On the Shortness of Life

SENECA
c. 4 BC – AD 65

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De brevitate vitae

Translated from the Latin with AI (Claude) and edited

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On the Shortness of Life · Seneca (c. 4 BC – AD 65)

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INTRODUCTION

Seneca, the Roman statesman and Stoic philosopher, wrote this short essay around AD 49, probably just before he became tutor to the young Nero. It is addressed to Paulinus, a friend (perhaps his father-in-law) who held the demanding post of overseer of Rome's grain supply.

Its argument is simple and startling: life is not short, we make it short. Most people complain that nature gives them too little time, but they squander what they have on business, ambition, luxury, other people's demands and endless postponement, and only realize at the end that they have barely lived. Seneca surveys the "busy" — from politicians and lawyers to collectors and dinner-party hosts, and even Augustus, who longed for a leisure he never got — and sets against them the few who give their time to philosophy and so make the whole past their own.

The essay closes by urging Paulinus to step back from public office while he still can. It is one of the most quoted works of ancient philosophy, and one of the shortest.

On the Shortness of Life

Life is long enough if we know how to use it; the busy waste it, and only those who give their time to philosophy truly live.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Most of humankind, Paulinus, complains about the meanness of nature. We are born for a brief span, they say, and the stretch of time given to us runs out so swiftly, so rapidly, that apart from a very few, life abandons the rest of us just as we are getting ready to live. Nor is it only the crowd and the unthinking masses who groan over what they take to be a universal evil; this feeling has drawn complaints from famous men as well.[1]

1.2 Hence the cry of the greatest of doctors: "Life is short, art is long." Hence the quarrel of Aristotle, taking nature to task in a way most unbecoming to a wise man: "She has been so indulgent to animals that they live out five or ten human lifetimes, while for man, born for so many great things, the limit is set so much nearer."[2]

1.3 It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and it has been given in generous measure for accomplishing the greatest things, if the whole of it is well invested. But when it drains away through extravagance and carelessness, when it is spent on nothing good, then at last,

1 Pompeius Paulinus was prefect of Rome's grain supply, and probably a relative of Seneca's wife Pompeia Paulina.

2 The doctor is Hippocrates (fifth century BC), whose *Aphorisms* open with this line; "art" means the art of medicine. Elsewhere the complaint about animals is attributed to Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus.

under the pressure of the final necessity, we realize that it has passed, though we never noticed it passing.

1.4 So it is: we are not given a short life; we make it short. We are not poor in life but wasteful of it. Great, princely wealth that falls to a bad owner is squandered in a moment, while wealth however modest, entrusted to a good guardian, grows with use. In the same way, our lifetime offers plenty of room to the one who manages it well.

CHAPTER 2: LIFE IS LONG IF YOU KNOW HOW TO USE IT

Nature is generous; greed, ambition, idleness and service to others waste our time, and no one belongs to himself.

2.1 Why do we complain about nature? She has behaved generously: life is long if you know how to use it. But one man is gripped by insatiable greed, another by laborious devotion to pointless tasks. One is soaked in wine, another numb with idleness. One is worn out by an ambition that always hangs on the judgments of others; another is driven by a headlong craving for trade over every land and every sea in the hope of profit. Some are tormented by a lust for soldiering, always either intent on danger to others or anxious about their own. There are those who wear themselves out in voluntary servitude, courting superiors who show no gratitude;

2.2 many have been held back either by coveting someone else's fortune or by complaining about their own; most, pursuing nothing fixed, have been tossed from one new plan to another by a fickleness that is aimless, inconstant and dissatisfied with itself. Some approve of nothing to steer their course by, and fate catches them sluggish and yawning—so much so that I do not doubt the truth of what the greatest of poets said, in the manner of an oracle: "Small is the part of life we really live." All the rest of the span is not life but merely time.[3]

2.3 Vices press on them and surround them on every side. They do not let them rise again or lift their eyes to discern the

3 The poet is not identified, and no source for the line is known.

truth, but hold them down, sunk and fixed in desire. They are never allowed to return to themselves. If some calm ever comes their way by chance, they toss about like the deep sea, which goes on heaving even after the wind has dropped, and they never get any leisure from their desires.[4]

2.4 Do you think I am talking about people whose failings are admitted? Look at those whose good fortune draws crowds: they are choking on their own blessings. How many find their wealth a burden! How many are drained of their lifeblood by their eloquence and the daily strain of showing off their talent! How many are pale from endless pleasures! How many are left no freedom at all by the throng of clients swarming around them! In short, run through them all, from the lowest to the highest: this one calls for legal support, that one gives it; this one is on trial, that one defends him, that one judges him. No one claims himself for himself; each is used up for someone else. Ask about those whose names are learned by heart, and you will see that these are the marks that tell them apart: this one cultivates that man, that one another. No one belongs to himself.

2.5 And then there is the utterly insane indignation of certain people. They complain about the disdain of their superiors, who had no time for them when they wanted an audience! Does anyone dare complain of another's arrogance, when he himself never has time for himself? Yet that great man did at some point look your way, whoever you are, even if with an insolent expression; he bent his ears to your words; he took you to his side. You never deigned to look into yourself or to listen to yourself. So there is no reason to charge anyone for these services, since when you performed them it was not that you wanted to be with someone else, but that you could not be with yourself.

4 Leisure (*otium*): time free from public business, to be spent on oneself and on study—not idleness.

CHAPTER 3: TIME GIVEN AWAY

People guard their property but give away their lives; an old man is asked to count what his years were spent on.

3.1 Let all the brilliant minds that have ever shone agree on this one point: they will never marvel enough at the fog that clouds human minds. People allow no one to seize their estates, and at the slightest dispute over a boundary they rush for stones and weapons; yet they let others invade their lives—indeed, they themselves bring in those who will take possession of them. No one can be found who is willing to share out his money; but among how many people each of us distributes his life! They are tight-fisted in guarding their inheritance, but as soon as it comes to wasting time they are utterly lavish with the one thing where it is honorable to be a miser.

