

Werner Ulrich's Home Page: *Ulrich's Bimonthly*  
Formerly "Picture of the Month"

July-August, 2011



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**Seneca on serenity, leisure, and philosophy** I am a great fan of Seneca. Well, yes, occasionally. Especially in summer, when I try to practice (rather than study) him. Just in case you don't know him: Lucius Annaeus Seneca was a Roman Stoic philosopher and statesman, born in Cordoba in Spain but educated and living in Rome around 1-65 AD (the exact dates are unknown). He made himself a name as a writer of tragedies and popular writings on the good and right life, but also as an (involuntary) temporary educator of the later Roman Emperor Nero, whose reputation, of course, is not the best, to put it mildly. It is to Seneca's credit that Nero ultimately ordered him to commit suicide on charges of conspiracy against the emperor; which he did, in the Stoic manner he had been teaching others.

This much (or little) you probably should know about Seneca's life, some 2000 years ago. But I don't want to take you back in time to days long past. I want you to enjoy your summer holiday. Summer is here, it is certainly a good idea to try and gain some distance from our usual preoccupations with work and life. Step back, breathe deeply, let go. It is to this end that I like, occasionally, to turn to Seneca. More precisely, to two delightful – and delightfully thin – books that most of the time are dormant on my shelf and which contain a selection of Seneca's essays, among them *De brevitate vitae* (On the shortness of life) and *De tranquillitate animi* (On tranquility of mind). Reading Seneca is easy and relaxing. He does not try to construct any kind of theory but writes from within a Stoic framework of thought that he takes for granted (no need to argue), so he can apply it directly to questions of how to *practice* a Stoic way of life. He formulates his thoughts and recommendations in the style of letters to family members or friends, or of dialogues with people he knows. Moreover, you don't need to do much reading to get a sense of what Seneca is writing about – the titles of his essays are often the best summaries.

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To be sure, it might be tempting to explore Seneca's view of philosophy as a practice rather than theory. However, at this time of the year I have no intention to exchange one kind of academic writing for another. I want us to take Seneca more seriously than that: I want you and me to try and *practice* him. The idea is to take something like a temporary philosophical (or academic, professional, ...) holiday, by stepping back and gaining some sound distance from the usual philosophical, academic or professional efforts. It is not easy, of course, to "switch off" and forget one's philosophical and professional interests and attitudes for a while, nor should we – no more than one can and should suddenly forget one's moral principles, or one's responsibilities as a citizen or one's professional expertise. Thus seen, we obviously cannot take a "philosophical holiday" any more than a "citizen's holiday" or a holiday from our professional knowledge and responsibilities (e.g., a doctor remains a doctor and will offer medical help even while on holiday if the situation demands it). But again, the point is not to exchange one idea for the other. The point is to seek a healthier balance between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* than we may manage to maintain most of the year; to correct their usual lack of balance so that they can better support one another. This is what I mean when I suggest to take a "philosophical holiday," that is, to exchange philosophical argument for contemplation; academic writing for reading; professional pressures for distance.

But how should I translate such contemplation into my summer *Bimonthly*, which after all is still a *written* Bimonthly? And how might I engage you, my esteemed reader, in this kind of philosophical practice, the practice of recovering some distance? Just as I don't feel like constructing a theoretical argument or in any case writing a lot, I assume you don't feel like being talked at so much during your summer holiday. My solution is to offer two short quotes from Seneca's essays, without however commenting on them in any detail except some most rudimentary hints. That is, I offer them as short aphorisms and for the rest will leave it to you whether and in what ways you take them as impetus for practicing contemplation, and about what exactly they may have you reflect.



### *De tranquillitate animi* – on peace of mind

Among far over 100 letters and dialogues that Seneca wrote about ethical questions, this one, written around 60 AD, is addressed to Annäus Serenus, a friend who at the time was a prefect of the Emperor's guard. It may be Seneca's best known and most widely read essay nowadays. Although written in a rather long-winded and repetitious style that does not immediately appeal to us today, its topic certainly does: How can we acquire and maintain some *peace of mind* in this troubled world of ours? Seneca's answer, basically, will not surprise you: one must *practice* it.

