

LETTER 119

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. Whenever I've found something, I don't wait for you to tell me 'share it!'; I say it to myself. What is it that I've found, you ask? Open your wallet: it is pure profit. I'll teach you how you can get rich very quickly. You are really eager to hear this, and rightly so—I'm going to take you on a short cut to enormous riches. Still, you *will* need a financial backer; to do business you need to take out a loan, but I don't want you to borrow through an agent nor do I want the brokers to be tossing your name around.

2. I'll give you a ready-made backer, in the famous phrase of Caio, 'borrow from yourself'. No matter how small the loan, it'll be enough if we seek from ourselves whatever we lack. Lucilius, my friend, it makes no difference whether you feel no need of something or you have it already. In either case the upshot is the same: you will not be in anguish. Nor do I instruct you to deny something to nature—she is unyielding; she is unbearable, she demands her due—but rather I instruct you to be aware that whatever goes beyond nature is at the whim of others and not necessary.

3. I am hungry; I must eat. It makes no difference to nature whether this bread is coarse or fine; she wants the stomach to be filled, not pleased. I am thirsty. It makes no difference to nature whether this water is some I have drawn from a nearby cistern or water I have kept on snow to be chilled with a coolness not its own. All she asks is that thirst be extinguished; it makes no difference whether the cup is made of gold or crystal or agate or whether it is a travertine goblet or a cupped hand.

4. Look to the goal of all things and you will eliminate the superfluous. Hunger summons me: my hand reaches out for whatever is closest; hunger itself will recommend whatever I take hold of. Someone who is hungry despises nothing.

5. You ask, then, what it is which has caught my fancy? I think it a splendid maxim, that 'a wise person is the keenest pursuer of natural wealth'. You reply, 'You are presenting me with an empty platter. What is this? I already had my account book ready and was considering what sea I might sail to do business, what public contract I might take on, what merchandise

I should be acquiring. It is deceit to preach poverty after promising prosperity.' So do you think someone poor if he lacks nothing? You reply, 'No, but that is due to himself and his endurance, not due to fortune.' So do you think that he isn't rich just because his riches can never cease?

6. Would you rather have a great deal or enough? Someone who has a great deal desires more and that is an indication that he does not yet have enough; someone who has enough has acquired what no rich person has attained, his goal. Or maybe you think that this isn't real wealth because no one was proscribed for it? Because no one was poisoned by his son or his wife on account of it? Because it is safe in wartime? Because it is unused in peacetime? Because it is neither dangerous to possess it nor burdensome to spend it?

7. 'But the person who merely avoids cold, hunger, and thirst just has too little!' Jupiter has no more. What is sufficient is never too little, and what is not enough is never a great deal. Alexander is poor after [conquering] Darius and the Indians. Am I wrong? He seeks something to make his own, he scours unknown seas, sends new fleets out into the ocean and, as I might put it, bursts the very ramparts of the world.

8. What is enough for nature is not enough for a human being. Here we have someone who would just for something after he has everything. Mental blindness is so profound and each person so thoroughly forgets his own origins once he has made some progress. Having begun as the master of an obscure patch of land (and not even its undisputed master), he reaches the ends of the earth and is on the point of returning home through a world he has made his own, but Alexander is grief-stricken.

9. Money never made anyone rich. On the contrary, it has made everyone long for yet more money. You ask what causes this? A person who's got more starts to be able to get more. To sum up the point: you can name anyone you like of those who are ranked alongside Crassus and Licinius; let him state his wealth and add together all that he has and all that he expects to get. If you accept my view, he is poor, but even on your own view he *can be* poor.

10. The person, however, who has set himself up in accordance with the demands of nature is not just free of the feeling of poverty, he is free of the fear of it. But to let you know how hard it is to confine one's possessions to the limits of nature, this very person whom we are so constraining, whom *you* call poor, he not only has something, he even has something to spare.

11. Riches blind people, though, and attract them if a great deal of money is paraded out of some house, if all its ceilings are richly gilded, if the house-slaves have been chosen for their physical attributes or are

dressed in splendid livery. The prosperity of all those people has an eye to public display. The person whom we have insulated from the public and from fortune is happy on the inside.

12. For as far as concerns those for whom a frantic poverty has usurped the name 'wealth': they have 'wealth' in just the same way that we are said to have a fever, when in fact the fever has us. We are accustomed to put it the other way around: 'a fever grips him', and in the same way we ought to say 'wealth grips him'. The advice I would most like to leave you with is the advice that no one hears enough: to measure all things by one's natural desires, which can be satisfied for free or for very little. Just don't mix vices with your desires.

13. You ask what sort of table your food is served on, on what sort of silver plates, how uniform and elegant the servants who bring it? Nature desires nothing beyond the food.

Surely you don't ask for a golden cup when your throat is burning with thirst. Surely when you are starving you don't reject everything except peacock and turbot.¹

14. Hunger has no ambitions. It is content if it stops. It doesn't much care what makes it stop. Those things are the torments inflicted by wretched luxury. Luxury looks for a way to be hungry even after it is full, for a way not to fill the stomach but to stuff it, for a way to revive the thirst which has been slaked by the first drink. So Horace made an excellent claim, that it doesn't matter to thirst what sort of cup the drink is served in or by how sophisticated a hand. If you think it matters to you how nicely curled the boy's hair is and how translucent the cup he offers to you is, then you aren't really thirsty.

15. Along with everything else, nature has given us this one most important gift: she has purged necessity of any fussiness. What is superfluous leaves room for choice. 'This isn't stylish enough, that's not fancy enough, that offends my eyes.' The great builder of the cosmos, who set forth the laws of living for us, has made it possible for us to attain well-being, not to be pampered. Everything needed for our well-being is ready and waiting; to be pampered, everything has to be acquired with wretched care and worry.

16. So let us take advantage of this gift of nature, which is fit to be numbered among her greatest blessings, and let us reflect that she has done us no better service than this: whatever one desires out of necessity one accepts without fussiness.

Farewell.

¹ Horace, *Satires* 1.2.114-16.