3.2 So I would like to pick out someone from the crowd of old men: "We see that you have reached the limit of a human lifetime; your hundredth year, or more, is bearing down on you. Come, then, call your life to an audit. Reckon how much of that time has been taken from you by a creditor, how much by a mistress, how much by a patron, how much by a client, how much by quarrels with your wife, how much by punishing slaves, how much by dutiful rushing around the city. Add the illnesses we have brought on ourselves; add, too, the time that has lain unused. You will see that you have fewer years than you count.

3.3 Search your memory: when were you ever sure of your purpose? How few days went as you had planned? When did you have the use of yourself? When did your face keep its natural expression, when was your mind free of fear? What work have you accomplished in so long a life? How many people have plundered your life while you had no idea what you were losing? How much has been taken by useless grief, foolish joy, greedy desire, the charms of society? How little of what was yours has been left to you? You will realize that you are dying before your time."

3.4 So what is the reason? You live as if you were going to live forever; your frailty never occurs to you; you do not notice how much time has already gone by. You waste it as if it came from a full and overflowing supply, when all the while that very day you are giving to some person or some business may be your last. You fear everything like mortals, and want everything like immortals.

3.5 You will hear most people say: "At fifty I will retire into leisure; at sixty I will be released from my duties." And what guarantee, may I ask, do you have of a longer life? Who will let things go as you have planned them? Are you not ashamed to keep for yourself only the leftovers of life, and to set aside for a sound mind only the time that cannot be used for anything else? How late it is to begin living just when you must stop! What foolish forgetfulness of our mortality, to put off sound plans to our fiftieth or sixtieth year, and to want to begin life at a point few have reached!

CHAPTER 4: AUGUSTUS LONGS FOR LEISURE

Even Augustus, the most powerful of men, kept hoping for leisure while wars and plots filled his life.

4.1 You will see the most powerful men, those raised to the heights, let slip remarks in which they long for leisure, praise it, and rank it above all their blessings. At times they wish they could come down from their pinnacle, if only they could do so safely; for even if nothing outside attacks or shakes it, great fortune collapses under its own weight.

4.2 The deified Augustus, to whom the gods granted more than to anyone else, never stopped praying for rest and asking to be relieved of public affairs. All his conversation kept coming back to this: his hope of leisure. He used to cheer his labors with this consolation, false perhaps, but sweet: that one day he would live for himself.[5]

4.3 In a letter he sent to the senate, after promising that his retirement would not lack dignity or be out of keeping with his former glory, I found these words: "But these things are finer to do than to promise. Still, my longing for that time I so deeply desire has carried me so far that, since the joy of the reality is still delayed, I have taken some pleasure in advance from the sweetness of words."[6]

4.4 Leisure seemed so great a thing to him that, since he could not have it in fact, he enjoyed it in advance in thought. The man who saw everything depend on him alone, who dispensed fortune to individuals and to nations, was at his happiest thinking of the day when he would lay aside his greatness.

4.5 He had learned how much sweat those blessings that shine across every land wring out of a man, how many hidden anxieties they conceal. Forced to settle matters by arms first with his fellow citizens, then with his colleagues, and finally with his relatives, he shed blood on land and sea. Driven by war through Macedonia, Sicily, Egypt, Syria, Asia and almost every coast, he turned his armies, weary of killing Romans, to foreign wars. While he was pacifying the Alps and subduing enemies lodged in the middle of a peaceful empire, while he was pushing the frontiers beyond the Rhine, the Euphrates and the Danube, in Rome itself the swords of Murena, Caepio, Lepidus, Egnatius and others were being sharpened against him.[7]

4.6 He had not yet escaped their plots when his daughter and so many young noblemen, bound together by adultery as if by a soldier's oath, were alarming his already failing years—and Paulus, too, and once again a woman to be feared alongside an Antony. He had cut out these ulcers together with the limbs themselves, but others kept growing up underneath; as in a body overloaded with blood, something was always bursting open somewhere. So he longed for leisure; in the hope and

5 Augustus was Rome's first emperor (27 BC–AD 14).
6 This letter of Augustus does not otherwise survive.
7 The younger Lepidus (30 BC), Egnatius Rufus (19 BC), and Murena and Caepio (c. 23–22 BC) all plotted against Augustus.

thought of it his labors found rest; this was the prayer of the man who could grant the prayers of others.[8]

CHAPTER 5: CICERO, HALF FREE

Cicero complains in a letter that he is only half free; the wise man is never half free.

5.1 Marcus Cicero was tossed about among men like Catiline and Clodius, Pompey and Crassus—some open enemies, some doubtful friends. He was buffeted along with the republic and held it up as it went under, until at last he was swept away; never at peace in good times, never able to bear bad ones. How often he curses that very consulship of his, which he praised not without reason, but without end![9]

5.2 What pitiful words he pours out in a letter to Atticus, when Pompey the father had already been defeated and his son was still reviving his shattered forces in Spain! "You ask what I am doing here?" he says. "I am lingering at my place at Tusculum, half free." He goes on to add more, lamenting his past life, complaining about the present and despairing of the future.[10]

5.3 Cicero called himself half free. But the wise man, I assure you, will never sink to so abject a title. He will never be half free; his freedom will always be whole and solid; he will be unbound, his own master, and above everyone else. For what can be above the man who is above fortune?[11]

8 His daughter Julia was banished in 2 BC for adultery with Iullus Antonius, son of Mark Antony, and others—a new Cleopatra with a new Antony. Paulus, husband of Augustus's granddaughter, was later executed for conspiracy.
9 Cicero (106–43 BC), orator and statesman, crushed Catiline's conspiracy as consul in 63 BC and was killed in the proscriptions of 43 BC.
10 Atticus was Cicero's closest friend and correspondent; this letter does not survive. Tusculum, near Rome, was the site of Cicero's country house.
11 The wise man (*sapiens*) is the Stoic ideal: the perfectly rational person, whom nothing outside him can harm.

CHAPTER 6: DRUSUS AND THE RESTLESS GREAT

Livius Drusus regretted never having had a holiday, and vices shrink even a thousand-year life.

