



FOCUS ON YOUR CHOSEN PROFESSION SENECA

This is the third chapter of Seneca's discourse, *On Tranquility*. In this exchange with his young protege Serenus, Seneca expands on the following key ideas:

Key ideas of this chapter

1. *The best way to overcome boredom is to get involved in day-to-day affairs, both public and private.*
2. *If you find it difficult to participate in public life because ambitious people get in your way, feel free to withdraw. But even when you work by yourself, do so for the benefit of others.*
3. *There are many ways to serve. Serving in isolation is not any less worthy than serving in the normal way.*
4. *The study of philosophy helps overcome boredom and disgust with life.*

How to fight boredom

You ask me my opinion on what we should do to fight boredom. As Athenodorus [possibly Athenodorus of Tarsus, a Stoic philosopher] says, "The best course is to get involved in one's day-to-day affairs, affairs of the state, and the duties of a citizen. Some pass the day exercising in the sun, taking care of their physical health. Athletes find it useful to spend most of their time building their muscles and stamina to which alone they have devoted themselves.

Become active in your chosen occupation

For people such as yourself, who are training their mind to take part in the contests of public life, it is far more

honorable to be at work than to be idle. Since you have decided to be of service to your fellow citizens and humankind in general, train yourself while serving both public and individual interests the best you can.

Be active even in seclusion

"But," you say, "because in this crazy ambitious world, with so many people twisting right into wrong, we will certainly find people who would obstruct rather than support us." We should definitely withdraw ourselves from the forum and public life. Even in private life, a great mind has scope to expand freely. The case of lions and wild animals is different; captivity limits them. It does not apply to human beings. They create their most important work when they are alone.

Use seclusion to benefit others

However, you should only withdraw in seclusion such that whatever time you spend this way would still benefit individuals and the world at large – through your intellect, your voice, and your advice.

Those who serve the state well are not just those who put forth candidates, defend the accused, and give their vote for peace and war. It is also those who encourage young people, instill virtue in them when good teachers are in short supply, and restrain those who rush headlong in search of riches and luxury. If they do nothing else, they at least check their course. Such people serve the public even though in private life.

Who contributes more?

The praetor who decides cases between

citizens and foreigners, or citizens and citizens, and delivers the verdict his assistant has prepared, or the one who shows them what is meant by justice, family feeling, endurance, courage, contempt of death, and knowledge of the gods and how much one is helped by a good conscience?

If you transfer the time you take away from public service to philosophy, you would have neither abandoned nor refused to perform your duty.

There are many ways to serve

A soldier is not just the one who stands in line and defends the right or the left-wing; there is also the one who guards the gates. It may be less dangerous, but it is not an idle occupation. The guard must keep watch and take charge of the arsenal. It may involve no bloodshed; nevertheless, it counts as military service.

Philosophy overcomes vexation

As soon as you devote yourself to philosophy, you will overcome all disgust at life. You will not wish for nightfall because you are wary of daylight. Nor will you be trouble to yourself and useless to others. You will win many friends, and people of great merit will be attracted to you. Virtue cannot be kept hidden. Even when it is obscured it gives signs of its presence. Any worthy person will trace its whereabouts.

But if we give up all society, turn our backs upon the whole human race, and live turned in on ourselves alone, this solitary state lacking any interest will lead to a want of something to do. We will begin to build some buildings and to pull down others. We will push the sea back and make the waters flow through natural obstacles. And, in general, we will use the time which Nature has given us to spend very poorly. Some of us use it economically and others wastefully. Some of us spend it so we can show a profit and loss account and others so that we have no assets remaining, which is most shameful of all. Often a very old man has no evidence to prove for his long life except his age.

This is an extract from the book Stoic Tranquility, which is the plain English version of Seneca's discourse 'On Tranquility.'