But what is "it"? Perhaps the title of the German translation of the essay is helpful: it reads "Von der Seelenruhe," which means *tranquility of the soul*. I find this translation more beautiful, more engaging. It also comes closer to the root meaning of the Latin word *animus* (spirit, soul). Here is Seneca's definition of *tranquillitas animi* (in Section II.4 of the essay, my free translation from the Latin and German texts):

*To maintain serenity without getting  
exuberant in joy or cast down in sadness,  
this will be tranquility of mind.*

So, what Seneca has in mind is a state of mental tranquility that goes together with confidence and *serenity*. Serenity may be the key: it implies a certain detachment from the details and pressures of our usual preoccupations with work and life, a detachment that affords us both clarity of mind (due to gaining some distance) and a sense of cheerfulness or contentment (due to worrying less).

As I understand Seneca, a thus-understood tranquility of mind is at the same time *an ideal to strive for* and *a means to achieve it* at least partly. The way is the aim – the quest for the kind of virtuous happiness that the ancient Greeks called *eudaimonia* or "well-being of the soul."

*De brevitae vitae – on the shortness of life* This essay, written in 49 AD and addressed to a friend, Paulinus, is famous for an aphorism that actually goes back to Hippocrates: "Vita brevis, ars longa," or "life is short and the art is long." (*De brevitae vitae*, section 1.2). Another well-known quote from this essay is this: "It is not that we lack time, but we waste much of it." (1.3) However, the quote that I have chosen for my reflection during this summer is a different one. It reads:

*The only people really at leisure are those  
who take time for philosophy.*

In Seneca's words: "Soli omnium otiosi sunt qui sapientiae vacant" (*De brevitae vitae*, section 14.1), or literally translated: "Only those who are free to dedicate themselves to philosophy (the study of wisdom) are really at leisure." My philosophical holiday, then, is leading me right back to philosophy rather than away from it, it appears, just as I hoped it would. The same holds undoubtedly true for any effort to take some distance from one's usual academic or professional activities: it makes us see those activities more – not less – clearly. Thank you, Seneca, for this piece of good holiday news.

Let me try to sum up, lest I waste your holiday time any more. Taking the two quotes together, it would seem that "taking time for philosophy" as Seneca understands it, and at the same time taking a "philosophical holiday" as I have described it, is not a contradiction in itself. Both aim at gaining distance; both also imply that we take the time needed for practicing tranquility of mind. The quest for distance (or serenity, to use Seneca's term) is certainly essential for gaining peace of mind (and of the soul), just as it can also be a way to increasing one's professional competence and personal happiness. There is no guarantee, to be sure, but isn't it worth trying? Whether it works for you, only you can give the answer. No need to continue talking at you, then. Instead, I sign off with this combined motto of Seneca:

*Practice tranquility – take time for philosophy.*

Enjoy your summer. May it be a summer of serenity; of leisure; of philosophy.

#### July 2011

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31						

#### August 2011

**Picture data** Digital photograph taken on 25 June 2010 around 08:30 a.m. ISO 400, exposure mode "program"; aperture f/9.0, exposure time 1/640 seconds, exposure bias -0.70; focal length 70 mm (equivalent to 140 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera); metering mode multi-segment, contrast soft, saturation high, sharpness soft. Original resolution 3648 x 2736 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 124 KB.

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
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7	8	9	10	11	12	13
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*July-August, 2011*



*Practicing tranquility of mind: serenity, leisure, and philosophy*

„Practice tranquility, take time for philosophy”

(A summer motto to be gained from reading Seneca)

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personal thoughts »

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Just be sure to copy them elsewhere before leaving this page.

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