6.1 Livius Drusus, a fierce and forceful man, had stirred up new laws and the mischief of the Gracchi, with a huge crowd from all over Italy around him. Not foreseeing how things would end—he could not carry his measures through, and once he had begun them he was no longer free to drop them—he is said to have cursed a life that had been restless from the very start, and to have said that he alone had never had a holiday, not even as a boy. For while still a ward and still in the boy's toga, he had dared to recommend defendants to jurors and to bring his influence to bear on the courts, so effectively indeed that some verdicts are known to have been extorted by him.[12]

6.2 Where would such premature ambition not break out? You could tell that such precocious audacity would end in great harm, both private and public. So it was too late that he complained he had had no holiday since boyhood—this troublemaker, this menace to the courts. It is debated whether he took his own life; for he collapsed after suddenly receiving a wound in the groin, and some doubted whether his death was voluntary, but no one doubted that it was timely.

6.3 There is no need to mention more of those who, though others thought them supremely fortunate, bore true witness against themselves and loathed every act of their years. But with these complaints they changed neither others nor themselves; for once the words have burst out, their passions slide back into habit.

6.4 Truly, even if your life should exceed a thousand years, it will shrink to the narrowest span: these vices of yours will devour any lifetime whatever. As for this span of ours, which nature makes run fast but reason can stretch, it is bound to slip

12 Marcus Livius Drusus, tribune in 91 BC, pushed reforms recalling those of the Gracchi brothers a generation earlier, and was murdered in office.

away from you quickly. For you do not seize it, or hold it back, or slow down the swiftest of all things; you let it go as if it were something superfluous and replaceable.

CHAPTER 7: THE BUSY DO NOT LIVE

The busy cannot learn to live; the man who guards his time has enough, and gray hair proves nothing.

7.1 But first of all I count those who have time for nothing but wine and lust; for no one is busy in a more shameful way. The others, even if they are held captive by an empty image of glory, at least go wrong with some show of decency. You may list for me the greedy, the hot-tempered, those who pursue unjust hatreds or unjust wars: all these sin in a more manly way. Those who have thrown themselves away on the belly and on lust bear a stain of disgrace.[13]

7.2 Examine all their time. See how long they spend calculating, how long plotting, how long fearing, how long courting others, how long being courted; how much is taken up by their own court appearances and other people's, how much by dinner parties, which have now become duties in themselves. You will see how neither their troubles nor their blessings let them breathe.

7.3 Finally, everyone agrees that no activity can be pursued well by a busy man—not eloquence, not the liberal arts—since a distracted mind takes in nothing deeply, but rejects everything as if it had been crammed into it. Nothing is less characteristic of the busy man than living; there is nothing harder to learn. Teachers of the other arts are everywhere, and plentiful; and some of those arts even mere boys seem to have mastered well enough to teach them. It takes a whole life to learn how to live, and—what may surprise you more—a whole life to learn how to die.

7.4 So many great men, casting off every encumbrance and renouncing wealth, office and pleasure, made it their one aim

right up to the end of their lives to know how to live. Yet most of them departed from life admitting that they did not know yet—still less do these people know.

7.5 Believe me, it is the mark of a great man, one who rises above human error, to let nothing of his time be skimmed off; and his life is the longest precisely because, however much of it there was, all of it was free for him. None of it lay fallow and idle, none of it was under another's control; for, as the most frugal guardian of his time, he found nothing worth exchanging for it. So he had enough; but those whose lives the public has carried off in large part are bound to have fallen short.

7.6 Nor should you think that such people never recognize their loss. You will certainly hear many of those weighed down by great prosperity cry out now and then, amid their herds of clients, their court cases or their other respectable miseries: "I have no chance to live!"

7.7 Of course you have no chance! All those who call you to their side take you away from yourself. How many days has that defendant taken? How many that candidate? How many that old woman, worn out with burying her heirs? How many that man who pretends to be ill to whet the greed of legacy hunters? How many that more powerful friend who keeps people like you not as friends but as part of his display? Tick them off, I say, and review the days of your life: you will see that very few, and only the rejects, have stayed with you.

7.8 One man, having won the fasces he longed for, wants to lay them down and keeps saying, "When will this year be over?" Another is putting on games, though he thought it a great prize when the lot fell to him: "When," he says, "will I be rid of them?" Another is an advocate fought over all through the forum, filling the whole place with a vast crowd far beyond the reach of his voice: "When," he says, "will the courts go into recess?" Every-

13 The busy (*occupati*): Seneca's term for people so absorbed in affairs, pleasures or ambition that they have no time for themselves or for philosophy.

one rushes his life along and suffers from longing for the future and weariness of the present.[14]

THE MAN WHO OWNS HIS TIME

Whoever lives each day as if it were his last neither longs for tomorrow nor fears it.

7.9 But the man who puts every moment to his own use, who arranges every day as if it were his last, neither longs for tomorrow nor fears it. For what new pleasure can any hour now bring him? He knows it all; he has enjoyed it all to the full. As for the rest, let chance arrange it as it likes: his life is already safe. Something can be added to it, nothing taken away—and added in the way that a man already full and satisfied takes a little more food, which he does not want but has room for.

7.10 So there is no reason to think anyone has lived long because of his gray hair or wrinkles: he has not lived long; he has been around long. Would you think a man had done a lot of sailing if a savage storm had caught him as he left harbor, carried him this way and that, and, with winds raging by turns from opposite quarters, spun him round and round in the same waters? He has not done a lot of sailing; he has been tossed about a lot.

CHAPTER 8: THE MOST PRECIOUS THING

People give away time freely because it cannot be seen, though no one can give back the years.

8.1 I am always amazed when I see some people asking for time, and those who are asked granting it so readily. Both look at the purpose for which the time is requested; neither looks at the time itself. It is asked for as if it were nothing, given as if it were nothing. People are playing games with the most precious thing of all; and it deceives them because it is intangible, because it

14 The fasces, bundles of rods carried before consuls and praetors, symbolized high office, which was held for a year.

cannot be seen, and so it is valued very cheaply—indeed, it is given almost no value at all.

8.2 People accept annual pensions and handouts most gratefully, and hire out their labor, their service or their diligence in return. No one puts a value on time; they use it freely, as if it cost nothing. But look at these same people when they are ill: if the danger of death comes closer, they clasp the doctors' knees; if they fear capital punishment, they are ready to spend all they have to stay alive! So contradictory are their passions.

