

2. Seneca



TRUE HAPPINESS IS TO REST
SATISFIED WITH WHAT WE HAVE

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA was a man of many talents. He was a poet, dramatist, orator, statesman, and one of the greatest of the Stoic philosophers. He was also one of the best-read men in Rome.

At the moment he was thoroughly enjoying the fables of a Greek slave named Aesop who was said to have lived at the court of Croesus six centuries ago. They were quaint little stories, about animals mostly—but each with a moral truth concealed in its penetrating nonsense. A pity more people couldn't read, he thought. There were some good lessons to be learned here.

Suddenly his attention was caught by a single phrase: "Be content with your lot; one cannot be first in everything." Why, that was almost exactly what he had written yesterday in his essay on happiness! He got it out and found the sentence: *A wise man is content with his lot, whatever it be.* Without realizing it, he had paraphrased the Greek storyteller!

But many others had said the same thing in almost the same way, he reflected. Cicero, for example, had said, "To be content with what we possess is the greatest and most secure of riches." And before Cicero, Epicurus had said it in still another way: "If thou wilt make a man happy, add not unto his riches but take away from his desires."

He read over what he had written the day before and found it good. It was what he wanted to say.

True happiness is to understand our duties toward God and man; to enjoy the present, without anxious dependence upon the future;

not to amuse ourselves with either hopes or fears, but to rest satisfied with what we have, which is abundantly sufficient; for he that is so wants nothing. The great blessings of mankind are within us, and within our reach; but we shut our eyes and, like people in the dark, fall foul of the very thing we search for without finding it. Tranquillity is a certain equality of mind which no condition of fortune can either exalt or depress.

There must be sound mind to make a happy man; there must be constancy in all conditions, a care for the things of this world but without anxiety; and such an indifference to the bounties of fortune that either with them or without them we may live content. True joy is serene. . . . The seat of it is within, and there is no cheerfulness like the resolution of a brave mind that has fortune under its feet. It is an invincible greatness of mind not to be elevated or dejected with good or ill fortune. A wise man is content with his lot, whatever it be—without wishing for what he has not.



The times in which Seneca lived were turbulent and exciting, as are all periods of change and transition. It was the first century of a great new era, a time rich in hope and promise. But it was also a time of moral laxity, of political corruption, of cruelty and greed.

Seneca preached against the errors and evils of his day, against selfishness, greed, and pride. He stressed the more enduring values of life: courage, moderation, self-control—above all, the peace of a contented mind.

In the end his death, like that of Socrates, was an inspiring testament to his own integrity. Falsely accused by Nero of conspiracy and ordered to take his own life, he turned to his weeping family and friends and gently reminded them they must accept with courage that which it was not in their power to control. Refused the right to make a will, he said he would leave them the best thing he had: the pattern of his life.

Seneca wrote for his own uneasy times; but his voice has been heard in all the centuries since. Even now, nineteen hundred years after he lived and wrote, troubled minds find comfort in

his philosophy: "*Do the best you can . . . enjoy the present . . . rest satisfied with what you have.*"



I have learned, in whatsoever state I am in, therewith to be content.

Philippians 4:11



He is a wise man who does not grieve for the things which he has not, but rejoices for those which he has.

Epictetus



Let not your mind run on what you lack as much as on what you have already. Of the things you have, select the best; and then reflect how eagerly they would have been sought if you did not have them.

Marcus Aurelius



Before we set our hearts too much upon anything, let us examine how happy they are who already possess it.

François de La Rochefoucauld



Joy of life seems to me to arise from a sense of being where one belongs . . . of being four-square with the life we have chosen. All the discontented people I know are trying sedulously to be something they are not, to do something they cannot do. . . .

Contentment, and indeed usefulness, comes as the infallible result of great acceptances, great humilities—of not trying to make ourselves this or that (to conform to some dramatized version of ourselves), but of surrendering ourselves to the fullness of life—of letting life flow through us.

David Grayson



The secret of contentment is the discovery by every man of his own powers and limitations, finding satisfaction in a line of activity which

he can do well, plus the wisdom to know that his place, no matter how important or successful he is, never counts very much in the universe. A man may very well be so successful in carving a name for himself in his field that he begins to imagine himself indispensable or omnipotent. He is eaten up by some secret ambition, and then good-bye to all contentment. Sometimes it is more important to discover what one cannot do than what one can do. So much restlessness is due to the fact that a man does not know what he wants, or he wants too many things, or perhaps he wants to be somebody else, to be anybody except himself. The courage of being one's genuine self, of standing alone and of not wanting to be somebody else!

Lin Yutang

3. W. Beran Wolfe



TO FIND HAPPINESS WE MUST SEEK FOR IT IN A FOCUS OUTSIDE OURSELVES

THE ROOM was empty, except for the man who sat writing. But for him it was filled with people and with voices.

"Help me or I'll commit suicide!" . . . "What's the use of it all?" . . . "I'm lonely, doctor" . . . "I hate my job!" . . . "I have no time for friends."

W. Beran Wolfe had just passed his thirtieth birthday. He was young, as psychiatrists go; but he was old with the agonies of other people. He thought of the men and women who had come to him for help—the bitter and frightened, the anguished and confused—all of them desperately unhappy, and all of them seeking some tranquil adjustment to life.