

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 147: How To Avoid the Busy Trap

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Tim Ferriss: Hello, my gorgeous little groundhogs. This is Tim Ferriss and welcome to another episode of The Tim Ferriss Show. This is not a long-form interview. In fact, it is a bite-sized morsel for your brain and for your life. And this is an excerpt from my favorite writing of all time that I review at least once a quarter, the Letters to Lucilius, Moral Letters to Lucilius, by Seneca the Younger; roughly 2,000 years old. And this letter is No. 22 on the Futility of Half-Way Measures. And as usual, Seneca takes a little time in his preamble to get warmed up. That is his style; kind of feeling out the opponent, i.e., the recipient of his letter as if in a boxing match. And then he jumps right into it.

There's some really valuable takeaways here. My favorite portion begins with, "Hence men leave such advantages as these with reluctance," and it is a gem. I really encourage you to listen to this over and over again; particularly the passages beginning with, "Hence men leave such advantages as these with reluctance."

And you can find all of these letters – I think there are about 120 in three volumes – as part of my book club if you're interested. The Tao of Seneca is the compilation. I created it because I wanted to listen to this in audio and couldn't find it. All of that and more can be found at audible.com/timsbooks. So please enjoy Seneca on the Futility of Half-Way Measures.

Seneca the Younger: Letter 22 on the Futility of Half-Way Measures. You understand by this time that you must withdraw yourself from those showy and depraved pursuits, but you still wish to know how this may be accomplished. There are certain things which can be pointed out only by someone who is present. The physician cannot prescribe by letter the proper time for eating or bathing; he must feel the pulse.

There is an old adage about gladiators, that they plan their fight in the ring; as they intently watch, something in the adversary's glance, some movement of his hand, even some slight bending of his body, gives a warning. We can formulate general rules and commit them to writing, as to what is usually done, or ought to be done. Such advice may be given, not only to our absent friends, but

also to succeeding generations. In regard, however, to that second question – when or how your plan is to be carried out – no one will advise at long range.

We must take counsel in the presence of the actual situation. You must be not only present in the body, but watchful in mind, if you would avail yourself of the fleeting opportunity. Accordingly, look about you for the opportunity. If you see it, grasp it, and with all your energy and with all your strength devote yourself to this task to rid yourself of those business duties.

Now listen carefully to the opinion which I shall offer. It is my opinion that you should withdraw either from that kind of existence or else from existence altogether. But I likewise maintain that you should take a gentle path that you may loosen rather than cut the knot which you have bungled so badly in tying; provided that if there shall be no other way of loosening it, you may actually cut it.

No man is so faint-hearted that he would rather hang in suspense forever than drop once for all. Meanwhile, and this is of first importance, do not hamper yourself. Be content with the business into which you have lowered yourself or, as you prefer to have people think, have tumbled. There is no reason why you should be struggling on to something further.

If you do, you will lose all grounds of excuse, and men will see that it was not a tumble. The usual explanation which men offer is wrong: “I was compelled to do it. Suppose it was against my will. I had to do it.” But no one is compelled to pursue prosperity at top speed. It means something to call a halt, even if one does not offer resistance, instead of pressing eagerly after favoring fortune.

Shall you then be put out with me if I not only come to advise you, but also call in others to advise you? Wiser heads than my own, men before whom I am wont to lay any problem upon which I am pondering? Read the letter of Epicurus which appears on this matter. It is addressed to Idomeneus. The writer asks him to hasten as fast as he can and beat a retreat before some stronger influence comes between and takes from him the liberty to withdraw.

But he also adds that one should attempt nothing except at the time when it can be attempted suitably and seasonably. Then, when the long-sought occasion comes, let him be up and doing. Epicurus forbids us to doze when we are meditating escape. He bids us hope for a safe release from even the hardest trials, provided that we are

not in too great a hurry before the time, nor too dilatory when the time arrives.