8.3 But if the number of each person's future years could be set before him as the number of his past years can, how those who saw that only a few remained would panic, how carefully they would spare them! And yet it is easy to manage an amount that is certain, however small; what you must guard more carefully is what may run out at a moment you cannot know.

8.4 Still, you should not think they are unaware how precious a thing it is. They often tell those they love most that they are ready to give them part of their own years. They give without understanding; and they give in such a way that they take from themselves without adding anything to the others. But they do not even know whether they are taking anything away; that is why they can bear a loss whose damage is hidden.

8.5 No one will give you back your years; no one will restore you to yourself. Your lifetime will go on the way it began, and will neither reverse nor halt its course. It will make no commotion, give no reminder of its speed. It will glide on in silence; it will not lengthen itself at a king's command or at the people's favor. It will run as it was sent off on the first day; it will never turn aside, never linger. What will happen? You are busy; life hurries on; meanwhile death will arrive, and for death, like it or not, you must make time.

CHAPTER 9: LIVE NOW

Postponement is the greatest waste of life; Virgil's line shows that the best day flees first.

9.1 Can anything be more foolish than the outlook of certain people—I mean those who boast of their good sense? They keep themselves laboriously busy so that they can live better; they build their life at the cost of life! They plan their thoughts far ahead; yet delay is the greatest waste of life. It robs us of each day as it comes; it snatches away the present by promising what lies beyond. The greatest obstacle to living is expectation, which hangs on tomorrow and loses today. You arrange what lies in fortune's hands and let go of what lies in your own. What are you looking at? What are you reaching for? Everything that is to come lies in uncertainty. Start living now.

9.2 Listen: the greatest of poet-prophets cries out and, as if inspired by a divine voice, sings a saving song: "For wretched mortals, the best day of life is always the first to flee." "Why do you hesitate?" he says. "Why are you idle? Unless you seize it, it flees." And even when you have seized it, it will flee all the same. So you must compete with the swiftness of time by the speed with which you use it, and drink quickly, as from a rushing torrent that will not always flow.[15]

9.3 This, too, is a splendid touch, a rebuke to our endless procrastination: he says not "the best age" but "the best day." Why, amid such a rush of time, are you so unconcerned and so slow, stretching out months and years for yourself in a long series, however far your greed sees fit? He is talking to you about a day—and about this very day as it flees.

9.4 Can there be any doubt, then, that the best day is always the first to flee for wretched mortals—that is, for the busy? Old age overwhelms their still childish minds, and they arrive at it unprepared and unarmed, for they have made no provision.

15 Virgil (70–19 BC), Rome's greatest poet: *Georgics* 3.66–67, where the lines are about breeding cattle.

They have stumbled into it suddenly, without expecting it; they did not notice it drawing closer every day.

9.5 Conversation or reading or some absorbing thought beguiles people on a journey, and they find they have arrived before they realized they were getting close. In the same way, this unceasing and headlong journey of life, which we travel at the same pace awake or asleep, does not become apparent to the busy until the end.

CHAPTER 10: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Of life's three periods the past is certain and safe, but the busy have no time to look back at it.

10.1 If I wanted to divide my theme into sections and separate arguments, many would occur to me to prove that the busy have the shortest lives. Fabianus—not one of our lecture-hall philosophers, but one of the true, old-fashioned kind—used to say that we must fight the passions by force, not subtlety, and turn back their battle line with a charge, not with pinpricks; that quibbling is no good, for they must be crushed, not nibbled at. Still, if people are to be reproached for their error, they must be taught, not merely lamented over.[16]

10.2 Life is divided into three periods: what has been, what is, and what will be. Of these, what we are doing is brief, what we will do is uncertain, what we have done is certain. For this is the part over which fortune has lost its rights, which cannot be brought back under anyone's control.

10.3 This is what the busy lose. They have no time to look back at the past, and even if they had, the memory of something to regret is unpleasant. So they are reluctant to turn their minds back to time badly spent, and they do not dare revisit it, since its faults—even those that slipped by, disguised by the lure of some pleasure of the moment—become plain when it is gone over again. No one willingly turns back to his past unless all his actions have passed his own review, which is never deceived;

16 Papirius Fabianus, orator and philosopher, was one of Seneca's teachers.

10.4 the man who has craved much out of ambition, scorned arrogantly, conquered without restraint, deceived treacherously, plundered greedily, squandered extravagantly, is bound to fear his own memory. And yet this is the part of our time that is sacred and consecrated, beyond all human mishaps, removed from fortune's kingdom, the part that no poverty, no fear, no onset of disease can disturb. It can be neither troubled nor snatched away; our possession of it is everlasting and free from fear. Only one day at a time is present, and that only moment by moment; but all the days of past time will come when you call them, and let you examine them and hold on to them as you please—something the busy have no time to do.

10.5 It is the mark of a mind free from care and at peace to roam through every part of its life; the minds of the busy, as if under a yoke, cannot turn and look back. So their life vanishes into an abyss. It is no use pouring in as much as you like if there is nothing underneath to receive and hold it; in the same way, it does not matter how much time is given if there is nowhere for it to settle: it passes straight through minds that are cracked and full of holes.

10.6 The present is very short—so short, indeed, that to some it seems not to exist at all. For it is always on the move; it flows and rushes on; it ceases to be before it has arrived, and it no more allows delay than the heavens or the stars, whose ceaseless, restless motion never stays in the same track. So only the present concerns the busy, and it is so brief that it cannot be grasped—and even that is stolen from them while they are pulled in many directions.

CHAPTER 11: DYING WITHOUT HAVING LIVED

The busy cling to life at its end, while those free of business meet death with a steady step.

11.1 In short, do you want to know how little they live? See how much they long to live long. Decrepit old men beg in their prayers for a few more years; they pretend to be younger than they

are; they flatter themselves with the lie and deceive themselves as happily as if they were deceiving fate at the same time. And when some infirmity has reminded them of their mortality, how terrified they are as they die—not as though they were leaving life, but as though they were being dragged out of it! They keep crying out that they were fools not to have lived, and that if only they get through this illness they will live in leisure. Then they reflect how uselessly they acquired things they would never enjoy, how all their labor has come to nothing.

