

# Seneca, wisdom and living well with nature



## Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Born about the same time as Jesus of Nazareth, Lucius Seneca was a Roman writer, administrator and Stoic philosopher. Stoicism emerged from the teachings of the Greek thinker Zeno 300 years before Seneca's time, and takes its name from public lectures and discussions on the *stoa*, or porch, in the Athens public square. As scholar Robin Campbell writes in his *Introduction to "Seneca: Letters from a Stoic"*: "The Stoics saw the world as a single great community in which all men are brothers, ruled by a supreme providence. . ." This divinity could be called "divine reason, creative reason, nature, the spirit or purpose of the universe, destiny, a personal god . . . even, 'the gods.'" Living in harmony with this universal force was central to Stoic wisdom and ethics.

Seneca's letters reflect his desire to pass along any wisdom he has gained as a Roman official who is also contemplative. Similar to the *Meditations* of later Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius, there are many thoughts in Seneca ripe for contemplation and serious pursuit of wisdom (philosophy). In Campbell's view, Seneca's commitment to philosophical excellence "was grounded on a belief that his end was the practical one of curing souls, of bringing peace and order to the feverish minds of men pursuing the wrong aims in life." One of the first true essayists in history, Seneca felt: "What we say should be of use, not just entertaining." Whether

spoken or written, words carry influence and impact our daily lives, at least they should.

To get a sense of his Stoic views, a flavor of his wisdom, here's a brief selection (and good Roman numeral practice):

"It is not the man who has too little who is poor, but the one who hankers after more." (Letter II)

"You ask what is the proper limit to a person's wealth? First, having what is essential, and second, having what is enough." (Letter II)

"The first thing philosophy promises us is the feeling of fellowship, of belonging to mankind and being members of a community . . ." (Letter III)

"Our motto, as everyone knows, is to live in conformity with nature." (Letter III)

And living well is something the gods didn't give and can't do for us; it is a practice and process:

"Who can doubt . . . that life is the gift of the immortal gods, but that living well is the gift of philosophy?" (Letter XC)

The universal principle of reciprocity, or "do unto others," appears in Stoic thought:

"If you wish to be loved, Love." (Letter IX)

"No one can lead a happy life if he thinks only of himself . . . You should live for the other person if you wish to live for yourself." (Letter XLVIII)

"Never to wrong others takes one a long way towards peace of mind." (CV)

"I should find it difficult to say which [people] annoy me most, those who would have us know nothing or the ones who refuse even to leave us the small satisfaction of knowing that we know nothing." (Letter LXXXVIII)

A sense of resignation (fate, destiny, fortune) weaves through Stoic thought. Bad things happen—

storms, ill health, floods and fire:

"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 person, so that we may bear up bravely under all that fortune sends us and bring our wills into tune with nature's . . ." (Letter CVII)

Stoics believed in keeping our mortality in mind every day in order to live more consciously and ethically:

"Death ought to be right there before the eyes of the young just as much as the old." (Letter XII)

"One thing I know: all the works of mortal man lie under sentence of mortality; we live among things that are destined to perish." (Letter XCI)

"Death you'll think of as the worst of all bad things, though in fact there's nothing bad about it at all except the thing which comes before it—the fear of it." (Letter CIV)

Most schools of Philosophy or Religion tend to have a few rivalries with other teachings. One gets the impression Seneca doesn't care for that; he likes to play with his friend Lucilius who wonders why Seneca enjoys quoting the sayings of Epicurus:

"Why should you think of [these sayings] as belonging to Epicurus and not as common property?" (Letter VIII)

"Whatever is true is my property . . . the things of greatest merit are common property." (Letter XII)

"Whatever is well said by anyone belongs to me." (Letter XVI)

Like any great teacher, Seneca expressed what he learned from life's lessons. "[People] can prove that their words are their own: let them put their preaching into practice." (Letter CVIII).

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