Now, I suppose, you are looking for a stoic motto also. There is really no reason why anyone should slander that school to you on the ground of its rashness. As a matter of fact, its caution is greater than its courage. You are perhaps expecting the sect to utter such words as these: “It is base to flinch under a burden. Wrestle with the duties which you have once undertaken. No man is brave and earnest if he avoids danger, if his spirit does not grow with the very difficulty of his task.”

Words like these will indeed be spoken to you, if only your perseverance shall have an object that is worthwhile, if only you will not have to do or to suffer anything unworthy of a good man. Besides, a good man will not waste himself upon mean and discreditable work or be busy merely for the sake of being busy. Neither will he, as you imagine, become so involved in ambitious schemes that he will have continually to endure their ebb and flow.

Nay, when he sees the dangers, uncertainties, and hazards in which he was formerly tossed about, he will withdraw, not turning his back to the foe, but falling back little by little to a safe position. From business, however, my dear Lucilius, it is easy to escape, if only you will despise the rewards of business.

But we are held back and kept from escaping by thoughts like these: “What then? Shall I leave behind me these great prospects? Shall I depart at the very time of harvest? Shall I have no slaves at my side? No retinue for my litter? No crowd in my reception room?” Hence men leave such advantages as these with reluctance.

They love the reward of their hardships, but curse the hardships themselves. Men complain about their ambitions as they complain about their mistresses. In other words, if you penetrate their real feelings, you will find, not hatred, but bickering. Search the minds of those who cry down what they have desired, who talk about escaping from things which they are unable to do without. You will comprehend that they are lingering of their own free will in a situation which they declare they find it hard and wretched to endure.

It is so, my dear Lucilius. There are a few men whom slavery holds fast, but there are many more who hold fast to slavery. If, however, you intend to be rid of this slavery, if freedom is genuinely pleasing in your eyes, and if you seek counsel for this one purpose

that you may have the good fortune to accomplish this purpose without perpetual annoyance, how can the whole company of stoic thinkers fail to approve your course?

Zeno, Chrysippus, and all their kind will give you advice that is temperate, honorable, and suitable. But if you keep turning round and looking about in order to see how much you may carry away with you, and how much money you may keep to equip yourself for the life of leisure, you will never find a way out. No man can swim ashore and take his baggage with him.

Rise to a higher life, with the favor of the gods, but let it not be favor of such a kind as the gods give to men when with kind and genial faces they bestow magnificent gifts, justified in so doing by the one fact that the things which irritate and torture have been bestowed in answer to prayer. I was just putting the seal upon this letter, but it must be broken again, in order that it may go to you with its customary contribution, bearing with it some noble word.

And lo, here is one that occurs to my mind. I do not know whether its truth or its nobility of utterance is the greater. "Spoken by whom?" you ask. By Epicurus, for I am still appropriating other men's belongings. The words are: "Everyone goes out of life just as if he had but lately entered it." Take anyone off his guard, young, old, or middle-aged. You will find that all are equally afraid of death, and equally ignorant of life.

No one has anything finished, because we have kept putting off into the future all our undertakings. No thought in the quotation given above pleases me more than that it taunts old men with being infants. "No one," he says, "leaves this world in a different manner from one who has just been born." That is not true, for we are worse when we die than when we were born, but it is our fault, and not that of Nature.

Nature should scold us, saying: "What does this mean? I brought you into the world without desires or fears, free from superstition, treachery and the other curses. Go forth as you were when you entered!" A man has caught the message of wisdom, if he can die as free from care as he was at birth, but as it is we are all aflutter at the approach of the dreaded end.

Our courage fails us, our cheeks blanch; our tears fall, though they are unavailing. But what is baser than to fret at the very threshold of peace? The reason, however is, that we are stripped of all our goods, we have jettisoned our cargo of life and are in distress, for

no part of it has been packed in the hold. It has all been heaved overboard and has drifted away. Men do not care how nobly they live, but only how long, although it is within the reach of every man to live nobly, but within no man's power to live long. Farewell.