11.2 But those whose life is spent far from all business—why should it not be ample? None of it is handed over to others, none scattered here and there, none of it entrusted to fortune, none lost through neglect, none taken away by giving it away; none of it is superfluous. The whole of it, so to speak, is earning interest. So however little there is, it is more than enough; and so, whenever his last day comes, the wise man will not hesitate to go to meet death with a steady step.

CHAPTER 12: BUSY LEISURE

Collectors, the overgroomed, dinner-party hosts and the pampered are not at leisure but idly busy.

12.1 Perhaps you ask whom I call the busy? You need not think I mean only those whom the dogs let loose at last drive out of the basilica; those you see crushed with some distinction in their own crowd of followers, or with contempt in someone else's; those whose duties call them out of their own houses to dash them against other people's doors; or those whom the praetor's spear keeps busy with disgraceful gains that will fester one day.[17]

12.2 Some people's leisure is busy. At their country house or on their couch, in the midst of solitude, though they have withdrawn from everyone, they are a nuisance to themselves. Their life should be called not leisure but idle busyness. Do you call a

17 The basilica was a public hall used for the law courts; the praetor's spear marked a public auction, often of confiscated property.

man at leisure who arranges his Corinthian bronzes, made valuable by the mania of a few, with anxious fussiness, and spends most of his days on rusty scraps of metal? Who sits in the wrestling ring—for, shame on us, we suffer from vices that are not even Roman—watching boys brawl? Who sorts his herds of pack animals into pairs matched by age and color? Who feeds the latest athletes?[18]

12.3 Well then, do you call people at leisure who spend many hours at the barber's, while whatever sprouted the night before is plucked out, while a council is held over each separate hair, while disordered locks are set back in place or thinning ones are coaxed forward onto the forehead from here and there? How angry they get if the barber has been a little careless, as if he were cutting a real man's hair! How they flare up if any of their mane has been cut off, if any of it lies out of place, if it does not all fall back into its proper ringlets! Which of them would not rather see the republic in disorder than his hair? Who is not more anxious about the beauty of his head than its safety? Who would not rather be well groomed than honorable? Do you call them at leisure, these people kept busy between the comb and the mirror?

12.4 What about those who are occupied with composing, hearing and learning songs, twisting the voice—whose natural straight course nature made the best and simplest—into the winding turns of the laziest melodies? Their fingers are always drumming, beating out some tune in their heads; even when they have been called to serious and often sad occasions, you can hear them humming under their breath. These people do not have leisure, but idle business.

12.5 Truly, I would not count their dinner parties as free time, when I see how anxiously they arrange their silver, how carefully they tuck up the tunics of their kept boys, how on edge they are over how the boar will turn out from the cook's hands, with what speed the smooth-skinned slaves rush to their tasks at

18 Corinthian bronze, a prized alloy, was collected by connoisseurs at extravagant prices.

a signal, with what skill birds are carved into portions of just the right size, how carefully wretched little slave boys wipe up the spittle of drunks. By these means they angle for a reputation for elegance and refinement, and their vices follow them so far into every private corner of life that they cannot drink or eat without an eye to show.[19]

12.6 Nor would I count among the leisured those who have themselves carried this way and that in a sedan chair or litter, and turn up punctually for the hours of their outings as if they were not allowed to miss them; who must be reminded by someone else when to bathe, when to swim, when to dine. They are so enfeebled by the excessive languor of a pampered mind that they cannot tell by themselves whether they are hungry!

12.7 I hear that one of these pampered people—if indeed unlearning human life and habits can be called pampering—was lifted out of the bath in people's arms and set down in a chair, and then asked: "Am I sitting down now?" Do you think this man, who does not know whether he is sitting, knows whether he is alive, whether he can see, whether he is at leisure? I cannot easily say whether I pity him more if he really did not know, or if he pretended not to know.

12.8 They really do forget many things, but many they also pretend to forget. Some vices delight them as proofs of their good fortune; it seems the mark of a very lowly and contemptible person to know what you are doing. Go on, then, and suppose that the mime shows make up a great deal to mock luxury! Truly, they leave out more than they invent; and such an abundance of incredible vices has come forth in this age, inventive in this one respect, that we could now accuse the mimes of negligence. To think that there is anyone so lost in luxury that he takes someone else's word for whether he is sitting down![20]

12.9 So this man is not at leisure; you must give him some other name. He is sick—no, he is dead. The man at leisure is the one

19 Kept boys (*exoleti*): young male slaves kept for their looks and for sex.
20 Mime was a popular, often coarse form of comic theater that satirized contemporary life.

who is aware of his leisure. But this half-alive creature, who needs someone to tell him what position his own body is in—how can he be master of any time at all?

CHAPTER 13: USELESS LEARNING

Antiquarian trivia about who first did what, from Duilius to Pompey's elephants, makes no one better.

13.1 It would take too long to go through them one by one—those whose lives have been used up by board games or ball games or the care of baking their bodies in the sun. People whose pleasures involve a great deal of business are not at leisure. As for those caught up in the study of useless literature—and there is now a large band of them among the Romans too—no one will doubt that they are laboriously doing nothing.

13.2 It used to be a Greek disease to ask how many oarsmen Ulysses had, whether the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* was written first, and moreover whether they were by the same author, and other questions of this kind. If you keep such things to yourself, they do you no good in private; if you bring them out, you seem not more learned but more tiresome.

