headlong flight. Do you ask the reason for this? All past time is I the same place. It all presents the same aspect to us, it lies together. Everything slips into the same abyss. Besides an event, which in it's an entirety is of brief compass, can not contain long intervals. The time which we spend in living is but a point, any even less than a point. But this point of time, infant simile as it is, nature has mocked by making it seem outwardly of longer duration.

She has taken one portion thereof and made it infancy, another childhood, another youth, another the gradual slope, so to speak, from youth to old age, and old age itself is still another.

How many steps for how short a climb? It was but a moment ago that I saw you off on your journey, and yet this moment ago makes up a goodly share of our existence, which is so brief; we should reflect that it will soon to come to an end all together. In other years time did not seem to me to go so swiftly. Now it seems fast beyond belief. Perhaps because I feel that the finish line is moving closer to me, or it may be that I have begun to take up head and reckon up my losses.

For this reason I am all the more angry that some men claim the major portion of this time for superfluous things, time which no matter how carefully it is guarded can not suffice even for necessary things. Cicero declared that if the number of his days were doubled, he should not have the time to read the lyric poets. And you may rate the dialecticians in the same class, but they are foolish in a more melancholy way.

The lyric poets are avowedly frivolous, but the dialecticians believe that they are themselves engaged upon serious business. I do not deny that one must cast a glance at dialectic, but it ought to be a mere glance. A sort of greeting from the threshold, merely that one may not be deceived or judge these pursuits to contain any hidden matters of great worth. Why do you torment yourself and lose weight over some problem, which it is more clever to have scorn than to solve.

When a soldier is undisturbed and traveling at his ease, he can hunt for trifles along his way, but when the enemy is closing in on the rear, and a command is given to quicken the pace, necessity makes

him throw away everything, which he picked up in moments of peace and leisure. I have no time to investigate disputed inflections of words, or to try my cunning upon them.

Behold the gathering clans, the fast shut gates, and weapons wetted ready for the war. I need a stout a heart to hear without flinching this din of battle, which sounds roundabout. And all would rightly think me mad, if when gray beards and women were heaping up rocks for the fortifications when the armored clad youths inside the gates were awaiting or even demanding the order for a sally. When the spears of the throw men were quivering in our gates, and the very ground was rocking with minds and subterranean passages, I say they would rightly think me mad if I were to sit idle, putting such pretty posers as this.

What you have not lost, you have, but you have not lost any horns, therefore you have horns or other tricks constructive after the model of this piece of sheer silliness.

And yet I may well seem in your eyes no less mad if I spend my energies on that sort of thing. For even now I am in a state of siege, and yet in the former case it would be merely a peril from the outside that threatened me, and a wall that sundered me from the foe. As it is now, death dealing perils are in my very presence. I have no time for such nonsense. A mighty undertaking is on my hands. What am I to do? Death is on my trail and life is fleeting away.

Teach me something with which to face these troubles. Bring it to pass that I shall seize trying to escape from death, and that life may seize to escape from me. Give me courage to meet hardships. Make me calm in the face of the unavoidable. Relax the straightened limits of the time which has allotted me. Show me that the good in life does not depend upon life's length, but upon the use we make of it.

Also, that it is possible, or rather usual for a man who has lived long to have lived too little. Say to me when I lie down to sleep, you may not wait again. And when I return, you may never go forth again. You are mistaken if you think that only on an ocean voyage; there is a very slight space between life and death. No, the distance between is just as narrow everywhere. It is not everywhere that death shows himself so near at hand, yet everywhere he is as near at hand.

Rid of me these shadowy terrors, then you will more easily deliver to me the instruction for which I have prepared myself. At our birth, nature made us teachable and gave us reason, not perfect, but capable of being perfected.

Discuss for me justice, duty, thrift, and that twofold purity, both the purity which obtains from another's person, and that which takes care of one's own self. If you will only refuse to lead me along bypaths, I shall more easily reach the goal at which I am aiming, for as the tragic poet says, the language of truth is simple. We should not therefore make that language intricate, since there is nothing less fitting for a soul of great endeavor than such crafty cleverness. Farewell.