13.3 And now look: the empty eagerness to learn useless things has invaded the Romans too. The other day I heard someone reporting which Roman general had been the first to do what. Duilius was the first to win a naval battle; Curius Dentatus was the first to lead elephants in a triumph. Still, these facts, though they do not lead to true glory, at least concern examples of service to the state. Such knowledge will do no good, but at least it holds our attention with the attractive emptiness of its subject.[21]

13.4 Let us also allow the researchers this question: who first persuaded the Romans to go on board a ship. It was Claudius, who was called Caudex for that very reason, because the ancients called a structure of several planks joined together a *caudex*. Hence public records are called *codices*, and even now,

21 Duilius defeated the Carthaginian fleet at Mylae in 260 BC; Curius Dentatus paraded elephants captured from King Pyrrhus in his triumph of 275 BC.

by old custom, the boats that carry supplies up the Tiber are called *codicariae*.[22]

13.5 By all means, let this too be to the point: that Valerius Corvinus was the first to conquer Messana, and the first of the Valerian family to be called Messana, taking the name of the city he had captured; and that later, as common speech gradually changed the letters, he came to be called Messala.[23]

13.6 Will you also allow anyone to care that Lucius Sulla was the first to present lions loose in the Circus, when previously they had been shown tied up, and that King Bocchus sent javelin throwers to kill them? Well, let that pass too. But does it serve any good purpose to know that Pompey was the first to put on a fight of eighteen elephants in the Circus, pitting criminals against them as if in battle? The leading man of the state, and one who, as tradition has it, was outstanding for his goodness among the leading men of old, thought it a memorable kind of spectacle to kill human beings in a novel way. Do they fight to the death? Not enough. Are they torn to pieces? Not enough: let them be crushed by the enormous bulk of animals![24]

13.7 It would have been better for these things to be forgotten, so that no powerful man later on would learn of them and envy an act so utterly inhuman. Oh, what darkness great prosperity casts over our minds! He believed himself above nature at the moment when he threw so many troops of wretched men to beasts born under another sky, when he set such mismatched creatures to war with each other, when he shed so much blood before the eyes of the Roman people—he who would soon force them to shed more. But the same man was later betrayed by Alexandrian treachery and offered himself to be stabbed by the

22 Appius Claudius Caudex, consul in 264 BC, took the first Roman army across to Sicily, beginning the First Punic War.

23 Messana is Messina in Sicily, taken in 263 BC by Manius Valerius Maximus, the first of his family to bear the name Messala.

24 Sulla, later dictator, gave these games in 93 BC; Bocchus was king of Mauretania. Pompey's elephant fight was staged in 55 BC.

lowest of slaves, understanding only then the empty boast of his surname.[25]

13.8 But to return to where I left off, and to show some people's pointless diligence on the same subject: this same man was telling how Metellus, celebrating his triumph after defeating the Carthaginians in Sicily, alone of all Romans led a hundred and twenty captured elephants before his chariot; and how Sulla was the last of the Romans to extend the pomerium, which the ancients customarily extended only when territory had been acquired in Italy, never in the provinces. Is it more useful to know this than that the Aventine Hill lies outside the pomerium, as he claimed, for one of two reasons—either because the plebs had withdrawn there, or because the birds had not given a favorable sign when Remus took the auspices on that spot—and countless other things that are either stuffed with lies or very like them?[26]

13.9 For even if you grant that they say all this in good faith, that they write it with a guarantee of its truth, whose errors will these facts lessen? Whose desires will they curb? Whom will they make braver, more just, more generous? Our friend Fabianus used to say that he sometimes wondered whether it would be better not to take up any studies at all than to get entangled in these.

CHAPTER 14: ONLY THOSE WHO STUDY PHILOSOPHY TRULY LIVE

Those who give their time to wisdom add every past age to their own and keep the best company.

14.1 Of all people, only those who make time for wisdom are at leisure; only they are alive. For they do not merely keep good watch over their own lifetime: they add every age to their own. All the years that have gone before them are added to their

25 Pompey was murdered in Egypt in 48 BC, betrayed by the court of Ptolemy XIII; his surname was Magnus, "the Great".

26 The pomerium was the sacred boundary of the city of Rome. Lucius Caecilius Metellus defeated the Carthaginians at Panormus (Palermo) in 250 BC.

store. Unless we are utterly ungrateful, those illustrious founders of revered doctrines were born for us; they prepared a way of life for us. Through the labor of others we are led to the finest things, brought out of darkness into light. No age is closed to us; we are admitted to all. And if we choose, by greatness of mind, to pass beyond the narrow confines of human weakness, there is a vast stretch of time for us to roam in.

14.2 We can debate with Socrates, doubt with Carneades, find peace with Epicurus, overcome human nature with the Stoics, go beyond it with the Cynics. Since nature allows us to enter into partnership with every age, why should we not turn from this brief and fleeting passage of time and give ourselves with all our mind to the things that are boundless, eternal, and shared with better men?[27]

14.3 Those people who rush around on their social duties, disturbing themselves and others—when they have properly run themselves mad, when they have tramped every day across everyone's threshold and passed by no open door, when they have carried their mercenary morning greetings around the most different houses—how few will they manage to see in a city so vast and so torn by conflicting desires?[28]

14.4 How many will there be whose sleep or self-indulgence or rudeness shuts them out! How many who, after keeping them in torment for a long time, will rush past them pretending to be in a hurry! How many will avoid coming out through an atrium packed with clients and slip away through hidden back passages —as if it were not ruder to deceive than to shut out! How many, half asleep and heavy from yesterday's drinking, will barely part their lips for those poor wretches who break off their own sleep to wait on someone else's, and with a most arrogant yawn will return the name that has been whispered to them a thousand times!

14.5 We may say that those are engaged in true duties who want to have Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus and the other high priests

27 Carneades (second century BC) was the leading skeptic of Plato's Academy.

of the liberal arts, and Aristotle and Theophrastus, as their closest companions every day. None of these will be too busy to see you; none will fail to send his visitor away happier and fonder of him; none will let anyone leave him empty-handed. All mortals can meet them, by night or by day.[29]

CHAPTER 15: ADOPTED BY GREAT MINDS

The philosophers of the past share their years with us and offer the only road to immortality.

15.1 None of them will force you to die, but all will teach you how. None will wear out your years; each will contribute his own to you. No conversation with any of them will be dangerous, no friendship with any of them fatal, no attendance on any of them costly. You will take from them whatever you like; it will not be their fault if you do not draw from them as much as you could possibly want.

15.2 What happiness, what a fine old age awaits the man who has made himself their client! He will have friends with whom to deliberate on the smallest and greatest matters, whom he can consult about himself every day, from whom he can hear the truth without insult and receive praise without flattery, and on whose likeness he can model himself.

15.3 We often say that it was not in our power to choose the parents we were allotted, that they were given to us by chance. But we can be born as we choose. There are families of the noblest minds: choose the one you would like to be adopted into. You will be adopted not only into its name but into its very property, which you will not have to guard meanly or grudgingly: the more people you share it with, the greater it will grow.

15.4 These men will give you a road to eternity and lift you to a place from which no one is thrown down. This is the only way to

28 The morning greeting (*salutatio*) was the daily call that clients paid on their patrons.

29 Zeno of Citium founded the Stoic school; Pythagoras and Democritus were early Greek philosophers.

extend mortality—indeed, to turn it into immortality. Honors, monuments, whatever ambition has ordered by decree or built in stone, are quickly brought down; there is nothing that the long passage of time does not demolish and shift. But it cannot harm what wisdom has consecrated. No age will abolish it, no age will diminish it; each age that follows, and each one after that, will add something to the reverence paid it, since envy works on what is close at hand, and we admire more honestly what is far away.

15.5 So the wise man's life extends far; he is not confined by the same boundary as everyone else. He alone is exempt from the laws of the human race; all ages serve him as they serve a god. Has some time passed? He holds it in memory. Is it here? He uses it. Is it still to come? He anticipates it. What makes his life long is the gathering of all times into one.

CHAPTER 16: BUSY DOING NOTHING

Those who forget the past, neglect the present and fear the future have the shortest and most anxious lives.

16.1 Shortest and most anxious is the life of those who forget the past, neglect the present and fear the future. When they come to the end, the poor wretches realize too late that they have been busy all this time doing nothing.

16.2 Nor should you think it proves that they live a long life that they sometimes call on death. Their folly torments them with unsettled passions that rush headlong into the very things they fear; they often wish for death precisely because they fear it.

16.3 Nor should you take it as proof that they live long that the day often seems long to them, that they complain the hours pass slowly until the time fixed for dinner comes. For whenever their occupations desert them, they are left at leisure and fret, not knowing how to arrange it or make it pass. So they strive for some occupation, and all the time in between is a burden. Truly, just as when a day has been announced for a gladiator show, or

when the appointed date of some other spectacle or entertainment is awaited, they want to leap over the days in between.

16.4 For them any postponement of what they hope for is long. But the time they love is short and fleeting, and made much shorter by their own fault; for they flee from one thing to another and cannot settle on a single desire. Their days are not long but hateful. And yet how short the nights seem that they spend in the arms of prostitutes or in drinking!

16.5 Hence, too, the madness of the poets, who feed human failings with their stories, and who have imagined Jupiter, beguiled by the pleasure of lovemaking, doubling the length of a night. What else is this but inflaming our vices—to name the gods as their authors, and to give the disease a license excused by divine example? Can the nights not seem very short to these people, when they pay so dearly for them? They lose the day waiting for the night, and the night fearing the dawn.[30]

CHAPTER 17: ANXIOUS PLEASURES

Even the pleasures and successes of the busy are fearful, and each occupation only gives way to another.

17.1 Even their pleasures are fearful and disturbed by various terrors, and at the very height of their rejoicing an anxious thought creeps in: "How long will this last?" This feeling has made kings weep over their power: the greatness of their fortune did not delight them, but the end that would one day come terrified them.

17.2 When the most arrogant king of the Persians was deploying his army over vast stretches of plain, and could grasp not its number but only the ground it covered, he burst into tears because within a hundred years not one of so many young men would be left alive. Yet the very man who wept was about to bring their doom upon them: he would destroy some at sea,

30 In myth, Jupiter lengthened the night he spent with Alcmena, when Hercules was conceived.

some on land, some in battle, some in flight, and within a short time wipe out those for whom he feared their hundredth year.[31]

17.3 What of the fact that even their joys are fearful? For they do not rest on solid grounds, but are thrown into turmoil by the same emptiness from which they spring. And what do you think those times are like that are wretched even by their own admission, when even the things that exalt them and raise them above humanity are far from pure?

17.4 All the greatest blessings bring anxiety, and no fortune is less to be trusted than the best. To protect prosperity you need more prosperity, and for the very prayers that have been answered you must offer more prayers. For everything that comes by chance is unstable, and the higher it has risen, the more liable it is to fall. And no one takes pleasure in what is bound to fall; so the life of those who acquire with great toil what they must keep with greater is bound to be not only very short but very wretched.

17.5 They toil to get what they want, and anxiously hold on to what they have got; meanwhile they take no account of time, which will never return. New occupations take the place of old ones; hope stirs up hope, ambition ambition. They do not look for an end to their miseries; they only change the material. Have our own offices tormented us? Other people's take up more of our time. Have we stopped toiling as candidates? We start canvassing for others. Have we laid aside the burden of prosecuting? We take on that of judging. Has a man stopped being a juror? He becomes presiding judge. Has he grown old managing other people's property for pay? He is kept busy by his own wealth.

17.6 Has the soldier's boot released Marius? The consulship keeps him busy. Is Quintius hurrying to get through his dictatorship? He will be called back from the plough. Scipio will march against the Carthaginians before he is ripe for so great a task; conqueror of Hannibal, conqueror of Antiochus, the glory of his own consulship and guarantor of his brother's, he would have

31 Xerxes, during his invasion of Greece in 480 BC; the story is told by Herodotus.

been set beside Jupiter had he not himself prevented it. Yet civil strife will hound the savior of his country, and after spurning, as a young man, honors equal to the gods', as an old man he will take pleasure in the ambition of a defiant exile. There will never be a lack of reasons for anxiety, whether happy or wretched; life will be shoved along through one occupation after another. Leisure will never be lived, only forever longed for.[32]

CHAPTER 18: ADVICE TO PAULINUS

Seneca urges Paulinus to leave the grain supply, recalling the famine Caligula nearly caused.

18.1 So tear yourself away from the crowd, my dearest Paulinus, and at last withdraw into a calmer harbor, after being tossed about more than your years deserve. Think how many waves you have faced, how many storms you have weathered—some private, others public that you drew upon yourself. Your virtue has been shown clearly enough through toilsome and restless trials; find out what it can do at leisure. The greater part of your life, and certainly the better part, has been given to the state; take some of your time for yourself as well.

18.2 I am not inviting you to a lazy or idle rest, or to drown whatever lively talent you have in sleep and the pleasures the crowd holds dear. That is not what repose means. You will find tasks greater than all those you have so energetically handled up to now, tasks to pursue in retirement and free from care.

18.3 You manage the accounts of the whole world as scrupulously as if they were someone else's, as carefully as if they were your own, as conscientiously as if they were the state's. You win affection in an office where it is hard to avoid hatred. And yet, believe me, it is better to know the accounts of your own life than those of the public grain.

18.4 Call back that vigor of mind, so capable of the greatest things, from a post that is honorable, certainly, but hardly

suited to a happy life. And reflect that it was not for this that you devoted yourself from your earliest years to every liberal study —so that many thousands of measures of grain might safely be entrusted to you. You had promised something greater and loftier of yourself. There will be no lack of men of meticulous thrift and hard-working diligence. Slow pack animals are far better suited to carrying loads than thoroughbred horses: who ever weighed down their noble speed with a heavy pack?

THE HUNGRY CITY

Feeding Rome is a heavy burden; under Caligula the city came within days of famine.

18.5 Think, too, how much anxiety there is in shouldering so huge a burden: you are dealing with the human belly. A hungry people neither listens to reason, nor is softened by fairness, nor swayed by any plea. Only just recently, in the last few days of Gaius Caesar's life—and if the dead feel anything, he is taking it very hard that the Roman people outlived him, since he knew there was food left for seven or at most eight days—while he was building bridges of boats and playing with the might of the empire, the worst of evils even for people under siege was upon us: a shortage of food. His imitation of a mad, foreign, disastrously arrogant king nearly cost us destruction and famine, and the collapse of everything that follows famine.[33]

18.6 What state of mind were they in then, those entrusted with the public grain supply, when they were about to face stones, swords, fire—and Gaius? With the utmost concealment they hid the great evil lurking in the vitals of the state—and with good reason, of course. For some illnesses must be treated without the patients knowing; for many, knowing their disease has been the cause of their death.

32 Marius rose from the ranks to seven consulships; Quintius (Cincinnatus) was called from his plough to be dictator. Scipio Africanus, victor over Hannibal in 202 BC, ended his days in self-imposed exile.

33 Gaius Caesar is the emperor Caligula (AD 37–41). His bridge of boats across the bay of Baiae was seen as an imitation of Xerxes.

CHAPTER 19: HIGHER STUDIES

Seneca contrasts managing granaries with studying god, the soul and the universe.

19.1 Retreat to these calmer, safer, greater things! Do you think it is all the same whether you see to it that the grain is poured into the granaries unspoiled by the fraud or carelessness of the shippers, that it does not absorb moisture and rot and overheat, that it tallies in measure and weight—or whether you take up these sacred and sublime studies, to learn what god's substance is, what his pleasure, his condition, his form; what fate awaits your spirit; where nature places us when we are released from our bodies; what it is that holds up the heaviest elements of this universe at the center, suspends the light ones above, carries fire to the highest region, and rouses the stars to their successive changes—and all the other things that follow, full of tremendous wonders?

19.2 You really must leave the ground behind and turn your mind to these things! Now, while the blood is warm and we still have our vigor, we must move on to better things. In this kind of life much that is good awaits you: the liberal arts, the love and practice of the virtues, forgetfulness of desires, the knowledge of how to live and how to die, a deep tranquility.

19.3 The condition of all the busy is wretched, but most wretched is that of those who do not even toil at their own occupations, who sleep by someone else's sleep, walk at someone else's pace, and are ordered to love and to hate—the freest things of all. If these people want to know how short their life is, let them consider how small a part of it is their own.

CHAPTER 20: DYING BUSY

Officials who work until they die, like Turannius, deserve the funerals given to those who lived the shortest lives.

20.1 So when you see a man who has often worn the purple-bordered toga, or a name famous in the forum, do not envy him:

these things are bought at the cost of life. To have one year dated by their names, they will squander all their years. Some have been abandoned by life while still struggling at the start, before they could climb to the height of their ambition. Some, after crawling through a thousand indignities to reach the crowning dignity, are struck by the wretched thought that they have toiled for an epitaph. Some, in extreme old age, while it is being fitted out with new hopes as if it were youth, have given out in weakness amid great and shameless efforts.[34]

20.2 Disgraceful is the man who breathes his last in court, advanced in years, pleading for utterly obscure litigants and angling for the applause of an ignorant crowd of bystanders. Shameful is the man who, worn out more by living than by working, collapses in the middle of his duties. Shameful is the man who dies going over his accounts, to the amusement of the heir he has kept waiting so long.

20.3 I cannot pass over an example that comes to mind. Sextus Turannius was an old man of meticulous diligence who, after his ninetieth year, when Gaius Caesar had released him from his post as procurator without his asking, had himself laid out on his bed and mourned as if dead by the household standing around him. The house lamented its old master's leisure, and did not end its mourning until his work was restored to him. Is it really such a pleasure to die busy?[35]

20.4 Most people feel the same way: their desire for work lasts longer than their ability to do it. They fight against their bodily weakness, and they judge old age itself a burden for no other reason than that it sets them aside. The law does not enlist a soldier after fifty or summon a senator after sixty; people find it harder to obtain leisure from themselves than from the law.

20.5 Meanwhile, as they are dragged along and drag others, as each one breaks another's peace, as they make one another

34 The purple-bordered toga was worn by senior magistrates; each Roman year was officially named after its two consuls.

35 Turannius had been prefect of the grain supply—Paulinus's own post—under Augustus and Tiberius.

wretched, life passes without profit, without pleasure, without any progress of the mind. No one keeps death in view; everyone aims his hopes far ahead. Some even arrange things that lie beyond life: massive tombs, dedications of public buildings, shows at their funeral pyres, and ostentatious funerals. But truly, such people's funerals ought to be held by the light of torches and wax tapers, as though they had lived the shortest of lives.[36]

36 Children's funerals were held at night by torchlight.